Recognizing Aboriginal English as a Dialect in Curriculum: Advancing Aboriginal Students’ Academic Successes

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Educators have long been aware of the challenges, but not necessarily the opportunities given to First Nations/Aboriginal students whose maternal language is not the language of the classroom and who endeavor to become bilingual. Although entire fields of study are devoted to English as a Second Language/Dialect (ESL/D) springing from the larger domains of education and applied linguistics, scant application of this knowledge is given to Aboriginal student ESL/D needs. New research examines the challenges stemming from speaking an Aboriginal English Dialect (AED), which differs from the Standard English Dialect (SED). We see opportunities from this research, which will provide literacy teaching and learning for Aboriginal student success.

The linguistic characteristics of Aboriginal dialects of English, which have developed through historical events of the colonization process have been described in the literature (Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2006; Dannenberg, 2002; Leap, 1993; Mulder, 1982). Sound patterns, word composition, sentence structure, discourse styles and histories, are what make AEDs different from one another and different from the standard variety of English expected in the classroom. Linguistic analyses demonstrate these unique dialects are as linguistically robust as any other regional and social varieties such as Black English in the US, Received Pronunciation in the UK, Singapore English, Jamaican English, and so on.

There is strong evidence to suggest that students of minority backgrounds can become very successful in acquiring more than one dialect, which allows them to maintain and enhance community ties held together by local culture and non-standard dialect use, while participating successfully in the mainstream education system in the standard dialect (Malcolm & Sharifian, 2005; Nero, 2000; White, 2003; Yiakoumetti, 2007). Aboriginal learners, too, who develop the ability to code-switch, to be adept at shifting dialects, will be at a greater advantage academically. This advantage contrasts with the past, and in many cases present, where speaking Aboriginal varieties of English has led to the perception that speakers are grammatically 'less-than' at best, and speech pathological at worst. “Speakers who are not fluent in the standard variety [of English] are at a social disadvantage when confronted with mainstream gate keeping processes, because many people associate nonstandard varieties with low status, low intelligence, and relative incompetence, especially when in used in formal settings (Giles and Powesland 1975, Edwards 1989). These judgments do not depend solely on speakers’ use of nonstandard grammar. Lippi-Green (1997) shows that nonstandard pronunciation (i.e. accent) alone can have the same effect. Thus, if a person does not use the standard variety well, this can affect their ability to succeed (or even participate) in mainstream domains such as education….” (Ball et al 2006).
Although the goal of Aboriginal educators today is to have students competent in two dialects/varieties, the past ignorance regarding First Nations languages and Aboriginal dialects is now documented. In the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report (RCAP 1996), it offered a government statement from 1890 that ‘the use of English in preference to the Indian dialect must be insisted upon’ and ‘E.F. Wilson informed the department that at Shingwauk school, "We make a great point of insisting on the boys talking English, as, for their advancement in civilization, this is, of all things, the most necessary." The English they were referring to was SED. Today, for Aboriginal peoples, the insistence that standard English is the only option for Aboriginal students, is unacceptable to a First Nations/Aboriginal educator. The AED and SED learning needs of the Aboriginal student is an English learning dichotomy that is eloquently expressed here: “And the colonized who has the wonderful good luck to be accepted in a school will not be saved [culturally]. The memory that is assigned him is certainly not that of his people. The history that is taught him is not his own … … The colonized is saved from illiteracy only to fall into linguistic dualism…” (Battiste 2000 p. 249).

Research supports the use strategies to address the need for changes to Aboriginal Education curricula in order to significantly improve the academic success of Aboriginal students. We propose that is facilitated by an exploration of the development and affects of approaches such as Aboriginal English as a Second Language/Dialect classes, English Developmental Programs and in place of strictly visual vocabulary in curriculum material, the use of aural-oral vocabulary. Students need “teachers who teach with a multi-modal approach,” addressing the unique learning needs of individual students. (Fleming 1995).

Language related challenges in the classroom result in Aboriginal students' who are often labeled behaviorally difficult. From the first day of school, the Aboriginal student's communicative style is deemed defective and must be corrected. This negative method of acknowledging a young child’s personal, family and speech community is an unacceptable educational strategy and may be one of the factors that underlie the high prevalence of Aboriginal children in “behavioural adjustment programs.” Vygotsky’s sociocultural development theory (2003), identifying the affective in learning, and with the “zone of proximal development” concepts, will facilitate understanding of the language transition needs of the Aboriginal students. Vygotsky’s description of social speech development and its importance to children’s development underscores the importance of the school’s positive acknowledgement of the kindergarten student’s First Nations English dialect. Vygotsky describes the connection between language development and behaviour, adding that “private speech is first used externally in interactions with other people and then internalized and used by an individual to master his or her own mental functions… It signals an important development in self-regulation: Starting with regulation of their practical actions, children expand their use of private speech to regulate a variety of their mental processes. The concept of self-regulation plays a prominent role … one of the most critical advances in child development at this time…(Ed. Kozulin et al p.160 2003).
Raising the awareness in the classroom and in the community that Aboriginal Englishes are legitimate and unique dialects, having evolved from pidgins and creoles of years past is an educational imperative if they are to gain full language status they deserve.

In this work, we describe the linguistic properties of Aboriginal English dialects, and we make suggestions and recommendations for their inclusion in a curriculum that promotes and celebrates their use in urban communities, in tandem with standard English so that Aboriginal learners have the opportunity to succeed in two worlds.

References