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BOOK REVIEW :

English and the Aboriginal Child - Robert D. Eagleson, Susan Kaldor, Ian G. Malcolm. Curriculum Development Centre, P O Box 52, Canberra, 1982. ISBN 0 642 96197 2.

Reviewed by Michael Christie*

The two most important single ideas which teachers of Aboriginal children need to know about language are, in my opinion, as follows. *First*, that languages differ in more ways than simply phonology (the sounds of the language), and grammar (how the words and sentences are put together). They differ also in the ways in which their speakers use them to organize their understandings of the world (semantics) and to fulfil social and communicative functions (sociolinguistics). *Second*, teachers must appreciate that this is as true of Aboriginal English, in all its forms, as it is of any other language or dialect in the world.

In their book, *English and the Aboriginal Child*, Eagleson, Kaldor and Malcolm have spelt out some of these principles in a comprehensive yet very readable way. The book begins with an interesting chapter on variation in the English language which is directed mainly at putting paid to the alarmingly popular opinion (even among teachers), that there is only one correct form of English and all other forms are inferior, inadequate and symptomatic of shoddy thinking. Eagleson writes of the differences in geographical location, social class, and the immediate context of language, while also noting that all Australian children should be given the opportunity to learn Standard Australian English without risking the denigration of their own dialect. This chapter fails, however, to point out the differences in the social and communicative functions which various dialects fulfil, and the reader may be left with the dangerous opinion that the actual way in which middle class white Australians employ their dialect to interact and communicate does not differ significantly from the way Aboriginal people use language. (In the same way that a failure to appreciate this will inhibit a teacher's understanding of classroom language problems, it seems to have limited the usefulness of Eagleson's analysis of English in this book.)

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Chapter two is a feat in itself in that it presents the lay person with as much interesting information on the Aboriginal languages of Australia as it is possible to squeeze into thirty-eight pages. The reader learns not only how rich and complex Australian languages are, but also how the languages reflect some of the richness of Aboriginal life and how some features of pre-contact languages are reflected in Aboriginal English.

Chapter three is an analysis of the English spoken by Aboriginal children in rural Western Australia. Read in conjunction with the two preceding chapters, three important implications are made clear. First, that Aboriginal English is as coherent and regular as any other language (probably more so than Standard Australian English), and that all those so-called errors which Aboriginal children make in the classroom are, in fact, quite correct according to the rules of their own dialect. Second, that Aboriginal English fits into the whole pattern of Aboriginal languages; they share phonological and grammatical features, and reflect the Aboriginal way of life. Third, Aboriginal English is just as appropriate to Aboriginal life as Standard English is for middle class Australians. In other words, to say that there is something *wrong* with the way Aboriginal people use English is to argue from a position of blind ethnocentrism.

After this promising start, chapter four comes as a surprise. Here, an analysis of the English of urban Aboriginal children is presented, this time with a subtle ethnocentric bias. Standard Australian English is taken as the criterion against which Aboriginal English is measured. The careful reader can trace this bias through the analysis and see how Eagleson concludes, in contrast with the other authors, that Sydney Aboriginal speakers "are not creating anything new nor, except for a handful of terms, introducing anything from Aboriginal languages" (p.138). These biased interpretations are compounded by the author's apparent ignorance of the unique urban Aboriginal culture which gives rise to the distinctive systems of meanings and social interactions which are at the heart of language use.

It is exactly these differences between the two English dialects and the worlds to which they are related, compounded by teacher ignorance and ethnocentric attitudes, which set the background for communication breakdown in the classroom. In Chapter five, Malcolm gives examples of typical verbal interactions between white teachers and Aboriginal children which will sound embarrassingly familiar to all teachers. There are several interesting features of Malcolm's work. First, it is abundantly clear that

children who speak an Aboriginal dialect of English simply do not understand much of what the teacher is saying in the classroom, and vice versa. Secondly, teachers teach with all kinds of assumptions about language and its role in learning, without any critical awareness of how language is working (or not working) in their classrooms. However, the third feature of chapter five is the suggested strategies for improving communication with Aboriginal children in classroom situations. The suggestions are simple and sensible, but of course require much skill and patience for successful implementation.

The final chapter details some educational implications of the research cited in earlier chapters, and focuses specifically on principles and methods of teaching Standard Australian English as a second dialect to speakers of Aboriginal English. Overall, the final chapters provide an excellent balance for the data-filled earlier chapters, and the reader is left in no doubt as to the relevance of linguistic research to the day-to-day life of the classroom. Finally, the warmth and richness of Aboriginal English is made real to the reader by a tape recording of Aboriginal children's stories and conversations, and by the inclusion of some excellent photographs in the text.

Overall, this book is highly recommended and will provide compulsive reading for any teachers concerned about providing the best possible education for their Aboriginal pupils.

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* 'THE ABORIGINAL CHILD AT SCHOOL' NEEDS ARTICLES *
* BY TEACHERS TO FULFIL ITS AIM OF BEING A FORUM *
* FOR TEACHERS OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN TO EXCHANGE *
* INSIGHTS, IDEAS AND TEACHING STRATEGIES ACROSS *
* AUSTRALIA. INTERSTATE DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATION *
* TEND TO BE CONSIDERABLE AND A SPECIAL FUNCTION *
* OF THE JOURNAL IS TO BRIDGE THESE DIFFERENCES - *
* BUT, TEACHER CONTRIBUTION IS ESSENTIAL. *
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