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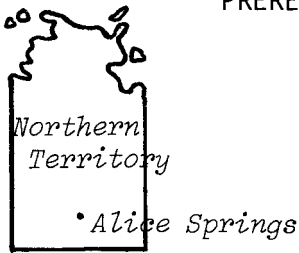
This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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PREREQUISITES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING



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Today, as never before, the teacher has access to an extremely wide array of materials claiming to foster language development. The language in this context can mean anything from oral language learning to appraisal skills for English literature.

This paper, however, will deal specifically with the acquisition of oral language and can be applied either to a first or second language learning context.

As teachers, we will have a personal expectation of the level of competence to be achieved by our students. Our expectations may decrease or increase according to the responses of our students over a period of time.

One may wonder if our levels of expectation related to the acquiring of English language skills by our Aboriginal students have declined over the years. Have we become overawed by the problems confronting our Aboriginal students in learning English? Why should this be? Can we ensure that our students will acquire a firm grasp of oral English to such a degree that they can express their ideas and communicate successfully?

I believe the prerequisites for language learning have been largely overlooked; instead of occupying the philosophical base for all language programs, they have been neglected to too great an extent. The result is that our language programs have produced results far below expectations.

It has been said that "language is learnt through interaction based on a relationship." It is within this statement that the prerequisites for language learning exist. Firstly :

INTERACTION

Interaction, or two-way communication, occurs in many forms and at many different levels of intensity. For example, interaction can be shallow, albeit functional, e.g. buying groceries

across a counter; or it can be deep and emotional and sometimes irrational, e.g. an argument between husband and wife.

It has been found that the type of interaction evident between many parents and their children is of a type that most successfully develops language within that child. The components of this type of interaction are:

- a) initial period of in-put - stimulation;
- b) child utterances that may or may not be referring to any object or event;
- c) parent responding to child by repeating utterances (in early stages only), then re-modelling utterance into correct form (often referred to as expansion) then supplying further stimulation around subject in question (often referred to as extension);
- d) eventually child will respond once again, and cycle continues.

For a baby, the interaction may take this form:

Child : "Car" (pointing to car).

Parent: "Car, look at the car." (An expansion that may represent child's true intent). "I bet it can go fast." (Extension of a type that child will eventually respond to.)

Notice that formal correction does not exist. The parent accepts the child's attempt at communication. However, the parent is supplying the correct expanded forms, allowing the child to realize the differences himself.

As the child grows older, the complexity of sentence types increases. The pace at which this occurs is often staggering, as any parent of an average two-year-old knows.

Many parents provide stimulating environments that a child can respond to, and therefore set the interaction cycle in motion. Children will naturally have little to say in an unstimulating environment, and as a result, develop language at a slower rate.

It has also been noticed that the subject of interaction is often child-based. As children are naturally self-interested, their talk will often revolve around themselves and areas they can identify. Such things as emotions, needs, wants and desires can be discussed. Not only does the child learn a language through such topics, but he learns about himself also. Obviously, motivation is an important consideration here, and we must consider heavily the motivation and stimulation offered through many formal methods of language teaching.

This brings us to the other factor:

THE RELATIONSHIP

Again, a relationship can be either shallow or deep. What we are concerned with is what type offers the optimum climate for language learning in the classroom.

When interaction takes place without directly involving correction ("say it like this" etc.) and encompasses subjects that each person can identify with, the relationship between the two people is free to develop. As the relationship deepens, so too do the parameters of discussion and the depth of the discussion. This in turn develops the relationship.

A relationship cannot develop without interaction. Interaction cannot develop without a relationship. Marriage guidance counsellors have been saying this for years.

Why does a deepening relationship affect a learner's ability to acquire language? One reason is that a relationship provides the necessary intrinsic motivation essential for language learning. A relationship supplies a need to respond, to react, to communicate in ever increasing amounts to another person. What type of attitudes to learning in general might be displayed by a child experiencing such an environment?

Teachers in Aboriginal schools have noted the inappropriateness of many materials. Some materials depict circumstances outside the realm of an Aboriginal child's experience. The child cannot relate to the circumstances depicted and therefore feels less inclined to verbalise about them. Obviously the purpose of such material is defeated.

Tough (1976) states emphatically that :

...these programmes fail to tackle the basic problems which some children have. Language is not best seen as a set of skills to be established by drilling; this is to neglect the essential character of language which is its potential for expressing meaning.

The materials of the programmed language kits may hold his attention, and give him practice in using particular linguistic structures, but there seems little to suggest that it will carry over into other learning. (p.14)

Obviously, there is a great deal of difference between intrinsic motivation of a child to learn language as compared to a child -

...passively learning the structure of language (when) his main incentive to learn is praise from the teacher. The use of language is not likely to become more than knowing prescribed answers under these circumstances, and when the teacher is not there to listen and praise, it seems possible that the child will feel little need to use these skills.
(Tough, 1976, p.15)

While not implying that materials should not be employed, the point of this article is to demonstrate to the reader that dependence on such materials achieves little, if used in an environment devoid of interaction and a growing relationship.

These are the prerequisites for language learning.

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REFERENCES

Tough, J.: *Listening to Children Talking: A Guide to the Appraisal of Children's Use of Language*. Ward Lock Educational, London, 1976.

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