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PREFACE

These Work Papers are being produced in two series by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Australian Aborigines Branch, Inc. in order to make results of SIL research in Australia more widely available. Series A includes technical papers on linguistic or anthropological analysis and description, or on literacy research. Series B contains material suitable for a broader audience, including the lay audience for which it is often designed, such as language learning lessons and dictionaries.

Both series include both reports on current research and on past research projects. Some papers by other than SIL members are included, although most are by SIL field workers. The majority of material concerns linguistic matters, although related fields such as anthropology and education are also included.

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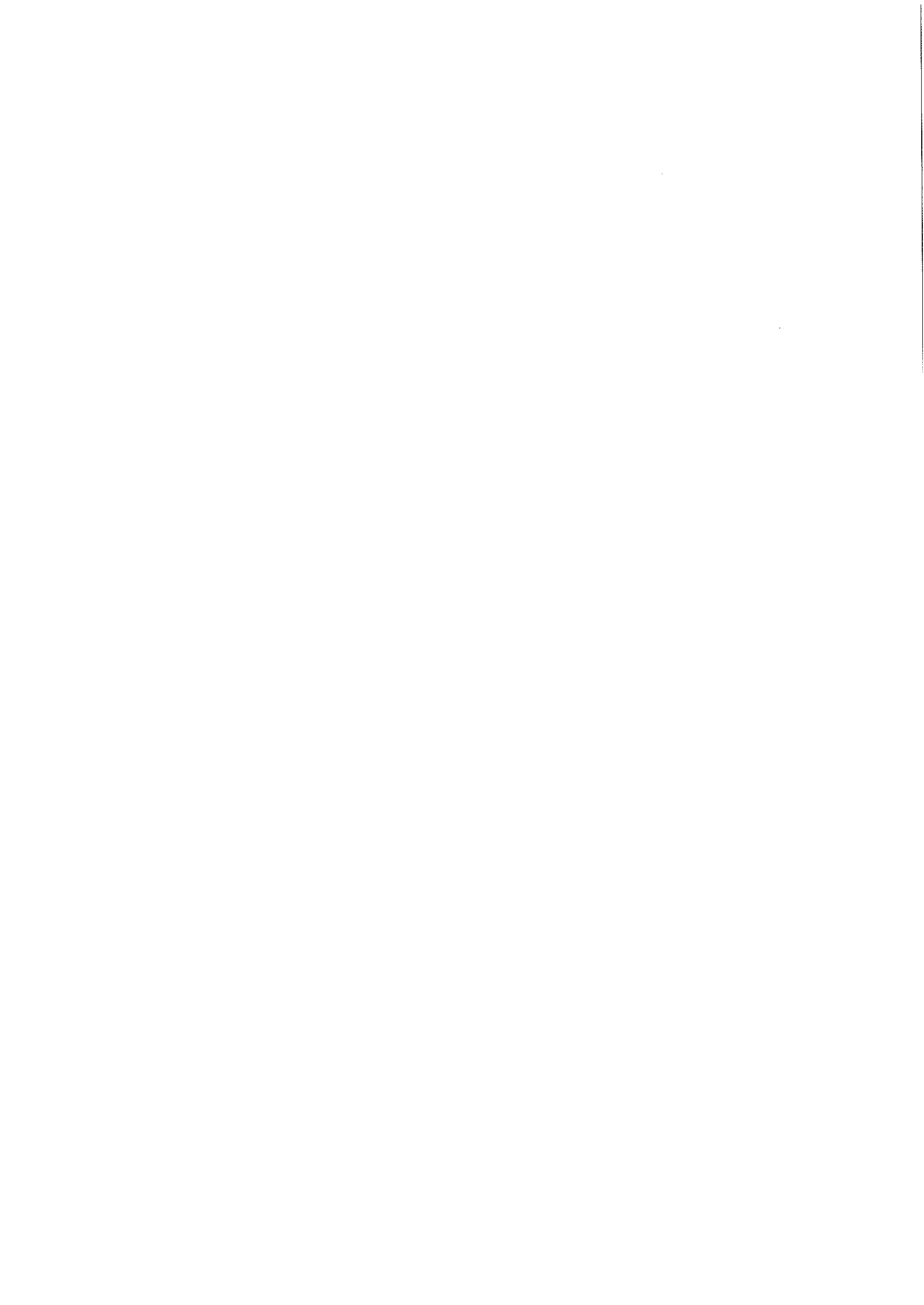
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INTRODUCTION TO
SERIES B VOLUME 6

Literacy in an Aboriginal context is a complex concern. As the first four papers in this volume indicate, factors that need to be considered are psychological, sociolinguistic and anthropological as well as more directly educational.

The fifth paper is of a different mode but it too presents a factor for the literacy worker to consider — the growing importance of Kriol as an Aboriginal language. Whether one considers it a simplifying or complicating factor, it cannot be ignored.

All of the contributors are SIL field workers who themselves face the challenge of literacy in an Aboriginal context.

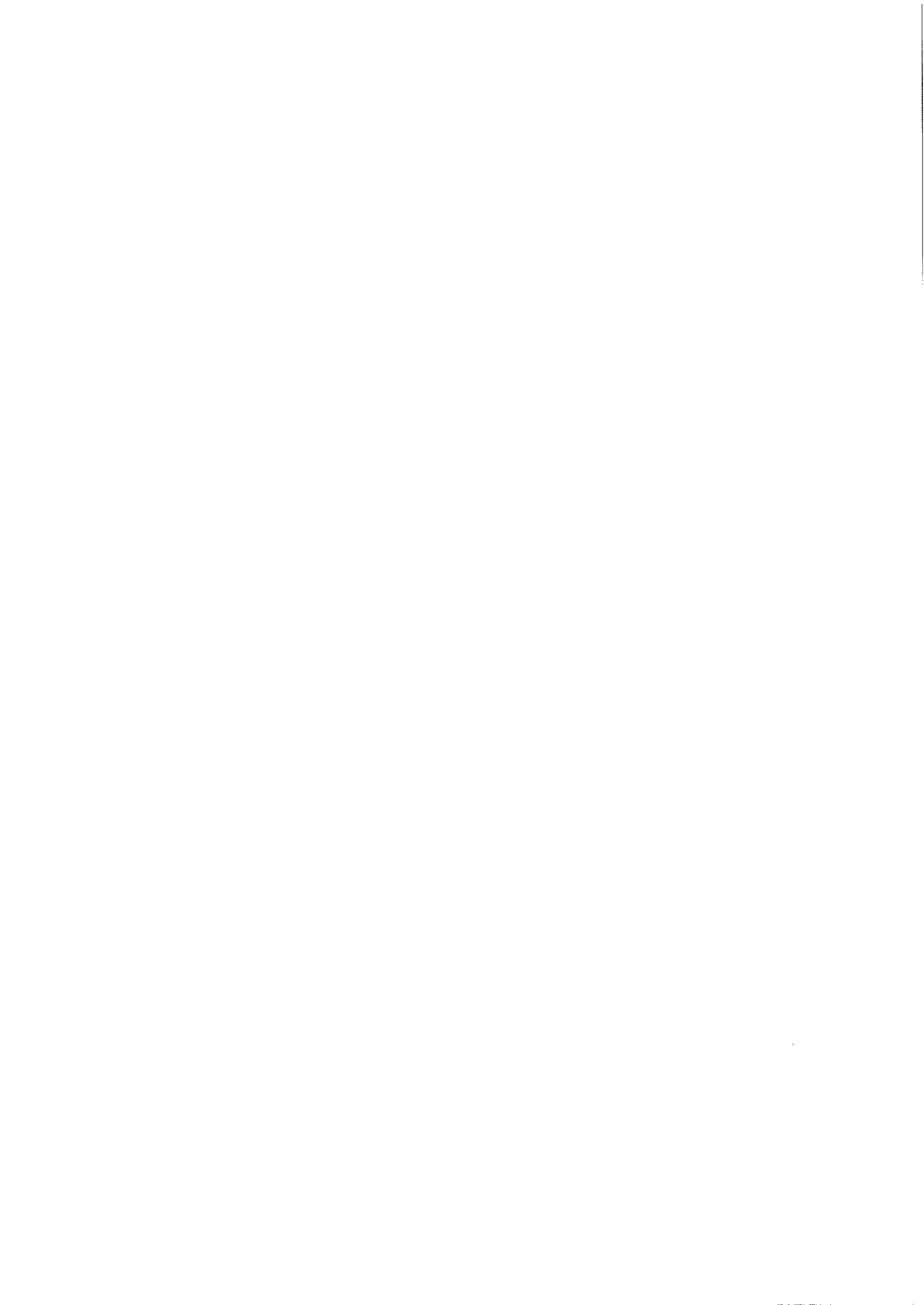


TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Preface	iii
Introduction to Series B Volume 6	v
CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN VERNACULAR LITERACY PROGRAMMES FOR TRADITIONALLY ORIENTED ADULT ABORIGINES, by Joy L. Sandefur	1
0. Introduction	1
1. Traditional Aboriginal Values	2
2. Moves Toward European Values	4
3. Traditional Aboriginal Education	6
3.1 Approaches	6
3.2 Methods	9
4. Traditional Education and Literacy Programmes	11
4.1 Teacher-Pupil Relationship	11
4.2 Out-Of-Doors Environment	12
4.3 Practical Experience	12
4.4 Adapting to the Environment	13
4.5 Travel	13
4.6 Observation	14
4.7 Repetition	14
4.8 Challenge	14
5. Other Cultural Considerations	15
5.1 Kinship	15
5.2 Content of Literature	16
5.3 Illustrations	18
5.4 Aboriginal Teachers	24
6. Conclusion	25
Footnotes	26
References	27
Suggested Readings	29

	Page
CHARACTERISTICS OF ABORIGINAL COGNITIVE ABILITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERACY AND RESEARCH PROGRAMMES, by W. H. Langlands	31
0. Introduction: Topic, Purpose and Scope	31
1. Cognitive Abilities, Functional Learning Systems and Cognitive Style	35
1.1 Cognitive Abilities	35
1.2 Culture and Cognitive Abilities	38
1.2.1 Functional Learning Systems	39
1.2.2 Cognitive Style	41
2. Cognitive Abilities Involved in Reading	43
2.1 Reading and the Structure of Intellect	43
2.2 Perceptual Abilities in Reading	47
2.3 Cognitive Development	49
3. Research From Outside Australia Correlating Culture and Cognitive Abilities	54
4. Research Findings on Aboriginal Cognitive Abilities and Some Implications for Literacy Programmes	61
4.1 Aboriginal Cognitive Abilities	61
4.2 Summary and Implications for Literacy Programmes	65
5. Some Areas for Continued Research	70
Footnotes	74
Appendix: Tests Referred to in this Paper	75
Bibliography	76
A SUGGESTED STRATEGY FOR AN ALYAWARRA LITERACY PROGRAMME FROM A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT VIEWPOINT, by Nancy J. Turtle	81
Introduction	81
Suggested Strategy	84
Evaluation of the Product and the Process	90
Footnotes	99
References	100
VERNACULAR LITERACY FOR WARLPIRI ADULTS, by Beverly Swartz	101
0. Introduction	101

	Page
1. Benefits of Vernacular Literacy for Warlpiri Adults	102
1.1 Preservation of Culture	102
1.2 Interest in Children's Education	102
1.3 Understanding of Christian Teaching and Scriptures	103
1.4 Political Awareness	103
1.5 Transference from Vernacular to English	104
2. Aboriginal-European Cultural Differences	104
2.1 Learning Methods	104
2.2 Concepts of Time	105
2.3 Future Versus Past-Present Time Orientation	105
2.4 Other Differences	106
3. Differences Between Teaching Children and Adults	107
4. Teaching Methods	108
4.1 Sentence Method	108
4.2 'Gudschinsky Method'	109
4.3 Programmed Instruction	109
4.4 Transfer Material	110
4.5 Use of Cassettes	111
5. Conclusion	112
References	113
DEVELOPING A LITERATURE FOR KRIOL, by John R. Sandefur	115
Kriol - An Overview	115
Kriol Literature	117
Kriol Orthography	118
Kriol Research	118
Appendix 1: Selected Bibliography of Works on Kriol	120
Appendix 2: Complete Bibliography of Kriol Vernacular Publications Listed by Year of Publication	122



VERNACULAR LITERACY FOR WARLPIRI ADULTS

Beverly Swartz

0. INTRODUCTION

My interest in adult literacy has come about as my husband and I have lived for the past two years on the Aboriginal settlement of Lajamanu. Lajamanu is located in the Northern Territory about 700 kilometers southwest of Darwin, on the edge of the Tanami Desert. Most of the Aborigines living there are Warlpiris. In all, there are approximately 3,000 Warlpiri speakers living on settlements in the Northern Territory. At Yuendumu, the largest Warlpiri settlement, there has been a bilingual education programme for five years in the school. For Warlpiri children, this involves only reading in their own language with the rest of their education being conducted in English.

Most of the Warlpiris at Lajamanu over forty years of age are illiterate. Those under forty have had the opportunity of a partial European-type education, many of them receiving their schooling at Yuendumu. All the education has been in English and most can read English to some degree. Yet comprehension remains very limited, for English is still a second language for them.

This paper outlines, firstly, my reasons for believing that adult literacy in the vernacular would be beneficial for the Warlpiris. Secondly, the paper briefly outlines Aboriginal-European cultural differences that affect teaching methods and also differences in teaching methods for adults and children, with particular reference to the Warlpiris. Finally, there is a discussion of a few teaching methods that may be useful in an adult vernacular literacy programme. Although the paper is written with a specific group - Warlpiri adults - in mind, the ideas presented may have application to other Aboriginal or minority groups.

1. BENEFITS OF VERNACULAR LITERACY FOR WARLPIRI ADULTS

The primary reasons that I feel adult vernacular literacy would be of value to the Warlpiri community are 1) preservation of Warlpiri culture
2) interest in children's education
3) understanding of Christian teaching and Scriptures
4) political awareness and
5) transference from the vernacular to English.

I will go into these points each in detail.

1.1 PRESERVATION OF CULTURE

The process of change in which European culture is being pushed onto the people from all sides often means their own culture is pushed into the background. Kath Walker, the well-known Aboriginal writer, says that as they throw away their own culture and way of life they become 'black replicas of a white race ... All that this has succeeded in doing is to swell the ranks of the Aboriginal fringe-dwellers who are learning about the European's way of life from the rejects of that society' (Walker 1969:104). Vernacular books on folklore, living and hunting customs and other areas of Warlpiri culture would help to give the same prestige to their language as English. English could never communicate these things as clearly as can the Warlpiri to a Warlpiri speaker.

1.2 INTEREST IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Adult literacy would stir an interest within the community for the education of their children. Children's attendance in the local school is very sporadic. Many children are not encouraged by their parents to attend school. If the children are told to go to school it is more to get them into some supervised activity than for the educational benefits.

This could be because the adults that previously attended the English school have seen little benefit from the education they received. W. H. Edwards quotes a UNESCO report that 'Adults will be less interested in literacy as an end in itself and "will continue to learn only as he sees that his literacy will further his economic, social, or cultural improvements"' (Edwards 1969:284). If adults see that literacy will improve their situation they may encourage vernacular literacy, and also education in general, for their own children. It has been found that two to three years of literacy in the vernacular

aids in switching to the national language, but without the encouragement from their parents the children may not be inspired enough to learn. The Northern Territory Department of Education has a policy that they will not begin bilingual education in the school at Lajamanu until the adults show that they are behind the programme. I don't feel this will happen until the adults themselves are literate in the vernacular.

1.3 UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIAN TEACHING AND SCRIPTURES

We are at Lajamanu primarily for Bible translation into Warlpiri; thus we see a real need for teaching and reading the Bible in the vernacular. W. H. Edwards, who is a pastor in an Aboriginal settlement, feels there has been a real failure in establishing strong Aboriginal churches due to not using the vernacular. He has seen the change when people have vernacular scriptures and hymnbooks: they have a better understanding of what Christianity is about and are more confident in sharing their Christian faith with other groups (Edwards 1969:284).

I have seen people who cannot read buying Bibles. They figure there is some magical power in possessing a Bible which will keep them from harm. They do not realise that the words inside are the source of their help. A Bible which they could read and understand would clear up much of this misunderstanding. Also vernacular hymns would be more meaningful than English hymns which are loaded with many English idioms that they have no way of understanding. Mission groups have found vernacular hymnbooks are respected by the people and are not destroyed like books that have no meaning for them. Bible story books and pamphlets would also aid them in reading practice for fluency.

1.4 POLITICAL AWARENESS

The Australian government is trying to get the Aborigines interested in running their own political affairs. At Lajamanu there are many town meetings held concerning some aspect or other of running the settlement. The old men who are supposed to be the decision makers sit in the front. The other groups sit according to their status. The meetings are held in English. One or two of the younger Warlpiris might lead and participate. These few that participate and understand the political system make the decisions while most others go home not understanding what is going on. Even if they do understand somewhat, they realise they have no power over the decision because they do not know how to make their opinion count in this Warlpiri-European political system. This has caused a

breakdown in the culture as far as authority goes. The old men have lost their say and thus they lose the respect of the younger Warlpiri group who feel the elders are too ignorant to ever understand political matters. The old men still have a say in cultural matters, but European culture is bearing in on the settlement at such a rate that the elders are being left in the background.

Vernacular literature and adult literacy would allow pamphlets, posters and newspaper articles to be made so that more could understand the issues for which they gather at the town meetings. With more understanding, decisions would be more apt to be made which would benefit the community rather than a few individuals. This could bring improvements in health, economics and culture retention.

1.5 TRANSFERENCE FROM VERNACULAR TO ENGLISH

The ability to transfer from Warlpiri literacy to English literacy would bring about a better understanding of European culture and politics. This is important if the Warlpiris are going to fit into the ways that are being pushed upon them. '... the Aborigine needs more knowledge of the European-Australian way of life and ... he should be encouraged to walk, if he chooses, in these two worlds' (Walker 1969:104).

As stated before, literacy and education which begins in the vernacular is beneficial for learning the national language. Many Aboriginal people taught first in English have never caught on to what reading is about — that it is more than knowing what the words are; it is knowing what the combination of words mean. When the people learn to read for comprehension in the vernacular they will have a much easier task in reading for comprehension in English.

There are other areas where adult literacy would be of value but I will not dwell on these to any extent. These include letter writing between parents and children away at school or between relatives on different settlements and also record keeping in the school and offices.

2. ABORIGINAL-EUROPEAN CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

2.1 LEARNING METHODS

From the time a white child can talk he starts asking questions as to how things work. The process is explained to him verbally and he will try it and continue to ask questions to improve his skill. From this he can adapt easily to the classroom where the teacher

explains how to do something and he follows the directions. We have found that this method is not used by the Warlpiris (nor, we understand, by other Aboriginal groups). In an attempt to get a procedural discourse as part of our linguistic research, the only thing we got was a narrative of what went on while the task was being performed. For instance, we attempted to get a text on how to make a fire with firesticks. Instead we got a story about going hunting, the need to burn a clearing, and then about a fire being started with firesticks. An Aboriginal learns to make a fire by watching it being done and then trying it. Someone may give him advice and coaching while he attempts to do the skill, but most of the learning is through watching and trying until it is achieved satisfactorily. For this reason lecture-type classes are of little value to the Warlpiris. More activity-type learning and teaching techniques would be better.

2.2 CONCEPTS OF TIME

Our European society is time oriented. We usually have the day organised into little slots with specific times for each activity and activities for each time. Aborigines are not time oriented in this sense at all. If they are busy doing something they will continue to do it until it is finished or they get hungry or tired. They eat when they are hungry and sleep when they are tired. Ceremonies and dances often last far into the night with little thought given to the late hour.

For these reasons, rigid class schedules cause many problems such as sporadic class attendance, fatigue or boredom. It may be better to let the students choose the classtime and let each period be loosely enough structured that it can be ended early or extended if the students desire.

2.3 FUTURE VERSUS PAST-PRESENT TIME ORIENTATION

For Europeans, what is done today is often for the benefit of the future. Schooling is for later financial benefit and we Europeans are content to wait for the results. The Warlpiris, as with most Aboriginal groups, are more concerned with the present and past. They are more apt to want immediate results from what they are doing. It is not productive to tell them that if such and such is done now, then the benefits will be reaped at some later date. A literacy course that promised them reading fluency within the year would probably never get off the ground.

We had an interesting experience in this area at Lajamanu. We tried to get the Warlpiri teaching assistants to help start a vernacular reading programme for the school children. We planned to have two to three meetings a week. During the meetings we would help the assistants improve on their reading skills and also get materials ready for starting the programme later in the classroom. After a few meetings, no one showed up except a couple of the European teachers. An explanation for this apparent lack of interest could be that the Warlpiri teachers were not seeing any results from the planning they were doing. My husband tried another programme later in which he and the Warlpiri teacher, Paddy Jangala, started teaching the children from the first day. He had short planning sessions with Paddy before the class. The teaching method was taught right in the classroom. My husband would do it the first time then Paddy would do it next. By using this method, Paddy improved his teaching style. This has worked much better and Paddy is so happy with it that he does a lot of planning alone after the class is over. He can see the immediate benefits of what he is doing and thus is motivated to do more.

This same idea applies to a literacy class. The Warlpiri students want to use the reading skills immediately. It is therefore important that as soon as possible reading be a meaningful activity. Because of this, a sentence method of teaching might be more helpful. Plenty of graded reading material would also be needed to go along with the lessons so that the students would be able to read comprehensible material from the start instead of just word lists and nonsense sentences.

2.4 OTHER DIFFERENCES

There are other differences which could affect a literacy course. Whereas Europeans are competitive, Warlpiris do not appreciate one person trying to outdo the rest. Europeans have a definite idea of what is work and what is play, but there does not seem to be a real distinction between the two for Warlpiris. In fact, they do not have a word to distinguish work from play in their language. This could affect motives for learning and the methods of teaching. Another European-Aboriginal difference becomes apparent in classroom or lecture-type situations. Europeans in such a situation consider it rude to the speaker to talk or engage in other activities. But Aborigines feel free to move around and talk, and they seem quite capable of absorbing at the same time what the speaker or teacher is saying. While to European observers they appear to be rude and paying little attention, they are actually behaving in a culturally acceptable manner.

D. Williams states that 'if Aboriginal education is to be successful, we must have an Aboriginal-centred curriculum based on the needs of

Aborigines. If we attempt merely to fit the Aboriginal child [or adult] to traditional European syllabuses, I think we are doomed to failure' (Williams 1969:26). We Europeans must consider these differences and respect them as we attempt to teach the Warlpiris or any Aboriginal group. Once the people see that we respect them as people and respect their culture they will be more willing to give us as teachers an opportunity to help them read their own language.

3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TEACHING CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Children at Lajamanu go to school because of peer pressure, parental enforcement and/or enjoyment. Adults are going to go only if they feel the class is teaching them something and if they enjoy the teaching. If it becomes boring or they are offended with teaching techniques, most of the adults probably will not return. In short, 'Adults are more capable of making value judgments' (Edgington 1976: 38).

Edgington (1976) also brings out the idea that adults are more subject to prejudices and misconceived ideas about teaching and teachers. Part of the learning process will be the re-evaluation of such prejudiced ideas. The literacy teacher will have to do his best to give the adults the education they want without offending them or fulfilling negative expectations they already have. 'A teacher's superiority in skills and teaching ability must not extend to superiority in other qualities. He should recognise in many areas he may be inferior to his students and could learn from them' (Stephens 1971:13). Some European teachers have the idea that Aborigines are simple minded and treat them as children. They do not give them the respect and consideration that should transpire between adults. If this happens, any attempt at a literacy course will fail. A good teacher of adults will possess sensitivity, humility, integrity, sincerity and enthusiasm.

Another point that will be important for teachers to remember is that although adults are intellectually as capable as children, their sensory skills may be worse. Many Warlpiri adults have poor eyesight due to trachoma. They have difficulties in keeping a pair of eye glasses for any period of time so most just learn to live with fuzzy vision. This could cause real problems in reading off the chalkboard or from fine-print books. It would be important to have a clean chalkboard and the writing printed distinctly in large letters. Primers and reading books should also be done on clear paper with large dark print to avoid eye strain.

4. TEACHING METHODS

4.1 SENTENCE METHOD

This method has a synthetic approach. It starts with a sentence which is later broken down into words and syllables. The advantage of the sentence method is that it begins with a comprehensible unit. As I stated before it is important for adults to feel the immediate value of what they are learning. If they feel that they are actually reading something from the beginning it encourages them to keep on reading. In *Read* magazine (no author given) there is a short article on the sentence method which includes the statement, 'Thus by the time one has "built-up" along a line, the all-over thought to be absorbed has been forgotten...especially with adult learners! As far as I can ascertain, the Sentence Method (beginning with the sentence before breakdown) is the only one which truly encourages people to think in terms of wholes and ideas from the outset of their reading experience' ('The Genuine Sentence Method' 1976:81).

The author of the above article suggests starting with flashcards with pictures and a sentence to match on each. He used eight flashcards. All eight sentences were made up from different combinations of ten words. The next step would be to have the sentences on flashcards without the pictures. Then the pupils learn the ten words from flashcards and off the blackboard. After the student has been through these steps he goes on to books. The first book is easily read because it involves only the ten previously learned words and flashcard material. This gets the learner accustomed to handling a book while dealing with familiar words and sentences. The next two books are phonic primers and the last two deal with more difficult combinations in the language. How the primers are used would be more a matter of preference as far as I can see, but I think that starting reading with sentences on flashcards could be valuable in giving a head start before the students begin in primers.

After several tries at teaching a group of Warlpiri women to read we tried the sentence method described here. First they learned to read the eight sentences from a paper with a picture and the sentence below. Then they were to read the sentence without the picture. From this point they started using Breakthrough material. Each word from the eight sentences was put into a Breakthrough booklet. The student then was to make each of the eight sentences by pulling out the appropriate word and putting it into a rack which was provided. When they finished one sentence the words were then returned to the appropriate slot in the booklet. The next step was to make as many sentences as they could from the words in the booklet that were different from the original eight sentences.

When the women felt confident with this set of words we started on a new unit of eight pictures. We were also starting a phonics-type booklet to go along with each unit which would teach syllable sounds that were in the lesson. This has not been finished at the writing of this paper. We were seeing good results with this method with women that had had some previous education, even if it was minimal. I discovered, though, that the older women who had never attended school were in need of a lot of pre-reading before they were ready to start on any reading method.

4.2 'GUDSCHINSKY METHOD'

This method was especially designed by Sarah Gudschinsky for mother tongue teachers who have little or no formal teaching education. It is an easy method to get across and simple teacher's guides can be produced to go along with the primers. The method is actually eclectic, drawing from several methods. It starts with words and breaks them down into syllables. These syllables are then used to form words that the students have not seen in print before. This is done through the process of analogy.

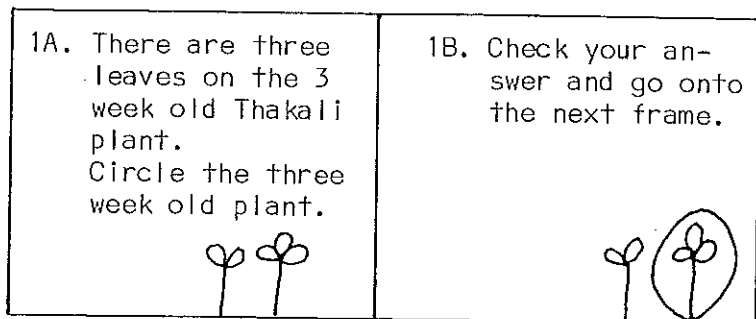
Many people, though, who have studied Aboriginal culture feel that Aborigines do not learn by analogy. Pam Harris, who has worked amongst the Warlpiris at Yuendumu, states: 'Thus it seems to me that, although one can argue as Gudschinsky did that "everybody learns by analogy", that is, has the innate capacity to learn by analogy, still it seems possible that the skill of learning by analogy could be less developed in the Aboriginal child beginning school than in children of some other cultures' (Harris 1977:129).

From the little we have used this method at Lajamanu, we have seen its drawbacks. A lot more activity-type exercises are needed with this method to aid in understanding and to keep the students' interest. Students also seem to do a lot of guessing with this method: they get the first part of the word correct but guess for the later syllables and suffixes.

4.3 PROGRAMMED INSTRUCTION

Thiagarajan in his book on programmed instruction says, 'The programmed instruction material is self instructional because it uses highly structured sequencing, small steps in presenting content, is self paced by the learner while providing him with knowledge of results and, therefore, reinforcements as he engages in the learning task' (Thiagarajan 1976:8). This helps semi-literates

take material on any subject and go through it on their own if it is written up in the programmed instruction format. 'This should be an important consideration for literacy workers who seldom work with adults in class groups for more than four to six months' (Thiagarajan, p. 8). Below is an example of the 'frames' used in the programmed instruction format. In the first part of the frame (1A), a question is asked or instructions are given. On the other side of the page or card is the correct answer (1B) so that after completing the box the person can see whether or not he is correct.



The principles of programmed instruction are '(1) Learning should take place in small steps...(2) The learner should learn actively... The learner learns best by answering questions rather than reading and memorising the material...(3) The learner should check his answers immediately...(4) Learning should be from the simple to the complex...(5) The learner should learn at his own speed' (Thiagarajan, p. 18).

I think this method would be good for further reading practice, as an aid in comprehension, but I'm not sure it could be used in teaching reading because someone would have to get the learner started on the reading process.

I would like to try this method with the Warlpiris because it seems to be quite activity oriented. It would also allow them to learn independently and not be bound to the classroom setting (often unfamiliar and uncomfortable) or to a classroom pace. If they felt they were falling behind in the classroom they might quit, but with this method they wouldn't feel that pressure.

4.4 TRANSFER MATERIAL

The use of transfer material from English into Warlpiri might also be a good teaching technique. Many of the people at Lajamanu from five to forty years of age can read English. Their comprehension is limited and they do not read fast, but this previous English

reading experience may help them to read Warlpiri. Richards and Hudson (1977), in the Walmajjarri transfer primers that they made, used three volumes. The first book 'is designed as a motivational volume. It includes natural stories, activity pages, and many illustrations. English and Walmajjarri equivalents are given for all the sentences except those on the activity pages and the final story of each unit.' Book two 'is the instructional volume of the series where the symbols of the Walmajjarri alphabet are taught,' and book three 'provides the reader with a number of illustrated, short natural stories in Walmajjarri only' (Richards and Hudson 1979: preface).

These books are designed to be self teaching, but if help is needed, a literate person could aid the reader. I feel this type of primer might be profitable for Warlpiris who can read English. It would be self teaching and would avoid classroom situations with their problems of time and speed of learning. Classroom competition would be avoided and people might be encouraged to help each other learn.

4.5 USE OF CASSETTES

Cassettes could be used with many of the previously mentioned methods, aiding in self learning. They would also be a motivational factor since cassettes are quite popular amongst the Warlpiris.

Conrad Hurd writes in his article *On Joining the Cassette Set* (1976) that Navajos and Eskimos are independent types which like to learn on their own. This would apply to the Warlpiris too. Hurd goes on to say that when differences in rate of learning appeared in the classroom, the class ceased functioning. To get around this he started a cassette learning course. With the course came a cassette, writing paper, pencils and reading material. All instructions were given on the cassette so a person could go at his own speed and do it alone or with the group of his choice.

I see this as a valuable method of learning for the Warlpiris in terms of providing both activity and motivation. Many of them already have cassette players. Since storing material in their own homes for long periods can often be difficult, the cassettes and other materials could be kept in one location and borrowed as needed. For the Warlpiri people who attend church, hymns and scripture verses could be put on the cassettes and followed along in their reading material.

5. CONCLUSION

As teachers or trainers of teachers, we must first of all keep in mind what the students see as valuable. We can try all the methods in the world but if we never consult the learners as to what they see as valuable, then all of our enthusiasm will never break the literacy barrier. 'Education attempts many times fail because there is no correspondence between the foundation education attempts to lay, and what is really going on in Aboriginal life' (Wilson 1969: 132).

Wilson feels the teacher should help Aboriginal students draw out their strengths such as pride in their heritage, self esteem, patterns of mutual help and co-operation, and a strong sense of family and group identity. 'After this they can define what must be learned and what methods of learning will be necessary to reach the identified goals' (Wilson 1969: 135).

For many fluent readers in our society, books are entertaining and a source of knowledge. Culture breakdown has resulted in boredom and lethargy for many Warlpiri and other Aboriginal people. I would like to see Warlpiris sitting in the shade engrossed in books. I believe books could help fill leisure hours in a beneficial way. I feel that vernacular literacy in particular would restore a sense of pride and help the Warlpiri realise that their language is just as important as English. It must begin with the adults or it will not continue with the children.

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