

# Teaching in remote Aboriginal communities

**Philip M. Wood,  
Deakin University, Australia**

## Abstract

Students in remote Aboriginal communities encounter many difficulties in regard to English language acquisition. The majority of these difficulties originate from living and learning in an environment that does not assist the students in practice and production of the target language. Due to the remoteness and isolation of their communities, Aboriginal learners also encounter a number of social differences that can make it difficult to progress with their learning. Through my experience of living and teaching in a remote East Arnhem Land community I will discuss some of these issues and offer some opinions and approaches which may assist teachers and students living and working in this environment in the future. I will also suggest some appropriate teaching strategies focused mainly on reading and writing which I feel benefit students in this learning context. There are also many factors that can assist educators in the community, such as the role of the bilingual Aboriginal assistant teachers and support from within the community by students parents and family members. This is vital for education as the adults within the community provide a much needed role model for language learning, education and employment opportunities.

## Introduction

I was employed as a grade 4/5 classroom teacher at a school in a remote Aboriginal community in East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. The majority of the population was indigenous with about seven local dialects used, with English spoken and taught as a foreign language. I taught all subject areas but the major focus was the development of English language skills. I had 29 students enrolled in my class but attendance varied dramatically depending on seasons and ceremonies taking place within the community. Ages ranged from eight to thirteen in my class and the ability of the students was also varied due to the fact that some students attended school everyday while others would be present once or twice a month. Teachers are expected to follow the NT curriculum guidelines for ESL learners and in particular use the Walking Talking Text program for English development.

## Using the target language

All students who are learning a second language require opportunities to practice and develop confidence in meaningful authentic situations for their skills to improve. No language teaching and learning can take place in a classroom which is isolated from the world of experiences and personal engagements outside the classroom itself. The social context of life outside the classroom has an important effect on interactions between learners and teachers. Candlin and Mercer (2001) Believe that for many learners, the contexts outside the classroom are not only where they make use of the English they have learned in class, but can also constitute a powerful incentive (or disincentive) for further learning. Most of the students I taught did not have this opportunity as the only place that English communication took place were in the classroom. Outside of the classroom all students spoke in their native language with friends and family members. If I saw students in the company of family outside of school they would often be reluctant to talk to me in English. This is due to language being a symbol of social identity and cultural values in Aboriginal communities.

The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture. (Kramsch, 1998, P.3)

This is one of the reasons that many Aboriginal learners of English are reluctant to use their target language, as members of their family may view this as moving away from their cultural and traditional values or untrue to their identity.

There is a strong feeling among some urban Australian Aboriginal people that Standard Australian English, which they refer to pejoratively as 'flash' language, is not their own dialect, and members of the community who adopt it are seen as attempting to raise themselves above the community. (Fromkin et al 1999, P.414)

This can make it very difficult for Aboriginal students to receive the necessary practice and communication required for learning a second language as many learners don't learn languages in the classroom. Candlin and Mercer (2001) explain that students learn languages well or badly, on the street, in the community, and in the workplace. Culture is an extremely important part of an Aboriginal person's life and many older Aboriginal people understandably want to see this maintained in the younger generation.

They often have a long history and their children are socialised to internalise their culture. They are not particularly concerned with pursuing social and economic

interests and are more interested in maintaining their distinctive culture. (Van Krieken et al 2000, P. 519)

However learning about another culture does not necessarily mean that one must accept that culture. McKay (2002) believes that gaining cultural competence does not mean that one has an obligation to behave in accordance with its conventions. To assist with learning the English language students are required to have an understanding of another culture. Aboriginal students therefore need to gain knowledge of the culture's pragmatic rules through interculturalism. This involves assuming knowledge of another culture rather than an acceptance of the culture. McKay (2002) also states that teachers can then encourage students to reflect on their own culture in relation to the target culture and provide additional information when students request such information.

## **Meaningful reading and writing**

A major area of learning the English language concerns reading and writing skills. These skills are generally not considered important in the majority of remote traditional Aboriginal communities and Aborigines often fail to see the benefits of learning these skills. Reading and writing skills are not common in Aboriginal society as they have an oral culture as opposed to a literate culture. Aboriginal children learn through watching or being shown how something is done. Stories and past experiences are passed on orally rather than through books or writing. These skills are therefore unfamiliar to many students in the classroom and often they fail to see the benefits, and reading for pleasure is virtually non-existent. Often students are able to read books and recognise words and form sentences, however often the books are not culturally appropriate, the stories do not make sense and the students cannot relate to them. This means that the students are just reading words but have no understanding of what they are reading. Gee, Hull & Lankshear (1996) believe that if one has not understood what one has read then one has not read it. So reading is always reading something with understanding.

To be literate means not only to be able to encode or decode the written word, or to do exquisite text analyses; it is the capacity to understand and manipulate the social and cultural meanings of print language in thoughts, feelings and actions. (Kramsch, 1998, P.56)

A problem that also seems to be common with Aboriginal students is the difficulty they face with independent writing. If they are presented with words or sentences they will happily copy them into their exercise books, although understanding what it is they are writing is a difficult task. This is common with lots of second language learners as students require confidence to put their thoughts onto paper. The difference with Aboriginal students in isolated locations is that their experiences of life outside of the community are very small if at all. These students cannot be expected to write stories about events or topics they have never encountered and have no understanding of. With students who find this task difficult I would often produce group negotiated texts on the board and ask for contributions from the class. Together with storyboards and commonly used words we were able to produce different texts in different genres. The texts usually focused on Aboriginal life such as hunting and gathering, fishing, ceremonies or funerals as this is what is important to the students. The problem is that the students then pick up a book to read and it is full of words and pictures and they have no idea what they are so they lose interest. If English skills and in particular reading and writing are to be successfully learnt in remote Aboriginal communities then the resources used by teachers and schools has to have some meaning to the students themselves. To provide students with meaningful reading I would often make corrections to students writing and ask them to type their stories on the computer. They would then illustrate their stories and they would be used as books or reading exercises for lower level or younger students. This would then provide students with reading which includes words and situations which they understand. Schools could possibly organise a system where students writing is passed on from class to class to provide reading material.

When I first arrived in the community with no experience of teaching EFL students I asked my class to write a story explaining what they did in the school holidays. This request was met with blank expressions and silence as I realised the difficulties that language learner's face with independent writing. I began by presenting my students with handwriting exercises immediately after lunchtime which involved them copying writing off the blackboard. This at the time was more of a strategy to settle the children down after an active break. The students seemed to enjoy this form of writing and often rushed back to class to complete the task, they became quite competitive to see who the first person to finish was. Although I was pleased that the students enjoyed the activity I was concerned that the students were just copying and not actually producing any writing.

Simply allowing students to write a lot will not necessarily provide sufficient practice in the types of writing valued for academic learning. (Reppen, 1995, P.32)

I decided to introduce a different form of writing and changed the format so students had to write about what they did at lunchtime. At the beginning I gave prompts on the board to help the students. What did you eat? Who did you play with? How much did it cost? Students then read their writing to the rest of the class. Once the children became familiar with this form of writing I asked them to write about different time frames such as, last night, on the weekend. The competitiveness remained from the handwriting exercises and the students produced some excellent work on a range of different topics. This writing was also corrected and used as future reading material.

## **Assistant teachers and support in the community**

In each classroom at the school where I worked there was a bilingual Aboriginal assistant teacher to assist with translation and some of the cultural differences associated with working in the community. The assistant teacher is a valuable and necessary asset for the teacher and students. They are also a role model of a good language learner that is relevant to their own social and cultural experiences and are able to provide modelling of the target language which can be motivating for the students.

Another advantage of bilingual English teachers is that, since they have gone through the process of acquiring English as a second language themselves, they often have a highly developed awareness of the structure of the language; in addition, they can anticipate the problems their students may have in acquiring it. (Mckay, 2002, P.45)

The lady who worked with me in the classroom was an extremely good teacher who enjoyed working with the students and taking responsibility for their learning. Aboriginal teachers need to be encouraged to express their educational ideas and contribute fully to the curriculum and teaching approaches used in the classroom. I attempted to regularly support and encourage my assistant teacher to undertake more responsibility and develop her teaching skills. I feel that assistant teachers need to believe that through study and experience that they can progress to classroom teachers, senior positions within the school and eventually principals.

Aboriginal students are not forced to attend school by their parents so it is mainly their decision to attend school or not. This means that a teacher has to provide

motivating, enjoyable lessons to encourage the students to come to school. I felt that a CLT (communicative language teaching) approach worked well as this required the students to use the language in a way that was enjoyable. There were certainly times when I felt that the students were not making progress as they were unable to use the language outside of the classroom in any meaningful way. This is a problem for education in remote Aboriginal communities but I also feel that Aboriginal student's lack a purpose for learning and using the English language. In most cases the jobs that require English ability within the community are held by non Aboriginals, even though there are Aboriginal people with the necessary language skills to do the job. This is why the bilingual assistant teachers are vital to the school and the community. In the school that I worked at they were Aboriginal women who hold these positions and men need to be encouraged to help at the school with cultural activities to provide young Aboriginal males a much needed English speaking role model. On one occasion a teacher organised some men from the local community to come to school and assist with a project in which the students designed and made didgeridoos. This was hugely successful as many of the older students attended school consistently and completed the task with support and assistance from the men in the community.

## Conclusion

Aboriginal students in remote locations need to be made aware of the benefits of learning English. Some teachers believe that when an Aboriginal student reads a book or completes a written task their objective is to please the teacher and they don't understand the point of their learning. A strategy that I feel is vitally important for teachers, is opportunistic teaching. Teachers must always be aware of opportunities to provide a focus for language items, which were not planned or intended. These opportunities are likely to be meaningful and something the student can relate to which then provides exposure to a particular component of language.

When used appropriately, the relevance and immediacy of opportunistic language study may make it the most memorable and effective kind of language study there is. (Harmer, 2001, P.157)

Teaching strategies are required to assist students in a communicative approach so they have the necessary skills to seek employment within or outside of their home community. I would often attempt to encourage the students by discussing future job opportunities and what job they would like to hold in the future. I would often

express my wish that in the future the students would be doctors, pilots, nurses or teachers. Until Aboriginal students see Aboriginal people in these roles they will not fully believe that they can achieve these goals. Living and teaching in a remote community can be a demanding experience but I also feel it is extremely rewarding and beneficial for a teacher. This experience certainly improved me as a teacher and provided me with a greater insight into the difficulties ESL/EFL students encounter and in particular students who live and are educated out of mainstream society.

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