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ORAL ENGLISH IN ABORIGINAL SCHOOLS :  
A PERSONAL VIEW

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It is difficult for a teacher who is non-Aboriginal to understand what the Aboriginal people expect from their school. One well-documented fact is that every Aboriginal community so far approached in the Northern Territory has stated that the children of that community must be taught English.

This is good for the non-Aboriginal teacher. She knows what she has to do. She speaks the language. Now she must learn how to teach it.

As in all subjects, the first task is to locate one's aims. Is the aim to teach the child to parrot off a few greetings? Or to recite poetry? (I once heard a class of children who had never ventured out of the tropics recite a poem about a "host of golden daffodils"). My aim in teaching oral English is to enable children to conduct a conversation in English with any English speaker they meet.

This is a big demand. Check around the environment in which you work. Apart from different Australian accents, there is possibly a Scottish, an English and maybe even a French or German English accent. You want the child to be able to talk to and understand all these people.

When he speaks, the pupil's English should be comprehensible to the listener. It should sound like English. If it is a statement, it should carry the intonation of a statement. If it is a question, it should sound like a question. Try to read this question as a statement:

"He comes from Cairns, doesn't he?"

It is difficult for a native speaker to read this as anything but a question. And if the child learns his English from listening

he will have difficulty in reading it as anything but a question (unless he has a reading problem - but that is another story not within the scope of this discussion). Even if the words are not audible because of distance, it should be possible to tell whether it is a statement, or question and response conversation that is being held, just as it is when two native speakers of English are speaking.

If you look at the question above, you will realize that we accent the word *Cairns*, then pause, and then raise our voices in the two words that form the question *doesn't he*.

English should be taught in sentences. In English, the basic unit of communication is the sentence. This does not mean that a child should answer the question, "Did you go to the pictures last night?" with the laborious and artificial reply, "Yes, I went to the pictures last night", but rather with the more natural, "Yes, I did".

Frequently a child will answer the question, "Where's Johnny?" with, "Store, store". This is not English. The acceptable English replies are, "At the store", or, "He's gone to the store". I would regard the last three replies as English sentences.

The English lesson should prepare the child for realistic conversation. We rarely speak in unison. In adult society in Australia today, church is about the only place where we speak in chorus. Therefore we should teach the child to speak by himself, not in chorus. Chorus drilling has a great deal to recommend it as a builder of confidence. But it is only a brief stage in the development of language. Every oral language drill session should have every child speak the pattern that is being taught in that lesson. The child should repeat the sentence with the correct intonation at least six times. He should be speaking alone and in a meaningful context.

The child should also understand what he is saying. The new pattern should be presented in such a meaningful context that the child can understand exactly what is being said; for example, if the prepositions *on* and *under* are being presented, then the children should see and put things *on* and *under* the table, their books, a box, a shelf, etc. and say what they are doing as they do it.

Many teachers approach me about how they should drill oral English. It is so very different from their experience in a school with an enrolment of native English speakers. I have chosen at random, a lesson from the *N.T. Oral English Syllabus*, 1974, and set out a

fairly detailed lesson plan. I realize that many people will not need to read this, but in the interest of those who have asked for this, I am including it here.

The lesson which turned up is Lesson 7 of Block 3, and the section I have chosen is teaching the following patterns:

|     |     |     |     |                                      |     |           |         |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|--------------------------------------|-----|-----------|---------|
| Has | he  | got | a   | car?                                 | Yes | he        | has.    |
|     | she |     |     | pencil?<br>ribbon?<br>horse?<br>etc. |     | she       |         |
|     |     |     | any | string?<br>milk?<br>jam?             | No  | he<br>she | hasn't. |

The first thing is to look at the lesson and list the things that are taught or reinforced. I have listed them for your information:

- 1. *he*, a male being talked about, not talked to.
- 2. *she*, a female being talked about, not talked to.
- 3. question form.
- 4. answer forms, negative and positive.
- 5. *a*, the indefinite article for countable objects.
- 6. *any*, the indefinite adjective for uncountable objects in interrogative or negative forms.

(Before I go further I should point out that this is a revision lesson. Such a contrast as *a/any* would not be introduced in one lesson).

So, in order to understand the lesson, the child must realize that he is asking a second person whether a third person has a specific thing. It is the teacher's job to set up such a situation.

LESSON PLAN

I am writing a lesson plan that I would use (not necessarily the only plan, or even the best plan) for this lesson, assuming a class of thirty children.

Aim: To teach the lesson set out above.

Preparation:

- a) Class trained to break into five groups of 6 children, each in an appointed place with an appointed leader.
- b) Teacher has five sets of familiar objects, some countable, (car, book, pen, clock, doll, umbrella, stone, shoe, leaf, etc.) and some uncountable, (chalk, sugar, sand, grass, string, paper, water, milk, etc.). The set of objects that the teacher is to use is sorted into countable and uncountable objects.

Presentation:

1. One boy chooses a countable object, for example, a car.

Teacher : "Has he got a car?" (Repeats if necessary).

Children : "Yes, he has."

Teacher : "Has he got a bike?"

Children : "No, he hasn't."

Teacher : "Has he got a car?" (indicates that the children are to imitate).

Children : "Has he got a car?"

Teacher : "Yes, he has."

1. a) Repetition of above without the teacher. One child asks the question and another answers. Teacher intervenes only if necessary. This can be done a few times.
  1. b) Repetition of above using a girl to select the countable object.
  1. c) As for 1 a), only using uncountable object and *any*. The teacher must intervene at this point and demonstrate the correct pattern.
2. One of the five groups works as a group drilling the pattern.
  2. a) Group leader appoints a child to choose an object.

Leader : "Has he got any water?"

Child 2 : "No, he hasn't".

Turns to Child 3 -

"Has he got a gun?"

Child 3 : "Yes, he has."

Turns to leader -

"Has he got any Coke?"

Leader : "No, he hasn't". Leader then changes child who is choosing object, and drill continues.

2. b) Group repeats this routine two or three times with class watching.
3. All class moves to groups and drills in step 2. Teacher moves from group to group, but remains on the periphery of groups only intervening when there is need to help, or give commendation.

#### COMMENTS

In a drill lesson the teacher should try to confine her voice to the patterns taught. If she talks too much she will confuse the children. It is possible to get the class to drill by a waving gesture or some other drilling code that the teacher will have evolved.

Sometimes an Aboriginal teacher can help by supervising a couple of groups at drilling time. Alternatively, this is an ideal time for the Aboriginal teacher to give a lesson to half the class while the other half is having its English oral drill. Children who are native speakers of English can be trained to help in this lesson, and if they have the capacity to manage a group, are excellent peer teachers for the children. They do need to listen carefully at the presentation stage or else they may use a correct pattern that is not the pattern being presented.

To rephrase what I have been saying :

1. Children should learn a foreign language by listening.  
(If you learnt a foreign language in secondary school by reading it before speaking it, you will realize this).
2. Children must understand what they are saying.
3. English should sound like English, with the intonations

that belong to English. Many foreign speakers of English speak and write grammatically correct English which is almost incomprehensible to the native speaker of English because they use the rhythms and tones of their mother tongues.

4. A sentence should be the unit of communication.

I am enlarging on the fourth point as I feel this one is most difficult for teachers to handle. In southern teacher education centres, there is a strong emphasis on communication, and it is difficult to face a class with whom you do not have a great deal of common language. However, the teacher has a certain role assigned to her by the Aboriginal community, and one thing she is expected to do is teach English. While she accepts language that is not standard English, the children will think they are speaking English. If she can understand it, they believe it is English. If a plane is landing and the children are saying, "Dove, dove", (or more usually, "Dub, dub") or "DC3, DC3", then the teacher should say "It's a Dove", or "The Dove's landing", so that the children learn that this is the way English is spoken and that labelling is not speaking.

A final word of encouragement. Aboriginal children enjoy learning English. Once they know you want them to imitate the way you speak, they will drive you to distraction imitating you and picking up the intonations that you use. And one day they will surprise you by having a conversation in which you hear yourself speaking. It is one of the most satisfying moments of an English teacher's career.

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