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AN ABORIGINAL CHILD LEARNING TO WRITE

Chris Walton

In 1985 there was a Combined Associations Conference held in Darwin. As part of that conference Ann Harrison (a TESL lecturer at Darwin Institute of Technology) and I prepared a workshop to explore some issues concerned with Aboriginal children learning to write in English when it is not their mother tongue. In that workshop we looked at samples of Northern Territory Aboriginal children's writing in English to consider:

**What knowledge about writing Aboriginal children bring to school with them?*

Using one 6 year old Aboriginal child's writing samples collected over a six month period as a case study, we looked at the possible implications of the data. (Handout of complete set of samples not included here.)

**What do Aboriginal children write in terms of quality, e.g., range of genres? Where do their stories come from?*

Using some texts published in the NT Aboriginal Children's Writing: Stage 5 Moderated English Samples (NT Dept of Education, 1985) Ann Harrison considered the quality (e.g., range of genres) of the texts.

** What are the teaching implications?*

Having considered these samples, we talked a little about the teaching strategies that could be used to more effectively teach Aboriginal children to write.

In this Report of the Workshop I will relate some of the information about the first and last of these questions.

QUESTIONS RELATED TO THE CASE STUDY OF ONE SIX YEAR OLD'S SAMPLES
COLLECTED SEMESTER 1, 1985

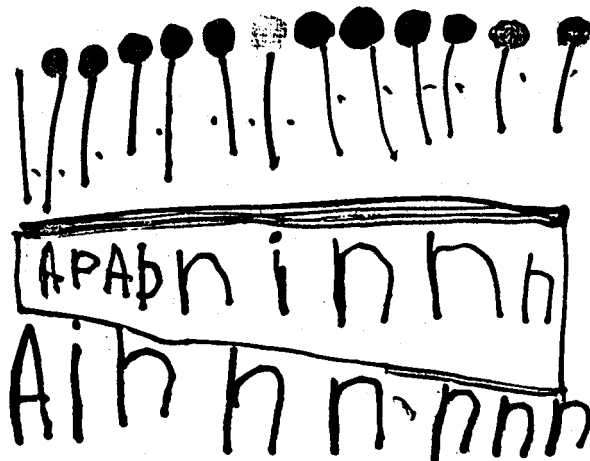
(Without wishing to replicate the details of this case study here, the following questions emerged from the data. Early Childhood teachers may find some of them helpful when thinking about the writing of their students).

1. How much writing is the child doing?

Over the period from February to June (1985) this child did 33 'writing tasks' represented by the samples collected by the class teacher. This is about one or two per week. This may not represent the full quantity and range of writing actually done, however it does seem to be a small number. Samples from the rest of the class indicate this to be representative.

2. What role does learning to write her own name play in the child's process of learning to write?

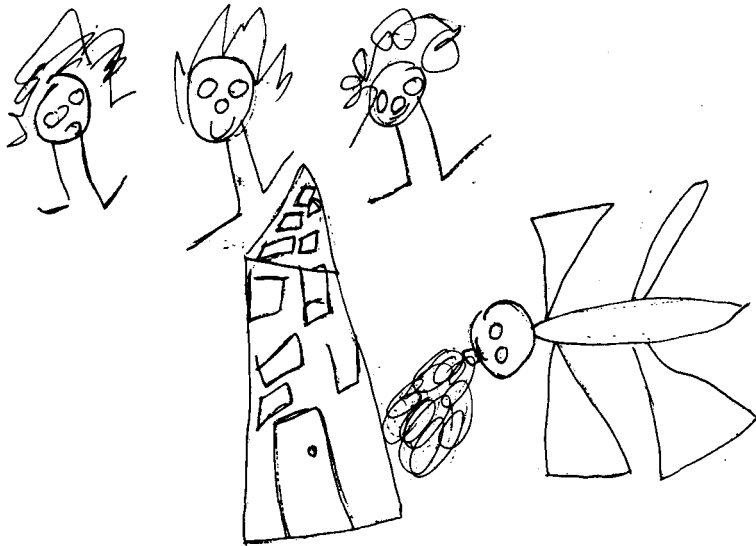
The actual examples of writing in many of the samples are approximations of the child's own name accompanying a picture, that are gradually becoming closer to the correct form. This is an important beginning point for many children as it provides them with a set of symbols that are significant to them and from which they can improvise. It is the first significant sign for this child and may provide her with a powerful hypothesis 'that what is written are names'. This hypothesis becomes 'progressively generalised to later include the names of objects'. (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982, p.179) This child began the year being able to attempt an approximation of her name. Like most of her classmates, this was the only word she was able to write at that stage. It is most likely that she had learned this in her half year of schooling the previous year.



3. What teaching strategies are most commonly represented in the data?

The following strategies are inferred from the data:

* Copying a sentence, e.g. 'Look at the deer'.	15
* Approximation of name only.	6
* Child dictated and teacher scribed.	2
* Letter-like shapes (not name).	7
* Sentence completion, e.g. 'I'm.....'	2
* Individual attempt to write about something from personal experience.	2
* Own effort to write about a story or video, e.g., 'Three Little Pigs'.	4

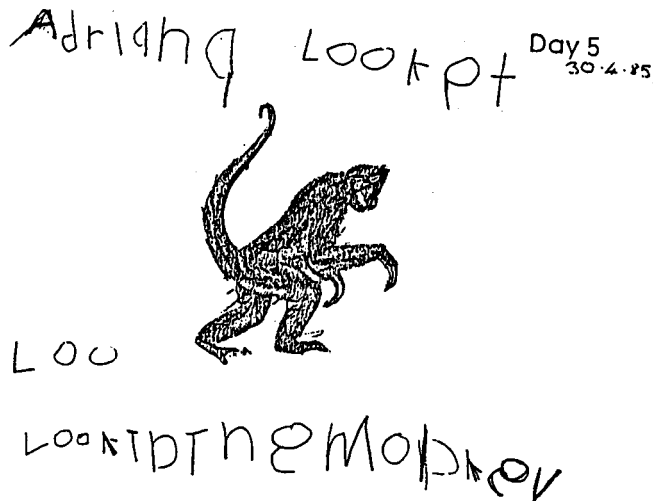


STH in p

The Three Little pigs.
The wolf comes, he's going to
blow the brick house.

child wrote alone Then
teacher wrote down what
child read back.

The classroom teacher herself, reflecting on the samples, thought there was too much copying. This 'gut reaction' is confirmed in the literature related to the role that copying plays in learning to write. For instance, Marie Clay (1982) while recognising copying as an important beginning step, considered if it was not balanced with risk taking strategies it could lead to over dependence of the learner on the model provided. Clay found in her research that copying was not a very productive strategy but that 'inventing was a quicker way to new discoveries'. (p.206) Inventing forms to convey your message is closer to the needs of an active learner as it retains the communicative purpose that is lost in copying as well as providing children with the opportunity to discover that their own invented system is not the conventional one 'and in this way find valid reasons to substitute their own hypotheses with our conventional ones.' (Ferreriro & Teberosky, 1982, p.277) Copying, then, does not allow for active purposeful learning (hypothesis testing). As Ferreiro puts it, a copy is a drawing of letters and not writing.



This, of course, is not to say that children don't enjoy it. On the contrary, Aboriginal children learning to write (in English which is not their mother-tongue) are quite content to copy as there are no risks involved. It is, nevertheless, a dead-end learning/teaching strategy, if over used. There are ways of providing helpful models for children in these early stages of learning to write, which are likely to assist children in the long term to develop the confidence to take a few risks in their learning and hence retain some control of that learning.

4. What models of the writing process are apparently available to the child?

It is a little risky to extrapolate too much from such a small sample of writing as the kind of information we need to consider this question fully can only be found by looking into classrooms to get some idea of the immediate context from which each piece of writing has emerged. As well we would want to know what writing acts she sees in her classroom, school, and wider community. The models of the writing process evident in the texts alone are reasonably restricted. Without further data, however, it is difficult to comment further upon them.

5. What models of written text is the child being provided with?

The models of written text evident in the data include her name, a little environmental print, and single sentences provided with a picture for copying. The sentences for copying are largely little observations about the picture, e.g., 'There are two hippos'. It is interesting to think about the models that could have been evident in a young child's early attempts to write. For example, there could have been more evidence of stories read to or with the child, and environmental print around the room. Only four samples out of 33 relate to story or video input.

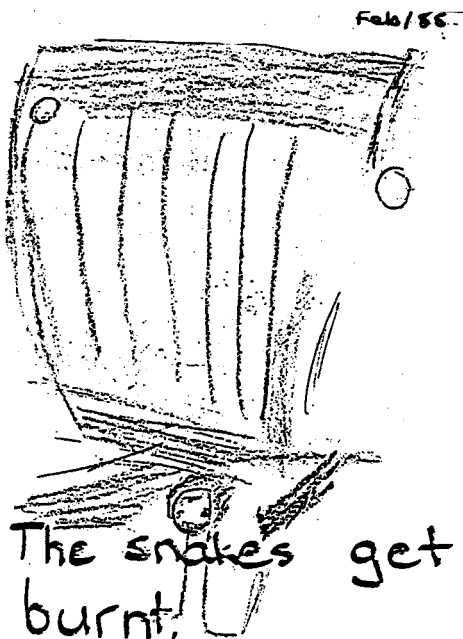
the hippo There 194.85
There hippo
Two hippos★

6. What knowledge about writing do you think the child has been able to construct for herself?

Apart from the important step of learning to write her own name, conveying the message of me or mine, (e.g., as a label for her illustrations) there is some evidence of using other words found in the room to label her pictures. She is developing a notion of the sign value of such squiggles. It is possible that given the preponderance of copying tasks set she may have hypothesised that writing equals copying what someone else has to say. It will be interesting to see what happens over the full year in both the teaching strategies employed and the consequent knowledge the child is able to construct for herself as the teacher reflects on her practice and participates in the ELIC (Early Literacy In-Service Course) in Semester 2.

7. What genres are evident in the child's writing or the teacher's scribing?

I am not sure if genre is the correct term to use for the labelling that was evident in the samples. However, what the teacher scribed for the child was a little observation based on the child's illustration of a part of a story read to her, e.g. 'The snakes get burnt'. This form of genre is appropriate to the purpose of describing an aspect of the illustration. It is a chunk of oral language written down. As such it is representative in form of many early attempts to write.



8. What functions are served by the child's writing?

Language (and writing is a form of language) is learnt in use. The bulk of this child's writing serves purposes other than her own, i.e. the real purpose of copying is to please the teacher. Sometimes when the child labels her illustrations or dictates to the teacher there can be a communicative or expressive function evident. A broader range of purposes, audiences and strategies for writing will enable the child to more effectively learn to use writing as a tool for making sense of her experiences and her world.

9. What seem to be the child's understandings about text and the functions of written text in a literate culture?

This question may seem to repeat earlier questions. The important consideration for this child, however, is the knowledge that she comes from an oral cultural tradition, not a written cultural tradition. She has to learn from the models provided in the school much of what other children have learnt before coming to school. She is not just learning a second or third language but also learning about what writing and the print medium is used for in a literate context. She would have been immersed in mother-tongue language used in different ways for different purposes prior to coming to school, but may not be able to transfer much of that knowledge to the new classroom situation. For example, her knowledge of oral stories (in Warlpiri) and how they are structured would not be immediately useful to her unless that knowledge is somehow tapped. A bilingual program is the obvious solution, however, it may not be a solution available to her in the immediate future.)

Some of the knowledge that is evident to varying degrees to children growing up in literate cultures, long before school entry includes:

- * An awareness of the difference between oral and written stories and the way they work and sound gained, for example, from hearing many bed-time stories.
- * An awareness of the wide variety of the functions of written language evident from seeing significant adults writing and receiving letters, compiling shopping lists, reading books and newspapers, etc.

By taking into account where the child is at and looking at this child's progress in the first months of formal schooling we are in a better position to know the kinds of experiences that we need to provide for her in order to enable her to learn more effectively.

10. What teaching strategies could be used to enable her to learn to write more effectively?

Fran Christie (1984, p.9) argues that

what children generally produce in writing is very much a function of the context of situation in which they are asked to write and the kinds of linguistic demands that context actually makes upon them.

There is in this case study a strong relationship evident between the teaching strategies the teacher had access to and the learning that was taking place. From what has been described above, there is a need for a wider range of models, purposes, audiences and strategies that will enable the child to explore more profitably the world through and of print.

Firstly, we would want the child to write much more than she is currently doing. Given the size of the task ahead opportunity and quantity are important. For this reason it would be useful to allow more time for writing individually on a daily basis. The 'Process Writing' literature is helpful in that it provides teachers with ways to begin to get children writing more and therefore willing to take risks with their learning. Providing the opportunity and thereby encouraging the child to write more is part of the answer.

In addition to increasing the quantity of writing, we would want to find ways of modelling the process in co-operation with the child so that she has meaningful/rich/varied experiences of writing upon which to draw. Giacobbe (1982, p.119) suggests that

what a child can do in co-operation today s/he can do alone tomorrow, therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it...

For this reason it makes sense to search for ways to model the writing process. As children from literate cultural traditions with the familiar bedtime story are gradually beginning to understand concepts of print and concepts about how stories work, so for Aboriginal children entering school with little experience of this, the lap reading technique is considered vital. Similarly, with writing, the process of creating texts together with the teacher allows the child to form some notions about how writing works and what it is used for. Therefore the creation of Group Negotiated Texts seems to make a lot of sense. Different kinds of writing for

different purposes can be modelled in this way. For example, they will be in a position to actively collaborate in the creation of a form new to them based on shared experiences, and thus be able to use that knowledge when writing individually.

The chart (p.25) tries to show a range of possible strategies to achieve a balanced program with the aim of maximising the support provided to learners while not interfering with their control of their learning. There's too much in the chart to go into detail here. Think, however, about the possible inter-relationships between reading, writing and talking, and the way learning could be enhanced if the connections were strong in a teaching program.

I am looking forward to observing the continuing progress in both learning and teaching during the second semester. I sincerely thank the class and teacher concerned for allowing me to share in their experiences.

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ENGLISH READING

READING STORIES TO AND WITH CHILDREN INDIVIDUALLY (LAP METHOD)

READING STORIES TO AND WITH CHILDREN IN GROUPS

SHARED BOOK EXPERIENCE

Read together

- using big books, charts, etc
 - with whole class and small groups
 - using class made and commercial materials
 - using a range of texts, e.g. stories, rhymes, songs, poems (literary), and information texts (expository)
- in order to
- learn about books and print
 - learn to predict from meaning and language (i.e. semantic and syntactic cues) and to scan, rerun and self-correct
 - learn about words, build a sight vocabulary
 - learn about parts of words, letters and sounds (learning to use grapho/phonic cues), developed through both reading and writing activities

INDIVIDUAL READING

- sets of suitable readers
- own writing from language experience, process writing and Break Thro'
- class made books
- other, e.g. library books,
other subject areas,
newspapers and magazines,
comics,
functional reading, e.g. notes, recipes,
forms, letters,
etc.

UNINTERRUPTED SUSTAINED SILENT READING

READING FOR MEANING ACTIVITIES

e.g. Cloze, scrambled texts, sentences or words, meaning webs and maps, and sequencing drawings and photos, etc (see English Core Curriculum and Language Power, part 2).

ENGLISH WRITING

GROUP WRITING

From Concentrated Language Encounters

- create over time (with teacher input), class stories based on shared experiences or favourite stories
- develop stories (literary), information texts (expository), and functional writing

INDIVIDUAL WRITING

- early attempts (scribble leading to invented spelling)
- language experience and Break Thro' stories
- process writing leading to a variety of literary, expository and functional texts

MECHANICS OF WRITING

- handwriting
- punctuation
- phonic, syllable, spelling, word attack skills
- dictionary skills