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RESEARCH REPORT

THEY TAUGHT ME ALL I KNEW

Dr B. Drinkwater

I keep six honest serving men
 (They taught me all I knew)
 Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who

Kipling

I have been visiting Aboriginal communities, over a number of years, examining differences in learning styles between Aboriginal and white children. The reason for this is that today, and unfortunately for some time to come, most of the people who teach Aboriginal children in schools are white. And most white teachers are trained to teach according to the cultural traditions of white society, and according to the evidence gathered by behavioural scientists over many years, of the ways in which white children learn. This is not necessarily appropriate training for the teaching of Aboriginal children, but so far there is little evidence available to white teachers about Aboriginal learning and teaching styles.

As the Kipling quotation above suggests, and as most educators in this country would agree, European children should be encouraged to ask questions freely of their teachers. In practice, however, most of our formal teaching systems are geared to obtain answers rather than questions from students. There is little evidence as to the readiness of children to ask questions of adults, or of possible social-class or ethnic minority differences in question-asking skills.

We do have some evidence, however, that Australian Aboriginal children tend to employ non-verbal rather than verbal information-seeking strategies when interacting with whites. McElwain and Kearney (1973) note that children have tended to search their faces for clues rather than scanning stimuli or asking questions when they are unsure how to respond in a testing situation.

* Dr Betty Drinkwater, Department of Behavioural Sciences,
 James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, 4811

Hamilton, in her study of child-rearing practices in a traditional Arnhem Land community, writes:

A striking feature of Anbara 3 and 4-year-olds is the lack of questions they ask...The Burara language has no single word for "why" and the question is so seldom asked by anyone, adult or child, that people have to think carefully before finding any expression for it, when specifically asked to do so.

(Hamilton, 1970, p.86).

Pierre Dasen goes further and claims that -

verbal exploration seems to be discouraged, and Aboriginal children do not, apparently, go through the period - well known to European parents - of asking 'why'. This is probably due to the cultural norm of accepting the laws of nature, the social customs, and the decisions of elders without question.

(Dasen, 1974, p.408).

One obvious way in which culture could shape children's facility with the verbal mode is through formalised learning settings such as the school. Another is through games and pastimes. Together with a Japanese colleague, Uriko Oshima, the present author devised a picture communication task (PCT) which could be administered to children from cultures which until relatively recently had no formalised education and quite elaborate non-verbal communication systems, (Polynesian Hawaii, and Aboriginal Australia), as well as to children from cultures which have had for centuries institutionalised methods of training at least some sections of their youth (Japan and European Australia). It was decided to examine the relationships between success in this referential communication task, skill in another verbal game, a shortened version of "Twenty Questions", and the ability to define and give examples of Riddles (see Drinkwater, in press).

Although the Australian Aboriginal and Polynesian Hawaiian children who took part in the study came from less traditional communities than those described by Hamilton, it was predicted that the long-term cultural effects of largely non-verbal learning and teaching systems would affect both the frequency and form of questions asked by these groups.

In the communication game, 8 to 9-year-old children are shown a number of pictures with a button under each which lights a small bulb when pushed. The children are asked to push the button under

a certain (target) picture. In some cases, the target is described fully. In others, much necessary information is omitted. For example, if I show eight pictures of planes and ask the children to push the button under the picture of the plane, they cannot know which button to push unless they ask for more information. If I tell them I want the picture of a Bush Pilot's plane on the airstrip at Aurukun, and there is only one picture like that, then they know just which button to push.

Middle-class European Australian and Japanese children asked more questions than did lower SES European Australian and Hawaiian children. Aboriginal children asked least questions of all, in the PCT and the Twenty Questions game. They also knew very few riddles.

Several authors (e.g. Krauss *et al.*, 1977) have commented on the fact that communication skills depend on many factors, including social interaction factors. The Aboriginal group was the only group tested by an adult of another race. Although the tester was of the same race as their teachers, it is possible that this factor created an inhibiting effect on the children's performance.

It was noted, however, that the Aboriginal children who had asked virtually no questions of any kind during the quasi-formal sessions, did not hesitate to ask the tester where she was staying, if she had any children, and so on. Thus there was no dearth of question-asking in informal interactions with the tester, and with other members of the community, including teachers. This discontinuity between adequate performance in informal situations and inadequate performance in a formal one bears a strong resemblance to that noted by Cole and Scribner (1974, p.178.) in their description of referential communication tasks among the Kpelle in Africa.

In an attempt to unscramble some of the social factors operating in the formal testing situation it was decided to carry out another study examining the effect of Race of Tester on Aboriginal children's performance on the PCT. An Aboriginal tester was to be used, and the test administered in an Aboriginal language.

The community which made possible this investigation was the Aurukun Shire on Cape York Peninsula. Aurukun is one of the most traditional of Queensland's Aboriginal communities, and has one of the few schools where a bilingual teaching program is in operation. The majority of the people speak Wik-Mungkan, either as their first language or as the local lingua franca. Children speak it in the playground and around the community, although the major part of the school program and associated activities are carried out in English.

Two female testers were used in the study. One was black and the other white. All the children aged between 8 and 9-years were allotted at random to each of the two testers. The group tested by the white tester took the test in English, while the group tested by the black tester took the test in Wik-Munkan.

There was no significant difference between groups. Once again, the great majority of the children guessed by pushing the button, without asking for more specific information where it was necessary. Only one child asked any questions on any item.

However, both testers and the present author found these self-same children spontaneously asking questions about personal matters in the testing room, as well as in the school and elsewhere in the community. Once again there was no lack of question-asking when the children really wanted to know something.

Overall then, Aboriginal children, from both high-contact and low-contact communities, asked fewest questions in the formal test situation. There are certainly cultural factors which suggest explanations for this fact. David Biernoff (1975) in commenting upon values of traditional Aboriginal Society which are virtually the opposite of those held by white Australians, notes that knowledge is not freely accessible, but rather restricted and controlled. It is the prerogative of age rather than youth. One might speculate that traditional respect for age and knowledge may mean that children are actively discouraged from questioning their elders about matters not specifically related to their own immediate needs and concerns.

A major concern of the Picture Communication Task was the children's coping strategies when they do not understand a message or instruction given to them by an adult. This is important to the school situation because it has implications for children's behaviour when they do not understand their teachers. As noted earlier, most white teachers would expect children to ask questions when in doubt.

Asking a question, however, is an indication that you don't know what to do. This could be a serious thing in a culture which teaches children in very small steps, so that they are protected from being asked to do a new thing until they are pretty sure to do it well. Aboriginal mothers seem to teach their children in this way. Other cultures, like many European cultures, believe that children learn by making mistakes. If children have been encouraged to try things even before they are ready they might be more prepared to be wrong, to admit they don't understand, and to ask questions of their elders. Both learning styles could be equally effective if

teachers and learners share the same cultural values. But if the teacher is working in one frame of reference and the child in another, then there is a serious mismatch. The white teacher would expect a child to ask questions if he or she did not understand, and the Aboriginal child would attempt to carry out the instruction immediately, using a "best guess" as to what was wanted.

Aboriginal children in the testing situation appeared to do just this. They pushed one button after another, and looked for feedback from the adults' faces.

There is nothing wrong with this method of finding out, so long as you can see the other person. Aboriginal people are noted for their skill in using many methods of communication in addition to words. White children would not understand the gestures, facial expressions, and body positions which have a wealth of meaning for Aboriginals. But today's Aboriginals often need to communicate with people they cannot see - by radio, or on the telephone, or in letters. If somebody were to send a radio message from Aurukun to Cairns, asking another person to bring back "a new part for the tractor", it is important that the other person should ask questions which would tell him exactly which part, what size, or what the measurements would have to be, otherwise he would be likely to bring back something that does not fit.

Aboriginal children certainly ask questions when they really want to find out about something. But school activities may not seem so important to them. Jerome Bruner (1979), a well known American educator, has said that he has never seen anyone improve in the art of question-asking by any means other than by asking questions. For this reason it is important that teachers consider ways in which they might increase verbal question-asking in the classroom. One method is through question-asking games. European children have been playing games like "Riddles" and "Twenty Questions" for many generations. So the asking of questions may not be such a worrisome thing to them, as it could be to Aboriginal children.

Every culture finds a way of communicating that is most effective for its own needs. But when different cultures are in contact, people need to be able to communicate across cultures, if misunderstandings are to be avoided. It is important for us all to know much more about each other's communication systems. It would be fun if Aboriginal children could teach their white teachers their skills in non-verbal communication!

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