Investigating Literacy Achievement for Students Who Speak Aboriginal English

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Aboriginal English

- A different dialect of English which varies throughout Australia – NOT a deficient or inadequate form of English
- An important part of identity and culture in Aboriginal communities
- The first language of many Aboriginal students in New South Wales
# Two Ways for Aboriginal Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spoken Language</th>
<th>Written Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Aboriginal Education Policy requires teachers in NSW to accept and respect Aboriginal English.</td>
<td>The NSW English K-6 Syllabus requires all students in the state to read and write standard Australian English.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Why do Aboriginal students need to learn standard English (SE)?

- SE is a prerequisite to equal participation in areas such as employment and further education
- Aboriginal English speaking children should have the right to education that begins with their own dialect and to learn SE as a second dialect
What happens when we do not recognise Aboriginal English?

Diana Eades (1995)

• “Aboriginal students are still being wrongly classified ‘slow learners’, in large part because of their different ways of communication, particularly their different ways of responding to questions.”

• Aboriginal students are “over-represented in remedial classes”.

Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979
Could it happen here?

- Children spoke Black English Vernacular (BEV) and were classified as learning disabled
- African-American parents took School District Board to court to prove BEV was a barrier to learning
- Linguists proved BEV is sufficiently different to SE to be a barrier
- Judge ordered District recognize BEV, develop a program for teachers to recognise it and use the knowledge in teaching students Standard English
**Evidence from Basic Skills Tests**

**Y5 Aboriginal students’ literacy**

- The expected growth from Year 3 to Year 5 is about 6 to 7 points on this scale.
- The gap between the mean score of All state and ATSI students in 1998 was 5.1 and in 2004 it was 5 points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>All NSW</th>
<th>NESB1</th>
<th>ATSI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

[Bar chart showing the comparison of scores for different groups over the years.]
What do we learn by comparing Y3 and Y5 literacy results?

- Mean Y3 All NSW score in 1998 was 49.2
- Mean Y3 ATSI score in 1998 was 44.3
- In 1998 there was a gap of 4.9 points between Y3 All NSW mean and ATSI mean
- 2004 Y3 gap was 4.7
- In 1998 there was a gap of 5.1 points between Y5 All NSW mean and ATSI mean
- 2004 Y5 gap was 5
- The gap is growing - ATSI students are further behind in Y5 than they were in Y3
Research into Aboriginal English

- Muhlhausler and Rose’s 1996 research in remote schools in SA and NT suggested using ESL methodology to teach ESD.
- Malcolm and Koscieleckii (1997) identified features of Aboriginal English used by older members in La Perouse community, Sydney.
- No research using students in NSW found.
- No quantitative research could be found.
1999 NSW Quantitative Research with Aboriginal English speakers

- 1998 Basic Skills Test (BST) for Y3 and Y5 grammar responses in the language section
- BST is a compulsory test – done by all students in NSW

- 1998 Writing Assessment Program (WrAP) Y3 and Y5 grammar criteria
- WrAP was an optional test – not done in many remote schools
- So, expect ‘light’ AE
Comparisons of Student Results

- ATSI to non-ATSI – compared difficulty
- Aboriginal results compared to features of Aboriginal English
- Aboriginal to NESB – are the difficult skills for each group similar?
- NESB to ESB – compared difficulty
- NESB results compared to NESB language features
- Proportion of NESB students to proportion of Aboriginal students not achieving skills
Results of non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal student comparison

In the BST, AE speakers had difficulty with
- prepositions (at), verb form (seen for saw) and verb agreement (are for is) in both Y3 and Y5
- demonstrative adjective (them for these) in Y5

In the Writing Tasks, AE speakers had difficulty with
- correct sentence pattern and prepositions in Y3
- articles in Y5

These are AE features noted by Diana Eades (1995)
Here is some writing about the NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM. Some parts of the writing have been left out. Colour in the bubble next to the correct answer to fill in each of the gaps.

| Last Thursday we travelled to the National Maritime Museum | on | to | by | in |
| Inside the museum we saw the fastest boat ever built, was made by an Australian. Next we looked at displays about fishing, whaling and sea trading. | | | | |
| of all we found out how Aboriginal people in Northern Australia made canoes. canoes were made. One was a bark canoe and the other was a wooden dug-out canoe. | | | | |
Results of comparison of NESB to ESB – skills that were harder

These skills were only harder in Y3, not in Y5

- BST – subject/verb agreement, preposition
- Writing – pronouns, tense, subject/verb agreement, articles in a description

These skills are acquired later by ESL students according to Krashen (1982) in his Natural Order Hypothesis
# Results of comparison of NESB to Aboriginal English speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BST Writing</th>
<th>Harder for NESB</th>
<th>Both find hard</th>
<th>Harder for AE speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y3 + Y5</td>
<td><em>Articles in both tasks</em>&lt;br&gt;Subject/verb</td>
<td><em>Verb tense in instructions</em></td>
<td>Prepositions Article, a/an Verb form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y3 only</td>
<td>Preposition, on the beach</td>
<td><em>Subject/verb in instructions</em></td>
<td><em>Sent. pattern in instructions</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y5 only</td>
<td><em>Tense in a description</em></td>
<td>Conjunctions in description</td>
<td><em>Modality Pronouns</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What can we conclude?

- AE speakers have as much need for explicit teaching as do NESB students
- Language features differ for NESB and AE
- ESL teaching focuses on spoken language but AE should be a respected spoken dialect
- AE speakers need to focus on writing for a purpose and deconstructing texts in reading
What do speakers of Aboriginal English need?

Davies, Grove and Wilkes, 1997 (DEETYA Report)

• Educators should be trained to recognise the specific language ecology of the Aboriginal community in which they will teach

• Teachers should be trained in the explicit teaching of English as a second dialect

• Research into how to use oral AE as a transfer strategy to SE in early stages of schooling
• Analysis of Language texts showed that the discourse of the texts would not have adversely influenced Aboriginal students.

• Analysis of Reading texts showed that there were some questions where students who speak Aboriginal English performed better and others where they performed less well.
Analysis of Reading Texts

Narratives

• Narrative texts were relatively easier for students who spoke Aboriginal English even though the questions were often harder inferential questions.

• Similar to findings of Heath (1983) in a longitudinal study of the black community ‘Trackton’ in the US, which had a strong oral tradition of narrative discourse.
Magpie Island – Year 5

Questions that were easier for Aboriginal students were

- Which event in the story was imagined?
- What was Magpie’s problem before he felt a surge of hope?
Analysis of Reading Texts
Factual Texts

• Factual text questions were relatively harder for students who spoke Aboriginal English even though these questions were easier for the whole state – Is discourse unfamiliar?
• Might be similar to findings of Heath (1994) where Trackton children ‘seem to have skipped learning to label, list features and give what-explanations’.
Fact File on Australian Authors Who Love the Sea

Questions

• Which author grew up on a beef farm? (photographs)

• Who died in 1958? (names)
Reading Text Analysis
Interesting Findings

- A text that did not have an authentic voice was difficult for Aboriginal students even though it was about an Aboriginal person.
- A text that presented a science experiment in the guise of a magic trick did not impart the intended knowledge about science.
- A text from a similar cultural discourse was easier even though it was foreign (PNG).
Marlene Stewart – Year 5

- No authentic voice even though about an Aboriginal person
- Question about the meaning of ‘looked forward to’ was more difficult for Aboriginal students

We always looked forward to visiting the Coorong in the school holidays. Our families loaded up the drays with cooking pots and other things. The children liked to sit on top as they travelled along.

Most of the children at Point McLeay were good swimmers because our parents taught us in the lake when we were young. We used to like playing in the sandhills and fishing off the jetty or from the shore with fishing lines we made from string or nylon.
Text presented an experiment in the guise of a magic trick

Question ‘Why does the egg float?’ was harder – chose ‘It is a magic trick’

Question about performing was easier
A text from a similar cultural discourse was easier even though it was foreign (from Papua New Guinea) and the questions were inferential / main idea.
Scaffolding Literacy for Indigenous students