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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a didactic model of teaching-learning which underlies the approach of many teachers and linguists, and proposes an organic interaction model, which recognizes children's individual needs and characteristics, instead. Problems in interpreting test results in areas of primary or oral language and in the secondary language skills of reading and writing are examined, with particular reference to aboriginal children learning English as a second language. Ethnocentric attitudes on the part of the teacher are opposed to the need for increased understanding of the characteristics of learners, children in general, particular cultural groups, and individual children. Consideration is given to recognition of developmental patterns observed among children and accomodation of such sequences in planning programs by teachers and linguists. Finally, some examples of an organic interaction model of teaching-learning in operation are provided. (Author/AM)

# 6. CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND EXPERIENCES: SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR LINGUISTS

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This paper focuses on five major areas of consideration -

I. An examination of two contrasted models of teaching-learning which underlie the thinking of many teachers and linguists involved in school programs. It is recognized that a restrictive model may actually operate in a school or it may be falsely assumed by a linguist, thus introducing unnecessary constraints.

II. Implementation of an organic interaction model in schools.

III. Problems in interpreting test results in areas of primary or oral language and in the secondary language skills of reading and written communication.

IV. The need for increased understanding of the characteristics of learners - of children generally, of particular cultural groups, and of individual children. Such understanding provides a basis for planning programs which capitalize on learners' characteristics.

V. Recognition of developmental patterns observed among children and accommodation of such sequences in planning programs by teachers and linguists.

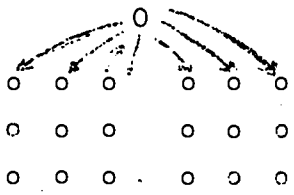
Finally, some examples of an organic interaction model of teaching-learning in operation are provided.

I. MODELS OF TEACHING-LEARNING

(a) Didactic Teaching Model

In the writings of some linguists involved in childhood education, there is an implicit acceptance of didactic teaching. With this model, teachers initiate action and children respond. Feedback from children to teacher is limited. Communication among children is restricted.

Associated with a didactic teaching style, there often exists a view of the learner as receptacle and the teacher as the source of learning. Learning tends to be viewed in a limited way - as acquisition of new items of information. Little emphasis is placed on understanding - integrating ideas in terms of past experience. "Learning" tends to be equated with "that which has been taught". With teacher as instructor and quiet rows of passive learners, a limited communication system of the following type results:

| Interaction Pattern | Setting |
|---|---|
|  | Classroom |

In this system there is a high risk of miscommunication if the experiential background and linguistic code of teacher and learners differ. So poor is the communication system operating in didactic teaching that teacher

and children are often unaware of miscommunication. A pluralistic ignorance situation of this type is likely to be more damaging than poor communication which the participants recognize. An example of such pluralistic ignorance is provided by "too much/too many" which is frequently used by teachers in relation to mathematical ideas and is also used with high frequency by children in many Aboriginal communities.

" 'e steal too much money" was quoted by a teacher as a child's explanation of his father's being in jail. The teacher, who was predisposed to interpret unfavourably, enlarged:

"You see, they think it's alright to steal, as long as they don't steal too much and get caught."

The child's "too much" simply meant "a lot".

After teaching in this particular community for three years, this teacher still had not become sensitive to such differences in meaning. It is my view that the didactic teaching model contributes to such communication problems by limiting scope for the teacher to learn about the children whom he teaches.

A didactic teaching model underlies a teaching style which has been widely used in the past and which continues to be influential. Even in schools which have moved well away from this model, it may continue to be limiting if it is accepted implicitly by linguists working in education. A didactic model is totally inadequate as a means of representing the ways in which children

learn. Instead, I propose that we adopt an organic interaction model which is much more consistent with learning theory and child development studies -

(b) Organic Interaction Model

A child learns by interacting with his environment, both physical and social. He learns through all his senses. As he feels things, smells things, sees things, manipulates them, etc. he takes into himself information about the world. He begins to develop a cognitive model of his world, and in this, language plays a vital role. He begins to use symbols for items in his world. He classifies experiences, observing similarities and tolerating differences within classes. Each new item is coded and must be related to previous experiences as the child's structuring of his world proceeds.

A teacher who accepts an organic interaction model of learning tends to define his own role as promoting new learning by children. The concept "language of instruction" is fairly unimportant for this teacher. The linguistic code which provides a vehicle for children's learning is the more important consideration. For school starters, this language will be the language of the child's home, and perhaps, later, will gradually extend to a second language or dialect.

With an organic interaction model, various functions of language can be recognized and accommodated;

structuring of the individual's world as symbols are organized into a model of reality;

communicating with social beings of significance to him;

self-communication and self-guidance as he directs his behaviour through language, either spoken or silent;

verbal mediation in problem solving as verbalizing helps to organize thinking.

Since the consciousness of the child, not of the teacher, is of prime importance in this model, children will often initiate action while the child's peers or the teacher will respond to him. Natural social interaction is expected as children participate in various activities and seek the companionship of their mates. The teacher's role includes:

determining learning goals (in consultation with others);

structuring learning experiences;

promoting verbalization by the children;

helping children to focus on new aspects of experience and to linguistically code new features of experience.

Patterns of communication will be varied as will be settings for interaction, e.g.

| Interaction Patterns | Settings |
|---|---|
| groups vary in size but often consist of 2, 3 or 4 members | Classroom |
| groups informally structured by children and sometimes by teacher | Playground |
| | Beach |
| | Creek |

| Interaction Patterns | Settings |
| --- | --- |
| all group members free to initiate action | Local Store<br>Streets, etc. |
| groups regularly include parents and other community members | |

With an organic learning model, it is recognized that children do not learn in neat compartments - oral language during oral language lessons, reading during reading lessons, maths during maths lessons, etc.

If an activity is sufficiently meaningful to impinge strongly on a child, learning outcomes of many types are possible. While maths concepts are developing, oral language experience may be provided, perceptual skills strengthened, and often, experiences provided with written forms of language. Integrated learning situations with high interest for the children will thus be exploited by the teacher to obtain multiple learning outcomes.

With a class group organized on an organic interaction model, the teacher becomes simply one member of an interacting group - a member who admittedly has special responsibilities but who observes the normal courtesies of interaction with the children's group.

In this model, the teacher accepts that the children, with their wealth of past experiences and learnings, will provide the starting point for any planning of future learning. The teacher thus needs to learn about the children and their socio-cultural

systems as fully as possible. He also needs a knowledge of learning theory and of sequences in child development in order to determine learning goals and to structure learning situations. The children at all times should be active learners involved in terms of physical activity and ideas.

These two contrasted models have quite different implications when we consider either language as a means for learning, or learning of language - be it oral language or the secondary skills of reading and writing.

## II. IMPLEMENTATION OF ORGANIC INTERACTION IN SCHOOLS - PROBLEM AREAS

If, as I have claimed, theory and research support an organic interaction model of learning, why is it so difficult to find in operation in our schools? Undoubtedly, this pattern is becoming more widely accepted, as is evident in the move towards open area schools. In the most successful class groups functioning under the Van Leer Language Development Program in Queensland, an organic interaction model may be seen in operation. These classes are exciting places for children and teachers. It is also true that a few of the teachers attempting to implement our program have made limited progress towards establishing such patterns. In these instances, it seems likely that teachers have failed to understand or have been unable to accept the underlying philosophy.

There appear to me to be several major reasons for difficulties in establishing the organic interaction pattern:-

(a) Institutionalization of School Programs

As school programs become established, teachers gradually come to value the programs in their own right. Once this happens, it is an easy step to begin expecting children to fit into pre-determined programs instead of creating programs to fit the children. Teaching behaviour has then become ritualistic - teachers lose sight of the original purpose of their behaviour and it is no longer subject to rational examination in the light of outcomes promoted.

If teachers allow themselves to accept school programs as given, they then tend to see learning problems as indicating deficiency within the children. By incorrectly identifying problems as within the learner, the teacher is well on the way to establishing a situation of self-fulfilling prophecy. If the teacher regards a child as dull, her attitude and her limited expectations for this child begin to influence his response. He then has a learning limitation unconsciously imposed by the teacher.

Institutionalization of school programs is compounded by a system in which recommended change is usually in restricted, narrow areas. With piecemeal change, the teacher is not challenged to rethink a philosophy about children and learning. The next and probably the most important area of difficulty is:-

(b) Ethnocentrism versus Acceptance of Cultural Relativity

Acceptance of a child with his experiential background, his learnings and his consciousness of reality must include a

recognition that, for Aboriginal children, the cultural system of meanings, values and norms differs from that of non-Aborigines but is equally as valid.

A teacher who deeply accepts cultural relativity might explain it as follows:

> "Each social group has evolved its own pattern for meeting human need. Values and behaviour patterns are meaningful within a system but are not intrinsically superior to those of other groups. There are no absolutes. Patterns are meaningful in the context of a particular cultural system."

This teacher learns about the child's system. His ethnocentric counterpart sees no point in trying to.

A highly ethnocentric teacher is likely to deny validity of the child's socio-cultural system, and further, may regard it as degenerate. He may continue demanding a response in terms of the dominant culture. He will also, unwittingly or otherwise, offend against the child's cultural system. His attitudes of contempt for other cultures will also apply to the linguistic system of the child's community.

(c) Perceived Practical Problems

Perceived practical problems in implementing an organic interaction model are numerous. "It won't work" is not an unusual attitude. Confronted with convincing evidence, particularly film records of operating groups, this attitude will often change.

Lack of support from other members of a school staff often imposes difficulties for a teacher attempting to develop a more open interaction system within a class group. Community attitudes may also be perceived as limiting change, especially in communities with mixed ethnic groups. In fact, in some isolated Queensland communities, there are members of the non-Aboriginal population who ostracize teachers attempting to develop closer social contact with the families of their Aboriginal pupils.

While some perceived difficulties in implementing an organic interaction model are real problems with no easy solution, others may be rationalizations from teachers who feel threatened by the prospect of radical change. They are asked to put aside professional skills in which they feel secure and to develop new strategies. Understandably, this may give rise to anxiety.

## III. INTERPRETING RESULTS OF LANGUAGE TESTS

For teachers and for linguists working in education, the interpretation of results from language testing is of considerable importance. Yet, frequently, there are obvious weaknesses in the interpretations which are made.

Reports on the language development of children from minority cultures have been influenced by ethnocentric attitudes or by a failure to logically trace through implications of cultural difference. Often, tests are culturally irrelevant and assume experience to which a child has had no access.

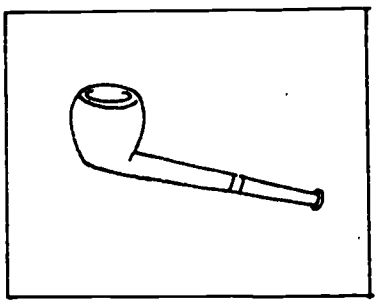
Paraphenalia of a middle-class urban home is used as content. Items which children learn about from books or films are also used in tests. This is demonstrated by the following responses from young Aboriginal children to items from a picture vocabulary test (Entticknap Picture Vocabulary) - see page 62.

Information from tests of this type is not particularly helpful in assessing a child's language development - if he comes from a minority cultural group. The information is of value in planning school programs. For example, it indicates to teachers that, when labelling of picture items differs widely from the labels given by the majority cultural group, commercially produced reading skills kits will be relatively ineffective. This is not because of children's poor language development but because of mismatch between the child's cultural system and that assumed by developers of reading materials.

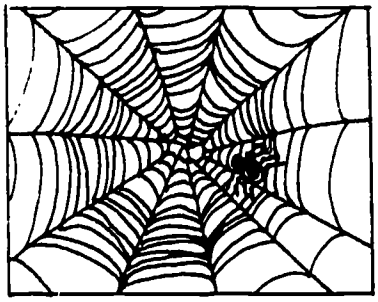
If a child speaks a nonstandard form of English, his performance on some tests will be affected by unfamiliar language structure, as well as differences in rhythm, intonation etc. Consider language structure in the following responses to items from the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities -

"During the day we're awake, at night we're ... the moon come up."
"During the day we're awake, at night we're ... pyjama."

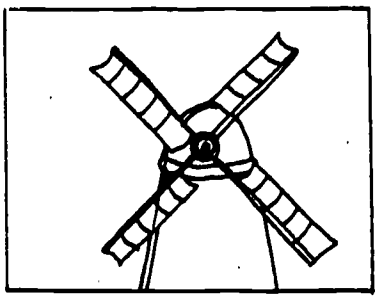
"Ears are to hear with, eyes are to ... eye." (two eye)
"Ears are to hear with, eyes are to ... big." (too big)



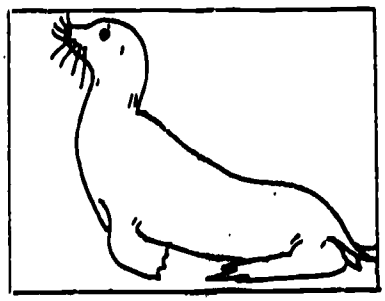
'moke
'moke ting
'moke it
Daddy pipe



umbrella
beetle
spider 'ouse
beetle thing



helicopter
ting go round
wind blow
clock
aeroplane
spinning



penguin
porpoise
platypus
puppy dog
a slippery
Moby Dick
on a rock

In the first example (p.61), the unfamiliar "we're" is processed as the known items "where" or "wear". In the second example, repeated use of the copular makes the item a difficult one, particularly as it combines with other unfamiliar patterns.

When a grammatical test developed for one group is used with a different linguistic group, it should be obvious that a child's responses cannot validly be interpreted as failure to acquire the patterns of Standard English but constitute success in acquiring those of his own community. For example -

"Here is a dog. Here are two ... dog" does not give us much information about a child's syntactic development if plural forms are not inflected in his community. The only justification for using a test such as this is to gain some assessment of the child's competence in Standard English as a second dialect. This does become important while Standard English is the language of books.

There are additional hazards in test interpretation once a child has some mastery of Standard English as a second dialect, particularly if he has been involved in a school program aimed at developing bidialectalism. The child may then respond to a test item in terms of either code, depending on the social situation of testing, the item's ideational content and its strength of association with each of the codes. An item about home is likely to elicit his first code while the subject "satellites", which he discussed at school, is more likely to elicit patterns from the second dialect.

In test situations, children often give perfectly valid responses in terms of their own experience. These responses are sometimes unscorable if the test was normed on a culturally different population. A commonly used intelligence test, the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), contains the following item:

"What is the thing to do if you cut your finger?"

Non-Aboriginal children in Brisbane gave answers such as -

"Run to Mummy and she'll put a bandage on it." or

"Go to the hospital and the doctor will fix it up." They scored.

I administered this item to young children on Palm Island -

"What is the thing to do if you cut your finger?"

"Bleed" was often the answer.

In fact, for these independent young children who play away from home and who often cut themselves on the rocks or reef, this is precisely what you do. Running to Mummy for minor injury would be negatively sanctioned by the peer group. Bandages are not around and, in some cases, there may be a relationship of hostility towards the hospital. The child's response may also be influenced by lack of familiarity with the idiom "the thing to do".

Interpretation of pictures is often involved in responding to test items. Unless children have had experience with picture books in their early years, they will be unfamiliar with our

conventions in two-dimensional representation. This is evident in the following item from the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities in which a dog is depicted as barking, using the convention of strokes to represent sound.

"This dog likes to bark. Here he is ... (barking)"

Children who are unfamiliar with the convention interpret the picture in various ways -

"Here he is - spittin' da stick out."

"Here he is - get dem spear down 'e belly."

"Here he is - stick pokin in 'e teet'. 'e'na waste all 'e blood."

These are all reasonable interpretations but, if a child persists in such a response, he fails to score.

It is not only language tests in which the culturally different child is disadvantaged through dialect difference. In a recently reported piece of research, children aged between five and nine years were questioned about two displayed cylindrical containers full of water, containers being of equal height but clearly differing in width. They were asked:

"Does this container have the same amount or more than this one?"

In the unlikely event that a young child using a different linguistic code actually fully comprehends the question, he may respond as follows:

"This one got lot o' water.
"This one got lot." (elongating the vowel in the second "lot")
This child has expressed his understanding that quantities differ though heights of the containers are the same. Yet unless the tester perceives and understands elongation of the vowel in the second "lot", he will probably conclude that the child has not yet reached this stage of understanding.

If the child really fails to demonstrate understanding, it could be because -

(1) Difference in dialect between child and tester were too great for adequate comprehension;

(2) The complexity of language was beyond most children in the younger range of this research. Even if a child speaks Standard English, he is likely to experience difficulty with the logical connective "or" in combination with difficult relational terms;

(3) The child may not yet have developed a relational concept as expressed by "the same";

(4) The child <u>has</u> such a concept but he expresses it in a different way, e.g. " 'e tie this one 'ere."

... and so on. There are so many possibilities that the interpretations placed on tests in this form are frequently suspect.

Interpreting tests of reading achievement is also fraught

with hazard. Conceding that cultural difference makes it difficult for many minority group children to acquire reading skills, we may feel that reading tests still provide valid measures of the progress which a child has made. Often, this is not so.

The Neale Analysis of Reading Ability is a test which has been widely used. It is couched entirely in the past tense. Past tense forms of Standard English are particularly difficult for children using "bin" forms, as in -

" 'e bin 'ook 'im."

("He/she hooked him/her" - Standard English equivalent)

This test therefore gives an unfair assessment of the reading skills of such a child, by repeatedly penalizing him the same feature of mismatch between his oral language system and that of Standard English.

Let us consider reading tests which require decoding of isolated words. Such tests may provide a fair assessment of progress in reading, as long as familiarity of the words is the same for children of the norming population and the minority groups. Problems of difference in language structure have not, however, been eliminated by using single words. Take for example, the word "painted". To score on this item, not only must the child have some familiarity with Standard English past inflection, he must also have acquired the phonological rule

which adds a syllable in the above instance. Until children in our Van Leer groups have had sufficient oral experience of this phonological rule in operation, they tend to generalize from the more common form, e.g. "played", and render "painted" without the added syllable. This is as much a comment on a child's oral system or systems as on his ability to decode written forms.

Care in interpreting test performance is clearly necessary. Teachers need constantly to keep in mind the two linguistic codes which are operating. This is demonstrated by the following example of a Standard English sentence as read by three Aboriginal children:

She ran fast

Child 1: She run fast

Child 2: 'e run fast

Child 3: She ..... ran ..... fast.

In the first two cases, the children may be perfectly matching the text with their own oral language systems. While they have achieved a meaningful match, the third child may decode word by word, making no "errors", but may fail to make sense of the message. Even with the word "ran" presented in isolation, the teacher would need to consider whether reading it as "run" constitutes an error in the usual sense. A child who is used to reading for understanding rather than "barking at print" will often shift towards meaningful interpretation of single words, even though his word attack skills are advanced.

By selecting tests which minimize mismatch between Standard English and a child's first dialect, the problem of test interpretation is reduced. Strangely, research workers and teachers have often gravitated towards reading tests such as those of Holbourne and Neale which put Aboriginal children at greatest disadvantage.

Let us return for a moment to oral language tests such as the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities. Frequently, results are interpreted as an indication that children who speak a nonstandard dialect are "behind" their dominant culture peers in language development, not just in their competence with Standard English. For speakers of nonstandard dialects, scores on such tests cannot be interpreted as an adequate index of language development, for various reasons, some of which have been mentioned. Yet reasoning of the following type is not uncommon:

> "The average age of these children is six years.
>
> The mean score for this group is the same as that of average four year olds.
>
> Therefore, these children are two years behind the general population in terms of language development."

Having made such an interpretation, writers frequently proceed to talk about the children's "language problem" in much the same way as "The Aboriginal Problem" is discussed. The assumption is that "problems" lie within members of one

system rather than in the interaction between systems which are mismatched.

Having said this, it should be conceded that there may in fact be weaknesses in some of the areas of development which are purported to be measured by the test. This cannot be deduced from tests in which cultural factors mitigate against children performing well.

When teachers and research workers have sufficient access to meanings and values of both sociocultural systems, their own and the children's, the absurdity of interpretations of this type becomes clear. For a culturally flexible teacher, increasing access to the children's socio-cultural system also reveals the sheer irrelevance of much that is contained in school programs. If, however, a didactic teaching style operates, the teacher has restricted opportunities to learn about the second system of meanings, values and norms.

On my most recent trip to a North Queensland community, I wandered towards the "Bottom End" play groups with which I have become associated. Sitting on the edge of a ditch talking, I and the group of "littlies" with me eventually started singing about the things around us. We sang about the babies in the children's families, about dogs passing by and about many other subjects introduced by the children. A five-year-old sitting in my lap began an extended solo comment in song on her life and all the "doings" of the community which were important to her.

She wove a spell drawing in children passing by, in a wonderfully creative fluent way. I just kept up my rhythmic movement and the child's song continued, without missing a beat, for three-quarters of an hour.

The children and I rode on the crest of this wonderful shared experience for several days. The following week, I tested the little singer on the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities. She had one of the most dismal performances which I have recorded. Had I been a research worker dropping into the community for a brief period, without knowledge of the child's cultural system and her performance in other settings, my interpretation of this test result may have been quite different.

Before leaving the question of interpretation in studies of child language, it should be mentioned that ethnocentric interpretations have been made by some prominent writers who have been influential among teachers. People who talk about "cultural deficit", "culturally deprived children", "language deprivation", "inadequate language models", "remedial programs" etc.; often indicate that they have judged children in terms of the dominant culture instead of the children's culture of orientation.

## IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNERS

If, in education, we abandon rigid school curricula, and

use the children's interests and previous learnings as a basis for structuring learning situations, we need as much information about the children as we can possibly gather. By sensitively interacting with the children and other community members - in ways which the community approves - a teacher can learn a great deal.

The teacher's exploration of ideas relating to the second socio-cultural system should also include professional reading - insights from sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, educationists and others. There is time to mention only a few areas of difference which may usefully be explored by teachers and linguists working in education.

Obviously, language is an important area of difference if the children concerned speak a code other than Standard English.

A teacher who accepts the notion of cultural relativity should accept that the vernacular of another group is as valid as his own language. He should also accept that this will be the language of peer interaction for much of the children's school experience. With nonstandard English, the teacher should recognize that the child's language is a valid rule-governed system. In arriving at this position, the teacher needs to overcome prevalent attitudes in which nonstandard syntax is stigmatized.

In learning about the children's language, the teacher needs expert support - expert interpretation of studies of the

dialect spoken by the children. With nonstandard English, it would be particularly helpful if linguists would interpret the children's language in terms of influence from vernaculars, as this would help to combat the teacher's perception of the dialect as a degenerate form.

If a teacher is highly ethnocentric, he may reject the idea that the children are using a different linguistic system and may perceive what he regards as "bad" English and random error. Such a person is unlikely to be an effective teacher of culturally different children, and is particularly unsuitable for teaching a bidialectal program of the type developed through the Van Leer Project in Queensland.

The decision to teach Standard English as a second dialect within a school system does not indicate any rejection of the children's home-based language. In our own program, we have expected teachers to be warmly accepting of the ideas a child expresses and to refrain from any rejection of his language patterns. Learning a second dialect does not imply derogating the first, any more than learning French would require a student to abandon and feel ashamed of English.

One of my personal research interests is interaction patterns among young children, particularly young Aboriginal children. Apart from the actual language codes, I am as yet sure of only a few major differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups which I have studied. One such

difference lies in the Aboriginal children's greater use of language to direct attention and to enjoy an experience together, without verbalizing extensively about it, e.g. "Look ober dere", or "Crab la", with little elaboration as the children watch.

In activities which form part of the children's school program, teachers may promote language development by gently encouraging children to verbalize more extensively about features of experiences.

A second major difference in interaction patterns of the two groups lies in the very large number of participants in many interacting groups of Aboriginal children. A communication competition situation develops which makes it difficult to sustain an idea in language. This must influence communication style which develops in the peer system of young Aboriginal children.

Because some young Aboriginal children interact mainly with other immature children, their language development may be slower than would result from increased interaction with mature speakers. Observations such as this may be helpful in preventing teachers from negatively evaluating learning potential of such children.

Nonverbal communication systems should also be considered by teachers. Interacting successfully in school groups is dependent, among other things, on interpretation of nonverbal

symbolism. If two cultural groups are represented, then the teacher needs sensitivity to the children's system and must also gauge the effect of his own behaviour on the children. For example, a non-Aboriginal teacher may have inherited a British-derived inhibition towards body contact. In my experience, young Aboriginal children make considerable use of touch in their normal interaction style. If the teacher withdraws from physical contact, children may gain an impression of rejection or coldness. So may the children's parents. If, on the other hand, the teacher allows herself to be drawn into the children's style of interaction, she may come to appreciate the contacts by touch which they make.

In testing large numbers of young children, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, I have become acutely aware of the importance of eye contact, particularly with Aboriginal children. This is evident in a verbal fluency test which I have used a great deal. The child talks about each of several concrete objects which are handed to him in turn. Three verbal prompts are permitted -

"Tell me some more about it."

With many Aboriginal children, the verbal prompt is scarcely necessary. All that is needed is eye contact, an attitude of expectancy, and the suggestion of a smile. This must be a rare case of test discrimination in favour of a minority group.

Eye contact, in certain circumstances, may take on a highly threatening form. Staring may intentionally express malevolence and is clearly much more highly charged emotionally for many Aboriginal children than for most non-Aboriginal Australians.

An advisory teacher in the Torres Strait area relates many examples of failure in nonverbal communication. A teacher's question to a child is likely to be answered by an eyebrow flicker indicating "yes". Teachers who are new to a community often fail to notice the child's response and think that he has suddenly and inexplicably become completely unresponsive.

Clearly, teachers need to learn about such systems of meaning. Some of this learning may result from a teacher's interaction with members of the local community and with Aboriginal teachers or classroom assistants on staff in the school. In addition there is a need for professional literature which sensitizes teachers and teacher trainees to nonverbal communication devices operating in Aboriginal and Island communities. At present, much of the accessible material draws examples from North American Indian systems.

Hearing loss is an unfortunate characteristic of Aboriginal children in many areas. Commonly, chronic middle ear infection produces fluctuating hearing loss during a child's early years. Often this is set up in the first year of life and, undoubtedly

has a detrimental effect on the language development of many children, particularly since the loss tends to be greatest in the vital language acquisition years of early childhood.

Surveys in Queensland suggest that approximately half of the Aboriginal school starters have a hearing loss which is regarded as significant. This compares with about nine per cent of the general Queensland population who have a significant hearing loss at school entry point.

With younger children, the rate of hearing loss tends to be higher. This was demonstrated at one Queensland community during an audiologist's recent visit. After mounting an extensive campaign over a period of years, he and his coworkers were pleased to find a marked reduction in the rate of hearing loss among the primary school children. He then visited the pre-school and examined all 29 children who were present. He was shaken to find 57 diseased ears.

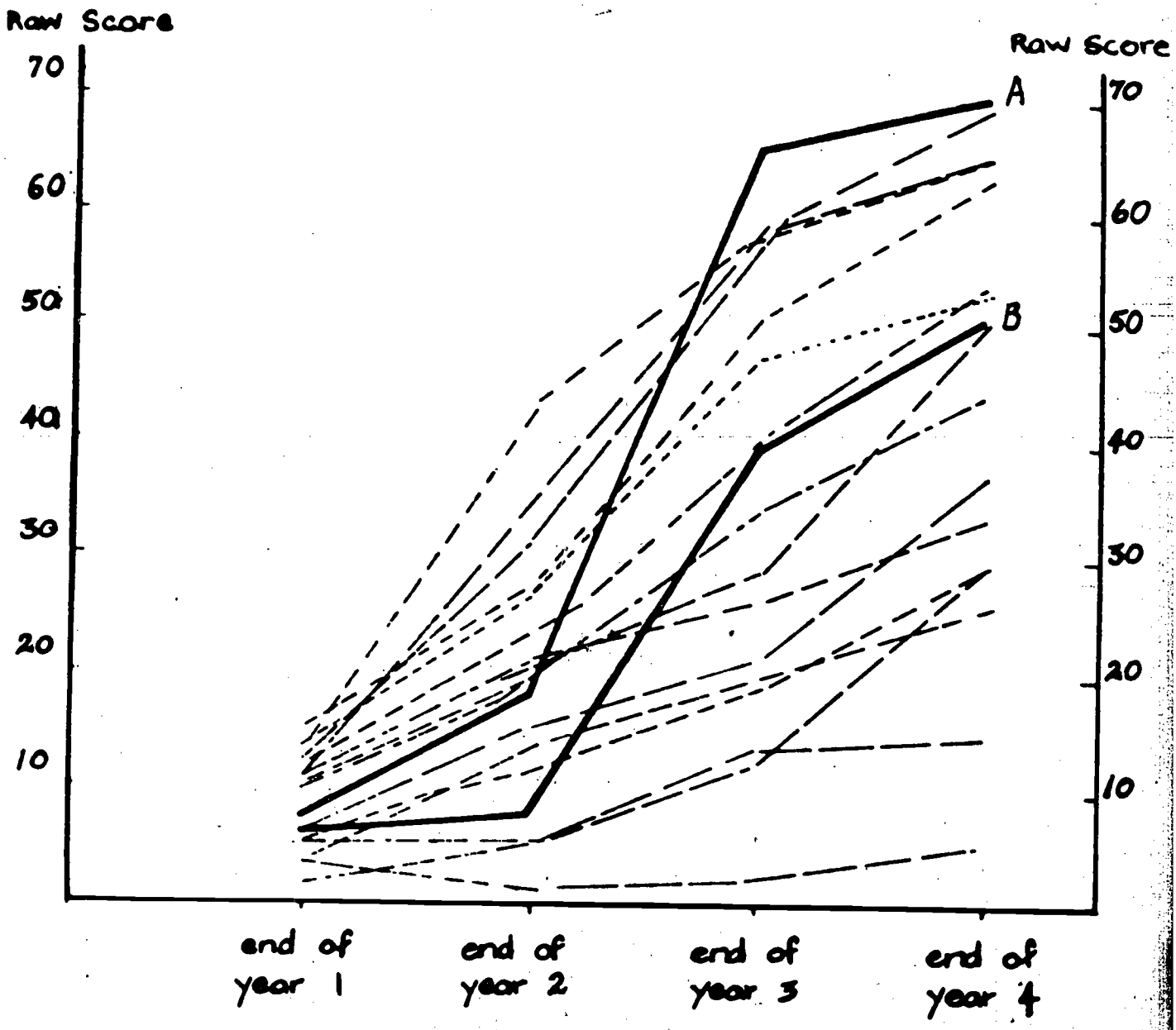
The evidence on hearing loss adds to our arguments for abandoning didactic teaching, since the prevalence of hearing disorders reduces effective processing of the teacher's language, especially in large group situations. In the organic interaction model, the teacher works with small groups of interacting children and encourages them to express ideas instead of merely responding to ideas expressed by the teacher.

Aware that hearing loss may have hindered a child's early development, a teacher is less likely to perceive him as dull,

and thus avoids setting into action a situation of self-fulfilling prophecy. This effect may also work for a low-achieving child who has actually had normal hearing. If the teacher rationalizes this child's poor performance as due to early hearing loss, he may respond well to the teacher's encouragement and belief in his potential. Such is the power of teacher expectation.

In experimental groups following the Van Leer Language Development Program, there are several cases of children with a poor early hearing history who have initially made slow progress in reading but have made rapid gains later. This is demonstrated in the following graph which plots children's progress on a reading test administered at yearly intervals.

The two children, A and B, whose profiles are indicated by a heavy line, both had hearing problems which were among the more severe cases in this group. One of these children (A) was performing below the group average in reading after two years at school and, a year later, recorded the highest score in the group. This particular little girl was fortunate to have a mother and a teacher both of whom were warmly encouraging. Had the teacher negatively evaluated the child's potential on the basis of her initially slow progress, the teacher's low expectation would almost certainly have prevented this child's spectacular gains.


Raw Score
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
Raw Score
A
B
end of year 1
end of year 2
end of year 3
end of year 4

Social orientation, the final example in this section, encompasses a broad range of characteristics. By using such research evidence as is available, and by developing our own sensitivities to a particular group of children and their families, we may structure learning situations which draw on features of their social orientation.

A summary of available research evidence on social orientation is beyond the scope of this paper. I shall simply quote from my own experience one example of difference which I interpret in terms of people orientation versus task orientation.

During a particular session of individual testing, I had an injured finger. Among the non-Aboriginal Brisbane children whom I tested, only an occasional child commented. They tended not to be distracted from the task by this personal factor.

In sharp contrast were the reactions of children at an Aboriginal community which was visited shortly afterwards. For almost all of the young Aboriginal children, this personal factor was sufficiently important to draw the children's attention and to provoke comment as they temporarily abandoned response to test items.

Before leaving the subject of social orientation, it should be mentioned that, in Aboriginal communities, a well-established pattern of social interaction already operates within the peer group by the time children start school.

While the institution of the school is new to the children, the teacher is the newcomer to the children's interaction system.

Since social skills of peer relationship are likely to be more advanced than for non-Aboriginal children, we may expect co-operative small group activities to be used effectively in school programs planned for Aboriginal children.

V. DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERNS AND PLANNED LEARNING SEQUENCES

Many teachers of young children know the frustrating result when a direction of the following type is given -

"Put up your hand if you don't have a pencil."

In this particular instance, the teacher is expecting children to deal with a conditional form and to take positive action in a negative instance. Rephrased without negation, the direction becomes much easier -

"Put up your hand if you need a pencil"

With language acquisition receiving increased attention in preservice training, teachers may be expected to gain greater awareness of such difficulties. They should also recognize stages such as logical overgeneralizations which constitute progress in a child's syntactic development, e.g.

cats, bees, mans; jumped, played, runned; biggest, fattest, goodest

For children learning Standard English as a second dialect, commonly occurring transitional patterns may be

recognized as such - as progress in acquiring competence with the second code, e.g.

| Code 1 | Code 2 | Transitional Pattern |
|---|---|---|
| He can run fast? | Can he run fast? | Can he can run fast? |
| He can run fast eh? | | |

An awareness of stages in language and concept development provides teachers with insights into children's behaviour and also establishes a framework for planning learning sequences. Instead of relying on adult logic as to what seems to be an order of difficulty, we are able to plan learning sequences which are consistent with research into actual development patterns.

If we expect a child to become bilingual or bidialectal, we should plan progressions of learning which take account of normal developmental stages. Studies of acquisition of Standard English as a first language can provide a strong basis for determining learning sequences when Standard English is introduced as a second code. Empirical studies indicating frequency of usage of particular patterns directs us to those of greatest usefulness for children's communication.

With each new pattern of language, introduction should follow the natural language learning sequence of listening experience, then oral usage and, perhaps finally, experience with the printed form.

In vernacular literacy programs for children, a study of the children's language would be an important supplement to

previous studies of the language as spoken by adults. Through such studies, we can control language structure in literacy materials and ensure that children are only expected to read language which is meaningful to them in the spoken form. By studying the children's language, words and word sequences with high interest associations for the children may be identified and incorporated into reading materials, thus improving motivation to read.

Often, children are expected to read language which they could not adequately comprehend in spoken form. This may be because -

(i) the language is too advanced, e.g. passive forms for six-year-olds;

(ii) the printed language presents the code of another social group and differs significantly from the child's own group of orientation;

(iii) the printed language is stilted, unnatural language which differs significantly from that spoken by any social group.

By expecting a child to read language which is not part of his oral system, we are encouraging decoding without comprehension. Since mismatch of the text with the child's language makes reading more difficult, he is likely to make slower progress and derive less satisfaction from reading, thus reducing his motivation to read.

Studies of language acquisition in Aboriginal vernaculars are obviously valuable in vernacular literacy programs and in teaching oral English as a second language. These studies may have broader relevance when analysed to indicate the range of concepts expressed by children at various stages of development, and the systems of classification embodied in their language. Analysis of this type provides a more adequate basis for developing maths/science programs in bilingual education.

## VI. ORGANIC INTERACTION MODEL IN PRACTICE - SOME EXAMPLES

I have discussed an organic interaction model of learning and have argued that the consciousness of the child, not the teacher, is of importance. How can this work in practice? Let me give a few examples from actual groups:

A. On the beach at Palm Island, a group of five-year-olds play energetic language games. Most of the children move and chant language patterns such as "I'm a bird. I'm flying", while a few group members provide rhythmic percussion accompaniment.

When the language games end, children begin writing in the sand, a favourite activity which provides multi-sensory experience with written forms. Because this activity is highly stimulating, learning potential is good. It is increased further as the activity flows into out-of-school play, initiated by the children.

By using the community-at-large for activities planned by teachers, the artificiality of the school is reduced. As the children's school activities spill into the community, members of the community have increased contact with the school.

B. A small group of seven-year-olds works with the teacher, using magnetized word and phrase strips to construct sentences. In another part of the room, children select mounted photographs supplied by the school camera club and write stories about the pictures. As they work, the children quickly locate words which they need from word lists and dictionaries which the class has made.

On the verandah, three children are using word slides, a projector, and rear-projection screen. Previously, the child operating the projector has been checked off as recognizing all the words in this box. He now checks his mates. As they work, children trace over the image of words which they do not readily recognize.

The remaining children select from collections of books, puzzles or other activity materials which have been tested for child appeal and learning potential. Available materials include many self-corrective items such as circuit boards on which a light glows each time a child correctly matches

word with picture. Many of the other items of equipment require co-operation of two or more children for effective use. Accustomed to taking considerable responsibility for their own learning, children efficiently return materials to their usual places, and, without adult direction, select other items.

C. Children are playing in the schoolground before school when the following is overheard -

Teacher to another adult: I'll just go and back the car.

Six-year-old girl to friend: Booboo likes backing cars.

Second child: An' Booboo like backing a bus too, eh.

This is a typical example of the pervasiveness of auditory activities which had been introduced with phonic puppets. A series of these puppets had already focused attention on several sounds and associated printed symbols. As the children play with a puppet, take him on walks to collect things that he likes, make books about him etc., they follow an unstated rule: that the puppet likes things starting with the same sound as his name, e.g. "Booboo likes babies/bubbas, bananas, bogeying etc." Since the children think of items for a particular puppet and locate objects from a familiar environment, the examples of sounds-in-context are those which flow most readily from

the children's language systems and their consciousness of the world around them. Items incorporated in books and word lists summarizing activities are both important to the children and consistent with their coding.

This contrasts with a more traditional approach to reading skills in which commercially produced charts are used. For example, a picture of a ring beside the letter "r" may be displayed, to help the children associate sound with symbol. If the children are speakers of Aboriginal English and label the picture as "finger-ring", the intended learning is unlikely to result, due once again to cultural mismatch.

D. In a class of seven-year-olds, frequent use is made of the tap at a nearby tank. When the children begin "growling" about the muddy patch beneath the tap, the teacher encourages them to put forward ideas about possible solutions. After discussing ideas, the children decide to find out how to make cement and to mix and lay the cement themselves. They also plan to visit the plumber and ask him to put in a drainage pipe.

As the children measure the area, dig a depression, measure materials, and mix and lay the cement, a photographic record is kept. After surveying with pride the results of their

work, the children set about making a photographic experience book which records their achievement.

By encouraging the children to solve a problem which they perceive, the teacher had promoted learning in many areas, including oral language, reading, and measurement, and with concepts of quantity and shape. Both the book and the job of work are tangible evidence of their solution and serve to reinforce feelings of competence.

Experience reading is worthy of further comment. It refers to writing of ideas and language expressed by the children and may be an aspect of almost all school activities. At first, the teacher writes what a child or group of children dictates. At a more advanced stage, children will also write or type their own ideas.

A Polaroid camera may be used to provide a pictorial record of high interest activities, e.g. five-year-olds making and baking gingerbread men. After the actual activity, children arrange and discuss the photographs and then dictate the story which the teacher writes or types. Because the children supplied the language, their recall of the stories is excellent. Their delight in the books is demonstrated as books are re-read again and again.

Often, experience reading books may appear somewhat unattractive to an adult but, to the children, may be of far greater value than the most popular published books. This was

forcibly demonstrated to me when I attempted to borrow an experience book from a group of five-year-olds. It was their "red book", recording items located on a "red" walk. Included was a "beat-up" old coke can which they had insisted on pasting into the book. The children's reluctance to part with such books, even for a short time indicates the value which these books have for the children.

It does not matter that, in the early stages, most children are "reading" by reliance on memory instead of actually decoding the text. The importance of an experience reading approach lies in its powerful effect on motivation to read and in its matching with children's interests, ideas, and language. By establishing reading in a context of shared pleasurable experience, this approach promotes peer group value of reading, an especially important consideration if reading has a tenuous position in home and community.

As children's skills in written expression develop, individual children may often express their own ideas in written form with little help. Oral situations, in which the teacher acts as recorder for groups of children, also have a continuing contribution. We should recognize the satisfaction which is obtained from pooling ideas in co-operative creative expression. We might also admit that the stories created by groups of children have a lively appeal which we, as adults, would find

difficult to achieve. Take, for example, a recent book entitled "The Sick Ghost", produced by seven-year-olds. In this, the isolated little ghost becomes very lonely and sad and is eventually rescued by a young hero from the class who lifts the ghost onto his horse and gently carries the ghost back to his coffin bed. Which of us could create a story like that?

I can see no reason why experience reading should not be used in conjunction with a Gudschinsky type approach to word attack skills. If we depend solely on word attack approach of decoding letters as sounds, there is a long delay before kids can write and read things which are important to them. If we combine such an approach with experience reading, the content of reading material is more interesting, the patterns of language are most natural, and children will therefore tend to learn faster, even though they are often "reading" rather than actually decoding in the early stages.

As well as advocating use of experience reading in a class situation, I would suggest that in preparation of all literacy materials, children be used as collaborators. To see things with the eyes of a child is a worthwhile ambition for adults working on programs for children. Some of us will attempt this with greater success than others. None of us could do it nearly as well as a child, therefore, let's ask the kids.

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