



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

ACROSS AUSTRALIA
FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH -
AN OUTLINE OF ITS USE AT KOONIBBA



Geoff Rogers,
Principal,
Koonibba Aboriginal School,
Via Ceduna. S.A.

From a child's point of view, some of the main concepts of the language-experience approach to the teaching of reading are:

What I think about, I can talk about.
What I talk about can be expressed in other ways.
Anything I write can be read.
I can read what I write and what other people write.
What I say and write is as important to me as what other people have written for me to read. (1)

This approach was adopted at Koonibba school at the beginning of last year in an endeavour to try to make reading more meaningful and interesting for the children. Excursions became a vital part of the language program. Each week the "classroom" was found somewhere within a hundred mile radius of the reserve. Places were visited along the coast as well as areas beyond the dingo-proof fence. Transport varied from trucks, land rovers, boats, canoes, buses, station wagons, on foot, utilities and a tugboat. The premises that reading should come from the child's experiences and that all

.....

(1) John P. Madison citing Doris Lee and Roach Van Allen *Learning to read through Experience*. Appleton - Century Crofts, 1963.

children want to read and write were adopted here. The child's wish to communicate with others about the excursion was also capitalized upon.

After the excursion the experience stories were dictated by the children in response to shared and immediate first hand experiences. These were recorded using polaroid photographs. These "stories" were written on large sheets of newsprint using a felt tip pen. The children could see that reading is talk written down. The words that they read were meaningful because they were within their spoken vocabulary. When reading material is designed for a basal reader by an author, the language and content is determined by his own experience. If this experience is not shared by the reader, then lack of understanding can occur. If however, the material uses the same background of experiences as that of the reader and is written in the language of the reader (as in this approach), no conflict occurs.

The community and surrounding countryside's resources were so numerous that a year's reading program has been completed, with new stimulus interest areas still emerging almost daily.

LOCAL WILDLIFE

At lunch time one day a parent mentioned that there were *minya magu murga** in the scrub. The next few hours were spent removing the grubs from the trees, photographing the action (the children enjoy using the camera too) and then cooking the grubs which had survived the walk back to the village without being eaten raw. When back at school the dictated experience stories were recorded firstly on the large sheets of newsprint with the children and later by the teacher-aide into the class "reader" with accompanying photographs.

A commotion outside the classroom one morning soon provided the stimulus for an oral language, written language, natural science and reading lesson. A six year old boy proudly announced "we fellers bin birdin". They had caught a *ga:nga***. Charlie Ga:nga as he was soon named, spent a few hours in the classroom providing plenty of motivation and noise. Tiger snakes, death adders, kangaroos, wombats, eagles, goannas and many varieties of lizards

.....

* lots of witchetty grubs

** crow

also have provided opportunities for dictated experience stories based on local wildlife.

SEASONAL EVENTS

Gathering wild tomatoes, wild peaches and the numerous other edible seasonal fruits, roots and sea foods provide a variety of experiences to capitalize on. Sporting events, shearing, harvest and seeding add to these.

ON THE RESERVE

Lessons have been developed using particular localities close to home. Some interest areas we have used include the shearing shed, the fire at Johnny Johnson's house, the clinic, the rockhole, the cows, the spray plane, the sheep and the crop. Teaching reading using an oral language based medium enables the child's early reading experiences to be realistic because of their immediacy and the satisfaction of seeing *their own story* next to the relevant photos. This contrasts with the sterile mechanistic content of the basal reader with its controlled vocabulary and many syntactic patterns not found in the language of the Aboriginal child.

PERSONAL (Self concept area)

The world of "I", "me", "my" and "mine". In this area we are using the Van Leer Experimental Language Program with some local adaptations. It is proving very helpful.

HOME

Mum, dad, sister, brother, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, pets, the rooms and outside of house have all been topics of reading lessons.

THE SCHOOL

Young Robbie arrived at school one day with boots much too large for his feet. They also had holes in the ends making his toes clearly visible. These boots were labelled *gulda* shoes* by the children because of their resemblance to a sleepy lizard with

.....

* sleepy lizard or skink (*tiliqua rugosa*)

his mouth open. Some amusing stories were soon concocted, such as the one about Robbie's shoes biting off any fingers that dared to tickle his toes. Robbie went home quite proud that day, as not everyone gets to have his old boots photographed, talked and written and read about.

Events such as the "Paperbag Puppets" visiting the school, when the children "dressed up", the Xmas party, planting our lawn, each child's birthday, the garden, and lessons of particular interest have stimulated reading lessons.

STORIES, DREAMS, FILMS AND WISHES

Sometimes a story may interest the children to the extent that they want to do more than just talk about it after it has been read. They may retell it in their own words and after this has been recorded, illustrate it as well. A portable video tape camera is proving very useful because the "stories" really flow out after they have seen themselves going on an excursion on television. Some very good follow-up Art and Craft lessons have occurred after films, particularly those from the Australian Council for Children's Films and Television. Having a *tjilpi** come into the school and tell the children stories about the old days proved profitable also. Two additional bonuses of this approach appear to be an improvement in attendance and the videotapes attract interested parents to the school.

EXCURSIONS AND CAMPS

For "environmental reading", trips away from the reserve are essential experiences. Here we are building upon the child's experiences regularly. A five hundred mile bus trip to Adelaide was a new experience for some of the children, as was the camp they attended after arriving. They had never been on a train before, or been inside a factory or a television station or a host of other things that city folk take for granted. Meeting Aboriginal children from all over the state at the camp proved of great benefit to them socially also. Having another Aboriginal school group from 450 miles away stay at this school for a few days and join us on some excursions also proved a popular topic to talk about, write about and read about.

.....

* grey headed old man

Canoeing, going out to a shipwreck in a tugboat, being shown over a helicopter, a microwave station, a tuna boat and visiting a seal colony are just a few of many other learning situations where the classroom has been the wider environment.

The Language Experience Approach has provided numerous opportunities for the children to think, speak, listen, react, read, share, be listened to and acquire modified forms of language. It has also provided opportunities for the introduction of word attack skills to be done in a more meaningful context. The eight stimulus interest areas mentioned are only those which we have found to be useful guides and it is natural that headings would differ in each school. However, I believe several of the self-concept area headings could not be left out of any language experience approach to the teaching of reading. The children have gained a great deal through this experience-based learning program.

.....

TREAT YOURSELF TO

A READING AND WRITING EXPLOSION



G.H. Edwards,
Principal,
Yarrabah S.S.,
Via Cairns.

Engaged as we are in the essential task of assisting Aboriginal children to decode and encode a language which presents many problems to them, it behoves us to strive for the one aspect that many teachers - particularly those new to the field of Aboriginal education, and those charged with the teaching of reading to our school beginners - appear to miss. The reference, of course, is to relevancy.

How many of us, in retrospect, have been guilty of peddling irrelevant or "foreign" reading materials during our careers? Are we