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EXTRACT FROM ...

HANDBOOK FOR FIRST YEAR EXPERIMENTAL LANGUAGE
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM : BOOK ONE

Department of Education,
Queensland,
Van Leer Foundation Program.

Several programs have been developed in Australia recently designed to help Aboriginal children to be more comfortable in the Standard English situation of the classroom. These programs are concerned particularly with children whose first language is not an Aboriginal language but rather a form of English which differs in some respects from Standard English.

One such program has been developed by the State Department of Education in Queensland with some funding from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation. The program is intended to cover many aspects of the curriculum during the first two years of schooling. Teachers' Handbooks for the first year of the program have been produced and the following extract is taken from the introduction to the first Teachers' Handbook.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the past five years several pilot studies have been undertaken by the Department of Education in Queensland to obtain information concerning the likely causes of the poor scholastic attainment of large numbers of Aboriginal children. These studies reveal that such children are comparatively retarded in reading and that this appears to militate against achievement in many other areas of the curriculum.

It has been frequently noted that the spoken language of Aboriginal children in general differs markedly from that of other Queensland children. This linguistic system is no doubt a reflection of the different socio-cultural background to which Aboriginal children are exposed in their pre-school years.

Recent research in a number of places shows that retardation in reading often occurs when a child's oral linguistic system differs greatly from that employed in reading texts.

It would appear therefore that the reading retardation characteristic of Aboriginal children may well be associated with the fact that the linguistic system employed in reading texts differs greatly from that to which Aboriginal children are accustomed.

To enable further research to be undertaken and to enable subsequently the preparation of compensatory educational programs, the Department of Education approached the Bernard Van Leer Foundation in 1968 with a view to obtaining a grant to assist in undertaking the necessary activities.

The Bernard Van Leer Foundation provided support initially for a three year research and development project which began in 1969. One of the first tasks undertaken was the determination of the extent of the underlying pattern of differences between Standard Australian English (S.E.) and Aboriginal English (Ab.E.).

Extensive recordings were made of the speech (in a variety of situations) of a representative sample of 2, 3 and 4 year old children who spoke S.E. Computer analysis provided an index of the range and frequency of certain language units used by these children at the start of their school careers. A further analysis of the speech of 4 to 5 year old Aboriginal children (few, if any, of whom spoke the vernacular Aboriginal languages or dialects) indicated that there were notable discrepancies in the linguistic structures used.

Information concerning other aspects of the language competence of young Aboriginal children was obtained from the application of a series of tests. The Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities in particular revealed areas of strength and weakness in children's language usage which amplified the results of the analysis of tape-recorded speech.

The language analyses and test results were subsequently used in the compilation of a compensatory language program for school starters. This handbook is a guide to that program.

2. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN DEVELOPMENT

By the age of five years most children have acquired considerable competence with the vocabulary and syntactical complexities of the language spoken around them. Such competence is of importance to children's social and cognitive development, since language can be considered to serve the two major functions

of communication between people, and facilitating of thought and action.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language acquisition occurs in a social setting and consequently the particular language children speak is learned from the people with whom they interact. By the time they enter school, Aboriginal children are fluent in the vocabulary, syntax and idioms of the form of English to which they have been exposed throughout their first five years or so of life. They can express ideas sufficiently clearly for other speakers of the language to comprehend, and conversely they are able to comprehend, and act on, the speech of others.

Their spoken English can be considered a restricted form of S.E. and differs from S.E. in several important aspects. This may reduce communication between the children and speakers of S.E.

In the English of Aboriginal children the rate of speech tends to be more rapid, and the timing and intonation patterns of syllables, different. Phrases are frequently repeated, perhaps to ensure understanding by the listener. Some vowel sounds are not distinguished from each other (notably the vowel sounds in "man" and "men"). Consonants are often pronounced differently, replaced by other consonants (for example, *th*, *v* and *f* by *d*, *t*, *b* or *p*) or the final sound omitted (for example "roun" for "round", "wen" for "went").

Meaning, moreover, is often derived from contextual cues. The grammatical markers of S.E. are used less frequently. For example, even though an event happened in the past, a past tense form is not often used. Similarly, the use of "he" to cover both male and female gender, nominative and possessive case, and singular and plural number limits the precision of expression. The verb "to be" and auxiliary verbs are frequently omitted.

For adequate communications to occur it is essential that language provide the words and structures capable of cataloguing or describing experiences to which the children might be exposed. As they acquire the more elaborated structures of S.E. their expressive skills will be expanded thus facilitating more precise communication.

LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND ACTION

Language can be said to affect cognition insofar as the concepts peculiar to a particular culture or subculture are internalized by means of language. The structure of a language may in fact determine the forms of thinking.

It has been shown that different social systems are characterized by a diversity of relationships. This gives rise to different linguistic codes. For example, where a social system emphasizes need to maintain rapport and solidarity within the group, this gives rise to a restricted linguistic code. On the other hand, a structure which emphasizes individual differences and long-term goals leads to a more elaborated code.

Children whose language is of the latter type are better able "to explain, to describe, to instruct, to enquire, to hypothesise, to analyse, to compare, to deduce and to test."*

CONCEPT FORMATION

While it is true that some concepts are attained without language, they are usually coded linguistically. One function of linguistic forms is to aid the formation of new concepts and the extension of existing ones.

Concepts are usually formed by the children as the result of experiences with objects and ideas within their environment. In order to develop a concept children need wide experiences. This development will be facilitated if attention is directed to differences and similarities in these experiences through the use of language.

PROBLEM SOLVING

The ability to reason depends largely on the ability to formulate verbally the steps in solving problems. It has frequently been shown that if children verbalize while engaged in problem solving, they perform much better than when they are silent. Some of the most important concepts for the solution of problems,

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*Bereiter, C. and Engleman, S. (1966) *Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Pre-School*. Englewood-Cliffs. N.J. Prentice-Hall.

for example the concepts of identity and similarity, spatial position and temporal sequence, comparison of magnitudes and causation, are embedded in the meaning and structures of language.

LANGUAGE AND READING

It is usually assumed that, on school entry, children have attained some control of the spoken form of language and are therefore ready to learn to read the written form. However, beginning reading texts are written in the structures of S.E. over which Aboriginal children usually do not have the degree of control necessary to make satisfactory progress. It is essential, therefore, that skill and flexibility in the oral use of structures of S.E. be developed, before children are asked to read.

3. AIMS OF THE PROGRAM

The major aim of the program is to help the children to develop facility in the use of language structures of S.E. It is hoped that they will eventually make automatic use of such English in school and in comparable settings. This accomplishment should facilitate their cognitive development and their learning of reading and writing skills and should so ensure a more successful and satisfying school career.

The children will continue to live their lives in their home settings. It is not the intention of the program to alienate them from their own people or to diminish the potency of their Ab.E. If this were to happen, the children would lose the ability to communicate readily with their parents and other members of their own community; this would result in loss of feelings of security and would lead also to emotional impoverishment. Teachers must ensure that they avoid any impression of derogating Ab.E.

It is hoped that through the program the children will in time become proficient and secure in the two forms of English, each being used by them in its appropriate place.

The second aim is to help each child to develop a favourable self concept. In establishing feelings of self-esteem and pride in self, children need frequent experiences of success. It is important that the teacher be continuously aware of each child's level of achievement so that the introduction of new activities

provides both a challenge and an opportunity for successful attainment.

The third aim is the stimulation of cognitive development. To this end, the children need to be helped to perceive and understand their familiar world more accurately. In addition, there is need, through carefully selected experiences, to widen the children's world and to help them to develop concepts which become gradually more precise and enriched.

Problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills need to be fostered. The children should gradually become able to use language to deal more effectively with problems presented by their everyday environment and those posed within the school program.

The fourth aim is the fostering of creativity by encouraging children to adopt novel approaches to problems and their solutions. In addition, their imagination should be stimulated with a view to the personal enrichment of their lives.

4. SOME GUIDELINES

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HOME

Teachers of Aboriginal children will be aware that a gap seems to exist between the home and the school. Often, behaviours which are sought and rewarded in the school are not reinforced in the home. Similarly, those activities which bring praise to the child in the home are not necessarily rewarded at school.

During their pre-school years and during their out-of-school hours the children develop certain skills, concepts, abilities and attitudes. These should serve as a foundation for school learning. Failure to capitalize on the child's prior learnings makes school activities less meaningful and less productive than they might otherwise be. There is need, therefore, for the teacher to be aware of the nature and extent of previous learnings.

Teachers can gain some of this knowledge through observation of the children's activities and through noting their interests. Although opportunities for such observation are limited to some degree, they can be supplemented through contact with the children's homes. Greater understanding of the Aboriginal child's world will follow closer relationships between the teacher

and the children's families, especially the mothers and grandmothers.

The Aboriginal parents have rarely in the past become closely acquainted with their children's teachers. Yet with their active concern for people, they would probably welcome approaches by the teachers. These approaches would need to be informal, the aim initially being to create situations in which the mothers would come to know the teachers as people rather than as professionals. The benefit would be reciprocal; teachers would come to know the parents as individuals, and not only would they learn something, at first hand, of the home lives of their pupils, but also they would, through this interaction, come to appreciate the qualities of the people.

After the two groups - teachers and mothers - have begun to know each other, invitations by the teachers to the mothers to visit classes in which they could observe their children working would be likely to be accepted by a significant number. This practice could be supplemented by teacher visits to homes, by arranged appointments, to discuss the progress being made, and the difficulties being encountered, by individual children.

Children should be encouraged to take home tangible evidence of their school activities. For example, a child may dictate a caption which the teacher writes under his painting or drawing. His "reading" of the story should be checked before he leaves for home and the child encouraged to read his story to everyone at home. Through activities such as this, considerable repetition of the task in question is ensured, while involvement of the child's immediate family in his school activities is increased.

Through procedures such as these, parents can become much more knowledgeable about the aims and methods of the school; they may then begin to appreciate more fully the academic role of the school.

Parents are interested in the well-being of their children. This increase in detailed knowledge about the school could well lead them to extend their concern for their children to include their educational progress. Children, seeing their parents as frequent visitors in the classroom, might begin to see the school as less divorced from the home and community. Closer links between home and school are likely to lead to more efficient learning and

to a greater transfer of school learnings to out-of-school life.

Many Aboriginal parents feel unable to help their children with their school work. These feelings are due, in the main, to a lack of confidence arising from their own limited educational background. Teachers should help the parents to understand that they can provide a very direct help to their children, through activities such as:

- discussing with the children their everyday experiences, including television viewing;
- maintaining an active interest in the children's school work;
- encouraging the children to talk about the academic events of the day;
- rewarding school progress with approval.

MOTIVATION

Learning is more likely to take place if there is a warm and encouraging atmosphere in the classroom. It is vital that every effort, every step forward, be recognized and rewarded. Detailed knowledge of pupils will enable the teacher to arrange activities in such a way that every child can experience success.

Punishment for non-achievement will develop adverse attitudes towards school and towards learning. If a task appears too difficult, the teacher should present a simpler activity so as to ensure success. Success should be frequent and immediately rewarded.

Rewards may take many forms. Praise, a smile, a nod of approval will indicate to the child appreciation of his progress and so stimulate him to further effort. Similar results can be achieved through material rewards, particularly in the early stages.

Rewards will vary in their attractiveness to different children. Teachers should aim to discover the rewards to which each child is sensitive and make use of this knowledge in their interactions with the children.

The children will differ in their rates of mastery of the language program. If motivation is to be maintained, teachers must cater for these different rates of development. The program

should be implemented in such a way that each child is challenged at his own level and tempted forward to new accomplishments.

The ultimate aim is for the children to learn because the learning is enjoyable, intrinsically rewarding and satisfying. Activities which are novel and interesting are likely to capture the interest and attention of young children and lead to feelings of accomplishment which are independent of external reward. Under these circumstances, the children learn because learning is fun and because it increases their feelings of competence.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND USE

The teacher should aim to create a classroom characterized by child talk rather than by teacher talk. Children should be encouraged to talk about experiences which are highly meaningful - enjoyable, frightening, comic. Experiences that occur spontaneously may be utilized to extend language and concept development. Children's contributions will provide the starting point for many activities. The teacher should attempt to learn as much as possible about children's own views of their environment. Too often classroom discussion is based on the teacher's experiences; this is less meaningful to children than events in their own lives. Nevertheless, the model provided by the teacher is important, particularly in the early stages of the program.

It is important that the children have opportunities to hear the new structures before they are expected to produce them spontaneously. To assist in increasing familiarity with the new structures, the teacher can quietly and unobtrusively offer them during informal discussions. For example, if one child says of another, "he big", the teacher can say, "yes, he's big". Under no circumstances should the teacher convey to the child a suggestion that his spontaneous language forms are not acceptable. The continuing aim is the encouragement, not the inhibition, of the child's desire to talk.

Opportunities for the use of new language patterns will be provided in teacher-directed activities, along the lines set out in the detailed language program. In carrying out this program, teachers will note the emphasis on repetition.

Repetition and overlearning are essential for the acquisition of skills of all types. Since language learning, particularly the learning of structures, is basically skill

learning, much meaningful practice is required.

The amount of practice is important. So, too, is the way in which the practice is organized. Massed practice is not nearly as effective as distributed practice, where the language learning tasks are interspersed with other learning activities. Spaced repetition is a vital part of the learning program. Language drills can be presented in the guise of songs, rhymes and games so that repetition can be achieved without loss of motivation. Boredom soon robs repetition of value as a teaching device.

It is envisaged that children will ultimately use the new structures, not only in formal situations but also in their spontaneous questioning, comment and discussion.

GROUPING PROCEDURES

In all classrooms, organization should be varied. At times the class will work as a whole; at other times, in small groups, or in pairs; sometimes the children will pursue activities individually.

The advantages of small group work for Aboriginal children are very marked. The Aboriginal culture places emphasis on personal relationships; the children are concerned with establishing and maintaining pleasant relations with others. Small group work capitalizes on this attitude. On many occasions, the children will naturally form their own groupings and if they can work cooperatively their motivation is likely to be high. This should lead to more effective and lasting learning.

The development of language skills requires an audience. Even with a reduced pupil-teacher ratio the teacher cannot always be available to each child. Even if this were possible, it would not be desirable. Children need to communicate with other children. The creation of small groups increases for children the number of available listeners.

Grouping has the further advantage of helping the teacher to cater for individual differences. The composition of the groups should vary. At times, similarity in achievement might be the criterion for group placement. Children who are more advanced in their acquisition of new language skills can be encouraged to move further forward. Those who are slower can be given additional practice in the use of earlier structures.

On other occasions, the teacher will deliberately seek to create groups of children with a wide range of achievement. In this way, children who cling to Ab.E. can gain by working with other children who are using S.E. more often. They are perhaps more likely to imitate these models than the teacher's.

When the classroom is organized on a small group basis, the teacher is able to devote attention to individual children. Sometimes she will be helping the weaker; sometimes she will be extending the more advanced.

It is important that Aboriginal children be helped to develop independence and initiative. These characteristics can be fostered when the children work individually or as members of small groups. It will be some time before all the children can work effectively as group members. Teachers should recognize and accept this, and devise activities which will foster the steady development of this ability.

The aim should be to lead the children, from their first day at school, towards acquiring the skills of initiating and directing their own learning. Small group work gives children the opportunity of planning together, free from teacher direction. They may then work cooperatively to carry out their plans, or may pursue them individually.

ENVIRONMENTAL RICHNESS

The development of adequate cognitive skills requires a rich and stimulating environment. The greater the variety of sensory experiences, the more opportunities the children will have to make the fine discriminations necessary for competent interpretation of the world around them.

Through the provision of a wide range of material, children can be assisted to observe relationships between objects and experiences, and encouraged to anticipate the probable effects of changes in such relationships. Open-ended questions about their observations can help them to develop critical thinking and problem solving abilities.

Creativity develops more readily when children work in an environment rich in the possibilities for manipulation and imaginative exploration.

Children need language in order to capitalize on their experiences. For optimal development, they need to be active and talkative explorers of a rich and varied environment.

OUTSIDE THE FOUR WALLS

It is neither necessary nor desirable that all formal education take place within the four walls of the classroom. If education is to be successful, it must be seen by the children as relevant to their own lives. Two ways of achieving this end are:

- (a) bringing the personal and physical resources of the district into the classroom; and
- (b) taking the children out into the surrounding district.

The local environment can be the source of examples for all areas of the curriculum. In particular, it provides subjects for discussion and vocabulary development. Local resource people too have a valuable place in the classroom.

Materials available in the environment can be used in the classroom. These are valuable because they are meaningful to the children. Moreover, collecting and sharing provide opportunities for greater involvement.

Excursions give teachers the opportunity to observe children in an environment more familiar to them than the classroom. By listening and watching, teachers may build up a knowledge of the meaning that children attach to the words they use. Experiences shared by the group on excursions can be discussed and developed as they occur, as well as later in the classroom.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISCOVERY

Children, especially young children, learn through doing. The concepts that they hold are rooted in specific, concrete actions. They need to be confronted with meaningful problems where the solutions are dependent on their own exploration and thinking.

Children should try things out to see what happens, manipulate new as well as familiar objects, pose questions and seek answers in efforts to reconcile what they find at one time with what they find at another time. In this process the teacher acts as a guide, helping children to be aware of the demands of the problems and assisting with relevant facts and ideas both

inside and outside their own experiences.

DEVELOPING CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

An essential condition for the promotion of children's imagination is the presence of a permissive and supportive atmosphere in the classroom. This is particularly important when children attempt to be creative, exercising their imaginative powers fully. They need to be sure that they will not be ridiculed or judged too hastily, especially during the stage of production of ideas. Once the ideas have been developed, the teacher can then help the children to evaluate them.

Children need time for the flowering of imagination. Quiet periods and some degree of privacy are often necessary to encourage the flow of ideas. Many children lack this quiet and privacy in their homes; this makes it all the more necessary to provide such experiences at school.

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The following publications are available from : The Director,
Van Leer Project, P.O. Box 33, North Quay. Q'ld. 4000.

Handbook for First Year Experimental Language Development Program:
Book One. \$3.50

Handbook for First Year Experimental Language Development Program:
Book Two. \$2.50

Handbook for First Year Experimental Language Development Program:
Book Three. \$3.50

*Research Report on Some Effects of an Experimental Language
Development Program on the Performance of Aboriginal Children in
Their First Year at School.* \$2.00

*Research Report on Some Aspects of the Language Development of
Pre-School Children.* \$2.00

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