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DEVELOPING EARLY READING SKILLS IN YOUNG ABORIGINAL CHILDREN THROUGH LISTENING ACTIVITIES

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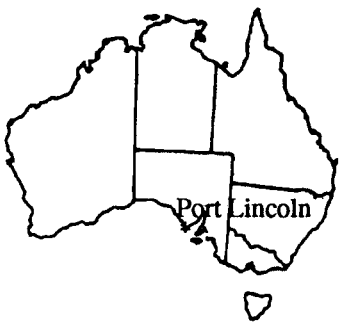

The mastery of beginning reading skills by Aboriginal students is still an area of ongoing concern. The discussion paper released as part of the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people (1994) points to 45% of Aboriginal students having significantly lower levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy than other Australian students despite the intervention programs that have been developed and implemented. The Review also recommends that to improve this situation an emphasis needs to be placed on literacy programs " which identify difficulties as early as possible and which deliver special assistance to improve and maintain literacy achievements at the earliest possible time"(1994). The purpose of this article is to provide an example of one such program that has been developed around new research into the area of early reading development and used successfully with young Aboriginal students.

Current research from both within Australia and overseas is offering new information as to what are some of the basic precursors of literacy development. Recently, the most successful area of inquiry has been in the area of phonological awareness (Stanovich, 1989). A child who has phonological awareness has a knowledge of how speech is composed of a series of individual sounds and can manipulate or 'play' with these sound segments. The child's awareness of phoneme or sound segments in words and their ability to manipulate (count, delete, categorise) these segments seem to be a crucial ingredient if the child is going to be successful in their early attempts at reading (Groff 1990;Snider 1992). Some examples of these types of skills are:

- Sound to word matching e.g., What sound does 'sun' start with?
- Word to word matching e.g., Does 'sun' start with the same sound as 'sat'?
- Recognition of rhyme e.g., does 'sun' rhyme with 'bat' or 'bun'?
- Recognising the initial/middle/last sound e.g., What is the first sound of 'sun'?
- sound segmentation e.g., What are the three sounds in 'sun'?
- counting sounds e.g., How many sounds do you hear in 'sun'?
- sound blending e.g., What word is this - sssss-uuuu-nnnn?
- Sound deletion e.g., Say 'sun'. Now say it without the /s/.

- Identifying deleted sounds e.g., Say 'sun'. Now 'un'. Which sound was left out?

- Sound substitution e.g., Say 'sun'. Now say it with a /b/ instead of a /s/

It is generally believed that this phonological awareness develops in many pre-school children through their experiences with rhyme, alliteration and literary classics such as those provided by Dr. Seuss. Only recently I was confronted by my 5 year old daughter and told 'Daddy put ants down the policeman's pants and made him do a ballet dance!' this experimentation with rhyme and alliteration by the young preschool child seems to provide a natural path for their development of phonological awareness (Layton & Upton, 1992).

What about the Aboriginal child that for cultural, socio-economic or health reasons has limited experience in being read to; who is learning English as a second language; who has not 'played' with words or rhyme; who has not had the opportunity to experiment with language in both a written and spoken form? Unfortunately, speech, unlike writing does not consist of separate sound segments produced one after the other in a row over time. Many vowel and consonant sounds are blended together in normal speech. Consequently, the Aboriginal child who has limited experience in being read to, or who has not had the opportunity to play with language through rhyme or chant may find it particularly difficult to develop an awareness of these sound segments and their relationship to print without direct intervention. It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest that all Aboriginal children will require training in phonological skills but it should be considered in the educational management of such children and intervention provided where necessary.

Several studies have investigated the trainability of phonological awareness and it has been shown that children can be taught to become more proficient in these tasks. This increased proficiency is then reflected in increased reading ability (Blachman, 1991). An example of such a program was carried out by Lundberg and colleagues (1988) in Denmark where non-reading kindergarten children were given 8 months of instruction in developing phonological awareness. It was noted as part of this study that according to custom in Denmark, "preschool children are seldom subjected to informal literacy socialisation by parents or older peers"(p266). Sound familiar? Results of this study demonstrated that the teaching of phonological awareness has a positive influence on reading and spelling acquisition with those children involved achieving superior scores in reading and spelling at the end of Year 2 than those children who were not part of the program (Lundberg et al, 1988).

Between 1992 and 1994 a number of intervention programs based around developing phonological awareness have been trialled in some South Australian schools with Aboriginal children. In particular, a focus was placed on those children who were felt to be most at risk in developing phonological skills due to chronic "Otitis media" (runny/glue ear). The following is a summary of one of these programs.

The intervention program is a 3-step lesson plan (adapted from Blachman, 1991) which requires at least three fifteen minute sessions per week for each child and can be used on an individual, small group and whole class basis.

Step 1

The first part of the session should take no longer than five minutes and is a segmenting and counting activity where the child is taught to represent sounds in one, two and three phoneme words by manipulating disks. The teacher and each child have an A4 sheet that has been divided in half horizontally by a thick black line. Across the top half of the sheet pictures are placed of items that are of interest to the

child. These pictures provide an interesting storage space for the disks during the activity and also allow the child to colour and add a personal touch to the sheet which you will want them to keep. The bottom half of the sheet has an arrow pointing from left to right depicted along the bottom or at the left hand end. The arrow is to emphasise the need for the children to work from left to right during these activities.

Several disks are placed on one of the pictures in the top half of the sheet ready for use. The order of items to be segmented follows a relatively fixed sequence. First the teacher models the representation of one sound (for example /b/) with one disk by moving a disk from a picture as he/she says the sound to the left hand side of the bottom half of the sheet. This can be done in front of individual children or using an overhead projector for a whole class. The teacher then asks the child to, "show me /b/", and performs the task with the child. The child represents one sound with one disk and says the sound as the disk is moved. Next the teacher repeats the single sound twice (/b/,/b/) and the child moves one disk to represent each sound. Emphasis is placed on the movement from left to right as each sound is represented. When the child has successfully completed this task with a number of different letters two phoneme real words can be introduced such as 'at, me & us'. Initially the different phonemes may need to be accentuated e.g., 'mmmmmm...eeeee'. Eventually three phoneme words are introduced with the words carefully selected so that only those beginning with continuous letters are used (e.g., sun-ssssuuuuunnnn). Care also needs to be taken not to use solely consonant-vowel-consonant words so that the child does not become reliant on the concept that each phoneme in the English language is represented by a single letter.

STEP 2

The second part of the program is a similar activity where the child is provided with another A4 sheet on which there are three consonant-vowel-consonant words with corresponding pictures. An effort should be made to place words with similar visual and sound patterns on the same sheet (e.g., hat, cat and rat). Care also needs to be taken to make sure that the pictures are relevant to the child. Each word will need to be fairly large to allow disks to cover single letters without obscuring other parts of the word. Again this activity should last no longer than five minutes.

Several disks are placed on one of the pictures which the child selects. The child watches the teacher model the sound segmentation of the word by covering each letter with a disk as they say it. This is done in an accentuated fashion to begin with so the child is able to clearly distinguish the different sound segments. It is important to use the appropriate sound and not the letter name. The child then attempts to copy the teacher. To complete this exercise successfully the child does not need to be able to identify individual letters. They need to realise that each letter symbol represents a single phoneme and that we move from left to right as we say each word covering each letter as we go. This constant reinforcement of letter sound relationship will help develop both the child's phonological awareness and his/her letter identification skills.

Again, there is a danger that the child will assume that each phoneme will always be represented by one symbol. For this reason, once the child is able to identify most letters it is important to introduce letter blends such as /sh/ but with a supporting square or circle around the blend.

STEP 3

The final activity involves the manipulation of either magnetic or cardboard letters to form consonant-vowel-consonant words in order to illustrate how we can categorise words on the basis of common sounds and how these sounds often have similar letter patterns. Using the

letters the teacher first models the formation of words such as 'pen' (try to choose letters that the child is already familiar with as a starting point). The child is then asked to change 'pen' to 'ten'. Often the child will remove all the letters and try to start again. The teacher needs to sound out the word once more and point out the similar sound and letter patterns. The child needs to see that the 'en' can stay and only the first letter needs to be changed. This focuses the child's attention on the initial letter and reinforces the idea that common sounds often have the same letter patterns. As the child will often have limited letter identification skills it is best to keep his/her choices to a minimum or to letters that he/she is already familiar with. For example a choice of /h/,/p/,/t/,&/m/ may be sufficient for the 'en' pattern. Once the child has become proficient at identifying the initial letters and exchanging them effectively the focus can be shifted to final consonants. For example changing 'men' to 'met' attention can also be drawn to medial letters ('met' to 'mat') remembering that this is probably the most difficult skill for the child to master. Activities with other letter patterns are developed to bring the child's attention to 'why' words rhyme and how the changing of initial, final and medial letters affect the word. Here again the early skills of phonological awareness, letter identification, left to right movement and the difference between what constitutes a letter and a word are taught. And all without the added pressure of having to write.

At this stage the supportive evidence for this program is still anecdotal but through observation and evaluation of each child's early literacy skills there have been some most encouraging results. All the children involved in the program have shown a distinct improvement in their auditory/phonological skills. After six months some children who initially could only count single phonemes were able to count and segment three phoneme words with no accentuation of the individual sounds.

Each child is assessed prior to implementing the program and re-assessed every six months using the Marie Clay Pre-Reading Evaluation procedure. In each case there has been substantial impovement in their letter identification skills and the children developed a broader approach in their word attack strategies (instead of relying on initial letter clues the children were also paying attention to letters in the final and medial position and to common letter patterns). They also improved their conceptual understanding of print in such areas as print containing a message; left to right movement across a page; letter order; the difference between one and two letters and identifying first and last letters in a word.

The structure of the sessions and a commitment to 'building on' from the skills that the child has already acquired ensure a large amount of success is associated with each activity. The children enjoyed themselves and they were keen to build on their previous experiences.

It is important to note that the activities do not constitute a phonics program or a complete reading diet. Ideally, these short instructional settings are incorporated into a classroom where storybook reading is commonplace, oral language activities are valued, basic concepts about print and the functions of reading and writing are will developed and the children have adequate opportunities to talk and write about their experiences.

During the Aboriginal child's early literacy development it will be necessary to evaluate their ability to hear sounds in sequence and program accordingly. The strategies documented here are but one example of a number of useful learning activities listed in current reading research which can be supported by resources developed for use in this area.

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