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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....



FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

USING LITERATURE IN AN ORAL ENGLISH PROGRAM

*Margaret Allen

Part of my role as a member of a teaching team in the bi-lingual program at Barunga School (formerly Bamyili) has been to teach English in the early childhood section. These children come from homes where Kriol is the main language. In some cases a traditional Aboriginal language is used at times, mainly by older people.

Children have a fair exposure to English via television and videos, and also from contact with people in Katherine. At this age, however, the children have limited competency in English.

ABORIGINAL LEARNING STYLES

For these children the learning context at school is different from that at home. This affects the way in which the children learn to think and to use language, and therefore in the way they cope with school. Stephen Harris (1982) contrasts Aboriginal learning processes as follows:

- observation and imitation, rather than through verbal instruction;
- personal trial-and-error, rather than verbal instruction;
- real-life performance rather than through practice in contrived settings;
- mastery of context-specific skills rather than abstract context-free principles;
- orientation to people rather than to information;
- orientation more to the present than to the future;
- learn through wholes rather than through parts;
- persistence and repetition are used as an efficient problem-solving approach rather than analysis.

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ENGLISH ACHIEVEMENT

Aboriginal parents are concerned that their children achieve a good level of spoken and written English. Increasingly Aboriginal people are finding that they not only need to communicate with English speakers concerning everyday matters, but that they also need to present their views and make decisions on a wide range of issues. There have been, however, several factors mitigating against this achievement by children. Often appropriate recognition has not been made of learning styles and sociolinguistic behaviour. Children have little opportunity/need to use English outside the classroom in the community. Many children are first or second generation literates and there is little reading material in the home and few adult models.

At the same time -

they cannot be expected to be able to set aside immediately the dialect they have used since birth and to which they are exposed outside school hours and indeed outside class hours.

(Eagleson, 1982, p.161)

LANGUAGE LEARNING

Ventriglia (1982) suggests that children learn a second language in two steps -

1. They learn language receptively.
2. They actively produce and practice language using a variety of strategies and processes.

These include -

- labelling (bridging) (pp.3-10)
- using phrases holistically (chunking) (pp.11-18)
- receptive expressive strategy (listening in and sounding out) (pp.31-40)
- pattern practice strategy (follow the phrase) (pp.41-51)
- inferencing-guessing strategy (cue me in) (pp.69-83)
- role-playing strategy (copy-cattling) (pp.113-127)

It is important to remember that learning a second language covers not only the rules and sounds of that language but also how to use the language in a second culture.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

Often a curriculum was set out based on sentence patterns and features of grammar. Form was more important than content. It assumed all children were at the same level and needed to learn the same things in the same order.

Because of this lock-step progression it was easy to show what had been taught and which children could produce what structures. There was, however, little provision for the child to use what he already knew. There were tight restrictions on what could be taught/learnt.

...many of our language tests based on lists of syntax which we expect children to repeat or close in a test situation do not give an adequate representation of children's capacity with language.

(Gray, 1980, p. 2-20)

Much time was spent in drilling various structures and patterns without providing many opportunities to participate in realistic conversations.

CURRENT APPROACHES

In recent years there has been a move away from this approach, with its repetition and drills, to programs using language in more natural situations, whilst still retaining the importance of grammatical structures and features.

The aim obviously has to be to make language development programs such that learning activities resemble real language using situations as much as possible. At the same time there has to be an awareness on the teacher's part of the learner's progress in mastering the structure of the target tongue.

(Eagleson, Kaldor, Malcolm, 1982, pp.203-4)

There is a school of thought which makes a distinction in second language development between language learning and language acquisition. The features of language learning are seen as:

- the objectives are in linguistic terms;
- learning comes through practice of discrete linguistic items;
- learning takes place through a) drilling or b) conscious attention to and manipulation of linguistic skills or c) a combination of both;

- language skills are practised in artificial confines, then applied in the real world.

(Nunan, 1984, p.4)

The features of language acquisition are seen as:

- the learner is striving for meaning, rather than concentrating on linguistic form;
- competence grows through exposure to language which is -
 - a) comprehensible,
 - b) of significance to the learner, i.e., relevant and interesting,
 - c) just beyond the current level of competence.
- comprehension is facilitated by language which
 - a) is simplified,
 - b) occurs in environments which provide non-linguistic understanding.
- growth into the second language occurs below the level of consciousness.

(Nunan, 1984, p.4)

A grammatically sequenced program distorts attempts at real communication. Language acquisition sets aside the idea that a language's structures should be learnt in a particular order and allows students to select for themselves what they need to learn from what is presented.

The teacher then needs to set up a good language learning environment. Some features of that are:

- the children are encouraged to use natural language learning processes;
- the children have something to talk about;
- communication is 2-way;
- attempted approximations are accepted and completed, but not corrected;
- repetition is regarded as essential but with meaningful situation and language;
- children feel free to contribute to conversations;
- the teacher focuses on what the children mean, not the form.

(N.T. Dept of Ed. in press p.3)

LITERATURE BASED PROGRAMS

As mentioned earlier, many of the children at Barunga school come from homes where there is little literature in either Kriol or English. They see few adults/older family members reading for pleasure or for a purpose.

Children in bilingual programs such as ours, begin initial literacy in an Aboriginal language, but as they progress through school, there is an increased emphasis placed on spoken and written English. Thus,

There is need for an effective introductory English reading language program - one which introduces children to a spoken type of book language and which promotes discussion, interpretation and "playing around with words". This serves to familiarise Aboriginal children not only with spoken language but with books and the type of language to be found there.

(Murray, 1983, p.5)

While working with the younger children here at Barunga, I have made much use of literature in English lessons. I have usually collected a number of books (often from sets of readers) associated with a particular theme and selected one as the basis of the lessons and used the others as extra stories. Finger plays, rhymes and songs have also played an important part.

The material selected for use has a large content of dialogue to give children practice in this area, both in reading along with the teacher and in role playing. There is also usually repetition of a particular structure in the story.

The books used in English lessons are always available in the English corner for the children to use as they wish. Children will sit and 'read' the books aloud in English, instead of just flipping through them or talking about them in Kriol. Sometimes they 'read' to themselves, sometimes they gather a little group around them and role-play a teacher reading to the class.

One book which was a favourite with the Year 1/2 class last year was *Playtime*, in which Susan goes around the school looking for her brother Timothy. One day, one of the girls was heard reading this to herself, "Where is Timothy? Aibin lukaran ebriweya bla im."[#] She had obviously understood what the English meaning was but at that time was not able to reproduce it completely.

#Aibin lukaran ebriweya bla im = I've been looking for him everywhere.

When I read a book to the children, they are welcome to join in as they feel ready. This allows children who use what Ventriglia terms the receptive/passive strategy, time to listen before joining in. They don't have to speak out aloud by themselves before they have heard a sentence or structure a number of times, and their attempts are covered by the other children.

Once the children are familiar with the content and dialogue of the story, much use is made of role playing the characters. Children are given the opportunity to participate if they want to. In the initial stages the more difficult roles are assigned to those with greater language competency. After that the children choose what roles they wish to take. At times I have had to make out a roster as to who will play each character, because there are too many volunteers.

Minimal use is made of props and these are suggested by the children. For example, a child hiding behind a chair soon becomes a tiger hiding in the jungle. When we were doing the story about *Harry by the Sea*,² a piece of green curtain material from the dressing-up box was used to represent the sea weed which covered Harry, the dog.

Acting out also allows the children to add their own little bits. Transition/Year I did a unit which concentrated on the structure "I can see..." We went for walks to the local creek and talked about what we could see. We also used a book called *Swish, Swish, This Is a Fish*,³ which used that structure. Towards the end of the unit we went for an 'underwater swim' in the classroom, pretending to put on our wet suits, flippers, etc. As we 'swam' around we talked about what we could see. I modelled the language - for example, "I can see a crab behind a rock." Most of the children named animals from the story book, but one of the boys came up with, "I can see a big dolphin jumping through the water." We had not talked about dolphins but he felt free to use his knowledge of English.

The children usually put a great deal of expression into their acting and this often carries over to when they are 'reading' the story to themselves. Babies/young children are represented by high pitched voices and adults by lower pitched voices. Intonation is often over-emphasised. In the story, *The Big Red Ball*,⁴ the ball asks the coat/hat/dress to play with it. The answer is "No, I can't play with you", usually expressed in such a way that the 'ball' is left in no doubt that the hat/coat/dress doesn't want to play. (This is something which has developed over a period of time.)

Opportunities are provided for the children to create new stories and books from the original. Recently in the Transition/Year 1 class, we had a story about a father bear going fishing.⁵ The children decided that we should write another story about a father emu going hunting for worms, using much of the dialogue from the first story, for example, "Where are the fish?" became "Where are the worms?"

There have been times when the children have spontaneously used the pattern practice strategy to create new materials. I used the PM reader *Blackberries*⁶ with the Year 1/2 class. In the story a family of bears go to look for blackberries. As he picks them, Baby Bear says, "Blackberries, blackberries, I like blackberries." We talked about what fruit the children liked and made a book using that pattern. For example:

"Mangoes, mangoes, I like mangoes."

"Bananas, bananas, I like bananas."

During activity time later that week, one of the girls started to sing "Buses, buses, I like buses." Different children from around the room chimed in, using the names of other transport vehicles.

Children have taken chunks of language and used them in other situations. A favourite rhyme is the *Bear Hunt*⁷, which has as one of its opening lines, "All right, let's go." One day the children were lined up ready to go for a walk to the creek. From within the ranks came the direction, "All right, let's go."

Earlier this year the Transition/Year 1 class did a unit on the gingerbread man. We made gingerbread men and acted out the story a number of times. About a week afterwards I was walking past the playground climbing equipment. One of the children on the top called out to me, "You can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man." (I didn't set out to prove him wrong.)

Sometimes it is necessary to alter the dialogue to fit the ability of the children. The Year 1/2 class recently did a class theme on fishing. I used the Gay Colour Book, *The Little Goldfish*⁸ as the basis for English activities. In the story the little goldfish says to different people, "I'm a little goldfish and I want to have somewhere to swim. Please will you take me out of this jam-jar and look after me?" It was difficult for the children to repeat all that so I asked them what they thought we should say instead. One child said, "Will you take me and put me...somewhere." It was eventually decided we should make it, "I'm a little goldfish. Will you take me and look after me?" Thus, we had taken what was a

fairly complex piece of language for the children and reduced it to something that they could cope with.

As a teacher it has been easier to be enthusiastic about this approach than the structural/repetitious drill approach I used when I first started teaching. I believe that enthusiasm on the part of the teacher has a positive effect on the children. It has allowed a greater freedom of choice of material while still ensuring that children are exposed to structures that can be used. It also allows the children to use a number of cultural and language learning strategies.

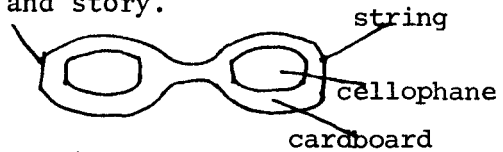
I have personally found this approach very satisfying and the children have obviously enjoyed their work and learnt from it.

OUTLINE OF LESSONS USING "SWISH, SWISH, THIS IS A FISH" - TRANSITION/YR 1.

1. Walk to local creek. On the way and at the creek, teacher and children name the things they can see. "I see a ..."
On return, children draw pictures of what they saw. Make into a class book. Caption - "I see a ..."
Introduce "Swish, swish..." book.¹
2. Known finger play. "Great big bullfrog"²
Poem: Swish, swish, swish,³
I'm a little fish,
I swim in water,
Swish, swish (children put hands together to make fish movements)

and two other verses -
Grab, grab, grab, Smile, smile, smile,
I'm a little crab... I'm a crocodile...
- Read through class book. Go for walk to creek. Teacher models extended language, e.g., I see a striped/little/dead fish. Read story "Swish, swish...". Children join in.
3. New song "The Frog Song"⁴
Poem "Swish, swish..." (children suggest other animals for verses.)
Read story, children joining in.
Cut out pictures of animals for story, mount on card and give to children. Read through story, ask 'animals' what they see. (One word answers accepted.)

4. Poem/finger play/song
Read story, children join in.
Give out cards from previous day. Ask, e.g., "Tadpole, tadpole, what do you see?"
Children make class book illustrating verses from "Swish, swish" poem. (Own or teacher's drawings)
5. New song "Over in the meadow"⁵
Read poem from class book.
Read story with class.
Use cards again. Children both answer and ask questions, with teacher's help if necessary.
6. Continue with songs, poems and story.
Make glasses.



Go for an "I can see" walk wearing glasses.

7. Poems and songs. Go for another "I can see" walk, with teacher modelling locational phrases, e.g., I can see a bike near the door. I can see a tin on the ground.
On return discuss what children saw. Make a chart.
8. Read class books, story. Show pictures of divers. Talk about what they wear/what they do. Go for an 'underwater swim'. Pretend to put on air tanks, flippers, etc. Use glasses from above as goggles.
Teacher models language, e.g., I can see a fish swimming near the rocks.
9. Repeat underwater swim. Teacher adds adjectives to describe animals, e.g., I can see a big fish swimming near the rocks.
Follow up with an art/craft activity.
10. General revision of unit.

MATERIAL REFERRED TO IN TEXT

1. *Playtime*. Ready to read series, Methuen.
2. Zion, Gene: *Harry by the Sea*. Bodley Head, London, 1975 reprint.
3. *Swish. swish. This is a fish*. Puku-Puku Wita-Wita series in new Tracks material. N.T. Dept of Education, in press.
4. Williamson, Alice. *The Big Red Ball*. Gay Colour Book No.5. E.J. Arnold, Leeds, 1975 revised edition.

5. Randell, Beverley. *Father Bear*. PM Reader 3f.
6. Randell, Beverley. *Blackberries*. PM Reader 4e.
7. "Bear Hunt" in *Play School Play Ideas* (Ruth Craft). A.B.C. 1981 reprint. 1st published by B.B.C. 1971.
8. Prior, Pat. *The Little Goldfish*. Gay Colour Book No. 13. E.J. Arnold, Leeds, 1973. (2nd impression).

MATERIAL REFERRED TO IN LESSON OUTLINES

1. *Swish, Swish, This is a fish*: Puku-Puku Wita-Wita series, in new Tracks material, N.T. Dept of Education, in press. (See below)*
2. "Great Big Bullfrog". Winer, Yvonne, *Of Frogs and Snails*. Belair, Adamstown Heights, 1979, p.32.
3. "Swish, swish, swish." *Concentrated Language Encounters in Bilingual Schools in the NT*. (Draft). NT Dept of Education, 1984, p.49.
4. "The Frogs". *Sing and Play*, A.B.C. cassette / A German folk tune. Words - George Keiser from "Growing with Music - Book 1", Prentice-Hall.
5. "Over in the Meadow." *Merrily, Merrily*. Nursing Mothers Association of Australia, 1979, F49, p.190.

* Text for *Swish, swish, swish. This is a fish*.

Tadpole, tadpole, what do you see?

I see a yabby looking at me.

Yabby, yabby, what do you see?

I see a little frog looking at me.

Little frog, little frog, what do you see?

I see a big crab looking at me.

Big crab, big crab, what do you see?

I see a hungry fish looking at me.

Hungry fish, hungry fish what do you see?

I see a turtle looking at me.

Turtle, turtle, what do you see?

I see a water snake looking at me.

Water-snake, water-snake, what do you see?

I see a crocodile looking at me.

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