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Section F: Teacher to Teacher

Teaching Literacy Through Rhyme and Rhythm

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Introduction

Poems, songs and chants are excellent resources for developing competence in English for Aboriginal children who speak other languages at home. Children find rhythmic and repetitive language attractive and accessible. It is not unusual to hear children using the language over and over again in their play and, incidentally, teaching it to younger children in the community. As chunks of language are memorised, new language structures and vocabulary are also internalised. While there is very little commercial material available which is relevant to the interests and needs of remote Aboriginal children, it is a powerful learning activity for children to work with the teacher to create texts which reflect shared experiences.

This paper outlines strategies for incorporating rhythmic and repetitive language into the English program and for assisting children to create their own material.

Getting Under Way

Shared songs and poems are a great way to begin the school day. It brings everyone together in an atmosphere of shared enjoyment and acts as a signal to the stragglers that school is under way. Material can be written up on large, colourful

sheets of paper to create a flip-chart and children take turns each day to nominate favourite items. Many schools begin the day with a Health Hustle and this session too, can be invigorated with the use of a relevant chant. The children at Yipirinya School in Alice Springs used a reggae beat to help develop a chant which began:

*If your nose is running like a (clap)
leaking tap*

*You'd better grab yourself a tissue from the
(clap)
tissue pack ...*

Dramatic Play

Material which lends itself to dramatic expression is of high interest to children and encourages experimentation with different vocal expressions and the use of props. In this way, a text can be revisited over and over again without the children tiring of the repetition.

The following poem, written collaboratively after a bush excursion, is an example of a text which not only encourages the children to 'act out' the drama, but invites them to experiment vocally. The poem begins with the slow, stolid tones of the fat goanna which contrast with the menacing, quick-fire pace of the hunters. The children who helped develop this piece eventually chose to act it out in three groups — goannas, hunters and a third group providing the tension with the accelerating beat of clap sticks.

Anna the Goanna

*Anna the goanna,
Is fat and slow.
Her belly is like jelly,
Wobbling to and fro.*

*Here come the hunters,
Looking high and low.
Go Anna! Go Anna!
Goanna, go!*

Puppetry is a natural extension of the desire to act out rhythmic material and can be presented in such a way that shy or reluctant puppeteers need not suffer performance anxiety. Once the material is well-known, one group watches the performance and recites the text with appropriate dramatic pauses while puppets perform the actions.

Over time, a polished performance may develop from the repetition of favourite pieces and the children are then ready to present their piece to school and community members at assembly or via video.

Hey, I Can Read!

An effective strategy to boost the confidence of emergent readers is to withhold the written version of a text until much of the material has been memorised. Children will be thrilled to discover that they can 'read' the text with the rest of the class.

Alternatively, a desire to be part of the dramatic action can inspire children to learn to master unfamiliar words quickly. In the following chant which follows a question and answer format, the success of the performance is dependent on each group providing a timely response to further the dramatic action and maintain the suspense.

Honey Ant

Group 1: *Honey ant, honey ant,
Where do you sleep?*

Group 2: *I sleep in a tunnel,
So dark and so deep.*

Group 1: (Taking a step forward)
*Honey ant, honey ant,
What's on your back?*

Group 2: *I carry sweet honey,
Around in a sac.
(Moving backwards)*

Group 1: *Honey ant, honey ant,
Don't run away.*

Group 2: *My children are calling,
I really can't stay.
(Moving backwards)*

Group 1: *Honey ant, honey ant,
Why run and hide?*

Group 2: *Your teeth are too sharp,
And your eyes are too wide.... !
(Running off, chased by Group 1)*

The content of this chant was suggested by one of my classes after a hunting trip and a format and rhyme structure subsequently modelled. Final rhymes were omitted to allow for the children's suggestions and they delighted in the experience of 'creating' poetry.

Rhyme, rhythm and repetition provide a high degree of contextual predictability and give new meaning to the use of context clues and phonemics as literacy tools. Many enjoyable learning activities based on rhythmic texts can be used to support literacy development. As an example, a popular game called *The Lost Children* is outlined below.

Rhyming words which are spelt consistently are selected from the poem or song. In the case of 'Anna the Goanna', these could include 'slow' and 'low' but not 'go'. The words are written on individual flash cards along with some other words from the poem and then placed face down on the floor. Then introduce Mr and Mrs Crow who have lost their 'children'. Have the group hunt through the cards for the lost children, and then reunite them by placing them all together. Once this game has been played with a range of individual word families, children can hunt for a larger number of families which are hidden around the classroom. It is important to reinforce the patterns by prominently displaying the word families on the wall and reading them regularly. Occasionally a recalcitrant 'child' could go missing to spark a renewed search. Encourage children to be alert for additional 'family members' in other reading material.

This notion of word families and patterns is particularly effective with Aboriginal children and some young enthusiasts have created their own

large familial networks. For example, 'sing' and 'thing' were classified as brothers, while 'song' and 'thong' were designated as their cousin-brothers. Initial phonemes can also be reinforced through melodic material. Sounds such as 'f', 'v', 'sh' and 'ch' are generally unfamiliar to Aboriginal children with English as a second language. The following chant is an example of a series of rhymes developed to support phonics awareness. Over a few days, the children were asked to find and record words beginning with 'ch'. These were then categorised into concept clusters to reveal an emerging food theme with 'chicken', 'chips', 'chilli sauce' and so on. This provided the material for a popular chant:

*Ch..ch..children love to chew on
Ch..ch..chops with chilli sauce.
We love to chomp on
Ch..ch..chips with
Ch..ch..chicken too, of course!*

Collaborative Writing

After much exposure to the processes of poetry writing, children become adept at 'hearing' metre and selecting appropriate rhymes. The following poem was written as a negotiated text after a bout of teasing had disrupted class routines.

The children were asked to list the class rules which included: 'No teasing', 'No fighting', 'No swearing', 'Share the pencils', 'Share the rubbers', 'Share the toys'. These responses provided sufficient repetition to form a scaffold for the poem's structure. Further responses to fairly directed questioning fleshed out the content.

The children quickly came up with the possibility of rhyming 'school' with 'rule' and from then on, the poem seemed to write itself.

*'No teasing,' said the teacher,
'No fighting in the school,
Be kind to all the little kids.
Remember, that's the rule.*

*'No swearing,' said the teacher,
'Let's all have some fun.
Share the pencils, share the rubbers,
Share the toys with everyone.'*

Conclusion

Playing with language is fun. For children who are struggling to come to grips with unfamiliar language structures and intonations, an introduction to English language via its rhythms and harmonies mirrors the melodic nature of Aboriginal languages and is a welcome doorway to new skills.

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