



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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§ LANGUAGE AND THE ABORIGINAL CHILD

*J. Schmider

The language used by Aboriginal and Islander¹ children has become in recent years a major focus of attention, with concern being felt on two broad fronts. There has been an increasing awareness that many use a mother tongue which is not English; at the same time there has been a growing realisation that many of those Aboriginal and Islander children who do use English as a first language use a form of language which differs from that normally used in the school. Whereas originally the tendency was to see these deviations from mainstream language use in terms of language deficit, they are now increasingly accepted as examples of language difference. A major philosophical shift has therefore occurred in the area of language teaching: an early emphasis on remediation and compensation has given way to a stress on language development; and language programs are now based on a philosophy of acceptance of the child's language, and on the belief that it is necessary to start from where the child is. Thus programs no longer aim to 'stamp out' the child's language or to 'overcome' the influence of the home, but instead have as their goal the extension and broadening of the child's already existing language abilities. The emphasis has shifted from 'correctness' in terms of standard English, to 'appropriateness' in terms of language use in different social situations.

Aboriginal children speak a wide variety of languages - some speak an Aboriginal language or a creole; some speak a dialect of an Aboriginal language or of English; some speak a combination of these. But whatever their mother tongue, their ability to understand another language or dialect generally exceeds their ability to produce that form of language.

FORMS OF LANGUAGE

Many Queensland Aboriginal children speak the dialect of English known as Standard Australian English (SAE). Others speak a dialect known generally as Aboriginal English (Ab E). The term Ab E covers many language varieties that range from a 'heavy' creole to a

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* Ms. Joann Schmider, Aboriginal Education Officer, Department of Education, Queensland.

dialect very close in character to SAE. Ab E is frequently referred to as a non-standard dialect. This extremely simplified example shows something of the continuum that Aboriginal students may work in:

Ab E ←-----→ SAE
'e coat bla John *Dis John coat* *This is John's coat*

It must be recognised that a dialect of a language is only standard in the terms of the society utilising it. Each dialect of a language is different from, not inferior to, another dialect of the same language. Any dialect of a language meets the needs of its users in their own environment and constitutes a language that is complete in itself. It should therefore be acknowledged and accepted as a coherent and consistent language having its own logic and rules.

Certain beliefs and assumptions about the Aboriginal student, language and the school have been used as the basis of the Language Development Program for schools in Aboriginal communities (Years 4-10). It is recognised that Aboriginal students may have developed attitudes and interests different in many ways from those of their teachers, and that their learning styles will probably be based on personal orientation and involve learning by observation, real life performance, personal trial and error, repetition, and imitation. The languages (e.g. Wik Munkan) or dialects (e.g. a variety of Aboriginal English - Ab E) in which they are fluent will differ from the language of the school in terms of sounds, words, meanings, and use. In addition, although they have mastered language functions relating to their experiences, these may differ in emphasis from those functions required by the school.

METHODS

Bilingual Programs

A number of different methods of language teaching are presently being used in Queensland schools. The community of Aurukun and Pormpuraaw on the western side of Cape York are committed to a bilingual program which actually encourages the use of the vernacular for instruction in these schools. At present all teachers in these schools are Europeans, so it is essential to have local teacher aides involved in classroom lessons. The best results come through methodical and regular planning of lessons by the teacher and the aide working together.

While the children, early in their school life, are being taught concepts and skills in their mother tongue they are being increasingly exposed to English. By the fourth or fifth year at school the language of instruction is English but the skills of reading and writing are acquired in the child's mother tongue.

The mobility of teaching staff in community schools presents problems because of lack of continuity. To assist in this area a resident teacher-linguist is located at Aurukun and provides an advisory service to Pormpuraaw. Material development in the vernacular is an essential element of such a program and these materials are written and produced both locally and in Brisbane.

Vernacular Maintenance

The Bloomfield River Primary School and Thursday Island High School conduct a vernacular maintenance program in which a local language speaker teaches children to read and write in their mother tongue. This activity is usually allocated a small amount of time each week.

Culture Programs

Some schools such as Mornington Island and Doomadgee Primary Schools and the high schools in Mt Isa conduct culture programs which include an element of local language as well as devoting time to dance and legends. In these programs some language words are introduced to pupils by Aboriginal people who speak the local language. The Aboriginal children respond positively to these experiences and European children have an opportunity to gain an insight into Aboriginal studies.

ESL and ESD

ESL and English as a second dialect (ESD) strategies and techniques are used where appropriate in providing English programs for Aboriginal children in community schools. These children seldom come into contact with standard English speakers except in the school situation and, on occasions, with Government administration officers. Aboriginal children in communities often see little real need to learn English, so the teacher must make the students see its relevance by capitalising on 'real' situations that require the use of SAE.

It is generally conceded that children in bilingual programs have greater self-esteem and a higher achievement level, and they are generally happier at school.

The Scattered Students

Although it is recognised that Aboriginal children in mainstream education often have language differences and hence require different programs, it is most difficult to deliver these because of the scattered nature of the students throughout Queensland. In general terms it is acknowledged that the difficulty which Aboriginal children

have in handling the English language is enormous. This difficulty is reflected in the Aboriginal child's lack of achievement in the mainstream, English-speaking school system of today.

Looking to the Future

In our multicultural society the school's curriculum and ethos must be responsive to the varied cultures and experiences of its students. Recognising and appreciating a student's linguistic identity is an essential part of the school's response to his wider cultural identity.

Aboriginal parents clearly indicate that they want the school to develop their children's facility to use Standard Australian English (SAE) but they also indicate that they want their children to be able to interact with their own community as well as with the wider community. Thus a major aim of the school must be to expand the total language of each child, to broaden his language resources as his needs increase, and to help him acquire styles of language appropriate to use in a wide variety of situations.

The differences in Aboriginal/Islander cultures and languages are just that - differences - and can be built on. But this will be possible only if teachers put aside their middle class expectations for the child. Instead they must

gain an ever-increasing understanding of the child in his own world recognising that the child operates in a different cultural system and that he uses a rule-governed language code which is as valid as that of the teacher.²

Formal education can then be effective for it will be based on two-way communication between the teacher and the student, with the teacher listening to and understanding the student and the student listening to and understanding the teacher.

REFERENCES

- ¹ The term 'Aboriginal' is used in this article to refer to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.
- ² *Overview for Language Development Programs Years 1-3*. Department of Education, Brisbane, 1979, p.10.

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