The Traeger Park Project - Concentrated Language Encounters: Developmental Outline

Brian Gray

Overview

The developmental phase of the Traeger Park Concentrated Language Encounters Project ran from late 1979 to the beginning of 1985. The resultant program was continued by the school until the early 1990's when the school was transferred from the Northern Territory Department of Education to the Northern Territory Catholic Education Department.

Traeger Park School, in Alice Springs, Central Australia was attended mainly by low SES and fringe dwelling Aboriginal children. The project commenced because the principal and staff at Traeger Park Primary School in Alice Springs were concerned about extremely low language and literacy outcomes. The oral language support program in place was demonstrably unsuccessful and studies had identified Aboriginal English/Standard Australian English differences but offered little in the way of direction for a new program. Brian Gray was invited to initiate a language teaching project by the school. The project was funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and the Northern Territory Education Department.

At the school, Gray worked closely with the language unit teacher Julia Price who took on the strategies and incorporated them into her teaching. The teaching in the language unit then became a model for assisting Gray to spread the new program more broadly across the school.

Methodology

From his observations at the school, Gray concluded that two basic features had to be incorporated into any proposed program.

First, there was a need to sustain goals that were demonstrably generative of academic and community success. Gray had observed a lack of connection between the curriculum content within the school and the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve educational success. In addition, most of the programming goals were set at very low levels with an emphasis on short-term non-academic tasks.

Second, he proposed that there was a need to create a teaching/learning environment that was more supportive and which encouraged the students to feel that they belonged in the classroom. This was because much of the learning interaction that occurred in the school was breaking down and the effect on the students was constructing a view of them as failures both in their eyes and in the eyes of the teachers.

Gray's observations led him to propose that much of the students' low risk-taking, resistance and reluctance to take part in learning tasks was generated by the nature of the learning circumstances and the tasks themselves and was not characteristic of Aboriginal thinking styles. In addition, Gray's observations revealed that most of the communication breakdown between teachers and students was caused by the nature of the questioning

and other learning negotiation strategies typically used in mainstream classrooms. This meant that the alienation issues at Traeger Park were not just confined to the school but were systemic and fundamental to mainstream schooling in general.

Project outcomes

Because change at a fundamental level was required, Gray needed to develop three key aspects of the proposed new program. He needed to find,

1. Appropriate goals at which to target teaching.
2. A teaching/learning negotiation process that was highly supportive and inclusive.
3. A lesson framework that was capable of sustaining and promoting appropriate appropriate negotiation processes and goals.

1. Appropriate goals at which to target teaching.

Gray proposed the following model to guide the development of language activities.

Figure 1. A Language Model for Programming (Gray 1980)
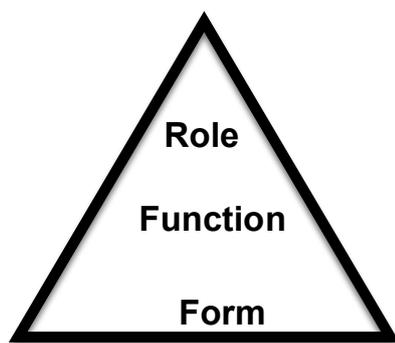
This model set 'social role' as the primary goal to be achieved in language teaching. The teaching of 'function' (i.e. purpose) and 'form' (i.e. language structure and vocabulary) would not succeed if the learner did not have a perception of some kind of social role within which the other two operated. Likewise, learning 'form' successfully required the learner to possess an adequate awareness of both 'function' and 'role'. Gray concluded that teaching goals for language programming had to be expressed as 'texts' because texts could easily be linked to social roles.

Another critical reason for the shift to setting texts as goals was that at the time of the project, research on language development was beginning to highlight the importance of control over texts that essentially referenced within themselves. That is, they were explicit in the sense that they made few presumptions concerning the understandings that were required. Meanings were carefully constructed and logic and sequencing carefully elaborated and explained if necessary. It was beginning to be understood that experience discussing with these kinds of 'literate' texts and the ability to produce them played a crucial role in preparing children to succeed in academic learning.

The decision to privilege literate texts amongst the goals for language teaching imposed serious challenges to the previous program at Traeger Park. At no time in the previous program had the children been exposed in any substantial manner to such texts.

Gray identified the following taxonomy of texts to be set as goals for language and literacy development.

a. Transactional Texts
(working texts such as forms, notes, signs etc.)

b. Factual Texts
Recounts
Procedures
Explanations
Descriptions
Reports
Arguments

c. Literary Texts
Recounts
Narrative
Aboriginal stories for children
Poetry
Legends
Fables

Gray also determined that the texts selected as teaching goals should not be low level or even set at or close to the performance level of the students. Instead, the texts needed to be well beyond the individual competence of the children. This gave a unique nature to the goals set for teaching at Traeger Park.

Gray drew upon contemporary research into early childhood literacy development the work of Vygotsky (1978) to justify the need to teach literacy skills at a level well in advance of the current performance level of the students.

2. A teaching/learning negotiation process
The teaching/learning process that was developed at Traeger Park was highly inclusive and supportive and covered both the negotiation of behaviour management and the negotiation of learning

Teacher strategies for behaviour management
The strategies developed for behaviour management took as their fundamental premise the need to never construct children as marginal or outside the group. Coercive strategies were eliminated and replaced by a more collaborative approach.

Teacher strategies for promoting learning
Similarly, strategies for promoting learning were changed so that they did not mark learners as outside the learning group. The fundamental principle for constructing the new negotiation strategies was the notion of 'scaffolding' (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976: Wood, 1980) which was being demonstrated at the time in studies of parent/child interaction and which was inspired by Vygotsky's work. The key elements were,

1. The adult (i.e. teacher) supported the child in the learning task by supplying those parts of the task that the child/children could not do when left to their own resources. Whatever the child/children could do the adult (teacher) let them do it.
2. Learning occurred across sequences of related lessons that were organised to form 'routines' similar to bedtime reading sessions.
3. As experience with the task progressed over a number of 'routines', shared knowledge built up and the adult/teacher was able to extend both the complexity and depth of the shared learning. As this extension process progressed, children were encouraged to contribute and lead the extension activity.
4. There was a recognition that, especially in the early stages of the children's learning engagement, they joined in not because they understood fully what they were learning but because of the collaborative and positively social nature of the task.

In order to build new strategies that incorporated these elements, a number of well-established and fundamental teaching practices had to be challenged. Two key strategy areas required direct challenge. These were issues around correction and questioning. The following principles were applied to all learning negotiation contexts.

Do not correct something that has already been produced

Do not ask children questions when you are not sure if they know the answer

Amongst a range of new strategies, Gray replaced the traditional IRE (initiating question - child response - teacher evaluation) pattern of teacher questioning with a new pattern that allowed for variation in the amount of teacher assistance that was given in any questioning environment. The new pattern is set out below.

Teacher Preformulation -
Teacher Question -
Child Response -
Teacher Acceptance -
Teacher Reconceptualisation

This pattern was based on parent-child interactions that occurred in literate homes as children were socialised into high levels of language and literacy awareness. Teacher preformulation allowed the teacher to prepare and give clues to the learner being questioned. Teacher reconceptualisation allowed the teacher, who had accepted the child's response, to expand and develop understandings. Both preformulation and reconceptualisation could be adapted by the teacher as common knowledge around the topic built up between the teacher and the children. Another important feature of questioning at Traeger Park was that questions were directed at a group level rather than individually unless the teacher was sure the child could provide an adequate answer.

3. A lesson framework for organising the development of the goals

A lesson framework that made it possible to bring together the text goals and the negotiation process that was being developed at Traeger Park was found in the work of Courtney Cazden (1977). Cazden proposed a teaching context that she called 'concentrated encounters'. A concentrated encounter was essentially a lesson that was focused upon teacher/student negotiation of a defined text product. Both the negotiation and the text produced were not solely at the discretion of the student. Rather, the production of the text was mediated by input from the teacher.

When the notion of concentrated encounters was put with the scaffolding negotiation process being proposed by Gray, the result was a series of lesson routines which acted in sequence to allow the teacher and students to build up common knowledge about the production of a text that was revisited over each of the lessons in a concentrated encounter sequence. The terms 'concentrated encounter' and 'concentrated language encounter' were used interchangeably at Traeger Park to refer to this lesson model.

Gray identified two simplified patterns to illustrate the kind of lesson sequence represented by concentrated encounters:

Type A concentrated encounters produced written texts that originated in experiences shared by both teacher and children. For example, at school entry, making toast together was used as the basis for giving children control over the ability to produce an extended procedural text. Once the students had built up the capacity to retell this procedural text, it

was transformed into a written text through teacher/student negotiation around the production of a written text. This written text was then used for reading development.

Type B concentrated encounters derived from experience with texts. In these encounters, texts were read, to, with or by students and discussed. In these sessions, the teacher mediated the production and discussion of the target text using the scaffolding strategies that had been introduced.

Often, both of these types of concentrated encounter lesson sequences were used in parallel. For example, a Type A sequence built around discussion of chicken hatching in an incubator targeting an explanation of embryo development within an egg was paired with a Type B sequence that discussed a book that provided a written explanation of the same process. The second concentrated encounter sequence helped shape the language choices and structure used in the joint construction of a written explanation of embryo development. Some major features of concentrated encounter sessions are outlined below.

• **Concentrated encounters and role play**
Role play was used for a variety of purposes within the language unit program. However, all role-play activity was structured around and incorporated the understanding and production of various kinds of text and involved considerable preparation. Role-plays drew heavily on resources, knowledge and skills specifically developed in related concentrated encounter work that had already taken place. That is, children learned "How to be a doctor" or "How to be a receptionist" or "How to do a certain task, for example, "How to take temperature" in intensive concentrated encounter sessions before these were incorporated into role-play.

With literary texts, role-play consisted of more than simply 'acting-out' the story unless the text involved was simple and short. However, even then, the acting-out was designed to focus children on specific aspects carried by either the illustrations or within the wording of the text. In this way, the children built up a repertoire that could be incorporated into an acting-out of the story. In doing this, the children were being led to engage with the subtext of meanings carried within the illustrations of children's storybooks.

When storybooks began to contain more complex imagery within the text itself, the children never acted-out the whole story. Rather, they focused on interpreting the particular writing choices they encountered in the text.

• **Concentrated encounters and the development of multiple texts**
The development and implementation of concentrated encounter sequences around various themes became the basis for language and literacy development in the language unit and was extended into classroom programs. A number of concentrated encounter sequences, each targeting a different text, ran simultaneously in the one class. Thus, each theme unit typically produced or exploited a range of texts.

• **Concentrated encounters and the expansion of text complexity**
During the course of the theme unit, teachers and students revisited the production of the target text as frequently as possible and through as many varied concentrated encounter tasks as ingenuity allowed. It was the construction of individual sessions as part of an ongoing routine of activity that made it possible for the highly supportive questions to work. Gray found that, in a similar manner to the processes operating in parent/child language and literacy development, it was the teacher's reconceptualisation that was picked up and given back to her by the students on the next occasion the topic was revisited. This meant that the continued reconceptualisation process led to an exponential increase in the quality and complexity of the language the children were producing over time.

• Concentrated encounters and the expansion of child control
In addition to promoting the development and complexity of the text that was being produced, the teacher would be working simultaneously to progressively hand over her control of the discourse to the children. This 'handover' of control in the production of the text applied, not only to production of spoken text, but also to the development of independent control in the writing task itself.

In general, as the competence of the children increased, the teacher backed off. She moved away from reliance on preformulation/reconceptualisation questioning patterns, for example, and asked more open questions. She also actively encouraged the children to spontaneously extend and initiate within the discussion that was taking place.

In the beginning of a concentrated encounter teaching sequence, the teacher would be leading and directing the learning process. However, towards the end of the concentrated encounter lesson sequence, the learning would be driven very much by initiations made by the children. Thus, towards the end of a concentrated encounter sequence the interaction between teacher and children would be somewhat similar to the kind of interaction that would take place in a child-centred teaching process.

In his Ph.D. Thesis, Gray (1998) demonstrated how the developing common knowledge and encouragement to take control within the teacher/student, teaching/learning negotiation could produce student responses that eagerly sought to assume control in the learning task.

• Concentrated encounters and the explicit awareness of social roles
Teacher consciousness about making explicit for the children the communication roles and the communicative purposes of the word choices that went to construct the target texts was a continuous focus throughout the operation of the teaching activities. Texts and the contexts from which they arose were studied and analysed prior to teaching to determine their potential for building perceptions of the social roles in which they were embedded.

Discussion around the word choices involved in considering why a writer would choose specific words, the effect they had on characters and even the effect specific wording had on the feelings of readers. This process of making the social purpose and social role associated with particular language choices commenced from the first moment the students entered the program. Even with the very early text negotiated around 'How to Make Yummy Toast', a number of language choices were explicitly discussed. For example, *'first'* (*First, you have to get the bread out of the packet*) tells the reader this is what has to be done to avoid mistakes. It also tells the reader that other things to do will follow (e.g. *"When we write 'first' like this the reader knows there is going to be a second thing after it. When we write as experts who know how to make toast we have to make these things clear for the learner - it is part of being an expert and if anyone is an expert on making toast - we certainly are."*). To illustrate such points, Gray even went to the extent of writing a short story book about "Mr Fuddle" a very confused individual who did not attend to the order of activities in a procedural text. Mr Fuddle did not pay attention to words like 'first' or 'second' or 'then' or 'next' and, of course, reaped the consequences when he tried to make a sandwich from a recipe.

As well as discussing word choice as she constructed texts with the children, the teacher pushed them to think about how they might spell words and form letters. In the joint construction, especially, the teacher's approach was deliberate and sequenced and designed to point out the difference between oral and written language as well as the motivation behind word choice and the orthographic system. As she worked, she also focused the children's attention on a specific set of thinking stages to do with the writing process.

Evaluation

The Traeger Park project was unique in the sense that it shifted the intervention spotlight away from presumed disadvantage, language difference and home background of Aboriginal children attending mainstream schools. Instead it asked the question, what is it that we do in our schools that make it impossible for Aboriginal children to succeed? The program that arose at Traeger Park to address this question was an initiative that was broadly based and designed to sensitise and change the fundamental nature of the relationships, teaching strategies and goals that were in operation across the language and literacy curricula in schools that attempt to cater for Aboriginal children. The strategies developed in the program challenge the validity of many of the teaching practices that have become embedded in conventional mainstream teaching, especially when they are used with Indigenous students.

The project gained considerable attention at the time and is still mentioned by researchers and teachers who came into contact with it. The Northern Territory Department of Education circulated some papers from the project in Northern Territory schools and teachers who visited the project took some of the strategies back to their own schools.

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