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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE, EH?

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1. INTRODUCTION

The first and probably most important piece of advice that anyone can give to prospective teachers of Aboriginal children is to 'watch your language'. Whether or not the children speak an Aboriginal language as their first language, a Creole or a Pidgin or a version of Aboriginal English, with standard English as either a second language or second dialect, opportunities for miss-communication and non-communication abound.

Since for Aboriginal children (and other children as well) success or failure in school is ultimately dependent on an understanding of and oral competency in both spoken and written English, the importance of effective English As A Second Language (ESL) programs and/or English As A Second Dialect (ESD) teaching can not be over-emphasised. High quality TESL/ESD teaching needs to be a feature of the program of every teacher of Aboriginal children, regardless of the specific curriculum area being taught. So every Maths lesson also needs to be an English lesson, as for

every Social Science lesson, Tech. Studies lesson, and so forth. Furthermore, to be effective, teaching needs to focus on the specific areas of difficulty commonly experienced by the particular group of Aboriginal children enrolled in the school. Likely areas of difficulty can be identified by the mapping of the structures of English, or using the same methodology with Aboriginal English and standard English.

A word of caution at this point: this method is very useful up to a point. However, the diversity within Australian (i.e. Aboriginal) languages needs to be stated and recognised. Not all Aboriginal languages have the same grammatical structures or sound (phonological) systems. I have based this part of my paper on my knowledge of Western Desert languages, so I believe that it is particularly relevant to teachers of children who are speakers of Western Desert languages situated in parts of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory. However, this methodology can be applied to create relevant and successful TESL programs for Aboriginal children throughout Australia as well as other NESB children.

The paper will be divided into five parts:

1. An outline of the specific difficulties experienced by Aboriginal children who speak a Western Desert language, when learning English;

2. An outline of the specific difficulties experienced by Aboriginal children who speak Aboriginal English as their first dialect, when learning standard English;

3. An outline of differences of a socio-linguistic nature which mean that many Aboriginal children in Australian classrooms are (wrongly) viewed by their non-Aboriginal teachers as having 'switched off or worse';

4. An outline of the differing interpretations of what can be broadly glossed as 'body language', or non-verbal language, which frequently works to the disadvantage of Aboriginal students in Australian classrooms;

5. And finally, a conclusion.

In doing this, I need to emphasise that in talking about the 'difficulties' experienced by Aboriginal children in learning English, I am in no sense framing Aboriginal children as 'the problem'. Indeed, the inadequacy of many TESL programs designed for Aboriginal children, and their failure to sufficiently take into account the particularities of Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English, is the major reason for this paper. The real source of the current problems experienced by Aboriginal students in Australian schools is the continuing process of colonisation whereby English has been installed as the dominant language, the language of power in this country and Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English have been relegated inferior status.

Indeed, non-Aboriginal people who attempt to learn Aboriginal languages find themselves confronted with similar learning problems, only in reverse-in mirror image as it were. Indeed, for many non-Aboriginal people, the learning of an Aboriginal language turns out to be an impossible task. This chastening truth needs to be highlighted for those teachers who become

exasperated at errors made by their Aboriginal students when learning English.

To conclude this section, I would like to emphasise that all of the difficulties in learning English which I pinpoint in this paper are difficulties which arose repeatedly among the Aboriginal children I taught over a ten-year period. The problems I identify are definitely NOT the merely abstract musings of an ivory-tower linguist, but problems I and other teachers grappled with in real classrooms with real children, for years.

1. AN OUTLINE OF THE SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY ABORIGINAL CHILDREN WHO SPEAK A WESTERN DESERT LANGUAGE, WHEN LEARNING ENGLISH.

In this section I will deal with some of the specific areas of difficulty encountered by Aboriginal children who speak an Australian language, more specifically a Western Desert language, as their first language, when they go about learning English. This is applicable to many Aboriginal children currently enrolled in Western Australian, South Australian and Northern Territory schools. It is my contention that having identified the specific areas of difficulty frequently encountered by the 'client group', effective teaching/learning programs need to address those specific areas directly, rather than teaching English in (the more usual) 'hit and miss' style. Having made these prefatory remarks, I will identify the specific ESL problems commonly experienced by this group of students.

(i) Difficulties with English Personal Pronouns

English personal pronouns (he, she, it, him, its, his, hers etc) constitute an area of genuine

difficulty for Western Desert learners of English. There are two main reasons for this. The first and most important reason is that pronouns in Western Desert languages do not distinguish gender. Hence when Western Desert children begin to speak and write English they have a tendency to use personal pronouns interchangeably, apparently randomly. Teachers will often hear constructions like:

Freddie is really good at basketball - she shoots goals every time.

Jennie goes hunting for bush tucker every week. He always gets plenty goannas - him good hunter.

In addition, in most Western Desert languages personal pronouns are bound - that is, they are always incorporated into another part of speech, whereas in English, they are separate words, as it were, 'free-standing' words. This constitutes a further difficulty when it comes to learning English personal pronouns for Western Desert learners, young or old. It means that students will sometimes use personal pronouns unnecessarily, just to be on the safe side, e.g.

Freddie he shoots goals every time.

Mary she goes longa creek every day.

The only way to ensure that children will use the correct English constructions is to teach the English personal pronouns, and the rules pertaining to them (e.g. their gender-specificity) as part of a formal TESL program.

(ii) Difficulties With English Word Order.

English word order is relatively speaking, inflexible (the usual order of elements in an English clause is actor-action-goal, e.g., Susan walked out of the humpy). However, word order in Western Desert languages and other 'traditional' Aboriginal languages, is relatively-speaking, free. The relatively restrictive word

order of English can pose a very real problem for Aboriginal learners. The following are examples I have heard from the mouths of young Aboriginal children:

He nothing likes, eh?

Basketball you play?

Again, word order is a feature of English which needs to be explicitly dealt with in ESL programs for Aboriginal children.

(iii) Difficulties with the English Verb 'To Be'.

There is no equivalent to the English verb 'to be' in Western Desert and other Australian languages. This is not to imply any deficit on the part of Aboriginal languages-they are simply different, neither better nor worse. However, the absence of the verb 'to be' in Western Desert and other Australian languages accounts for many errors in English expression on the part of young (and not so young) learners, e.g.,

Bill walking all day long - he get tired.

Angela a good girl, she never naughty.

To properly address this area of difficulty, the effective teacher of Aboriginal children needs to incorporate a strong component of teaching the verb 'to be' in all of its forms and tenses into his or her teaching program.

(iv) Difficulties with the English Articles, Both Definite ('The') and Indefinite ('A' and 'An').

Again, the fact that the definite ('the') and the indefinite ('a' and 'an') articles are not present in Australian languages is not to imply any kind of deficit model. However, their absence in Australian languages does account for the fact that Aboriginal children learning English frequently drop 'the' and 'a' from both their oral and written expression, or use them inap-

appropriately, e.g.,

Roger went longa creek.

Man he went into shop.

You gottim basketball?

The only solution to this is direct teaching of the rules pertaining to the English articles 'the' and 'a', and giving the children plenty of practice in their use.

(v) Difficulties with English Plural Forms.

There are marked differences in the ways in which English and Australian languages form plurals. Some Australian languages form plurals by reduplication, e.g.

kurdu = child

kurdukurdu = children

Frequently there are no differences between the singular and plural forms of a noun - it is simply evident whether the work is singular or plural via the context.

As a result Aboriginal children who speak an Aboriginal language often have a great deal of trouble with English plurals. To compound this, the letter 's' is the most difficult sound for Western desert speakers to produce - it does not exist in Western Desert languages. Furthermore, it is frequently not even heard by Western Desert speakers, because of:

- (a) its unexpectedness, and
- (b) the fact that many Aboriginal children (ie up to 85% at any given time) suffer from educationally significant hearing loss which compounds their difficulty in learning what is essentially a foreign language.

To deal with this, English plurals need to be carefully programmed into the curriculum, and

plenty of practice time allocated in order for the children to master this aspect of the curriculum.

As a final cautionary note: once children have mastered the English system of forming plurals, they often show a marked tendency to overgeneralise, e.g.

-childs
-childrens
-sheeps etc.

This also needs to be dealt with at a later stage in the TESL program.

To conclude this section, I would like to state that I have not attempted a comprehensive coverage of this extremely important area, but have merely tried to raise the consciousness of potential teachers of Aboriginal children by identifying a number of the major problem areas which will definitely be encountered in classrooms with significant Aboriginal enrolments, especially where those children are speakers of Western Desert languages. To be effective teachers of such Aboriginal students, teachers can not afford to ignore these issues.

2. AN OUTLINE OF THE SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY ABORIGINAL CHILDREN WHO SPEAK ABORIGINAL ENGLISH AS THEIR FIRST DIALECT, WHEN LEARNING STANDARD ENGLISH.

Many of the difficulties experienced by children who speak Aboriginal English as their first dialect, when learning standard English, have been foreshadowed by the previous section. For a thorough-going analysis of likely TESL 'problem' areas, I would refer you to Diana Eades' excellent article, Aboriginal English, in a recent *Pen* (the journal of the Primary English Teaching Association).¹


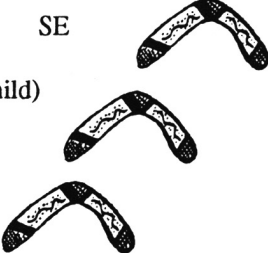
I will take two of Eades' examples to illustrate potential problem areas on which teachers of standard versions of English need to focus:

1. Expressions of Possession.

... To express possession, many varieties of Aboriginal English simply juxtapose the possessor and the possessed. By contrast, to express possession in Standard English the possessor noun receives the suffix - s.

AE ²		SE	
I can't see that man car Where Tom house?		I can't see that man's car. Where's Tom's house? ³	

Eades also gives examples of English words which have different meanings in Aboriginal English, e.g.

AE		SE	
grow (a child) up camp growl charge		raise (a child) home scold alcohol ⁴	

To these I would add my own example:

Cheeky		vicious (e.g. a cheeky dog); or 'rough' or 'violent', e.g. the man was very cheeky to his kids; or 'hot' or 'very spicy', as in 'the chilli sauce was very cheeky'; or venomous, e.g. 'a cheeky snake'.
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I have included this example because it demonstrates the complexity of this issue: sometimes it isn't merely a matter of a one on one correspondence between the Aboriginal English and Standard English word or concept - the Aboriginal English word may incorporate a range of different (although in this case, related) English meanings.

Finally, a word of caution to those teachers who set out to 'teach' standard English to Aboriginal children whose first dialect is Aboriginal English, because of a worthy desire to impart to those kids the language of power of

this country: take it easy! Language and identity are very closely related and lessons in Standard English may be perceived by the children as a fully-fledged assault on their identity. This is a powerfully emotional issue. Aboriginal English is NOT simply uneducated English but constitutes a genuine dialect of English which needs to be respected and affirmed. Certainly teachers should not be working to eliminate it.

In my experience it is best for teachers to 'come clean' and explain to Aboriginal students precisely why they are teaching them Standard

English - that is not to denigrate Aboriginal English, or the children's personal language, but to increase the students' educational and social 'capital'. Teachers need to make it clear to the kids that they are teaching that they consider Aboriginal English to be a legitimate, valued form of expression. Children are always able to sense disparaging attitudes where they exist, even when such attitudes are not explicitly stated. When such attitudes are perceived, students will either actively or passively resist the teacher's authority over them.

3. AN OUTLINE OF DIFFERENCES OF A SOCIOLINGUISTIC NATURE WHICH MEAN THAT MANY ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIAN CLASSROOMS ARE VIEWED BY THEIR NON-ABORIGINAL TEACHERS AS BEING 'SWITCHED OFF' OR WORSE.

Since harmony and good relations in the classroom are prerequisites for any real learning taking place, important sociolinguistic differences need to be acknowledged. Equally, there are important courtesies in Aboriginal societies which teachers need to learn in order to be successful teachers of Aboriginal children.

- (i) **There are no equivalents for 'hello' or 'please' or 'thankyou' in Aboriginal languages.**

Trivial as this point may appear on the surface, over the years I have seen many well-meaning teachers label Aboriginal children rude and ignorant or even, in some instances, virtually write them off because they do not use English forms of greetings or make habitual use of the words 'please' and 'thankyou'. Teachers' criticism often also extends to Aboriginal adults, ie the same children's parents, who for the same reasons, do not use these words as a matter of course. In fact, many Aboriginal adults find their continual use degrading. As

one Aboriginal man said to me, 'We do not want to get involved in your begging cycle.'⁷

Many teachers hold the opinion that Aboriginal children need to learn the courtesy cycles of the English language in order to succeed in the dominant culture of this country, and this is probably true. However, the mastery of such forms should not be viewed as the *sine qua non* for success or otherwise in the classroom - many non-Aboriginal teachers place an undue emphasis on such matters, and go to great lengths to enforce their pupils compliance. Such attitudes are unnecessarily ethnocentric and can be profoundly alienating for young Aboriginal children, who may well switch off from any further classroom learning if these points are pushed too hard.

- (ii) **Aboriginal children (and adults) have the right not to answer when spoken to or directly questioned.**

It is not difficult to see the potential for conflict in the classroom when a non-Aboriginal teacher asks a question to which she expects an immediate response and she gets silence. Again, this can lead to inaccurate labelling of children as variously disobedient, uncooperative, 'away with the pixies', uninterested, surly, insubordinate etc.⁸ Such stereotyping of Aboriginal children is to be avoided at all costs, because it may adversely affect their classroom performance, and may well turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Unfortunately, I have seen this happen in a number of classrooms.

Further to this: direct questioning is rarely used as a means of eliciting/soliciting information in 'traditionally-oriented' Aboriginal societies. Direct questioning is perceived by many Aboriginal people (including many children) as an offensively invasive means of obtaining information. In any case the response will often be non-compliance on the part of the 'quarry', ie the person being questioned. This sociolinguistic feature needs to be considered in terms of the preponderant Australian pri-

mary school methodology of teachers' rapid-fire questioning of the kids in their classrooms, and their accompanying expectation of immediate answers.

(iii) The Effect of Bereavement Rules on Language in the classroom.

When someone passes away in an Aboriginal community, there are strict rules pertaining to the avoidance of words or terms homophonous (ie sounding the same as) or similar to, the name of the deceased. Replacement words or terms must be used in lieu of all similar sounding words or terms; not to conform to this practice causes great offence, hurt, shock and sometimes even social conflict. This concept exists across Western Desert languages but also in many other Australian languages.

The implications of this in the classroom for teachers is two-fold:

(i) Teachers will find that there are certain words that Aboriginal children will simply not utter, in the classroom context, or elsewhere. If children are reading orally, either they will leave the taboo words out, or attempt to substitute a different-sounding synonym, or a generic replacement word (eg in the Warlpiri language, the generic word is 'kumunjayi'). Sometimes teachers believe that pupils have simply made a mistake in reading, or don't know the answer to a question. I have seen teachers try to force the issue on the pretext that Aboriginal children need to become 'bicultural' and 'learn the ways of the dominant culture'. In the case of taboo words, this is simply not on: rules pertaining to bereavement are highly significant ones and must be observed by children as well as by adults. Forcing children to say taboo words is nothing but enforced assimilation, a means of driving a wedge between the children and their families. There are some

things which on no account ought to be undermined by teachers and this is one of them.

(ii) Conversely, for the teacher to command and maintain respect and have status in the classroom, which is crucial if she is going to be effective as a teacher, it is important that she learn to avoid words which fall into this category. If not, she will be viewed by the children in the class as ignorant and sacreligious.

To conclude, this section again offers only a sampling of the possible sociolinguistic pitfalls which can lead to mistakenly adverse judgements about Aboriginal children (and teachers too) in classrooms. It is important to avoid the consequences of these, in order that teachers maintain high opinions of Aboriginal children as learners. It is my contention that the low expectations of many teachers regarding Aboriginal children's ability to learn often contribute to their failure in Australian classrooms. All too often these low expectations are based on misunderstandings of a sociolinguistic nature.

4. DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS OF WHAT CAN BE BROADLY GLOSSED AS 'BODY LANGUAGE', OR NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE, WHICH FREQUENTLY WORKS TO THE DISADVANTAGE OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIAN CLASSROOMS.

The classic example here is the oft-quoted question of eye-contact: primary teachers in particular tend to interpret the behaviour of pupils who refuse to make eye-contact as variously shifty, sneaky, unreliable, insubordinate, indicative of untrustworthy character, a threat to authority etc. On the other hand, many

traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people interpret direct eye-contact as unduly forward, insubordinate, shifty, sneaky, invasive, dicative of unreliable character, a threat to authority and so forth: in other words, to be avoided at all costs.

Again, it is crucial that teachers do not lower their estimation of Aboriginal students on the basis of their own ethnocentric socio-cultural misinterpretation of students' behaviour or language. Many a child in an Australian classroom has been damned for life at a tender age as a result of the premature, ill-informed opinions of those who more than anyone else need to suspend their judgement.

5. CONCLUSION

Regardless of specific curriculum area, language is the medium by which the curriculum is transmitted. If you are teaching Aboriginal children who are speakers of either an Aboriginal language or a dialect of English known as Aboriginal English, you are still a language teacher even if your subject area is Maths or Art. And you are most definitely a language teacher if you are a generalist primary school teacher. Awareness of the 'language ecology' of the classroom is an important determinant of the success of all teachers; in this case it is a critical factor. This paper has been written with teachers of diverse curriculum areas in mind, to provide them with much-needed background information about the language Aboriginal students will bring into their classrooms, and to encourage acceptance of Aboriginal English dialects as something other than 'poor English'. (N.B. Acceptance of a person's language amounts to acceptance of that person and vice-versa). It has also been written with the specialist TESL teacher in mind, to encourage the development of quality TESL programs based on the specifics of the children's language needs, rather than a more hit-and-miss approach (the problem with 'hit and miss' approaches being that they miss as often as

they hit), and to encourage a research-based approach to the ESL teaching of Aboriginal students.

NOTES

1. 1993
2. AE= Aboriginal English; SE=Standard English.
3. Eades, 1993:3
4. Ibid:4
5. Ibid:2
6. Because young Aboriginal children learn their ways of speaking from their extended families, a rejection of the way they speak amounts to a rejection of their relatives as well. Since the harmonious involvement of the child's family is a prerequisite for success in Aboriginal education (as for the education of other young children) such a situation is to be avoided at all costs.
7. Personal communication to Christine Nicholls, 1991.
8. By the same token, I am not trying to romanticize the behaviour of Aboriginal children -like other children, they are capable of being all of these things.

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