



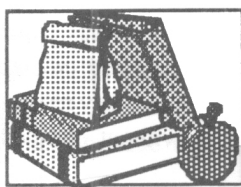
The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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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BOOK REVIEW

Langwiji Comes to School: Promoting Literacy Among Speakers of Aboriginal English and Australian Creoles

Booklet with text by David McRae

Commonwealth Department of Employment,
Education and Training, n.d. [?1995], 32 pp.

Reviewed by Anna Shnukal

This booklet, written by David McRae for the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training, and distributed nationally to primary school teachers, is a companion to a previous publication, *To Be Good at English*. Both booklets are part of the public awareness campaign component of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy.

The aim of the booklet is to raise teacher awareness about the various non-traditional languages and English dialects spoken as home languages by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. An associated aim is to demonstrate by example how the acknowledgement and acceptance of these languages produced successful teaching outcomes in six schools. It seems hard to believe, but even today some teachers equate their students' use of non-standard English varieties or the two indigenous Australian creoles with general aptitude and intelligence. Thus, the abilities of indigenous children, who begin their schooling in a second (or even third) language other than 'Standard Australian English', tend to be discounted by a system which devalues the non-traditional or non-standard language varieties of the community of which the school is a part.

Language is only one aspect of education; nonetheless, teachers recognise it as the instrumental basis of almost all school learning. Perhaps even more importantly, the value accorded the home language by the teacher plays a crucial role in every child's learning. Over the past decade, teachers of indigenous students have become aware of the importance of traditional indigenous languages (just as immigrant languages are increasingly valued and taken into account by school programs). The non-traditional languages discussed here, however, have until recently been discussed mainly in specialist linguistic journals, although they figure in National Language Policy and, increasingly, in state education policy documents.

The terms 'pidgin', 'creole', and 'Aboriginal English' are technical linguistic terms. Teachers, however, often have only a hazy idea of what they mean and I have found confusion in their application at the highest level of policy making.

Briefly, a pidgin is a mixed language, cobbled together originally by speakers who need to communicate, however briefly and imperfectly, but who do not have a language in common. Pidgins are always somebody's second (or third) language — they belong to nobody — and have restricted vocabulary, grammar and functions. It is not quite accurate to claim, as McRae does, that pidgins arise between two groups of language speakers — there are usually many more languages in play — nor that they have fluctuating rules.

Makeshift languages without agreed-upon grammatical norms are known technically as jargons. Pidgins often developed in colonial situations in which there was a power imbalance between a smaller high-status group and a larger low-status group which had no shared language. Though a number of jargons and pidgins quickly arose in many parts of Australia, and as quickly disappeared when the need for them was no more, none are now spoken here, although their various influences can be found in the languages which are the subject of this booklet.

When a pidgin becomes the primary language of a group of children in a given community, it undergoes a remarkable transformation. Because it now belongs to these children, it is used for a great variety of functions — children play in it, pray in it, count in it, ask questions, fight and joke in it, grow up speaking it daily — and to cope with its expanded roles in the lives of its speakers, it quickly expands its vocabulary and grammatical constructions. Today, there exist two indigenous creoles, Kriol (spoken across the north of Australia by Aboriginal people) and Torres Strait Creole (the *lingua franca* or shared language of most Torres Strait Islanders), both of which arose almost a hundred years ago and are now into the fourth and fifth generation of speakers. Largely because of their usefulness as areal common languages, they have gained speakers at the expense of traditional indigenous languages; today each creole has about 15,000 speakers. I am not sure what McRae means when he states that creoles have 'comparatively complex language'. Linguistically speaking, creoles are full and 'proper' languages: they are as linguistically complex as other languages, differing only in their origin as pidgins. (There is speculation that French, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian were originally creolised forms of Latin.) In many parts of the world creoles have become national languages, are written down, have dictionaries

and written grammars, and are used in media, schools and government instrumentalities. This is not the case in Australia; although both creoles have orthographies and dictionaries, they remain essentially spoken languages without codified norms.

The term 'Aboriginal English' (or, more accurately, Aboriginal Englishes because there are many Aboriginal varieties of English) refers, not to a separate language, but rather to dialects or varieties of English, spoken predominantly by Aboriginal people — though of course not all Aboriginal people speak forms of Aboriginal English — and which differ in systematic phonological and grammatical ways from one another and from Standard Australian English. Vocabulary items may not always be shared by speakers of Aboriginal Englishes, but there is a surprising uniformity, considering that they are spoken across the whole continent of Australia. Recent linguistic work has shown that these dialects of Australian English are rule-governed, although the rules are not necessarily those of the standard language and there is much more variation than is allowed by the standard.

The booklet seeks to counter misunderstanding and prejudice about these language varieties by taking the reader through three steps: **awareness** of the linguistic issues involved; **acknowledgement** of the different varieties; and, most difficult of all, taking **action** to teach in a linguistically sensitive way, not as an exercise in remediation but by building on the children's existing language skills and their language learning strategies as practising bilinguals. These can serve as resources for extending the students' general language awareness and skill. It deals briefly with questions of language and identity as well as language and power. Clearly, the language varieties under discussion have been stigmatised because of misunderstanding and, although the

author is too polite to say so, their association with racist stereotypes. Academic linguists in Australia are partly to blame for this state of affairs, as even now some are reluctant to claim true language status for Australian and other creoles.

The booklet contains a number of short information sections: extracts from interviews with teachers; examples of written Kriol; Aboriginal stories in Standard Australian English from Toomelah Public School; a deft summary of Diana Eades's work on Aboriginal English as a code and Aboriginal communicative conventions; the basic principles in teaching literacy to indigenous students enunciated by Robert Eagleson, Susan Kaldor and Ian Malcolm in their influential book, *English and the Aboriginal Child*; a list of basic practices for effective Aboriginal literacy teaching; some features of Aboriginal English by Ian Malcolm and Patricia Konigsberg; and a list of resources for teachers who want to read the texts in full. (Another book of interest, Jean Harkins' recent *Bridging Two Worlds: Aboriginal English and Crosscultural Understanding*, was reviewed by Sean Ulm in *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 22(2), July/August 1994: 163-164.)

The case studies of five school programs, and of Kriol-English bilingual schooling at Barunga, demonstrate that schools throughout Australia can achieve successful outcomes for language and literacy programs based on validation and acceptance of their students' home language and culture. Although some mention is made of Torres Strait Islander students, the focus is on Aboriginal students, who are more numerous and who speak a greater number of language varieties.

The booklet is very attractively produced, with line drawings and coloured photographs on every page. It is clearly and simply written, sometimes at the expense of accuracy, as I pointed out above with some of the definitions. And, speaking of accuracy, while I was pleased to find my name mentioned as the author of a book on Torres Strait Creole, I was disconcerted to find that the title is twice given incorrectly and that my name is three times misspelled. Perhaps other sections, with which I am not so familiar, are also less than accurate. On the other hand, perhaps accuracy doesn't matter in a booklet aimed at a general audience, provided that its heart is in the right place.

As a non-specialist introduction to Aboriginal Englishes and Australian creoles, this booklet is long overdue. It is accessible and answers in advance some of the objections of teachers unfamiliar with the languages it discusses. It is above all practically orientated. Despite a rather shaky theoretical content, it demonstrates how a number of schools have built successful teaching programs through acknowledging, accepting, and positively evaluating their indigenous students' non-traditional languages.

Editor's Note: The booklet can be obtained from Ms Janet Readshaw, Literacy and ESL Section, DEET, GPO Box 9890, Canberra 2601. Phone: (06) 240 9086; Fax (06) 240 9202.

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