

THE HONEY ANT READERS: AN INNOVATIVE AND BOLD APPROACH TO ENGAGING RURAL INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN PRINT LITERACY THROUGH ACCESSIBLE, CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY APPROPRIATE RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT

On entering school, rural Australian children from Indigenous backgrounds are thrown into an unfamiliar environment, linguistically and culturally, which sets them up for failure. The author, working closely with elders and community in Alice Springs, has drawn on her considerable experience in both Indigenous education and TESOL to address this disadvantage by developing a progressive series of early readers specifically targeted to rural Indigenous learners. This innovative series of books and resources is developed to teach both reading and Standard Australian English (SAE) to speakers of Aboriginal English (AE).

The presenter will outline the research, development, theory, publication and application of the Honey Ant Readers and will discuss their adaptability for all languages.

Focussing on the particular needs of Indigenous learners, and to assist them in acquiring reading, the content is made relevant by using Indigenous themes, stories and characters. Reading is scaffolded across 20 books in the following ways: the language moves from a light form of AE (referred to as 'The language of the playground') to SAE following natural stages of second language acquisition; phonic words, selected for their phonemic closeness to Central Australian Aboriginal languages are introduced gradually; the illustrations become more complex and the size and amount of text is graduated. The themes and style of storytelling are Indigenous, as are the characters in the books. Characters are referred to according to their role within family, rather than by name, for cultural reasons.

The presenter will demonstrate and share ideas on the use of interactive, supplementary resources, designed to reinforce the material in the HARs, and to engage learners of all ages, including teenagers, through physical participation and fun. Songs and rhymes, central to the pedagogy, are used to reinforce Standard English grammar and pronunciation, as well as the four macro skills of language learning: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Results at this early stage show that as students engage with the materials and relate to the subject matter of the books, they find it easier to start reading. With an increased interest in reading, their literacy and oral language acquisition is accelerated. Of particular significance, parents are also engaging with their children's literacy learning as the materials are equally relevant to them. The speaker will discuss the latest HAR research findings.

The principles of the pedagogy and methodology in the HARs are being applied to other learners throughout Australia and overseas. The first Readers for Chinese and Ghanaian ESL learners have been published, and the HARs have been translated into 6 Aboriginal languages.

INTRODUCTION

On entering school, rural Australian children from Indigenous backgrounds are thrown into an unfamiliar environment, linguistically and culturally, which sets them up for failure. Indigenous students encounter a number of barriers in formalised school settings. One aspect is the significant contrast of schooled-literacy practices with daily literacy practices (Street, 2000) in terms of content, purpose, language/dialect and relevance. There is a paucity of high quality materials in local

languages in Australia, the vast majority of basal texts available in schools Australia-wide are culturally irrelevant to Indigenous learners, devaluing or defiling representation of their world which, according to Rose et al. (1999, p.29) generates the impression that reading is “a ritual practice of the school that has no pleasurable or communicative function”. Moreover, when children arrive at school, it is often taken for granted that they bring with them different learning experiences and language from the home. As Glenys Collard, an Aboriginal trainer on the Deadly Ways to Learn Project, explains,

“this is how we're living and this is the talk that they've been taught from zero to age five (...) They don't know that they're not talking the same talk until they start going to school and start getting things 'wrong' (...) The big issue is the idea that they'll be able to start from where white kids start from, and that isn't true.”

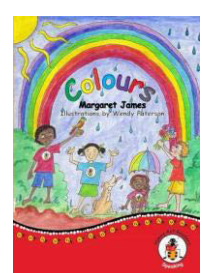
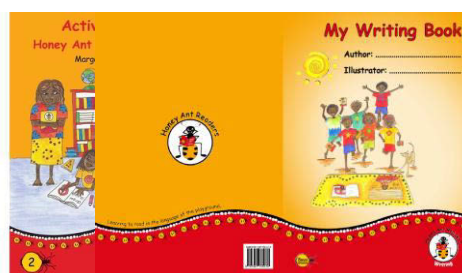
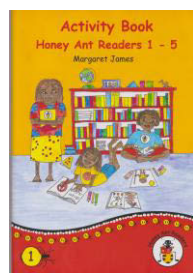
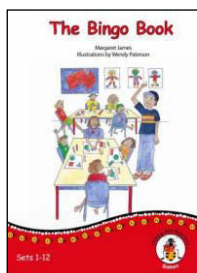
(Cahill and Collard, 2003,p.214)



The standard forms of English used in school texts, speech and assessment, privileges students who have been socialised in oral Standard English in the home, and marginalises Indigenous students from vernacular backgrounds. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2008), 47% of Indigenous children aged 4-14 years living in remote areas spoke an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander language as their main language at home, while 70% identified with a clan, tribal or language group in 2008. While in 2006, 86 % of Aboriginal Australians reported speaking English at home, there is

growing consensus that the majority of these speak Aboriginal English (hereafter referred to as AE), or a continuum of AE dialects ranging from those close to Aboriginal Kriol (“heavy AE”) mostly in remote areas where traditional languages are spoken in the home and those closer to Standard Australian English (“light AE”) in less remote areas where AE is a first language (Eades, 1994; Harkins, 1994; Caruso,1997, Malcom et al. 1999). These linguists recognise AE as a valid, rule-governed language variety which differs from Standard Australian dialect and mainland Kriol in terms of phonology, syntax, lexicon, semantics and pragmatics (Malcom, 2011, Eades, 1994). Aboriginal English is a medium for expression of Aboriginal identity and has adapted ways of communicating Indigenous world views and meanings distinct from the Standard English variety (Eades, 1991). Like many other non-standard language varieties, however, AE is commonly considered ‘bad/ broken/slang/deficient’ English. This poor perception is compounded by the widely-shared, largely unquestioned belief, across Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and administrators, that acquisition of reading and writing competence of print and digital forms of Standard Australian English is of the highest priority for Indigenous education (Fogerty and Schwab, 2012, Malcom,2011; Al Yaman and Higgins, 2001; Rose et al. 1999).

Over the past several years, a variety of national and state government programs have been exploring ‘new’ approaches to supporting Indigenous students such as the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Initiative and Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal Students (PLPs) (DEEWR, 2012) . A number of school-based, community initiatives have also emerged; among these the Honey Ant Readers, a phonics-based early literacy program which was initiated in 2008, at the request of, and in collaboration with, elders at Yipirinya School in Alice Springs, and has since expanded to schools and communities across Australia.



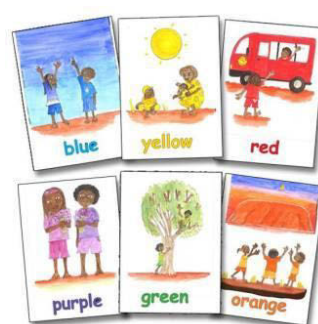
THE HONEY ANT READERS PROGRAMME- THE RESEARCH, RATIONALE AND DEVELOPMENT

The Honey Ant Readers (HARs) project was started in 2008 at Yipirinya School, one of the first Indigenous owned and run schools in Australia. Founded in 1979 in the town camps of Alice Springs, Yipirinya School aimed to provide a safe and culturally appropriate learning environment for Aboriginal children living in town camps and on nearby homesteads, and to promote Indigenous languages and culture. Concerns over persistent underachievement in reading at primary and secondary levels, led the school council in 2007, to collaborate with Margaret James, a linguist, ESL specialist and lecturer at Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education, who at the time was also working as a choral conductor for the school choir. Focus groups were held with community members, teachers and parents to ascertain the barriers and develop strategies to support Yipirinya students with their reading. A paucity of appropriate reading materials was identified as a significant factor of disengagement and disinterest in the available, Standard English, largely Eurocentric learn-to-read programs. Elders wanted their children to learn to read using their stories, a primary oral means for conveying cultural knowledge. A process of materials development commenced in 2008, with surveys of available literature in libraries and schools, observation and recordings of storytelling. General conversational language among the children was also recorded and drawn on to target difficulties. While they are written by a non-Indigenous author, Elders and teachers at Yipirinya School are consulted throughout the process from the choice of story, way of telling, vocabulary, illustrations and print-layout.



The first books were published in 2009 as a series of 20 high quality, full colour, laminated readers, written in the lingua franca, a variety of AE, referred to by the author as 'the language of the playground' transitioning into SAE by the 20th book. The HARs have since developed into a full literacy program, with the original 20 readers now complemented by resources supporting preparation for reading, decoding and teaching explicit awareness of SAE grammar and oral forms:

- Picture, Number and Word Card Packs
- A resource CD with printable alphabet and word cards colour coded for grammar, vowel and consonant recognition and pre-text awareness of letters
- Grammar books
- Bingo books
- Teacher's Handbook
- Song and Rhyme Book + Music CD
- A book, 'Colour', with matching A6 cards to reinforce spoken English
- 120 A6 Conversation cards
- 64 Bush tucker/animal cards
- Activity books 1,2, 3, 4 (used to consolidate learning, corresponding with every 5 HARs, and teaching 4 macro-skills of English - writing, reading, listening and speaking, as well as maths rhymes, songs, board games and practical activities such as art, cooking or making play-dough beads)
- A Writing book designed to encourage authorship and illustrating



In addition, three of the original books have been translated into 4 languages (Luritja, Western Arrernte, Pitjantjatjara, Yankuntjatjara), and there are plans to translate further books in the series. A number of schools and communities have expressed interest in translating the existing readers into local languages, or developing similar learn-to-read programs using local stories and themes through collaboration between elders and the author. What started as a school/community-based program quickly gained popularity among Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners and teachers in schools in Alice Springs in 2010, spreading to communities in the Northern Territory and by 2012 the HARs are being used in roughly 20 communities and nearly 60 schools covering every state across the country, with University libraries in every state carrying the books. The expansion of the program beyond the Yipirinya School community necessitated the development of a professional development and training programme to assist teachers, tutors and families in its delivery.

“These are wonderful books that all kids should have access to. This is the exact resource we need for our National Languages Curriculum.” Dr Jakelin Troy, Ngarigu woman.

THE THEORY

The HAR programme draws on action research, local knowledge of community members, teachers and students as well as a vast literature on second language acquisition to provide a set of resources that are accessible and culturally and linguistically relevant to learners. In the Honey Ant Readers, the way of storytelling and subject matter, set in the red desert of Central Australia, are familiar to the readers, and consistent with the learners' knowledge, culture and experience of the world. Themes are more congruent with their out-of-school context, with the first 10 readers involving Central Australian Indigenous-specific activities such as digging for honey ants, hunting for bush *tukka* (food), and also experiences familiar to all children in Australia (particularly remote communities): taking the bus to school, playing in the playground, naughty dogs, a snake in the playground tree and family life. Readers 11-20 cover traditional stories of the central desert, such as the Rainbow Serpent at Ellery Creek, NT, and cautionary tales of the “boogie woman”. Nana (grandmother), a key figure in traditional family structure and knowledge transfer, is appropriately the protagonist of the series.



The HARs are written using aspects of AE spoken in Central Australia, referred to as the “language of the playground”, following spelling conventions of Standard Australian English (SAE) to allow easier transition as the grammar and vocabulary progresses into SAE by the 20th book. This approach is further justified by the broad consensus, of the benefits of initial literacy in first language such as not having to overcome syntactical, semantic or phonetic differences to one’s first language prior to decoding graphemes into phonemes. According to research on bilingualism sound systems (phonology), decoding and communication skills are readily transferable on to other languages, and by the 20th book, learners are expected to be able to navigate the textual conventions of SAE (Bialystock, 1991; Baker, 1993). In this bidialectal approach (Oliver et al. 2011), AE (the dialect of identity) is valued and accommodated at the same time as the standard dialect (the dialect of power) is explicitly and systematically taught to facilitate learning in SAE (Cahill and Collard, 2003). Accommodation of first dialects, or bidialectal education has been introduced in Queensland, Australia (see Exely & Bliss, 2004); the USA (e.g. in Dekalb County, Georgia (see Harris-Wright, 1999) and the Kamahameha Schools in Hawaii (see Baugh, 2007) among others. This approach follows the ‘Natural Order Hypothesis’ in English as a Second Language teaching which suggests that speakers of other languages acquire the grammatical structures of Standard English in a predictable, often universal order regardless of age, mother tongue and even conditions of exposure (Krashen, 1993). SAE morphemes are deliberately incorporated into each Reader according to this order, with the exception of the verb ‘to be’ introduced later, as this is not used in AE and could cause confusion to the AE-speaking learners (James, 2009).

Throughout the progression from AE to SAE, the phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic differences between the dialects are considered. In the early readers, words are chosen so that they contain phonemes found in both SAE and AE to ensure ease of decoding and pronunciation.



The books build in vocabulary and complexity of words, pictures (from simple, to complex multi-actor events) and grammar as they scaffold learners from AE to SAE. Over 650 words are progressively introduced into the series, repeated frequently, based on evidence from studies in mnemonics and language acquisition regarding the cognitive and affective benefits of frequency of exposure (Duff, 2009). These words are listed at the back of each reader for review. *HARs 1-6* are written in lower case letters (with no punctuation), so that the learners can become familiar with the shape of the letters without the

confusion of punctuation markers. This approach builds on the theoretical base proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1986) of “scaffolding”. Scaffolding is a process of developing supporting structures for assisting learning of new concepts and skills, with high levels of initial assistance towards independent control of the task or text (Hammond, 2001). In the *HARs* scaffolding takes the form of supporting learners along a spectrum of language structures from AE structures towards SAE academic discourse required for, and rewarded by, schooling (Gee, 1996; Rose, Gray & Cowey 1999). The books follow what Gibbons (2002) describes as a strong ‘futures orientation’, one that builds towards independent use of language, through readers and supplementing activities, speaking and grammar resources, card and board games.

The uniqueness of the Honey Ant Readers is further evident with the introduction of the SAE edition of readers 11 to 20. Learners can ‘exit’ the AE edition once their acquisition of SAE overtakes the language of the readers, and transfer into the SAE edition which follows the same ‘new word list’ and grammatical progression as the first edition.



The major explicit pronunciation and grammatical difficulties faced by AE learners (such as voiced and unvoiced phonemes, double or triple consonants, fricatives, affricates, nasal phonemes, past tense, plurals and auxiliary verbs) are taught through songs and rhymes at the back of each book and in a separate song and rhyme resource. The use of songs and rhymes is a unique feature of the *HARs* for teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar of SAE, whereby the learner “imitates the rhythm, stress, pitch and patterns of a language, thereby becoming familiar with the pronunciation and syntax of the language” (James, 2009). Singing and recitation also have benefits in

stimulating memory and are powerful tools for Indigenous-language speaking learners who come from an oral background. Group singing is culturally appropriate for Aboriginal learners for whom “shame” of being singled out is a significant inhibitor to language learning (Reed, 2011).

The Honey Ant Readers are professionally designed and printed, with laminated covers and colour illustrations. The high resolution colour and quality printing enhanced by laminating, serves to afford respect to Indigenous resources, which are rarely professionally produced. Simple, clear illustrations in bright, bold colours enhance and clarify the text. Illustrations appear on the right page, text on the left to reinforce reading from left to right. In *HAR 1* there is one picture per 1–3 words. As the focus is on decoding the words rather than relying on pictures as cues in the first 5 readers, the pictures add a story line and interest to what would otherwise be a word list. In the later Readers the drawings become more detailed and complex, and correlate with more text. The lay-out of the readers is not trivial and can be enjoyed by adults and teenagers learning to read, or for parents with low literacy levels reading with their child.

THE APPLICATION



Since the first books were published three years ago, the Honey Ant Readers have been helping both children and adults alike engage with books, improve their literacy and, more importantly, build an ongoing connection with literature. Young children, primary school age students, teenagers, young adults and mature age learners are all using the *HAR* with success beyond all expectations in schools, libraries, women's shelters, childcare centres, youth centres, prisons and private homes all around Australia.

The *HARs* can be used as individual learning programs in which learners can progress at their own speed. This is particularly useful in schools where student absenteeism is high. Levels are not associated with age, as students of all ages are expected to be learning to read and parents and grandparents can enjoy the learning experience with their children. In order for the students to experience a sense of progress, the 20 books are colour coded. *HARs* 1-10 are red, *HARs* 11-12 are blue, *HARs* 13 - 14 are orange, *HARs* 15 - 16 are yellow, *HARs* 17 - 18 are green and *HARs* 19-20 are brown. Each 5 books are linked to an Activity book that compounds and reinforces learning. Teaching resources have also been developed for teachers, to assist with individual or group teaching, and an accompanying professional development program has been delivered in schools and rural communities around the country.



The scope for this project is enormous and is moving in exciting directions as interest and enthusiasm increase from those using the books and from government and non-government organisations involved in Indigenous education both in Australia and in other countries such as Ghana, Botswana and China. What started as a small-scale community project of 5 books has become a program consisting of around 50 ISBN numbers. Results at this early stage show that as students engage with the materials and relate to the subject matter of the books, they find it easier to start reading. With an increased interest in reading, their literacy and oral language

acquisition is accelerated.

CONCLUSION

At a time of increasingly strident efforts in Australia to "close the gap" in Indigenous education, it is vital to consider how this "gap" has been created and perpetuated in the first place and to pursue critical efforts to develop pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners. The Honey Ant Readers is an extremely promising example of engagement with these issues, of addressing the affective and cognitive elements of literacy and ultimately giving learners, their families, communities and schools, the tools to engage with literacy in a way that motivates and interests them. Acknowledging diversity in Australian classrooms is vital in order to cater for the various learning needs of rural communities. It is important to consider the linguistic barriers rural learners, indeed all children face in Australian classrooms. As Au (1993) contests, "With regard to school literacy learning, proficiency in Standard English should be seen as a goal, *not* as a prerequisite to becoming literate" (p. 129). Malcom (2003, p.23) cogently supports this point, "If Standard English is treated not only as the end-point of language education but also as its unique medium, both teachers and Indigenous pupils will continue to suffer miscommunication and the educational goal will remain, for many students, unattainable. If, on the other hand, Aboriginal English and its associated conceptual framework are able to be accessed as a part of education towards Standard English competency students will be more willing learners and their educational goals more generally achievable".

Ongoing consultation and collaboration with Elders and community stakeholders has been vital to the program's ongoing development to build a program that is responsive to local needs, accessible for a diversity of learners and empowering for individuals and communities.



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