



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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REVIEW :

FILM : NOT TO LOSE YOU, MY LANGUAGE

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This film describes bilingual education in three places in the Northern Territory: Milingimbi, Yayayi and Yuendumu.

It shows Aboriginal teachers in action, teaching reading, number and traditional dance and weaving, as well as English speakers teaching English.

At Milingimbi the bilingual program is advanced, and there is an enthusiastic team including United Church linguist, Miss Beulah Lowe. One of the highlights of the film shows Miss Lowe taping a story told to her by an old man, transcribing it, and bringing it to him as a published book.

At Yuendumu, in the desert, there has been no linguist, and the teaching staff has had to work very hard to overcome the problem of teaching materials. A most interesting discussion between an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal teacher on the change of roles that has accompanied the change to bilingual education is of great interest to all educators.

Yayayi is an outstation about fifty kilometres from Papunya where the Pintupi people have moved to get away from the pressures of the larger settlement and to manage their own affairs. Reading materials are provided by Lesley and Ken Hansen of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Here life is still largely traditional and school has to 'fit in' to the local life styles. A visiting teacher comes out from the nearby settlement to help the Aboriginal teachers.

Because this film is bilingual, it often carries sub-titles in English which make the viewer very much aware of the existence of a non-English speaking indigenous culture.

The film presents a realistic picture of life in a bilingual school in its early days. Problems are not disguised, nor are the

changes in attitudes engendered by the bilingual program. As Mrs Ies Nabaldjari of Yuendumu says, "The children were happy because I was their teacher".

At the end of the film, one is left with several questions:

- .. Where is bilingual education leading?
- .. What can be done next in a bilingual program?
- .. Who can provide the materials needed for the next steps?

This film is worthwhile viewing for all teachers in Australia, whether they be Aboriginal teachers, teachers of Aboriginals, teacher educators or student teachers. It is also worth showing to wider Australian audiences and in the schools as part of a Social Sciences program.

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*The Director of the film, Mr. Greg Reading, makes the following comments:**

Film Australia has just completed a 16 mm colour documentary film called *Not to Lose You, My Language* for the Australian Department of Education on the Aboriginal bilingual education program in the Northern Territory. The film runs for just under thirty minutes. Copies of the film will be available later this year. Inquiries should be directed to Film Australia, P.O.Box 46, Lindfield, 2070, the Australian Department of Education, or State film centres and education department film libraries.

The Australian Department of Education approached Film Australia late in 1974 to make a film about the bilingual program. The Department had an open mind on how the film was to be made, being less concerned to 'sell' the program than simply to inform people about some of the interesting though little known things happening in the Territory. The film crew therefore attempted to present a candid and honest impression of how the program is working, with no glossing over of problems.

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The film was shot over three weeks in March 1975. Apart from one short sequence filmed at the Summer School of Linguistics at Darwin, the film was shot at three locations, each quite different from the others.

Making a film with the Aboriginal people is always exciting because it involves contact with a radically different culture. Understanding this culture, and then communicating something of its character on film, poses a real challenge.

One difficulty in making *Not to Lose You, My Language*, was that much of the dialogue takes place in what are, for us, foreign languages. We have provided English sub-titles for a few short sequences, working from translations obtained at the time of shooting. Occasionally, because of the difficulties of working in another language, or because our translations were not detailed enough, we know we have made mistakes. We hope speakers of the languages concerned will forgive us any small inaccuracies, and look rather at the overall result.

The film does not show children reading and writing in English. The bilingual program is still at a very early stage and at the time of filming no one at the centres we filmed at had advanced this far. We could have filmed at Goulburn Island where some children were reading English, but as it was the only centre where this was happening and as the class there was so small we felt that featuring it would tend to give a false impression of the progress of the overall program.

The bilingual program should not be seen simply as the most effective way of teaching English to Aboriginal peoples. We came away with a strong impression that the program will be worthwhile just for its effects on the confidence of Aboriginal teachers and aides, and in the involvement of Aboriginal children and their parents.

We wanted the film to give as much emphasis as possible to Aboriginal points of view. This is not easy, and this is one area where we did not succeed as well as we would have liked. It seemed important to feature the work of linguists, which is vital to the bilingual program, but this inevitably meant featuring a white person, with the implication of showing what 'we' are doing for the Aborigines. Again, it is not easy to find tribal Aborigines with sufficient command of English to get a point across effectively to a not necessarily sympathetic English-speaking audience. Nor did we want to put

Aboriginal spokesmen in the position of politely mouthing the sort of opinion that they felt we wanted to hear. Despite the bilingual program, school is still essentially a European institution, and the content of the film reflects this.

Another problem in filming Aboriginal subjects is that audiences (and film-makers) tend to respond in terms of their own preconceptions and prejudices. Some people will react with disgust that Aborigines could live in such squalor; others will be outraged that governments should permit people to live in such poverty. Yet both reactions may get in the way of seeing Aboriginals on their own terms, as people with their own values and their own right to freedom of choice in their own lives, and neither 'noble savages' nor objects of pity.

I am sure that many things in this film will be viewed in many different ways by different audiences. I've got my own point of view, of course, but we did not want to make a heavy propaganda film, to impose one interpretation upon audiences. We resisted the temptation to run around cleaning running noses before each shot because we thought they might offend or shock audiences. We tried to show things as we found them, in all their variety and confusion, with no comment except from those directly and personally involved in the program.

We hope audiences will be prompted to question their own preconceptions. If we are left feeling a little confused, at least that is an improvement on thinking we know all the answers. Aboriginal societies, like our own, are faced with incredible changes and stresses. The meeting of the Aboriginal and European cultures in the bilingual program may give Aboriginals a better foundation to cope with these changes and find their own answers to their own problems.

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