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BUILDING A BRIDGE TO ENGLISH LITERACY IN ABORIGINAL BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

* B. Graham

A. FOUNDATIONS

The aim of bilingual education is to develop a person who can think, speak, read, write and act appropriately in the language and culture of both his home and the wider society. Therefore, although for sound educational reasons the first formal reading experiences of children in a bilingual program are provided in their mother-tongue and these activities are maintained and extended throughout the child's school life, at an appropriate time a bridge to English literacy needs to be built. Once this is done the world of English literature should be explored as far as is possible for each individual child. Sarah Gudschinsky stresses the importance of the addition of English literacy skills for pre-literate groups within a wider society when she reminds us that

people who are deprived of this opportunity will find it difficult to take their rightful place in modern society. (1973, p.138)

She has defined a literate person as one who

in language that he speaks, can read and understand anything he could have understood if it had been spoken to him and can write, so that it can be read, anything that he can say. (1973, p.5)

Bridging is the process of taking literacy skills developed in one language or dialect and applying them to another language or dialect, and it is based on the principle that every person only learns to read *once*. This means that if you are literate in one language you can learn to read and write in another language *that you can speak*, without once more having to learn to read. So here we have two criteria for bridging to English.

1) Children must be able to read in their first language. If the bridge is going to stand it must be built on the solid foundation of literacy skills in the first language and not just on the initial attempts at gaining those skills.

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2) Children can only transfer their reading skills to a language in which they can speak with some degree of confidence. People can really only read with understanding, especially in a second language, those things that they can already say. (Here we need to remember that reading is not primarily a visual decoding skill, but a matter of picking up grammatical meaning and prior experience clues from the written page). So the children are only ready to bridge to English reading when they have sufficient understanding of oral English to spontaneously offer meaningful information about personal experiences that have occurred both in and out of school. Children must be communicating orally in English so they can begin to communicate through reading and writing, for it is the children's own spoken English that should provide the material for the initial bridge to English literacy.

Watts, McGrath and Tandy (1973: p.5) defined the time for bridging to English literacy in this way:

When the children have mastered literacy skills in the Aboriginal language and when they have achieved a sufficient command of oral English, literacy in English will be commenced.

They hoped that some children would reach this stage during their third year at school but stated -

The timetable presented...must be interpreted as a flexible timetable. The sequences can be determined in advance *but the timing of the achievements of the successive stages cannot at this point be predicted.* (p.5. Emphasis mine)

It appears now that the majority of N.T. Aboriginal children are not going to be ready to build a bridge to English literacy until their fourth year of regular schooling.

B. ON THE ROAD TO ENGLISH LITERACY: APPROACHING THE BRIDGE

1. The Beginning of the Road

Although there is an optimum time for the formal introduction of English literacy, teachers need to be preparing for this by exposing children to enjoyable and meaningful experiences in English literature so they will be both ready and eager to move into this new area of learning when other criteria have been fulfilled.

Creating a Reading Environment

Most non-Aboriginal children are aware of what it means to be literate and how literacy skills are integrated into the total life-way of a literate society. At this time, many Aboriginal people who have learned to read find little use for reading skills in the life they live outside school. Therefore reading for enjoyment and reading for information are not yet really part of the total Aboriginal life-way, and so children come to school relatively unprepared to acquire literacy skills.

Hence, whenever teachers have the opportunity, they should read to Aboriginal children in both languages from the earliest years. This will serve two purposes:

- . it will help children begin to understand what reading is about and so lay a foundation for literacy in the first language, and
- . it will begin to prepare the way for later literacy in English.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers need to work together to create a reading environment within the room, and the children need to see both teachers reading and writing. In this way, reading, including reading in English, becomes not only something that has to be learned, but something that is acquired because it is part of the life-way of the school.

There is something about sharing a good book with others that is a bit like sharing a good film or TV show. Children need to be read to in groups. They need to feel part of a group responding to the magic moment of a good book. Several times a day, from the time children start school, teachers should pick up a book and read to children in English. Keep a pile of children's favourites at hand and read whenever there is a possible opportunity. Aboriginal teachers will be doing this also throughout the day but we can snatch moments too. Plan to begin and end every one of our contact times with the children by reading to them in English. It often only takes a minute in time but may build a skill that will give pleasure for years.

Planned Informal Reading Experiences (The Lap Method)

We need both to read *to* children and *with* children, "Kids who read, were read to" says a poster produced by the Reading Association of the N.T. and for those involved in bilingual education we should add, "Kids who read in English, were read to in English."

Stephen Harris, in an unpublished paper "The Aboriginal Way of Teaching Reading: The Lap Method", spells out why holding children on our laps and reading to them (which is an informal method of teaching) is a highly appropriate beginning strategy to use with Aboriginal children. Aboriginal informal learning styles favour the strategies of observation and imitation, persistence and repetition, real life performance and person orientation. All these are present when we gather one or two children close to us and read to them and with them. It is important that often when we read to children in this way we point to *each* word. This helps children to understand the 'separateness' of words and helps them relate the sound of the word to its visual symbol. They also begin to appreciate that print runs from left to right across the page; all this is valuable information if you wish to learn to read. In this way Aboriginal children acquire reading skills as they acquire all other knowledge in Aboriginal society: by living rather than by direct teaching.

The Bullock Report (p.97) has this to say

...the best way to prepare the very young child for reading is to hold him on your lap and read aloud to him stories he likes, over and over again. The printed page, the physical comfort and security, the reassuring voice, the fascination of the story: all these combine in the child's mind to identify books as something which hold great pleasure...

Encouragement of Individual 'Reading' (i.e. Emergent Reading)

We need to provide English books for the book corner that are not only looked at but 'read'. Copies of the simple stories that you read to the children should be available for them to 'read' also. Do not wait to add them to the book corner until the children can 'read' them with you, which means they will know them almost by heart. Several copies of simple cheap books that children can 'read' may be a better purchase than many expensive books that can only ever be looked at, for if a book is worn out it can be replaced and children can go on 'reading' their favourite stories. Holdaway (1979) describes children who read in this way as "emergent readers". It is a vital stage in the reading process.

What Do We Read to Children?

Begin this informal approach of reading to children in the pre-school with books that are simple, that include maybe one word, or perhaps one phrase, on a page. Look for the sort of books that are the first books we would give to our own children. Make some

more of these simple books using objects and experiences that are familiar to the children. After children move into school and as their command of oral English is extended, introduce longer stories. Caption books and Instant Readers are good but do not use only these; look for simple stories that will help children develop a love of literature. Many of our traditional folk tales, like *The Three Little Pigs* and other simple stories that have been re-told for younger readers, are ideal for Aboriginal children who have been at school for a year or so, as the English is simple enough for second language speakers. Look for stories with chants and repetitions that will encourage children to join in. "Run, run, run as fast as you can, you can't catch me I'm the ginger bread man", can be meaningful to all children if you have taken the trouble to cook and eat a ginger-bread man when the story was first introduced. Animal stories of all kinds are popular. Dramatizing these stories with the children helps to ensure that they really understand what the stories are all about, so re-tell and re-play them often.

If a book with interesting content has to be 'told' to students, because the written text is not suitable, re-write it yourself so you read it the same way each time, for that is what reading is all about. Do not worry too much if children don't know *all* the words, though the total experience should be meaningful. Books are a good way of introducing and reinforcing new vocabulary for second as well as first language speakers. However, children not only require the words of English but the patterns of written English also.

- . They need to acquire the pattern of the *rhythm* of the English language -
e.g. "Little pig, little pig let me come in."
- . They need to acquire the pattern of the *idiom* of English.-
e.g. "They walked just alike, they talked just alike."
- . They need to acquire the *patterns of story structure* -
e.g. "Once upon a time..." "Once long ago..."
and, after evil is overcome, a happy ending -
"...and that was the end of the wicked old wolf."
- . They need to acquire the *patterns of the cumulative tale* -
e.g. "This is the house Jack built"(adapted, if necessary, to have meaning for Aboriginal children).

- . They need to acquire the *feeling of repetition*

e.g. "Not I", said the cat.

"Not I", said the dog.

"Not I", said the pig.

"Then I'll eat it myself," said the little red hen...

If we read to children until the words and patterns of English become part of them, we not only help them become readers of English but also provide the raw materials that will enable them to become writers of English.

2. Getting Close to the Bridge

During the months before children actually begin both reading and writing activities in English, the planned informal program needs to be extended. Now a period of time needs to be set aside for what Holdaway (1979, p.79) calls "Shared Book Experiences."

Group Sharing of Books and Predicting Words

By creating 'giant' books we can provide children with learning experiences that combine the value of reading to children individually (the lap method) and the value of being in a group where children can share with others the pleasure of a good story. Simply write out one of the children's favourite short stories in a large scrap book or a home-made book. Read it to the group pointing to each word as you read. If the children know the story they will read along with you and later will love to provide the illustrations.

When you are using these giant books, with print that everyone in the group can see, encourage children to predict words. Cover a word, then let children guess or predict it, uncover it and look at it. If the children know the stories well it should be no trouble. Remember, they can read their own language fairly well by now, so they should be able to draw on phonic clues to help them. Don't only predict the interesting words but predict some of the little words or functors which form such a large part of any written English. Make it fun. Find the same word again and again.

If the caption books or instant readers cannot be read by the total group of children because the print is too small, make these into giant books also. These will provide a fairly controlled vocabulary for children, and those children who are ready will begin to find words that they know and can read. Try adapting other simple stories (e.g. *Day's Day* by Lois Lenski could be rewritten for children anywhere), and also develop stories related to the oral English program.

Children's favourite songs and chants can be written up for shared book experiences and children can learn to read as they sing together. Rhymes such as:

"Jeremony Hall
Is so small,
A cat ate him
Hat and all"

should provoke interesting conversation and illustrations and give children the opportunity to discover many new words as they read. Remember that you want children to learn to read English, so it is important that children have material that is familiar to them and which includes plenty of repetition so they can discover words and phrases for themselves and have sufficient practice to remember them.

In this way, while the children acquire the solid foundation of vernacular literacy skills, the non-Aboriginal teacher slowly approaches the bridge to English literacy by helping children gain a command of oral English and by supplying the real-life reading experiences in written English, which will provide the motivation and the material to build the bridge itself.

C. ON THE BRIDGE - READING AND WRITING IN ENGLISH

In any classroom the following things should all be happening about this time. There seems to be no special order for they all have value and in fact are probably all essential experiences for children as they cross the bridge to English literacy. Some children may be participating in group activities while not yet ready for the challenge of individual work, others may be able to write their own stories, while some may need to copy for quite a while. A few children may be applying the knowledge of phonics they gained in the vernacular without any help or prompting from the teacher and so the program should allow for these differences.

1. Activities Related to Language Experience

Individual Language Experience

At the appropriate time begin helping each child to create his own personal English literature. Sometime when the children have been talking to you in English and recounting some vital experience, simply say, "I'll write it down for you and you can copy it and make your very own book." And that is what you do. Once you have started you keep going, drawing on the "stuff of their lives" as Ashton-Warner calls it, to create their own reading materials which will be read and re-read.

While the main purpose of this activity is to encourage children to record and then read about the vital experiences of their life, in English, a good deal of incidental teaching about English itself can occur as familiar or new letter shapes are noted, or perhaps the child's attention is drawn to the number of very little words in English. Gradually, as each child's awareness of the written form of English is awakened, he will become ready to write his own stories, but until then just let him copy the stories you write down for him.

Group Language Experience Books

Books that are made together and become part of the group experience are always good value, especially if they are related to a stimulating group experience, and by now the children should have enough oral English to make them more interesting. For example, a best-seller that one group of children at Yirrkala produced was about the film *King-Kong* which all the children had seen several times but I had not. One of the children brought some tattered pages from a magazine which contained photos of the film and proceeded to disrupt the day's activities as everyone tried to have a closer look. In desperation I decided to capitalise on their interest and proceeded to make a book about the film. Heated arguments erupted as the children endeavoured to express in English their knowledge of the events about which I knew nothing, but in time, everyone was satisfied and the book was stapled together. It didn't last long as it was literally 'read to death', but while it lived it was read avidly by all.

Not all books will be so popular but in all Aboriginal communities the day-to-day life contains sufficient drama to provide the experiences for class-experience books just as it does for the individual ones. Talk with children about it all, so they can develop the language they will need and don't just write about the *happenings* of Aboriginal life, the *feelings* must also find their way into the stories. Shame, fear, anger and laughter are very real to all children, so include these real experiences in children's stories also.

Such class experience books enable us to help children create stories and not just sentences. Retelling an event can yield a variety of sentence patterns which children will need to create their own stories. For this reason it is better to extend the class experience through a week, if necessary, than write about a different event each day. Always write these stories in front of the children (even if you have to reprint them later). Remember they can read and write in their own language and probably read some English words. Watching you write, and listening to the incidental comments you make

about words as you do so, help them to see *into* English and increases their awareness of the language that they began to develop when you encouraged them to predict words.

Wall Charts

Some of their group experiences, particularly about the children themselves, can be made into wall charts and placed around the room. However, don't put them up and then forget them until they gather dust; put them up until children are tired of reading them, then take them down. While they are on the walls they not only provide children with meaningful reading, but they can also be referred to by other children who are trying to do their own writing in English and who need help with words.

Very-own Words

Sylvia Ashton-Warner talks of using key-words in teaching children. Michael Christie (1978) also refers to the value of 'very-own' words. These are the words that a child can have written down for him, and that he can own. Just simply keep a large pile of ready-cut cardboard (different sizes for different size words) and each day write down a word that a child would like. It may well be the name of the star in last night's film, but it doesn't matter. Let the children read them, copy them and use them when they want to write 'very-own' sentences. If the children forget words, remove them, as they are not significant.

Labelling the Room in English

Let the world know that children in this room are now reading in English and label all the things in the room, including children's work, in English. Read labels while they are new and meaningful, then discard them. Involve the children in labelling: let them write labels for their own chair and table or whatever they use. Labels introduce children to a whole new range of vocabulary, and if you use phrases as well it allows practice of some of those little words of the English language that make up such a large part of any English writing and which will never be anyone's 'very-own' word.

Breakthrough to Literacy

The large Breakthrough Kit for use with groups can provide some valuable teaching/learning experiences for children and help to increase their awareness of the words of English. Actually handling the words is a good learning strategy for Aboriginal children, but the small individual kits could slow down children who are good

readers and writers in their own languages and are eager to explore the new world of English literature. Nevertheless, there may come a time when they would be valuable for children who are moving slowly and need just such an experience to help them through the early stages of English literacy.

2. Simple Stories and Readers

Include in your daily program regular reading of instant simple books that provide the introduction to whatever reading scheme is in use in your school and which children will be reading soon. Materials such as *Tracks** Sentence and Story Readers should be in use by now and *P.M. Instant Readers* are excellent for this activity. When children are familiar with any book, put a copy in the book corner but keep reading it with a group. Help children focus on words in the book and let them read individually as well as in groups. Begin keeping records of each individual child's reading so you know what is happening.

Reading in the Book Corner or Library: Sustained Silent Reading

During their years at school, children should have come to know many simple English stories and these should now be available for children to read. Children love to look at English books with good pictures and they should continue to do this, but there should be a place for books that are *read* and at some time each day children should actually read. This should be a time when children are not learning to read but are reading, and if possible, reading silently. If children have been doing this in their first language, when the English books are made available, children should read these in the same manner.

McCracken (1979, p.33) calls this '*sustained silent reading*' and it is an essential ingredient in any reading program. The important thing is that everyone, *including teachers*, read for a set period of time, so that children don't just *learn to read* but actually *read*, which is really what it is all about.

The library or book corner should be used at other times also and children should be encouraged to read before and after school and at any other time during the school day. Remember, children need to practise their reading skill if it is ever going to be a usable

* Information about *Tracks* may be obtained from the Department of Education, Darwin.

one, and that means hours and hours of just reading. The foundation for this should have been laid in the vernacular but English offers children the opportunity of a multiplicity of materials that will never be available in their first language. So keep the library corner organized and used, add new stories, mend the old, and keep everyone reading, reading, reading.

3. Phonics, or "Follow the Leader"

If you have been talking to children about those English letters which do not occur in their own language (as you write down their stories) and have been helping them use phonic clues to predict words, you should find that the children are ready for some informal introduction to the English spelling or phonic system. Perhaps you can treat a sound incidentally during a speech segment of an oral English lesson, or children's own natural interest might spark this activity in reading or story-time, but the important thing is to casually and informally follow the leads given by the children and help them discover for themselves the symbols of English.

Any teacher working at this level needs to be aware of the English phonemic system and the way it relates to the language the children speak.

- a. Teachers must be aware of all the sound/letter combinations that are common to both languages. This group of sounds provides a good starting point for any work in this area.
- b. Teachers must be aware of all the sounds that are in English that are not in the language the child already speaks (e.g. s,f,v,z etc.). Children are reproducing these sounds in oral English lessons and hopefully when they talk in English. Now they need to meet visually the letters that represent the sounds.
- c. Teachers must be aware that there may be some sounds that are common to both languages but represented by a different letter, e.g. η = ng in N.E. Arnhemland.
- d. Teachers must be aware that some letters that are common to both languages represent quite different sounds. This is often so for vowels.

Obtain this information and write it up on a chart on the wall so you can refer to it yourself. This is *not* the time to teach

these things formally to children but it is a time for conscious discovery by children of things they already largely know intuitively.

Perhaps another thing teachers need to be aware of is that many of the children will never really hear the difference between many of the English sounds. For example 'd' and 't' in the initial position are interchangeable to most Aboriginal children. They will need to build up their visual memory repertoire and remember which is which, just as we remember when to write 'c' or 'k'. Learning sounds and letters for a second language speaker is largely a *visual* activity. We teach through children's eyes rather than through their ears and we teach rather than test. Only with practice will children eventually be able to write down what they hear in English.

Activities at this time could involve looking at alphabet books. Do paste pictures that children find meaningful over pictures of objects that they will never know about in their primary school years. *First Phonics* (Methuen, 1970) and *This Is My Sound* (Philip Alexander, 1975) are fun and when they have been read for a while they can be put into the book corner. *Dr Seuss' A.B.C.* could be useful, but why not make your own also? As children become interested in a letter, make a chart or book about it, find the page or special alphabet book for it, and say some speech rhymes. If it is a new letter shape, a handwriting lesson may be required because children will want to be able to write all the English words they know containing this grapheme or letter.

Teachers often fear the group of letters that involve the same symbol but represent a different sound. "Isn't English funny?" needs to become a catch cry for children as they discover some of these new sound/letter combinations and some of the other peculiarities of English. One child I taught was really quite disgusted when I wrote knife on the 'k' page of his dictionary and he proceeded to rewrite it as 'nife' in his story. But all these things are important discoveries for the children as they begin to understand that, unlike their own language, English is not always phonemic. But whatever you do, just follow the children's lead; let them discover, and you reinforce. Some formal teaching of all this is yet to come. All these informal fun activities are only aimed at helping children transfer what they already largely know from the mother tongue and apply to the reading and writing of English.

At this stage the bridge has been crossed. Children are reading and writing in English and it is time now for the steady development of these skills so that children leave school not only bilingual but biliterate.

D. "ACROSS THE BRIDGE AND AWAY ON THE OTHER SIDE"

The first thing to do is to keep doing all the things that have already been suggested. Children still need a room that creates a reading environment for them. They need a book corner of books that they can read, they need group and individual experiences in both reading and writing, (which result in lots of home-made books that they have created and that they read) and they still need to be read to in English every day - but it is now time for a systematic approach to each of the literacy skills to achieve both independent reading and independent writing. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail about programs for this level but some points need to be made.

1. Reading

The children should now be reading more commercially prepared materials. The N.T. *Tracks* reading scheme provides children with a reading program that they will find within their experience, but reading English should open doors to the wider world. You may find that the second reading scheme that your school has selected is on the whole fairly meaningful to the children but perhaps some of the supplementary readers are beyond their experience. Just leave these out. In reading, the brain tells the eye more than the eye tells the brain, and if a book is about something that is too remote for an Aboriginal child to understand the resulting activity is not reading.

One important value of any reading scheme in a school, and particularly in an Aboriginal school, is that there is a systematic development of language so children should learn all the things they need to know about reading English. In schools where there is rapid staff turnover the use of a Reading Scheme makes it much easier to keep accurate records of children's progress and children gain a sense of security because they know what they are doing. Finally, a good reading scheme provides a quantity of good quality materials that have been prepared for children to read. No reading scheme is perfect, so use it as just one of your tools to assist children on the way to becoming independent readers. Don't see it as your total reading program for so often a reading scheme can involve children purely in 'learning to read', rather than in reading for the enjoyment and information that can be gained from this activity.

2. Writing

These children, who have acquired literacy skills in their mother-tongue before doing so in English, have developed ideas about

writing down what they can say. They have begun to do this in English also, but to achieve independence in their second language there are some necessary skills they will need to acquire. McCracken (1979) claims that to write anything down you need *ideas*, *words*, *structures* and *spelling*, and so we must ensure children acquire all this knowledge.

Ideas and Words

Writing in English needs to develop from talking in English. As the children in isolated communities really only communicate orally in English with the non-Aboriginal teacher, and perhaps one or two others, writing periods must relate to talking periods. Conversation must be part of the daily program and out of such conversation or oral communication will come written communication. This conversation will not only help children gain new ideas but will help children express these ideas in English, and provide the words they require to write. List the words so children can refer to them when they require them.

This type of writing, where children write down what they want to say, is often called expressive writing, for a very few people at this age get to be creative writers in other than their mother tongue. Look for themes in social studies and in other areas that interest children. Talk to children and capitalize on their personal interests. Browse through materials and suggestions for children from our own culture and cull out ideas that may work for the children you are teaching.

When children are beginning to write confidently in English encourage them to rewrite their stories so other people can read them easily. Rewriting for yourself appears pointless to children but to rewrite for a home-made book, newspaper or for a wall display makes the activity worthwhile.

Structures

Not only do children need ideas and words, they need the structures of both oral and written English to help them achieve independent writing. This is when the effectiveness of previous teaching is put to the test. If children have been generating oral language and have been listening to written English, the foundation has been laid and children will have the structures they require to communicate in written English. However, there is always more to learn and much of what children have caught now needs to be taught. All children who speak English need some 'directed' English activities, but the Aboriginal child who speaks English as a second language will need more.

Reading and writing schemes and oral English programs such as *Learning English in Australia* may be helpful at this stage, and a paper prepared by Ruth Lipscombe (for the National Conference of Teachers of Aboriginal Children) has many practical suggestions. Each school needs to ensure that all children have learned what they need to know to function effectively in the wider world before they leave school.

Spelling

Spelling needs to be taught rather than tested. Aboriginal children have good visual memories and will have acquired word attack skills in their first language but it is important that teachers ensure that children not only follow their own particular interests but also become familiar with and write correctly a basic list of English words. So follow children's lead but keep a check list so you are aware of children's progress in this area.

E. CONCLUSION

We cannot predict the knowledge that all Aboriginal people will need in the future, but to become an independent people many of them will need skills in reading, writing and speaking English to cope with whatever demands life may bring. The road to English literacy is a long one for children whose mother tongue is not English. If, while children are at school, we can help them discover the joy of reading and writing both in their own language and in English, and not just 'teach them to read', we have given them a capacity that will not only give great pleasure but will provide the means by which Aboriginal people can function as independent people in modern society.

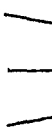
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BUILDING A BRIDGE TO ENGLISH LITERACY

	PRE	T	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Vernacular Literacy	Reading to and with children Language Experience Reading Schemes								
FOUNDATIONS	Informal - Planned - Informal - Formal								
THE ROAD TO ENGLISH LITERACY	Reading stories to children Reading stories with children i.e. lap method and shared book experience								
THE BRIDGE: READING AND WRITING IN ENGLISH									
ACROSS THE BRIDGE AND AWAY ON THE OTHER SIDE									

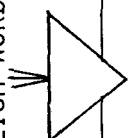
CONFIDENT READER
IN VERNACULAR



COMMUNICATING
IN ENGLISH



PREDICTING
ENGLISH WORDS



LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE
COMMERCIAL READING
MATERIALS
SOUNDS AND LETTERS

ENGLISH LITERACY
AND ORACY PERMEATES
80% TOTAL PROGRAM