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TEACHING READING AND WRITING TO OLDER ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

R. Lipscombe

Teaching reading and writing to older Aboriginal children can be one of the most satisfying teaching tasks in the Northern Territory. Most of these students have a culturally different background from the teacher's. Their perception of a topic therefore may be quite different from the teacher's. A good teacher will value this difference and use it:

- . as a starting point to teach the student about living in a bicultural world;
- . to broaden the teachers own outlook of the world. These differences can add a new dimension to a good teacher's thinking.

LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE

The language experience approach seems to be one of the most effective methods to use with students. This approach relies upon the use of language arising from personal experience. It involves a meaningful integration and development of thinking, talking, writing and reading.

Encourage the students to talk about their sport; they can report on games they have played or watched. Ask them to tell about/write about themselves to include in a sports book. Collect books from the weekend sporting fixtures and use them as reading material. Comprehension exercises, sequencing, language structure, grammar etc., are more meaningful if they are based on these articles.

One teacher had tremendous success with all students writing their own biographies. My own class wrote stories about their home communities; these were displayed at the local Tourist Bureau and attracted much interest. (*Better Reading/Writing Now* contains 100 ways to publish children's writing: available from P.E.T.A., C/- Business Manager, Epping Public School, Epping, 2121 (\$4-\$5)).

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The rationale behind the success of the language experience approach is:

1. What a child thinks about he can talk about (or paint or draw).
2. What he can talk about he can write about (or someone else can write for him).
3. He can usually read anything he writes about; we have found also that our pupils enjoy trying to read what other students have written as well.
4. It is much easier to reinforce the skills of comprehension through personal writing.

One method of organizing this approach is for the teacher to introduce the topic naturally during the morning talk. She may read an article about a football game, or relate an anecdote about a game she watched. Allow the students to draw a picture about the topic before they start writing (not all of them will want to - leave it up to them). The more capable group will probably draw a picture and then get on with their story. This group can have free reading/tutor systems when they finish. Try to get them to proof-read their own stories. With the majority of the class encourage them to talk about their picture and begin writing. With the really slow group get them to give you a sentence to write on their picture. They copy this once and then attempt to write a similar sentence substituting a noun, adjective, phrase etc.

All children have access to dictionaries. I recommend the following:

An Easy Dictionary. Schofield & Sims Ltd., plus one workbook for same;

Chambers Young Set Dictionaries, 1 2 3 4.

As well as dictionaries, each child has a 'spelling paper'. Encourage them to try to write the words needed on this paper. If time permits, tick each part they have written correctly and change the 'wrong' letters. It is necessary that they are shown that (usually) most of their words are correct. The more able groups write the words they needed help with in their dictionary note books. If the students are giving/asking for really interesting

words I note them down and put them on display. Try to correct as much as possible of their written work with them.

Sometimes I ask them to rewrite their stories, especially if they are going on display. Children should have the opportunity to see their work in corrected form. Point out acceptable forms of spoken and written English. I do not believe in accepting wrong structures and I am sure the children do not want errors on display either.

With my below average (!!) group I found the following idea very valuable. After they had written (or I had written) their story they then wrote each word in their dictionary notebook. If they had already used the word in a previous story, they simply put a dot to show that they had used it again. Thus pages in their dictionary might appear like this:

aA	tT	sS
a.....	the.....	some.....
aeroplane..	Tom..	sand..
are....	tomato.	Susie.
Australia.	there.....	sat...
at.....	time...	silver.

In effect you are building up the 'sight word' list. You will find that they grow in confidence in their own ability to read and write when they realize that they have a stock of 'known' words.

Lots of teachers still rely heavily upon 'phonics' for the teaching of reading and spelling: if you are determined to place an emphasis on phonics could I suggest you adopt this suggestion - before you throw yourself into phonics *make sure you have an adequate listening program in operation*. Also make sure you understand thoroughly the significance of all types of hearing loss.

You can take all your 'phonic' words direct from their individual dictionaries: compound words and syllabification exercises are more meaningful if the words are known.

Learn all you can about the Language Experience, Break-through to Literacy, Organic approach. When you have time, I suggest you read:

Harris, S.: *Culture and Learning : Tradition and Education in N.E. Arnhem Land*. N.T. Department of Education, 1981.

Fader, D.: *Hooked on Books*. New York. Pergamon Press, 1969.

Kohl, H.: *Reading - How to*. Penguin Education.

Christie, M.: What to do until the reading specialist comes.
The Aboriginal Child at School, Vol. 6 No. 3, 1978.

READING FOR A PURPOSE

We must give students a purpose (one which they can appreciate) for both reading and writing. The following lists, which have been compiled by Libby Pearce, show some of the purposes of reading and writing. (N.B. Reading and writing for leisure/pleasure should not be overlooked).

SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR READING

- . Reading labels - on foodstuffs, clothing etc. to ensure correct or appropriate article is purchased.
- . Reading instructions on labels, e.g. cake mixes, packet foods etc. Also washing or cleaning instructions on clothing.
- . Reading instructions, dosages etc. on medicines.
- . Reading assembly instructions for do-it-yourself kits etc.
- . Reading instructions on paint cans, garden sprays etc. to be able to calculate amount required.
- . Map reading.
- . Reading manuals of instructions for the care and maintenance of appliances and motor vehicles.
- . Reading traffic signs and motoring regulations.
- . Reading hire purchase agreements and contracts.
- . Reading minutes of a meeting.
- . Reading insurance brochures etc.
- . Reading advertisements and mail order catalogues.
- . Reading sewing and knitting instructions and patterns.

- . Reading recipes for cooking.
- . Reading plans as a basis for construction.
- . Reading and interpreting telegrams.
- . Reading business letters, graphs, tables etc. Official forms, e.g. tax returns, census forms, applications for benefits and bank statements.

SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR WRITING

- . Filling in mail order catalogue forms.
- . Writing mail order letters.
- . Writing telegrams.
- . Filling in banking forms, e.g. deposits, withdrawal, application for cheque account.
- . Writing simple business letters.
- . Keeping a simple credit/debit ledger.
- . Filling in official forms e.g. tax returns, census forms, application for benefits etc.
- . Writing instructions for another person to follow, e.g. directions to find a place, job routines etc.
- . Writing duty statements.
- . Writing minutes of a meeting.
- . Writing accident reports, eye witness accounts etc.
- . Writing statutory declarations.

With a bit of thought these purposes can be made interesting for our students. A whole unit of work can be centred around an order from D.J.'s. Imagine the excitement of receiving a new blouse from D.J.'s in Sydney.

I can hear a few settlement dwellers saying, "Yes, and imagine the disappointment when you find it's the wrong colour or the wrong size."

SPELLING

I believe that the teaching of spelling should still have a place in the Language Arts. We should systematically teach the students to recognize and spell the Dolch words. Research has shown that these words make up 50-70% of all of the words our students have to read and consequently spell. The methods following are those used in most standard spelling schemes, e.g. EPIC.

Words taught in formal spelling lessons can be obtained from many sources, e.g.:

- . common errors in weekly/daily stories.
- . all subject areas of the curriculum.
- . topical words - I am doing student driver words and words connected with the 'office' because this is the unit we are studying.
- . all words connected with a sense, e.g. sound - pop, band, laugh, roar, whine etc.
- . a graded list.

METHODS OF TEACHING A WORD

- a) Pre-test all students.
- b) Write each word on the board, say it clearly and carefully, use it in a simple sentence. Point out any interesting feature, i.e. phonic features, shape feature.
- c) Tell students to write the word then they check it while you spell it to them.
- d) Rub out the word and tell them to write it down again and get their partner to check it.
- e) Write the word in a sentence to illustrate its meaning.
- f) Students make up their own sentence using the word.

WHAT THE STUDENT SHOULD DO.

- a) Look at the word.
- b) Say it yourself.
- c) Write the word and check it.
- d) Underline any hard spots.

- e) Spell the word, letter by letter, to yourself.
- f) Picture the spelling of the word.
- g) Write the word in syllables (if possible).
- h) Write the word in a sentence.
- i) Build other words from it.

ACTIVITIES TO REINFORCE WORDS

1. Write down the big word in your list which has this small word in it, e.g.:

ear all each

2. Missing letter. Find these words in your list, e.g.:

_ _own _ske_ c_ _led

3. Write all your list words in alphabetical order.

4. Find these things in your list and write them down, e.g.

3 colours

3 words that tell us about the weather.

5. Can you find these words in your list? e.g.:

1)

	o			
--	---	--	--	--

1. Someone who looks after you.

6. Jumbled words. Find these words in your list, e.g.

niogg sakem

7. How many new words can you make by joining the words on the left to the words on the right?

in	to
on	where
to	one
bed	thing
some	day
every	room

8. Secret Message. These words are all mixed up. Work out the secret message by putting them in the right order:

the are All Yirara going clever Drive the
students to In.

9. Find opposites to these words in your list and write the pairs of words down, e.g.:

always n _____

black wh _____

10. Write a short story using some of your list words.
11. How many new words can you make by adding these heads (write down several prefixes, e.g. un, re) or these tails (write down several suffixes e.g. ful, ment) to your spelling list.
12. Make two (or three or four) lists of words. Put the words with only one syllable in the first list and those with two syllables in the second list and so forth.
13. Check your dictionary and write two sentences for each word to show that the word can have two different meanings.
14. Make new words by filling in the empty squares:

loud	louder	loudest
------	--------	---------

clear		
-------	--	--

15. Complete these sentences by using a list word:

The cattle () water to drink.

16. Say these words. Write two more words that rhyme:

sound ground

17. Change mea in measure to make new words commencing with
plea trea.

18. Add er, ed, where possible to:
being travel

19. What list words can you make out of these letters. You
can use each letter several times:

r e m p a l

20. Yirara College - how many words can you make out of this?

N.B. Remember Aboriginal students usually have well developed
visual skills and good visual memories. Use all sorts of
visual presentations in preference to auditory stimuli in
these lessons.

We should take account of the way the Aborigines have traditionally learnt their skills - this has an extremely important bearing on our future survival in Aboriginal schools. We can successfully follow their methods in many subjects, e.g. spelling, maths, visual perception and awareness. Stephen Harris has written a fascinating account of the Aboriginal learning context.¹ Try to get hold of a copy. It should be *compulsory* reading for all teachers of Aboriginal children.

READING/WRITTEN EXPRESSION IDEAS

Alphabet Ideas

Try to foster a 'love affair' with words. Try a group (class) story with words using each letter of the alphabet, e.g.

All big crocodiles dislike eating five girls hurriedly
in June. etc.

Class A B C

Students use people, things, actions from their own classrooms (or school) to make up an A B C.

A is for acting

D is for David

G is for good

B is for bell

E is for everyone

H is for home time

C is for class

F is for Freddy

I is for itchy

¹ See reference p.5.

Expression of a Thought or Feeling

Read a poem or a short story illustrating someone's thoughts or feelings. Ask students to think of a time when they were lonely, happy etc. and write about it.

Write down some things you'd like to know but are too frightened (ashamed) to ask.

Food

Plan a menu for a special event. Write out a menu for a cafe or restaurant. Draw the clothes you'd wear. Who would you take with you? Do a food alphabet.

Cartoons

Talking cartoons - students do a cartoon on the language master card. They then record the dialogue on the language master.

Conversation bubbles to go with a set cartoon or draw a picture to go with a conversation bubble. Sequence cartoons.

Class News

Students help the teacher to compose a daily news item. When sufficient items have been collected the teacher has them typed and roneoed for each pupil.

Weak class - write the news with several words omitted. A supplementary word list could be given to help the students choose (and spell) the missing words, e.g.

Today is It is We will have.....
David saw five in the lagoon near the school.

Word bank: fish, sunny, raining, Friday, crocodiles, Reading, Art.

News Clippings

Clip suitable headings from newspapers, magazines, pamphlets etc. Students have to write a story to go with the heading for a newsheet. Have a suitable 'spread' of topics, i.e. sporting events, crime, women's news etc.

Life Story

Ask each student to think about his life story being made into a film. Ask the class to think about the important things which have happened in their life. You could give them 'leading' questions as a guide, e.g. Where were you born? Tell me about your family.

Staff Book

Students arrange to interview each staff member. To help them initially you can give them a prepared set of questions to ask. These can be collated into a reading book. A Polaroid photograph would add interest.

Visitor's Book

Interview or summary of short speech on visitor's home, family, job etc.

Words

Talk to the students about all the things you need words for, e.g. pop songs, picture shows, radio, television, school, sports rules, telephones, you sometimes have to talk at the store, or at the clinic if you are sick.

Tell your students to pretend they can't talk (or speak English) and ask them how could they show a European or someone from another tribe that:

- . They are hungry and need something to eat.
- . They want to join in and play basketball or football.
- . They are lost and can't find their own people.
- . They want to buy a can of Fanta and a boiled egg.

Try to find out which words the children feel are important for them to know - see how their list compares with your basic survival list.

Signs

Draw each sign the students might see in their communities. Ask the students what each sign means. See if they can design

some 'fun' signs, e.g. "Goannas cross here", or "Danger - sharks swim here".

Ask your students to teach you some of their own sign language.

Who Am I?

Write five clues about yourself -

1. I am _____
2. I have _____
3. I can _____
4. I live _____
5. I like _____

We must take note of their interests, e.g. sport, pop stars, local activities. Use the local environment to teach the skills needed. Take 'a reading walk' around your settlement. You will be surprised how much 'purposeful' reading you will find.

The activities already mentioned could all be expanded to make a unit of work similar to the Pop Star unit.

Pop Stars

This topic is almost unlimited in the variety of motivational lessons which it generates. Level of teacher expectation will need to be adjusted to individual abilities.

Activity 1

Collect stories and pictures from newspapers, weekly magazines, pop magazines etc. These could be pasted onto light card if you intend to use them for a variety of activities.

If you have an old alphabetical expanding file you could have the students file the stories in alphabetical order; or put them in alphabetical order and keep them in two-hole folders. Instead of filing them alphabetically the students could file them according to a time - line schedule, or a popularity rating

(this leads to lots of 'animated' discussion - quite possibly the students could conduct a survey among class members to determine the popularity rating. Votes could be awarded to each pop group by the students and the rating worked out on a preferential voting system. Parallels could be drawn between this activity and the way elections are conducted).

Many comprehension exercises could be based on the information contained in these articles. Make sure that your comprehension exercises encompass the whole range of comprehension, i.e.-

- a) Literal (most basic level where students only have to give you back the information contained in the article);
- b) Interpretive level which is based upon -
 - 1. data provided by the author,
 - 2. logic, and (in the case of divergent inferences)
 - 3. readers' imagination.
- c) Critical level of comprehension involves the student in evaluating and judging the material contained in the articles. As with all levels of comprehension this skill can and *should* be taught by the teacher. To help develop the skill of critical comprehension the following activities are useful, e.g. panel discussions, whole class or group discussions, evaluation of relevant reviews of the pop group, advertising blurbs related to their performances, editorials, letters to the editor etc., comparison of facts from different sources, e.g. information put out by pop group managers, recording companies, critics, fans, national magazines, etc.
- d) Creative comprehension is normally quite a difficult level to teach. Nevertheless this particular topic seems to 'lend' itself very well to creative exercises. e.g. What would you do if you belonged to the Bee Gees? How would you dress if you were a member of a Punk Rock group? etc.

I had 'less able' students copy out short articles about pop stars; they had substituted their own (or a friend's) name in place of the pop star's name. This exercise has helped train students in acceptable sentence structure as well as being a powerful motivation for them to read their own and their friends' work. These stories could be bound together as a 'Class Pop Star Magazine'.

Activity 2

Lots of spontaneous 'talk' was generated during a lesson in which we made up a pop star alphabet. This exercise helped many of the students to visually fix the position of letters in the alphabet, e.g. :

Abba
Bee Gees, Boney M, Boyfriends
C
David Bowie, Dragon
Elton John, Elvis Presley
Faces
etc.

An additional activity in this area is to take one letter, e.g. 'S' and arrange all the pop groups which start with that letter in alphabetic order, i.e.

Sex Pistols
Sherbert
Starjets
Stevie Wonder
Sweet
etc.

Following this exercise you could tell students to select a pop group, write this down and see how many groups they can incorporate in the following way:

Stevie Wonder
O
D
S
T
E
W
A
R
The Darts
w
e
e
t

I have found that this exercise has led to a great awareness of sound/symbol relationship.

Students can even write 'off beat' poetry (!!) by working with a Pop Star's name, e.g.:

Sex Pistols	- Noun	Dragon
Sing	- Verb	Drones
Savagely	- Adverb	Drearily

or a Word Crocodile based on pop group names -

Monkees
Kiss
Sweet
Elton John etc.

Activity 3

Select one of the current pop tunes and stencil enough copies for your class. I have used the words of pop songs to increase students' awareness of words with multiple meanings; we have studied the compound words, grammatical structures and word families contained in the song. Comprehension exercises based on the words of the song have 'uncovered' interesting attitudes to social issues. Some of the 'folk' songs can be used to develop 'caring' attitudes. Many students have never looked beneath the superficial 'surface' meanings of songs. By encouraging 'in-depth' analysis of their own 'pop-culture' we can hopefully inculcate an in-depth analysis of everything they read and experience.

One of my classes compiled a Dictionary of Slang from pop songs. Many lunch hours were spent debating (to put it politely) the meanings of particular words. These sessions led to an increased awareness of the 'power' of language. The same group developed their own 'Class Slang List' and took great delight in 'not being understood' by their peers in other classes. Fortunately they did not use 'their' slang with other teachers on the staff. Believe it or not, a 'love of language' *can* be born by using this approach.

Activity 4

Writing letters to pop groups has always been a popular activity with my students. Several years ago we decided to make up some questionnaires to send to some pop groups. Initially we compiled a class one which we wrote on the board. In the next lesson students compiled their own list of questions to a group of their own choice (some judicious censoring might be needed with

less inhibited students). We were fortunate to receive replies from a few groups (send a stamped addressed envelope and you *may* be lucky.)

Another interesting lesson developed out of the above; small groups within the class were formed to research a group of their choice. They then filled in a duplicate questionnaire form as best they could. Several groups were able to compare their answers with questionnaires returned by the groups.

Each class group selected a spokesperson to be 'interviewed' by a student. The spokesperson pretended to be a pop star which his/her group had researched. These interviews were taped. Students quickly became aware of their excessive use of the meaningless phrase 'you know'. These sessions led to a definite improvement in clarity of speech, organisation of answers and (thankfully) a marked decrease in the use of 'y'know'. Several weeks later I used these taped interviews to test students recall of facts. Students were surprised at the discrepancy between what they 'remembered' and the played-back interview. We then developed a series of ways in which we could select important visual and auditory information and methods by which we could 'learn' this information and recall it more easily. I was optimistic enough to hope that these methods would also be used by the students to help them in their 'more academic' lessons.

Activity 5

Each student selects a pseudonym and writes a 'Dorothy Dix' type letter to a pop group asking for advice about a real (or imagined) problem they are facing. Ask the class to appoint a small group to answer these letters. These can be displayed in the classroom. I have been amazed at some of the 'teenage insights' contained in some of the replies. Change the 'answering group' occasionally if your class want to continue this activity. This type of activity helps students to see that other students have to face similar problems. Disputes regarding advice have paved the way for many lessons (informal) on problems related to drugs, sex, food, health, appearance, romance etc. Worries about physical and mental differences, discrimination (age, sex, appearance, taste, socio-economic class, religion, political opinions, race, residential area etc), relationships with parents, siblings, peers, opposite sex, other adults etc., have all been discussed at length. More mature attitudes regarding tolerance and prejudice have developed.

These spontaneous, informal discussions on the above issues have proved more worthwhile than the most assiduously planned lesson.

(Warning - High School teachers will need to be prepared to defend this approach. Make *sure* you are aware of the actual 'learning' that is going on. Judicious questions can maximise the benefits of spontaneous communication).

Activity 6

Ask students to design an interesting record cover for a pop song. More able groups can often design a cover using words arranged in an interesting visual way, e.g. for the song "Money Money Money".

Activity 7

Musically inclined pupils might be interested in writing a report on the instruments used by a group. Research into ways in which certain instruments have changed over the years could be an interesting exercise. One of my classes became interested in the Melbourne based 'Bushwhackers' group. They studied their unusual instruments and made up their own set (with variations). Subsequently these were donated to a local primary school.

Activity 8

Dramatise/tape a "This is your life" program.

Activity 9

On many occasions we have used pop song lyrics as the basis for our study of 'poetry' (a painless way to encourage students to study poetical notions).

Activity 10

Collect several old accommodation books. Select a pop group and tell students to find them suitable accommodation. Selected accommodation must meet the following criteria, e.g. it must be within 12kms of Adelaide, must have a spa pool, colour TV, 24 hour room service etc. Students then select about five motels/hotels which meet these requirements.

Use of pop-songs, stars and groups is only limited by the teacher's ingenuity and imagination. If your group is more interested in sport, politics or business, you could substitute the topic and adapt your activities accordingly.

N.B.

In learning to use and fully understand English your Aboriginal student may have to learn not only to speak in a different way, but also to think and act in ways which are different from those of his people (i.e. his society - the way he knows). Be very careful in the activities that you introduce that you are not unwittingly undermining your student's faith in his own way of living.

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