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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

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ATTITUDES TO LANGUAGE IN A BILINGUAL PROGRAM

Language is an important part of a child's total development as a person. Through language the child learns the behaviour patterns that are expected within his society, the society's religious beliefs, and how the society sees the organisation of the world around it.

"Language is a powerful force of socialisation or the preparation of a young person for later life in a social group." It has a vital function in "accumulating and transmitting culture" (Bostock, 1977, p.6).

Language is also important in a child's conceptual and cognitive development. Harris (1980, p.29) says,

A student will only grow cognitively if he/she is thinking, and a person needs a fairly good control of any language before he is able to spend time verbalising his thoughts.

At Barunga (formerly Bamyili), the children speak Kriol as their mother tongue and have been doing this for two or three generations.

A bilingual program, using Kriol and English as the languages of instruction, is operating at the school. There was much debate about the introduction of this program. However, one of the recommendations of the O'Grady/Hale Report (1974) was that Kriol be used in early education in communities where children speak it as a first language (p.8). Support was given at the 3rd meeting of the Bilingual Consultative Committee, November 1974, for the use of Kriol on an experimental basis, in the preschool at Bamyili and Roper River in 1975 (Report, p.5). A full program commenced at the school in 1977.

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Over the years there have been many detractors of Kriol, who have considered the language to be 'rubbish English', because of its close derivational relationship to English. It was regarded as being synonymous with backwardness and lack of intelligence.

In the past, Aboriginal people who are Kriol speakers held negative opinions about it, mainly as a result of European attitudes towards Kriol. During the past ten years or so, however, this has been changing, and Aboriginal people are increasingly proud of their language. The introduction of the bilingual program at Bamyili/Barunga has had an effect in changing attitudes.

What I want to look at briefly in this paper is the way attitudes to Kriol play a significant role in the planning and running of the program.

1. EUROPEAN TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TO KRIOL

There have been some teachers on the staff who have maintained the view that Kriol is only a poor form of English, that it is a simplistic language, reflecting a European world view. There has been little understanding (or attempt to understand) the complexities of the Kriol language.

Some who have worked in areas where traditional languages are still very strong, have seen Kriol as a second rate language in comparison and doubted the validity of the use of Kriol in the school setting.

These attitudes have created tensions between staff members. Those in favour of the use of Kriol have had to do a lot of public relations work, explaining the whys and wherefores of the program and conducting seminars on Kriol. There has been some success in changing attitudes.

The bilingual schools in the Northern Territory are officially following a maintenance model. Literacy is developed in the vernacular, with an oral English program up to about Year 4. Literacy is then developed in English, whilst maintaining literacy skills in the vernacular.

Often the ultimate end product of the program is seen as greater English skills, without considering the importance of full development within the child's first language. Thus Kriol should not be seen as a means to an end (i.e. literacy in English) but as an end in itself (cognitive development in, and proficient use of, Kriol.)

It has to be remembered that,

Education is more than information: it is much more concerned with thinking and with what people do with what they know.

(Graham, 1982, p.5)

Therefore teachers, both European and Aboriginal, will have to plan carefully to ensure that they allow children to develop the cognitive and verbal skills they need.

...children will need to be introduced to the more oral or formal strategies which are essential for secondary education and beyond. In view of this, Aboriginal teachers are being encouraged to develop and regularly use those language skills associated with school learning.

(Harris, Graham, Buschenhofen, 1984, p.13)

Many of these skills were not needed in the traditional Aboriginal setting. Therefore time needs to be allowed for teacher development sessions for teachers to discuss and work on these skills, and for individual teams to discuss and plan language in all areas of the curriculum.

2. SOME PARENTS FEEL THAT KRIOL HINDERS THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH.

Some parents have expressed their concern that, because their children are spending so much time in Kriol, they won't learn enough English and will therefore be at a greater disadvantage when they leave school. However -

Overseas research into bilingual education for minority group children (Cummins, 1979) supports the view that it is the development and enrichment of the child's first language which will lead to cognitive gains for the child, in addition giving him greater growth in his second language.

(Graham, 1982, p.12)

This means that children who become good speakers of, and thinkers in Kriol, will have a strong base from which to develop in English. This is not an easy idea to explain as many parents have little understanding of European style education in general, and the theory behind bilingual education.

Here, the Aboriginal teachers who themselves are gaining increasing understanding of the program, can play an important part in developing understanding and awareness in the community of what is happening in the classroom.

At the same time, we need to look at ways of encouraging parents to come to school to see what is happening, and how to keep them and the school council informed of what is happening and why.

Associated with this, whilst the children's first language is being developed, the non-Aboriginal teachers have the responsibility to ensure that instruction in English is of the highest quality to maximise the benefits the children receive from instruction in Kriol.

3. CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TO KRIOL

As the children progress through school, there is a demand for a greater range and depth of literature to be made available in Kriol, in order to keep pace with the children's skills and also to maintain some prestige for Kriol as a written language.

The oldest group in the program, who are now in Year 8, expressed the opinion to their classroom teacher last year that they felt doing Kriol work at school was babies' work. The high school students at the school weren't doing any Kriol work and this group saw themselves as almost being at that level.

If they are to maintain a positive attitude to Kriol work at school, we have to enable them to see purpose and value in what they are doing and to look at ways and means of developing and using the literacy skills they have.

One successful venture in 1984 was for the Year 5/6/7 class to go to the early childhood section and scribe stories told to them by the younger children. These were checked, edited and published, with a positive response all round. This group was also involved in lap reading sessions with the younger children - a mutually pleasant experience.

Over the past 12 months, several books which have been written by these students have been printed and are now part of the Kriol language program. Some of these were specially commissioned, others developed from creative writing sessions. These books have been well received and the authors are very proud of their efforts.

There are difficulties in producing materials for these older students. The majority of stories produced locally thus far have

been set very much in a traditional or community context. By the time students reach the upper years, there is an attitude - Who wants to read those same old stories, with black and white pictures, when there are English books with interesting stories and colourful pictures?

At a meeting to discuss the literature needs of the oldest group in the bilingual program, it was decided that we should extend the range available in Kriol to include some factual material, and settings from the European world. It was suggested that there be translation into Kriol of some longer appropriate English texts.

We are endeavouring to work along these lines but one of the greatest difficulties is the currently small pool of writers who have sufficient literacy skills to write and/or translate at this level.

Due to local staffing difficulties, we have been able to offer only a very limited Kriol program in the high school this year. We still need to discuss further the place of Kriol at this level of the school, so that the children will be involved in culturally and educationally valid activities. Kriol needs to have the status of a high school subject. One area which could be dealt with at this level is interpreting and translating skills.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that attitudes to Kriol amongst Aborigines and non-Aborigines have become more positive, although there are still some reservations. Consideration has to be given to these in planning a program which will uphold the language of the home and enable children to develop their language, both Kriol and English, to a high level.

Kriol maintains its prestige as a spoken language but we need to continue to look at ways of extending its value as a written language, particularly for students in the upper levels of the school.

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