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ACROSS AUSTRALIA

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



PRE-READING PROGRAM AT MILINGIMBI

M. Christie,
Milingimbi,
N.T.

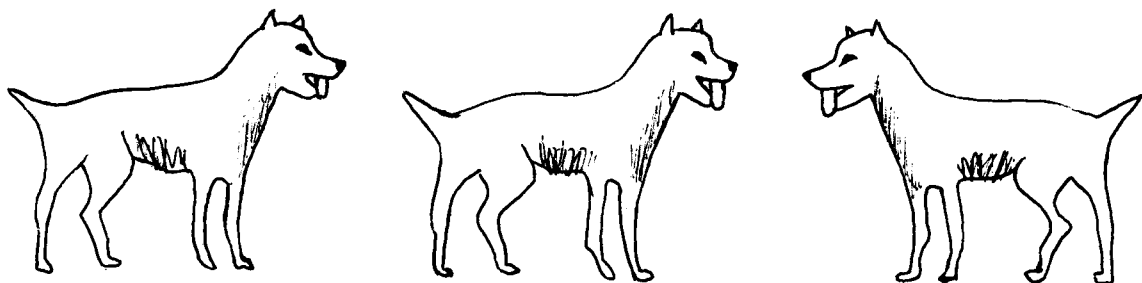
The Pre-reading program for Gupapuyngu speaking children was largely based upon the lectures of Sarah Gudschinsky given in Darwin in early 1973.

The first part of the pre-reading program involved helping the children to learn exactly what reading (and writing) is. In a European culture children often come to school with this understanding, but many Aboriginal children take some time to register the basic principles involved. This aim was achieved as much in incidental teaching as in planned lessons. The children were read to in their own language. When they were read to, the teacher often pointed to the words as he read them. The children were shown the relationship between the figures on the page and what was being read. Every day, after morning news, we wrote down what one child had said (and a picture was drawn). Later on the short story or phrase was read back to the children. When the children were sent on messages, the teacher read out what he had written down. The children learnt the communicative value of writing and reading. Children who, when they arrived at school, thought that reading involved showing a picture and making up the story, soon learnt what the words were for, and thus were motivated to learn to read.

The second area covered in the pre-reading program concerned language awareness. It is essential that children appreciate something of what language involves. The children isolated and discussed individual words. We spent a little bit of time discussing different dialects, and as their oral English ability increased, there were times when we discussed the possibility of stating simple ideas in both Gupapuyngu and English. Simple games were also used to arouse language awareness - syllabification, rhyming and repetition games. The way in which small words change meaning

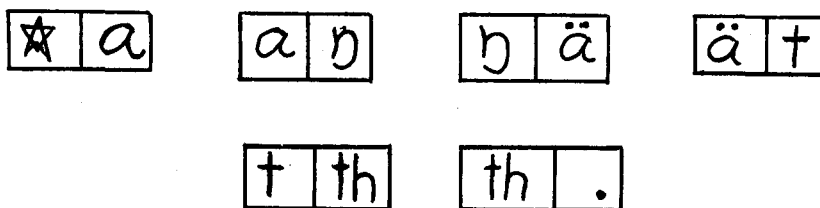
was discussed, and games made up to deal with these. The aim here was to create an awareness of the patterns in the language.

The third area covered visual discrimination. The problem here was not to teach the children how to discriminate, but rather to teach the children which differences are the ones that matter in discriminating letters when reading. For example, exercises such as the one below were considered irrelevant. (Fig. 1)



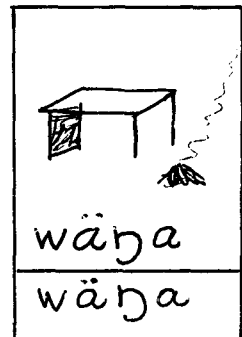
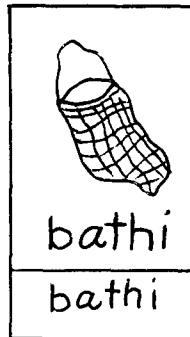
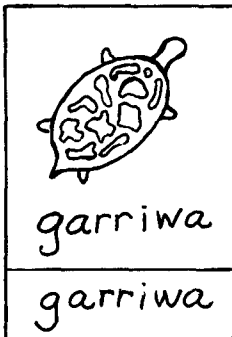
Children don't have to discriminate dogs when they are reading; and besides, a dog is a dog no matter which way it is facing, but when, say, a "b" turns around, it becomes a "d". In reading, the children are translated from a world where things remain the same no matter which direction they point, to a world where this "b" means four different things when in four different positions (i.e. b, p, d, q). That is a unique phenomenon. Part of the job of pre-reading is to teach the children what differences to look for when discriminating letters. With exercises involving ducks and pigs, it doesn't really work (although there is definite value in interpreting pictures and other picture-based activities).

The materials we did use included symbol dominoes (a large set for class games, and several small sets for group and individual work). (Fig. 2)



Research has shown that children discriminate more readily symbols which are arranged vertically, so the discrimination worksheets were all arranged vertically. (This also helped the children to learn tj, dj, nh, dh, th and ny as single entities). In preparing the sheets, care was taken to include examples which are important when reading. No English symbols were included if they were not found in Gupapuyngu. By the time the children are transferring to English reading, their discrimination techniques will be good enough to enable them to discriminate the exclusively English symbols. Introducing them at the pre-reading stage would only complicate matters. At first, single letters were used in the worksheets, then two letters, short syllables and finally whole words. The children had to discriminate letters in every possible position in which they occur. Of course, nonsense words had to be used, but as the children weren't reading them, this made no difference.

Other activities included word to word plus picture matching (using the key words from the primer) which help to teach word = meaning. (The teaching of sight words was not considered desirable but a small number doesn't do any harm). For this we had again one large class set and about ten sets for individual work. (Fig. 3)



Also, we had phrase to phrase, and sentence to sentence matching. The fourth part of the program taught the basis of writing, in the hope that by the time the first primer was started, the children would be able to write all that they read comfortably. (Actually writing the symbols, of course, is also a most effective way of teaching the differences in letters which really matter). Letters were taught one by one on blackboards, starting with the straight letters (l, t, y, k, i etc) progressing to the anti-

clockwise (c, o, a, d, g, e, etc) and clockwise (p, b, r, etc). These lessons were considered most important and were taken every day in groups and with the class as a whole.

There was nothing else planned into the pre-reading program - thus a considerable amount of the conventional pre-reading material was cut out.

An examination of a whole realm of pre-reading materials included three sorts of material which were all excluded :

1. Activities which had little or no application to reading (e.g. discrimination of animals, clownfaces etc).
2. Activities which are difficult, when learnt independent of actual reading, to transfer and apply in a reading situation (e.g. left to right eye movement).
3. Activities which involved too much *play* and not enough *work*. The children who were well motivated towards reading wanted to work hard during reading lessons and get on with the job of learning to read. They were often asking for *hard work*.

The whole process of pre-reading was considerably simplified by this means, and the Aboriginal teachers found it easier to understand in its entirety. The reading awareness and language awareness lessons were taken with the whole class, and the visual discrimination lessons were taken in groups (according to achievement). Some children were ready to start reading soon after the start of the second term.

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The Australian Schools Commission has asked us to remind readers that it would be interested to receive submissions relating to Aboriginal education. The address for correspondence is:-

Australian Schools Commission,
P.O.Box 34,
Woden, A.C.T. 2606