Children's Language and Multilingualism

Indigenous Language Use at Home and School

Edited by

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7 Children, language and literacy in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands

Inge Kral and Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis

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In Australia research on literacy in remote Aboriginal communities tends to focus mainly on schools, methodology, curriculum and the failure of students to meet national English literacy and numeracy benchmarks. In general, minimal attention is paid to the Aboriginal language context and to everyday literacy use in social and cultural practice. This study of language and literacy in a remote Aboriginal community in the Western Desert takes an ethnographic approach to consider the impact of language shift and changed language socialisation practices on the development of linguistic and cognitive skills and to view literacy as a cultural, rather than instructional, process. Literacy as social and cultural practice is explored by tracing intergenerational literacy transmission since the introduction of textual practices, in Ngaanyatjarra and English, from the 1930s onwards. The study indicates that literacy is seeping into social and cultural practices in families where literacy has meaning and purpose in everyday life.

Introduction

In remote areas Aboriginal children appear to be growing up in environments where there are few resources to stimulate reading and writing at home. Commentators commonly write about these children in terms of 'deficit'.[1] However, around the world, ethnographers have studied children and families in different communities and highlighted the strengths of diverse language and literacy socialisation contexts (Heath, 1982, 1983; Schieffelin and Gilmore, 1986; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

In this chapter we draw on the sociolinguistic and anthropological literature that opens the way to seeing beyond deficit theories (Duranti and Ochs, 1986; Kulick, 1992; Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). We consider how children in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands are socialised into oral practices and the impact of language change in this region. Through ethnography we also show the ways in which literate practices have seeped into cultural processes in some Ngaanyatjarra families.

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands in the east of Western Australia comprise some 250,000 sq kms (or approximately 3 per cent of mainland Australia) fanning out from the tri-state border with South Australia and the Northern Territory. Approximately 2000 Aboriginal people live in 12 communities that comprise the 'Ngaanyatjarra Lands'. Residents are predominantly Ngaanyatjarra speakers, but the speech community also comprises speakers of other mutually intelligible Western Desert dialects (predominantly Ngaatjatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi) and adults generally have competence in these local dialects and English.[2] The population of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands includes the first wave of people who came out of the Western Desert in the 1930s and the last wave in the 1960s.[3] The Ngaanyatjarra as a group have never left their country, nor has their land been annexed or occupied by outsiders. Remoteness has protected the Ngaanyatjarra from the more profound ravages of the colonial encounter and their post-contact experiences have been relatively benign.

Language socialisation

In this first section we describe the oral language socialisation environment and discuss changed language socialisation patterns and language shift.

All children acquire their first language or mother tongue through social interaction and language behaviour patterns are acquired through language socialisation (Romaine, 1984; Snow and Ferguson, 1977; Wells, 1979). Language plays a critical role in the 'construction of social identity' (Ochs, 1993). It also acts as an 'agent' for the transmission of culture and it is through language socialisation that children acquire 'the ways and world views' of their culture (Romaine, 1994; Schieffelin, 1990).

Baby talk

Ngaanyatjarra language socialisation begins with the arrival of a new baby who is fussed over with much tactile interaction: cuddling, pinching of cheeks and kissing, in conjunction with the undulating prosodic contours of 'baby talk'.

Studies of baby talk suggest that simplified registers or modifications of adult speech assist in scaffolding the language learning process for young children (Ferguson, 1977).[4] Linguistic studies on Aboriginal child language development note the early stages of verbal communication (Hamilton, 1981; Lowell et al., 1996), including 'baby talk' (Bavin, 1993; Hoogenraad, 2005; Laughren, 1984). Observers characteristically describe an incremental scaffolding approach to language acquisition in the use of diminutives, word reduplication and a specific baby talk lexicon, as well as regular phonological modification of standard adult speech: consonant elision and substitution with accompanying gestural interaction.

Ngaanyatjarra has a distinct baby talk register (Table 7.1) that exemplifies similar features.[5] Caregivers are conscious that through baby talk children learn to speak. Adults intentionally scaffold language to assist young learners in acquiring difficult sounds. This process allows the learner to first understand the semantics of the utterances and then learn a mature way of articulating words. After a certain age children will be teased if they have not acquired standard Ngaanyatjarra forms, that is, proper adult talk.

Oral narratives

By participating in social and cultural practice children acquire the linguistic and cognitive orientations of their elders. As in other Aboriginal settings, the Ngaanyatjarra world is highly social, interactive and verbal. Storytelling and language play (including speech arts such as rhyming, metaphor, alliteration and onomatopoeia) are intrinsic to everyday discourse (Douglas, 1979).

Table 7.1 The distinct baby talk register of Ngaanyatjarra

Baby talk form	Standard Ngaanyatjarra	English translation
Akula!	Ngala!	Eat it!
Kikila/kikilawu!	Tjikila!	Drink it!
Tutula!	Tjutjurla!	Cover it!
Ampu!	Yampula!	Hold me!/pick me up!/hug me!
Awulu	Ngayulu	I – first person singular
Utuna	Nyuntunya	You – second person singular
Atjutjaya	Ngarltutjarra	Poor thing
Nyampi	Nyarnpi	Child's version of a traditional women's dance/song
Nyanya akula!	Mirrka ngala!	Eat the food!
Apa kikila!	Kapi tjikila!	Drink the water!
Uupa	Onomatopoeic sound/gesture	'Kiss'
Nyamnyam	Onomatopoeic sound/gesture	'Yummy'
Nyanya	Onomatopoeic sound/gesture	'Food'

Source: E. Marrkilyi Ellis 2006

Children are immersed in this language-rich environment and acquire the speech styles and oral narratives of their culture by listening to and interacting with those who speak *tjaa yuti* ('strong Ngaanyatjarra') and increasingly with those who 'code-switch' or 'code-mix' between Ngaanyatjarra and English.[6] Children also acquire the lexical and gestural vocabularies that denote kinship relations and the rules that govern social organisation.

In many Indigenous cultures oral narrative has been central to instruction and learning (Basso, 1984; Rogoff, 2003). In the Western Desert, oral memory and the transmission of cultural knowledge and learning through the *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming) have been intrinsic to the maintenance of a regulatory framework that has bound culture over generations. In the socialisation of Ngaanyatjarra children a fear of *mamu* or 'bad spirits' was (and still is) inculcated to discipline or keep children obedient (*ngurlutjingalku* or *pinangkatjunku)* and to steer them away from sacred objects or locations (*pikangurlu*). *Mamu tjuma* – stories about 'monsters' or scary spirits – were used to teach children the 'right way' to act. Thus stories for children were told as sanitised versions of the *Tjukurrpa*, as moral tales or simply as imaginative tales. Such stories are still told today, but with diminishing potency and fewer adults are able to articulate the traditional oral narrative style. Alongside the dissipation

of contexts for oral storytelling, the transformation of oral genres into simplified written versions for children (or English translations) is also reducing the function of oral narrative as a moral or metaphorical cultural guide.

Developmental studies on the acquisition of narrative competence indicate that 'narrative discourse structures are commonly acquired and internalised by age 10 in a child's process of socialisation' (Klapproth, 2004). We see this exemplified in *mirlpa* the typically female storytelling tradition acquired in childhood throughout the Western Desert and across Central Australia.[7] In this storytelling practice oral narratives accompany drawing in the sand, and iconography, symbolic representations, spoken narrative and gesture are integrated into a 'coherent narrative whole' (Wilkins, 1997). Essential communication and cognitive skills are embedded in the symbols utilised to tell stories. Girls acquire the habit of 'writing' in the sand and transfer it to other surfaces with ease. Now we see numerical and textual elements seeping into this traditional practice with mothers and daughters writing initials and names on the ground with bent 'story-wire' (fencing wire has replaced the traditional use of twigs and gum leaves). Through this practice girls are verbalising stories, drawing cognitive links and matching these with symbols drawn in the sand – all essential 'pre-literacy' skills.

Language shift

Language socialisation practices have, however, altered and changing practices are accelerating language shift. While some oral traditions remain strong, language shift is in process in Western Desert as in other Aboriginal language contexts (Langlois, 2004; McConvell, 1991; Rigsby, 1987). The 2005 National Indigenous Language Survey rates Ngaanyatjarra as 'critically endangered' (AIATSIS/FATSIL, 2005). Whether language death will eventuate is, as yet, unclear. What is evident, nevertheless, is that altered child language socialisation practices have impacted on spoken Ngaanyatjarra.

The introduction of Western schooling and changed social practice has impacted on Ngaanyatjarra cultural processes. Schooling has reduced the time spent acquiring and using complex linguistic structures, routines and speech styles in traditional contexts and Western institutionalised practices, values and expectations have been replacing cultural learning.[8] In the past complex oral and gestural forms were learned, and used by children, *in situ*, with knowledgeable elders telling stories, noting signs of seasonal change in the flora and fauna, observing animal and human tracks and navigating using spatial

orientation skills on land and in the night sky. In addition, hunting and gathering provided everyday contextualised occasions for discussion around tool preparation, animal behaviour, sign language, etc. when stalking prey, or during the cooking and distribution of meat according to kinship relationships. It has been suggested that an outcome of changed practices and schooling in English, is that some Western Desert youngsters are 'losing some of the insightfulness of their own language' and may not be achieving 'adequate self-expression in any language' (NLLIA, 1996). The vernacular mother tongue remains, nonetheless, a salient symbol of social identity as the following quote from a Ngaanyatjarra mother exemplifies:

> Ngaanyatjarra is important for everyone because it is their birth, number one language and it's important for them not to lose their language, always keep it, it's their point, their own.

Family literacy

In this section we turn the discussion to family literacy and consider whether literacy has been transmitted and acquired in Ngaanyatjarra families through everyday social and cultural practice.

Literacy research emphasises the importance of family literacy practices as antecedent to successful literacy learning at school (Wells, 1985). Some writers emphasise that literacy is a cultural process and that 'everyday practice' is 'a more powerful source of socialization than intentional pedagogy' (Lave, 1988):

> Children who learn to read successfully do so because, for them, learning to read is a cultural and not primarily an instructed process. Furthermore, this cultural process has long roots at home – roots which have grown strong and firm before the child has walked into school. Children who must learn reading primarily as an instructed process in school are at an acute disadvantage (Gee, 2004).

In mainstream Australia successful literacy learning builds on the long culture of literacy in Western society *and* the foundation of formal schooling. Literacy acquisition also incorporates interactive engagement and participation in other processes, practices and contexts that are meaningful and purposeful at an individual and community level and there is a synergy between all these processes. Research has identified that children from literate school-oriented families commence school better prepared than children from non-literate families who are not school-oriented. In Australian, North American

and British middle-class homes 'caregiver talk' or 'motherese' often parallels 'teacher-talk' used in classrooms (Cazden, 1988; Snow and Ferguson, 1977). In these contexts interlocutors scaffold language for children in a literacy-oriented manner. Heath (1982) posits that in such homes children are prepared for schooling through modelled or instructed patterns of language socialisation including: dyadic adult–child question and answer routines and ways of talking about books in literacy-oriented activities that correspond with structured periods of child development. In these ways the continuity between home 'caregiver talk' and the kind of adult–child interactions used in schools is reinforced as children learn the ways of 'taking meaning' from written texts by paying attention to text, by learning how to talk about reading and by having the right interactional style for orally displaying their 'literate orientation' (Heath, 1982). Heath (1982) indicates that where children have *not* been participating in specific school-like oral discourses, literate practices and child-focused instructional activities at home, they are less likely to do well in school after the initial few years.

In most remote Aboriginal communities the historical and social circumstances of literacy learning differ from mainstream Anglo-European contexts and the cultural processes (i.e. the habits and attitudes associated with everyday literacy practices that underpin success at school) are still evolving. Unlike many Western homes, houses in remote communities are generally not print-rich environments and people are often not in the habit of accumulating texts in their camps. Further, as Barton and Hamilton (1998) note, opportunities for literacy are provided by 'the range of resources available to people'. Thus the capacity to buy and store literacy artefacts (including story books, educational toys, activity books and pencils) remains a factor that inhibits home literacy practices in many remote communities (Bat, 2005; Kral and Falk, 2004). Moreover, the more visible and competent literates tend to be adults who participate in the institutional arenas of work, church and community governance and the less literate are often those on the periphery of Western institutional domains.

Literacy transmission in Ngaanyatjarra families

The Ngaanyatjarra, and their neighbours the Pitjantjatjara, have had an unusually long exposure to literacy in English, and in the vernacular Ngaanyatjarra, compared with many other remote Aboriginal groups. English literacy was

introduced to this preliterate group with the commencement of schooling at the United Aborigines Mission at Warburton Ranges in the 1930s. For the current generation of school-children some of their great-grandparents were among the first to learn literacy in the mission school. Many of their grandparents then experienced compulsory assimilation-era secondary schooling while boarding in hostels in the towns of the Eastern Goldfields of Western Australia during the 1960s. From the late 1970s most of the current parent generation have attended the government schools established in each of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands communities.

Schooling is, however, only one influence on the acquisition and transmission of literacy practices in the Ngaanyatjarra region. As Street (1994) notes 'literacy processes cannot be understood simply in terms of schooling and pedagogy: they are part of more embracing social institutions and conceptions'. This region also has a history of adult vernacular literacy learning. From the late 1950s missionaries have been teaching vernacular literacy and translating the Old and New Testament.[9] In some 'mission families' literate practices have been building up over three or four generations and Christian literacy practices have seeped into the domestic space. Children have observed their elders learning and reading Christian and secular texts and some children have learned from them. Through ethnographic interviews insights have been gained into the nature of family literacy practices in this community.[10]

Family literacy research indicates the importance of 'memories of literate things' in the transmission of a knowingness about literacy from one generation to the next (Taylor, 1983). Examples from Warburton support this. Mary and Jack began learning Ngaanyatjarra literacy in the 1960s and their daughter Jacinta remembers:

> Bibles, that's all, my mum would read it. I can read Ngaanyatjarra language from my mother . . . When she reads I always see her reading and listening and that's how I got learn.

When Jacinta was a teenager she continued learning to read Ngaanyatjarra from a missionary every afternoon. Mary also taught her grandchildren to read: 'I used to teach all the little kids in this house, at the tree . . . teaching the *Mama* God*ku* book, learning'. Now, she says, her grandson can read the Bible: 'I been learning him to do all that . . . I always sit down and read, sit and read'. Mary's grandson describes how he observed his grandfather reading:

> He know it for English, Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara language, three language, he can read, before he used to read. He read newspaper, dictionary, that old first one, first language.

Una's interest in reading was stimulated by observing her mother learning Ngaanyatjarra literacy in the 1960s, she then read with her own children during the 1970s and 1980s. Dawn recalls her children *nyakula nintirringkula* – 'watching and learning' from her as she read the Bible at home. Dawn is now repeating the process with the next generation of children. David contributed texts and drawings to a book (Glass and Newberry, 1979) of published Ngaanyatjarra stories during the 1970s and David's son recollects his father teaching him to read from this book. Patricia's mother began acquiring Ngaanyatjarra literacy in the 1950s when still a school girl in the mission. Patricia learnt English literacy at school in the Eastern Goldfields and later acquired Ngaanyatjarra literacy as an adult and she now works as a language worker. Patricia's adult daughter Lucy is also learning Ngaanyatjarra literacy and does home reading in Ngaanyatjarra with her 5-year-old daughter. Lucy says that she has kept her reading and writing strong by observing her mother: 'when she do it, I look at her when she write and read'.

Jennifer recalls her mother receiving a copy of *Jungle Book* from the missionaries:

> My mother always gets some books from the mail . . . Christian book . . . I used to get it and just help my mother read it, read it aloud so she can hear. Used to read it all the way, finish. I always tell her: 'You have to learn us kids reading . . . like giraffe, elephants, lions, monkeys. African stories'.

Molly says her grandson likes reading because 'we used to keep a book for him all the time, Bible stories . . . and *Three Bears*, we used to buy reading books in the shop and read to him'. Silas is a community leader and recalls reading at home as a child in the mission:

> In my after school when I go home my mother used to read a story, like the Christian story, little baby Jesus . . . So you know I was learning like the education side, school, but my mother was learning on the Christian side Jesus and all the stories. But she also learned me all the dreamtime stories too. Dreamtimes, you know, because they never lost the dreamtime stories, like the Seven Sisters.

In addition, literacy transmission is taking place in some families where the encounter with literacy has been more recent and the parent and grandparent generations were unschooled. Louisa was a child when her family came out of the Gibson Desert in the 1960s and she represents the first generation in her family to acquire literacy. Now she says:

> I read lot Bible, I read any Chapter or any Prophet who wrote Bible . . . I don't know the hard word in the Bible . . . I read, trying to read it, but I can't read it

cause I have to spell it, then I read it. But I pray and like read straight out. Read all the history in the Bible, New Testament, Old Testament.

Louisa's daughter has also acquired the habit of reading from her mother and describes how her 'favourite thing' is to sometimes 'read Bible with my mother, she got a two Bibles, and it's one youth Bible . . . young people's, English . . . because it's got stories in there'.

These memories and reflections illustrate that the habit of reading has become transmitted social practice in some Ngaanyatjarra families, and children have been 'apprenticed' in literacy through observation and 'guided participation' with mature community members (Rogoff et al., 1993). They also shed light on the significance of iterative social practices such as Bible reading (in English or Ngaanyatjarra) in church and at home. In these communal literacy events everybody participates irrespective of literacy competence, either by decoding or by memorisation and oral recitation.[11] These children may not be acquiring solitary literacy practices, nor the dyadic oral and literate skills that match the kind of adult–child interactions used in school, but they are acquiring the shared, communal literacy practices that match Ngaanyatjarra sociality.

Children reading and writing: a special situation

In this section we focus on the development of reading and writing with children in one family group.[12]

Rosie and Harold were children in the mission and now have numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Rosie and Harold's granddaughter Nina is in the third generation to pass through schooling and their great-granddaughter Rosina is in the fourth. Rosina and Nina observe their elders assuming responsible community leadership roles requiring English literacy. Furthermore, Ngaanyatjarra literacy has been taught to three generations in the family. Rosie and Harold's adult daughters (some of whom went away to secondary boarding schools in the Eastern Goldfields during the 1960s) still do vernacular literacy lessons and help with Bible translation work. Nina and Rosina have been observing their kin learning Ngaanyatjarra literacy and reading the Bible and the Christian song book.

In April 2004, Rosina was 4 years and 5 months old (4.5) and Nina was 5 years and 5 months (5.5). The girls had attended the community-run playgroup before starting schools in 2004. The playgroup functions as a bridge between the home language socialisation environment and social, oral and

literate practices required for 'school readiness'. The girls are bilingual Ngaanyatjarra–English speakers who enjoy going to school and attend regularly.

Girls' 'writing'

As mentioned earlier, social relationships are illustrated and inculcated through oral narratives and *mirlpa* 'sand storytelling'. Nina's mother Pamela has taught Nina to write her name as the initial letters of her first name, mother's surname and father's surname. Adina also says that when her daughter Rosina was about 3 years old she taught her to write her name as a 'tag' using the initials of family names 'so she can get learn for the first letters' that represent her name. In April Rosina and Nina are both able to 'write' their names as 'tags' and self-describe: 'I'm writing my name'.

Pretend writing and 'invented spellings' (i.e. spontaneous early attempts at writing where children begin hypothesising about spoken and written language using a mix of spelling conventions and mimetic symbols) emerge during the year (Read, 1986). In May 2004 Rosina is drawing pictures and Adina is writing sentences underneath which Rosina memorises and copies. Nina is also drawing pictures and 'writing' stories using invented spellings. These stories are then retold: 'I know go to my *warta* (tree). I know go into my *kapi* (water).' By August Adina is guiding Rosina to: 'do your name long way, not initials' and Rosina finger writes it on the table. Adina also guides Nina to the initial sounds of common words by reinforcing sound–symbol correlations and breaking words into segments. By October, Nina knows most of the letters of the alphabet and has an understanding of the English sound system. Her mother Pamela guides her and writes: 'I LOVE Mummy' on a piece of paper and encourages Nina to copy it. By December, Rosina is 'writing' and retelling stories using left-to-right and top-to-bottom 'pretend' cursive writing on hand-drawn lines, illustrating her comprehension of 'writing-like' behaviour.

In these instances we have seen caregivers and children exploring language and writing with children gaining the prerequisite 'metalinguistic awareness' for successful literacy learning at school (Olson, 1984; Romaine, 1984).

Girls' 'reading'

Most homes in the community have few literacy resources. Any children's books there have generally been borrowed or bought second-hand. Pamela borrows children's stories (in Ngaanyatjarra and English) to read to the children as they go to sleep. Adina says she never buys children's books, but takes her readers home from her Ngaanyatjarra literacy classes. In this family,

reading with children has become second nature and is being incorporated into social practice.

In September Rosina chooses a maths concept book and snuggles up to her grandmother Carmel who starts reading to her. As she completes the final page Carmel asks her in English: 'How many green cars? How many wheels?' Rosina knows the routine, but counts the wheels randomly. Immediately Carmel guides her: 'No, you got to do it like this' and scaffolds the literacy event by demonstrating counting in a left-to-right and top-to-bottom motion. Another time Rosina (R) and a non-Aboriginal adult (G) read the same book. In this scaffolded interaction Rosina demonstrates her familiarity with asking and answering book-oriented questions in English:

R: How many red ones?

G: How many red ones? 123456789!

R: How many, which one? Red ones!

G: Red ones, 12345678! Oooh 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23! 23 red ones! Yikes! There's a lot of red isn't there?

R: Lotsa red, little one, bigges', bigges', bigges', bigges' bigges', bigges', big!

G: Yeah, look at the stripey one and the spotty one.

R: Big one, big one, big one.

G: Biggest one?

R: Smalles', smalles', smalles', smalles', smalles'.

G: There's the littlest one right at the end.

R: Little right on the end.

G: Yeah, it's the littlest.

Research in emergent literacy tells us that:

> Children with experience of books and literate stories develop a sense of how text should sound (such as how short and long sentences should alternate for variety and what sentences with subordinate clauses sound like). They imitate the narrative framework, at first without coherent content . . . They copy adult intonation and phrasing in pretending to read books, irrespective of sense they sound like stories as they run pages smoothly using appropriate cadence, with repetition, contrast, counting, and exaggeration. (Rogoff, 2003)

In the Ngaanyatjarra case study it was found that Rosina and Nina rapidly memorised and 'read' favourite stories to themselves or other children. Nina often

sat alone 'memory reading' by following the picture cues while turning the pages. One evening she arrived with the children's book *Aladdin* that she had received as a 'reward' from her teacher for going to school everyday. The text was too complex to read word-by-word, so I paraphrased a simple story to match the pictures. Nina quickly perceived my strange reading prosody and no engagement with the text and told me that I was 'cheater reading' and looked for another book. She found the *Three Little Pigs* with text in simple, large font and close sentences marked with graphics. We read it together, and she immediately engaged by cross-referencing her textual and real-life experiences. She asked me: 'Who did this book?' as her grandmother has written a published Ngaanyatjarra version of the *Three Little Pigs* and it's a favourite. She then found this Ngaanyatjarra version on my book shelf and read her grandmother's name on the cover and compared it with the English author's name. In these ways Nina demonstrated emergent literacy practices.

Through ethnographic research it has been possible to observe the ways in which these children interact with text and the mediating role that adults play and how these children are beginning to use oral and written discourse in 'school-like' ways.[13] The children exhibited the decoding–encoding conventions associated with learning to read and write: left-to-right and top-to-bottom progression, letter identification and formation (Wells, 1985). They demonstrated reading-like behaviour, distinguished between conversational prosody and oral reading prosody and displayed other behaviours indicative of an emerging 'literate orientation'.

On return trips in April and September 2006 I again informally observed the literacy practices of these two girls. Both girls still exhibited an insatiable interest in story book reading and engaged whenever the chance arose. By April 2006 Nina was decoding unknown words as she 'read' stories out loud using picture cues and predictive story schemata, while Rosina was counting hidden objects embedded in pictures. Both girls were also playing word games: recalling, spelling and writing known sight words or names of relatives. They also avidly copied and traced words from books, labels, stickers, and instructions on packets and brand names on objects. These words were then superimposed onto 'lines' that rendered the page a visual imitation of a cohesive piece of written text. By September, both girls were independently composing and segmenting simple English sentences and playing self-proclaimed 'tricky writing' games.

Conclusion

In remote Aboriginal Australia literacy learning has been experienced by only a few generations during a concomitant period of profound language shift and cultural change. This is a short time for the cultural processes, that is, the social habits, attitudes and practices associated with language and literacy that underpin success at school, to seep into family life and for intergenerational transmission to take hold. The ethnographic study described in this chapter has emphasised that literacy is a cultural process and suggests that everyday practice may be just as powerful as intentional pedagogy, irrespective of instructional methodology.

It can be conjectured that many Ngaanyatjarra children have not been prepared for school through participating in literacy events, specific school-like oral discourses and child-focused instructional activities at home as the teaching of reading and writing is seen as the job of the school. However, in families where literacy has become a taken-for-granted cultural process it is more likely that children will acquire the habits and values of literacy than in other families, as indicated in the 'special situation' described above where emergent literacy practices are exemplified. Although this situation may be atypical in the remote Aboriginal context generally, this case study does indicate that literacy is being acquired and transmitted 'out-of-school' (Hull and Schultz, 2002) in certain remote Aboriginal contexts.

In general, however, many Aboriginal children in remote communities are not acquiring high order literacy skills at school, but are absorbing the values, skills and mannerisms that their kin associate with literacy. If Aboriginal children do not witness their elders in literate roles then the likelihood of literacy being acquired as social practice by the next generation may be diminished and literacy learning at school may be less effective. Hence, Aboriginal children need to be observing and participating in activities where literacy has meaning, not just for non-Aboriginal people in Western institutional contexts, but in the mature practices of their own community and in the home environment. In the remote Aboriginal context home literacy can be enhanced by increasing family access to literacy resources and providing caregivers with mediated guidance in how to effectively scaffold language and literacy events for children to better prepare them for school success.

Notes

1. Some commentators on Aboriginal education express the view that for children from remote communities to 'succeed' at school the behaviour of the parents will have to change. Johns suggests that schooling in the remote context is 'concerned with overcoming elements absent in the home: peace and quiet, food, civility, reading skills, discussion, use of the English language and the work ethic' and the 'new emphasis on preschool education is an explicit acknowledgement of making up for those things that are missing in the culture of the home and the community' (Johns, 2006, p. 21).
2. References to 'Ngaanyatjarra language' in this chapter may also encompass the other Western Desert dialects spoken in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.
3. Most recently in 1984 a small family group who had never had contact with European society came out of the desert and now reside at Kiwirrkura community in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.
4. The term 'scaffolding' is drawn from Vygotsky's notion of the 'zone of proximal development' – a way of guiding learners to a higher level of understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). Literacy researchers have also adopted this concept (Ninio and Bruner, 1978; Rose et al., 1999).
5. For a longer discussion on Ngaanyatjarra/Ngaatjatjarra baby talk and language learning (see Ellis, 2006; Jacobs, 1988).
6. The term 'code-mixing' is used to indicate that interlocutors may not be aware of mixing languages and the vernacular has become 'mixed and/or simplified' (AIATSIS/FATSIL, 2005, p. 28). Whereas 'code-switching' typically involves bilinguals who know both languages well, but choose to alternate between them (AIATSIS/FATSIL, 2005, p. 85). See McConvell (1988).
7. Other references to Western Desert sand story practice include Eickelkamp (2005) and Watson (1997). Also see discussions on sand storytelling in Warlpiri (Munn, 1986) and Arrernte (Green, Forthcoming; Wilkins, 1997). A comparable tradition is noted in the Alaskan Eskimo practice of girls telling 'mud knifing stories' (de Marrais et al., 1992).
8. Shirley Brice Heath comment from presentation at *Imagining Childhood Symposium*, Alice Springs NT, September 2005.
9. Wilf Douglas compiled the first grammatical analysis of Ngaanyatjarra by 1957 and developed a Roman alphabet orthography. In 1963 Amee Glass and Dorothy Hackett commenced a lifetime vocation learning Ngaanyatjarra, teaching vernacular literacy, and translating Scriptures from English to Ngaanyatjarra. They have published a number of significant Ngaanyatjarra texts including the New Testament (Ngaanyatjarra Bible Project, 1999) and the Ngaanyatjarra dictionary (Glass and Hackett, 2003). Still today they continue to teach Ngaanyatjarra literacy, translate the Old Testament and publish Ngaanyatjarra texts. They have been assisted by others including Herbert and Lorraine Howell. In 1982 they formed the Ngaanyatjarra Bible Project with the Ngaanyatjarra people. From the 1990s Marie Geytenbeek and Jan Mountney from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) were also seconded to the Ngaanyatjarra Bible Project.
10. The data presented in this section are drawn from PhD research by Inge Kral in the Ngaanyatjarra region between 2004–2006 (Kral, 2007). All personal names used in the text are pseudonyms.
11. A similar practice is noted among Afro-Americans where non-literate elders assist their grandchildren in learning to read Scripture by activating their memorised oral 'reading' strategies (Dorsey-Gaines and Garnett, 1996).

12. During 2004 and on subsequent visits Kral observed the development of children's literacy in one extended family group. The literacy events described in this section came to light as a consequence of social interactions with families in and around households in the neighbourhood. As acknowledged in other child socialisation studies (Miller, 1996; Scollon and Scollon, 1981), the presence of the researcher and her relationship with the children has influenced the data.
13. Studies have shown that teachers expect children to mark their narratives with particular elements (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981).

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