

Improving literacy for adult prisoners and offenders

Bernard Meatheringham, Pamela Snow, Martine Powell and Michael Fewster

If prisoners are to return to the community rehabilitated, they must have the literacy skills to take part in rehabilitation programs. In this chapter, firstly, Bernard Meatheringham explores the link between prisoners' literacy levels, their ability to meaningfully gain from offence-focused programs and the development of a national literacy indicator tool. He draws on the findings of British research into the link between prisoners' literacy skills and the literacy requirements of offending behaviour programs. He outlines the seven principles that underpin the conduct of literacy assessments in Australian prisons and the use of the National Reporting System's five-level scale. The National Reporting System is a nationally recognised mechanism for reporting outcomes of adult English language, literacy and numeracy programs. Meatheringham concludes with a challenge to further develop the areas of literacy assessments, particularly verbal literacy skill assessment of prisoners, and the need to develop a National Prisoner Literacy Assessment Tool to ensure a national reporting system for prisons.

Secondly, Pamela Snow and Martine Powell discuss their research into oral language deficit in male juvenile offenders and the implications for literacy education in correctional settings.

Thirdly, Michael Fewster, reflects on his experience of using the THRASS®—Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling System—in the Alice Springs Correction Centre. He considers how THRASS® works and the features that make it effective with students whose first languages are oral languages.

Literacy and assessment in prison

Bernard Meatheringham

Literacy standards of prisoners

'All prisoners are illiterate and that is why they commit crime.'

'Illiterate people are likely to commit crime and end up in prison.'

These are two of the stereotypical views of a link between offending behaviour, criminality and literacy levels. As with most stereotypical views, there is very

little evidence to support the assertion. However, those assertions are given authoritative weight when well-meaning, but ill-informed people make the comments. They are given even more credence when social or political power is brought to their commentary.

There is a common view that prisoners, as a group, represent a concentration of low-level literacy skills. That view has been used to shape and direct the nature of prisoner education in many jurisdictions throughout the western world. In many ways the provision of a literacy program is seen as a 'magic bullet'. If we provide literacy programs, it is argued, prisoners will be able to get a job when they are released from prison and they will not commit crime. Literacy programs are seen as the saviour of criminal behaviour and as reducing recidivist activities. These views of the value of literacy programs for prisoners reach back through the centuries to the first models of prisoner education.

Prisoners as a group do exhibit a range of literacy deficits when compared with the broader community, but a study of the range of deficits compared with the socioeconomic group from which they predominantly come will possibly reveal that those literacy deficits are more common in the prisoner's home setting. In other words, the prisoner's lack of reading and writing skills is not necessarily considered a deficit in their own community.

Prisoners, by and large, come from depressed socioeconomic backgrounds. They are often members of communities where welfare dependency is structural and intergenerational. They come from communities where models of schooling often do not address the reality of their lives and do not prepare them for a dominant view of middle-class work and positions in society.

It is not accidental that prisons are filled with the poor, the migrants, the Indigenous, those who are generally classified as socially disadvantaged. The levels of imprisonment of Australia's Indigenous population continue to rise. There is an increasing flow of people from non-English speaking backgrounds into Australian correctional systems. Prisons in the United States have large numbers of African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. Many of the prisoners in the British system are from former British colonies, have English as a second language, and are predominantly non-Caucasian.

These groups of communities have a level of literacy that meets their immediate needs. They communicate freely with each other and can, in a contextual sense, read the literature of their communities. They do not have a great need to write, other than to compile short lists. They certainly do not need to write lengthy articles or letters. Their literacy is, by and large, an oral literacy.

However, there is also a need to recognise that people in prison are not in that situation purely as a result of their socioeconomic status. Increasingly, the demographic of a prison indicates a significant and increasing number of people with a range of cognitive and behavioural disabilities. Increasing numbers of clients are in prison as a result of drug-related offences and, for a number of these, the loss of cognitive functioning is a result of substance abuse. The literacy needs of this group are considered different when one is addressing future life styles.

Literacy, as defined for educational purposes, is predominantly a reading and writing form of literacy. Using these definitions for assessment purposes, it is therefore not altogether surprising that prisons systems in Australia report that approximately 62% of prisoners have deficits in their literacy levels to the point of being classified as less than functional.

In general terms prisoners have a level of reading that allows them to engage with written materials that exist within their contextual setting. They can, for example, usually make sense of short reports in newspapers. They can usually understand the transcript of the report of their trial (they were present to hear most of the legal argument). They can understand magazines that address their immediate interests.

However, it may be stated that the evidence of poor levels of literacy amongst offenders in the correctional centres of Australia (and other countries) has been well established through extensive research and reporting. The Australian vocational education and training (VET) system recognises that offenders not only have lower-than-community-accepted rates of literacy but also have multiple problems associated with social, educational, financial and cultural disadvantage.

Literacy assessing in prisons

Initial language, literacy and numeracy screening in correctional services facilities across Australia has historically been the responsibility of each state and territory correctional jurisdiction. Each jurisdiction has developed strategies to identify prisoner risk factors and a range of well-respected risk assessment instruments are currently available across Australia.

Literacy assessment has, to date, been undertaken when a prisoner first enters the prison and is used to identify the type of literacy programs that may be required or is undertaken on commencement of education and training programs. Rarely has the assessment outcome been used to inform the broader prisoner management system and, in particular, the case management process.

Many of the people sentenced to prison have relatively short sentences, often of months duration rather than decades as per public perception. Consequently, there is a limited window of opportunity to address offending behaviour through a range of criminogenic programs. Programs, such as anger, drug and alcohol, and domestic violence management, and cognitive skills, are usually delivered by prison services staff who do not necessarily come from an education and training background. Teachers, on the other hand, are very cognisant of the level of literacy of prisoners involved in education programs. Indeed in some states over 50% of the prisoner education budget is used in addressing literacy deficits. However, if one of the functions of imprisonment is to affect recidivism rates, there is a need to ensure that the prisoners' literacy skills are at a standard where they, and ultimately society, can benefit from an involvement in offence-focused programs.

A research exercise conducted in the United Kingdom in 2004 entitled *An evaluation of the literacy demands of general offending behaviour programs* found that '... the literacy demands of the three programs [General offending behaviour programs: *Think first*, *Enhance thinking skills* and *Reasoning and Rehabilitation*] exceed their literacy skills'. There is little reason to expect the situation will be any different in Australia, particularly as many jurisdictions are using these and similar programs. The whole issue of the prisoner's ability to cope with and benefit from the offence-focused programs is in question once the low level of prisoner literacy skills is known.

Prisoner literacies are also an issue for prison management. Processes and procedures based on written documents are often opaque and confusing to prisoners with literacy reading levels below level 3 of the National Reporting System (NRS). This situation can lead to misunderstandings, blocked information flow, or officer time being spent explaining such information verbally. It is important that language, literacy and numeracy courses relate both to the prisoner's everyday life and living skills while in custody and upon release, as well as to any offence-related and rehabilitative programs they are required to attend.

Development of a National Prisoner Literacy Assessment Tool

The National Reporting System is a nationally recognised mechanism for reporting outcomes of adult English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) programs in Australia. A new resource to support language, literacy and numeracy program teachers and assessors in interpreting and reporting on the learning strategies in the National Reporting System has been developed under the Adult Literacy National Project (Department of Education, Science and Training 2006) Other resources developed using funds under Australian National Training Authority (ANTA)¹ Adult Literacy National Projects (including Innovative Projects) and/or the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) Programme are also available online.

In 2004 the Correctional Education Administrators group, acting as steering committee on national prisoner education issues was successful in an application for a Department of Education, Science and Training National Literacy Innovation Project.

The focus of the project was threefold:

- ❖ to develop a literacy assessment instrument that would be used by all correctional jurisdictions to determine the level of literacy skill as reported in the National Reporting System framework
- ❖ to create a professional development network for monitoring, promoting and exchange of resources
- ❖ to report on the findings of research and analysis.

1 ANTA was abolished in 2005 and its functions taken over by the Department of Education, Science and Training.

Research findings

A detailed scoping study identified a range of good-practice models for language, literacy and numeracy assessment in the various states and territories. However, the research also identified many gaps in assessment practices, and in planning vocational pathways and integrating language, literacy and numeracy delivery in vocational education and training. While significant resources have been invested in prison and prisoner management in some jurisdictions, approaches to initial language, literacy and numeracy assessment in correctional settings across Australia has been inconsistent, and in some cases, incoherent.

The research into literacy assessment processes in Australian prisons found that:

There is no consistent model of assessment of offenders to determine their literacy proficiency.

At admission, all prisoners are assessed for risks and needs. This may include an observation by the assessment staff that the offender has problems with literacy. This may be based on information about levels of education achieved, school leaving age, direct information from the offender, or by the difficulties the offender has with filling out forms. This observation is part of a generic assessment, not an assessment of literacy proficiency. As a result of this induction assessment, offenders may be referred to education on the basis of this observation.

The more intensive assessment conducted by education centres is modelled on the national general education curriculum. (Madsen 2004, p.5)

The scoping research was considered and discussed at a meeting of the Correctional Education Administrators and literacy coordinators from states and territories in 2005. While many felt that there were exemplary models of assessment and engagement of prisoners in education and training, it was clear that the funding and operational differences between jurisdictions made it difficult to settle on one assessment tool. Consequently, the group decided on some principles that should be held as important when undertaking literacy assessment in prison settings. After much discussion, consensus was reached on the following key points:

- ❖ An initial language, literacy and numeracy indicator tool should be developed which would be based around the National Reporting System and enable case management staff to identify prisoners with the greatest language, literacy and numeracy needs before individual case plans were determined. Prisoners identified at National Reporting System skill levels 1, 2 or 3 would be referred for more comprehensive language, literacy and numeracy assessment by education staff.
- ❖ The indicator tool should be capable of being used in a variety of ways: as a stand-alone process that could be locally customised to reflect particular prison populations and profiles; incorporated into an already established, general risk assessment process; and/or incorporated into a more comprehensive holistic language, literacy and numeracy assessment system. Western Australian managers made it clear that they wanted

to continue with their current approach, but would ensure that their language, literacy and numeracy measurements were mapped to National Reporting System levels for the sake of national consistency.

- ❖ It would be a tiered tool with a common entry point.
- ❖ All prisoners sentenced to six months or greater would be assessed. Prisoners would be asked to complete only as many tasks as they could independently manage. Identification of language, literacy and numeracy needs would result in referral to educators for closer language, literacy and numeracy assessment.
- ❖ As the initial indicator tool was intended for use by a range of employees with limited training, it should be short and easy to use and the manner of data collection should be straightforward.
- ❖ The comprehensive language, literacy and numeracy assessment tools currently in use across the states should be collated in a consistent format organised according to National Reporting System levels. This would provide a bank of detailed assessments which could be used by educators as a follow-on after the indicator tool. This bank would also provide a set of common resources for correctional services in all states to build consistent common practices.
- ❖ The importance of staff training and support for interviewers, interview guidelines and principles of best practice, was acknowledged

The unique nature of the prison environments led the steering group to refer to the tool as providing an indicator of literacy ability. It could not be seen as providing a full diagnostic assessment, and the process requires that, where a full assessment is required, the prisoner should be referred to the education centre where a more detailed assessment could be undertaken. However, some jurisdictions are able to undertake a considerable assessment at the induction phase of a prisoner's sentence and will continue to operate in that manner.

An assessment instrument has been constructed utilising the services of TAFE SA (Adelaide campus) and has been reviewed and commented on by all members of the steering group. In developing the tool, the second outcome of the project has been achieved, with the development of a network of professional prisoner educators. While the Australasian Correctional Education Association also provides this service to prison educators, the literacy assessment tool project has focused the attention of many of the prison-based literacy educators. The assessment instrument will be available through the Department of Education, Science and Training

Where to from here

The indicator tool will identify the levels of prisoners' literacy ability according to the National Reporting System scale. However, it was beyond the scope of the project to develop a national reporting system for prisons. It is in the interests of all state and territory jurisdictions to collect data in nationally consistent ways using the National Reporting System as a framework to describe adult literacy

and numeracy skills. Until nationally consistent approaches are followed, policy development, needs analysis and even intercountry comparisons will be difficult to research.

New policy analyses emerging from the United Kingdom are a direct result of consistent data management in prisons. It is much easier to argue for improved services if needs are comprehensively documented. Similarly, the links between low-level literacy and numeracy skills and recidivism rates can be discussed and researched more easily when prisoner profile information is available.

At a local level, work will need to be done to customise the tool to local populations. Again it was not within the scope of the project to develop separate tools for Indigenous prisoners nor to make the tools gender-specific. However, this work is needed so that a clearer view of the levels of prisoner literacy in Australia is established.

At the beginning of this paper the view was expressed that much of the judgement of prisoners' literacy is based on an assessment of their reading and writing skill, yet many of the people who go into the nation's prisons live in a verbal culture. Considerable work needs to be undertaken to establish sound verbal assessment tools for use in prisons. In this way authorities will be made aware of the significant numbers of male prisoners who predominantly live in a verbal environment.

Oral language competence: A missing link in literacy education

Pamela Snow and Martine Powell

Introduction

'Oral language' refers to the talking and listening skills that humans employ across a range of settings and interactions as they go about the business of everyday life. This section positions oral language competence more centrally in the debate about literacy programs in both adult and juvenile correctional settings—both as a means of better understanding why offenders are likely to have low levels of literacy in the first place and as a means of rethinking approaches to literacy education with this complex, heterogeneous, but very needy group.

Humans, across many cultural groups, share their experience with others mainly by verbal means of a discourse genre known as 'narrative account'. For other cultural groups, such as traditional Indigenous Australian people, details of past experiences are also commonly transmitted via enactment and drawing (Powell 2000). According to Stein and Glen (1979), a well-developed verbal narrative account comprises up to seven logically sequenced story grammar elements. These elements include a setting, an initiating event, an internal response, a plan of action, an attempt at action, direct consequences of this action, and protagonists' reactions.

For further information on the development of oral language competence, and the factors which interfere with this development, see attachment A at the end of this chapter.

Our research on male juvenile offenders

Over the past five years, we have conducted three studies (Humber & Snow 2001; Snow & Powell 2004a, 2004b, 2005) on the oral language abilities of male juvenile offenders serving community-based orders. We have specifically targeted male juvenile offenders because they embody the notion of 'adolescent risk', in terms of their home environments, their associated difficulties (for example, attention, behaviour, substance misuse), and because they are likely to detach early from school (see Ward & Stewart 2003 for review). We have focused on oral language competence in this group because we believe it is an important protective factor that has been largely overlooked in previous research on high-risk young people. It is widely accepted that academic achievement is a protective factor, but few researchers have considered the role of oral language competence in, first of all, fostering, and, later strengthening and sustaining, academic achievement. While there is agreement that higher rates of school retention are desirable, disappointingly little discussion has occurred around the role of oral language in supporting school success and creating a sense of attachment to and wellbeing at school, both academically and socially.

A key assumption underpinning our research, therefore, has been the notion that the learning (literacy) difficulties displayed by high-risk boys once they reach school may actually be a surrogate indicator for significant levels of underlying, but previously undetected, oral language deficits. Having to learn how to read 'flushes out' these problems but, because they often co-exist with attentional and/or behavioural problems, early intervention efforts may be inadequate and/or misplaced. As Cohen and co-workers (Cohen et al. 1998) observed in their Canadian research, if the key adults in the child's life see the primary handicapping condition as behaviour, then this will determine both the label applied and the types of services offered.

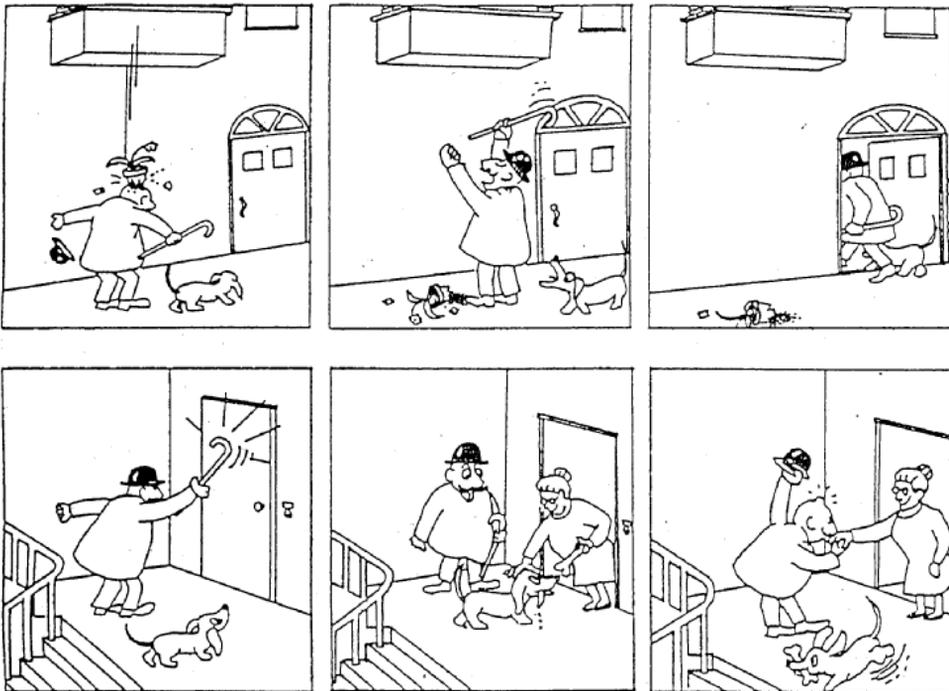
Across our three studies, we have examined the expressive and receptive language skills of nearly 100 young male offenders and have compared these with the performance of non-offending boys attending state government high schools in the same socioeconomic region. Because of their established impact on oral language functioning, we have excluded boys with a known history of hearing impairment, major psychiatric illness (for example, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia), traumatic brain injury involving loss of consciousness, and/or diagnosed intellectual disability. Obviously it has not been possible to comprehensively assess all aspects of oral language functioning, but we have attempted to sample across key competencies, such as the ability to interpret figurative and ambiguous language, the ability to narrate a simple story, and the ability to repeat back sentences of increasing length and complexity. In our most recent study (Snow & Powell in preparation), we have also included a comprehensive measure of social skill ability and a measure of nonverbal intelligence.

Our findings have, unfortunately, roundly supported our hypothesis that young offenders are at high risk for undetected oral language deficits. We will deal now with two main lines of enquiry in our research: narrative discourse and figurative language.

The narrative language skills of young offenders

As outlined above, narrative competence is a fundamental component of everyday communication. We also believe that narrative competence has a special significance in forensic settings, as it is the means by which an accused person *tells his or her own story*—a fundamental principle in a justice system which holds that people are innocent until proved guilty. In our studies, we have used a six-frame black-and-white cartoon known as *The flowerpot incident* (see below) to elicit narrative descriptions of a simple story.

Figure 1 The Flowerpot Incident



Source: (Adapted from 'So En Deckel! 22 Bildergeschichtinn für den Sprachunterricht' by H. Kossatz (1972). Berlin: Tomus-Verlag.) Reproduced with permission.

The scoring system we developed allows us to very simply count the number of story grammar elements (see above), as well as to make qualitative judgements on the adequacy of the information provided. A detailed account of the scoring system is provided elsewhere (Snow & Powell 2005). The young offenders differed significantly from their non-offending peers on some important communication dimensions. Firstly, they achieved poorer

overall scores, indicating that, compared with their peers, they produce less well-developed or detailed narrative accounts. Further, when we considered each element of the narrative separately, we found that young offenders have particular difficulty with the following story parts: the *internal response* (the part of the story that identifies how someone is feeling—in this case, angry/annoyed), the *plan* (the part of the story where it is necessary to infer somebody's intentions from their actions, in this case, a decision to go inside the building and seek out the person responsible), the *direct consequences* (the part of the story that concerns how one person's responses might relate to another person's actions, in this case, the astute actions of the little old lady), and finally, the *resolution* (the part of the story that concerns the conclusion of events, which, as in the story we used, is sometimes different from what might have been predicted at the outset, that is, instead of continuing to be hostile, the old man was charmed).

The young offenders did not differ from the non-offenders, however, when they were dealing with more concrete aspects of the story, that is, the *setting* (a man and his dog walking along the street), the *initiating event* (a flowerpot falls on his head), and the *attempt* (the fact that he went inside the building and banged on the door to express his annoyance). These findings suggest that high-risk young people (and possibly adults too) have difficulty understanding and interpreting the emotional responses and consequent actions of others and linking these together as a coherent narrative. Instead, they tend to simply *list* events, without establishing cause and effect or temporal links between them. When we divided the young offenders into two subgroups, according to whether or not they could be described as having a language impairment, we found that the language-impaired subgroup performed more poorly than the non-language-impaired offenders and, further, that they actually *said less* on this task. This means that, in a forensic setting, such young people will convey even less information than non-language-impaired peers, and are therefore at greater risk for being labelled as rude or uncooperative by authority figures, such as police, lawyers, and magistrates. Setting aside these forensic implications, however, these findings suggest that high-risk boys as a group find it difficult to develop a logical, coherent, and sufficiently detailed narrative to be able to share their experiences with others—a fundamental process by which we establish and maintain interpersonal relationships in everyday life. Our findings should be viewed alongside evidence cited by Cohen (2001) that narrative language deficits have been observed in children who have been abused, children with attention deficit disorder, and children with thought disorders—all of which we can expect to be over-represented in both juvenile and adult correctional settings.

The figurative language skills of young offenders

The subtests of the Test of Language Competence—Expanded (Wiig & Secord 1989) that we employed in our research examine, firstly, the ability to identify two possible meanings for an ambiguous sentence (for example, 'John was looking up the street') and, secondly, the ability to decipher metaphorical language (for example, 'there's rough sailing ahead of us'). As indicated earlier, being able to understand and appropriately use non-literal language is a mark of a competent communicator. Our findings show that young offenders

experience significant difficulties with both types of abstraction—finding two possible meanings for the one sentence and deciphering figurative language. On the ambiguous sentences task, young offenders responded by giving an initial interpretation (for example, ‘He was standing out the front of his house’), and then instead of finding a different meaning altogether, simply recasting the initial interpretation (for example, ‘He was looking for a friend up the street’). On the figurative language subtest, the young offenders displayed enormous difficulties moving from the literal, surface meaning to the abstract, hidden meaning. For example, when presented with the following scenario: A student talking to his friend about a trip, and asked to explain the expression: ‘It’s still up in the air’, a typical response was ‘Kite, a balloon or a bag or somethin’. Somethin’ about flyin’. He’s afraid of flyin’ or somethin’.

These problems have particular implications for the ability to make judgements about the range of intentions behind another speaker’s communication. It has long been recognised that both juvenile and adult offenders are susceptible to *hostile attribution bias* (Vitale et al. 2005), that is, the tendency, where ambiguity exists, to opt for the more hostile intention behind another’s verbal or nonverbal response. Our findings lend support to the notion that this may be, at least in part, due to the difficulties inherent in the rapid linguistic processing that needs to occur in social settings, in order to make more than one possible interpretation. Children and adolescents who are accustomed to conflict being resolved via physical and/or verbal aggression may experience few opportunities to discuss, understand and re-interpret what others have said. Our findings are consistent with the observation made by Hollin (1996) that ‘... aggressive and violent people search for and perceive fewer social cues ... are more likely to interpret the behaviour of other people in a hostile manner ... [and] generate fewer options for dealing with a social situation’ (p.473).

Notwithstanding the fact that, like all research our studies have some limitations, it should be noted that these language problems (a) cannot be ‘explained away’ as reflecting lower IQs in the offender group, and (b) occurred despite the fact that in each of our studies the young offenders were significantly *older* than the controls—meaning that, on developmental terms alone, they should have easily performed better than the control group. It should also be noted that our findings are derived from a non-stressful communication context, so if anything, we are probably underestimating the true extent of the everyday language problems these young people experience.

Implications for literacy education in correctional settings

Taken along with the existing vast literature on high-risk young people (in particular, boys) our findings give cause for reflection over how literacy programs should be conceived and delivered in correctional settings (both juvenile and adult). At the simplest level, it is fair to ask this question:

If it’s not reasonable to expect 5 to 8-year-olds to master the transition to literacy if they have inadequate oral language skills, what would make us think that it is reasonable to expect adolescents or adults to achieve this transition if they have a lifelong, but undetected oral language deficit?

Let's think for a moment about the context of correctional literacy education for a hypothetical young white Australian offender, whom we'll call Brad. Brad is the oldest child of his single mother Mandy. Mandy also has two other children with her second partner, who does not relate well to Brad. Mandy has a history of depression and substance misuse, in particular tobacco and alcohol. After years of poor school engagement and achievement, early school leaving with minimal, if any, actual formal achievement to show for the school years, and lots of memories of exclusion and suspension (both at a classroom and a school level), at age 18 Brad has finally been formally rejected by society and incarcerated, following a series of property and violent offences. Although he's never been formally assessed by a speech pathologist, Brad actually has significant expressive and receptive language difficulties, but 'gets by' as best he can through his script knowledge and by 'grunting', shoulder-shrugging and other minimal responses. Brad began using tobacco at age 11, progressing quickly to alcohol abuse at age 13, regular cannabis use from 14, and has since experimented with a range of licit and illicit substances, including solvents and amphetamines. Brad has 'dabbled in' various pre-vocational training programs, but has not completed any of these and has no marketable work skills. In the juvenile detention centre, Brad is informed that he will be attending a literacy class. What kind of associations will these have for him? In all probability, associations of frustration, repeated failure, and poor self-esteem. If factors that promote and sustain these feelings and beliefs are not identified and addressed, it is hardly reasonable to expect that literacy education will have any meaningful impact on Brad's functional capacity to engage in vocational training and thus re-enter society with the types of skills and attitudes necessary to avoid re-offending.

We would like to see the education workforce in correctional settings become more skilled and confident in addressing underlying oral language competence as a means not only of 'back-filling' the subskills necessary for successful literacy, but also as way of making it easier to engage offenders (irrespective of the reason for their deficits) in the highly verbal counselling approaches that are used in such settings. For example, consider cognitive behaviour therapy (Beck 1995). This widely used, evidence-based intervention draws heavily on a range of verbally mediated tasks, such as problem-solving, identifying and responding to negative thoughts, assertiveness training, giving and receiving feedback, and social skills training. Without a reasonable level of verbal competence (both receptively and expressively) it is difficult to imagine such approaches making significant inroads to entrenched patterns of belief—about oneself in particular, and about one's position in a world that must seem unpredictable and hostile much of the time. It is even more concerning to consider the extent to which such approaches may be culturally and linguistically inappropriate for offenders from Indigenous backgrounds who may find such approaches alien and confronting.

We have similar concerns about the implications of poor oral language competence for engagement in restorative justice programs, as these typically rely heavily on verbal skills to establish a sense of empathy between the offender and his/her victim(s). Emphasis in such programs is on discussing and resolving

the offence, as an alternative to being charged and appearing in court (Australian Institute of Criminology 2005). Offenders who lack the skills required for this type of verbal engagement may either decline this offer because of its verbally confronting nature, or be viewed by those in authority as less than committed to its success if they do participate.

THRASS® works

Michael Fewster

This section is adapted from the presentation by Michael Fewster, titled *THRASS works. Now What?*, at the 2005 Australasian Corrections Education Association conference held in Darwin available from the Australasian Corrections Education Association website <<http://www.acea.org.au>>.

Background

Education is in a unique position to improve literacy outcomes for offenders and also to contribute positively to the communities from which they come. In the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, almost all students are Aboriginal adult males, with more than half from remote communities and with very limited ‘western’ education experience, if any at all. Petrol-sniffing and alcohol abuse are significant contributing factors to the matters for which they have been sentenced.

The community Indigenous languages, which are the first language of most students in Alice Springs Correctional Centre, are oral languages. A large number of our students therefore have little conceptual understanding of how a written language operates. This is a significantly different learning situation from that of working in a regular classroom or with most migrant groups learning the English language, where the nature of what the teacher is trying to convey is understood.

This section is written from my experience working at Alice Springs Correctional centre where a different approach to teaching literacy was tried from 2003–05. THRASS®—Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills—is a proprietary, copyrighted product, created and designed by Alan Davies in England in the early 1990s (Davies 1992). If THRASS® works for Aboriginal adult males in Alice Springs Correctional Centre, then it deserves a thorough appraisal. However, at this time, my data are mainly anecdotal.

How THRASS® works

Firstly, the English language uses 26 signs (letters) as symbols for sounds. But the language uses more sounds than this (about 44 discrete sounds or phonemes to use the technical term). Therefore, some of the letters get combined to make a new sound. Secondly, because English is a mix of languages and has developed over a long period, there can be many ways of writing the symbol (letter, or group of letters) for that sound. Thus, the key problem for English language learners is to

understand the complexities, permutations and combinations to decode or encode English when reading and writing. The numbers of rules, the exceptions to the rules, and the numbers of words seem endless and intimidate learners.

THRASS® focuses on this key problem and sets up a relatively simple system to enable the reader to decode and code words.

- ❖ THRASS® identifies the 44 phonemes (sounds) that we use in English.
- ❖ THRASS® identifies the different graphemes (symbols or letters) we use to write each one of these phonemes.
- ❖ THRASS® ties each grapheme with a key word and picture. The picture gives the student a cue to how to read the word and the phoneme for the particular grapheme demonstrated in that word.

With a limited number of phonemes to learn, the core information can be shown on two charts: vowels and consonants (see THRASS® resources). These charts are the centre of the method, and students learn to use them rapidly. The charts are arranged to group each of the 44 phonemes with the various graphemes used to symbolise each of the phonemes. For example, the phoneme represented by the letter 'e' in 'bed' is the same phoneme as represented by the letters 'ea' in 'bread'. The THRASS® chart shows this phoneme in a block of two words, bed and bread, with an appropriate picture above each word.

The learner knows that every grapheme in the block has the same phoneme. In the initial stage of learning the system, the reader will use the pictures to identify 'bed' and 'bread'. They rapidly learn to remember the pictures and the 'e' and 'ea' with the correct phoneme/grapheme association. Also in the block on the THRASS® chart representing the phoneme 'e' (as the letter is pronounced in the word 'me') there are five words with corresponding pictures: me, beach, tree, key and pony. The pictures enable the students to quickly learn the same phoneme (which they know because the picture has given them a cue to how the grapheme will sound). Thus, the student has also learned that the grapheme 'e' can have two different phonemes.

In my experience most students at Alice Springs Correctional Centre can learn these charts and understand their use after about 40 to 60 hours tuition. A few students have been much faster. Students who suffer from some form of substance impairment are slower, some much slower. But even these students seem to get there. It would appear that damage that once was thought irreparable can be rebuilt and that the THRASS® teaching process assists this to happen. Recent research by Sheree Cairney² at the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, although not linked to literacy but centred on petrol sniffing and the brain, concludes that abstinence from the substance abuse and some kinds of mental activity can rebuild this type of damage.

2 Cairney, S, Senior Research Fellow, Menzies School of Health Research, various articles listed at <http://www.napnt.org/pages/petrol_menzies1.html>.

Why THRASS® works

THRASS® appears to be especially effective with Aboriginal students for four main reasons:

- ❖ The concept of ‘symbols’ is central to the art and culture of Aboriginal students. The core THRASS® approach of teaching graphemes and phonemes as symbols representing sounds is immediately understood.
- ❖ The THRASS® methodology links a limited number of key THRASS® words with pictures. This is very effective with Aboriginal students. Most have excellent visual skills and the picture connection rapidly builds confidence and retention.
- ❖ The ‘THRASSWORDS’ technique means students have a relatively small number of keyword/phonemes/graphemes to learn, after which they feel they are reading and writing. Students feel at the outset that this is achievable. Other methodologies appear open-ended—as though they will stretch on forever. The ability of THRASS® to rapidly teach the basic concepts of literacy is critical in giving students with low literacy success levels the confidence needed to take on learning literacy.
- ❖ Learning the key ‘THRASSWORDS’ and phoneme/graphemes can be achieved with flashcards. This is easily accomplished by students themselves in small groups and increases the feeling that they can do this themselves. It is also a culturally appropriate technique for Aboriginal students, further building their confidence and feeling of being ‘at ease’ with this methodology.

Some of the success is also probably due to the educators’ understandings of the students’ cultural issues. At Alice Springs Correctional Centre, educators were very explicit in discussing cultural differences, the reasons for the differences and the educational implications. For example:

- ❖ the need for students to be able to make mistakes in the classroom, if they are going to make progress, without its being a ‘shame job’
- ❖ the role of argument in western thinking—very different from our students’ perspectives.

In relation to this last point, we teach the need to understand and use techniques of argument in order to participate in ‘western’ life. This explicit teaching is done in a non-judgemental manner.

Once students have established this foundation knowledge, which unlocks the reading and writing process, other methodologies can be used to build vocabulary, sight recognition of words, fluency, grammar and punctuation. The students are excited because they now feel that they are reading and are eager to work on stories and texts accessing written accounts of their own culture or experience. Whole word and frameworking methodologies seem to work well at this point. THRASS® bridges the whole word and phonics camps in the eternal debate on literacy methodology.

THRASS® within a prison system

One of the problems of teaching literacy in a prison is continuity, a consequence of the variable beginning and end times of our students' sentences. But THRASS® is flexible. Because that core collection of phonemes and graphemes can be learnt relatively quickly, illiterate students who are not with us for long can leave feeling that they are in control of the key mystery. Further, it is not too difficult to teach those basic concepts to a beginners' group containing students at many levels. The chart-mastering activities lend themselves to self-directed small group work in which students can assist one another. Most other methodologies for beginning readers are much more dependent on teacher direction and therefore, in the context the ever-changing clients in a prison setting, harder for teachers to implement.

As prison educators, we have one huge advantage over other providers of Indigenous, especially Indigenous remote, education. We can get our students into a classroom, very day of the week, enthusiastic and ready to learn. Education in correctional services is uniquely able to address adult literacy issues and so improve outcomes for Australia's Indigenous citizens. The prison education system must be our most underused asset. We need a change of mindset. Think of us as a big, multi-campus boarding school with an old-fashioned approach to discipline matters.

But then there are problems. As a registered training organisation, we can only teach accredited courses within our scope. None of the national certificates has literacy modules (or units of competency) that accommodate THRASS®. We torture and twist module outcomes around to align them to THRASS® development steps. But really, they don't.

We need some new certificates, or perhaps modification to modules in existing certificates. The Institute of Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs has come to a similar conclusion based on its experience in trying to find a suitable certificate.

THRASS® in the community

We need to be aware of the opportunities students will have to continue literacy development after they leave prison. There are short-term and long-term students. Methodology is not such an issue with long-term students, as consistency of approach can be provided. For example, after initial literacy tests, teaching can be tailored to fit the needs of long-term students by grading the classes into different literacy levels. For long-term students with higher literacy skills (who have completed at least Year 10 at high school), creative writing provides a great basis for working on English comprehension and sentence structure. And the more they write, the easier reading and writing become (Shilton 2005).

What should be the aim for short-term students, that is, those with sentences less than one year? In the case of virtually illiterate students with sentences of less than three months, there is little that can be done in the time available but to attempt to link them with another agency that can work with them after release. In the case of non-impaired illiterate students with at least three-month

sentences, THRASS® can be used to achieve understanding of the basic concepts of literacy and to gain a measure of independent reading and writing by the end of this time. If the student has substance abuse impairments, at least six months is needed to achieve the same end point. The students therefore have the tools to become truly literate. But will they?

The biggest issue leading to recidivism in the Northern Territory is the reality of life in Indigenous communities. Most communities are located in places that have cultural significance to those that live there. 'Western' communities, by contrast, grow out of an economic need or an opportunity identifying that place a good place to establish a town. Western cultural attachment to the site then develops over years. If the site ceased to have economic meaning, the town declines or may simply be abandoned.

If the community is located close to a physical feature that has tourism potential, or if it happens to have mining or some other resource, then the community has an opportunity to develop business and income independent of welfare. If the traditional land of the community does not have these sorts of assets, then it is going to be welfare-dependent.

I suggest that, for literacy teaching in correctional services to impact on recidivism, prison educators need to be very aware of the kind of reality to which the students, especially the shorter-term students, will return. We need to know a lot about the communities, specifically the nature and size of industries to which our students will return. With that information and in partnership with the community or employer, students can be trained for real jobs. Then the THRASS® program would have somewhere to go. Vocabulary, manuals and procedures would focus THRASS® to give real point to the literacy learning. Further training back in the community can be designed to build on learning that has been undertaken in the correctional centre.

If the Aboriginal community does not have job opportunities, how can the students continue to develop literacy after their release? Libraries and reading resources rarely exist outside schools and even there they are limited. There is a need for post-release data to be collected so that we know how many return to their communities. That is what most said they intended doing and what would be expected, given the strength of their cultural attachment to their country. Students in prison could be trained to undertake basic tutoring using THRASS®. Subsequently, after release, they could work in local schools in partnership with the schools. Thus, in an environment with access to books, they could be encouraged to continue their own literacy development. They could also be tutors within their own families, which would be doubly effective if the community school is using THRASS®.

Any real reduction in recidivism will require working in partnership with communities. There is no single answer. Any steps we take must be tailored to the realities and opportunities in the individual communities to which the students return. However, establishing partnerships with communities is complex (Hill, J, 2005). The present levels of education staffing are not sufficient for this work, and a community liaison unit of sorts may be required in the prison.

The prison needs communication with communities. Sentence planning and the Aboriginal Elders' visiting programs in Northern Territory prisons are moving down this track. At Alice Springs Correctional Centre contacts have been made with groups who provide educational programs to communities. The intention is for the prison to have a contact point in each community for students returning home. It is envisaged that both the student and the contact would be advised when one of the students is about to return home, so that the two can meet. The hope is that the contact will organise further classes and access to resources for the student.

Seeding a core of interested students in a community rather than having returning students feel that their reading isolates then will help give the student confidence to continue. Furthermore, the community is best placed to define just what skills and vocabulary are most needed in that community.

Establishing and maintaining a unit that interfaces between prison education and the communities may be an expensive exercise. However, if it reduces recidivism, it would, in the long run, be the cheaper option.

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Attachment A: What is oral language competence?

'Oral language' refers to the talking and listening skills that humans employ across a range of settings and interactions as they go about the business of everyday life. Oral communication emerges in early infancy, initially through crying, then through more differentiated 'cooing' and 'babbling', until sometime around the child's first birthday, a few recognisable single words emerge. From here on, there is an 'explosion' in vocabulary and early sentence structure, such that by the time children enter school, they can usually use sentences of about six words with correct grammar, express cause-and-effect relationships, describe their ideas and feelings, and follow three-step directions (Speech Pathology Australia).

Receptive language skills are enhanced through the opportunity to interact with others and engage in several everyday tasks, including listening to complex stories, engaging in conversations with others, and through exposure to the instructional and expository discourse-style typically employed by teachers. Receptive language is contingent on several subskills, including adequate hearing, attention, and auditory attention and auditory memory abilities.

Narrative discourse: A key marker of oral language competence

Humans, across many cultural groups, share their experiences with others mainly by verbal means of a discourse genre known as a 'narrative account'. For other cultural groups, such as traditional Indigenous Australian people, details of past experiences are also commonly transmitted via enactment and drawing (Powell 2000). According to Stein and Glenn (1979), a well-developed verbal narrative account comprises up to seven logically sequenced story grammar elements. These elements include a setting, an initiating event, an internal response, a plan of action, an attempt at action, direct consequences of this action, and protagonists' reactions.

Narrative development begins to emerge in early childhood through exposure to highly formulaic fairytales (Paul 2001). Children initially learn to relate isolated and salient incidents from a story, and later learn to link more story elements using cohesive devices (such as 'so', 'then', 'because') to mark temporal and cause-effect relationships in the story. During their third year, children begin to narrate personal experiences in the context of conversations with caregivers. By five years of age, children can usually provide well-sequenced, chronologically ordered accounts of their past experiences. At six to seven years, children begin to provide contextual information at the beginning of a narrative, recognising that this is where such comments are of greatest value to the listener. At around this age, children's narratives are often judged as complete in terms of story-grammar content (see McCabe 1996).

To be an effective narrator of one's own experience, the speaker must be able to make judgements about what the listener does or does not already know and adjust background detail accordingly. Effective narration also depends on the ability to sequence events in a story in a logical and coherent manner, while doing so in a way that is engaging and interesting to the listener. In

emphasising the developmental importance of the narrative genre, Hedberg and Stoel-Gammon (1986) noted that individuals who lack narrative skills ‘... have difficulty reconstructing their own experiences and sharing them with others’ (p.68). In other words, narrative competence reflects skill in a variety of linguistic, cognitive, social, and cultural domains (Westby 1982).

Spicing up everyday communication: Non-literal language

In English-speaking cultures, speakers are not always meant to be taken literally. Once they reach a certain level of competence in receptive and expressive language, children learn to use creative techniques which create an added level of interest or sophistication to their communication. Common linguistic devices include sarcasm, metaphor, irony, humour, puns, and idioms. Table 1 includes some examples.

Table 1 Examples of some non-literal everyday linguistic devices

Linguistic device	Spoken meaning	Intended meaning	Comment
Sarcasm	Lovely weather we're having	Isn't the weather awful?	Here the speaker says the exact OPPOSITE of what is intended, but it is up to the speaker to use contextual and cultural knowledge to make this inference for him/herself.
Idiom	A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush	You're better off sticking with what you have, rather than risking being worse off by going after more.	This requires the benefit of previous exposure and world knowledge to make a shift from the literal, to the abstract meaning.
Metaphor	He's a dark horse.	It's difficult to work out what he's thinking or feeling.	Like idiom, the ability to 'decode' metaphor requires the benefit of previous exposure and world knowledge to make a shift from the literal, to the abstract meaning.
Puns	Doctor, doctor! I swallowed a bone Are you choking? No, really I did!!		Here the listener must 'straddle' the sound and semantic (meaning) interpretations to understand that there is a play on words (choking/joking) at work.

Further, many jokes require the ability to make a quick linguistic shift from an expected, to an unexpected interpretation. Consider the following joke that would be understood by most children of late primary school age:

A woman was running along the beach with her two small dogs. A man stopped her and asked 'Excuse me, are they Jack Russells'? The woman looked confused. 'No', she replied, 'they're mine'.

In this example, the joke is only understood if the listener has accessed two interpretations at a linguistic level—one, the plural form of the dog breed, the other pertaining to the possessive (ownership) form. People of all ages who have oral language deficits often miss these shades of meaning, thereby misunderstanding the speaker's joke or actual intent.

The potential detrimental effect of misunderstandings in social situations should not be underestimated. Misunderstanding a speaker's intent can lead to feelings of social exclusion, alienation, hostility and aggression. It is interesting that hostile attribution has been described in many high-risk young people (Vitale et al. 2005), that is, the tendency to interpret others' actions in a hostile or aggressive way if actual intention is open to interpretation in some way. This may reflect underlying linguistic deficits which limit the range of possibilities accessible in the milliseconds in which a response is required in social situations.

Why does oral language competence matter?

In western cultures, oral language competence serves crucial developmental purposes. Firstly, it underpins successful transition to literacy, and secondly, it enables the formation and maintenance of prosocial relationships with others. Each of these is briefly described in turn.

Transition to literacy

Learning to read English was once considered to be a largely visual or perceptual task. Now, however, it is fundamentally conceptualised as a linguistic task. In other words, it draws heavily on one's knowledge of the sound system in his/her language, of words and word parts, such as syllables and morphemes (described below), and of how words are joined in sentences to express an infinite variety of ideas.

Many experts in English language have emphasised the critical links between oral language competence and transition to literacy in the early school years (Naucler & Magnussen 1998). This link is implied by the robust finding that oral language deficits in the preschool years are predictive of reading difficulties throughout childhood and adolescence (for example, Catts et al. 2003; Nippold & Schwarz 1996; Snowling, Bishop & Stothard 2000; Stothard et al. 1998). Why is this so? Oral language competence enables the child to transfer knowledge of one communication domain (talking and listening) to another (reading and writing). Specifically, the capacity to think about one's own knowledge of talking and listening, and apply this to reading and writing is referred to as metalinguistic ability. For example, one metalinguistic task mastered in the preschool years is the so-called 'alphabetic principle'. This is the notion that sounds are represented by single letters or groups of letters, and can be decoded in the process of reading, or encoded in the process of writing. In the early stages of learning to read, children draw heavily on spoken language to develop

phonemic awareness—detection and prediction of word parts, such as syllables and morpheme units. Linguistically, a morpheme is the smallest unit which can alter the meaning of a word, so a word such as ‘walked’ has two morphemes—‘walk’ plus the grammatical past tense marker ‘ed’. Morphemes may be whole words, or they may be affixes which occur at the start of a word (for example, the prefix ‘un’ in undo), or at the end of a word (for example, the suffix ‘ing’ in doing). The ability to detect and segment words by both syllabification and later by recognition and identification of morphemes draws heavily on the child’s oral language skills.

Not surprisingly, children who enter school with well-developed oral language skills achieve the transition to literacy with little difficulty, provided that adequate and timely instruction is provided. Of course in English, there is some, but by no means a one-to-one, correspondence, between sounds and letters (the so-called phoneme-grapheme link). Children soon learn, therefore, that for every ‘rule’ there is an exception (for example, the two or more possible sounds that can be associated with the letters ‘c’ and ‘g’). The mastery of these irregularities requires a combination of strong oral language skills, good self-efficacy for reading, and developmentally appropriate instruction techniques.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to enter into the complex, long-running debate about ‘phonics’ versus ‘whole language’ as approaches to reading instruction, it should be noted that children with oral language deficits find it more difficult than their more competent peers to intuitively apply the alphabetic principle. Further, they find it more difficult to develop sufficient phonemic awareness to help them decode novel words and to write their own text. When such children are exposed to ‘whole language’ instruction in the early school years, the true extent of their language and literacy difficulties may be concealed. If other risk factors are also present, by the time such children reach late primary/early secondary school, however, they may develop a high level of antipathy about school, and begin to disengage, both overtly and covertly from the curriculum. It is not uncommon for such children to display behaviour problems and early initiation into substance use, association with similar peers, and ‘delinquent’ behaviour. When the life histories of offenders are examined, this is a frequently observed pattern (Loeber et al.1998).

So, for high-risk children, most particularly boys, developmental oral language disorders frequently underlie school-based learning difficulties. However, these difficulties are typically obscured by the heavy emphasis placed on reading and writing instruction in the classroom setting (Paul 2001; Snow 2000). We suspect that many children (particularly boys) commence school with poorly developed oral language skills, but their difficulties are only identified when they fail to make a successful transition to literacy. At this point, many boys are labelled as having a ‘learning problem’, and at around the same time, they may also develop significant behavioural difficulties which undermine effective remediation. The problems of late identification of oral language disorders are compounded by the fact that formal instruction in reading is relatively short-lived. By the middle primary school years, the emphasis in schools changes from learning to read, to reading to learn. Thus, children who miss the ‘learning to

read' boat never seem to catch up with their achieving peers (Stanovich 1986). In contrast, the children with adequately developed oral language skills are 'value adding' on their already strong oral skills, as they are constantly engaged in the inductive process of decoding new words by making sense of context and discovering reading for pleasure (Nippold & Schwarz 1996).

Forming prosocial relationships

In English-speaking culture, oral language plays a fundamental role in the formation and maintenance of satisfying social relationships. Thus, it is not surprising that children and adolescents with oral language disorders frequently experience interpersonal difficulties with others (Cohen 2001). Such difficulties include (but are not restricted to):

- ❖ problems with the rapid information processing required to follow group interactions, where it is common for many people to be speaking simultaneously, and/or for rapid topic changes to occur
- ❖ an inability to structure and share one's own experiences with others in a way that is both coherent and engaging for others
- ❖ an inability to 'read cues' from others that signal a need for a topic shift, a turn change, or a desire to conclude an interaction
- ❖ an inability to grasp non-literal language, such as humour, metaphor, puns, idioms and sarcasm

Difficulties forming and maintaining peer relationships has widespread implications for young people. It decreases exposure to prosocial styles of communication (for example, the ability to use appropriate politeness conventions according to the nature and purpose of an interaction), contributes to poor self-efficacy for spoken and written communication-related activities, and heightens the individuals' tendency to associate with similar, underachieving (sometimes antisocial) peers. Such patterns are often deeply entrenched by late primary school and become even harder to change following the upheaval associated with the transition to secondary schooling that coincides with early adolescence—a challenging time for most young people, but particularly so for those from more high-risk backgrounds.

High-risk children and adolescents do not typically present with obvious communication breakdown at the level of everyday social interactions. This is probably because their knowledge of conversational scripts can be called into play in these contexts. Scripts represent an individual's knowledge about everyday interactions which are so familiar and ritualised that they are stereotyped in terms of the temporal ordering of events, main characters and settings (Abbott, Black & Smith 1985; Nelson 1996). Such situations include social greeting rituals, and everyday exchanges between familiar and unfamiliar individuals, for example, in service encounters, or passing a work colleague in the corridor. Over-reliance on script knowledge, however, may cause many young people with significant levels of language processing and production difficulties to superficially 'get by' in

more novel and challenging interactions such as interviews in forensic or health settings. Further, in many cases, the compensatory behaviours they exhibit, for example, providing short, simple responses such as 'yep', 'nup', 'dunno', 'maybe' can be mistaken for antisocial behaviour such as rudeness and disinterest, and so can further penalise the speaker.

Research carried out in Canada by Cohen and co-workers (Cohen et al.1993; Cohen et al.1998) alerts us to the often unidentified overlap between language and behaviour problems in high-risk children. These workers have shown that some 34–40% of children referred for psychiatric assessment have an unsuspected language impairment that is not detected until a formal assessment is carried out. Cohen et al. (1993) have also reported that children with unsuspected language impairments showed significantly higher levels of externalising behaviour disturbance (for example, aggression, oppositional behaviour) than those whose language impairment had been previously detected. These workers suggested that this may in part reflect the fact that children find their way into the service delivery system by virtue of key adults' perceptions of the primary handicapping condition. In the case of young people at risk for juvenile offending, this is likely to be behaviour disturbance rather than 'subclinical' language impairment. Not surprisingly, many such young people later graduate to the adult correctional system, still handicapped by significant but undetected oral language deficits and poorly developed reading and writing skills.

What factors can interfere with the development of oral language competence?

Most children receive the necessary social, emotional, and environmental stimulation for oral language skills to develop normally from birth into early adulthood. Unfortunately, for some children, oral language is compromised by a range of social and environmental factors. In particular, emotional and/or physical neglect or abuse reduces opportunities to interact with others through talking and listening, stories, music, and mutual enjoyment of books. Parental mental health problems such as depression and substance misuse may interfere significantly with the parent-child attachment process and make it difficult for child-centred interaction to occur. In some families, learning problems are transmitted from one generation to the next (perhaps genetically, perhaps environmentally or due to a combination of factors), hence little emphasis is placed on communication for its own sake, whether it be through the spoken or the written word.

Compared with peers raised in more nurturing secure families, children raised in households with little child-centred interaction typically display impoverished vocabulary and reduced grammatical complexity, as well as difficulties adjusting communication behaviour according to the social and environmental context. It is not uncommon for children with poorly developed oral language skills to find themselves alienated from more verbally proficient

peers and associating more with peers whose verbal skills are similar to their own. This can result in lack of reinforcement of prosocial skills and the normalisation of more antisocial ways of interacting with others. This in turn incurs great social cost to the individual.

It is also important to note that deficits in oral language competence are not always the result of problems in family functioning. They can also be due to having to acquire English relatively late in development, as a second language. Learning a second language is obviously not just a matter of learning to speak the words. As indicated above, communication competence reflects knowledge of how to interact in a wide range of contexts. Difficulties in acquiring a new language are generally more pronounced in cases where the individual has had little prior exposure to the English-speaking culture (for example, through television). Further, they are more pronounced when there is little incentive to integrate into mainstream culture.