



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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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REVIEW: *Language Development Program for Schools in Aboriginal Communities (Years 4 - 7)*. Department of Education, Queensland.

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Teacher: (very annoyed)

Class: (singing)

Teacher: (still more angry)

Class: (afraid, quietly singing)

Teacher:

Class, What is she doing?

You are standing up.

I am asking you... What is she doing?

You are standing up.

Look here you stupid and lazy fools. How long do you take to catch things? Didn't we go over all this yesterday? If I come tomorrow and find that you make a single mistake, I'll punish you severely.¹

Thus, does Ngugi wa Thiong'o relive a moment of his childhood and his first, tentative attempt to learn English (a language to which he and his people impute great power); thus, also, does he demonstrate one approach, albeit highly questionable, to the teaching of a non-native language.

In utter contrast to the above quite joyless and, indeed, sterile learning situation is the spirit implicit in the program under review:

Aboriginal parents clearly indicate that they want the school to develop their children's facility to use Standard Australian English but they also indicate that they want their children to be able to interact within their own community as well as within the wider community. Thus a major concern of the school is to expand the *total*[#] language of each child; to broaden his language resources as his needs increase, and to help him acquire styles of language appropriate for use in a wide variety of situations.

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Reviewer's emphasis.

On entering school the student will already have acquired knowledge and concepts that he may not yet be able to express in SAE. In order to interact effectively within the wider community he will need to develop the ability to recognise the situations requiring SAE and to develop the skills of using SAE in these situations. *At the same time the student will need opportunities to use and develop his own language/dialect.*#

The comments above are extracts from the Overview to the Language Development Program and it must be argued that this document is, necessarily, the key to the program. Indeed, this very point is made in the foreword:

I urge all teachers using this program with Aboriginal children to read carefully right through this overview before they begin using the Modules and to refer to it often as they continue using them.

But before an examination of the program and its various elements, there seems some point in placing the program in its intended perspective:

The Language Development Program has been prepared for use in Years 4-7 in schools in Queensland Aboriginal Communities. Eventually, it will be followed by a program for students in Years 8-10 thus, with the Van Leer Foundation Language Development Program Years 1-3, providing a continuous and theoretically compatible development program for Years 1-10 in these schools.

ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAM

1. Overview : Section One sets forth a range of values and beliefs, about the Aboriginal student, language, and the school. Section Two discusses the framework used in developing and implementing the language program.

(The overview is such a crucial aspect of the program, it is proposed to offer further discussion of this element later in this review article.)

2. Wallchart : 'Overview of the Language Program' elaborates on the elements of the framework.

Reviewer's emphasis.

The wallchart is essentially a summary of the types of activities intended within the program. It should serve as a useful 'memory-jogging', organising device for teachers using the program. It is succinct but well-organised and certainly has relevance to *all* teachers of Language Arts who have a genuine concern for offering more than a nebulously-related series of lessons touching upon language development aspects.

3. Modules: Eight Modules of work for each year level are provided. Each module spans approximately four weeks and is made up of several content related Work Units. Each half semester 2-3 weeks have been left to allow for student-teacher planned activities.

Module A at each year level takes as a general theme 'Getting Started'. Through its activities it places emphasis upon the teacher's getting to know, as individuals, the children in the class group. It offers suggestions for Language Analysis, but now wholly in a diagnostic setting. As a prelude to this module a set of activity cards, quite comprehensive in detail, is offered at each year level.

Subsequent Modules (B-H) at each level concern other subject syllabuses and offer suggestions for integrating activities.

4. Strategy Sheets: These provide guidelines and activities for teaching-learning strategies which are integral to the program.

In all, some fourteen strategy sheets are proposed for issue in 1982, although not all are currently available. (It is noted that additional topics will be developed later.)

Topics currently on issue include: Classroom Discussion, Group Work, Language Analysis,...Spelling, Notetaking, Interviewing... etc. The thrust of these strategy sheets is to offer useful, if brief, background information concerning the topic, and to suggest some likely, relevant activities.

5. Inservice Workshops: Ten Inservice Workshops have been planned to run concurrently with the Modules. These allow time for principals, teachers and teacher-aides to discuss particular teaching-learning strategies as well as other issues.

In effect, this is a 'self-help' phase of the program. The booklet offered defines various topics, suggests background reading resources and offers discussion points. The purpose would seem that teachers within a school may gather to discuss frankly the various issues and thus evaluate the likely effectiveness of their present teaching approaches.

6. Resources: A range of teacher and student resources have been supplied to assist teachers in preparing their programs and in implementing activities.

THE OVERVIEW REVISITED

It somewhat challenges the orthodox to speak of the teacher as a learner, but certainly this is the role quite properly commended to the teacher in his contact with children within an Aboriginal community:

When first confronted with a culturally different situation, a teacher may see children in terms of deviation from the teacher's own familiar culture. He may thus develop a negative view, focusing on experiences the children haven't had, and on things they don't know or can't do. If teachers continue to perceive children in terms of white middle-class expectations both teacher and children are likely to be exposed to an unprofitable and frustrating school experience. Instead it is hoped that teachers will gain an ever-increasing understanding of the child in his own world recognising that the child operates in a different cultural system and that he uses a rule-governed language code which is as valid as that of the teacher.²

Put very briefly, it is the purpose of the overview to induct the teacher into his role as learner. The teacher of Aboriginal children, and here one generalises, is likely to be 'white middle-class', and must understandably reflect that set of values; again, he is likely to impute a 'prestige' value to SAE and see all else as deviant language behaviour. In brief, the teacher will be as much a product of his own, but different, background as those whom he is to teach.

Section One of the overview (Values and Beliefs underlying the Program) offers to the teacher much useful information and indeed, food for thought. It challenges him to move from a possibly rigid viewpoint to one more flexible and thus likely to accommodate those he is teaching.

The overview is, however, rather more than simply an exhortation. It is, fundamentally, a statement of the philosophy on which the program is founded. An important point thus must be the validity of the viewpoints put forward. If the notions advanced reside simply in some splendidly roseate view of the dignity of man, universal brotherhood and other such aspirations then, whilst they are noble ideals, they are little more than that. The principles advanced in Section One of the overview are, sociolinguistically, quite defensible.

Section Two of the overview establishes the Program Framework. It is, in terms of current linguistic theory, a sound delineation of issues likely to enhance language development. It does not follow Ngugi's description of the 'chant' approach to language learning but, quite rightly, assumes the premise that language is purposeful:

Since a central aim of the school is to expand the student's language development, it is necessary to identify the purposes for which a student is required to use language both 'in school' and 'out of school'. Ten such *language purposes* have been derived from:

- a) an analysis of the perceived needs of the student in 'out of school' interactions; and
- b) an analysis of the language needs of the student in 'in school' interactions.

It has seemed of point in this review, as often as possible, to let the program speak for itself. It is hoped that, from the various extracts offered, readers will gain some summary knowledge of content and also some appreciation of the straightforwardness of the text. The program is aimed at the teacher *busy* coming to terms with an entirely different situation.

In brief, the program is entirely readable; and certainly much more than that. It is maintained that the underlying principles are sound and have been thoughtfully translated into classroom language activities that embrace all language areas (listening, speaking, reading, writing). Further, the activities offer variety both in the cause of maintaining interest and in ensuring the linguistic and cognitive development of the students.

The program should hold exciting prospects for those for whom it is intended, provided that teachers implementing the program do indeed "...read carefully right through this overview before they begin using the Modules and...refer to it often as they continue using them."

References:

- ¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *Weep not, Child*. Heinemann, London, 1969.
- ² Department of Education, Queensland, Bernard Van Leer Project, *Overview of Language Development Program: Years 1-3*. Department of Education, Brisbane, 1979.

All other extracts are from the program under review.

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