



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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BUT THEY DON'T USE IT IN THE PLAYGROUND *

"HOW OFTEN DO WE USE STANDARD ENGLISH?"

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A common complaint from teachers of Aboriginal children in rural/remote schools goes something like this: "I teach them Standard English and they use it in the classroom and when they speak to me. But they don't use it in the playground. They revert to Aboriginal English or the vernacular. So why waste time teaching Standard English?"

So, what is the problem? More importantly, is there a problem?

There is little doubt that the teaching of English is one of the most difficult areas in classroom work with Aboriginal children. And the frustration felt by teachers when they hear children speaking other than Standard English is, in one sense, understandable. However, in another more important sense, it reflects a lack of appreciation for the different ways that people use language, either varieties of the same language or different languages.

It is unfortunate that so many people, teachers included, still think in terms of Standard English being 'right' and anything else being 'wrong'. There are many varieties of English. Standard English is one, Aboriginal English another. **There is not, and never can be any justification for calling one 'right' and the other 'wrong'. They certainly cannot be judged in this manner in linguistic or scientific terms. Standard English and Aboriginal English are different dialects of the same language, each having its own phonological and grammatical system and each being a separate and equal entity in its own right. There is no linguistic basis whatsoever for saying that one is better than the other.

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** Aboriginal English is used here as a collective term referring to the many varieties of the dialect.

There is a criterion for using one dialect or language in preference to another. That criterion is "appropriateness to the situation". For example, it would be most inappropriate for the Prime Minister to make an address to the nation using Cantonese. The reasons are obvious. This is not to say that Cantonese is intrinsically worse or better than English. It just would not be appropriate for the situation.

Nor would it be appropriate to use the same variety of language at both a CWA garden party and a two-up game. Not that one variety is superior to or better than the other. It is just that one variety is appropriate to the garden party situation and the other appropriate to the two-up game. The variation in form of language used depends not only on the total situation but also on the age, sex and number of people involved and the general context of the conversation.

In the course of any one day each one of us uses many different varieties of English, standard and non-standard forms included. One only has to compare the language he or she uses at breakfast, in the staff room, at the shop or supermarket, in the hotel or club and so on to appreciate the quite considerable differences in variety or form of English we use. And, how often, in fact do we use the so-called Standard English forms in other than 'formal' situations?

Children, Aboriginal and white Australian are no different. It is an interesting and remarkable fact that children recognize at a relatively early age the appropriateness of particular varieties of language to particular situations. Even in all-white schools the varieties of English used by children in the playground differ a great deal from the varieties they use in the classroom. Again, how often do white children use Standard English forms in the playground?

Is it right, then, to expect Aboriginal children to be any different? Should we require them to use Standard English at all times and in all situations at school? Many if not most teachers would justify this approach on the grounds that the children do not have the opportunities to use Standard English outside the school and so need the extra practice. This justification, as well as the expectations of such teachers are quite false, and, as stated previously, reflect a lack of appreciation of the way children use different varieties of language in different situations. In any case, how does one police such an approach???

This should not be misinterpreted as being an argument against the teaching of Standard English to Aboriginal children. The needs in this regard are obvious and compelling. Without a knowledge of and the ability to handle Standard English, how is a young Aborigine going to learn to read and write and cope with white society?

Teachers who insist on their Aboriginal pupils using only Standard English probably do not recognize Aboriginal English as being a legitimate dialect of English in its own right. The legitimacy of Aboriginal English cannot be denied. It may be deemed inappropriate in some situations. But never illegitimate.

Overt recognition of Aboriginal English by the teacher in the classroom can be a helpful tool in the teaching of Standard English. It is probably not unfair to say that Aboriginal children may well think that they are speaking 'English' when they use an Aboriginal dialect of English. That is, they may not be aware of the differences between the two varieties or dialects. The teacher would do well to point out some of these differences, not in terms of Standard forms being 'right' and Aboriginal forms being 'wrong' but rather in terms of appropriateness and that one is just different from the other.

The use of a contrastive approach in the teaching of Standard English forms or structure could be of enormous benefit. For example, if the teacher wants to teach the simple past tense of English verbs, he or she might use the following approach:

PRESENTATION

Start by writing the following two sentences on the board:

You went. You bin go.

Ask the children which is the Standard English (use the term 'whitefella' English if need be) form and which is the Aboriginal English form. Other examples from both dialects and discussion with the children should lead them to the fairly obvious conclusion that 'bin' is a past tense in Aboriginal English.

This simple and by no means original activity/approach should take only a short period of time and should lead to recognition by the pupils of one of the distinctive contrasts between Standard ('Whitefella') English and Aboriginal English.

The approach can be expanded and reinforced by using a variety of drills such as:

TEACHER STIMULUS

STUDENTS RESPONSE

You go.
You bin go.

Different

You sleep.
You sleep

Same

You bin stealim.
You stole.

Different

TRANSLATION DRILLS

As the name suggests, Translation Drills involve the translation of items from one dialect to another.

You bin pinish.

You died.

You worked.

You bin work.

You stole.

You bin steal.

You slept.

You bin sleep.

The format for these kinds of drills can vary in many respects. The teacher can use all Standard forms or all Aboriginal forms as stimuli or, as above, a combination of both. Obviously, emphasis on translation from Aboriginal forms to Standard English forms is desirable in keeping with the stated objective of teaching Standard English.

The examples given in the drills above are extremely simple using only one subject ("you") in all cases. However, there is much scope for expansion into more complicated areas of Standard vs Aboriginal English.

Teaching identification and discrimination of Standard and Aboriginal English is only part of the process. There is the obvious need for teaching when and in what situation and context each or either dialect is appropriate. A direct approach of stating just when and where would not be entirely wrong and role playing games and activities should be of some use. It can also be taught incidentally.

It is essential though, that teachers avoid making value judgements in terms of 'right' and 'wrong' in relation to the two dialects. Each should be treated as different but equal parts of the English language. Any reduction of the 'shame' factor amongst Aboriginal children in relation to their language is a step in the right direction.

Readers may well disagree with many aspects of this article. The ideas presented are not new or original, but they are pertinent. Any comments, criticisms or suggestions (including any more ideas concerning the contrastive approach in language teaching) are more than welcome.

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NOTICE - (from Australian Pre-School Association Inc.)

NEW EARLY CHILDHOOD JOURNAL

If you have an interest in Children - especially young children - you should also have an interest in the Australian Journal of Early Childhood.

The second issue, on the theme of *The Politics of Early Childhood* was recently published in Canberra. Articles by W.E.L., and Senator Don Grimes, Shadow Minister for Social Security, are featured. Other items of general interest describe the rebuilding of the playground in the Southern Hemisphere's oldest kindergarten, "Outpost Newtown", Sydney, and an ecological enterprise called "Reverse Garbage Truck".

The Journal is being edited with a view to providing a wide range of reading on early childhood, so that it should appeal to parents, teachers, nurses, educators, child care associates, and students in various disciplines associated with the care and education of children.

The subscription for the four issues of 1976 is \$5.00 including postage, and should be sent to the Australian Pre-School Association Inc., University Avenue, Canberra City, A.C.T. 2601.

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