Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes is not an Aboriginal Song

Photo By Illawarra Storm Chaser
Via Pete Brandtman Monday 19 November 2012

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- Graduand and lecturer from the Master of Indigenous Languages Education program at the University of Sydney
- Student research project
- Based in concerns that current revival songs are mostly Western (English) based:
  - conveying Western musical culture and concepts,
  - fostering word-by-word translation,
  - clashing with Aboriginal prosody (stress and vowel length),
  - potentially fostering further language shift.
An Example

• The Gamilaraay word for kangaroo is *bandaarr*
• In a formulaic approach:
  
  • Tie me kangaroo down, Sport  

  becomes

• Tie me *banda’a* down, Sport
• Stress shifted, glottal inserted, and trill lost

Songs

• are central to traditional Aboriginal culture and learning
• help break down language barriers between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people
• Songlines cross Aboriginal language barriers and foster language learning.

Photo By Ludo Kuipers  
Wed Sep 11 1996
The Research

- effectiveness of traditional music as a pedagogical tool within the language classroom
- song is widely regarded as a successful language teaching method
- uniqueness of Aboriginal music and traditional language
- grammatical patterns, word structure and related vocabulary

The Research

- Dharawal language from the South Coast of New South Wales
- two groups from neighbouring secondary schools taught in tandem:
  - mixed gender
  - 13-15 years
  - all Aboriginal
  - 16 students each
Walar njidigguli Wadhanhay?  
Head yours where is

Gunduyin nundhagarri yanba.  
Tree brown snake come from

Taliah King  
www.abcradio.com

Post Test
Delayed Post Test

Pronunciation Test
Results

• Aboriginal style of music taught learners effectively.
• It also allowed for looser acquisition of language.
• Stress and tone patterns closely replicated fluent speakers.
• Traditional music created a sense of culture.

Results

• Aboriginal music students more engaged and focused on the tasks.
• Allowed quicker transition through curriculum stages requiring an additional topic.
• Engagement was strong
• Attendance was increased
Students’ Comments

• It was a fun learning experience. I liked the singing and the games.
• Singing is a millions times more fun than book work.
• Using books gets boring, but you can learn by singing. I never knew that.
• There is so much you can learn about culture that you don’t from books.

Conclusions

• Aboriginal music styles can be used for second language acquisition within the classroom.
• Aboriginal music styles are an effective tool to engage Aboriginal students.
• Teachers should utilise Aboriginal music styles.
Conclusions

• Teachers should develop platforms to initiate teaching plans that incorporate quality teaching methodologies and professional frameworks utilising Aboriginal music.