

Koorie English and Code-switching in Schools: is it a problem and, if so where is it a problem and what potential solutions are available?

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When I went to girls' school to do my secondary schooling, I was the only Koorie there. I knew that I was different from the other girls, but one of the obvious differences was the way I spoke.

I had a teacher there who also knew that the way I spoke was different. She was my English teacher, and she used to make me stand up in class and sound out words that began with the letter 'h' because these were the words which I had the most difficulty with. I can still remember trying to sound out these words and having a difficult time because they were foreign to the way that I spoke. I don't think that people can realise how difficult it is to sound out a letter 'h' when you are not used to saying it. It annoyed me very much one day when I had to say the word 'honour' because the 'h' is silent, I was wrong and I felt that the word was only put in the English language to 'trap' me.

I also knew that the language which I was comfortable with and which I spoke at home was a different language to the school language because when I got home I had to change the way that I spoke so I was understood. One of the differences for me was trying to be accepted in both worlds. I wanted to be accepted in the school system, while, at the same time, I didn't want to give up the acceptance by my own community.

I found that the easiest thing to do was the minimum in both worlds. The minimum in the non-Koorie world was to 'pass' English and the minimum in the Koorie world was to only speak the school way when absolutely necessary, and never around those who would 'send me up'. This chameleon act got me through my school years without jeopardising my home life. A lot of other Koories have fallen casualty in the battle of trying to juggle two worlds.

Even when I got through the system to tertiary study I found that my language was a barrier to success in the system. I also found that my cultural ideas were barriers to success. Two examples of this were the fact that I took English literature in the first year of my Bachelor of Arts degree at La Trobe University.

In English literature we studied the play Othello and were told that he strangled Desdemona because of his great love for her. I believed that you couldn't love someone whom you murdered. I wrote as much in an essay, and was told in no uncertain terms that I was wrong. I believe that if we come from different cultures, we tend to view literature with the eye of that culture. Shakespeare might have believed that Othello actually had a great love for Desdemona, but I didn't agree....

Another incident that happened was the interview after I graduated from Toorak Teachers College. I received a low mark on my interview because the interview panel told me I would have to work on this area. As a matter of fact I did try very hard to ensure that my oral language improved to meet the standards that this panel impressed on me needed to be met.

It was a relief to me to meet Eve Fesl ... after I graduated... an Aboriginal linguist, and from her I was able to understand that the language we have is an acceptable form of English, and because of the history of the teaching of this language, there are some aspects of my culture which I need to keep. The oral presentation of my language is an important aspect of Aboriginal culture which I need to keep because it is a part of my history and it makes a statement about that history to those I meet.

As a qualified teacher, I am constantly correcting my children and the way they speak. I corrected my young son one day, and he replied, 'Mum, I'm a Koorie and this is the way I speak!' He is right, and he has a legitimate right to speak in the way he is comfortable.

There must be recognition that Koorie English is an acceptable form of English. I have realised that I have had to give up a large number of my cultural rules and norms in order to survive in this present culture. However, the language which I have is one of the areas which I need to keep more than I need to give up. Dr. Esme Saunders (Bamblett): a personal view of Koorie English in Deadly Eh, Cuz!(1996)¹

¹ McKenry, R. (1996) *Deadly Eh, Cuz!: Teaching Speakers of Koorie English*, Language Australia, Melbourne

Introduction

This report purposely begins with a yarn – a personal story about language struggle, identity, acceptance and awareness. It is a Koorie success story about juggling two, at times opposing worlds, especially in regards to language and power – through to the next generation. Storytelling is one of our most powerful mediums for communicating about language. Dr. Esme Saunders begins her story with school – often the first place where language and cultural differences are highlighted for many Koorie children; particularly those in isolation - and the stigmatisation around her home language. She talks about the necessity to change the ‘*way she spoke*’ between school and home - both ways - in order to be accepted throughout and beyond her secondary and tertiary schooling years – in effect active and successful code-switching.

Code-switching refers to a person’s ability to move back and forth between two languages or dialects depending on who they are speaking to and in what context. Code-switching is also a skill that people of multi-cultural and bi-lingual backgrounds have long recognised as necessary for success within mainstream education and employment. Koorie students often attain code-switching skills naturally, as they switch from speaking Koorie English in the home and amongst family and peers, to Standard Australian English (SAE) in the classroom and more formal environments. When this skill is encouraged, Koorie students are able to gain a full grasp of the SAE required for academic achievement, while maintaining a strong cultural identity through the geographical and kinship linkages associated with their home language. Problems occur when Koorie English (KE) or Aboriginal English (AE) is dismissed as a form of ‘bad’ or ‘inferior’ English and corrected as such. This undermines the student’s code-switching abilities and devalues the language of their family and peers, which can lead to disengagement in the classroom and with school-based learning. Just like children whose first language is not English, Koorie English speakers do better at school when their home language is affirmed.

Effective code-switching occurs when both dialects are spoken in a genuine and confident manner, and for this to happen, equal value must be placed on both Koorie English and SAE. This research paper puts forth the argument that code-switching is a necessary skill for Koorie students that should be nurtured within the education system. We advocate that all Koorie students must be equipped with the knowledge and ability to make informed linguistic choices, requiring a three-point strategy:

- That Koorie English is recognised by teachers and other educators as a distinct dialect intrinsically linked to Koorie students’ sense of cultural identity and wellbeing – through professional development focused on language awareness
- That students are taught the differences between Koorie English and SAE, without devaluing either dialect – through a whole of classroom language awareness curriculum
- Students are instilled with a sense of cultural pride and general confidence that allows them to effectively switch between dialects depending on context, purpose and audience – through effective bi-dialectal education.

Why is Code-Switching Valuable?

While in Australia the term code-switching is used predominantly in linguistic and research circles, internationally it has been embraced by multicultural professionals on a far more populist level. In the USA, political analysts have suggested that Barak Obama won the US Presidential Election based on his ability to effectively code-switch between an African American dialect and Standard American English. Chris Beam wrote in the online current affairs and culture magazine *Slate*: “Not only is code-switching standard in U.S. politics, it’s

necessary... the oldest political skill there is: the ability to adjust one's speech, and one's mannerisms, to different audiences."²

The same can be said for Aboriginal politicians. Linda Burney MP, who upon her election became the first Aboriginal person to serve in the New South Wales Parliament, commences speeches with an acknowledgement, because as she says "When we acknowledge *Country* we are reminded of many things." Burney's use of the term "Country" is specific to Aboriginal English and has multi-layered meanings, different to SAE usage and connotations.

Code-switching skills have been instrumental in the careers of many high profile Aboriginal professionals. Popular personalities such as Ernie Dingo connect with mainstream audiences through a mix of Aboriginal English and SAE. He introduced mass audiences to words such as "Deadly" and "Mob" and is adored for his charismatic story telling or "yarning" style. High profile Aboriginal men in politics and sports alike, often bare the brunt of negative media attention, yet Dingo has maintained a career on commercial television, and has continually been voted one of the Readers Digest's '10 Most Trusted People in Australia'. Effective communication is essential when gaining both respect and trust.

Author Anita Heiss, who has been called "Indigenous Australia's answer to Carrie Bradshaw" (Skattssoon)³ has a similar ability to connect with mainstream Australia while calling on the unique appeal of Aboriginal storytelling and language. The title of her most recent novel *Paris Dreaming* along with the first paragraph, which reads: "It was good to have her back from Manhattan. I had missed my Tidda⁴..." immediately signals effective code-switching skills.

Burney, Dingo and Heiss are just a few examples of the many successful Aboriginal people who utilise both Aboriginal English and SAE to connect with diverse audiences. Part of their success can be credited to a unique and engaging way in which Aboriginal people communicate. For students to master this skill they must value their home language. For as Cummins states, "The ability to choose either Standard Australian English or Aboriginal English reflects empowerment" (Cummins, 1986).⁵

What is Koorie English?

"Koorie English involves the differences in concepts as well as differences in the oral presentation of words. That is, when I think of the word 'family' I think of over 200 close kin, whereas a non-Koorie might think of 10 close kin. I don't see family in terms of a nuclear structure, because I am operating on an extended system. We call each other a 'mob' of Koories. To non-Koories the word 'mob' is threatening."

Dr. Esme Saunders (Bamblett): a personal view of Koorie English in 'Deadly Eh, Cuz!'

Koorie English is a localised Victorian variant of Aboriginal English, and is often the first language or home language of Victorian Koorie students. Students' understanding of the differences between Koorie English and SAE will vary - some may consciously code-switch between the two, others may not realise they are speaking a distinct dialect.

Linguistic studies in all states of Australia have confirmed that Aboriginal English (with certain local variations such as Koorie English) is a consistent dialect spoken across the nation. Importantly, It has been estimated that up to 80 per cent of Indigenous people in

² Beam, Chris: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2010/01/code_black.html

³Skattssoon: <http://www.anitahheiss.com/bookshelf.html>

⁴ Tidda:sister

⁵ Reproduced in: *Harvard Educational Review* Vol. 71 No. 4 Winter 2001

Australia speak a form of Aboriginal English as their mother tongue.⁶ There are a number of Aboriginal English dialects, or more accurately, there are a number of continua of Aboriginal English dialects, ranging from close to Standard English at one end (the 'light' varieties), to close to Kriol at the other (the 'heavy' varieties). Heavy Aboriginal English is spoken mainly in the more remote areas, where it is influenced by Kriol, while light varieties of Aboriginal English are spoken mainly in urban, rural and metropolitan areas. But even in these areas, some Aboriginal people in certain Aboriginal situations use a heavier Aboriginal English.⁷ It is crucial to understand that these are distinctive languages in the case of Kriol and Torres Strait Creole, and variants of English in the case of Aboriginal English. We are not dealing with 'bad' forms of Standard Australian English.⁸

Koorie English, like all Aboriginal Englishes, carries with it distinctive linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and conceptual characteristics. While this is known among Koorie people and communities and accepted amongst linguists and others concerned with language and communication, research suggests that teachers often find it difficult to differentiate between Koorie English and other non-standard forms of English. Discussions with researchers, teachers, and other educators reveal that many teachers are simply not aware of the dialectic and linguistic background of their Koorie students, traditional Aboriginal languages, of Koorie English as a distinct dialect, and code-switching between dialects (as opposed to between languages). If anything, it's been suggested, there may be an implicit (unrecognised) racism that some kids talk/write 'that way' because of a lower socioeconomic background.⁹ If teachers are not language aware, they are less able to nurture and develop students' code-switching and other linguistic skills. Further research through teacher surveys and interviews in Victoria would be useful in determining teachers' language awareness, related experiences, methods and further professional development requirements.

While there are a number of features (particularly grammatical features) which Koorie English shares with other non-standard varieties of English, there are many others which are distinctly Koorie.

Prior to colonisation there were at least 38 Aboriginal languages in Victoria,¹⁰ and an estimated 250 distinct languages nationally. Assimilation policies, punitive practices, and the intergenerational dislocation of Koorie people from their traditional lands and language groups has seen Koorie languages decline to a critical state. Today, very few Koories if any are fluent in their traditional languages, many have a word or phrasal knowledge and many are involved in local language reclamation programs. The majority however, speak Koorie English, a shared dialect that features words, grammatical structures and phonological (sound) systems from a mix of local and other Aboriginal languages; additionally many Aboriginal students through all levels of education in Victoria relocate from other States and Territories, bringing their own distinctive form of Aboriginal or Koorie English.

Koorie English is a rich dialect and utilises commonly and widely known Aboriginal words such as *tiddas* (sisters), *jiliwaa* (toilet), *moom* (bum), *joonggas/gandjibal* (police), as well as terms also common in SAE; and while largely based on SAE grammar it retains some elements of traditional Aboriginal language grammars. Despite this close similarity to the

⁶ <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/lsp/app-4.htm>

⁷ Eades, Dianne: <http://www.hawaii.edu/satocenter/langnet/definitions/aboriginal.html>

⁸ McKenry, D. (1994) *Langwij comes to school : promoting literacy among speakers of Aboriginal English and Australian Creoles*, DEET, Canberra.

⁹ Personal Communication. Sharifian, McKenry R., Atkinson G, Tashcoff S., Cooper P., Paton D, Briggs V. et al

¹⁰ Clark, Ian (1996). *Aboriginal language Areas in Victoria: A Report to the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages*, VACL, Melbourne - records 38; *note the actual number differs depending on a technically linguistic definition of language or an ethno-political definition.*

SAE dialect, the meanings of particular words, sentences or conversational contexts can differ greatly. Common examples are words like *deadly* which in SAE denotes extreme *danger* but in K.E. *good, excellent* etc, kin terms such as *Grannie* or *nan/pop* with the reciprocal meaning of both *grandparent* and *grandchild* and the multiple-meaning *mob*, with threatening connotations for many SAE speakers, and a rich thesaurus of cultural meaning for Koorie English speakers.

Another feature of Koorie English is the use of English words and phrases that have declined in popularity in contemporary SAE, such as ‘having a yarn’ and ‘yarning’ for speaking - captured in the title of the 1990s ABC program *Kum Yan* (SAE: Come and yarn) featuring Aboriginal people telling their own stories from their own perspective; *fellas/fullas* to mean men or people and *gamin* - tricking, making up, pretending.

Similarly, many words were borrowed from English and incorporated into the local Languages following Koorie sound (phonological) systems like *Gubba* for a non-Indigenous person (white), most probably evolved from the term Governor (Gubbanah) - a commonly used term at the time of colonisation for officials - or according to some sources from the word ‘government’.

Despite its superficial similarity to SAE then, **Koorie English - like all Aboriginal Englishes - is a rich repository of Koorie culture, and incorporates levels of meanings which relate to traditional Aboriginal values, relationships and ways of life.** When discussing the meanings of concepts such as *family, country* or *home*, teachers are likely to find striking differences between the conceptual understandings of Koorie students and non-Aboriginal students. This is reflective of much wider cultural differences. Subtle language variances can also reflect a wider cultural emphasis on kinship and community responsibility rather than individualist goal setting and achievement.

To give some concrete examples, data collected in WA using a list of everyday words such as *family* and *home* from two groups of urban Aboriginal and Anglo-Australian students in metropolitan Perth revealed differences and similarities in their responses. For the Aboriginal students, *family* moved far beyond the nuclear family – central in contemporary Anglo-Australian culture. The following table shows some of this data from Sharifian (2002)¹¹ reproduced in Sharifian (2012):

<i>Aboriginal</i>	<i>Anglo-Australian</i>
<i>Stimulus word: Family</i>	<i>Stimulus word: Family</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Love your pop, love your nan, love our mums, love our dads.</i> • <i>Brothers, sisters, aunnie, uncles, nan, pops, father, nephew and nieces.</i> • <i>They're there for you, when you need 'm they look after you, you</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>You got brothers and sisters in your family and your mum and dad, and you have fun with your family, have dinner with your family, you go out with your family.</i> • <i>Dad, mum, brother, dog.</i> • <i>Mum and dad, brother and sister.</i>

¹¹ Sharifian, F. (2002) Conceptual-associative system in Aboriginal English: A study of Aboriginal children attending primary schools in metropolitan Perth. PhD thesis, Edith Cowan University.

<p><i>call 'm aunie and uncle and cousins.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>People, mums, dads, brother, group of families, like aunties and uncles nanas and pops.</i> • <i>I've got lots of people in my family, got a big family, got lots of family.</i> • <i>My family, you know how many millions I got? One thousand millions, hundred ninety-nine million thousand thousand nine nine sixty-one ...million million uncle, Joe, Stacy ...cousins, uncles, sisters, brothers, girlfriends and my million sixty-one thousand family.</i> • <i>I like my family, all my family, my aunties an' uncles and cousins and I like Dryandra.</i> • <i>Just having family that is Noongar and meeting each other</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Fathers, sisters, parents, caring.</i> • <i>People, your mum and dad, and your sister and brother.</i> • <i>All my family, my brothers and sisters, my mum and dad.</i> • <i>Kids, mums, dads, sisters, brothers.</i> • <i>Mother, sister, brother, life.</i> • <i>Mum, dad, my brother.</i> • <i>I think of all the people in my family [F. Who are they? I: My mum, my dad, an my sister]</i> • <i>They have a house, they have a car, they have their kitchen, their room, their toilet, their backyard, their carport, they have a dog and a cat.</i>
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Responses such as “*they’re there for you, when you need ‘m they look after you, you call ‘m aunie and uncle an cousins*” by Aboriginal participants reflect the responsibilities of care between the members of an extended family. Aunties and uncles, cousins, nans and pops play a huge role in family life and the shared upbringing of an individual. The closeness and importance of extended members is also reflected in the pattern of responses where the primary responses refer to uncles and aunies, nana and pop instead of perhaps mum and dad. Responses such as “*my million sixty-one thousand family*” and “*I’ve got lots of people in my family*” reflect the extended coverage (Sharifian 2012)¹² and wide knowledge of FAMILY for these students.

While these examples above are from young urban Aboriginal speakers in Western Australia, the experience of family as a large extended network with connections to Country, responsibilities and obligations is shared and expressed through language equally in Victoria. VAEAI asserts the need for schools to work closely with the local Koorie community to better understand local language variants.

Literacy Skills of Koorie English Speakers

One of our kids got into big trouble for calling one of his classmates ‘horse’ but in our home talk ‘horse’ means ‘smart’.(Sharifian, 2012)

¹² Sharifian, F. (2012) “Understanding stories my way”: Aboriginal-English speaking students’ (mis)understanding of school literacy materials in Australian English. EDWA, Perth.

While this anecdote has been quoted from a recent WA report, it clearly reflects the types of miscommunication that can occur between Aboriginal English speaking students, and their non-Aboriginal teachers and classmates.

Koorie students have often been identified as having difficulty in achieving literacy outcomes. Yet the fact that their primary form of English is often not the form in which literacy is being imparted or spoken by most teachers, is rarely taken into account. The linguistic problems associated with school failure and alienation are of course not only the result of dialectal differences, but more importantly the subsequent problems of the experience of devaluation which these children experience, when the dialect which carries their culture and identity is treated as irrelevant, or even as a barrier, to their education. (Malcolm, c. 2000)

Because many Koorie students are bidialectical and generally come to school with some code-switching skills, teachers often don't realise that SAE is not the language that is spoken in the home. On the other hand, they may judge the spoken language of Koorie students as a non-standard variety of English, similar to that spoken by non-Koorie students; rather than as a distinct dialect. It is important for teachers to not only understand the spoken and written language of Koorie students, but also to be mindful that students are likely to comprehend school literacy materials in terms of meanings in Koorie English. This phenomenon, which may lead to alternative understandings of the literacy materials provided, can be a significant factor contributing to some students' lack of success at school and has been the basis of current research into Aboriginal English and code switching in schools in WA. (Sharifian, 2012) A failure by schools and teachers to identify, accept and take into account the separate features of Aboriginal English is a major factor in Aboriginal children's poor performance in school. (Commonwealth, 1992)

A greater knowledge about and respect for Koorie English enables teachers to develop a better understanding and appreciation of their students' strengths, and this in turn leads to a more accurate identification of where students need assistance and how this help can be best delivered. Literacy programs are strengthened when teachers and Koorie Educators plan activities together to strengthen this understanding, and work more closely in their delivery (*Koorie Literacy Links Program*).¹³

Whole of Classroom Approach to Language Awareness

The majority of Victorian classrooms are made up of students from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including Koorie and non-Aboriginal students. For this reason VAEAL supports a whole of classroom approach that instills respect for all varieties of English, including and especially, Koorie English. A teacher-student relationship based on mutual respect is the foundation from which students can be equipped with the skills to achieve control over which form of English they use, at what time and in what context.

Teachers' conceptual knowledge and therefore their interpretations of classroom texts are naturally informed by their own upbringing. Australian school texts and curriculum are developed in SAE. When a teacher's first language is also SAE there can be an assumption of universal interpretation, when in fact a student's comprehension of any text is heavily informed by their own personal experiences and home life. A lack of language awareness can result in children of different cultural and language backgrounds experiencing confusion, anxiety and misinterpretation (Williams, 1988). This is particularly relevant in many of today's

¹³ http://www.cdesign.com.au/proceedings_aate/aate_papers/044_johnston.htm

Victorian school profiles with 25% of students in government schools reportedly from a language background other than English.¹⁴

There is also a tendency to categorise people whose speech differs from the so-called “standard” and this can result in social, economic, educational and occupational disadvantage. When non-standard English is looked upon as bad English - as is the common experience - both the language and the speakers are devalued. In a school setting this can include a ‘shaming’ of students by teachers and peers, being put on the spot and in the limelight to pronounce ‘properly’ – as echoed at the start of this report, and still reported today¹⁵ - being corrected verbally or textually; and made to ask questions directly etc. A student’s ability to access SAE and become competent and confident users of SAE, does not mean that other dialects of English (such as Koorie English) should be perceived as inferior but rather as different alternative linguistic forms, suitable for particular audiences and purposes including within the school context. Furthermore, as language and communication is used in all subject areas, all teachers can choose to be language awareness teachers (McKenry, 2012).

Glenys Collard, a senior Indigenous consultant in Aboriginal English in Western Australia has said “Our long term aim is for our kids to participate equally in the classroom and for all kids to be able to learn about each other, from each other ... without having to give up one thing for another” (Sharifian, 2012). This is an important standpoint, and the antithesis of Dr Bamblett’s experience at the start of this report: “to do the minimum in both worlds ... the chameleon act”. We want a whole of classroom approach to language awareness, where ways of speaking and expressing one’s world is appreciated and respected, and diversity celebrated – without having to give up one thing for the other.

Rosemary McKenry - who worked closely with the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (GVAECG), Shepparton Community, teachers and students in the 1990s around the use Koorie English and code-switching by Koorie students (detailed further in this report) - provided a submission to the 2012 *Senate Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*, describing how to provide a curriculum that caters for the language needs of whole classes so that all have sufficient understanding and control of Standard Australian English. McKenry believes that it is necessary to focus on whole classes because in most schools, classes are comprised of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Therefore, teachers need the skill to cater for the needs of both groups. This can be done through a **language awareness curriculum**. The purpose of a language awareness curriculum is to provide all students with knowledge about language to enable them to develop academic and social skills effectively, and to provide teachers with the knowledge and a teaching practice that is genuinely helpful.

McKenry argues that people learn best when they are taught or can learn in the language of their thoughts, yet in education contexts, this language is often not the language needed to achieve academic success. A lack of academic success may in turn develop attitudes not conducive to high self-esteem, a sense of useful and fulfilling purpose in the world and general happiness. What is the language of thought? It is usually the language that a person first hears as a child, or uses at home and in social settings. For Aboriginal people, it may be a traditional Indigenous language but often it is a form of Aboriginal English or another form of non-standard English or a mixture - an ‘inter-language’. We all need a strong language that includes a wide vocabulary and other linguistic features that can be used to understand new

¹⁴ Calculated from Summary statistics for Victorian Schools (March 2012) data:
<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/publ/research/publ/statsvicschbrochure.pdf>

¹⁵ Personal Communication: Koorie Educator – metropolitan school (2012), Victoria

concepts. By gaining an awareness and understanding, the person is then in a position to transfer that understanding to another language such as SAE and to effectively and actively choose to code-switch.

Practical suggestions towards a language awareness curriculum can be found detailed in McKenry's referenced submission (McKenry 2012), and some suggestions have been incorporated later in this report as an appendix.

Nurturing Code Switching Skills

In most early childhood settings such as kindergartens, the language spoken and used for teaching is generally SAE, even though many forms of English may be heard in our increasingly multicultural early childhood workforce. Early childhood educators need to recognise the high likelihood that the Koorie children they teach may speak a variety or mix of Koorie or other English depending on their family background and heritage. Early childhood educators also need to recognise and respect the Koorie English spoken by the children, while simultaneously helping them to become competent users of SAE. Koorie children very quickly become competent in using both Koorie English and SAE – that is in code-switching. Sometimes children will be more comfortable with Koorie English and know more vocabulary associated with this dialect, while on other occasions they may feel more comfortable using Standard Australian English. Educators need to validate the children and families' use of Koorie English by accepting this use in positive ways (Eades 1995; 1995a; 1995b in DHS 2005).¹⁶

Koorie early childhood services such as the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) in Victoria and Koorie Playgroups, recognise, nurture and encourage a bi-dialectical language environment. Community owned and driven, they employ Koorie early childhood educators, and both staff and children are commonly referred to as *Aunie* or *Nan* following both traditional respect mores and reciprocal kinship terminology found in Koorie English (eg. aunt calling child *aunie* and vice versa; mum calling her own children *mum*; grandfather calling grandchildren *pop/grannie/nannas*; uncle calling nieces and nephews *uncle* - all commonly heard or used at home but not a feature of SAE. Furthermore, Koorie early childhood educators in these settings demonstrate active and effective code-switching throughout the day in their interactions with Koorie and non-Koorie staff, parents, carers and visiting specialists, as well as through their story reading; and singing and chanting of SAE pre-school songs and nursery rhymes.

Young Koorie children, who already come into this learning environment as fluent and competent communicators, thrive linguistically in such a nurturing language environment, gaining strong foundations for further linguistic development. Koorie English plays a vitally important role in the development and maintenance of Koorie identity and culture, and is a powerful means of expressing Koorie identity - essential in healthy early personal and social development.

Enhancing code-switching skills

Many Koorie students will start school with code switching abilities; and some will be such effective code-switchers that teachers may not realise that SAE is their second language. In order to nurture this skill, Koorie English must be recognised as a valuable asset. This early recognition will also assist teachers in building positive relationships with students beginning

¹⁶ Department of Human Services (2005) Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Kindergarten.

their learning of SAE; and as noted by the Queensland Studies Authority, children who are learning English as an additional language need to be encouraged to contribute to learning conversations using their first language¹⁷. In story telling exercises students are likely to express deeper layers of meaning when speaking in their first language, and creative writing exercises with a focus on Koorie English dialogue, are an ideal context to explore the differences between dialects.

It is essential that local Koorie voices are showcased through role modeling and through text choices. It is important for students to see role models within the school environment, who speak in their own first language, and are valued for doing so. It is equally important for students to see that there are texts such as books, magazines and newspapers written in a mix of Koorie English and SAE that is both comprehensible to the general reader and expressive of Koorie concepts and meanings.

The methods and language used to explain differences between Koorie English and SAE is perhaps the most important, if not most challenging, aspect of encouraging effective code-switching skills. There might not be direct translations from Aboriginal language words to SAE and some students may be hesitant to discuss these differences when they have experienced language prejudice. This is where local Koorie input is invaluable.

The grammar of Koorie English can sound very similar to other non-standard forms of English and it is easy for non-Aboriginal teachers to dismiss it as incorrect – as ‘bad’ grammar. If a student comes to school asking “Where’s me book?” or ‘Where you bin?’ because that is how most members in their extended family have asked that very same question, they may be confused or frustrated by being corrected or reprimanded. Continual misunderstandings can leave the student feeling discouraged or ostracised. At the same time, if a student enters higher schooling without realising that the SAE equivalent is “Where is my book?”, or ‘Where have you been?’, their performance grades are likely to be affected. For this reason teachers must take the time to explain that SAE is a specific form of English, and that in the classroom, students need to know the most effective ways to use it. When students are equipped with the knowledge to choose, they gain the power to lead discussions of mutual understanding.

Koorie English, Schools and Public Policy

The Melbourne Declaration states that ‘literacy and numeracy and knowledge of key disciplines remain the cornerstone of schooling for young Australians’ (MCEETYA, 2008). With respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in particular, governments concede that there is a need to “improve SAE literacy and numeracy outcomes by supporting the use and development of pedagogies that are sensitive and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ languages and cultures” (MCEECDYA, 2010, p.14),¹⁸ and in Victoria we acknowledge the need for “developing literacy programs that recognise the importance of ‘code-switching’ between Koorie English and Standard Australian English” (Wannik, 2008). The first goal of the Melbourne Declaration is in fact that we “ensure that schools build on local cultural knowledge and experience of students as a foundation for learning” (MCEETYA, 2008).

There is recognition therefore, in the policy arena that “the reality that Aboriginal students face in classrooms is influenced by the interaction between their own cultures and that of the school, and that cross-cultural teaching and learning programs need to be responsive to

¹⁷ http://www.gsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/early_middle/qklg_pd_atsti_esl.pdf

¹⁸ ATSIEAP

these students by addressing this interaction” (Sharifian, 2012) – that is, curriculum learning areas need to be inclusive of Koorie perspectives, *including* language use.

Despite the fact that Aboriginal English has been the subject of linguistic investigation for approximately 50 years and its understanding and acceptance as a true Australian dialect has grown, limited research has occurred within education settings in Victoria about the use of Koorie English and student code-switching abilities. Subsequently, we have no recent evidence-based research examining for instance: code-switching abilities of Koorie students, teacher language awareness, what language and dialects Koorie students are actually using in schools today in a range of contexts (hypothetically a blend or ‘inter-language’ of Koorie English, SAE, American-English, contemporary teen slang, acronymic text language associated with new information technologies such as OMG, LOL etc., and other contemporary slang), and contextual ‘(mis)understandings’.

Action Research: *Deadly Eh, Cuz!: Teaching Speakers of Koorie English*

The most widely quoted research and subsequent professional development course for teachers is *‘Deadly Eh, Cuz!: Teaching Speakers of Koorie English’* (1996) instigated and developed by the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (GVAECG) and senior project officer Rosemary McKenry. *Deadly Eh, Cuz!* is based on action research conducted by participants in a pilot program of the Koorie English Literacy Project (KELP) in 1993-94, with the support of Koorie project officer Geraldine Atkinson and the GVAECG. Thirty teachers and eight Koorie Educators took part in the KELP pilot project, trialing the draft workshops which included school based action research, the results of which became a resource for *Deadly Eh, Cuz!*. The pilot schools were: Wilmot Road Primary School in Shepparton, Mooroopna Park Primary School, Shepparton High School, Shepparton South Secondary School, Mooroopna Secondary College and Nathalia Secondary College. Gowrie Street Primary School and Barmah Primary School also gave support to the project.

The main goals of KELP were to:

- Raise the awareness of mainstream teachers, both primary and secondary, as to the reality of Koorie English being the first language of many Koorie students
- Investigate how to use this awareness to develop the literacy standard of Koorie students
- Collect local stories from students and Elders so that these could be published as part of the reading materials used in schools.

KELP was successful because:

- The project was initiated by the local Koorie Community through the GVAECG as they saw the need to improve the literacy of their children
- The project was ‘community owned’ and therefore supported by GVAECG and the then Directorate of School Education
- The project was administered cooperatively by the Koorie Education Action Network, which was made up of the GVAECG, school administrators and teachers
- The project officer worked closely with students, teachers and administrators as well as Koorie parents and GVAECG, and had a strong commitment to the project
- Students saw that it was a cooperative process, in that they provided advice to the teachers while at the same time receiving personal assistance from the project officer and teachers.

Unfortunately there was no funding to continue the project into 1994 and the Shepparton School Support Centre ceased to function at the end of 1993 due to governmental changes (McKenry, 1993).

In recent discussions with Koorie Community members and educators who were involved in KELP, and who are still actively involved in the Koorie education sector, there is unanimous agreement that '*Deadly Eh, Cuz!*' needs to be updated and reproduced.¹⁹ Currently in VHS video and audio cassette form it is inaccessible, out of production and possibly unknown to many emerging teachers. The following quotes from participating teachers involved in the Victorian action research through KELP are a good testimony to the project having achieved its goals:

"I didn't really understand for a long time what Koorie English was, until I started teaching a little girl writing. When I first collected her work I thought 'Oh, yes, she can't spell' then I started to read it and it began to make sense. I could pick out individual words, like 'wada' (water). Then I got her to read it to me and all the pieces started to fall into place. It was far more phonetic than I had realised. It was just that she had written it in Koorie English. The whole thing clicked when I started to see it through her eyes, not my eyes. It was the most wonderful piece of writing. That really was an eye opener" (grade 3)

"So having set out to help Glen with his language skills, I have really made more of an observation of Glen as a person and have come to understand him in a different light. I am now concluding that it is very important to try to understand the ways and culture of Koorie children so that they can be helped to develop to the fullest potential" (grade 3)

"After our last professional development together I had never actually sat down and talked to our kids (and I've got Years 3 to 6) about Koorie English and SAE. I had just accepted it. The other day one of the kids asked me 'Why do the White people always say 'Koorie,' he said using the long 'oo' sound. I replied 'Do they? How do you say it?' 'Koorie,' he said using a short 'oo' sound. I repeated it after him. 'Yeah, see you say it like I do. White people always say "Koorie". He was much more aware than I was. We have learnt a heck of a lot from the kids!"

Literacy Links Project

An alternative project which commenced in 1998 was the **Literacy Links Projects** involving interactive videoconferencing. This project (originally Commonwealth funded) was funded by the then Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) with support from the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEAI) and the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV). The initiative involved two distinct projects: (i) the Koorie Literacy Links Project for primary students and (ii) the Middle Years Links Project for secondary students in Years 7-9. Both were coordinated by DEET personnel and each involved a total of 14 government, Catholic and Independent schools.

Among other activities, the Literacy Links Projects used interactive videoconferencing to link students across the schools, as a component of their literacy programs; and the videoconferencing equipment also included a 'whiteboard' facility, so that students could interact through writing and drawing as well as visually and verbally.

Although some of the schools involved had quite large numbers of Aboriginal students, in others the Aboriginal students were in a minority. The Literacy Links Projects allowed for

¹⁹ Paton, D., Briggs V., Atkinson, G. [personal communication]

productive engagement between the different groups of Aboriginal students across the State, encouraging language use and expression.

Overall, the project found that improvements to Koorie students' literacy levels were attributable to a variety of factors, however some of the more general outcomes or findings identified and included the following:

- Videoconferencing can definitely be motivational for Koorie students.
- The use of texts by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander People can increase student self esteem when used as the basis of videoconferencing links.
- At times (but not all the time) it is beneficial to include some non-Koorie students in videoconferencing because a deeper understanding of culture and sharing occurs.
- Many students have learned to operate and fully utilise the technology.
- The establishment of school community teams, including Koorie community representatives, ensures commitment from a range of stakeholders to improved literacy outcomes for Koorie students.²⁰

At the time, Warrnambool East Primary School was recognised at the Excellence in Leadership in Indigenous Education Awards. The school had been part of the Koorie Literacy Links program since 1999, and following consultation with Koorie parents as a result, introduced the traditional *Keerraywoorroong* language to the school curriculum.²¹

Towards a Language Awareness Curriculum and Bi-dialectal Curriculum

Rosemary McKenry (senior project officer of the former KELP project) has continued to advocate for a language awareness curriculum, influenced by the work previously mentioned. She argues that for Indigenous students “it is important that they develop an awareness of Aboriginal English ...and that they can translate from these forms of language to SAE when they choose to do so – and vice versa. Because people usually learn best when the language of instruction is their home language, it is essential that texts be written in dialects as well as the standard form of English” (McKenry, 2012). Through her work, in particular with the GVAECG and KELP, McKenry has developed a suggested sequence for a language awareness curriculum incorporating games, exercises and discussion points, included as an appendix to this report.

There are multiple benefits of a language awareness curriculum. It can provide all students with knowledge about language, enabling them to effectively develop academic and social skills. By reaffirming that English is spoken in many dialects, none of which are ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’, it works to tackle discrimination in the classroom. It allows for students to make informed choices about their own language use and it provides teachers with the knowledge and a teaching practice that is genuinely helpful. While students are expected to master SAE in order to achieve academic success, a person’s first language or dialect must be respected as an integral part of identity and culture; and this is the best starting point for learning.

The suggested sequence for a language awareness curriculum provided by McKenry has been designed with whole classrooms in mind so that teachers can help all students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to access standard English, while at the same time, developing the knowledge and skills necessary to differentiate between the various dialects of English that are used by Australians. One of the outcomes of the whole classroom

²⁰ <http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=224>

²¹ http://www.aeuvic.asn.au/aeunews_koorie_ed.pdf

approach is that students learn to respect all varieties of language and to achieve control over which variety of English to use, according to audience and purpose. They also learn that it is acceptable to use a dialect of English as a way of achieving a sense of social and cultural identity, while, at the same time, developing confidence to use SAE to achieve academic success. For Koorie students it is important that they develop an awareness of Aboriginal English and that they can translate from these forms of language to SAE when they choose to and vice versa.

In *Deadly Eh, Cuz!*, Atkinson and McKenry also developed a suggested transition process from Koorie English to SAE reproduced below. The purpose of this transition process is not to replace KE with SAE but to give the student access to both dialects.

A possible sequence of literary development might be:

1. General language awareness. This would include an understanding that there are different languages and different dialects within a language, and that people change the way they communicate according to audience and purpose.
2. Awareness that Koorie English is different from Standard Australian English.
3. Awareness that Koorie English is respected by teachers and the school community.
4. Confidence to write in Koorie English.
5. Ability to decode spoken Koorie English and write it, spelling phonetically.
6. Ability to choose between Koorie English and SAE according to audience and purpose.
7. Development of SAE skills to communicate according to audience and purpose.

Two-way bi-dialectal education:

Language has been described as “a pane of glass through which ideas are transmitted from speaker to listener. Under ordinary circumstances language users are not conscious of the glass itself but only of the ideas that pass through it” - in other words that language can be taken for granted.²² As Sharifian notes, when two dialects are being used to communicate, the glass becomes ‘frosted’ to some degree. What is conceptualised and communicated from one side of the glass may be received, if at all, quite differently on the other side. The wider the conceptual gap between the dialects, the more impenetrable the frosting on the glass. Sharifian proposes two-way bi-dialectal education, incorporating similar approaches to language awareness curriculum. Working this way as a 2-way team is a means of making the *implicit* explicit through deconstructing the language, analysing its meaning and exploring how it is used and conceptualised.²³ Effective bi-dialectal education is based on four fundamental dimensions: relationship building, mutual comprehension building, repertoire building (including the explicit teaching of differences between AE and SAE, and the learning of SAE to add to their language/literary repertoire and the development of knowledge of AE to increase the intercultural language/literacy repertoire of non-Koorie students and teachers); and skill building (students gaining an understanding of the benefits of learning SAE as an additional dialect which can provide enhanced opportunities).²⁴

This approach requires identifying Aboriginal English speakers beyond linguistic factors, and looking below the surface to determine student’s cultural orientations in approaching experiences – as research supports the idea that dialect may be evidenced at the

²² Chafe Wallace(in Malcolm 2010) quoted by Sharifian 2012

²³ Sharifian 2012, p. 71

²⁴ Sharifian 2012 p. 72

conceptual level even when it is difficult to discern at the physical level (eg understandings of Country’.

We conclude this paper with some reflections from Carol Garlett (Senior WA Consultant for Aboriginal English/ESL/ELD),²⁵ as we believe they are appropriate to the Victorian context; and a set of recommendations for consideration by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and State and national curriculum development:

“Our kids get their understanding from the whole text, not just the words. They have this world view and knowledge that they can’t help but use in their understandings of texts. So their understanding of texts means different things as they bring it to their worldview. Our kids are often labelled shy ... but in fact are trying to interpret or formulate the most acceptable response which in a classroom situation is a western perspective. As they formulate their response they endeavour to take out of it the innate cultural interpretation so that they won’t be shamed or embarrassed by teachers who are ignorant of our (cultural) worldview.

Our kids know a lot, but over time they learn to filter out what knowledge they can share and what knowledge to keep to themselves because they know that some language is not acceptable or can be misunderstood by some non-Aboriginal people... we need to foster that Aboriginal knowledge or worldview of the children by making sure our teachers have the cultural competencies for teaching children across a diversity of cultural backgrounds. This will benefit all children in the classroom and assist in bridging the gap in Aboriginal education”

Recommendations

Following preliminary discussions with Sharifian who is now based at Monash University and members of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL), VAEAI recommends that a 3-way collaborative contemporary research project be planned and undertaken to determine:

1. The types of language Koorie students are *actually* using in schools, and in which regions (eg metropolitan compared with regional, regions adjoining State borders etc, interstate Indigenous students) – we would expect a mix of KE/AE, SAE, elements of standard American and Afro-American English as well as contemporary school slang and Koorie English slang – inter-language. We need to gain a better understanding of the linguistic cultural practices in our classrooms.
2. Code-switching patterns and skills among Koorie students.
3. Levels of language awareness with regards to Koorie English and code-switching among teachers.
4. The degree to which students who are speakers of Aboriginal English (*mis*)understand literacy materials; and the impact of their home dialect on their educational outcomes. This could be done by replicating methods used in original research in this field in WA, which systematically analysed the ways in which Aboriginal students interpreted the kinds of materials used in schools to promote literacy, and showed how the concept of schema (our mental/cultural framework) could be employed as an analytical tool for this purpose.

²⁵ In Sharifian 2012 p. 59

5. The degree to which non-Aboriginal teachers (mis)understand the oral presentations and texts of Aboriginal students could be incorporated – where both approaches are taken within the one larger research project, potentially informing the development of suitable professional development training for teachers in language awareness and bi-dialectal education.

The picture which could be usefully portrayed through this inter-language research and the wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge gleaned (both traditional and contemporary) would be illuminating. It would provide a foundation from which to determine fully how Koorie English is used in the classroom. It would determine if there are links between language discrimination and disengagement in the classroom; links between language awareness, cultural pride, and resulting confidence in the classroom; or links between code switching, affective mastering of SAE, and academic achievement. Following this research and analysis of findings, we would then recommend:

6. Developing a contemporary professional development package focused on language awareness curriculum and bi-dialectal education to assist student in developing effective code –switching skills for both teacher training and professional development of practising teachers.
7. Implementation of language awareness curriculum and bi-dialectal education approaches in trial schools and progressively into the AusVELS curriculum in Victoria, and the Australian Curriculum for English.

Appendix: Language Awareness Curriculum sequence (McKenry)

Early Years of School

Concepts:

- Australians speak many languages and dialects and all are valuable.

Exercises:

- Record a number of people the students know speaking, include some Koorie and some non-Aboriginal people, and have them all speak about the same thing. Children listen and are asked to identify the speaker.
- Record a number of people the students know from television. Try to include a variety of accents and include Aboriginal English speakers. Have the students turn their back to the television so they cannot see who is speaking and have them guess.
- Using a telephone or a microphone, conduct role playing games, listen to the way children mimic adults.

Resources:

- Give children the experience of looking at books in a variety of languages, including Koorie English.

Middle Years of Primary School

Concepts:

- Introduce the concept of 'audience and purpose' and relate this to all aspects of language.

Exercises:

- Record a number of people the students know from television in different situations; speaking to different audiences and with different purposes; for example the same character amongst friends, then with family and then in the workplace. Try to include a variety of accents and include Aboriginal English speakers. Have the students turn their back to the television so they cannot see who is speaking and have them guess.
- Play a version of "Chinese Whispers" but with a bi-lingual twist. If there are no bi-lingual students in the class, engage two school community members who speak a language other than English.

Student A writes down a short story in SAE and privately tells it to Student B (without Student C hearing). Student B translates the story into a language other than English for Student C. Student C then translates it back into SAE and writes it down. Have the class compare the stories that Student A and Student C have written down. Has it changed in any way? Where are some meanings lost, added or changed during the translation?

Resources:

- Play music from a variety of cultures across Australia, with lyrics in Aboriginal and Koorie English.

Later Years of Primary School and Junior Secondary

Ensure that students have experienced language awareness sessions and if they have not; repeat some exercises from the middle years.

Concepts:

- Expand the concept of 'audience and purpose' and relate this to writing as well as speaking. This includes both informal and formal language.
- Introduce the terms Standard Australian English (SAE) and non-standard Australian English (Non-SAE) and develop activities that demonstrate these.

Exercises:

- By this stage children should be able to identify both SAE and Non-SAE and will be able to switch from one to the other. Translate some everyday sentences from SAE to Non-SAE and vice versa. If students are finding it difficult to identify everyday sentences in Non-SAE ask them to read status updates from Facebook or other social networking sites, include a discussion of the spelling used on these sites, and translate the status updates into SAE sentences.
- Introduce Koorie English in the class as a distinct dialect and if possible engage a local Community member who speaks Koorie English as a first language. Tune into a local Koorie English radio station and work with the Community member to lead a class discussion on the differences between Koorie English and SAE.
- Provide experiences for written translation. Students will need practice listening to the way Koorie English sounds, and writing it phonetically, as there is no standardisation of Koorie English. Students should be encouraged to identify when they are writing in Koorie English and when they are writing in SAE. This creates an awareness of when phonetic spelling is required and when standardised spelling is expected.
- Teach cohesive devices such as connective words and phrases, for example 'however', 'on the other hand', 'finally' as they are useful in report writing but are not often used in everyday speech.
- The language of text books is different from the language usually spoken by students. Therefore there is a need to teach the de-contextualised language of texts. Some of the scenarios in the text may seem very foreign to students and difficult to relate to. It is important not to make assumptions about the home life of students, rather ask them if the scenarios featured in the texts are realistic. Ask them to rewrite the scenarios in a way that relates to their own lives. Try translating the scenarios into the first language/dialect of the student.

Resources:

- Local Koorie Radio programs are a great language resource, as some speakers of Koorie English will naturally code-switch and adjust their speech when in a class room environment, but the language of radio programs will always reflect the target Koorie audience.

Senior Secondary and Tertiary Years

Concepts

- What is a dialect? What is a language? Show that both languages and dialects have structure.

Exercises

- Watch films that are made in Aboriginal languages and in Aboriginal English and discuss the differences between languages such as Yolngu, Kriols used by some Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal English and localised variants such as Koorie English, Murri English, Noongar English and so on. Are there any shared words, how do the meanings of some words differ?

- Teach the meaning and use of words needed for subjects other than English such as science and maths. It is often the language in these subjects that causes students to fail because of a lack of comprehension.
- Role plays different professional scenarios, such as job interviews, corporate meetings, sales pitches and discuss the differences in language use. Include professional Koorie experiences, such as going for a job interview at a Koorie Organisation, working at the reception of a Koorie Health Service or being interviewed by a Koorie reporter.

Resources

The best language resources will be films made by Aboriginal filmmakers. Some actors may naturally code-switch and adjust their speech when working with non-Aboriginal crews, whereas their use of Aboriginal English is likely to be more explicit when working in an Aboriginal environment.