Meeting the English language needs of remote Indigenous communities –
realities of a ground worker.

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Handout notes

Background – grounding the context

The United Nations Literacy Decade: education for all Plan of Action for the period 2003-2012 embodied in Resolution 56/116 states that,

… “literacy for all is at the heart of basic education for all and that creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy:…. (paragraph 7)”.

In listing the priority groups in the Plan of Action the following is noted,

“…the particular needs and life contexts of economically, socially and/or culturally disadvantaged people urgently require special attention; in particular, ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous populations, migrants, refugees, people with disabilities, aged people and pre-school children…” (p4); indeed a number of the client groups that we, who are meeting here today, are working with everyday.
The Plan of Action goes on to list a range of expected outcomes for this literacy decade one of which has resonance for the people with whom I, and others amongst us, work, “... a recognizable increase in the absolute numbers of those who are literate among:...excluded pockets in countries that are otherwise considered to have high literacy rates...” (p4) for which I read for the purpose of this paper, Indigenous Australians within remote communities, but others of you amongst us would probably read migrants and refugees.

In listing the principle strategies to bring about these outcomes the plan talks about, “Building partnerships at all levels, particularly at the national level, between the government, civil society, the private sector and local communities...” (p5) and developing programs, “…which aim at meaningful uses of literacy in addition to the acquisition of the basic literacy skills of reading, writing and numeracy ...” In particular, the strategies for changed outcomes includes a focus on,”… addressing such content needs as literacy for vocational upgrading and employment”(p6), a focus that forms the basis for this paper.

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), Shaping Our Future: Australia’s National Strategy for Vocational education and training 2004-2010 notes as its fourth objective, “Indigenous Australians will have skills for viable jobs and their learning culture will be shared.” (p13)

Within this National Strategy, Key Performance Measure 4, for vocational education and training provides an interesting in-sight into the expectations of this National strategy in relation to outcomes for Indigenous participants. The performance measure will be, “The number of Indigenous Australians who do vocational education and training each year and the number of qualifications, competencies and modules they attain”.

And secondly, “The proportion of Indigenous vocational education and training students who improve their employment circumstances or continue on to further study, after completing training, or who perceive that they have gained benefits from completing their training” (my italics)
Partners in a Learning Culture; A blueprint for implementing the National Strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in vocational education & training 2000-2005, states that one of its measures for the success of the National Strategy will be that, “Indigenous VET students have equitable access to nationally recognized training,
- Via the full range of service providers
- At all AQF levels” (P13)

And in relation to meeting the literacy needs of remote Indigenous communities the blueprint notes that,

“VET which accommodates different levels of proficiency in English language, literacy and numeracy and embraces Indigenous languages is critical for many Indigenous Australians seeking opportunities in education, training, and in the world of work. English is a second language for many Indigenous people, for example, in the Northern Territory over 60 percent of Indigenous people speak an Indigenous language and have varying degrees of English proficiency. Training and education providers need to operate in environments that complement, are sensitive to, and affirm cultures, multi-literacies and first languages.”

(P29)

A final paper that reflects some of the National VET thinking is embodied in the Strengthening Communities and Regions Ideas for Action (2004) paper which comments,

“Australia’s well being as a nation in a changing world depends on making sure that communities and regions have what it takes to sustain themselves in the years ahead. …some communities could find themselves marginalized by shifts in industry. Indigenous communities are particularly at risk, …high quality, accessible and innovative VET that connects with the community labour market and other providers of learning services has never been more important.”(p2)
Table 1: Characteristics of women participating in the Batchelor Institute and Centre for Appropriate Technology ESL/VET program 2004

- they are a strong, united group
- they speak the local Indigenous languages, Eastern Anmatyerr & Alywarr but have limited vernacular literacy in those languages
- they are culturally strong in that they actively maintain and participate in cultural ceremonies etc;
- they range in age from their early 20s to early 80s.
- the majority have had limited access, if any, to formal western schooling, given that western primary schooling only became firmly established in the district where the women live in the mid to late 1980s (see Kral & Schwab 2003)
- Those who have had any significant schooling attended the Yirara College in Alice Springs (the only access to secondary schooling in the district) but only to Year 9 and still only able to operate at Year 3-4 level at best, in terms of literacy and numeracy development (see Collins 1999).
- The women who have attended some secondary schooling have been assessed as CSWE I (equivalent to NRS level 1) for placement and teaching purposes.
- The remainder of the group is now enrolled as pre-CSWE I (i.e. not yet competent on NRS Level 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Utopia women’s response</th>
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| Why study at Batchelor | -learning reading  
- talking in English |
| Why study English? | - to get a job |
| What sort of job? | - teaching  
- health worker  
- cooking (in the women’s centre)  
- office  
- shop |
| Improvements to current course content/methodology | - learn English and [own] language or have a tutor who speaks language to help in the class  
- make the content “more easier” e.g. “reading is taking a long time”  
- give easy books to take home  
- give a cassette recorder to take home to listen to and to talk into to practise  
- more practice talking to each other in class to improve speaking in English  
- choral reading from texts on the board |
| Other course content in the future | - cooking  
- art and craft  
- video  
- language  
- child care  
- aged care  
- painting  
- office work  
- BRACS (broadcasting) |
| Workshop organization and enrolment | - two weeks together  
- like going to Arlparra (Utopia)  
- Tennant Creek  
- Batchelor  
- Alice Springs  
- “everywhere” (to meet people)  
- want night time classes  
- happy being part-time |
| Positives about studying at Batchelor | - rooms  
- showers  
- no cooking  
- no family noise  
- no dogs  
- nice rest  
- can all be together  
- to learn  
- to meet people |
| Things to improve about Batchelor | - “keep all drinkers away”  
- if the drinkers are students they should go away and only come back when sober”  
- people ‘humbugging’ for money |
| Other issues                                      | -students want to work together as a group  
|                                                 | -students would like a community bus to take
|                                                 | the children out to learn how to hunt       |
| -want a telephone next to the ladies’ TV room   | (see also discussion about course content   
| to use in an emergency at night (Alice Springs | above)                                      
| campus)                                         |                                             |

Table 3: Successful teaching strategies noted in the teaching of CSWE I and Certificate I in Applied Design and Construction

Apparently successful strategies:

- constant repetition of items is necessary to promote retention
- physical application seems to help understanding e.g. standing up and physically organizing selves into alphabetic order holding individual letters
- cutting and gluing exercises prove useful when attention is drawn to the detail in a practical application
- need to work at the sentence level rather than the full narrative at the start of a task e.g. narrative
- using models, cloze techniques and progressing difficulty through the task is beneficial
- discussing/teaching grammar in context seems to help understanding and application
- grouping language levels to work on some tasks seems important so they have to rely on their own resources rather than copying from more advanced levels
- alliteration, word-shapes, cloze seem to be successful strategies
- transfer of knowledge does seem to take place for some individuals who are demonstrating more phonemic awareness and increased word recognition
- in phonetic practice there is a need to practise consonants as well as vowel sounds
- collaboration with CAT lecturer in planning course content and hence linguistic data is needed continually to get the most for the students
- collaborative group work sessions work well on achieving outcomes for a more complex task therefore there needs to be a combination of group work and individual work, e.g. students helped each other to order the alphabet.
- gradually withdrawing scaffolding appears to work
- computing exercises are great for alphabet practice. Computer activities facilitate individual progression work so that the learner is working against self rather than copying others or passively watching others
- vary activities otherwise students get board – "I think they’re over the alphabet"!
- bush plant activities held attention because the topic is of high interest, drawing on the students’ own cultural knowledge
- typing practice needs to focus on spacing and capital letters
- in feedback sessions students still want repetitive reading and writing activities where the same text is used repeatedly.

Problematic issues

- the break between sessions is too long – 3 months over the summer break
- concept levels for the design task for the CAT course are too complex
- retention seems to be a problem around grammar and vocabulary – why?
- Issues of child-care, hunger and tiredness affect learner concentration and participation
- using cloze exercises for grammatical items e.g. nouns, adjectives and verbs proved problematic. Beginning level learners can only identify the missing word in a cloze exercise when the word is first pronounced for them
- words such as “this” prove difficult to retain even after extensive use in formulaic sentences.
- word shapes continue to be problematic, students can’t distinguish between long, short, tall letters
Table 4: Reflective observations about the project discussed by the ESL practitioner and supervisor - May 2004

- the lecturers are not doing enough joint planning which was considered an essential ingredient of the project. As a result there is insufficient time for the language activities to be as closely linked to the content activities as we would like. Not building in enough time for planning within the workshop schedule is probably at fault.
- the Training Package course content is far above the language level of the learners – technical language and concepts embedded within the language are beyond the students’ comprehension level. Students have a very limited common sense vocabulary so it is difficult to explain technical terms. All content has to be broken right down to vocabulary building activities, phonetic practice etc;
- class language level is so low only one task a week can be covered
- joint planning is an imperative as is a clear mapping of the program
- small defined tasks are better than broad open-ended tasks
- skills expected in the course are culturally bound, number systems; symbols are abstract concepts that have to be taught.
- the students are not oriented to the schooling culture – they are a group probably with the least schooling in Australia. Most have never gone to school. The ones who are doing well at CSWE I level went to Yirara College.
- the language learning process is slow for those who have never been to school and have never been exposed to Western academic culture. When you consider where they are coming from their progress is remarkable.
- there is a total commitment to learning and there is gradual improvement.
- they treat study like work; there is a high work ethic amongst the particular family group; it’s their job and they want to learn; they like the idea of having access to learning.
- the women by their attendance and participation, and as evidenced in the 2002 research, want to learn
- there has been improvement e.g. D couldn’t count beyond 10 now she can count to 10
- individuals are progressing.
- they are taking on learning strategies
- they are learning to recognize the alphabet and common words
- one feature of their productive language that could be translating from the first language is that in their first language, language is used to get straight to the point – they tend to use one word in place of many to bring about action.
- is there a possible on-going effect of colonization? – refusing to take the language on-board?
- is there a cultural difference in approach to learning - if you don’t like it you don’t do it? e.g. students leave the room when oral activities are the focus rather than do the tasks. They don’t seem to see it as part of their learning. They can get away with not engaging orally in English in the Community.
- they might take a long time but they will get there.
- there is a resistance to certain activities but the more people who enroll and start to engage in the activities will give impetus to the others. This acculturation to being learners will encourage them to see the point of doing the full range of activities.
- the students want to be able to write.
- in phonetics the biggest problem is with recognizing the sounds. Perhaps some work in L1 will help with the initial focus on sounds that could parallel the L2 activities.
- content-based course is proving problematic because the Certificate level content is way beyond their language level.
- students are motivated but haven’t got the skill level.
- vocabulary level is limited
• government funding is tied to Training packages; because of funding arrangements there is the danger that the students and the teachers will be blamed for lack of progress in the time allocated to the training

References:

Australian National Training Authority, Partners in a Learning Culture; A blueprint for implementing the National Strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in vocational education and training 2000-2005.


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United Nations Literacy Decade: education for all Plan of Action


