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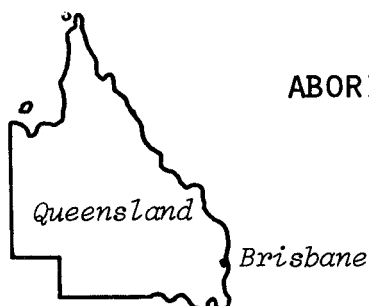
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Let me add that this is not in place of my reading program, which is dictated by school policy. This is in addition to our normal English program, and we do a story every couple of days. I am greatly assisted by having a helpful, motherly, teaching assistant in the room, who encourages the shy ones and smoothes over any momentous difficulties such as Cindy wanting to keep her word a secret and refusing to part with it.

The great benefits from this are the increased confidence of the children when they read, and the massive increases in the vocabulary that the child is interested in, and hence remembers. It is an enjoyable activity for all of us, and, for a child struggling elsewhere in the school system, a chance to succeed in a non-threatening activity. Also, this sense of success carries over to other activities.

If nothing else, I'll go down in history as the teacher who encouraged stories about Abba, and the Six Million Dollar Man!

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ABORIGINALS AND READING

*John Salmond,
Education Department,
Brisbane

For some time it has been obvious to teachers of Aboriginal children that the schools have been failing their young clients. This failure is nowhere more apparent than in reading. Comments such as the following one from Fleming (1974:49) are by no means isolated or solely applicable to his Western Australian Aboriginal situation. He says,

"...we have a reading problem in the 11-14 year group. Some of these children have failed to reach any standard of reading competence and coupled with this deficiency have a dislike for any form of reading at all."

*Formerly Mililingimbi, N.T.

These sentiments are echoed by Christie (1976:18) when talking about a large group of Aboriginal infant children and their reading performance.

Recent empirical evidence confirms what these writers have to say and indicates that the problem affects not only tribal Aboriginals but, to a lesser extent, non-tribal Aboriginals. The following table (Bourke and Parkin 1977:15) indicates how low their reading performance is in comparison with Australian children overall. The Aboriginal students in Group 1 are tribal Aboriginals living in the Northern Territory and attending predominantly Aboriginal schools. Those Aboriginal students in Group 2 are those who form a minority in schools throughout Australia and include part-Aboriginals.

Table 1.
Performance on Newspaper Reading
of Students Aged 10 Years.
Percentage correct.

Task	Aboriginal Students		Australia
	Group 1	Group 2	
Item 20. Reading a timetable to locate information	19%	79%	94%
Item 26 Comprehending the literal meaning of what is read	13%	70%	80%
Item 28 Deriving the inferential meaning of a passage	7%	36%	57%
Average	13%	62%	77%

The results of this survey for fourteen year old students show a slightly better performance (see Bourke & Parkin, 1977:16) but basically it presents the same bleak picture when the age factor is taken into consideration. This overall reading disability is not confined to newspaper reading, but reading in general (see Bourke & Parkin, 1977:14). For tribal Aboriginals in the Northern Territory, only some 20% do not need some form of remedial instruction, in the opinions of their teachers. (Bourke & Parkin 1977:11). In their summary and conclusion, Bourke and Parkin have the following to say:

"The overall performance of students at Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory on the tasks set in the Reading and Numeration Tests was very low indeed.

For most tasks only a small minority of these students gave the correct answer to items."

They also observe that while those Aboriginal students who form a minority in schools have a higher performance, they are still from 15% to 25% below the overall Australian samples in performance. (Bourke & Parkin, 1977:22-23)

Reasons for this poor performance in reading and indeed in school work generally, are not hard to find. The major one for most of the children in Aboriginal communities is that of language. Either English is a completely foreign tongue to them, or they speak a dialect of English. Douglas (1975:29) notes that the child who speaks little or no English when he starts school, takes up to two years before he knows enough to understand what the teacher is trying to teach him. By that time the child probably dislikes English and this, no doubt, has a disastrous effect on motivation towards reading in English. The children who use a dialect of English experience similar problems for, as Dwyer (1974(a):14) states,

"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 then, that the reading problem among Aborigines can be partly attributed to a communication problem. (Dwyer 1974(b):14)

However, it would be naive to believe that simply teaching Aborigines good English would overcome the problems. The fact that they are culturally different has major implications for the types of reading programs offered to them, and indeed, for the types of attitudes we bring to the situation. Watts (1974:164-165) maintains that there must be an orientation to cultural difference rather than to a cultural deficit, since it will require the school to courteously and realistically accept the child as he is, and his home and community as emotionally and cognitively significant to him. It is unfortunate that in the past there has been a strong imposition of European-style programs and methods of teaching Aborigines, with little or no thought being given to their unique and special needs. (Batchelor, 1975:9) It is even more unfortunate that in many places this still goes on.

However, efforts to take into consideration such factors as language and cultural differences in reading programs for Aborigines are now becoming more common. Two major approaches to meet these

types of problems can be isolated. The first is the use of vernacular languages to teach initial literacy within the wider concept of a bi-lingual, bi-cultural program.

The major impetus for this approach has been the findings of a number of researchers into the most effective language of instruction for beginning reading. Modiano, (1974:162) working with Indians in Southern Mexico, found that the vernacular was much more effective than Spanish and led to greater competence in the national language than if Spanish were used from the beginning. Four major advantages for the use of the vernacular as the vehicle for initial reading among Mexican-Indian students were found to be:

1. The children suffered less initial discouragement due to the lack of understanding a strange vocabulary.
2. They maintained a greater interest because the language was familiar.
3. They underwent an unprejudiced transition into Spanish because their own language was not disparaged.
4. Overall they gained in confidence and in enthusiasm for further learning.

(Kilham, 1971:207)

Hoping for similar outcomes, literacy acquisition in the vernacular programs have been set up in South Australia and the Northern Territory. Smaller projects have also begun in Queensland and Western Australia. The programs set up in the Northern Territory and Queensland have based their approach to literacy in the vernacular on the work of Sarah Gudschinsky. This scheme is highly structured, using elements of both reading methods and parts of many approaches, but it is basically an analytical rather than a synthetic approach. (Gudschinsky, 1973:25)

The bilingual approach has run into many problems. Of these, the production of literature in the various vernaculars has proved to be a major stumbling block. Not only is it slow, but also very expensive. (Christie, 1977:31). The use of the Gudschinsky method has been found to be a stumbling block for many children, which is not surprising, since it was actually designed for adults. To help overcome this, a language experience approach in the vernacular has proved successful with many children. (Christie, 1976)

The problem of training Aboriginal teachers to teach literacy in their own language is a major one. Penny, (1976:43) observes:

"Pitjantjatjara adults should not be expected to be able to teach children efficiently to be literate in Pitjantjatjara just because it is the common vernacular of teacher and pupils. We do not permit people literate in English to teach in schools just because they can read and write it."

It is this lack of proper training which has made the bilingual program difficult in various places throughout Australia.

Yet for all the problems literacy in the vernacular presents, it holds a great deal of hope. The program is only in its infancy and it is to be expected that there will be teething problems. Reading, (1975:59) mirrors the hope for this program in reviewing the film, *Not to Lose You My Language*, when he says,

"The bilingual program should not be seen simply as the most effective way of teaching English to Aboriginal people. We came away with the 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."

The other approach to the problem which is having some success involves the use of language experience programs for teaching reading in English to Aboriginal children. This is being used in a determined effort to make reading more meaningful and interesting to the children. Basically it involves the teacher and children in producing their own reading materials based on the children's in-school and out-of-school experiences. (Edwards, 1976:34). By doing this the problem of the unsuitability of white middle-class orientated readers is overcome, and reading, hopefully, becomes highly relevant.

This approach has particular relevance for bridging the gap between Aboriginal English and standard English. (Fleming, 1976:28) and between those literate in the vernacular transferring to English. (Lister, 1973, Batchelor, 1975). It helps smooth out the problems of decoding, because before any attempt to decode is made, the group or child encodes it first using the language structures they know and use in every-day speech. Using such an approach forces the teacher to take into account the culture of the child and to accept the child as he is.

Interest areas in a language experience approach cover an infinite area. Rogers (1976) lists such things as the community, local wildlife, seasonal events, personal self-concept areas, the home, the school and many more as being suitable areas to explore using this approach. Edwards (1976:36) provides a further extensive list. The use of photography has been found to be of particular value in motivating the children and centering interest. (Fleming, 1976:26-27)

Rogers (1976:33) sums up the advantages of such schemes well when he says:

"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."

Because the bilingual and the language experience approaches to reading have only recently been inaugurated among Aborigines, it is too early to predict their efficacy in improving reading skills. However, it can be said that they represent a real effort to overcome the problems and give hope to both pupils and teachers.

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