

Introduction

The purpose of this PEN is to encourage teachers of Aboriginal¹ students to see how Aboriginal English (henceforth AE) is a pivotal element of their classroom relationships. In focusing not only on the uses of Aboriginal English in the classroom, but also on how those uses are viewed and interpreted, we hope to encourage teachers to reflect on and consider ways that they could adjust their own teaching practices. The suggestion is that such changes might make classrooms places that work for the Aboriginal students educationally, culturally and socially, and assist them to become confident and capable users of Standard Australian English (henceforth SAE).

AE is the first and “home language” of many Aboriginal people. It is through this language that Aboriginal students learn about central aspects of their lives and their Aboriginality. An important point to note about AE is that it has derived from Aboriginal languages with an English influence, and that in many situations was an imposed language. A most potent example of this occurred when the Government placed Aboriginal people onto reserves and missions, where they were forbidden to speak in their traditional language, and were given no educative process to assist them to learn English. Those who spoke their traditional Aboriginal language were often punished by being removed from their family and expelled from the reserve or mission. AE is easily identifiable to those who use it. It is a common, diverse and unifying language.

A useful introduction to the linguistic features of AE is found in PEN 93 (Eades 1993). This talks about the diversity of AE and how it differs from SAE in systematic ways:

- phonology (accent and pronunciation)
- morpho-syntax (grammar)
- lexico-semantics (words and their meaning)
- pragmatics (the way that language is used in socio-cultural contexts).

We do, of course recognise that there is an ongoing debate about whether AE should be considered a dialect or a

Language tracks: Aboriginal English and the classroom

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language. It is important for teachers to have a fundamental understanding of AE as that knowledge will encourage them to recognise and accept that this is a dialect or language that is as linguistically valid and correct as SAE. AE is not “bad English”, “lazy English” or “uneducated English” to be corrected and eliminated.

It is worth considering, that within many school contexts, teachers cater for students who come from diverse cultures and speak a first language other than English. Their first language, pronunciation and attempts to use the English language are generally accepted, appreciated and encouraged. They are given classroom experiences that help them practise language and interact in “natural and meaningful contexts” (Gee 1996: 88).

In addition, teachers regularly provide support and develop curricula to assist these students in learning their second language of SAE. However, for Aboriginal children, their home language of AE is often unappreciated, unaccepted, not heard, misinterpreted, discouraged and corrected. This hardly seems fair.

There are some helpful resources for those teachers who aim for social justice. These resources will support them in valuing and ratifying the AE used by their students and enable them to reflect on its implications when making decisions about their classroom curriculum. Among these are *Supporting Early Language Acquisition* (1994), the *Aboriginal Literacy Resource Kit* (1995) and *A Place of Belonging* (1996).

What this PEN intends, is to acknowledge the information that such resources are able to deliver, while also drawing attention more closely to how AE is played out in *everyday classroom interactions* between Aboriginal students and their teachers. This is done through the theoretical underpinnings and presentation and analysis of data generated from the *Baiyai* Research Project.

The Baiyai Research Project

Baiyai is Wiradjuri language for “meeting place of two parties” (see figure 1). The Wiradjuri people are Aboriginal

¹ We recognise that Indigenous communities in Australia comprise both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, the focus for the research from which this paper is drawn is on Aboriginal students and communities.

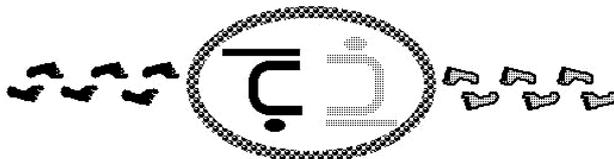
Australians who have lived and live in areas of southern and western New South Wales. It is a fitting name as the *Baiyai* research team is made up of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from a range of backgrounds and experiences.

Researchers observed Aboriginal students in classroom contexts, focusing on interactions that may otherwise pass unnoticed in busy classrooms. These were analysed and interpreted in a way that enabled the research group to construct a picture of classroom exchanges that were causing difficulties for Aboriginal students and their teachers. Importantly, observations were viewed and interpreted from different cultural perspectives. [See Munns, Simpson, Connelly and Townsend (1999) for a full description of the project's beginnings, theory and research concepts.]

Baiyai, Aboriginal English and classroom literacy relationships

Baiyai

(Wiradjuri language meaning the meeting place of two parties)



An explanation of Logo:

Dark colour represents Aboriginal people, light colour represents non-Aboriginal people
The Oval in the middle is the meeting place.
The u shaped symbol is for people
The straight line beside the u is to symbolise man
The small oval symbol beside the u is to symbolise woman
The footprints are to symbolise coming to the meeting place

Figure 1

It is the *Baiyai* image of the traditional Aboriginal meeting place that we are advancing as a metaphor for

contemporary classrooms where Aboriginal learners and their teachers come together. The metaphor is extended in two ways:

- The first is by considering that the tracks leading to the meeting place show people coming from different directions and different worlds;
- Secondly, despite these fundamental differences, there is still the possibility that the meeting place can encourage fruitful relationships where there is communication, understanding and mutual benefit.

Using the meeting place metaphor, we suggest that AE is central to all classroom relationships between Aboriginal students and their teachers. The purpose is to consider wider, 'big picture' ways of thinking about the implications of AE in the classroom. In doing this we can see that AE is much more than the spoken and written words in the reading and writing curriculum.

An illustration of the wider focus may be found in the *Baiyai* concept of the *Pedagogical Literacy Relationship* (Munns, Simpson, Connelly and Townsend, 1999). The Pedagogical Literacy Relationship (henceforth PLR) is the relationship generated in the interplay of students' and teachers' responses during all literacy and language classroom episodes (see figure 2). Since classrooms are typically constructed around words and talk, we contend that the PLR is in play all the time in which students and teachers are together.

Viewed in this way, both official and unofficial classroom curriculum are always taking shape as students and teachers draw on their own resources and experiences to make sense of and respond to the classroom. Official curriculum may be thought of as that which is planned in syllabi and programs and then delivered by teachers in their classrooms. Unofficial curriculum, on the other hand, refers to what is received and learned by the students. There is often a marked

Some Research Observations

There were three significant points about research into Aboriginal learners and their teachers that emerged during the project. **First, discussion of the findings highlighted the possibility that much of the previous research done by non-Aboriginal people has been interpreted from their own perspective** and therefore may not really indicate what is actually happening in classrooms.

Second, the Aboriginal researcher, before *Baiyai*, thought that many non-Aboriginal teachers chose to ignore issues that impacted on the level of achievement of Aboriginal students in their classrooms. It was later realised that this apparent "ignoring of issues" was often unintentional. The researcher's perceptions and awareness of Aboriginal issues came from a total immersion in Aboriginal culture. **Most teachers did not have these experiences and were typical of many 'educated' non-Aboriginal people who were unaware of Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture.** To be fair, how could teachers know? Aboriginal history and culture has been largely hidden from all Australians, as until recently we have all been denied our true history.

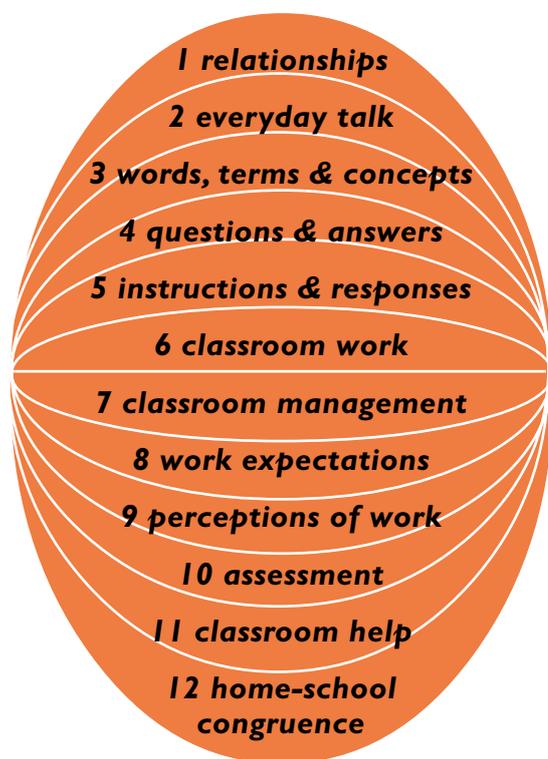
Third, observing and making sense of observations of classroom interactions pointed to the complexity of accommodating different viewpoints. This underlined the difficulty that many Aboriginal students must surely face when working out for themselves how the school culture works. They, often with minimal guidance, have to 'track a path' and fit into the school system, working out what is appropriate and inappropriate and adjusting their language and cultural practices to conform and 'fit in'. It is unsurprising that literacy is such a key issue for Aboriginal students.

distinction between intended and unintended outcomes in the teaching and learning relationship (see Grundy, 1994).

In the light of this understanding of the curriculum, clearly the PLR does not define or confine literacy to specific times and lessons in the school day. Rather, it suggests that there are direct and indirect literacy effects for students across the whole spectrum of classroom interactions.

The *Baiyai* project has listed some different categories of classroom interactions that impact on literacy attitudes and outcomes (figure 2).

Figure 2 Categories of Baiyai Pedagogical Literacy Relationship



Across all of these categories in the PLR, it is argued that there is a significant impact brought about by the way language culturally connects or disconnects in the classroom. Therefore, between Aboriginal students and their teachers, the use, recognition and understanding of AE is crucially interwoven with all classroom relationships. A particular aspect of this relationship concerns the Aboriginal concept of *shame* and its influence on risk-taking. Many Aboriginal learners are “shamed” in classrooms. One way this happens is when they get an answer “wrong”, make a “mistake” in their work or don’t know what to do. Another way is the shame brought about when one of a group of Aboriginal learners is coping well with classroom work and is thus looked on as a “big noter”. This can bring shame on the others. Avoiding bringing shame on yourself or being careful not to shame others can

significantly impact on the way Aboriginal learners approach their work. [See Munns, Simpson, Connelly and Townsend (1999) and Munns (1998) for further discussions of shame and Aboriginal learners.]

To return to the *Baiyai* metaphor, and the separate tracks Aboriginal students and their teachers bring to their classroom meeting place, the critical talk, words and actions when students use and teachers respond to AE, have the potential to drive a wedge between, or bring together, their separate worlds. In the two sections of this PEN each of these possibilities is explored.

Tracing different language tracks

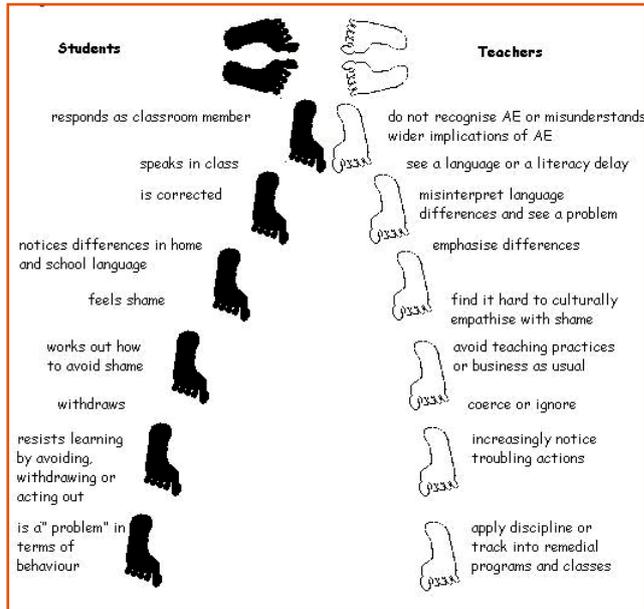
There is evidence to suggest that Aboriginal students are being taught and assessed by teachers who sometimes misunderstand and misinterpret their actions and responses. Often Aboriginal students enter school as confident and competent users of AE, and consequently are likely to have different pre-literacy skills and literacy needs from other students. Teachers need to recognise and cater for this. It is critical to realise that the school education process (usually conducted in SAE) can have a far-reaching negative impact upon the majority of these students. Regrettably, many Aboriginal students become “failures” very early in their schooling.

It is evident that contributing factors to the lack of success for many Aboriginal learners are invariably related to AE. This can happen in a number of ways. Teachers might not recognise the diverse characteristics and use of AE. It might not be “heard”, noticed or understood. Alternatively, teachers might identify Aboriginal English and be conscious of the need to respect “home languages” as advised and required in syllabus documents (for example, in the *NSW English Syllabus K-6*, 1998), but be not sure what this all means in the literacy context of a classroom. This raises many questions about how classroom interactions with Aboriginal students are played out and what kinds of strategies might be developed to support them as literacy learners.

By looking at classroom interactions across a number of classrooms and research contexts the *Baiyai* project uncovered some common themes in the ways Aboriginal learners and their teachers produced their relationships. These are depicted in Figure 2 as different and ultimately diverging language tracks. In presenting these themes the intention is not to suggest that all classroom relationships play out this way. This would essentialise the actions of students and teachers and we are aware of the inherent dangers of doing this. Aboriginal students are individuals who take up cultural traits in individual ways (see Malin 1998, drawing on Delpit 1992).

The project also concedes that teachers have many different backgrounds and experiences that influence their pedagogies (see Hatton 1994a). Rather, the purpose is to give an example of the way the use, reception and interpretation of AE can be central in the interplay of classroom responses within the PLR. The example given shows one way that the classroom relationship may not work productively for both students and teachers.

Figure 3



Readers might be able to identify some of these responses interplaying in classrooms that they know, or employ the concept of the PLR to consider other recurring classroom interactions. Thinking of AE within the wider PLR framework highlights teaching, assessing and classroom management strategies converging with classroom language and discourses. We would also argue that it provides specific sites for reflecting on and adjusting teachers' classroom responses. It has always been the *Baiyai* premise that effective pedagogical change comes from teachers themselves.

The next section illustrates the workings of the PLR and AE through a discussion of examples of specific research. This discussion offers wider interpretations of observations in classrooms and puts forward suggestions for further teacher reflection.

Rethinking language tracks – Towards an equal meeting place

As reflection on teaching practices is the main challenge offered in this PEN, we would like to preface this section with some questions relevant to the identification of different language tracks for Aboriginal students. Keep in mind that identification of difference is not necessarily for the purpose of change, but rather to find ways for the tracks to come together at an equal classroom meeting place.

The questions below (and others readers raise themselves) can form an initial basis for a consideration of the classroom interactions now presented from the *Baiyai* research. Presentation of these incidents highlight difficulties related to classroom literacy practices (both students' and teachers' difficulties) and are linked back to categories identified in the *Baiyai* PLR (figure 2). Different ways of interpreting the situation and possible changes that might support the learners are then taken into account. Incidents relate to cultural issues of the *content*, *vocabulary knowledge* and *cultural practices*. Each of these is tied intimately to AE and classroom relationships and practice.

"Me Koori Kid"

Dean is an Indigenous kindergarten student who identifies openly with his Aboriginal culture. Quite often he announces very proudly "Me Koori Kid" and talks about the Aboriginal flag, demonstrates dance movements round the room that he has learnt at cultural gatherings, or plays a cardboard didgeridu. In the classroom Dean appears eager to please and to be accepted. Quite understandably then, having been given a sheet on Humpty Dumpty (the class was dealing with nursery rhymes and learning about the letter "h") he begins with great gusto to colour in the picture next to the rhyme. However, a conversation with the researchers revealed that he knew very little about the content, the rhyme or the letter "h". As with quite a few other speakers of AE he does not usually sound the letter "h" (traditional Aboriginal languages have no "h" sound [see Eades 1993:3].

**"Koori" and "Koories" are the names used by many Aboriginal people when referring to Aboriginal people from most parts of NSW; "Murri" is likely to be used in QLD and north west NSW; "Nyongah" in WA; "Yolngu" in Arnhem Land; "Anangu" in Central Australia; "Palawa" in Tasmania; "Nunga" in SA; and Torres Strait Islander.*

At first glance this may seem like a common enough classroom scenario, with the use of rhyme often a component of early reading programs. However, we would suggest that there are a number of possible implications for both Dean and his teacher within the concept of the PLR (and more than mentioned here).

The first concerns whether his teacher has considered Dean's not using the letter "h" and what that means for him in the context of the lesson. There was a possibility that processes around pronunciation and correction could have caused Dean to question his own use of language. This could well have demanded a choice between home and school, feelings of shame and hurt.

Reflections

Consider these questions while thinking about classrooms you are familiar with:

- ◆ Is the identification of different language tracks the same for Aboriginal students as it is for students from other cultural groups?
- ◆ If the student is from another cultural group, what would be a likely teacher reaction when the student says something unanticipated, does not respond, or acts in an unexpected or "inappropriate" way?
- ◆ Is there a possibility that we react differently with different groups for similar classroom situations?
- ◆ Is it possible that we overlook and/or misinterpret classroom actions of Aboriginal students?
- ◆ Who needs to identify possible classroom misinterpretations and how might they be dealt with?

It is worth pausing here to note that because of language differences some students from other cultural groups find it difficult to pronounce certain letters but this is invariably not seen as careless or incorrect English. Instead it is accepted that this is the way the student speaks.

The second issue concerns the use of material that is culturally unfamiliar and remains that way for students during lessons. It was obvious that Dean had gained very little from the lesson perhaps beyond a view of literacy that equated colouring in with doing the correct classroom thing. What then of how Dean's teacher assesses his work now and in the future and subsequent expectations about what he can do? On one level Dean could be seen to be behaving and working. But he was clearly unsure of the purpose and was playing it safe even though he didn't "get it".

As a result of this classroom interaction both the Aboriginal student and the teacher were left puzzled and

"I Never Lifted It"

Johnny is a Year 2 student who is considered to be a "good kid" in most classroom situations. During a maths lesson the teacher is explaining a hands-on activity with dominoes. Placing them face down she instructs the class not to lift the dominoes. A little while later Johnny picks up one of the pieces and looks at the numbers. When the teacher reprimands Johnny, reminding him not to lift the dominoes, he snaps: "I never lifted it!" In the Community Room later that day the Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) wonders what is going on when a "good kid" like Johnny still gets into trouble.

unhappy. The AEA was frustrated that another Aboriginal student had unexpectedly got into trouble. What contributed to the confusion was the seeming failure to realise the different meanings of the word "lift" in SAE and AE. In SAE the word most often means to "pick something up". In AE it most often means to "steal" or to "punch" or "hit". In this classroom incident it appeared to be the case that Johnny interpreted the teacher's words as meaning not to steal the dominoes. Picking them up to have a look seemed a reasonable thing to do. The teacher interpreted this behaviour as disobedience. Johnny felt as though he had done nothing wrong. They were both on different language tracks but heading towards conflict.

Often neither Aboriginal students or teachers are aware of the confusion created by the failure to establish shared meanings. The only indication of this confusion can be when the students' response or action to the teacher's comment, question or request is seen to be inappropriate or unexpected. On the other hand, students begin to realise that they might not be getting the message right. One of the options taken up might be to scan what the other students in the classroom are doing before proceeding or responding. Such misunderstandings, while not intentional, can lead to anger, annoyance or confusion.

The incident reveals a language issue affecting a number of aspects of the PLR:

- talk and words
- instructions and responses
- classroom management.

Johnny's behaviour was misunderstood and the teacher was again faced with an unpredictable situation. While there are no ready-made solutions to the classroom difficulties caused by language not connecting, there are a number of ways that teachers can get around such misunderstandings by monitoring the ways in which Aboriginal students respond. This may involve looking for wider interpretations. For example, slowness to react might indicate Aboriginal students are checking what other students are doing. Out of character responses might be more a sign of miscommunication than that of a volatile, disobedient or inattentive student. Responses that make no sense to the teacher might mean there is more to be learned about the ways Aboriginal learners make sense of their school and classroom.

"E Walk Now Miss, Dat Baby"

Lisa, an Aboriginal student, had some exciting family news to share. However, when her turn came to give news she hung her head, said nothing and avoided standing in front of the class and telling her news.

A little later, during a writing session, Lisa attempted to share her news with her teacher. Excitedly Lisa said, "E walk now Miss, dat baby" (her baby brother had started to walk). The teacher did not become engaged in a conversation nor did she attempt to establish what Lisa was saying or talking about. Instead, Lisa was brought back on task. Lisa appeared to be very disappointed and silently withdrew herself from the lesson by "downing tools". She took no further part in the writing task.

Both the teacher and Lisa were confused. Lisa couldn't understand why the teacher didn't respond to her exciting news and the teacher was puzzled by the fact that Lisa had some news but didn't tell it at the appropriate time. In this instance Lisa's strong use of AE probably indicated that she wanted to get "close" to the teacher.

Many Aboriginal students speak both AE and SAE, depending on circumstances. Observations reveal that speaking AE can sometimes indicate that the student feels culturally comfortable with the teacher. Alternatively, it can sometimes mean that the students are looking to assert cultural distance when they are threatened and/or unhappy (for example Johnny's outburst, above). When Lisa opted out of the lesson there was a likelihood that the interpretation was that she was not interested, not capable, lazy or disobedient. PLR categories coming into play in this incident were:

- instructions and responses
- classroom work
- classroom management
- work expectations
- assessment.

From the Aboriginal perspective it seemed that shame was a significant factor in this incident.

Many Aboriginal students prefer not to be the centre of attention in the classroom. Being singled out can cause “big shame”. Often they prefer to speak on a one to one basis or in a small groups. Teachers who have little or no knowledge of the concept of shame, and the associated risks posed for the Aboriginal students, may not appreciate how these interrelated factors regularly have a very strong impact and effect upon Aboriginal students’ classroom participation and learning. As illustrated by Lisa’s classroom responses, the typical news session within many classrooms can be very intimidating for many Aboriginal students, threatening risk and shame. Avoiding shame often results in withdrawal or reactive behaviour. When this happens a classroom organisation aimed to encourage oral language and classroom interaction can work to the disadvantage of students.

The track forward

The *Baiyai* Research Project was founded on the belief that the most critical factor in the school success for Aboriginal students is a positive and friendly relationship between the student and the teacher. Research observations confirmed that students’ work practices, on-task compliance and behaviour, are all affected by classroom relationships. However, the *Baiyai* team also fundamentally held that a good personal relationship alone does not guarantee or provide academic success for Aboriginal students. Teachers have a part to play. Their classroom responses play a deciding role as they work towards promoting productive pedagogical relationships. Such a process would be:

- an acknowledgment of the centrality of AE
- followed by an increased awareness of the features of AE
- reflection on the implications of AE for classrooms.

To this end it is necessary that teachers have access to appropriate, specific and contextual information, especially that which comes from Aboriginal people.

Reflection on and changes to teaching practices need to confirm and extend the skills that Aboriginal students already have. Classrooms need to help students to successful learning in ways that maintain their cultural identity. When Aboriginal students fail to learn, it is important to question teaching strategies, rather than just blaming *their* “weaknesses”. Aboriginal students need to know their language is valued and that they are valued. This will help them grow as people and as learners.

Different tracks to an equal meeting place.

Further reading

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