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## LEARNING TO WRITE : A CASE STUDY

\*Christine Walton

In this article we will consider one Aboriginal child's literacy learning in her first year of formal schooling. The data were collected in 1985. Sharon was then a student in an Aboriginal Transition class in an urban school in the Northern Territory. The children in Sharon's class consisted of Kriol, Warlpiri and Aboriginal English speakers. The program they were placed in was an English-only one. This report considers one case study and discusses Sharon's learning in the classroom context (for a full report see Walton, 1986).

The intentions of the study were to find out:

- \* What knowledge the children had about written language at the start of the year.
- \* The learning that occurred over the year.
- \* The relationship between teaching and learning.

### WHAT KNOWLEDGE DID SHARON HAVE ABOUT WRITTEN LANGUAGE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL YEAR?

Sharon, a Kriol speaking child, had no formal schooling prior to enrolling in Transition, although she had attended pre-school. She was five years and six months old in February. She mixed with both Warlpiri and the Kriol speaking children using Kriol in both situations. Her attendance was reasonably consistent (71%). Using her texts and other information, this paper will explore some issues related to literacy learning and teaching for Aboriginal children in our schools.

Using Kemp's (1982) assessment procedure, known as *CURL* (Children's Understanding of Reading Language) (20.01.85) Sharon scored four out of twenty items. She correctly responded to the following items:

6. Which one is the top line on these pages? And which one is the bottom line?

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7. I'll read these pages again and I want you to turn over the page when I'm ready.
8. ...to visit her grandmother. Can you put your finger under "grandmother"?
18. Do you know what we call these? (numerals) See if you can jump like a kangaroo with your finger, starting at one and counting up to the number that should be at the end.

Segments from the transcript of this one-to-one interview indicated Sharon was able to repair miscommunication when it occurred and confidently engaged in the interview.

(S = Sharon, R = Researcher)

(Well into the interview)

S: The Little Red Riding Hood...lookem' in the pict...um... television.

R: Little Red Riding Hood looking in the television? True? What's the wolf going to do?

S: He's...he's coming la his camp. He's at the door.

R: Coming to his camp? Going to shut the door? Little Red Riding Hood going to shut the door or the wolf?

S: Red Riding Hood.

R: And what's the grandma doing?

S: He's gonna' chase him?

R: Grandma's gonna' chase the wolf...or the wolf's going to chase the grandma?

S: He's gonna chase the grandmother.

R: And what happens next?

S: He's die.

R: The wolf or the grandma?

S: Grandmother.

R: Grandmother dies? Why?

S: And Little Red Riding Hood hiding away.

R: Little Red Riding Hood hiding away. And what happens to grandma? She just finished up did she?

S: Dead.

R: Dead. Did somebody shoot him?

S: The wolf bite him right here.

(And so on for 50 lines.)

R: That's right, he's playing. Do you know what his name is? Which one here says his name? (Pointing to three words on page: playing, Tommy, and).

S: The little boy. (In a reading-like voice.)

R: The little boy...do you know...which word here says his name?

S: Little (.....inaudible)  
R: Righto, we'll read this one. Do you know this one? You join in then. A, B, C, D, E, F. What goes in there?  
S: Radio.  
R: Radio? A, B, C, D, E, F.  
(12 more lines.)  
R: What are all these things in the balloons? (letters)  
S: The number.

Sharon was familiar with the story used in CURL (Little Red Riding Hood). She used a reading-like voice. She was not able to join in with the alphabet. Her response 'radio' in this context may have been an association with call signs on the two-way radio back in her home community. Sharon understood most of the questions put to her in English. She confused letters with numbers, using the labels unreliably. She gave letter-names for the letters in the balloons although not accurately. This showed some familiarity with the alphabet.

## READING

14.02.85

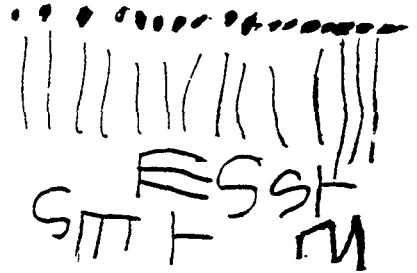
Sharon was familiar with the story *Hairy Bear* (Cowley, 1980) which the teacher had used in class. She joined in this reading with the researcher.

R: Let's read it together. Here now. Where's it start? Yeah.  
Can you say it too? 'Hairy Bear, Hairy Bear'...  
S: Hairy Bear, Hairy Bear.  
R: Ready? Hairy Bear, Hairy Bear, I can hear...?  
S: Um...robbers.  
R: Here now, put your finger here. 'I don't care.'  
S: I don't care.  
R: I don't care. I'll fim, fam, fight em.  
S: Hairy Bear, Hairy Bear.  
R: I can still hear...?  
S: Robbers.  
R: I don't care.  
S: I don't care.  
R and S: I'll bim, bam, bash em.

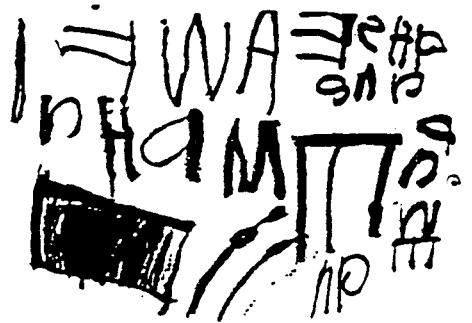
Below are some of her texts produced in the first month of school with brief notes about them made at the time of collection.

Texts 20.01.85 - 29.02-85

1. In response to 'write a story' task.



2. In the writing corner. Letter-like shapes. Mostly left to right, some top to bottom.



Like the other children in her class, Sharon began the year using letter-like shapes. She wrote by using the letters in her name and distributing them around the page. The 'E' was probably an approximation of the 'H' in her name. She knew the letter-like shapes had symbolic value. However, she had not yet established how they worked. She used a reading-like or 'stage' voice suggesting familiarity with the book language. Using Cambourne's (et al., 1984:12) categories, she used recognisable letter/number shapes and attempted her name unsuccessfully. Like the other children in her class she was not writing conventionally spelled words or stories.

It is often argued that most Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory come from an oral cultural tradition and that this in some way contributes to the difficulties these children experience learning literacy. The background knowledge the learner brings to the task is significant. Relatively speaking, literate-culture children, both L1 (learning through their mother-tongue) and L2 (learning through a second language), come to school knowing a lot more about written language than their Aboriginal peers. As we will see, a range of instruments were used to assess the students' knowledge about written language throughout the study. The following table provides comparative data from one of these.

Table 1 - A comparison of L1, L2 and Aboriginal L2 children on the 'Write a Story' task

Category	Cambourne's L1 children Average Age : 5 yrs	Cambourne's L2 children Average Age : 5 yrs	Aboriginal L2 children Jan. Av. age 6.1 Dec. Av. age 6.7
1. Imitative writing	Yes	Yes	3/11 0/13
2. Recognisable letter/number shapes	Yes	Yes	10/11 10/13
3. Unsuccessful attempts at name	Yes	Yes	7/11 7/13
4. Successful renditions of name	Yes	Yes	2/11 6/13
5. Conventionally spelled words other than name	Yes	No	0/11 1/13
6. Conventionally spelled words with a story line	Yes	No	0/11 0/13

(Cambourne et al., 1984:12)

The children were simply asked to 'write a story' using the procedure reported by Cambourne, (et al., 1984:12). The Aboriginal sample was quite small. However, some trends were evident. The five-year-old L1, English-speaking children in Cambourne's sample came to school being able to achieve on the six categories listed. (It is annoying that Cambourne failed to give us an idea of the size of his sample or the proportions that succeeded or failed in each category.) However, there is ample other research evidence available in the literature confirming the overall results for L1 children growing up in a literate culture. (See Harste, Burke and Woodward, 1983:117; Clay, 1975; Wells, 1982; Smith, 1982; Ferrerio and Teberosky, 1982; Heath, 1982.)

Long before school entry many children growing up in literate cultures learn much of the following:

- \* The differences between oral and written stories and the way they work or sound, gained for example from hearing many bedtime stories.
- \* Awareness of the wide variety of the functions of written language evident for example from seeing significant adults writing and receiving letters, compiling shopping lists, reading books and newspapers etc.
- \* The relationship between written language and oral language (grapho-phonics).
- \* Awareness of letter names.
- \* Differentiation of written text from illustrations.

The Aboriginal children were, on average, about a year older than Cambourne's sample. Understandably, the Aboriginal children's results resembled the L2 children's more than the L1 children's. They, too, were learning literacy via a second or third language. Significantly, some of the L2 children in Cambourne's sample were able to write their names at the start of the year. All three groups began the year with some knowledge of the symbolic nature of print. However, the L2 and Aboriginal children had not worked out how the symbols worked. Over the year, the Aboriginal children progressed much more slowly than the other L2 group in Cambourne's study.

Sharon and her classmates did not begin the year as blank slates with regard to written English. It would be doing them an injustice, however, to assume their knowledge to be the same as their literate-culture peers.

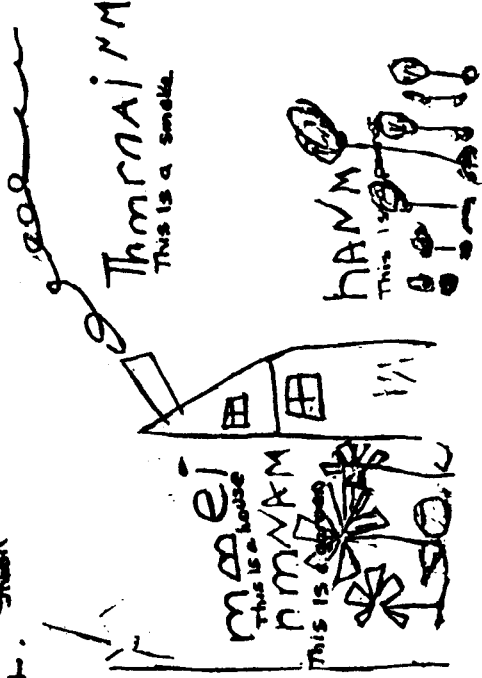
## WHAT LEARNING OCCURRED OVER THE YEAR?

A limited selection of Sharon's texts collected over the year follows. Brief observer notes accompany the texts.

3. March. Copied 'I'm at school'.
4. June. Discussion about different types of houses after teacher visited some children's homes. Children drew a picture of their house and did some writing. Sharon used ten letters. She read her writing using a fixed sentence pattern 'This is a.....'.
5. August. Children had heard a mouse story and talked about 'what little mouse would like to do'. Sharon wrote four lines of letters which she read back as indicated. Her letters included number, letter-like shapes and others. (OC: Her oral retelling/reading used a sequence of events and had a conclusion.)
6. October. Class theme about the sea. Sharon read her writing as indicated on the text. (OC: Her reading/retelling uses language from books.)
7. October. Had heard story *Plop* (Melser, 1981) often. A visiting teacher demonstrated 'modelled writing' as expounded in the ELIC program (Wilkinson and Weeks, 1984, 11). Children were asked 'to write what they thought was happening in the picture and why'. Sharon read her writing as indicated on the texts. She used a combination of sixteen letters and numbers.
8. October. Class theme about Ducks. Sharon wrote nine letters or letter-shapes. When asked to read it she began by ascribing one word value for each letter then kept going when there was no more text:  
'I shoot a duck.'  
'I boil him in the hot water.'  
'I eat him all.'  
(OC: First evidence of Sharon using one word per symbol hypothesis based on one-to-one correspondence. The beginning of establishing the relationship between print and speech.)

011P MY PHSCHO  
SNP.AWKE

4. Sharon



5.

THE MOUSE  
A WATER BOTTLE  
THE POLICE  
THE CHEESE

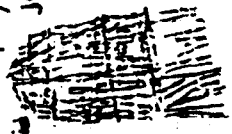
The mouse eat the rice.  
The lady look and chase him and the mouse eat the cheese and she ring the police and he go away then. He get the cheese he take it to the camp then he eat it.

Sharon

6.

NW 80PR BMTT

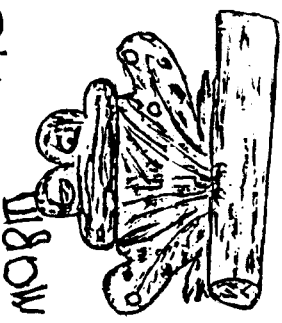
The water snake wanted to play with the dolphin he said. no I don't want to play with you I scare fish and can't play with you. Jelly fish, the Dolphin said. Jelly fish- come and play with me.



Ⓐ

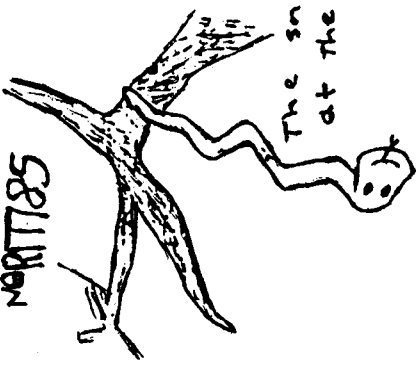
7. 8.

M8NOR90  
MOR90



Frog thinking a snake

MOR90



The snake look at the frog.

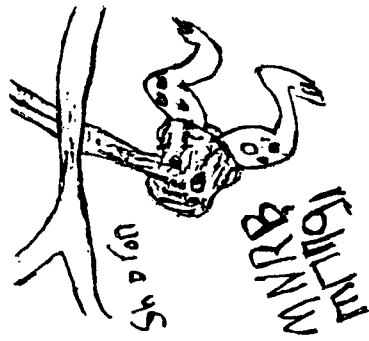
AF90+50, f

I shoot a duck = lost him in the hot water

I eat him all.

Sharon read to Chris pinning one letter per word.

REIGHT  
the great  
MOR90  
the frog



He grab him up the tree, he swallow him inside his mouth. He's foot open.

Another assessment procedure similar to Kemp's *CURL* was used at mid-year, i.e., Clay's (1979a) *CAP* (Concepts About Print Test).

*CAP*

Date: 30.05.85      Score: 12/24

Sharon had scored four out of twenty on the *CURL* at the start of the year. She participated confidently in the *CAP* interview.

Items correct: 1. Front of book. 2. Print contains message. 3. Where to start. 4. Which way to go. 5. Return sweep to left. 6. Word by word matching. 7. First and last concept. 8. Bottom of picture. 11. Left page before right. 16. Meaning of full stop. 19. Locate T t B b. 21. One letter, two letters.

Sharon used one-to-one correspondence accurately to point when the text was read for her. She recognised some of the peculiar layout features of the booklet and appropriately referred to the picture as 'upside down'.

*CURL*

Date: 03.12.85      Score: 13/20

Kemp's (1982) *CURL* was administered again at the end of the year. She had scored 4/20 in January. Segments of the transcript highlight her growing awareness of letters.

(After 9 lines.)

S: My mummy name like that.

R: Which one?

S: This one.

R: Do you know the name of that letter?

S: Says her mother's full name.)

R: (...), that's right. It's 'K' for (...) and it's on the end of 'book'. Right, you show me where it says, 'Once upon a time'. Right, where's it say 'time'? You point to 'time'. Yeah, can you read it for me?

S: Once upon a time.

(25 lines later.)

R: What's in all those balloons?

S: Um, all the name.

R: All the names. All right, some of those balloons have got away. Which ones have blown away? Good, do you know what that one is? What's its name?

S: 'O'.

R: O.K., what about another one that's blown away? Lovely! What's that one?

S: 'E'.

R: That's an 'E' isn't it. Any more blown away?

S: No.

R: O.K. Do you know any more there? Do you know the names for any more?

S: Leroy.

R: That's 'L' for Leroy, yeah.

S: 'S', my name. I got those.

## TASKS ADMINISTERED OVER THE YEAR

### WRITING VOCABULARY TEST

In this task children are asked to write all the words they know (Robinson, 1983 - Reported in Clay, 1979b:23-26). They are allowed 10 minutes to complete the task.

28.05.85      Score: 1

Sharon attempted twenty-three words. Other than her own name she attempted eight names and was able to put the correct initial letter for seven of them. As she wrote she talked about the names. For example, as she wrote 'Adriana' she said 'Aaron and Adriana start like that. Long name Adriana got.' As she wrote 'Jeremy' she said, 'Same name like Jodie'.

23.10.85      Score: 2 (Own name and numerals)

Sharon attempted six items: Aaron, big, sun, Sharon, Jodie, and numerals one to ten. 'Aaron', 'sun' and 'Jodie' had the correct initial letter.

03.12.85      Score: 3 (Own name, 'is' and numerals.)

Sharon attempted eight items. For 'Maria', 'Rebecca', 'Look', 'Kim' and 'Justin' she had the initial correct.

28.05.85

'Leroy, his name like that'

Lesley

LOY

NOMO

AVI

LOAGMM

Leois

AYOIX M MKG

Adriana

Jodie

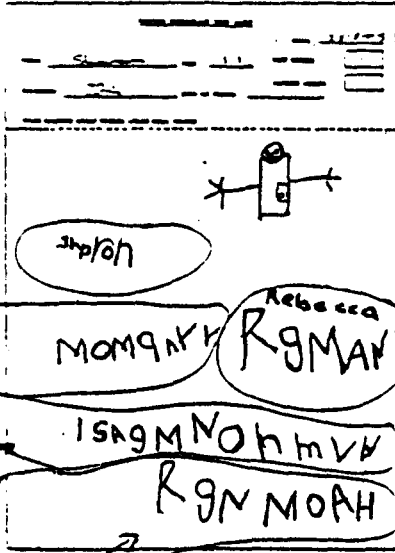
LOMEMO

Kim

KQING

Jeremy

UMTION MGYM



Sharon

MOMQNK

Rebecca

RGMAR

hook at a dog.

hook at a man

ISAGMNOH MVK

RGM MOAH

Sharon  
puppy dog  
Rebecca  
man  
Michael

AMQIFA

Aaron

AGCHORH

big

SAF800

sun

23.10.85

67766

12325 67 8910

LOAG

Jodie

READING RECOGNITION TEST SHEET

Date: 3 12 85

Name: Sharon Age: 6 4

TEST SCORE: 3

Recorder: CW Date of Birth: 20 8 79

READING GROUP: 1

Fold reading under before child uses sheet!

Sharon

Score of 3

for name

for numbers 1-9

for 10

~~MGHAMBHAY~~ Maria

a ISPT  
RAH ~~WISCCG~~ Rebecca is

look

LOT

O

Justin

Kim

KAAL

TUSHMD

Lesley

OHAS

12345678912

DICTIONATION TEST

A short sentence was dictated (Clay, 1969b:26). The child scored one point for each sound (phoneme) correctly scribed.

30.05.85 Score: 0/18

sharɔn

ʔəmmɔŋ qh

04.12.85 Score: 0/18

Sharon used one letter for each word (The boy is riding his bike.) None of the letters had a phonemic relationship to the words.

1  
 - | | H A | U  
 The boy is riding his bike  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

LETTER IDENTIFICATION

Clay's (1979b: 16-17) test uses both upper and lower case. It also provides for children to give answers on the basis of letter name (alphabetic response), letter sound or a word beginning with a similar sound.

28.05.85 Score: 15/54

Sharon used children's and family names for all her responses. She did not give any letter-name responses and gave only one letter-sound response for 'S'. She gave more than one child's name for many of the letters and was matching the letters on her sheet with the letters on the researcher's score sheet as we went along. She called the letters 'number'.

03.12.85 Score: 19/54

Sharon named two letters 'O' and 'J' and said 'O' was in 'house'. She used the sound response for nine letters having first provided a child's name beginning with the letter. She gave eighteen 'word' responses using names. She called all of the letters 'name'.

WORD TEST

Thirteen words provided by the teacher as words she expected the children to know as 'sight words'.

28.05.85 Score: 0/13

04.12.85 Score: 0/13

NAME TEST

Recognising the first names of the children in the class.

26.06.85 Score: 15/21

04.12.85 Score: 14/21

READY TO READ WORD TEST

(Clay, 1979b:21-23)

04.12.85 Score 0/15

READING

The children were taped reading books they were familiar with from their class reading program.

01.06.85

Sharon read each book relying on memory for the text. She also seemed to be recognising some words.

12.12.85

Sharon had heard the story, *The Kangaroo is looking for her child* (Ross, 1985) a few times. She relied on memory, predictable story structure and possibly some word recognition to read along and self-correct, as the following extract shows.

(After 9 lines.)

R: 'The mother went looking for her child. She asked an emu, "Have you seen my child?" The...'

S: 'emu said "No".'

R: 'She asked'

S: (Omitted 'a') 'goanna. "Have you seen my child?"

R: 'The goanna said, "NO". 'She went...'

S: 'to the blue-tongued lizard and asked, "Have you seen my child?" The goanna said, "No".' (Text: 'The blue-tongued lizard said, "No".'

R: Eh!

S: 'the blue-tongued lizard'

R: 'Then the mother kangaroo came upon a rock wallaby and asked him,'

S: He said you seen my little baby. (Text: 'Have you seen my child?')

'The wallaby said, "Yes". He's sleeping in my cave.'

(OC: Not looking at print. Text has 'inside' instead of 'in'.

R: 'Then the mother happily went back home with her child.'

## STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS 1 AND 2

Two interviews were designed for use with the children towards the end of the year (Walton, 1986:72-76).

04.12.85

The transcripts showed Sharon could:

\* Reconstruct a story in her own words.

(S.I. 1 - after 8 lines)

S: He run away...from his binji.

R: Run away from his binji?

S: (Inaudible)

R: What's a binji? Tummy isn't it? For the pouch, yeah?  
And what was mummy doing?

S: Eating grass.

R: Yeah and not looking, eh? And that baby ran away...it  
wandered away. Then what happened?

S: He asked that emu, 'I never seen your 'ild?'

R: I never see?

S: Your child.

R: Have you seen my child?

S: No.....

\* Dictate sentences.

(S.I. 1)

'The mummy kangaroo and the baby kangaroo are eating grass.'

\* State a preference for colouring over writing and drawing.

(S.I. 1)

R: What do we have to do to write? Is writing very hard?

S: Um...yes.

R: Or drawing? Which is hardest?

S: The kangaroo.

R: Mummy kangaroo yeah.

S: (Inaudible)

R: Do you like writing or drawing Sharon?

S: Colouring.

R: You like colouring.

S: Colour it and....(Inaudible).

\* Differentiate between writing and drawing.

(S.I. 1)

R: Which part is the part that you read when you're reading a story? Yeah, and do we read the pictures or the writing?

S: The writing.

\* Answer 'What is writing for?'

(S.I. 1)

R: All right, you write something about the emu. What did you write? What have you got here?

S: Emu.

R: You've got 'the'. 'The'.

S: Emu.

R: All right, you try 'emu'. 'The emu'. 'The emu'. What else are you going to say?

S: The kangaroo.

R: And the kangaroo?

S: Yeah.

R: You put it. Emu...What do you think writing's for?

S: Um.

R: Why do we have writing?

S: For um kid.

R: For what?

S: For the kid.

R: For the kids? Is it for grown-ups too? Does your mummy do some writing sometimes?

S: Yeah.

The igYao

The emu

KRAY  
Shofoh i a S mo

kangaroo

Sharon's data for the year indicated considerable oral language and literacy related language learning. She retold stories using complex book language. She was more confident using English in interviews. She expected print to be meaningful and clearly understood its sign function.

Sharon copied accurately and used about twenty-five letters in her writing. She wrote her name and numerals one to nine. Sharon approximated the names of friends and family members and a few other words using the correct initial letters. She could read the names of almost all children in her class as well as some of her family. She recognised some letters as being inside words she knew, not just in the initial position. She attended to the features of print including length of words and punctuation.

Upper and lower case alphabet knowledge had been learnt from the names of her friends and family. Sharon knew eighteen upper case letters using children's names, five using their sound, and two using their letter name. She knew names for many other letters although applying them incorrectly. In keeping with her source of alphabet knowledge she calls the letters 'names', as did other children. The precise relationship between speech and print was not yet established although with her stock of letter names and sounds and well developed oral language, it could be predicted that she was close to working it out.

Learning to write one's own name and that of other people played a significant role in Sharon's and her classmates' literacy learning. Many of Sharon's texts were approximations of her own name accompanying a picture, that were 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 significant to them, that they can use as their beginning repertoire to improvise from. It is the first significant sign for the 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 and Teberosky, 1982:179).

A simple teaching principle can be extrapolated for the early labelling stages of learning to write. Why not use kinship terms, names of classmates, family members, and so on to explicitly teach word recognition and to explore letter names and sounds?

Sharon read familiar texts relying on memory and some word recognition. She used one-to-one correspondence to follow along when text was being read for her. She confused the labels 'words'

and 'letters' although she had a word concept, evident when she used one-to-one correspondence to read along, and in the dictation when she used a one-symbol-per-word hypothesis.

This one-symbol-per-word strategy was not used often. The dictation situation seemed to have elicited it. Dictation was not a normal part of her experience with writing. It seems to have set up challenges to her usual strategies that were necessary to learn how print worked.

Sharon preferred colouring to writing and drawing. It was less cognitively demanding and free of risks. Like many of the other children in the class, she ascribed lengthy meanings to her strings of letters. In Cambourne's terms Sharon would now be classified as writing her name accurately. She had also written two other words accurately: 'is' in the Writing Vocabulary Test 3.12.85, and 'The' in the Structured Interview 3.12.85. She was approximating many more words.

By the end of the year Sharon was six years and four months old. She was a little more advanced than most of the children in the class although she was one of its youngest members. Sharon's teacher had decided to place her in the Composite Years One to Three Aboriginal class in the following year. Other options were to repeat Transition or to go into a 'mainstream' (non-Aboriginal) class.

## WHAT WAS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHING AND LEARNING?

The relationship between strategies the children employed and factors in the teaching context became an issue needing further exploration and explanation. Sharon's rate of progress raised the issue: What was happening inside the classroom that enabled and/or disabled her literacy learning?

Overall, the results for Sharon and her classmates indicated that they had begun school with less knowledge about English reading and writing and progressed more slowly than their L1 or even their L2 peers from literature culture backgrounds. The study indicated a strong relationship between teaching practices and knowledge children were able to construct about written English.

The following table was derived from analysis of another child in the class's texts. As most writing tasks were whole class activities it can be used as representative of the kind of tasks provided for the children.

Table 2 : Writing Tasks

Categories	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
1. Individual based on literature input		1		1	4	2	4	3	17		1	33
2. Copying		4	5	5	2	1			2			19
3. Based on individual experience	6	1		1	2	1		1	7			19
4. Individual based on class-shared experiences					1	1			5		2	9
5. Child dictates teacher scribes	3	1										4
6. Sentence completion				1					1			2
7. Tracing				1								1

Copying was the main teaching strategy used in First Semester. The classroom teacher herself, reflecting on the samples for the first half of the year, thought there was too much copying. This 'gut reaction' was confirmed in the literature related to the role copying plays in learning to write. For instance, Marie Clay, while recognising copying as an important beginning step, considered that 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' (1982:206). 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' (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982:277).

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. It could be argued that overuse of low-risk strategies maintained dead-ends in the children's generation of hypotheses about writing. So copying was used less in the second half of the year.

This, of course, is not to say that children did not enjoy copying. On the contrary, they were quite content to copy or colour as these were low risk activities. It raised the question of whether there were ways of providing helpful models for children in these early stages of learning to write? What strategies assist children in the long term to develop the confidence to take risks in their learning while retaining some control of that learning?

The ELIC program (Wilkinson and Weeks, 1984:11) suggested the use of 'modelled writing' for this purpose. In this strategy the teacher writes her story thus demonstrating the writing process in action. The text remains the teacher's. Sharon's text No.7 was written after this activity.

Another way to approach demonstrating the writing process for beginners is to use the Language Experience Approach, where the child dictates and the teacher scribes. The child may then trace and/or copy the text, eventually doing more of the writing herself. Another powerful strategy not evident in the data is the Group Negotiated Story developed by Brian Gray at Traeger Park School. This has the advantage of encouraging the children to collectively negotiate the text outcome with the teacher's guidance and scaffolding and then use this knowledge when writing individually.

It is possible that, given the preponderance of copying tasks set for the children, they may have hypothesised that writing equals copying what someone has to say. Two of the children indicated in the Structured Interviews that they believed this.

Individual writing based on literature input became the dominant teaching strategy in the Second Semester. The teacher implemented Process Writing and Shared Book Experience as the result of participating in the ELIC program (Early Literacy In-service Course, 1985).

Writing tasks changed from being relatively unrelated to other language activities to being part of a theme approach based on a book. Shared Book Experience was valuable and similar to bedtime stories upon which it was modelled. The influence of text inputs can be seen in the retellings Sharon and other students ascribed to the strings of letters in the second half of the year. They produced quite lengthy strings of letters and when asked to read them provided lengthy chunks of language, often influenced by the literature input.

However, as the data indicated, this was insufficient for the students to work out the relationships between oral and written language. The features of written language were not made explicit to the students in the context of using the shared books. Sharon memorised the stories and towards the end of the year was beginning to be able to identify words in context. Sharon and the other students were not able to use the Shared Books as tools to establish how print worked. On reflection it was apparent that the class read a story for a week or two - the students learned to join in repeated refrains, using predictable text structure, and were then moved on to another book without using the text to explicitly teach about features of the text (words, part of words, letters and so on).

The Process Writing literature emphasised individual student's responsibility and ownership of writing (Walshe, 1981) thus minimising the overt role of adults in children's language learning. L2 children in Cambourne's study engaged in prolonged repetition of known forms such as letter strings (prephonemic spelling). However, this strategy pervaded the Aboriginal children's responses when Process Writing was implemented. They had become stuck.

The writing context did not enable students to try out new hypotheses such as segmenting their letter strings into word units or sub-word units such as syllables or sounds (phonemic spelling). The students were left to fall back on their own limited English language resources. The students' prolonged use of one strategy indicated that there were some features of the learning context that were constraining their learning.

Occasionally, different writing tasks did elicit this kind of hypothesis generation. For example, Sharon used a one-symbol-per-word hypothesis in the dictation situation. Different contexts for writing set up different demands and hence different outcomes. Some experimentation with a wider range of teaching strategies was an obvious recommendation when children's learning has not progressed as well as it might.

The limited development of letter name and sound knowledge was of some concern. Sharon was one of the most capable students in this regard. There was no overt teaching of the alphabet. The teacher believed children had 'to learn their sounds first'.

A review of the literature revealed that for many children to move from prephonemic to phonemic spelling they use what is called the 'letter-name' strategy where a letter is used because the sound of its name resembles the sound the child wants to write (Temple, et al., 1982:61). By withholding alphabetic knowledge, these children may not have had the required information to move on to invented spelling using phonemic principles.

By apparently simplifying the task - one thing at a time - in fact, it was made more difficult for the learner who needs all the clues acting simultaneously in order to learn.

This data provides some evidence for teachers being familiar with the developmental sequence of children's learning. Not knowing where children are coming from and where they are going can lead to lowered expectations and prolonged periods of stagnation.

The bulk of this child's writing served purposes other than her own, i.e., the real purpose of copying and individual writing was to please the teacher. A broader range of purposes, audiences and strategies for writing would have enabled the child to more effectively learn to use writing as a tool for making sense of her experiences and her world.

The current debate about Process Writing compared with the Genre-based approach is partly about the relative importance of the context for learning - *laissez faire* vs. interventionist roles for the teacher - and the issue of where the child's learning comes from. The individualism of Process Writing ignores the social construction of learning. Sharon's texts over the year were remarkably similar to those of the other children in the class. They all copied in First Semester and individually wrote strings of letters in Second Semester.

There is a relationship between the way writing tasks are orchestrated in the class and the learning outcomes that eventuate. School success and failure are not outcomes of individual action, but rather outcomes of the interaction of the individual with others in the social contexts in which the learning takes place. The study shows that while learning is an individual phenomena it takes place in a social and cultural context where the role of others is significant.

Studies of the differences between oral and written language suggest that learning to write in L1 and L2 involves more than learning to put speech into writing. Immersion in a literate environment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for literacy learning. The implication for Aboriginal and other ESL students is that they need more explicit teaching about language. They have to be shown how to engage with text purposefully if they do not come to school with that experience. Literacy learning in L1 and L2 is not necessarily 'natural'. Learning may be natural - but what is learned is made more or less difficult depending on the learning context.

Process Writing had the advantage of taking the risks out of learning. In this classroom possibly too many of the risks, models and feedback were removed. From my experience of this and many other classes with Aboriginal students, whether Process Writing is used or not, I would argue strongly for a major rethink about the preponderance of low risk mechanical 'busy work' which in this case Process Writing became. Low-risk mechanical activities should be minimised while risk-taking, thinking, and intellectually challenging activities are maximised in order to avoid dead-ends in learning.

Feedback is possible within a Process Writing approach via conferencing and publication. Publication occurred infrequently. More importantly, this teacher like many others, found it very difficult to offer more than positive general encouragement in response to the children's texts. The idea that children individually owned their writing and learned through self-discovery exacerbated this problem for the teacher.

What are children learning when they learn to write?

Writing is one component of literacy and literacy is a form of language. Language is learned in interaction where the learner's intention is to do something with language. Many contemporary researchers stress the social and cultural contexts of literacy learning. Scribner and Cole (1981) consider literacy to be 'a set of socially organised practices' - practices being recurrent goal-

directed sequences of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge. During the course of their extensive research on the three literacies of the Vai, they developed this notion of literacy embedded within its social context. Their research took them away from a view of literacy as a fixed set of skills, since the three literacies (English, Vai and Arabic) studied in their research amongst the Vai did not fit this model. Each of the Vai literacies differed, and these differences related to socially determined functions.

What Vai children learned within each literacy tradition was constrained by the uses of that literacy within the society. This cross-cultural research is significant, in that it links literacy with social context. Within this framework, writing can be understood as a set of socially organised practices. Understanding writing necessitates observing and describing it as a social transaction.

Other researchers such as Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982: Preface) suggest that literacy learning can be considered as learning the 'nature, function and value of written language as a cultural object...' By implication, teaching literacy to children unfamiliar with it necessitates making explicit to them the nature, function and value of this cultural object. The teaching context must consider this as foremost amongst its objectives.

Over-emphasis on the writing process, without consideration of its functions and value, removes meaning and purpose from the task. My own reaction to the texts written by the children was that there seemed to be few real purposes for writing created in the classroom. Clearer teaching purposes would have created more purposeful learning.

The question arises: how to embed literacy into the routine activities of children's lives in school? M. Christie (1984) discussed purposeful learning as being at the heart of what the schools require of children. Purposeful teaching seems to be an obvious prerequisite to making learning purposeful for children.

## SOME CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The children in this study had minimal contact with written language outside of the classroom, despite the fact that they lived in a small town. What this meant was that they had to learn from the models provided in the school a lot of what other children have learnt before coming to school.

They were not just learning through a second or third language but learning, as well, some of their first lessons of what writing and the print medium is used for in a literate context. They had been immersed in language used in different ways for different purposes prior to coming to school and may not be able to transfer much of that knowledge to the new classroom situation. For example, knowledge of oral stories in Warlpiri and/or Kriol, and how they are structured may not be immediately useful unless that knowledge is somehow tapped. A bilingual program is the obvious solution, however, it was not a solution available to these children. We need to develop ways to link children's prior knowledge with the school's goals in both Bilingual and non-Bilingual programs in order to avoid perpetuating differential access to literacy learning.

The study raised the following questions that need further research: Does isolating Aboriginal students in special classes in urban schools withhold them from access to peers who could provide them with models of literacy learning? Sharon was obviously a lively intelligent child. Could she have progressed further in learning to write in a different teaching context? What would be the factors worth exploring?

The children in the class were on average seven years of age at the end of the year and had obviously progressed in their literacy learning. However, their rate of progress overall was disappointing. In comparison with other children in their first year of school they had made relatively little progress. The following illustrates, if somewhat superficially, the differences in outcomes after a year of schooling.

Table 3 : Writing Vocabulary Test Results

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<u>ABORIGINAL</u>	<u>NEW ZEALAND</u>
	282 urban children
	average age: 5.6
	Average score: 6.49 words
June : 6 children	
Average age: 6.3	
Average score: 1.5 words	
	(Same sample 6 months later.)
	Average age: 6.0
	Average score: 26.52 words
December : 8 children	
Average age: 6.7	
Average score : 1.75 words	

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Robinson's New Zealand data (1973) reported by Clay (1979b): 24-25.

To understand these children's learning outcomes we need to look outside the classroom to linguistic and cultural explanations of home/school mismatches. However, we also need to look more closely at our teaching practices and consider whether we have created the most efficient language learning context.

Studies of the origins of Aboriginal student failure have often emphasised the cultural and linguistic factors. I do not wish to deny their importance. However, I think we can explore the pedagogical issues that emerge from studies like this one to see how failure is created and maintained within our schools.

If children's learning (or lack of learning) can be shown to be closely related to teaching practices, there is some hope that changes in teaching practices can lead to changes in learning outcomes. This means we can avoid the misuse of cultural explanations that are so often used as a cop out for our responsibility.

Regrettably, the solution to cultural differences seems often to be to provide more and more time in informal learning situations with minimal interaction with print. What actually happens is that the children who need more and qualitatively better exposure to and interaction with written language learning contexts actually receive less of it in the name of meeting their needs. I believe part of the solution would be found in qualitatively better education. If we don't do this we exacerbate the situation for the young learners so that their differential knowledge about literacy becomes enshrined in day-to-day practice.

If Olson (1977:66) is right and schooling is a matter of 'mediating the relationships between children and the printed text' both the Aboriginal child and the teacher have a complex task ahead of them. What teaching strategies could be used to enable Sharon's pursuit of literacy?

F. Christie (1984:9) suggests that

what children generally produce in writing is very much a function of the context of the 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 was actually doing. Given the task ahead, opportunity and quantity are important. In addition to increasing the quantity, we would want to find ways of modelling the process in co-operation with the child so that she has meaningful, rich, varied and challenging experiences of writing to draw upon. Vygotsky (1962:104) suggested that:

What the child can do in co-operation today he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it;...instruction must be oriented towards the future, not the past.

We must search for ways to lead the child's search for meaning in written text. We need to model both the writing process and the products we want them to have control of.

As children from literate cultural traditions with the familiar bedtime story are gradually led to understand concepts of print and 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 negotiating texts together with the teacher allows the child to form some notions about how writing works and what it is used for. Different kinds of writing for different purposes can be modelled in this way. By actively collaborating in the creation of new texts they can have the process, products and mechanics of text construction made explicit to them and thus will be able to use that knowledge when writing individually.

When we find real differences in access to what school has to offer we need to consider carefully the implications. Young (1983:3) refers to the 'school communication failure' evident in classrooms where minority children are schooled. This interpretation puts the onus on the schools to change in order to do their jobs more equitably.

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