

○ TEACHER AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT ABORIGINAL ENGLISH IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Repeated assessments of literacy skills have shown that Aboriginal students do not achieve at the same level as their non-Aboriginal peers. Many Aboriginal students speak Aboriginal English, a dialect different from the Standard Australian English used in schools. Research shows that it is crucial for educators in bidialectal contexts to be aware of students' home language and to adopt appropriate educational responses. For over a decade, the ABC of Two-Way Literacy and Learning Professional Development Program has sought to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students in Western Australia. By promoting a two-way bidialectal approach to learning, Aboriginal English is valued, accommodated and used to bridge to learning in Standard Australian English. This paper draws on a large research project, which used qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate the impact of the on-going professional development for teachers. It reports on the attitudes and understandings of teachers, with and without professional development and working in different contexts.

KEY WORDS: Aboriginal English, bidialectal education, language awareness, teacher education, Aboriginal education

INTRODUCTION

Today it is generally understood that the maintenance of a student's first language is fundamental to their success in learning a second language. This understanding has now also been extended to the value and importance of the first dialect. Extensive studies in the USA (Alim, 2005, p. 138, after Gonzalez & Darling-Hammond, 1997; Baugh, 2007; Harris-Wright, 1999; Lanehart, 2006; Lippi-Green, 1997) provide evidence of the impact of the first dialect (AAVE or African-American Vernacular English) in terms of educational equity and educational success. In fact, the 'Ebonics Controversy' in Oakland, California, raised considerable awareness of the impact of dialect difference; issues which are equally as relevant in Australian schools in relation to students whose first dialect is Aboriginal English.

Many Aboriginal students speak Aboriginal English (AE), a variety of English that differs from the Standard Australian English (SAE) required in schools. According to Butcher (2008, p. 625), for example,

Many of the 455,000 strong Aboriginal population of Australia speak some form of Australian Aboriginal English (AAE) at least some of the time and it is the first (and only) language of a large number of Aboriginal children. This means their language is somewhere on a continuum ranging from something very close to Standard Australian English (SAE) at one end, through to something very close to [a] creole at the other.

While AE may share a number of grammatical features with SAE, it differs markedly on lexical, semantic, phonological and pragmatic levels (see further Malcolm et al., 1999; Malcolm et al., 2002). Moreover, learning another dialect, as with '[l]earning another language opens up access to other value systems and ways of interpreting the world, encouraging inter-cultural understanding and helping reduce xenophobia' (UNESCO, 2003). AE also differs from the creole language of the Australian mainland, (i.e., Kriol, spoken in the far the north west of Western Australia (WA) through to the Queensland gulf country (Harris, 2007)). Nonetheless, code-switching between Kriol and AE in these areas is common (Butcher, 2008).

In Western Australian schools, Aboriginal students may come from AE and/or Kriol backgrounds into educational environments where SAE is the medium of teaching and assessment. In the face of this new dialect and often inadequate explicit instruction in SAE, lack of achievement and absenteeism is common. Indeed Zubrick et al. (2006) in their large scale survey of Western Australian Aboriginal children's health found speakers of AE were three times more likely to show low level academic performance, although they do not attribute this lack of educational success solely to standard English language skills. This finding is supported

by the results of standardised literacy assessments implemented by the state Department of Education which have demonstrated that Aboriginal students in WA continue to achieve at lower levels (WA Department of Education and Training, 2007). Clearly these studies point to important equity issues, which are acknowledged for minority and indigenous groups globally, and which have been recognised by UNESCO: 'It is an obvious yet not generally recognized truism that learning in a language which is not one's own provides a double set of challenges, not only is there the challenge of learning a new language but also that of learning new knowledge contained in that language' (UNESCO, 2003).

Historically, AE has been widely stigmatised as 'bad English' or 'rubbish talk' by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Similar attitudes towards *Indigenous English*, spoken by Indigenous Canadians in Saskatchewan schools, have been observed where stigmatisation has resulted in the dialect being perceived as 'a substandard, deviant form of standard English' (Sterzuk, 2008, p. 12). However, (Harrison, 2004, p. 8) holds that AE is 'not something to be denigrated but something that mirrors and performs the identity of Aboriginal students' and therefore demands recognition and respect. To this end, teachers need to be aware of the importance of not only developing their students' SAE, but also recognising AE as fundamental to students' Aboriginal identity and ongoing acceptance within their own communities. The consequences of exposure to Standard English in one setting, and one's own dialect in another, have been addressed by Rampton (1998) who introduced the term *plural ethnicities* and the practice of *crossing* from one identity to another. Paris (2009, p. 431) also addresses this practice but prefers the term '*linguistic dexterity* – the ability to use a range of language practices in a multiethnic society' and '*linguistic plurality*, consciousness about why and how to use such dexterity in social interaction'.

The recognition of dialects in educational settings is not new and was the impetus behind the Oakland School Board when it 'called for teachers to respect the legitimacy and richness of BE [Black English] while teaching "standard English"' (Alim, 2005, p. 25). Several approaches to the accommodation of first dialects in what has been called bidialectal education have been introduced in the USA (e.g., by Harris-Wright, 1999, in Dekalb County, Georgia, and through the Kamahameha Schools in Hawaii (see Baugh, 2007)). These approaches have been categorised by Rickford (2003) into: a) the linguistically informed approach whereby teachers learn to distinguish between errors stemming from first dialect transfer and those from SAE development; b) the dialect reader approach whereby materials developed in the home dialect are used to bridge between the first and second dialect, and c) the dialect awareness approach where 'students learn the inherent variability of language' (Alim, 2005, p. 27).

Research on teacher attitudes toward language and cultural difference overseas shows that teachers tend to form negative stereotypes of students based on their command of the standard dialect (Münstermann, 1989). Similar attitudes have been attested among WA teachers (Haig, 2001; Haig & Oliver, 2003a, 2003b; Oliver & Haig, 2005). Garman (2004, p. 202) cites several examples of research showing the polarisation of beliefs in the course of teacher training, that is, students who enter a course with negative attitudes about cultural diversity become more negative, while those with positive attitudes become more culturally sensitive and responsive. Garman (2004, p. 202, after Smith, Moellam and Sherrill, 1997) cites four factors instrumental in bringing about positive attitude change: i) exposure to different cultures, ii) education, iii) travel, and iv) personal experience of discrimination.

Reeves (2006) found that teachers acknowledged their own lack of training for teaching non-native speaker students, however, they were still ambivalent about attending such professional development because they did not see this as their responsibility (Valdes, 2001) and because they have had disappointing histories of 'one-shot professional development schemes that have failed to provide the support necessary to sustain educational change and reform' (Reeves, 2006, p. 138, after Gonzalez & Darling-Hammond, 1997). A further reason for this apathy may be that teachers do not consider that professional development is needed to work with NNS students (Clair, 1995). A further finding from Reeves (2006) is also applicable to the second dialect situation. That is the perception that second-language learners should avoid using their first language while they are acquiring English. This is in spite of considerable and long-standing research into the importance of the continued use of the first language (e.g., Cummins, 1981, 2003; Krashen, 2003; Wong Fillmore, 1991).

To improve teachers' understanding of AE, the *ABC of Two-Way Literacy and Learning* professional development (ABC PD) program was launched by the Western Australian Department of Education in 1998. While the acronym *ABC* represents *Acceptance* of AE, *Bridging* to SAE, and *Cultivating* Aboriginal ways of approaching experience and knowledge, the *two-way* approach acknowledges that learning (about the other's dialect and culture) must go in both directions, between educators and students. The ABC PD program draws on all three of Rickford's approaches to bidialectal education by raising teachers' awareness of transfer and development, by introducing texts written in AE and by raising students' own awareness of dialect difference.

To date, approximately, 8500 personnel have participated in *ABC of Two-Way Literacy and Learning* PD since its inception in 1998. This includes staff at all levels and from all WA Education districts – Principals, Deputies, AIEOs, Teachers, Teachers' Aides, District Office Personnel (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) as well as cross-sectoral and inter-government PD.

In the process, *Two-Way Teams* are formed, usually comprising an Aboriginal Islander Education Officer (AIEO) and a non-Aboriginal teacher, to help disseminate information about AE. Workshops and conferences were provided to raise the level of understanding about AE, language variation in general, implications for education and bidialectal two-way approaches in the classroom. Considerable attention has focused on changing attitudes by broadening education practitioners' understanding of language variation, the historical development of AE, dialect development and cross-cultural communication. To support the delivery of the ABC program, a number of research-based publications and resources have been developed and provided as support for the PD program (Cahill, 1999; Deadly Ways to Learn Consortium, 2000; Malcolm, Grote, Eggington & Sharifian, 2002; Malcolm, Königsberg, Haig et al., 1999; Malcolm, Königsberg, Collard et al., 2002; McRae, 1994; Sharifian, Rochecouste, Malcolm, Königsberg & Collard, 2004; WA Department of Education, 2002). Other important materials developed specifically for the Western Australian context include the FELIKS program (Catholic Education Office, 1994).

This paper draws on a large research project which investigated educator attitudes and understandings about AE in Western Australian schools. It specifically examines questionnaire data obtained from teachers working in rural, remote and metropolitan regions who have and have not engaged in the ABC PD program¹. The paper addresses the following research questions:

- What attitudes to and understandings about AE (and its speakers) do teachers hold?
- Do these attitudes and understandings vary according to the location of teachers' schools?
- Do teacher attitudes and understandings vary based on their engagement in PD and training on AE?

METHODOLOGY

The study used quantitative methodologies to capture a picture of teacher attitudes and understandings about AE and the influence of the ABC PD program on their views. Questionnaires were sent to all WA District Education Offices and through them to a total of 400 teachers representative of the urban, rural and remote regions of the state. Participation within those contexts was voluntary hence the study involved a stratified random sample. Because of the frequent movement of staff throughout WA, this also enabled access to staff who had not participated in the ABC PD sessions to be included in the survey. Approximately 25% of the 400 (n=104) teachers responded to the questionnaire. Although not a large cohort, this was considered representative of the Western Australian situation with

regard to its distribution across the sectors: (70 worked in primary (K-7) schools; 10 in district high schools (K-12); and 24 in high schools (8-12)) and an adequate spread across service areas (see Tables 1–3). The low return rate may also reflect the time pressures that teachers experience and/or their prevailing attitudes to professional development.

Table 1

Location of teacher participants

Service Area	District	Number of teachers	Percentage
Canning	Canning, Albany, Goldfields, Esperance	29	28.4%
Fremantle	Fremantle/Peel, Warren-Blackwood, Bunbury, Narrogin	34	33.3%
West Coast	West Coast, Pilbara, Midwest	16	15.7%
Swan	Swan, Kimberley, Midland, School of Isolated and Distance Education	23	22.5%
Total		104	100%

Table 2

Professional Development in Aboriginal Education topics

Years of teaching experience	Number	Percentage
Relevant PD	45	43.3%
No relevant PD	59	56.7%
Total cohort	104	100.0%

Table 3

Number of years of teaching experience

Years of teaching experience	Number	Percentage
1-5 years	22	21.2%
6-10 years	11	10.6%
10-15 years	16	15.4%
15-20 years	21	20.2%
20+	34	32.7%

Of the 104 respondents, 100 indicated experience teaching Aboriginal students, ranging from less than one year to more than 21 years (Table 4). However, just fewer than half (43.3%; n=45) who had taught Aboriginal students had attended any PD sessions about AE.

Table 4

Number of years having taught Aboriginal students

Years	Number of teachers
0-5	59
6-10	19
11-15	7
16-20	6
Over 21	9

The development of the questionnaire was informed by several existing instruments (e.g., Oliver & Haig, 2005; Oliver & Purdie, 1998; Purdie, Oliver, Collard & Rochecouste, 2002; Tognini, Oliver & Purdie, 2003) which were piloted and refined. Questions sought information about the respondents’ backgrounds, their participation in the PD and their use of related material. Some 48 items required a four-point Likert scale to ensure committed

responses, with 1 indicating strong agreement and 4 strong disagreement; the remaining were open ended questions.

Analyses were undertaken using SPSS (statistical) software. Possible independent variables (e.g., location, participation in the PD, age, etc.) were examined in relation to questionnaire responses. Because the data were not normally distributed, non-parametric analytic methods were used. Teacher responses regarding attitude and knowledge/understanding were compared to background and experiential factors using chi-square procedures.

FINDINGS

AWARENESS OF AND UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT AE

When responding to open-ended questions, ‘Do you know what Aboriginal English is? (Item 1/13) If yes, how would you describe Aboriginal English?’, teachers who had engaged in PD about Aboriginal education exhibited a greater awareness about AE than those who had not. Those with PD:

- displayed greater metalinguistic awareness, using the terms ‘variation’ and ‘dialect’ instead of ‘language spoken by Aboriginal students’ and ‘the form of English spoken in Aboriginal societies where they are cut off from mainstream English’.
- displayed greater awareness and understanding about AE, although using SAE as a reference against which to measure AE rather than demonstrating a two-way bidialectal understanding, e.g., ‘with unique linguistic rules differing from SAE’; ‘sounds different to English as some words are different and the grammar and/or sentence structure is different’; and ‘English words with Aboriginal meanings (e.g. *solid*; *Toyota* meaning any 4WD vehicle)’.
- tended not to describe AE as a deficit variety (Cummins, 2003) of English compared with descriptions used by those without the PD, e.g., ‘modified or broken English’, ‘simplified English’, and a ‘slang version of English used by some Aboriginals in their home’. Nonetheless, some degree of misconception occurred in data from both groups such as a ‘mixture’, ‘combination’, ‘blend’ or ‘fusion’ of SAE and Aboriginal language(s).

More diversity in levels of knowledge and confidence was evidenced in the quantitative data. Some 36 participants (34.6%) were confident that they understood what AE is (item 2/2) (i.e., strongly agreed) and 42 (40%) agreed but with less confidence. There was a significant difference between those with ABC PD and those without for item 2/2: $\chi^2(3, N = 104) = 26.69, p = .0001$. Those who had undertaken the PD, not surprisingly, were more likely to

agree or strongly agree that they were confident of their understanding of 'what AE is'. Of concern was the quarter of the sample who were not confident (15 disagreed; 11 strongly disagreed) and who could possibly represent a considerable proportion of the teaching staff of a small country school.

Given an exemplar of AE that may be used by a student at school, i.e., 'an(d) I bin (h)urt my (h)ead' (Item 2/12), nearly a quarter of all respondents agreed that this was 'incorrect' showing a lack of understanding of possible dialect forms. Of those who disagreed, (i.e., they were not adverse to the use of the exemplar) only 25% did so strongly, which suggests that the notion of valuing students' home dialect has not consistently filtered through to all PD participants. Nonetheless, there was no significant difference based on PD attendance for this item. A significant result did occur, however, when matching responses about knowing 'what AE is' (Item 2/2) and responses to the correctness of the above exemplar (item 2/12): $\chi^2(3, N = 102) = 11.70, p = .008$. That is, those indicating higher levels of confidence in their knowledge of 'what AE is' were more likely to accommodate the exemplar in their classrooms. Of those reporting low levels of confidence in their understanding of 'what AE is', nearly one-third were intolerant of the exemplar.

School location proved to be an important factor in teacher awareness. A significant difference emerged in responses to the above AE exemplar (Item 2/12) according to location: $\chi^2(6, N = 103) = 20.49, p = .002$. Specifically, more metropolitan teachers agreed and strongly agreed that the AE example was unacceptable in the classroom, compared with the more general acceptance of this utterance among teachers from remote and rural areas. This may occur because of rural and remote teachers' greater contact with Aboriginal students and their greater acceptance of their students' home dialect.

Observed differences between the language use of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students

Some 91 of the 102 participants (89.2%) responded in the affirmative to noticing differences between the language use of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Item 2/49 – a Yes/No question). However, there was a significant difference: $\chi^2(1, N = 102) = 9.35, p = .002$, between those teachers who had undertaken the ABC PD – all strongly agreed, while 11 or 19% of teachers without the ABC PD reported that they observed no difference.

In the open-ended questions, both groups (ABC PD and non-ABC PD) explained how the language use of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students differed. These included: grammar, vocabulary, speech, writing, nonverbal language (gestures, eye contact, etc.), code-switching, language function and background knowledge/schemas. Those with ABC PD were more able to identify specific features such as tense, word order and syntax, thus demonstrating their

greater metalinguistic awareness. Those who had not undertaken the PD used more deficit descriptions, for example, *'grammatically incorrect'* and *'not complete sentences'* - thus not seeing AE as a fully functional oral language variety of English. Both respondent groups reported the use of different words or English words with distinctive meanings. For example, Aboriginal students *'substitute[d] English words with Aboriginal ones'* and *'used slang'*. A few teachers without the PD mentioned frequent swearing or *'inappropriate language usage'*.

Respondents also observed differences in pronunciation, speech patterns, intonation, accent and tone. The responses of those without ABC PD, however, reflected their need to develop greater linguistic understanding and tolerance. One respondent maintained that Aboriginal students *'tend to speak in a stilted manner'*; another that they *'mumbled- mouths closed to a degree'*; and another described how they *'run[ning] words together'*. Such portrayals of oral language demonstrate a clear lack of metalinguistic awareness and strong need for attitudinal change by these teachers regarding dialect difference.

Only a few respondents from each group mentioned code-switching, a key concept in bidialectal education. One teacher with the PD explained that *'Aboriginal students have the ability to code-switch and decide in which contexts which language is appropriate'*. This demonstrates the heightened linguistic awareness that participants can acquire from the ABC PD sessions. By contrast, teachers without the PD experience stated that their students *'speak AE with each other and SAE with the teacher'*; *'they change to suit the environment'*; and expressed awareness that *'the way in which Aboriginal children talk amongst themselves sounds different'*. While noticing how students engage, they showed no evidence of evaluating this linguistic activity positively.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AE AS A LANGUAGE VARIETY

Overall most teachers (72 of 100 who responded to this item) agreed with the statement that 'AE is a dialect of English' (Item 2/45); however, more teachers were likely to agree rather than strongly agree (48 versus 24) demonstrating a general lack of total confidence in their higher level linguistic understanding in spite of attending an ABC PD. Further, 28% of teachers disagreed with the statement or did so strongly – indicating a concerning lack of understanding about AE as a dialect of English. Approximately 80% of all teachers agreed with the statement that they 'would easily be able to identify a student who speaks Aboriginal English' (Item 2/17). This result is further supported by responses to Item 2/7 'All Aboriginal students speak Aboriginal English': only eight teachers agreed with this generalisation, with most reporting disagreement with the statement. A significant difference emerged regarding school location: $\chi^2(6, N = 103) = 16.97, p = .009$, with most remote teachers disagreeing strongly (i.e., not all Aboriginal students speak AE), whereas teachers in

rural and metropolitan regions disagreed with less confidence. This result is at best only indicative of remote teacher views because of their small number in the survey (n=9).

AE AND A RULE-BASED VARIETY

In response to the statement, 'Groups who speak English differently from the standard language still follow a set of rules in their speech' (Item 2/3), most of the total cohort (93%) agreed, but with varying certainty. However, responding to the more specific statement 'Aboriginal English has grammatical rules' (Item 2/20), fewer (just under three-quarters of the teachers) agreed. Also, there was a significant difference between those not knowing 'what AE is' and not acknowledging its grammatical structure: $\chi^2(3, N = 94) = 19.39, p = .0001$, although there was no significant difference on the basis of PD experience.

EXPRESSING ABSTRACTION AND COMPLEXITY IN AE

Most teachers in the total cohort (89/104) disagreed with the assertion that 'Aboriginal English cannot be used to talk or write about abstract or complex ideas' (item 2/19). Even so, there was still a significant difference between PD and non-PD groups, with the latter tending to support the view that AE cannot be used this way, while the former were more likely to disagree and strongly disagree: $\chi^2(3, N = 104) = 8.28, p = .041$. Furthermore, teachers who reported that they knew 'what AE is' responded significantly more positively to Item 2/19 than others: $\chi^2(3, N = 96) = 11.77, p = .008$. A significant difference also occurred in the level of confidence in this view, which was much stronger among rural teachers: $\chi^2(2, N = 104) = 31.75, p = .001$, suggesting that teachers in rural communities are more familiar with AE.

UNDERSTANDING AND TOLERANCE OF CODE-SWITCHING

Responses to the role of code-switching when bridging to SAE provided further significant results on the basis of knowing 'what AE is'. In response to Item 2/10 'If Aboriginal students are allowed to code switch (move from one dialect or language to another) when they are beginning to learn Standard Australian English, it will be difficult for them to speak Standard Australian English correctly later on', some 56 participants who reported knowing 'what AE is' disagreed with the statement, compared with 19 of those who did not know 'what AE is'. This was also a significant difference: $\chi^2(3, N = 95) = 12.915, p = .005$.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have sought to illuminate the attitudes and understandings that teachers in WA hold about AE; whether these vary according to the location of teachers' schools; and whether attitudes and understandings vary according to teachers' exposure to the ABC PD

with its input about AE and two-way bidialectal education. Overall, the data demonstrate that teachers' attitudes and understandings about AE vary considerably, ranging from ignorance and apathy to strong understanding and enthusiasm. Although those with little understanding or acceptance of AE may represent a small proportion, they can have detrimental effects on Aboriginal students' educational experiences and prospects for engagement in the workplace and the wider community.

The evidence indicates a relationship between the location of teachers' school and their attitudes about AE. Not surprisingly, participants in rural and remote regions were generally more familiar with AE and more at ease with the use of AE at school, while teachers in metropolitan schools were more inclined to view exemplars of AE as incorrect and/or inappropriate. Rural teachers were significantly more confident than those in other regions that AE could be used to communicate abstract and complex concepts. Although respondent numbers in remote schools were small, they expressed more confidence in their awareness that not all Aboriginal students speak AE.

The study has also shown that engagement in the ABC PD appears to enhance considerably teachers' understandings of 'what AE is', that the PD generates greater metalinguistic awareness and knowledge about language variation in general, and that it also generates more acceptance of AE in the classroom. In contrast, those without the PD often displayed a perspective based on 'deficit' rather than 'difference' and were more likely to evoke a framework of 'correctness' in relation to SAE. While most recognised AE as a variety of English, it is a concern that a quarter of teachers did not.

While there were clear differences between the two groups (with/without relevant PD), some misconceptions were evident for the survey population generally. Both groups gave inaccurate descriptions of AE and few referred to code-switching: a critical concept in bidialectal education when bridging to SAE, in their open-ended questions. Interestingly, however, an understanding of the benefits of encouraging code-switching was strongly supported by those who understood 'what AE is'.

Our research shows several similarities with that conducted in equivalent educational environments. Although not a longitudinal study, we have shown some degree of polarisation of attitudes to and understandings about AE as evidenced by Garman (2004). Our study also shows support for the positive impact of exposure to different cultures, in this case to Aboriginal community and culture, as suggested by Smith, Moellam and Sherrill (1997). As with many bidialectal and bilingual educational environments, our findings suggest that professional development about AE needs to be an ongoing process and not implemented simply to involve new generations of teachers. Such PDs should reinforce and strengthen the

varying levels of confidence that previous attendees have gained. Most importantly, the possibility of ‘one-shot professional development’ needs to be avoided since it cannot ‘sustain educational change and reform’ (Reeves, 2006, p. 138, after Gonzalez & Darling-Hammond, 1997) and, as seen in this study, does not guarantee the depth of knowledge of dialect difference required to bring about improvement in educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors of this paper are deeply indebted to staff within the Department of Education (WA) who assisted with the development and distribution of the instruments used in this research. We also particularly thank all those who completed the survey.

ENDNOTES

1. The Department of Education in Western Australia has a Remote Teaching Service (RTS) which services 42 remote communities. The Department distinguishes between its remote community schools and its 300 rural/country schools which are classified as more than 35 kilometres outside Perth (<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/teachingwa/detcms/navigation/working-in-a-public-school/>).

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