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## ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

## FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING EASTERN ARRERNTE  
IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Development and implementation of an Aboriginal language  
as a foreign language to non-Aboriginal high school students

\*A. Graham

Alice Springs, the major regional centre in Central Australia, has a population of about 19,000<sup>1</sup>, with about 25 to 30 per cent Aboriginal or of Aboriginal descent.

There are two high schools in Alice Springs, the largest being the Alice Springs High School with about 700 students, the majority of whom (including the Aboriginal students), have English as their first language. The school teaches to matriculation level and has traditionally offered a number of languages - including French, German, Indonesian and Italian.

The school population would have little knowledge of Aboriginal languages and the associated culture. At the time the Eastern Arrernte course was proposed the one time elective, Aboriginal Studies, was no longer offered due to lack of availability of staff, and lack of interest and expertise among existing staff. So, here was a senior high school, in the centre of country where Aboriginal cultures and languages are thriving, which offered little to enlighten its students about the life-style of a people they saw and heard daily in the streets and fringe camps of Alice Springs.

Central Australia is rich in Aboriginal languages<sup>2</sup> and over the years there have been many discussions and two attempts to teach Aboriginal languages. One involved the teaching of a 'Top End' language, Gupapuyngu, chosen because some teaching materials had been prepared and because the teacher involved had worked in Arnhem Land.

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<sup>1</sup> The June 1981 census recorded 18,500 people and a growth rate of about 5%. Figures on the number of Aboriginal people are difficult to determine and have been obtained from Aboriginal organisations.

<sup>2</sup> The main languages are Arrentic (Arrernte, East and West, Anmatjira, Alywarra), Walpiri and the Western Desert languages (Pitjantjatjara, Pintubi, Luritja).

The other was one of the Western Desert languages, Pitjantjatjara, a language traditionally spoken south-west of Alice Springs. In both cases, when the teachers involved left, the programs closed.

Interest in having a local Aboriginal language taught had been shown by the Aboriginal population. The motives had been to help keep the languages alive and help non-Aborigines understand something of the environment in which they live.

An amended (1980) version of *Guidelines for Languages other than English for Primary and Secondary schools in the Northern Territory* actually included Aboriginal languages in its list of examples:

As with other subjects in the curriculum, courses in languages other than English should be responsive to community needs. One basis for determining language courses should be special interests of ethnic backgrounds. In urban schools, for example, courses can include Chinese, Modern Greek, Italian, Tiwi, Pitjantjatjara, Wailbri (*sic.*) Indonesian, French, German...

The need to cater for these 'special interests' has been regularly articulated in Central Australia by non-Aboriginal linguists as well as Aboriginal organisations. These include Tangentyere Council, which represents the town, or 'fringe' campers and the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, a health and welfare organisation, which pays special allowances to staff who are fluent in Aboriginal languages and can act as interpreters.

In 1975 an Aboriginal consultative group recommended to the Schools Commission that, wherever practical, Aboriginal languages should be introduced into secondary school studies.

This movement followed the nation-wide growth of interest in Aboriginal languages and a "resurgence of pride [by Aborigines] in their traditional life-styles, values and especially languages." (Dixon, 1980, p.80)

Apart from these formal approaches it was widely recognised that the Education Department should be involved in the teaching of Aboriginal culture, including languages. Most Alice Springs students would have heard people speak an Aboriginal language and have seen

words from local languages in newspapers, pamphlets and in some public buildings.<sup>1</sup>

In 1981 the then principal of Alice Springs High School, Ms Bron Sims, responded to external pressures and assigned interested staff to prepare a program to teach an Aboriginal language.

## ARRERNTE<sup>2</sup>

This is the most commonly heard language in Alice Springs, with an estimated 2000 first-tongue users. It is closely related to other languages used in nearby areas and is understood by many more people. Traditionally, Aboriginal people in Central Australia tend to be bi- and multi-lingual, largely because of tribal inter-marriage.

The Institute for Aboriginal Development, a federally funded adult training organisation based in Alice Springs but with strong Western Desert links, teaches some Aboriginal languages, including Arrernte, but specialises in Pitjantjatjara.

It was decided that, as the school is on land originally owned by Eastern Arrernte people, it would be most appropriate to teach their language. It was also important that the school recognise the local political realities, which include the existence of people who are the descendents of the traditional owners of the land on which the town has been built and who regard other tribal groups as visitors only.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A recent phenomenon regarding the recognition of Aboriginal culture has been the wide use of transcribed Aboriginal languages. For example, many signs in the hospital are written in both English and an Aboriginal language, while one local newspaper publishes notices to Aborigines in their language. In reality this is just a window-dressing exercise, because any person literate in an Aboriginal language would also be literate in English, while a fluent speaker of Aboriginal languages who was illiterate would find these signs useless.

<sup>2</sup> This is now accepted spelling for the language spoken in and around Alice Springs. Till recently there were five separate orthographies, but following a number of meetings between Aborigines and with local linguists, it was agreed that spelling should be standardised.

<sup>3</sup> The subtleties of inter-tribal relationships are lost on many non-Aborigines in Central Australia who tend to regard all blacks as one homogeneous group.

Whichever language was chosen the choice would not please everyone. Alice Springs is in the heart of Eastern Arrernte country which was a reason logical enough to temper the tongues of discontent.<sup>1</sup> In formal terms it was eventually determined that the aims of the Arrernte course were

- \* to expose students to the basic structure of a Central Australian Aboriginal language,
- \* to introduce students to some aspects of Aboriginal lifestyle and culture through prepared dialogues and activities,
- \* to help bridge the gap between Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

Perhaps it is only by learning a language that we really begin to understand something of the culture which oral language reflects. If we are sincere in our attempt to help and understand Aboriginal people, "it can only be done via a study of the language." (Blake, 1981)

Politically there is seen to be a different need - the need of the owners of that language to gain recognition and thereby acceptance as a group with a different cultural background. The importance of a common language for ethnic identification has been well documented. (Dixon 1980, Ch.4)

## BILINGUAL EDUCATION

It is important to recognise the difference between the teaching of an Aboriginal language at the high school and the Bilingual Education Program which has been underway in the Territory since 1973.

The definition of bilingual education is that formulated by the United States in the Bilingual Education Act:

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<sup>1</sup> There are strong feelings among Aboriginal people about their languages. In 1981 a non-Aboriginal teacher-linguist, Neil Bell, stood for and won the predominantly Aboriginal seat of MacDonnell in the Northern Territory's Legislative Assembly. Much of Bell's success was undoubtedly due to the fact that he was a fluent Pitjantjatjara speaker. Mr Bell, after his election, travelled to Santa Teresa - about 80 kilometres south-east of Alice Springs in Eastern Arrernte country. He addressed a large gathering of people in Pitjantjatjara and was told in no uncertain terms - "What for you speak that language here - this is Eastern Arrernte country - we nothing do with that Pitjantjatjara mob." English was used as the medium for communication for the rest of the meeting, despite the fact that most Arrernte speakers would be able to follow Pitjantjatjara better than English.

Bilingual Education is the use of two languages, one of which is English, as mediums of instruction for the same pupil population in a well-organised programme which encompasses part or all of the curriculum and includes the study of the history and culture associated with the mother tongue. A complete programme develops and maintains the children's self esteem and a legitimate pride in both cultures. (Tryon, 1976, p.6)

Bilingual education in the Northern Territory is carried out only at seventeen selected remote primary schools where the majority of students are from a specific language group. Initial teaching of all subjects is given in the local language while English is introduced as a separate subject.

The idea is to ensure that the students gain literacy skills in their own language and that these are then transferred to the second language, English, which becomes the medium of instruction when the students move to higher grades.

There is no comparison between this program and the Eastern Arrernte course at the high school which, as can be seen, has different aims. The high school program is teaching Eastern Arrernte as a foreign language rather than a second language.

## COURSE PREPARATION

Once the idea of an Aboriginal language course had been accepted, meetings were held with the Tangentyere Council, the Institute for Aboriginal Development, interested linguists and Aboriginal traditional owners of the country around Alice Springs.

Approval for the course was given with enthusiasm by the traditional owners and arrangements were made to establish a cultural component involving Aboriginal people. This was to include trips looking for 'bush tucker' with stories of the ancestral heroes being provided by the owners of 'dreamings'.<sup>1</sup>

In February 1982 a curriculum committee was formed and this met every week till the end of first semester. The institute for Aboriginal Development had an abundance of teaching materials developed for

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<sup>1</sup>More recently the close association with some of the traditional owners has broken down following a dispute between the Northern Territory Government and an Aboriginal school, Yipirinya, seeking registration. The refusal by the Education Minister to register the school has resulted in legal action - and some traditional owners have been persuaded to refuse co-operation with the high school to demonstrate their displeasure at the Minister's action.

its adult course, but these were considered inappropriate because they were designed for a one-year course using a language laboratory. The materials had also been prepared several years earlier and the approach of using isolated words to build a vocabulary was considered inadequate.

The present Eastern Arrernte program is based on the Teaching English as a Second Language program, *All's Well*, which teaches the language through the use of dialogues which progress in difficulty.

All curriculum development meetings were attended by Eastern Arrernte speakers so that the materials were as authentic as possible. One of these speakers has been with the program from inception and now teaches in the classroom as a part-time instructor. The aims (p.6) and objectives, given below, had been formulated to cover common misconceptions about Aboriginal languages, as revealed by research and personal knowledge. (Dixon 1980, p.4; Brumby & Vaszolyi 1977, pp.5-6)

#### OBJECTIVES

At the end of this course students should be able to:

- \* understand the structure of the Eastern Arrernte language,
- \* hold a simple conversation on a given topic in Eastern Arrernte,
- \* exhibit their knowledge of Aboriginal culture past and present.

According to Dixon, it is not uncommon for educated people to believe that Aboriginal languages are primitive and lacking in extensive structures and vocabulary. Many of these beliefs are associated with the erroneous idea that "...the final proof of 'primitiveness' (was) the fact that Aborigines had no written language." (Dixon 1980, pp.4-5)

#### STAFF

The co-ordinator, an experienced teacher, had attended Eastern Arrernte classes at the Institute but was not a native speaker. All involved with the program agreed that native speakers should be used on the course, but unfortunately none were available who were also qualified teachers.

The Education Department was approached and it agreed to employ at least two Eastern Arrernte speakers as part-time instructors with the co-ordinator training them in the necessary teaching skills as the course progressed. Attempts to get men as well as women involved failed - and the course now involves the co-ordinator and one woman instructor only.<sup>1</sup> (<sup>1</sup> see footnote next page)

As the teacher-in-charge of the program, the writer spends an hour a week with the Aboriginal language instructor. Both evaluate lessons and decide on future content. The writer guides the instructor in on-the-job curriculum production, writing lesson plans and teacher training. The present assistant has only a primary education but is enthusiastic and eager to learn as well as teach.

A grant has been obtained through the Territory's Multicultural Education body to fund curriculum development and preparation of materials.

## STUDENTS

Students at the Alice Springs High School have traditionally been offered a choice of four languages - French, German, Italian and Indonesian. Italian had to be cancelled in 1982 due to lack of a qualified teacher to take students through to matriculation level. Eastern Arrernte filled this spot at least at the Year 8 level. If Year 8 students elect to take languages they are exposed to all four languages in ten-week courses. In subsequent years they can then choose with some understanding any particular language from that group which they would like to pursue. French, German and Indonesian continue through to Year 12 and matriculation.

The Eastern Arrernte pilot project was planned to cover a ten-week, half-semester<sup>2</sup> course. This comprised three lessons of fifty minutes each, making a total of 25 hours per week.

In May, Year 8 language students were asked to indicate whether they were interested in learning Eastern Arrernte. Thirty of the ninety students indicated positively. These were the first group to test out the new curriculum in July, at the beginning of semester two. Students were asked to give a reason for their choice or otherwise, and these included - "I can talk to Aborigines in town", and "I can understand what they say when they call out". There is no doubt that a possible immediate use of the language was a great attraction. Conversely, others saw it as "not quite my style", "no point in learning a language spoken only in Alice Springs", and the ethnocentric, if not racist comment - "Who would want to speak to an Aboriginal?"

<sup>1</sup> Although several men had shown interest in helping to teach the course, this was short-lived. The co-ordinator reported several cases of people failing to turn up at meetings as arranged, or men being affected by drink when they had arranged to take part in class activities. Alcohol abuse is a serious problem in Central Australia, particularly with men, and affects the operation of many organisations. Inevitably the staff who remain with any enterprise tend to be those who are most reliable and that usually means non-drinkers - and women.

<sup>2</sup> The Northern Territory Education year now comprises two semesters, with each semester comprising two ten-week terms.

## OBSERVATION OF CLASSES

The class appears to fall into three categories. Those who chose Arrernte because it seemed like an easy option and word had spread that it included at least two bush trips; those who did not fancy the other languages offered and, finally, the group whom Seliger (1977 pp.253-278) would term "high in-put generators". These latter students practise the language as often as possible and greet the teacher in the corridor in Eastern Arrernte. It was also noticed that these students addressed more questions to the Aboriginal instructor than to the non-Aboriginal co-ordinator. When working in pairs or groups they practised dialogue, tending to seek each other out for reinforcement. They interchanged roles without waiting to be told. Other groups meanwhile, once they had practised the dialogue as set, quickly returned to swapping yarns in English and only continued with Eastern Arrernte when directed to. The "high in-put" group asked for words and phrases to be repeated and they were noticeably willing to experiment.

A typical lesson is almost entirely oral. The lesson begins with an exchange of greetings - teachers to students, students to students. Simple directions, where appropriate, are issued in Eastern Arrernte - "*Ewente eneme*" (sit down) with sign language to match. Dialogues already learned were revised by volunteer pairs of students. Generally the conversations were delivered with assurance and obvious understanding. The efforts of each pair of students attracted comment with emphasis placed on the positive aspects such as, "that was clear pronunciation", or, "good use of sign language". These comments appeared to reinforce the presentation of other students.

From evaluations after lessons the writer and instructor agreed that the most difficulty encountered by the students was with the first dialogue (see appendix 2) - "*Nthenhewerne Iheme?*" (where-to go?). This was made into even more of a tongue-twister in dialogue 2A which practised the same structural patterns but used plural pronouns. "*Nthenhewerne rrantharre Iheme?*" (where-to you-mob go?).

It appears that Stages 2 and 3, personal strategies for learning another language, were largely solved by many children when they asked if they could write the language down - not as it is spelt, but phonetically as it sounded to them. This approach was encouraged by the teacher since such children were exhibiting a learning strategy they felt would work for them.

As problems arose the writer and assistant would devise games or strategies to overcome the problem. To keep interest high and encourage learning of new vocabulary ready for a bush trip, a game of

"Artnwere" (dingo/bingo) was prepared. Students had to match the spoken word with the appropriate picture.

The 50 minute lesson might close with the group sitting together responding to flash cards which encouraged the use of known vocabulary into phrases or sentences. "*Lewetyarre keke atherre*" (goanna small two). During the lesson the writer and Aboriginal instructor tried to become part of the class, joining in the games and cuing students who were uncertain. The majority of the time is spent listening to or speaking Eastern Arrernte.

The school course tries to strike a balance between the written and spoken word. Originally the course was to be completely oral. However, it quickly became obvious that students who are taught to rely heavily on the written word, were finding it difficult to retain or make sense of new material using aural/oral communication with the only visual back-up being picture sheets. The native speaker acted as a model, the students repeating her pronunciation and following the meaning through pictures which were later reinforced with written dialogues. Once the written dialogue was introduced progress was accelerated. Flexibility appeared to be the key with both teachers and students aware that the program was still evolving.

From the writer's experience, students in adult classes are highly motivated and many have a good understanding of Aboriginal culture. Discussions in and out of class concerned issues of Aboriginal life. Students in the school class, however, tend to be concerned only with the words that they are supposed to be learning. Only a few students show a genuine interest in other aspects of the course. By the end of the first course, however, walls of the room had been decorated with the students' illustrations and writings depicting dreamtime stories.

Exercises have local relevance and reference and relate to activities little known to many non-Aborigines, but certainly being conducted every day by Aboriginal people. These included expeditions for favoured foods, such as digging for "*tyape*" (witchetty grubs).

The dialogues included liberal use of hand signs (see Appendix 1) which are a feature of Aboriginal communication.

Although few questions were asked by students, and these referred only to the material before the class, the writer continually poses questions such as, "Why do you think only women are present?", causing students to discover for themselves aspects of Aboriginal culture through the language.

## EVALUATION

The writer and instructor are continually assessing and adapting this program. It is hoped to apply for a further grant to consolidate the present program in the light of experience, and continue the language into Year 9, where wider use of the orthography is planned. The other government high school and a Catholic high school in Alice Springs, which opened this year, have both indicated they will be introducing courses using the curriculum and materials now available.

If the outcome of the Yipirinya school court hearing is positive, a greater input by Aboriginal people may occur, both in the classroom and on bush outings.

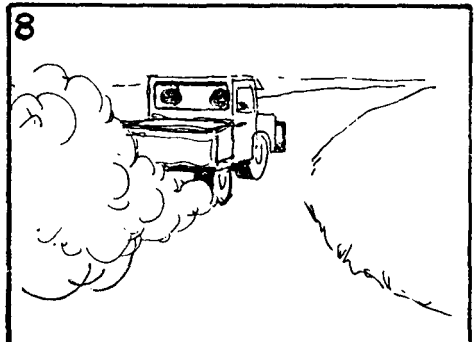
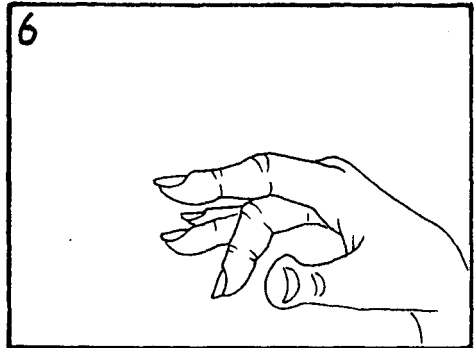
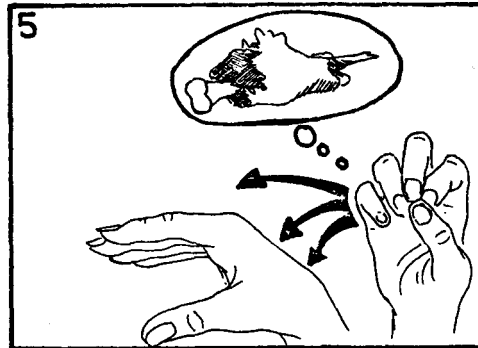
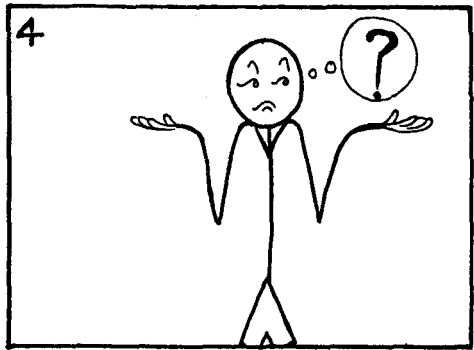
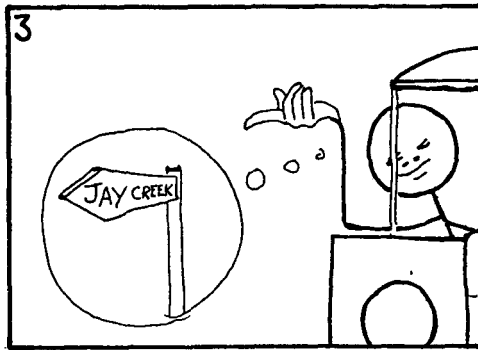
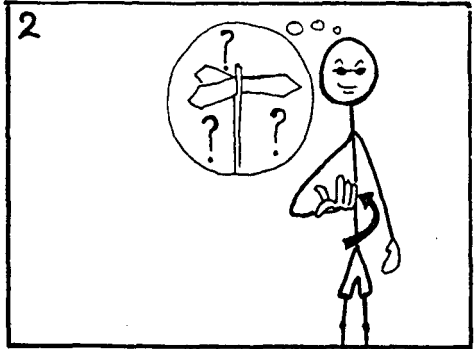
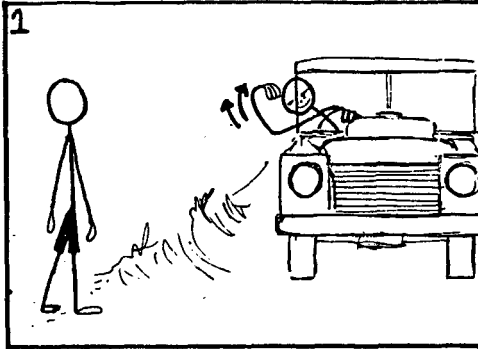
The enthusiasm of teachers and participating students has apparently affected other members of the high school. The School Council has asked that a report of the program be sent to the Senate Standing Committee on Education. It is hoped that resulting publicity will encourage other schools to start programs of their own.

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*See appendices following.*

APPENDIX 1 - DIALOGUE 1



APPENDIX 2 - DIALOGUE 1 - ARRENTE COURSE

(2 men meet)

- |    |    |                             |               |
|----|----|-----------------------------|---------------|
| 1. | A. | <i>Petyaye!</i>             | Come!         |
| 2. | B. | <i>Nthenhewerne Iheme?</i>  | Where-to go?  |
| 3. | A. | <i>Jay Creekewerne.</i>     | Jay Creek-to. |
| 4. | B. | <i>Iwenheke?</i>            | What-for?     |
| 5. | A. | <i>Kereke.</i>              | Meat-for.     |
| 6. | A. | <i>Ewnte petyeme?</i>       | You come?     |
| 7. | B. | <i>Kale Ayenge Petyeme.</i> | O.K. I come.  |

POSSIBLE EXTENSION WORK:

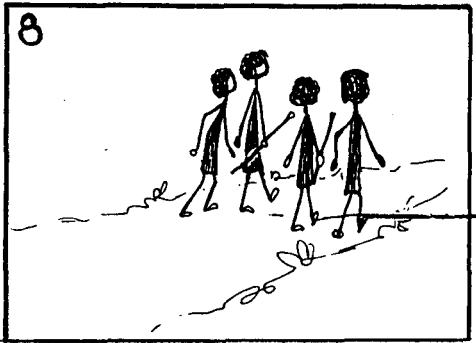
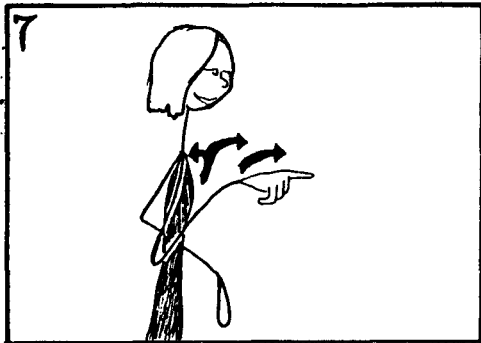
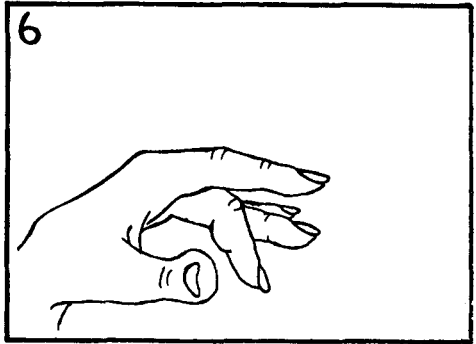
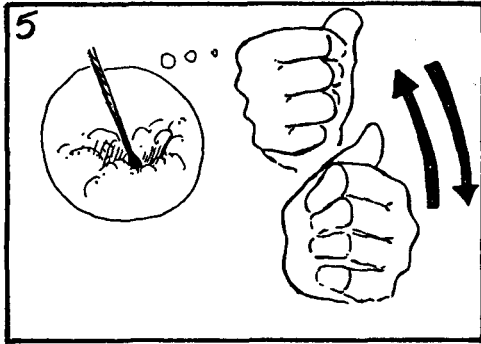
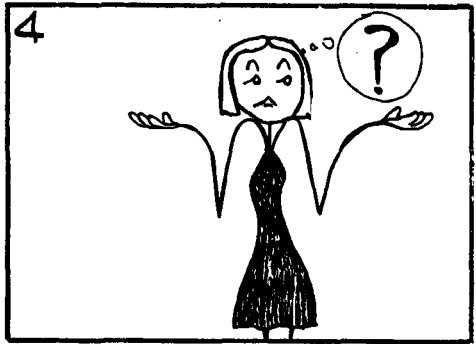
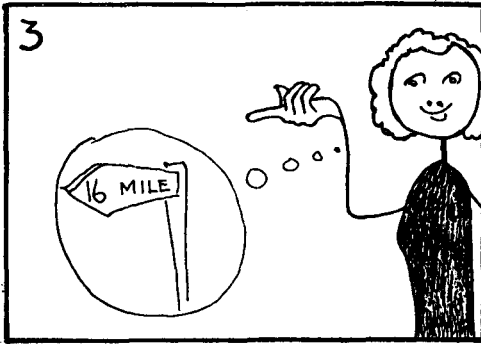
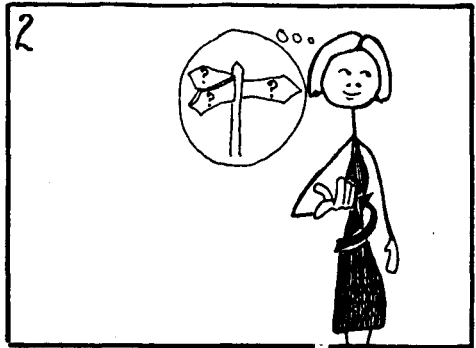
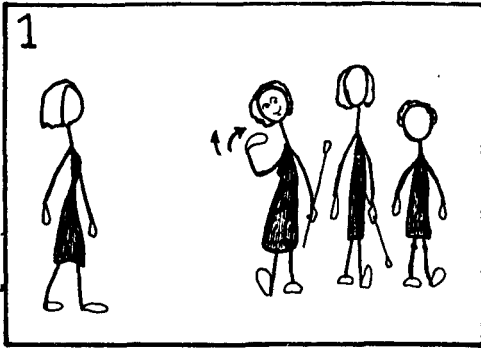
1. From Picture 1: Commands (Come!, Go!, Sit!...)
2. From Picture 2,3: "Where are you going?" / "To (place)."
3. From Pictures, 2,3,6,7: Hitchhikers/drivers - two sets of cards with destinations on them. One set distributed to 'hitchhikers' the other to 'drivers'. Hitchhikers flag down drivers, enquire where they're going to, and when they find one with the same destination, (from the cards) they accept a lift:

"Where are you going?" / "To Hermannsburg.  
Are you coming?" / "Yes I'm coming." or  
"Where are you going?" / "To Warrabri.  
Are you coming?" / "Yes I'm coming."

Students have got enough information to construct "I'm going to Warrabri" - "*Ayenge Warrabri-ewne Iheme*" for themselves. If they don't come up with this, just "*Warrabri-ewrne*" will get the message across, with handsigns.

4. From Pictures 4,5: "What for?" / "For (something)." Vocab extension - kangaroo, goanna, tea, sugar etc.
5. Whole Story: Practice entire dialogue, with different destination and different 'motive'.

APPENDIX 3 - DIALOGUE 2



APPENDIX 4 - DIALOGUE 2/2A

(3 women meet 1)

1. A. *Petyaye!* Come!
2. B. *Nthenhewerne rrantherre lheme?* Where-to you-mob go?
3. A. *Anwerne Sixteen. Milewrne lheme.* We-mob 16 mile-to-go.
4. B. *Iwenheke?* What for?
5. A. *Anwerne tyapeke lheme.* We-mob witchetty grub-for go.
6. A. *Ewnte petyeme?* You come?
7. B. *Kale mwarre ayenge petyeme.* O.K. good, I come.

POSSIBLE EXTENSION WORK:

1. As for Dialogue 1, using the longer grammatical forms employed here, and the plural pronouns.
2. Pronoun practice: Exercise on *Ayenge* (I), *Nwerne* (we-mob), *ewnte* (you-singular), *rrantherre* (you-mob).  
Give out 2 sets of cards: "*agherre*" (kangaroos) and *lewetyarre* (goannas). Students walk around, forming groups with fellow animals, commenting on who's what.  
  
e.g. A. "*Ayenge agherre.*"  
B. "*Ewnte agherre? Nwerne lewetyarre.*"  
C. "*Iwenhe rrantherre? Agherre?*"  
B. "*Na (no), nwerne lewetyarre.*".....etc.
3. Picture Sheet 2 (A) - same story as for 2, but with pronouns reversed. One woman approaches three. Students must construct the dialogue themselves.

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