Welcome to the Dolphins Class [Transition/Year 1] at Warruwi School in the Northern Territory. We are buzzing with excitement in our class because the students love to read.

But firstly, here is a little bit about our school and community contexts. Our school is on a remote island located in Western Arnhem land, approximately 350 km east of Darwin. It is an indigenous school with an enrolment [at the moment] of 140 students ranging from Preschoolers to Year 10 students. The school at one stage was a bilingual school, however in the recent past and at present this is not the case.

The Warruwi community is small with about 400 people living on the island. This fluctuates at ceremony and funeral times where the population can expand out to about 1000 people or become smaller with people leaving for other Arnhem land communities. Hence our enrolments and absenteeism for cultural reasons reflect these fluctuations. It is a multicultural indigenous community, with many languages being spoken here [from across all of Arnhem land, Tiwi Islands, desert communities, Torres Strait islands]. However Mawng is considered the main local language spoken on the island. There is very little SAE [Standard Australian English] spoken at home, hence school is the main venue for English to be modeled and used.

In our class alone, there are 13 different language speaking groups represented. The importance of our Dolphins teaching team cannot be under-estimated. The Teaching Assistants and I have the challenge of getting our messages and instructions across so all students can understand and access the concepts being taught. This is our exciting story about talking, playing and doing, in order to read. How does this happen with so many languages and how did the students become so interested in reading in English? It’s all connected!

The simple answer is that we talk and play and do and talk some more. Lots and lots of talking and doing! Our class program has a major focus on talking and playing. This happens in whatever language the students are comfortable with at the time. It isn’t a quiet time; it is a busy, full on, action packed, engaged time for all students and the teaching team alike.

There is a wealth of published information about the importance of play for Early Years students. Through our daily morning sessions of play, our Dolphins students do many things:
- They develop their oral language skills and their social skills
- They develop a sense of belonging and responsibility
- They get to be creative and constructive
- They have the freedom to choose what they would like to do, when to do it and for how long.

Let them talk, play and do … and they will read!

Sue Heyson
It is through play that our students have been able to explore their world using their own first language and to experiment with the use of SAE. Switching between language codes needs to be relevant and non-threatening in order for them to have successes. Through play, the students can internalise ideas and experiences and then through spoken communication express their thinking in order to be understood. They have fun and become empowered in their learning.

During play our students have the opportunity to create situations that mimic the real world around them. Whether it be in the home corner cooking at the stove, answering the phone in the play office or being the clinic nurse looking after the sick dolls and bears, it becomes very clear that role play has a valuable place within our program. Through role play, they can continue to develop their understandings of their world and develop the language needed to share and communicate with others.

Making learning experiences real is key to our program’s success. We maximise opportunities for role play by exploring the community and our physical environment. This provides the students with first hand experiences that can become the catalyst for the role play back in the classroom. It is a way of both connecting their real world with the classroom and connecting the classroom with the community.

To support this approach, we also have a very ‘hands on’ program to further develop oral literacies, SAE vocabulary and concept development across all Key learning Areas. By ‘doing’, the students:

• access curriculum outcomes.
• physically engage with the learning at hand.
• have something to talk about.

This opens up a huge door into the uses of language – be it instructional language, informative language, descriptive language, creative language, formal language, structured language and more. Throughout these sessions SAE is modelled and encouraged. There is strong community support for students to become competent speakers in both their first language and in SAE.

The teaching team creates these ‘doing’ sessions within a safe learning environment that supports the students and that caters for their learning needs. In Dolphins, these sessions involve an integrated curriculum approach, often involving Literacy, Mathematics and Science, and vary from tasty cooking sessions; measuring and making wooden planes; creating kites; to growing plants and watching and monitoring their growth. The opportunities are diverse. They are directed by curriculum outcomes and identified program needs, by the interests of the students themselves and by our discoveries together. It can be something as large as planning for a sleepover or setting up a Dolphins health clinic, to something as simple as finding a snail in the school yard and watching it slide up the classroom glass door or on someone’s arm!

And where do we go from here? With all of this action and talking, we balance it with written language. As part of established ESL teaching methodology, we follow the practice of Do,
To enhance and reinforce this learning of oral and written SAE language, the students have access to a variety of interactive computer games and software. The catchy tunes and lively characters capture the students’ attention and engage them in fun ways as they practice speech patterns, rhymes and SAE sounds. This is vital as there are several sounds that exist in SAE that are not present in indigenous languages [and vice versa]. One of the biggest surprises in our Dolphins class is that the students are eager to practise their reading. It is not uncommon to have a reading activity on every computer during their play session!

These experiences and successes have given the Dolphins students a self-belief in their own abilities as communicators, whether it is in their first language or in SAE. By having many experiences and opportunities to talk, play and do, they have created a foundation on which to build and extend into the world of written language. Watching our students get excited about their learning is truly a wondrous thing for our teaching team.

Sue Heyson has lived and worked in the Territory for the past 31 years. Her teaching experiences have included remote, rural, small town and urban school settings. Sue has an Early Childhood and Teacher Librarian background and has taught in the Early Years, Middle Primary and in Libraries. Her passion is for students to have every opportunity to explore and connect with their world and to make learning fun in the process. After many years, Sue (together with her teacher husband) has re-engaged with and is enjoying the challenge of teaching indigenous students in a remote setting.