

FELIKS IN QUEENSLAND

“Sometimes understanding what Kriol/Aboriginal English speakers are saying is more difficult *because* of the English base. It can lull the unwary into a false sense of security because *similarities are heard but differences are missed.*” (Berry and Hudson, 1997 p7).

The work of Rosalind Berry, Joyce Hudson in developing a resource book for teachers of Aboriginal students, was the inspiration for our professional development program for school personnel working in Catholic and Independent schools in Central and North Queensland.

We developed a two-day workshop that was designed to give participants knowledge and strategies to use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s speech as a jumping off point for improving their mastery of the language of the classroom, Standard Australian English (SAE). The design of the workshop was based on the FELIKS (Fostering English Language in Kimberly Schools) approach to teaching English language developed by the language team in the Catholic Education Office, Broome, WA. Rosalind Berry and Joyce Hudson detail the strategies that they developed in their book, ***Making The Jump (1997)***. We used this text as the key reference for our workshop and encouraged participants to select strategies that were most applicable for their students in their unique school setting. It is important to note that these strategies are not exclusive to Kimberly children but apply to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are learning English as either an additional language or dialect and whose language learning impacts on their learning in the classroom. To confirm this we used many of the language games in the workshop process.

The key to the success of the workshop is its flexibility. Tailoring the program to the explicit needs of the participant group is essential. It does, however, contain a core-learning element where the context of language development, pidgins and Creoles provides the theoretical framework for the code switching approach. An emphasis on developing focussed listening skills is stressed so that teachers can tailor their classroom activities to the particular language learning needs of their students.

Early in the workshop participants identify non-SAE words/phrases that their students use. This material provides a basis for making decisions about areas of difficulty that teachers need to work on in planning for future classroom work and guides the direction that the workshop takes. The spin-off from this activity is that over the course of the workshops we have run this year we have gathered a rich resource of language used by children in Central and North Queensland.

In nominating potential workshop participants we encourage schools to consider a range of personnel and this has highlighted the strengths and depth of our educational communities. Our participants have included teachers, teacher aides, indigenous education officers, curriculum support

officers, community liaison officers, and equity officers from the Catholic and Independent sectors.

These people bring with them a range of expertise including experience in using code-switching strategies in the classroom, knowledge and understanding of Queensland Aboriginal cultures, communities and languages and training in ESL teaching.

As with any attempts to change current practice we encounter some resistance and barriers to change. Most notable is the denial of Aboriginal English and Creoles as “legitimate” languages (“he just has a bit of trouble with his English”), resistance to changing teaching practices (“ I have too much work to get through to waste time playing games”), attitudes to students/community based on stereotypes (“he doesn’t really need this literacy because he will just go back to his community”) and equity issues.

Plans for 2003 include offering a shortened version of the workshop for school-based in-service and designing a follow-up workshop that enables teachers and others to share the successes they have had in implementing FELIKS strategies in their classrooms.

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