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ABORIGINAL CHILDREN LEARNING TO TALK AND LEARNING THROUGH TALK

John Dwyer *

"A PUSSY CAT HAS THREE WHISKERS"

I had been telling a group of Aboriginal mothers about some of the things that we had learned about how their children talk. The discussion had become quite animated as they recognised elements of their own speech in the examples I was giving. It was obvious that they were pleased that I regarded their way of talking as worthy of study and as something to be valued.

With this shared background of understanding established, I decided to seek their answer to a dilemma I was facing. Given that I had demonstrated that the way their children talk is logical, rule-governed and effective, should the teachers in the school help their children speak Standard English as well as the language they already use?

I was surprised by the immediacy and the unanimity of their response.

"Teach our children to talk proper."

While they undoubtedly valued their own form of speech and were delighted that we had developed some understanding of it, they were also very conscious that their children's use of it stigmatised them in some speech situations. For social reasons, then, they wanted us to focus on language structure.

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Clearly they were right. But for educational reasons we wanted our program to be broader than this. As well as giving attention to Standard English language structures, we wanted to focus on language development generally. We wanted to help these children use language, and particularly oral language, for a wide range of purposes. We wanted them to be able to talk confidently in a variety of social contexts; we wanted them to learn about talking and about different kinds of talk; and we wanted them to learn through talk.

To help them achieve these aims, we used a range of oral language activities, based on a number of general principles.

- The child's own language must be valued.
- All language activities should start from where the child is and should build on that base.
- The major focus should be on language development in general.
- The development of Standard English structures should be seen as extending the child's current language base rather than as replacing it.
- Any modification of language structures to achieve Standard English forms should be positive, supporting rather than criticising the child's attempts.
- Teachers need to be alert to opportunities for children to use oral language and to be aware of the importance of their own language behaviour as a model for children to follow.
- Activities should be planned to provide integrated learning experiences which allow for multiple outcomes.
- Planning should be flexible enough to allow the teacher to follow the child without abandoning the plan (we called it "structured freedom").
- There should be a heavy emphasis on the child's talking to learn.

The teachers and I tape-recorded many of these activities, both as an evaluative record for ourselves and as a guide and motivator for the children.

I'd like to share with you some of the taped experiences of the children in one class over a two year period (their first two years at school).

In this article I'll start with a relatively narrow focus, demonstrating how the teacher handled the development of Standard English structures. In a second article, I'll illustrate how specific learnings and understandings about reading, writing, spelling and punctuation were developed through oral activities. Finally, in a third article, I'll broaden the focus and describe some integrated, multiple outcome activities.

The Development of Standard English Structures

The research underlying this program had identified common language structures which occur in the language of young Standard English speakers and it had compared and contrasted these with those occurring in the speech of this group of Aboriginal children. On this basis it had been possible to develop a sequence of Standard English structures to be introduced through a wide range of activities.

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- (i) Each child is in front of a full length mirror chanting the sentences and performing the actions.

"I'm a girl. I'm jumping."

"I am a girl. I am waving."

"I'm a girl. I am hopping."

- (ii) Note how the structure is supported by physical and visual activity and through rhythm. "Clapping" the structures helps them "feel" the differences. Compare the rhythms of : "I'm jumping" and "I am jumping".

- (iii) The form of the question can help pattern the child's response.

Teacher: "What is daddy going to do?"

Norman: "Daddy is going to swim."

Note the importance of a positive teacher response when the child fails to use the Standard English form.

Year One: July

Teacher: "What is mummy going to do?"

Lorraine: "Mummy going cook."

Teacher: "Good. Mummy is going to cook. Tell me again."

Lorraine: "Mummy is going to cook."

This question patterning technique can help children make quite fine distinctions between structures.

"What is his name?" may yield "His name is Peter."

"What's his name?" may yield "His name's Peter."

(iv) This technique, often supported by rhythmic clapping, underlies the success of the "detective stick". This is a prepared pointer on which is printed a question. The leader (usually a child once the activity has been explained and modelled) points to an object or person, asking the question on the "detective stick". The children chant and clap (or sometimes simply clap) the response.

Examples of structures, which are introduced one at a time, are:

Leader:	Who is he?	Children: He is
	Who are they?	They are
	Who 's she ?	She 's . . .
	What is this?	This is a
	What's that?	That's a

I often enjoyed watching a group of five or six children, led by another child, wandering around the classroom or playground, chanting in response to the pointing of the detective stick.

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What's that? That's a desk.

What's that? That's a chair.

What's that? That's a table. and so on.

One of the strengths of this activity is its openness within clearly defined limits (an example of our "structured freedom"). The leader can point to any, and as many objects as he or she likes, so that the children feel

they are in control of the activity, while we can be confident that they are learning within our planned frame.

In addition, the use of rhythm makes the activity popular, drawing as it does on one of the children's strengths, while at the same time providing a valuable aid for focused pattern discrimination. Because all children (and adults) tend to operate at the level of meaning, children really do need help in "hearing" patterns which are different from the ones they use habitually.

- (v) Standard English patterns can also be introduced through guided picture talks.

Year One: March

A picture of a girl painting

Teacher: "What are we going to write about this girl?
What's she going to say?"

Brian: "I'm a girl."

Teacher: "Yes. It would be good to say, I'm a girl.
But, what's she doing?
Let's make a balloon for her to talk in.
Brian says we could say, I'm a girl. Watch as I write it. We know this don't we?"

Class: (Reading as the sentence is written in the speechballoon) "I'm a girl."

Teacher: "Right. Now what's she doing?"

Brian: "Painting . "

Teacher: "That's right. We can put 'I'm painting' in the balloon too."

Year Two: November

A picture of children at a party.

Teacher: "Here's a picture of some children at a party. Tell me what they are doing. What was she doing?"

Kristine: "She was cooking the cake for the party."

Teacher: "Right. And what was this boy doing?"

Norman: "He was blowing the balloons up."

Teacher: "Yes. And what do you think he was doing?"

Allan: "I think he is hiding the presents for the treasure hunt."

(vi) Using the tape recorder to provide a record of development and also to provide an appropriate context for "school talk".

Year One: February

Familiarising the children with the tape recorder. A progression of activities helps them feel comfortable with it.

All together, make any sound you like.

One at a time, make your own special sound.

Follow the leader. Teacher points to a child who makes an animal sound. All children copy that sound until the teacher points to a new leader who makes a new kind of sound which all then copy, and so on.

February Using Standard English units. (I'm, I am, a girl, a boy)

Emily: "I am Emily. I'm a girl."

Vincent: "I'm a boy. I'm Vincent."

Some children find such apparently simple tasks quite difficult.

3 March

Karen: "Karen. Girl."

Teacher: "I'm a girl."

Karen: " Karen . Girl . "

Teacher: "Say I'm Karen. I'm a girl."

Karen: "I Karen. Girl

Other children: "I'm Karen. I'm a girl."

22 March

Karen: "I little"

Teacher: "I'm little."

Karen: "Little "

Teacher: "I'm little."

Karen: "I'm little."

Teacher: "That's it. Good girl."

Sometimes children over-generalise or over-learn the structures in the early stages of acquiring them.

22 March

Lucas: "I'm a Lucas. I'm a boy.
I'm am little."

As confidence grows, children are encouraged to record examples of 'whole language', such as songs and nursery rhymes, sometimes with unexpected results.

Faith: "Jesus loves me. Yes I know For the Bible tells me so Little ones do leave me alone".

Allan: "Little Miss Muffet Sat on her tuffet Eating her curls and whales".

18 May We were surprised at how quickly the children developed confidence .

Emily: "I'm Emily. I'm a girl. I'm big. I can play with a doll in a pram."

Karen: (Remember Karen on 3 March?) "I'm Karen. I'm a girl."

Teacher: "What can you do Karen?"

Karen: "I can I can play I can play dressing up.

16 JULY Unit (I'm going to)

Vincent: "I'm Vincent. I'm a boy. Ina eat a bananas ... when I grow up."
Note Vincent's use of the Aboriginal English form 'I na' for 'I'm going to': He still has not mastered the relationship between articles and nouns - 'a bananas'.

16 JULY

Other children use the structure (or a variant of it) with varying degrees of confidence.

Kristine: "I'm Kristine. I'm a girl. I'm going to be a ...
I'm going to be a big ... I'm going to be a big school girl."

Lorraine: "I'm Lorraine. When I grow big I'm gonna wash up."

Faith: "I'm Faith. I'm going to be a nurse when I'm big."

Gradually the children are asked to record general language performance. Because they are using the tape recorder and are therefore aware that they are expected to produce "school language", it is interesting to note the way they incorporate the language structures they have been dealing with into their general speech.

20 JULY

Norman: "I'm Norman. I'm going to tell you about a animals.
I'm going to tell you about a dog.
A dog has three leg - four - I know (aside to a child who had corrected him)- and two eyes and two ears and one - and one mouth- and two legs at the back and two legs in the front - and this - makes like this - 'Woof!'".

Norman still has some difficulty with the article 'a/an'. He has also over-generalised his developing rule about plurals, adding an 's' to 'animals'. Interestingly, soon after this he omits the 's' in 'three leg', although he adds it later to words like 'ears' and 'eyes' and his later use of 'legs'.

Kristine: "I'm Kristine. I'm going to tell you about a pussy cat.
A pussy cat hab three whiskers.
A pussy hab four legs.
A pussy hab six - no - two ears and one nose and two eyes and one mouth."

Kristine uses an Aboriginal English pronunciation of the word 'have' - 'hab'. By the way, if you think that cats might not have three whiskers, draw one using the stylised convention and you'll see that she's right.

Emily:

"I'm Emily. The horse have two leg at the front and two leg at the back and he have two eyes and one mouth and one nose and, and a little foalie. And the little foalie have one mouth and one nose and he have two nostrils and two eyes and - and - and one heart. " Emily is still struggling with some standard forms but we, too, take heart at her increasing confidence.

Year Two: April

Vincent: "I'm Vincent. I'm going to tell you about a jigsaw puzzle. I put em in sets and I make em out of birds and kangaroos and turtles. I put em back in the drawer and I get drawings.

I draw a box and a name and I draw, 'We are going to town' and, 'They are going to town' and I write, 'They are animals' and - um - I write, 'They are going to the store to buy two apples for my ... for you.' Vincent demonstrates clearly that he is aware of a link between writing and talking. He is also familiar with the conventions of using speech balloons (his 'box') and picture captions. His switch at the end from 'for my ...' to 'for you' signals his awareness of audience. Remember his 'for you' relates to an orally described written caption.

April

Michael:

"I'm Michael. I'm six. Soon I will be seven. I'm going to tell you about my house. I have got five rooms and I sleep in my bed and in a morning I rake the fire out and I get some wood and get some matches and paper and the chips and I light it and make porridge for dinner."

When he started school Michael had only limited control of Standard English tense forms. He now demonstrates a high level of understanding and mastery in this area. However, he still has difficulty with the use of articles - 'in a morning'.

Many of these examples have illustrated the value of using a tape recorder to provide a context in which the child is encouraged to use what we called "school" language.

Through techniques such as this, the children become aware of the concept of appropriateness. When we were recording in class, I often heard one child say to another, "You don't talk like that on the tape recorder."

My most vivid memory of a child's awareness of context appropriateness was provided by Roy. He had decided that, in class, he would talk to me only per medium of one of a pair of telephones wired up in the classroom.

When, entered the room on this day, Roy turned the handle to make the telephone ring.

Roy: "You wanted on the phone, sir!"

JD: "Hello. This is Mr. D."

Roy: (using a very 'plum in the mouth' voice) "Hello. I'm Roy. I'm a boy. I'm big. I'm at school and I'm ready for work."

He then hung up, turned to me, flashing the broadest of smiles, and, forgetting his decision not to speak directly to me in the classroom, said,
"Pretty good eh!!!"

COUNCIL FOR ABORIGINAL RECONCILIATION

WALKING TOGETHER

Walking Together - is a quarterly Newsletter produced and compiled by the Council's Secretariat. Its aim is to promote the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and the reconciliation process.

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