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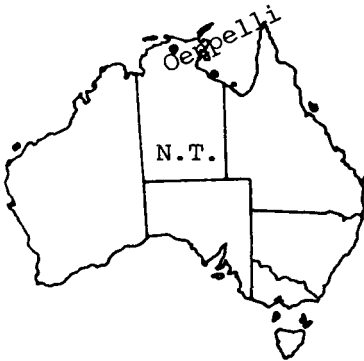
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SOME LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN KUNWINJKU AND ENGLISH

Strategies the teacher can use to help
Kunwinjku speaking children to learn
English

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Kunwinjku is the main Aboriginal language spoken in Oenpelli, Northern Territory. It is estimated that Kunwinjku is spoken by over 1,000 people; it is the *lingua franca* of Western Arnhem Land.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the linguistic difficulties that Kunwinjku speakers face in learning English as a second language, and to suggest some teaching strategies that a teacher can adopt to help children overcome these.

Most of the ideas in this paper are from my experiences in trying to learn Kunwinjku as a second language. I have applied the difficulties that I have had to the opposite situation - Kunwinjku speakers learning English. This exercise has shown me

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the value of the teacher trying to learn the children's language, as it gives a far greater understanding of the task that faces them.

Although this is specifically in relation to Kunwinjku speaking children of Oenpelli, a number of the linguistic difficulties and the resulting teacher strategies relate to other contexts in which English is taught as a second language to Aboriginal children.

Structurally, Kunwinjku is vastly different from English. It is based on verb stems to which are added prefixes, suffixes and infixes to give greater meaning. In effect this means that

a verb can be packed with a lot of extra information and can mean as much as a whole sentence in English... Verbs have prefixes to denote subject and object and suffixes to denote tense.

(Rowe 1981, p.3)

So, with the following example the prefixes denote who is being spoken to:

'Re' is the verb stem for 'go'

Yire	You (one person) go
Ngunere	You (two people) go
Ngurrire	You (three or more people) go
Benere	They (two people) go
Birrire	They (three or more people) go

The teacher should point out this structural difference to the children. They would then understand that English can be very ambiguous and at times they have to differentiate by using numbers. For example, "Can you two go over there?", as that information is not already built into the phrase by the prefix that has been used. In the example above they would learn about the ambiguity of the word 'you'. This would also give them greater appreciation of the structure of their own language.

PRONOUNS, SINGULAR AND PLURAL NOUNS

The prefixes function as pronouns so Kunwinjku speakers often confuse the sex of the pronoun; for instance, someone will be talking about a woman and say, "He is coming today". Children

need to practise using English pronouns, particularly using the appropriate one for the sex of the subject.

Similarly, they need practice in using the singular and plural forms of nouns such as 'goose and geese' because in Kunwinjku there are no distinctions between singular and plural nouns. When they are talking about people, the number has been designated by the prefix, as in the above example.

A further difficulty that Kunwinjku speakers have with English is with the present and future tenses. When using English they often do not discriminate between the two; hence, 'We go to Darwin' may mean that we are going now or next week. This is not because present and future tenses are not distinguished in Kunwinjku. It seems to be related to the social obstacles of learning English in this context, which will be discussed later.

When running activities to correct common errors in use of tenses, plurals and pronouns, it is important for the teacher to have many varied activities so that the children do not become bored and so that they can correctly apply the rules in various situations. Children will learn these concepts by lots of repetition and by using them in meaningful contexts. Thus, the teacher could incorporate chants, rhymes, games and songs as ways of teaching these concepts.

One of the major obstacles in learning a second language is remembering the vocabulary, especially when the words do not sound at all alike, as with the following example from English and Kunwinjku:

ENGLISH	KUNWINJKU
barramundi	namarnkol
emu	kurikadji
turtle	ngalmungi
now	bolkimen
sun	kundung
north	kakbi

Again, the children need a lot of repetition using exciting, meaningful activities so that the words stay in their memory and are seen as useful. The teacher should endeavour to monitor their competence in English vocabulary and, wherever possible, stimulate the children with more relevant and useful words.

PREPOSITIONS

The Kunwinjku language does not have such a complicated set of prepositions as English. The word 'kore' is used for 'on', 'in', 'at', and 'over there'; hence, Kunwinjku speakers often use the incorrect preposition and again this requires practice to correct.

SPELLING

Considerations need to be made when teaching spelling to Kunwinjku speakers because, unlike English, Kunwinjku has only five distinct vowel sounds:

/a/ as in 'father'
/e/ as in 'bed'
/i/ as in 'been'
/o/ as in 'for'
/u/ as in 'put'

Therefore it is difficult for the children to pronounce and spell the different vowel blends that are in English. This is made all the more difficult by the fact that English does not have a universal spelling of its vowel sounds and we have many examples of the same vowel sound being spelt in many different ways, such as the following: caught, bought, fort, wart. Furthermore, Kunwinjku does not have some of the vowel sounds of English, so it is often difficult for the Kunwinjku speaker to hear them as being different sounds, especially when the place of articulation of two vowel sounds is very close to each.

ARTICULATION

Kunwinjku speakers find it very difficult to say the letter 'v'; it is usually replaced by 'b'. There are some consonants which are not in Kunwinjku, such as 's', 'ch' and 'sh', so it is not unusual for these to be articulated as 'dj' as in 'Djilbedjer' for the name Sylvester. Teachers should not expect the children to articulate sounds that they do not articulate in Kunwinjku. This is a skill that they gradually acquire, and it is unnecessary to highlight it in class as it may embarrass some children.

For these reasons phonics lessons are appropriate in teaching English to Kunwinjku speakers, as they can help the children to recognise sounds that they are not used to. Although phonics

lessons are shunned in other contexts, in this case they are appropriate because, in English there are a number of letters that start words which do not start words in Kunwinjku. They also help their reading because in a second language it is so much more difficult to predict the text, so phonics work can give them a starting point for prediction. As I have mentioned earlier, lessons should be as meaningful and enjoyable as possible, so it would be more appropriate to incorporate phonics lessons into shared book experience or negotiated texts.

ADVERBS AND ADJECTIVES

All of these structural differences make it very difficult for Kunwinjku speakers to learn English, and vice versa. This makes it all the harder for Kunwinjku speakers to use more expressive English by including adverbs and adjectives. This becomes very threatening and is more difficult when we consider that an English sentence with one meaning can be constructed in so many different ways. For instance, the following sentences have virtually the same meaning:

'The plane took off into the sky.'

'An aircraft ascended to the heavens.'

'A Jumbo powered into the azure horizon.'

To overcome this hesitancy, teachers should try to incorporate lessons in the use of more descriptive English sentences by introducing easily understood adjectives and adverbs, such as:

'He walked *quickly*.'

'We are baking a *delicious* cake.'

THE TEACHER AS A MODEL OF ENGLISH USAGE

The teacher needs to be aware of the social difficulties of learning English for Kunwinjku speakers, as it is not easy to take risks with a language that is structurally so different. Virtually the only time when Kunwinjku speakers need to use English is during school, as most of the other services in Oenpelli employ Kunwinjku people.

It is very important for the teachers to model appropriate English usage and, at times, encourage the children to elaborate their answers in English. The teacher may accept one word answers so as not to make it awkward for the children; however, the

children need to practise hearing and speaking full English sentences as much as possible. It is easier for a teacher who wants to use a rubber to say, 'Rubber, rubber', instead of using a full sentence. This is the way the children ask each other for a rubber and, whilst asking in this way may be creating affinity between the teacher and the student, it is not modelling correct English usage that the children need for other contexts. It is something that the teacher has to be very aware of as it is easy to become lazy or forgetful.

It was mentioned earlier that children often do not differentiate between present and future tense when speaking English. It is not because of linguistic differences between the languages because present and future tenses are distinguished in Kunwinjku. It is simply a bad habit they have acquired which is partly because they want quick, easy communication, and it is also a result of bad modelling by the English speaking people with whom they have contact, most of whom are teachers.

These are some of the linguistic reasons why it is difficult for Kunwinjku speakers to learn English as a second language. Being aware of these difficulties should make it easier for the teacher to help the children to overcome them.

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