EDUCATIONAL FAILURE OR SUCCESS: ABORIGINAL CHILDREN’S NON-STANDARD ENGLISH UTTERANCES

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Within the Australian education system, Aboriginal students’ use of non-standard English features is often viewed simplistically as evidence of non-attainment of literacy and oral-English milestones. One reason for this is the widespread use of assessment tools which fail to differentiate between native-English speakers and students who are learning English as a second language. In these assessments, non-standard English features are framed as ‘mistakes’ and low scores taken as evidence of ‘poor’ performance. This paper will contrast a mistake-oriented analysis with one that incorporates knowledge of the students’ first language. It will clearly show that when consideration is given to the first language, a more nuanced picture of English proficiency emerges: one that is attuned to the specific second language learning pathway and thus far better placed to inform both assessment and classroom instruction.

KEY WORDS: ESL, Assessment, Alyawarr English, Mixed Languages, Education

INTRODUCTION

Within the government agencies of Australia a deficit model of Indigenous children has emerged. This is evidenced by the tendency to develop models which cast non-Indigenous, monolingual, Standard Australian English-speaking children as the ‘norm’, against which difference is problematised as deficit. For example, the Closing the Gap initiative (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) explicitly defines the ‘gap’ as between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students – rather than in terms of what Indigenous students’ own goals are for their futures (see Armstrong et al., 2012 for similar observations, and an example of a study taking a different approach). While Australian Indigenous people continue to articulate their desire for their children to grow up as strong multilingual adults (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2012), the only language gap being closed concerns Standard Australian English (SAE).

This deficit thinking is apparent in several other respects with regard to language. While the Northern Territory Department of Education’s Curriculum Framework (NTCF) states that 40% of its students are classified as ‘English as a Second Language’ (ESL) of which an unspecified proportion are Aboriginal students (Northern Territory Department of Education and Training [NT DET], 2009; see also Wigglesworth & Simpson, 2008), by and large...
these students follow the same curriculum, and receive the same instruction and assessment as non-ESL students. Several reports, including the current Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NT DET, 1999, 2010), acknowledge the shortage of teachers equipped with training in the explicit teaching of English for ESL learners.

With respect to assessment, the NT Department of Education has a local version of the NLLIA ESL Bandscopes (McKay, Hudson & Sapuppo, 1994) called the ESL Pathways (NT DET, 2009). This document consists of descriptors of the typical pathway travelled by students learning English as a second language. These descriptors are organised into levels, which may be used to track and report progress, as well as to assess learning needs. However, the document does not differentiate Aboriginal students whose first language (L1) is a contact language – such as Kriol or an Aboriginal English variety – despite the fact that these students are recognised in other educational jurisdictions as following a different language acquisition pathway. Queensland, for example, has the additional Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (Education Queensland, 2008). As Angelo and Hudson (2012) note, despite the various problems with scales (see McNamara & Elder, 2010), in the context of Queensland, the ongoing development of this tool is an important endeavour as the English-language learning needs of this cohort are largely invisible elsewhere within the Queensland education system.

Aboriginal students learning English as a second language are also routinely assessed using tasks and tools developed for the native-English speaking population. This includes school-entry screening exams, ongoing informal and formal assessment by classroom teachers, and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) standardised testing regime. The NAPLAN tests are taken by all Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Not only are these tests not validated for ESL students, the administering authority does not differentiate between ESL and non-ESL learners when analysing the results (the ‘language background’ of each student is recorded, but not their SAE proficiency) (Lingard, Creagh & Vass, 2012). So while its focus is ostensibly literacy and numeracy, the NAPLAN tests are, additionally, a de facto English language test for ESL students (Wigglesworth, Simpson & Loakes, 2011).

When Indigenous ESL students are generally undifferentiated from their native-English speaking peers, they are easily misrepresented as ‘deficient’. This paper will explore one way that understanding of ESL students’ proficiency in SAE could be improved, and the deficiency model undermined. It will do this by taking a language sample and evaluating it using a traditional ‘SAE-centric’ approach. This will be then be contrasted with an alternative analysis that incorporates an understanding of the structural similarities between the L1 and SAE. This will show in detail how the SAE-centric alone produces a distorted view of student progress.
METHOD

Data for this paper come from the corpus of recordings made for the Aboriginal Child Language Acquisition 2 (ACLA2) project (see http://languages-linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/projects/acla2), a longitudinal study of the interaction of home and school languages in Aboriginal communities. It has several field sites, and the present study draws upon the data collected by the author at a small, central Australian Aboriginal community. This sub-corpus consists of more than 50 hours of naturalistic video recordings of six focus children aged 5–8 (plus their relatives and classmates). Recordings were made in home and school contexts, over a period of two years at six-monthly intervals. Approximately 60% of recorded minutes of the video corpus were transcribed by the author, in conjunction with two research assistants who reside in the community, speak the same language(s) as the focus children and are closely related to them.

The children in this community speak Alyawarr English as their first language. Alyawarr English is a new language that has emerged in the community, probably within the last twenty years, and which shows evidence of a variety of source languages: SAE, Kriol (Munro, 2000; Sandefur, 1979), Aboriginal English varieties (Koch, 2000; Malcolm & Kaldor, 1991), and Alyawarr, a Pama-nyungan language of the Arandic sub-group (Yallop, 1977). These languages have contributed different elements to Alyawarr English: verb morphology derives from SAE/Kriol, and most nominal morphology derives from Alyawarr. The lexicon is mainly derived from SAE/Kriol with some Alyawarr words also in common usage. In addition to Alyawarr English, children are exposed to the traditional language, Alyawarr, at home, and frequently respond (in Alyawarr English) to conversation conducted in that language. Children are exposed to SAE through media, when observing adults in the community interact with non-Indigenous outsiders, or while in town. Generally speaking, the first time they would be required to produce SAE themselves is at school. For the present analysis I have extracted all the transcribed utterances of Tiffany (name changed) at age 7:0, totalling 827 utterances for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

A SAE-CENTRIC ANALYSIS

In this section Tiffany’s utterances will be analysed in a way that most closely reflects the main approach taken within the education system. That is, language is assessed according to what structures and expressions are grammatically (in)correct SAE. I will refer to this approach as ‘error analysis’, although in the literature ‘error analysis’ is used in a more restricted sense to refer to studies which examine the type of error, but not their incidence (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). In carrying out this analysis, I will highlight some of the many challenges and problematic assumptions that underlie this method.
The first challenge in conducting an error analysis is getting a sample of ‘target’ language. This may be a reasonably straightforward task with children whose L1 is a language unrelated to SAE, and so their L1 is clearly distinguishable from SAE on grammatical and lexical grounds. However, L1 speakers of languages that are closely related to English pose a different challenge. How are we to tell if We hot! or What I got write here? are attempts at SAE or use of the L1? In practice, utterances are determined to be ‘attempts at SAE’ on contextual grounds (e.g. the student is ‘talking to the teacher’ or ‘doing a NAPLAN test’) rather than on structural grounds. To mirror this approach, all Tiffany’s utterances that met this contextual definition were included for error analysis.

The data set also contains utterances directed at either unspecified or Alyawarr English-speaking interlocutors (Aboriginal teaching staff, fellow students). Instead of excluding these wholesale, some have been included on the basis of the following structural definition: utterances which contain structural features that make them non-‘standard’ Alyawarr English from the perspective of adult norms, suggesting that they are attempts at SAE (including utterances which are structurally SAE but would have been missed if a purely contextual inclusion criterion was used). This definition is by no means unproblematic, but this should be seen as a constraint of the error analysis approach, particularly when applied to L1 speakers of languages that are closely related to the L2.

The next step is to examine the utterances for errors. Herein lies the second challenge: whether to define errors on the grounds of grammaticality or acceptability (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Errors of grammaticality can be determined with respect to the standard rules of the code: ‘the man falled over’ contains the grammatical error of using the regular past tense ending -ed on an irregular verb. By contrast, an error of acceptability arises when, for example, using a present tense form to describe an event which took place in the past. Making an ‘error of acceptability’ judgement may require knowledge of the discourse context, and involve considerations of style and other subjective criteria (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). In the current analysis errors have been judged primarily on grammatical grounds, though in some cases available contextual information revealed errors on the grounds of semantic acceptability: for example, the instances when the third singular masculine pronoun ‘he’ was used to refer to a girl.

A further complication is that a clause may be considered erroneous on grammatical grounds but it may be unclear exactly what the error is. For example, in telling a story using a wordless picture book prompt, Tiffany states ‘The girl touch the horse’. While the uninflected verb is clearly erroneous on grammatical grounds, it is unclear what the intended meaning is (past or present time) and therefore what the ‘missing’ inflection is. It is possible to make a subjective acceptability judgement that SAE narratives typically use past tense, and so this is an error of regular past tense. But it is also possible to argue that present tense is regularly used to foreground events in SAE narrative. When contradictory explanations are
possible, error analysis forces a decision on subjective criteria, or necessitates excluding the
token from analysis. The latter course of action has been followed here.

Once all the errors have been counted (see Table 1), we can examine the results and see what
they tell us about Tiffany’s use of SAE. The column entitled ‘Errors’ represents the raw error
score. From this, it appears that the most errors have been made with incorrect choice of third
person singular pronoun (e.g. ‘He take him’, where ‘he’ refers to a girl) and with the expression
of an auxiliary verb (e.g. ‘They going to pick that man’). The least errors (total = 1) have been
made with use of the definite article, third singular ‘-s’, agreement on the verb ‘be’, and past
tense ‘-ed’. However, taking the red pen to the errors alone does not tell us anything about
Tiffany’s correct usage of the structure in question. If we now consider the actual incidence of
obligatory contexts for each feature and determine the percentage of correct use, a different
picture emerges. For example, although Tiffany makes one fewer mistake with auxiliary
expressions than she does with third singular pronouns, it should be borne in mind that there are
more obligatory occasions for auxiliary expression in the data (see column ‘N’ for the incidence
of each feature). Therefore auxiliary expression was actually achieved 36% of the time,
compared to 21% for correct third singular subject. Similarly, while there was only one error
made with the regular past tense suffix ‘-ed’, and agreement on the verb ‘be’ the percentage of
correct usage of these features is 67% and 95% respectively. Moreover, some features have so
few obligatory contexts in the sample (for example, the use of third singular ‘-s’), which could
be the result of a variety of factors, including task bias (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005), that caution
should be used in drawing conclusions about Tiffany’s proficiency with them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Pronouns (Singular Subject)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3sg (e.g. ‘He’, ‘she’, ‘it’)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliary/Copular expression</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auxiliary expression (e.g. ‘He is walking’)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>copular expression (e.g. ‘He is funny’)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural marking on nouns</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Verb agreement (present tense)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘have’ (main verb)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3sg -s (e.g. ‘He walk’)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consider the following:

Example (1)
SAE: She put him under the tree
AlyE: I bin putim im lang tri
   3sg PAST put.TR 3sg PREP tree

Example (2)
‘He put it on the tree’

The SAE and AlyE sentences in (1) differ structurally from each other in five ways:
i. subject pronoun: different 3sg paradigm in each language (SAE = she/he/it; AlyE = I)
ii. transitive maker: -im on AlyE transitive verbs; not marked on SAE verbs
iii. preposition: ‘under’ in SAE; ‘lang’ in AlyE
iv. article: ‘the’ in SAE; no form for AlyE
v. past tense marking: bin auxiliary in AlyE; irregular infinitive form in SAE

Thus, when we consider Tiffany’s attempt at SAE in (2), we find – using the error-count approach – that she has produced a sentence with three mistakes: subject pronoun (should be ‘she’), wrong object pronoun (should be ‘him’) and wrong preposition (should be ‘under’). But this assessment fails to capture what she has actually attempted and successfully achieved. We can only know this if we use AlyE as the starting point. This approach reveals that she has achieved three of the five necessary adjustments: she has dropped the -im transitive marker, dropped the bin past tense marker and used the correct SAE article. In the SAE-centric analysis conducted in the previous section, Tiffany didn’t get any points for
recognising that *bin* and *-im* are not part of SAE, but her consistent use of transitive verbs without transitive marking in the SAE sample indicates that she has recognised this difference. Interestingly, the absence of *-im* from SAE is referenced by Tiffany in an earlier recording (aged 6) in which she teases (genially) a fellow student for using *-im* when talking to a teacher: Tiffany repeats the student’s utterance, emphasising the verb-final *-im* and then states *I don no yo lengij* ‘She doesn’t understand your language’. This anecdote suggests that transitive *-im* may be a salient ‘non-SAE’ feature for Tiffany.

By comparing the above sentence (2) to the equivalent Alyawarr English sentence, it is also possible to identify several language structures where unsuccessful attempts at changes have been made: using an SAE preposition instead of the AlyE one, and changing the object pronoun – possibly an example of hypercorrection that is a noted feature of learner utterances (e.g. Selinker, 1972). So Tiffany has done five things to this sentence to move it from categorically AlyE to something nearer to SAE. By contrast, the error-count methodology considers Tiffany’s sentence to be just as ‘wrong’ as the following sentence (3), in which only the AlyE morphology has been dropped (*-im* and *bin*). This demonstrates that a ‘finish-line only’ approach can end up under-differentiating between students, benchmarking students speaking their first language as equivalent to students who have begun to experiment (sometimes unsuccessfully) with SAE structures.

Example (3)

I put im lang tree

Knowledge of the L1 can also help uncover ‘camouflaged’ forms, that is, forms which have two different underlying analyses or semantics in each language (Siegel, 2010; Spears, 1982). The surface similarities of such forms may obscure the underlying differences for the L2 learner, and make evaluation of their use of these forms challenging. One example of a camouflaged form is the Alyawarr English first singular pronoun *am* [ʌm], and the SAE first singular plus auxiliary contraction ‘I’m’. In fast speech the pronunciation of this contracted form moves from [aɪm] to [ʌm] in SAE. In Alyawarr English the first singular pronoun *am* occurs in complementary distribution with another first singular pronoun *ai* [aɪ]. *Am* is used in the present tense with any aspect, including verbless clauses (see example set 4) and *ai* is used for all other tenses, as well as clauses marked for mood and negation, as demonstrated in example set (5) below. In SAE the ‘I’m’ contraction is used when forming present continuous or copular constructions as demonstrated in example (6).
Example (4)

Am hebim im thiphip
1sgS have.TR 3sgO bird
‘I have a bird’

Am angri
1sgS hungry
‘I’m hungry’

Am meikimb msetwet
1sgS make.TR.CONT car
‘I’m making a car’

Example (5)

Ai bin getin tenbela
1sgS PAST get.TR ten
‘I got ten’

Ai gat meikim msetwet
1sgS INTENT make.TR car
‘I’m going to make a car’

Ai na meikimb msetwet
1sgS DES make.TR.CONT car
‘I want to make a car’

Ai don leikit na
1sgS NEG like.TR NA
‘I don’t like it now’

Example (6)

I’m going home
I’m happy

In the language sample of Tiffany’s SAE used above, [ʌm] and [aɪ] are in complementary distribution, as shown in Table 2: [ʌm] only occurs in copular and present continuous clauses, whereas [aɪ] occurs with simple present (and the other contexts shown in Table 2). Thus, her use of [aɪ] conforms to SAE grammar, but not Alyawarr English grammar (in which [ʌm] occurs with simple present verbs as well). But this only demonstrates that Tiffany has proficiency in maintaining control of the different distribution patterns of [ʌm] and [aɪ] in Alyawarr English and SAE. As there is no example of ‘I am’ [aɪæm] in clearly uncontracted form, it is not possible to be sure that her use of [ʌm] reflects an underlying analysis of ‘I’ plus ‘am’. In addition, this means that the three tokens of [ʌm] in the sample might have been erroneously counted as cases of correct auxiliary verb expression and agreement. This highlights an additional shortcoming of the error analysis performed above: the target-centric focus on SAE obscures potential underlying differences and prevents them from being integrated into a program of explicit instruction of SAE features.
Table 2. Distribution of [ʌm], [aɪ] and [aɪæm] in Tiffany’s SAE speech sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Following morpheme</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>I’m/Am</th>
<th>I am</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[ʌ]</td>
<td>[aɪ]</td>
<td>[aɪæm]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-ing e.g. ‘I’m doing the work’</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NP (i.e copular) e.g. ‘I’m right’</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V simple present e.g. ‘I pick this one’</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>got V e.g. ‘What I got say’</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t V e.g. ‘I dunno’</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V past irregular e.g. ‘I found this’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modal aux + V e.g. ‘I might pick Nick’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to identifying camouflaged forms, knowledge of the L1 structures can also give us insight into why some structures present more of a challenge than others. In Table 1 above, the rates of subject-verb agreement were presented: Tiffany produces near perfect SAE agreement on the verb ‘be’, but is only 29% correct with the verb ‘have’. Alyawarr English and SAE differ in several ways which may contribute to this difference. Firstly, Alyawarr English does not have a system of subject-verb agreement so the verb remains unchanged regardless of the number or plurality of the subject. Example set (7) shows the contrast between SAE and AlyE for ‘have’ in present tense clauses: in SAE the verb form changes to ‘has’ with 3sg pronoun subjects, singular noun subjects, and singular demonstrative pronoun subjects, while in AlyE the form stays the same (hebim) regardless of subject.

Example (7)

In hebim mwetek
3sgS have.TR car
‘He has a car’

Themah hebim mwetek
3plS have.TR car
‘They have a car’

Gel hebim loli
Girl have.TR lolly
‘The girl has a lolly’

Ola gel-rnem hebim loli
all girl-PL have.TR lolly
‘All the girls have lollies’

In fact, in the language sample Tiffany always produces the form ‘have’, which is ‘erroneous’ on the five occasions it is used with third singular pronominal subjects (N=2),
singular noun subjects (N=1), and singular demonstrative pronoun subjects (N=2). So it would appear that Tiffany is using the same paradigmatic pattern as exists in Alyawarr English. The verb ‘be’ has a different pattern of agreement from that of ‘have’ in SAE. In present tense clauses there is a three way split depending on subject pronoun, as demonstrated in example set (8).

Example (8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>SAE (I am going)</th>
<th>Alyawarr English (Im stenapbat)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1sg subject</td>
<td>I am going</td>
<td>‘He/She/It is going’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am happy</td>
<td>‘He/She/It is happy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular subjects</td>
<td>He/She/It is going</td>
<td>‘He/She/It is happy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John is going</td>
<td>‘John is happy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John is happy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural subjects</td>
<td>You are going</td>
<td>‘They are going’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We are going</td>
<td>‘We are happy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They are going</td>
<td>‘They are happy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural subjects</td>
<td>The kids are going</td>
<td>‘The kids are happy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John is happy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see from the left column of the above example set, ‘be’ occurs as an auxiliary verb in present continuous verb phrases of SAE as well as in present copular clauses (right column). In Alyawarr English, on the other hand, present continuous verb phrases consist of a main verb that is marked stem-finally with aspect. There is no auxiliary and the verb does not change to agree with the subject, as demonstrated in example set (9).

Example (9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alyawarr English</th>
<th>SAE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Im stenapbat</td>
<td>Them stenapbat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3sgS stand.up.CONT</td>
<td>3plS stand.up.CONT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘He is standing’</td>
<td>‘They are standing’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alyawarr English exhibits the functional equivalent of the SAE present tense copular construction with nominal-predicate clauses, as in example set (10) below. These clauses consist of two nominals or noun phrases, with one functioning as the predicative constituent.
Nominal-predicate clauses are a common feature of Australian Indigenous languages, including Alyawarr (Dixon, 2002; Yallop, 1977).

Example (10)

*Im mwerr, thet mwetek Kakey-wan iya*

3sg good DEM car uncle-one here

‘That car is good’

A summary of the different paradigms for ‘have’, present continuous and copular constructions is given in Table 3, which also shows how these paradigms relate to the paradigm used by Tiffany in her SAE speech. For the main verb ‘have’, Tiffany’s SAE paradigm resembles that of Alyawarr English in that there is only one form which doesn’t change to agree with the subject. By contrast, for present continuous and copular constructions Tiffany’s SAE ‘be’ paradigm matches the SAE ‘be’ paradigm. Alyawarr English has a ‘null’ paradigm, which may mean that the SAE paradigm is more perceptually salient than the ‘has’/’have’ contrast. Although of course, input frequency effects could also potentially account for different saliency of present tense ‘be’ versus ‘have’.

Table 3. Comparison of verb forms in AlyE, SAE and Tiffany’s SAE language sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alyawarr English</th>
<th>Standard Australian English</th>
<th>Tiffany’s SAE language sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘have’ All subjects:</td>
<td>3sg subject: ‘has’</td>
<td>‘have’ [N=7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heb ‘have’ All other subjects: ‘have’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘be’ All subjects: Ø</td>
<td>1sg: ‘am’</td>
<td>1sg: ‘am’ [N=3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>singular subjects: ‘is’</td>
<td>singular subjects: ‘is’ [N=9]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural subjects: ‘are’</td>
<td>plural subjects: ‘are’ [N=6]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This interpretation is supported in the literature on second dialect acquisition, where it has been suggested that in closely related languages the smaller differences may be the most challenging for second language learners (Kellerman, 1977; Wode, 1978; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998), leading to a reliance on L1 structures. Long (2007, p. 122) argues that this is particularly the case “if the L2 structures are perceptually nonsalient and/or communicatively redundant.” These findings therefore potentially speak to some of the difficulties specific to speakers of contact languages acquiring the standard variety (Siegel,
1999, 2010). Although other possible accounts, such as general L2 morpheme order effects, would also need to be considered in developing a hypothesis with respect to this data.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has presented two views of the same data. The first view reflects the SAE-centric lens with which curriculum, classroom pedagogy and assessment typically approach the non-standard English produced by Aboriginal students who are learning SAE as a second language. This views non-standard features as erroneous: as evidence of poor achievement. The second view draws on knowledge of L1 structures to identify four problems with viewing non-standard features as erroneous, and relying solely on them to assess SAE acquisition. Firstly, the use of non-standard features may be counted against the student despite evidence of learning as was evidenced by Tiffany’s unsuccessful attempts at using an SAE object pronoun and preposition in example (2). Secondly, a SAE-centric gaze was not able to identify when Tiffany had understood that some morphology (for example, transitive -im) had no formal or functional equivalent in SAE. She received no credit for this achievement in an error-focused assessment. Thirdly, the use of some features may be counted in Tiffany’s favour – as ‘correct’ – whereas knowledge of the equivalent L1 paradigm would give us reason for caution in drawing this conclusion. This was evidenced by the potential camouflaged first singular pronominal subject am/I’m. Lastly, error count alone treats all SAE structures of equal status in terms of learnability. However, there is evidence to suggest that some aspects of SAE are going to take longer for Tiffany to sort out, potentially requiring more explicit support. This was evidenced by the data showing that Tiffany performs subject-verb agreement on the verb ‘be’ but not for the verb ‘have’, and the discussion that attributed this to the relationship between SAE and the equivalent L1 paradigms.

**REFERENCES**


ARTICLES


ARTICLES


ENDNOTES

i I wish to express my thanks to Dr Samantha Disbray, Ms Denise Angelo and the three anonymous reviews for their comments, which contributed significantly to the development of this paper. I also gratefully acknowledge the contribution of research assistants Ms Linda Dobbs, Ms Michelle Dobbs and the late Ms Grizelda Kelly, the teaching staff at the community school, as well as Tiffany and the other participating children who allowed us to eavesdrop on their lives.

ii According to the NTCF this term refers to students “who speak languages other than Standard Australian English (SAE) at home” (NT DET, 2009, p. 1). This conflates two types of students: 1) those who are simultaneously acquiring SAE and another language from birth, who typically won’t require specialised support with respect to learning SAE (as they are native speakers of SAE along with another language), and 2) those students who begin their acquisition of SAE at school, and can be expected to require support, such as the explicit teaching of SAE. In the language acquisition literature the term ‘ESL’ is generally reserved solely for the latter.

iii Here the term ‘ESL’ is being used as an overarching term to cover what would otherwise referred to as English as a Foreign language (EFL), and English as a second dialect (ESD). EFL is a better descriptor of the language context for a large proportion of remote-living Aboriginal students.

iv The three ‘mistakes’ are: wrong subject, wrong preposition and no article.

v An alternate analysis is $a=m$, where $=m$ is a present tense clitic. A similar is analysis given for Light Warlpiri, a mixed language further north (O’Shannessy, 2013), where the clitic $=m$ is ‘non future’ and attaches to subject pronouns of all person (producing *yam* ‘2sg=NFUT’ and *wim* ‘3pl=NFUT’, for example). In Alyawarr English there are distinct present tense forms for 1sg (*am*), 3sg (*im*) and to some extent 3pl (*them*), but since the $=m$ has not spread throughout the paradigm, the analysis of complementary distribution is being advanced here.

vi All the examples in the language sample are present tense, main clause tokens so ‘have’ as an auxiliary or in past tense cannot be examined.