

What is Aboriginal English?

Aboriginal English is the language spoken at home, and is important to keep in classrooms.

Bidialectal approach to teaching SAE pilot schools training 2003

Aboriginal English is how Aboriginal people relate to each other, by body movement and language.

Aboriginal Research Assistant,

Bidialectal approach to teaching Standard Australian English pilot 2003

- *Aboriginal English is the language of most Aboriginal students in the education system.*
- *Aboriginal English is the language which Aboriginal people use to identify with each other and to express an Aboriginal World View.*
- *Aboriginal English is the language Aboriginal people use in place of their traditional languages.*
- *Aboriginal English consists of English words that are used by Aboriginal people and have specific Aboriginal meanings.*

Collard, G., 1997, *Thas the way we talk una thas our way - Towards More User-friendly Education for the Speakers of Aboriginal English*

Aboriginal English plays an important role in the maintenance and assertion of Aboriginal identity... Aboriginal English signals Aboriginality in many subtle ways.

Dr Diana Eades, *Aboriginal English*, PEN No. 93, Primary English Teachers Association, 1993

Aboriginal English is powerful, and the most appropriate personal language for Aboriginal people to express their identity, thoughts and ideas.

Aboriginal Islander Education Workers, May, 1997

Code-switching - Switching between dialects

Code-switching is a term used to describe movement from speaking one dialect to another. This movement occurs at various levels of language use (sound, grammar and meanings) and in different situations. The need to change from one dialect to another is governed by social rules and expectations.

Code-switching is the transfer of linguistic items from one dialect to another, in this case the mixing of Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English by students who are trying to accommodate the standard dialect.

***Two-Way English: Towards more user-friendly education for speakers of Aboriginal English*, Edith Cowen University, 1999**

Dialectal differences

Aboriginal English is appropriate language use in many different contexts as is Standard Australian English. Both are dialects of English and are valid and appropriate, depending on the contexts in which they are being used.

Although Standard Australian English (SAE) and Aboriginal English are similar as dialects of English, they have specific differences in structure (grammar), semantics (meaning) and phonology (sounds).

The difference in phonology makes it difficult for students to sound out words. For this reason there is a need to make sure students develop strengths across all code breaking and meaning making strategies.

The different linguistic features of SAE need to be systematically and explicitly taught as outlined in the *English K-6 Syllabus* content for each Stage. For example, Later Stage 3, Talking and Listening, syllabus content states that: 'Teachers will assist students to recognise the differences between spoken and written language and to apply this knowledge in their own texts.'

Aboriginal English as appropriate language use

Aboriginal English is appropriate language use for Aboriginal people of all ages. Although Aboriginal English

is sometimes referred to as 'home' language, Aboriginal English is better described as appropriate language use in a range of contexts. These contexts include home and family contexts, community contexts and some contexts throughout schooling. However, Standard Australian English is the required language used to demonstrate achievement of syllabus outcomes and the language use against which students' achievements will be judged.

Teachers of students who speak Aboriginal English need to understand that Aboriginal English is an appropriate dialect and needs to be accepted and respected. Teachers who acknowledge, understand and accept Aboriginal English can assist Aboriginal students to build self-esteem and feel comfortable in the school environment.

What is a bidialectal approach?

A bidialectal approach:

- accepts Aboriginal English at school by recognising and valuing Aboriginal English and allowing the use of the dialect in appropriate situations
- bridges to Standard Australian English by building upon what students already know and providing explicit instruction in what they do not know
- cultivates Aboriginal ways of learning by utilising the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and culture.

Malcolm, I.G., 1995, Language and Communication Enhancement for Two-Way Education. Report to the Department of Employment, Education and Training, Perth: Centre for Applied Language Research, Edith Cowan University

Body language, silences and questioning

Body language is an important part of Aboriginal English. Body language often substitutes for meanings often made in spoken or written language in SAE. For example, silences in response to questions do not necessarily mean Aboriginal students do not know the answer. *Many Aboriginal students don't see the point of answering questions if they perceive the teacher already knows the answer.* Although questioning is commonly used by non-Aboriginal parents and teachers as a strategy to teach children, questioning may not be used in the same way in Aboriginal English. Aboriginal parents often use statements in conjunction with action to guide their children's learning.

Adapted from The Way We Learn, p.22, Aboriginal Literacy Resource Kit

Teaching Aboriginal English speakers

Cultural education

It is essential for teachers to expand their knowledge and understandings about Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal English and to use this information to select appropriate teaching strategies. For example, it is important for teachers to have an understanding of the local Aboriginal community and their cultural understandings. For guidance, talk with Aboriginal parents, Aboriginal Elders, the Aboriginal Education Assistant, the Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (if there is one in your school), the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer or the Consultant Aboriginal Education (from the local School Education Area office) or the school's Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness committee (ASSPA).

Inducting Aboriginal English speakers into SAE

Explicit teaching about how and why language use varies is a syllabus requirement for all NSW students. However, inducting Aboriginal English speakers into SAE ways of making meanings is essential for them to become code-switchers.

The effective teaching of Aboriginal students involves selecting strategies that develop students' knowledge and

understandings about how and why language use varies, while at the same time developing skills required to use language in different contexts.

1. Provide additional support to develop understandings

When contexts and concepts represented in texts are unfamiliar, readers have difficulty making sense of what they listen to, read and view. This is the case for Aboriginal students who can read words but do not seem to be able to make sense of, or ‘comprehend’, what they are reading.

Aboriginal students who are not familiar with contexts and concepts embedded in texts need additional support prior to being asked to participate in class activities. They need to be prepared to engage in class tasks by being introduced to the knowledge, understandings, contexts and concepts addressed in a text. These new contexts and concepts also need to be linked to what students know and understand. Providing additional support prior to class activities will equip students with knowledge and understandings about what they are reading to make sense of the text and engage in class tasks.

2. Research to develop effective ways of teaching

Teachers need to develop effective ways to teach Aboriginal students ‘through researching appropriate methodology and content across all key learning areas’ (Aboriginal Education Policy).

Teaching strategies need to develop students’ understandings about purposes of texts, cultural contexts in which texts are developed and potential audiences for which they have been produced.

The effective teaching of Aboriginal English speakers requires a belief that Aboriginal students can and will achieve success in schooling equal to non-Aboriginal students.

3. Prepare students for code-switching

Knowledge and understandings about how and why SAE is used and what impacts on how and why it varies, help students to know that language choices are carefully selected to achieve specific purposes.

Developing an understanding that people make different language choices in different situations for different purposes prepares students for code-switching practices. Students who develop these understandings about language use are ready to be inducted into ways of using SAE in a range of contexts. These students require more opportunities to learn about SAE language use to become successful code-switchers.

4. Teach Standard Australian English

The *English K-6 Syllabus* requires teaching about standard and non-standard English.

‘Teachers will help students to recognise the differences between school and home language, between standard and non-standard English, between idiomatic and literal language.’

Later Stage 2 Syllabus content, English K-6 Syllabus

Using oral language as a basis for writing will not assist Aboriginal English speakers to write in SAE. The explicit teaching of language structures and features of SAE are required. Provide models of literate language to show students how the language choices that authors make relate to specific purposes. This approach provides students with examples of SAE language choices for writing rather than requiring students to rely on their own Aboriginal English oral language choices.