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EDUCATING THE ORIGINAL PEOPLES OF AUSTRALIA

Ronald GOSEWISCH

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I. Introduction

The field of education would, at first glance, seem a quite straightforward subject, the teaching of skills and knowledge to the young people in a given community. Mixed with this, however, have been political and sociological aspects. One might even say the ethical. By this is meant, to what extent have English speaking peoples who have moved into territories already occupied by indigenous peoples, attempted to pass on the ‘benefits’ of their ‘more advanced civilization’, including their language? A case in point is North America, the USA and English speaking Canada. Nowhere has there been a more dismal record of mistreatment of indigenous peoples. The American Indian custom of taking scalps was actually started in New England by the so-called Puritans. Later in California shooting Indians was a form of sport enjoyed by the Americans who had recently wrested the territory away from the Mexicans. Women and children hiding in caves as well as men defending themselves with spears, it made no difference, sport was sport and, besides, everyone knew, ‘The only good Indian was a dead one.’ Which is all to say that education for the Indians was, until relatively recently, not even a consideration. Nor has the more recent concern about ESL for indigenous people been clear cut, because as Anglo-Saxon Americans took on a more enlightened view of the Indian peoples, some became concerned as much about preserving Indian culture and languages as teaching Anglo-Saxon culture and English language to the Indians in order to help them assimilate into the larger society.

Though the same historical and subsequent issues have been and are prevailing Downunder, the questions this writer originally wished to direct himself to were: To what extent did and are European Australians making efforts to teach ESL to the Aborigines? and to what extent these attempts may be successful? Two questions, which, upon closer examination, turn out to be quite moot. In that, ESL Downunder is by in large in a state of non-existence. ‘... while the provision of ESL classes is an obvious solution to the language difficulties of many children, there are at present no ESL teachers employed in mainstream schools in Queensland and, it is fair to say, most educationists do not recognize that English is a second language for many of the

* Department of English, Faculty of Education, Nagasaki University
One must point out, however, that balanced against Ms Shnukal's opinion is the very real lack of funding to support any sort of comprehensive ESL program in Queensland's schools and there are, indeed, administrators and teachers alike who are fully aware of the problems they face in this area. Nevertheless, there is a serious situation that is generally growing worse, a failure in the education of Aborigine children. Even though the Aborigine child and his or her parents may have had high hopes for what education might do for them, this has in the main turned into resentment against the system and confirmed in the minds of many Aborigines that prejudice, even in the classroom, may never be overcome.

II. Difficulties with language

If we were to ask what should be the ultimate goal of a language development program, probably most people would agree with something like the following:

To produce children who are competent and confident communicators in both oral and written forms with the flexibility to transact communication at home, school, and in the wider community in which the language is used.

Unfortunately, very few programs in our schools which are attempting to develop the English language skills of Aboriginal children appear to be achieving these objectives to any meaningful extent.

Because it is widely accepted that all second language learners transfer phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and even pragmatic features of their first language to the second, in time, if the second language learning is successful, the number of features transferred becomes fewer, it is very important that educators understand that Aboriginal languages are vastly different from Standard English. The situation is made worse by two factors, both already lightly touched upon. One is the aforementioned differences in the languages and cultures.

Imagine, for example, teaching children whose culture teaches them that it is quite socially acceptable, and often in fact polite, to ignore the questions of adults. This plus the wholly inadequate preparation that most English teachers experience for approaching ESL make an unfortunate formula for failure. Again, imagine, for example a classroom dialog practice in a pet shop situation which quickly becomes stereotyped along the lines of:

Shopkeeper: Who's next?
Customer: Me.
Shopkeeper: What do you want?
Customer: I think I'll have a monkey: how much is it?
Scopleeper: Four dollars fifty.
Customer: Here you are.
Shopkeeper: Thanks.
Customer: Thanks, see ya!
While there is nothing essentially wrong with this, such interaction often barely touches on the potential of the situation for language development. The teacher can role-play with the children more as parent-child rather than as teacher-child. Thus he can support and extend the range of language produced in the encounter. However, such role play is rarely, if ever, done as teachers of English as a native language do not receive the training to deal with English language problems at this level.

III. A Pilot Project

The above notwithstanding, English for non-Anglophones is not something that has been entirely ignored in Australia. In fact, in the Northern Territory, a fairly successful pilot project in bilingual education was begun in 1973. The program began in five Aboriginal schools and has since expanded to sixteen. Bilingual programs such as this one probably constitute one of the boldest educational innovations in Australia's history of school education.

In 1980 an assessment procedure was commenced, which was designed to provide objective evidence about whether or not the extra staff and resources needed to support the program was warranted. In comparison to a control group of non-bilingual Aboriginal schools the bilingual program in those schools so far assessed appears to be substantially achieving its social and academic aims. During the primary school years fifty per cent of the overall teaching time is spent in the Aboriginal language, and fifty per cent in English, with the earlier years having more time in the Aboriginal language and the with the last three primary years having eighty per cent of the school day in English.

The Northern Territory bilingual program has a number of aims, some of the most important being the improvement of the standard of English speaking, reading and writing and maths; the improvement of all school learning through the use of the children's first language; and the promotion of the professional development of Aboriginal teaching staff.

The fourteen aboriginal languages currently used as languages of instruction in bilingual programs in sixteen schools in the Northern Territory require a considerable amount of research and curriculum development work to allow them to have a significant place in a well organized educational program. It was discovered therefore, during the first few years of the program that a specialist support staff team was required to develop the program, and in fact make it viable. There are four categories of specialist staff: linguist (language research to support curriculum development); teacher-linguist (Aboriginal language curriculum development and Aboriginal staff training); literature production supervisor (printing and Aboriginal staff training); and Aboriginal literacy workers (writers and artists). Between them this team produces Aboriginal language teaching materials—mostly reading materials—locally within the schools with their own photographic and printing equipment. Bigilingual education
represents a significant attempt to overcome some of the communications problems involved in cross-cultural fundamentals . . . . while being taught oral and then written English.7

IV. Difficulties with cultural differences

A. Time Sense

"Aboriginal people operate with different notions of time from European Australians. In pre-contact times, the passing of time was marked by seasonal, geographical and social events. Chronological, seriated time marking and reference were not used. The Aboriginal way of viewing time persists today, so that, for example, people talk about events which happened . . . .

. . . . 'when Johnny was as big as this little one now.'
. . . . 'in the winter time,'
. . . . 'last time Auntie Daisy was in town,'
or less specifically,
. . . . 'a long time ago.'

Aboriginal people today are not much concerned with or interested in the measurement of time (e.g. by clocks and calendars), nor with regulating their lives by such. Within Aboriginal society there is no such concept as punctuality, and while Aboriginal people widely recognise this as a significant element in white society, they frequently ignore it in their dealings with whites. Thus, although there is widespread stereotype among non-Aboriginal people of 'Aboriginal time' as implying 'always late', Aboriginal people are, in fact, sometimes very early for specific events such as a doctor's appointment or Church service.8

B. Work ethic

Aboriginal people typically do not share the work ethic. They work for economic survival where necessary, and to achieve social and political goals. There is still within many aboriginal families a relaxed, unscheduled approach to time and the feeling that what doesn't happen today will happen some other day. The highest values are placed on social and political relations, rather than, for example, achieved status. Spending time with one's relatives is possibly the highest priority in Aboriginal life.9 We can expect Aboriginal children to behave in school in the same way as they have learnt to behave in community life. What follows is a description of a ceremony, focusing on the role of the participants.

The Aboriginal people all agree that there is to be a ceremony but they also believe that passive participation is the most polite and the most peaceful way of achieving it. Therefore, no one person takes all the initiative. There is much [informal] discussion and planning together among the older people [but] no one
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takes full responsibility, and people who try to take too much power are passively resisted. The plans are specific, but when the time comes, participants know not to force the development of the ceremony so the time factor gets stretched, and often the whole action is put off for a day or a week. The amount of formal organization is minimal. All the organization is either inherent in the ceremony itself (e.g. who is to do what, the order of events, who sits where) or else is worked out there and then by discussion. It is a satisfying experience for all, because anyone who wants to play a part is welcome but the reserved people can simply sit and watch. [They too are participating.] In a sense everyone is active. But there is an essential passive element in the participation. Even the most powerful organizers in the ceremony can only work in co-operation with each other. No one forces the dancers to dance and although they dance together, they dance independently. The dances have definite ends, but don't seem to have definite beginnings. The music starts, and the dancers join in their own time.10

Which is to suggest that the Aboriginal child coming from a traditional Aboriginal home would naturally have more trouble adjusting to the structured nature of school life than do children from European background or, say, East Asian backgrounds.

C. Disadvantages and advantages for the Aboriginal child of the traditional teaching methods used in Aboriginal culture

The Aboriginal child is not subject to verbal or other overt restrictions, although his movements are carefully monitored; he or she explores away from his mother early, mixing freely with other children of various ages. The child is expected to become self-reliant and physically skilled when young, and to determine his or her own actions to a large extent, although still indulged by all. He or she becomes part of a multi-age group which appears to be responsible for much of his or her socialization, and which is virtually free of rules and restrictions set by adults; is not considered by adults to be 'naughty' or 'disobedient' in almost all activities since obedience to adults is not expected; may or may not come when called, or change his or her activity to suit an adult, or answer if addressed; is almost never 'punished' in any way by adults. The child is not pressed into service in domestic duties; may help in getting water or firewood but is not required to; may cooperate by choice with certain adults in work of various kinds, but may watch, help, or not help as he chooses; he is not discouraged from early self-reliance or independence in providing for himself, and is likely to be competent at self-care very early in life; e.g., he and other children may light fires and cook food they have obtained themselves, may traverse relatively long distances when small, may wash his or her own clothes or those of siblings if he or she chooses. The child is not expected to address adults differently from others, or to behave in special ways towards them because of the differences in ages. At no age is he or she
necessarily expected to work for or with adults with whom special relationships do not exist. He or she will cooperate willingly with others if he or she knows and likes them, but not because they are part of a system or institution; for instance, that of a school, because the child works for particular individuals, not systems.\textsuperscript{11}

The above suggests that the teacher must be able to build a bond of trust and respect with the Aboriginal child in order to get the child to cooperate in the learning process. It also suggests that the \textit{active listening approach to language learning is quite in keeping with Aboriginal learning styles}, as Aboriginal children learn by imitation and observation; there is little overt [formal] teaching as such.\textsuperscript{12}

D. Some Suggestions

1. Listening and Speaking

As mentioned above, the bilingual program with a balance between the use of English and Aboriginal languages as languages of instruction should lend itself to helping the Aboriginal child become proficient in the various discourse strategies necessary for successful completion of a structured educational course. But, teachers must always be conscious of the language they are using in the classroom. The pupils' ability to follow simple English instructions and make basic conversation is in no way indicative of their ability to follow an English explanation or proposition. The best indication of a child's learning is his or her own verbalizations. Another useful indication as to whether the kind of language necessary for cognitive and academic development in school is being used is to observe whether both teachers and students are using a wide range of what might loosely be called language functions: reporting, explaining, questioning, predicting, generalizing, comparing, inferring, and so on. It is not true that Aboriginal children are less verbal than children of European background. However, it is true that they find explaining difficult ideas in English to unfamiliar people very intimidating, so they have trained their teachers not to expect them to talk. Teachers must change this. They must learn the appropriate sociolinguistic rules of Aboriginal communication, and plan situations where talking is more natural. They must be patient and sensitive, while still maintaining high expectations of pupil participation. Also, the more the teacher knows about the children's own language, the easier it will be to understand them, and to help them learn and use Standard Australian English while still encouraging pride and respect for the children's own dialect.\textsuperscript{13}

2. Reading

Considering the cooperative nature of traditional Aboriginal culture and ways of teaching their young, a shared book experience would be an excellent way of demonstrating reading for enjoyment, especially for younger age groups and with slower, older children. Not only does it reinforce and teach decoding skills in a meaningful context but it reinforces reading as fun. A few homemade copies of the favorite books
are a good way of ensuring that the children will read and reread them alone and in small groups. However, it shouldn't be overdone, or be treated like singing, but should be used only to introduce new books and to work on them for a while. Then copies must be made available in the classroom, and opportunities provided for the children to read them to each other, and to small groups of children.14

A good technique for slower readers who have been at school a while but never had the satisfaction of reading an interesting book, completely and meaningfully by themselves, is to get them to choose a short, interesting well-illustrated book around or slightly above their reading level. Make a tape-recording of the story read slowly but with good intonation and lively presentation. The task of the children, over the next week or so, is to teach themselves to read the book with the aid of the headphones and tape recorder. If possible a photo copy of the book for home use should be made.15

3. Writing

One welcome focus of attention is in treating writing as a process rather than just an end product. The adoption of a process orientation in the teaching of creative writing has fundamental implications for the teaching of all children. However, the importance of these implications for children from specific sociocultural groups, who are presently failing in school, is even greater. This is so because a process writing approach holds as its basic premise that children cannot learn to write creatively unless they are encouraged to create writing and it embodies the assertion that all children will do so if the teaching environment of the classroom allows it. Consequently, the principal emphasis of the instructional task facing the teacher in the classroom is focused on how they can show pupils how to write creatively and effectively. In process writing, the teacher's task is to structure, monitor and organize a classroom context which provides the conditions, support and direction children need in order to apply their natural language learning strategies to the task of learning to write successfully. The teacher must motivate the children to write, discuss their writing attempts with them and show them how to develop their writing through discussion with each other.16

Unfortunately, Gray is only suggesting what can or should be done, not what is actually happening in classrooms today. Nevertheless, with appropriate support, Aboriginal children can develop effective writing skills. Such support must, however, take into account the divergence between the socio-cultural and linguistic background of the children on the one hand and that assumed by the formal school system and published reading and writing materials on the other.17

Conclusion

Educators Downunder must realize that cross-cultural communication between English speaking Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people is intensifying, not only in informal social settings, but in political, government, educational and judicial
arenas. While many Aboriginal people are competent bilingually and biculturally, many choose to maintain Aboriginal ways of speaking and relating. While distinctive-ly Aboriginal ways are maintained, and non-Aboriginal people are unaware that English is used in Aboriginal ways, there is considerable communication clash and inter-racial tension. What needs to be done is to implement a complete revision of the educational system to educate all children of every culture not only in the mainstream culture but in the minority cultures as well. For unless a foundation for understanding is begun and begun soon, Northern Ireland, Watts, South Africa, Wounded Knee, Notting Hill shall all of them come out of the television screen and into the classrooms and streets of what has been up until now a beautiful continent indeed.

NOTES

1) Shunukal, A., 'Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland Mainland Schools,' *Aboriginal Child at School*, vol. 12, no. 5, p 18.

2) Gray, 83.

3) Shunukal, A., 'Torres Strait Islander Students in Queensland Mainland Schools,' *Aboriginal Child at School*, vol. 12, no. 5, p 15.


9) Eades, ibid, p 35.


18) Eades, op. cit, pp 31-2.
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