



Literacy learning in a language other than your first

ET Staff



It's common for Indigenous Australians to speak several languages, it's just that often English isn't one of them.

This is problematic for principals, teachers and those responsible for learning in these communities, as ACARA requires all learning to be acquired through the use of SAE (Standard Australian English). Therefore, the starting point for early language and literacy teaching requires the acquisition of English in order to succeed.

Pormpuraaw is a case in point. It is an amazing indigenous community on the west side of Cape York nestled between two beautiful rivers and bordered by flood plains to the east and beautiful white sand coastal waters to the west.

The Township consists of two neighbourhoods known locally as Mungkan side and Thaayorre side. The neighbourhoods originated at the time of mission settlement and reflect traditional linguistic and territorial affiliations. They are united by Pormpuraaw State School.

The school educates students until Year 6, after which they attend boarding school in a regional centre like Rockhampton or Cairns, usually 1000 kilometres or more from home. For the students to be successful

a solid grounding in English and the very foreign culture that they'll be encountering is critical.

When THRASS first went to the school, barely 19 of its 100 plus population turned up. These intelligent, multi lingual learners failed in the fundamental cornerstone to all learning – literacy. Since then, with a succession of determined principals the school has seen remarkable change in their learners' attendance and results.

So what changes have Pormpuraaw School put into place to allow for the teaching of English as the 'language of learning' and how do they teach literacy skills?

Principal Michael Anderson says that THRASS has been critical in creating the positive feedback loop of success at school leading into increased attendance.

"We are regularly getting 80 per cent attendance, it has been down a bit recently as several elders have passed and there has been sorry business and ceremony within the community," he says.

"THRASS was inclusive of all students and led them to really mastering aspects of language, they are getting success and success breeds expansion

which created a really tight positive feedback loop.

“You can see kids in Year 2 and 3 using IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) to get to grips with pronunciation, it leads to them playing with language and developing language skills on their own, independent of school.”

Anderson and the staff have been trying to get traditional languages recognised in the school’s curriculum. The THRASS program is very useful in tying down traditional knowledge and language; because there is no written history of the local languages, the use of phonetics can lend it a written, formalised form.

“Using the program, we can get a really consistent approach to teaching the traditional language. I think through that we will achieve our next leap forward. If a kid in the city could speak say French or Japanese as well as English they would be lauded. There is an opportunity for us to acknowledge all the tradition and knowledge held in these Indigenous languages.

“The parents in the past didn’t have the greatest relationship with the school, if we’re able to bring in that traditional knowledge we’ll be able to break that cycle”, Anderson says.

There is a high turnover of staff at the school, each teacher lasts about two years in the job. When they leave it’s met with grieving from the children. They live in a small community and are sensitive to change and they’re less resilient to people leaving than students in an urban setting.

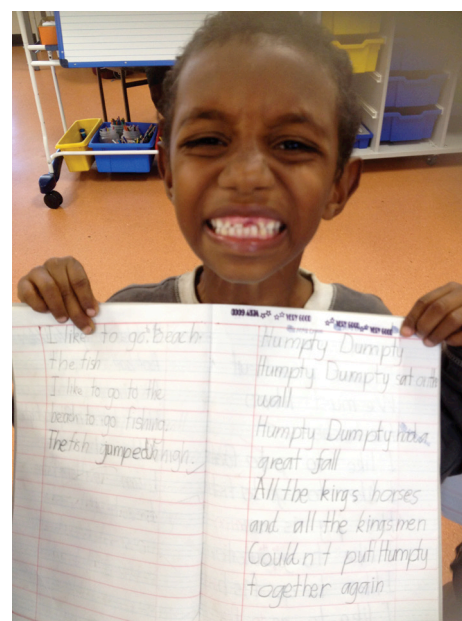
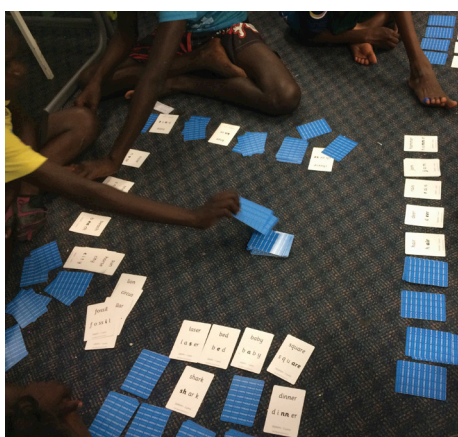
The continuity that the THRASS program offers helps the students to cope with teaching staff coming and going.

It was critical that teaching processes introduced were sustainable across the KLAS and could work across the grades. At the outset, Staff training was undertaken in THRASS for literacy, with phonic awareness as the starting point.

THRASS CEO Denyse Ritchie says: “Another factor of concern in putting together a successful literacy program within the school was the literacy levels of adults in the community. Education researchers and academics say that reading in the home is seen by them as an indicator of literacy success. For many community children this is just not an option. Their parents have been failed by the system and they have left school functionally illiterate.

“We found that classroom aides were not able to assist learners in literacy learning or the teachers in delivering literacy skills. This is an area that we are now focusing our attention on. The school has been running workshops for teacher aides which is not only helping the school, but more importantly is helping teacher aides and their confidence within the class setting.”

Phonics is the learned process of understanding how letters are used to represent sounds in written sounds. Phonics is based on the understanding of the Alphabetic Principle that English letters are used to represent sounds,



either singularly, in pairs or in groups of three and fours as graphs, digraphs, trigraphs and quadgraphs. This understanding is paramount to developing decoding and encoding skills for reading and writing.

“At this point we needed to acknowledge that these learners are multi lingual and are able to fluently alternate between languages. As such, acquisition of spoken English does not create a problem.

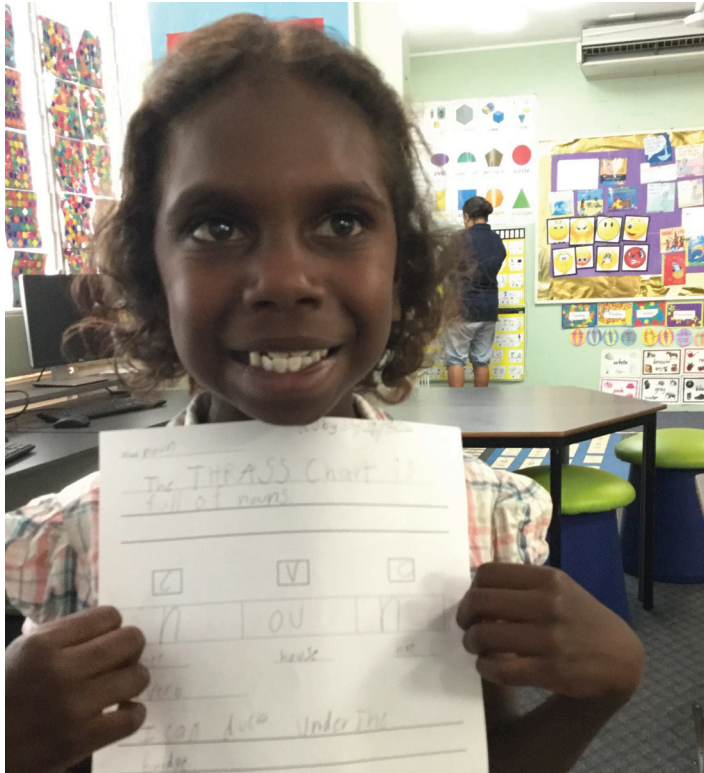
“Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, articulate and manipulate the phonemes of a language and is the undisputed predictor of early reading and writing acquisition.

“English is a language built around the manipulation of 44 distinct phonemes to produce spoken words. To build phonemic awareness in English, the first step was to provide a teaching process that would underpin the learning of the 44 phonemes. This was done with THRASSCHARTS. These are a classroom teaching resource used to show the relationship between English sounds and writing.”

The charts contain 44 boxes to provide a

reference point for each phoneme of English. In each phoneme box are pictures and words containing that phoneme. Using these distinct boxes the teacher is provided with a multi-sensory reference point to discuss particular phonemes. Words are easily built using the charts, pointing to phonemes in order builds both learners’ phonemic awareness and understanding that words are produced by synthesising sounds together. Phonemic awareness transitions into teaching phonics.

The charts have the Alphabet in both lower-case and capital form at the top. Children are taught letter names and use letter names to identify the letters that represent graphs, digraphs, trigraphs and quadgraphs in words on the chart.



The task from here is to enable learners to write words using the graphemes on the chart and this leads to how handwriting can be taught effectively.

“Handwriting is the key to literacy success, therefore it must be considered a major focus in the early years. If a learner cannot write they cannot express themselves or successfully answer questions. The writing of every letter is practised daily. Handwriting is treated as separate skill area focusing only on letter names and letter formation. Focus is on both lower-case and capital letters. Learners being able to automatically form letters expedites the teaching of phonics and spelling,” Ritchie says.

“Contrary to popular handwriting teaching, these learners are not taught handwriting as part of the phonics teaching. Letters are never referred to as ‘a sound’ or as having a sound. The constant reply from learners at Pormpuraaw when asked what sound a particular letter is, is ‘Give me a word. Letters don’t have sounds until they are in words.’

On the THRASSCHARTS there are 120 words, each containing a particular phoneme, the spelling choice for that phoneme is bolded. This helps children as they sound out words to visually take in the phonic patterns used to represent the phonemes that make up a word and provides the bridge between oral language and written language.

The process works from phonemic (sounds) to graphemes (spelling choices). This is the paradigm shift that has made the change. Phoneme to grapheme allows for an easy transition from oral to written language.

“This change to working with 44 phonemes daily from the beginning of learning is what has made the difference at Pormpuraaw. As distinct from when we started at the school, English is now used as a social language at school. With this building of English use comes a greater understanding of the meanings of words which directly translates into comprehension and writing skills,” Ritchie says.

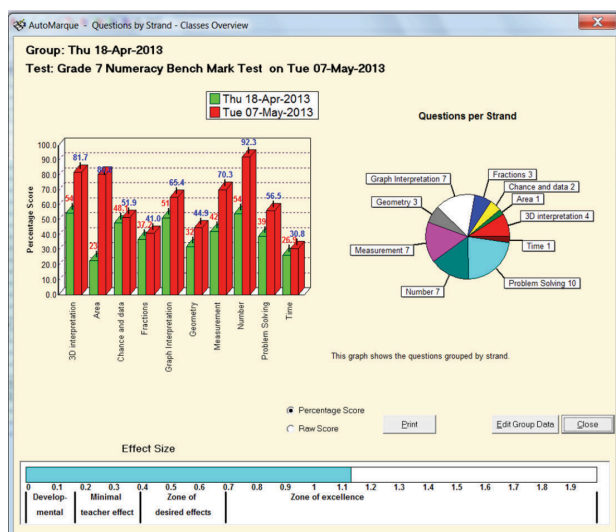
“With this change in learning comes success in other KLAs. As educators we know that word meaning is critical to comprehension. Stabilising reading and spelling allows for more intense words study and so understanding grows.” **ET**



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