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ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL TEACHING STYLES AT MILINGIMBI SCHOOL



*C.S.Deslandes

SUMMARY

Dr Ian Malcolm (WA) has shown in several papers the difficulties teachers have communicating with Aboriginal children in the classrooms. Dr Stephen Harris (NT), in his PhD thesis, defined some of the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sociolinguistic rules of communication.

This study hypothesises that the rules of communication and organisation in the classroom used by Aboriginal teachers at Milingimbi will be different from those used by white Australian teachers.

It concludes that the two groups are significantly different in teaching styles, each tending towards its own traditional sociolinguistic rules, with some integration of rules from the other culture.

No conclusions are drawn as to the effectiveness of each group.

It is stressed that this is very much only a pilot study to open the way for further research and discussion.

PREAMBLE

For many years Aboriginal children were placed in a situation in classrooms where they were expected to learn like white Australian children, taught by white Australian teachers. Teaching methods and child learning were regarded as being universal in styles and application and no account taken of the profound cultural differences between the white Australian education system, its content and teacher, and the Aboriginal child.

A few isolated schools began bilingual programs in an attempt to bridge that cultural gap and have had some success. The Northern Territory began bilingual programs in some schools that fulfilled

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* Formerly Milingimbi, now Principal, Yirara College, Alice Springs.

"certain conditions" and to date fewer than twenty schools operate bilingual programs in that state.

One of the greatest advantages of bilingual programs is that the school is dependent upon Aboriginal teachers to teach the vernacular literacy, because Aboriginal teachers bring to the classroom not only a familiar language model for the children but also an understanding of the conditions under which to use that language, thus overcoming, to a degree, one of the greatest difficulties Aboriginal children have had to face at school.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Philips (1972) studied the communication problems and classroom organisation of Warm Springs Indian children. There are certain parallels that can be drawn from this study with Aboriginal children.

The aim of her study was to show that when Indian children spoke a great deal in the classroom, the conditions were similar to social conditions in the Warm Springs community. When the children spoke very little, these conditions were absent from the classroom.

Philips describes a normal classroom as one in which the teacher directs and controls the spatial arrangements, movements and intra-classroom communications. Most activities in fact are initiated by the teacher. In contrast, Indian students forget to raise their hand to be called on to speak, walk around the room on their own initiative and talk to other students while the teacher is talking. They vie for the attention of peers rather than the attention of the teacher.

It is concluded that there are four main types of participant structures in classrooms. The first type is where the teacher interacts with the whole class together and addresses individual students in the presence of others. The second type is where the teacher works with a group rather than the class, still addressing students in the presence of others. The third type is where the teacher interacts privately with an individual student with the student asking for information. The fourth structure is where the classroom is organised into groups that run themselves.

Philips claims that only the third and fourth participant structures are successful in Indian classrooms as these approximate to community social conditions.

Mohat and Erikson (1981) studied the cultural differences in the way an Indian and non-Indian teacher organised their classrooms' structures for participation, and compared these structures to the community's social interaction. Both teachers taught in the same school in Canada.

It was found that for classroom management, getting children started on their work, giving directives and checking students' work, the teachers used very different strategies. The Indian teacher exerted slow and deliberate control over the whole class but did not single out individuals in front of the class. Attention was given to individuals at a private level. The non-Indian teacher moved rapidly around the classroom, singling out children for directives in front of all the children, and giving very little time for children to answer questions.

It was concluded, therefore, that the Indian teacher uses participant structures in the classroom that more closely relate to the characteristic Indian participation structures, than does the non-Indian teacher in the same setting.

Eagleson, Kalder and Malcolm (in press) discuss the problems Aboriginal children have in schools where there are non-Aboriginal teachers, showing the cultural parallel to the Indian children's problems.

[The school] is, or it may be (for the Aboriginal child) a new social setting where unfamiliar people carry on unfamiliar speech events according to unknown rules in an unfamiliar dialect.

(Eagleson, Kalder & Malcom (Ch.5.
5.2.)

Their findings show that Aboriginal children are reluctant to engage in two-way conversation with the non-Aboriginal teacher, and frequently break his/her imposed communication routine. Also the non-Aboriginal teacher frequently misunderstands the children's responses and has to hold up the interaction to obtain clarification. This further embarrasses the children and inhibits the possibility of interaction. Further, the teacher persists in using what Malcolm terms, "the basic teaching routine", that is, to nominate a student and ask a question in front of others. This clearly does not work effectively in an Aboriginal classroom. It was also found that non-Aboriginal teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time getting the nominated person to respond.

It is against this background of American Indian children responding better to classroom situations that are closely congruent with the community situation, American Indian teachers organising classrooms differently from non-Indian teachers, and delineated communication problems in Aboriginal classrooms that this study is made, to see if cultural factors present in the Indian teachers' classroom are also present in Aboriginal teachers' classrooms.

To do this effectively, it is necessary to look at traditional Aboriginal socio-linguistic rules, as described by Harris (1980).

- a) The most important rule is that everyone has the right to speak and the right not to listen. It is the listener who has the right to decide whether or not a question or some information should be responded to.
- b) There is no form of impersonal debate so any "strong talk" is regarded as a personal insult.
- c) Talk does not have to lead to learning or decisions, it can be purely for social intercourse.
- d) For Aboriginal people it is most important to know the relationships of all those people involved in a speech event, and to adjust one's own behaviour accordingly. Some relationships must avoid talking to each other altogether.
- e) There is little eye-contact in conversations.
- f) Personal names are not used freely, especially directly to a person.
- g) "Why" questions are not common, and certainly not used as a means of learning as in non-Aboriginal Australian society.
- h) Periods of silence are much more frequent in Aboriginal society, and the period of silence can be embarrassingly long for non-Aborigines.

(Harris, 1980)

Thus, the rules for speech events and participant structures Aboriginal children bring to school with them are quite different from non-Aboriginal society.

HYPOTHESIS

This study hypothesises that - (i) the rules of communication and organisation used in the classroom by Aboriginal teachers will be significantly different from those used by white Australian teachers in the same or similar classrooms, and (ii) that the communication and organisation in Aboriginal teachers' classrooms will be more closely aligned to traditional sociolinguistic rules than the non-Aboriginal teachers'.

That is, that the verbal and non-verbal communication rules will differ, and so will the participant structures of the classroom, according to whether the children are being taught by an Aboriginal or white Australian teacher, and that this difference will be caused by cultural factors.

METHODS

1. *The School*

Milingimbi has had some form of Western formal education for about 30-35 years. It has had a bilingual program since 1973, and still retains many of the Aboriginal teachers who were working in the school at that time.

The Aborigines in the community have strong traditional ties to their culture and at the same time are motivated to, and rapidly moving towards, self-management.

Although it is physically a very isolated community many people visit Darwin several times every year and many have visited southern capitals.

2. *Classrooms*

Each classroom in which teachers were observed is a formal white Australian type, housed in reasonably substantial buildings. The children all have desks and chairs, a carpeted area to sit on and the normal range of consumable items. The children have normal hours with set times for recess and lunch.

3. *Subjects*

Each Aboriginal teacher was born and brought up at or near Milingimbi. All were two year trained. Also each taught a significantly different age group, and there was a spread of the number of years teaching experience (see Table 1). Given these factors, any similarities could be interpreted as being socio-cultural.

The non-Aboriginal teachers were chosen because of the differences in years of experience, and there is some age range between the classes taught (see Table 1). Again any similarities can be interpreted as socio-cultural.

Table 1		Grade	Years Experience
Aboriginal	T.G.	1	9
	N.	4	14
	S.	7	5
Non-Aboriginal	T.K.	5	1
	T.	7	13

(Subjects were asked if they could be observed in their lessons for a study of "the way they talk and react with the children". No subject saw the criteria used before the observed lesson).

4. Criteria

The list of comparative descriptions was selected in light of the comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal socio-linguistic rules. They were selected mainly from the work of Phillips, Harris, Mohatt and Erickson, and Malcolm, with some of the writer's own. The list is not exhaustive, but enough to give an overall picture of types of communication and organisation used.

5. Observation

Only formal lessons were observed for statistics, and were restricted to reading and mathematics lessons. Lessons that were mainly activity based, e.g. art, social studies, were not used, nor were outdoor lessons.

Because it is a bilingual school there was no special consideration given to which language was used in which lesson.

Although the lessons were not video-taped for checking statistical data, the writer feels that the recording from direct observation was sufficiently accurate to give fair comparisons.

The observed time was kept to a strict 30 minutes.

ANALYSIS

		Average frequency in 30 min.	
TALK IN THE CLASSROOM		Aboriginal Teacher	Non-Aboriginal Teacher
<i>Teacher</i>			
1. Using talk as means of transferring information.	7.6	4.0	
2. Periods of silence (not for discipline).	1.3	0	
3. Direct eye contact with the pupil.	5.3	36.0	
4. Directly naming the children.	6.3	15.0	
5. Nominating childred to perform or answer questions in front of class.	2.0	6.5	
6. Class discussion - organised.	0.0	0.0	
7. Class discussion - not organised.	0.0	0.0	
8. Direct personal discipline.	3.6	7.0	
9. Use of not "why" questions.	13.0	38.5	
10. Use of "why" questions.	0.0	0.5	
11. Use of personal praise.	1.3	12.0	
<i>Children</i>			
12. Choosing not to listen or work without reprimand.	9.6	4.0	
13. Children's direct responses to class questions.	12.6	31.5	
14. Questions to teacher, or offering information.	19.3	15.1	
15. Telling each other what to do.	8.3	8.5	
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES			
<i>Teacher</i>			
16. In front of children as a class.	1.3	2.0	
17. Passing out materials.	2.0	2.5	
18. Circulating giving individual attention.	21.6	46.5	
19. Waiting for class.	0.3	1.5	
<i>Children</i>			
20. Working without supervision.	0.3	0.5	
21. Free time in class.	1.0	0.0	

DISCUSSION OF ANALYSIS

Item

1. This was regarded as a lecture type activity. Aboriginal teachers tended to 'lecture' more frequently, and although not timed, certainly for longer periods. Obviously this is easier to do in the child's first language, used by the Aboriginal teachers.
2. Although not great in frequency or duration, it tends to support the expectations of cultural differences. Aboriginal teachers tended to stop to read their lessons notes, or prepare some materials. The children paid no attention to these pauses.
- 3,4. Expected cultural differences.
5. Neither group to any great extent nominated children to perform in front of the class. This could be interpreted as social cultural adjustment by the non-Aboriginal teachers.
- 6,7. As for 5.
8. Expected cultural differences, but still some adjustment made by the non-Aboriginal teachers. It could be expected to be a higher frequency in a European classroom.
- 9,10. Questioning obviously plays a large part in lesson structures for non-Aboriginal teachers as suggested by Eagleson *et al*, although they did not use "why" questions. These questions were directed to the whole group (see item 5.)
11. Expected cultural differences.
- 12,13. Have the children worked out that the non-Aboriginal teachers persist in making them pay attention and responding, and the Aboriginal teachers do not? By the time the children are 11 years old, it may be less embarrassing to offer an answer than to have the teacher persist in asking.
14. Although the frequency of responses was similar, the responses were quite different in nature. The children asked non-Aboriginal teachers questions in single words, by calling the teacher's name and pointing to the problem in the book. When talking to the Aboriginal teachers the children engaged in

much more dialogue, actually discussing a problem and offering possible solutions for the teacher's comments. Similarly, information was given in a conversational manner to the Aboriginal teachers.

15. The children would appear to be as relaxed with either teacher when left on their own.
- 16,17. These show similarities in classroom organisation.
18. Both groups tended to make great use of Philips' third major participant structure of answering questions individually and privately. However, Aboriginal teachers moved slowly around the group, spending time with each student at a pace that closely paralleled the pace of the community. The non-Aboriginal teachers on the other hand tended to rush from child to child as the teacher's name was called. The effectiveness of this could be questioned as often the teacher was not with a child long enough to give an adequate explanation to problems.
19. Aboriginal teachers were prepared to carry on with some children not listening.
- 20,21. Basically these did not form part of the organisation of the observed lesson.

CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis tends to be supported by the fact that in half the items tested in classroom organisation and communication, the two cultural groups at Milingimbi showed substantial differences. Within the limits of this study it can be concluded that these differences are caused by cultural factors; that is, both groups use communication styles and participant structures that are reasonably congruent with their own cultures.

Nevertheless, it appears that both groups of teachers have made some adjustments to the situation: Aboriginal teachers to the formal teaching situation and non-Aboriginal teachers to Aboriginal children.

Apart from the variables present in this study, it would be expected that the degree of cultural congruence in teaching styles

for Aboriginal teachers would depend on the length of teaching experience and the academic or schooling background of the teacher.

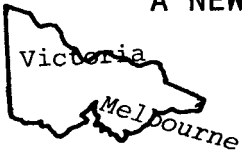
It should be noted too that this study is not concerned with effectiveness of teaching, but with the differences in lesson organisation and communication. It would be fair to comment that all lessons observed appeared well organised, with neither group appearing to have better organisation than the other.

It is recommended that this study be followed by a more comprehensive look into teacher communication and organisation styles, with perhaps more selective criteria that also looks at lesson effectiveness.

It is further recommended that the socio-linguistic rules for white Australians actually be itemised and introduced as part of the English language syllabus in Aboriginal schools to ensure that children can understand and predict non-Aboriginal methods of communication in the classroom, in the community and in the wider Australian society.

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A NEW COURSE : AUSTRALIAN RACE RELATIONS



*S. Stone

Australian Race Relations is a new Group Two Year 12 subject recently accredited by the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education for teaching in 1984.

Such a course is long overdue. It is necessary that all Australians understand the attitudes of the conquerors and the consequences of the manner in which this country was taken. Only then can Aboriginal land rights and other claims for compensation be properly appreciated.

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* Ms Sharman Stone, Upper Yarra High-Technical School.