ESL (ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE), ABORIGINAL ENGLISHES

As the language of school instruction, business, law and work is the dialect we refer to as standard Australian English (SAE), students from non-standard Australian English speaking backgrounds must be competent in SAE if they are to achieve educational outcomes, and employment and lifestyle opportunities equal to those of the rest of the community.

To become literate in the dominant culture students must master conventionalised linguistic and symbolic codes for constructing and deconstructing meanings in written, oral and visual texts. Students must therefore develop implicit and explicit knowledge of written and spoken SAE. The English Curriculum is designed to respect the linguistic and cultural differences of all students while developing and extending their knowledge and skills in SAE.

In contemporary Australia a growing proportion of students come from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. These students come to school with different levels of proficiency in SAE and will acquire second language/dialect proficiency at different rates.

To be successful in Australian society NESB students need to be able to understand, respond to and critically analyse the cultural assumptions and ideologies embedded in oral, written and visual texts. In the English classroom NESB students should be exposed to the full range of texts where cultural assumptions are identified by the teacher and are explicitly taught to students. Students from NESB should also be encouraged to engage in critical readings of texts that allow them to identify the ideologies embedded in texts and to weigh these ideologies against their own ideas and values as well as those of others.

The students’ first language embodies their early life experiences. Embedded in the first language or dialect are many of the cultural and social values (in fact, a world view) of a particular cultural group. Consequently, second language/dialect teaching programs and methodologies should be sensitive to the students’ cultural and linguistic background. As far as possible the learning experiences used in learning language or dialect should be used as a foundation or resource on which the learning of a second language or dialect is based.

English as a Second Language

In collaboration with mainstream English teachers, English as a second language (ESL) teachers identify students from non-standard English speaking backgrounds (NESB), assess their language needs and develop programs and/or support to meet their literacy needs. The English and ESL teacher may follow several programming models; ie withdrawal, individual support team teaching, special courses or units or in class support.

While the most effective ESL programs are those where ESL and English teachers jointly plan, implement and evaluate programs, it is recognised that, where there is no ESL specialist, available mainstream teachers will have to cater for the needs of NESB students. Furthermore, English and specialist ESL teachers often work with teachers from other subject areas to ensure that the English language needs of NESB students are being addressed in all curriculum areas.

NESB students should be explicitly taught the generic structures of text and the grammatical structures at word, sentence and paragraph level. Explicit teaching of generic features, modelling and joint construction is valuable methodology for NESB students and is often used in conjunction with the writing process model. A grammar is
not taught in isolation, but in the context of meaningful language activities. ESL students should be exposed to grammatical ideas only in language contexts and with appropriate first language models.

Aural and oral activities are prominent features of ESL programs and explicit teaching of oral genres, plus modelling of appropriate language, tone, register and paralanguage are considered vital if students are expected to become proficient speakers and listeners in a range of contexts.

It is essential that teachers understand the complexities of assessing work from NESB students and that they do not overlook vital areas of assessment by concentrating on superficial elements. The ESL band scale that was developed in response to the national profiles in English can be used to assess the special needs of NESB students, as can the band scale produced by the NLLIA.

**Aboriginal Englishes**

The task of providing Aboriginal students with access to the effective English usage is complex and problematic. The aspirations of the social group concerned need to be interpreted in the light of the nature of Aboriginal Englishes.

Aboriginal Englishes are cohesive language systems with their own grammatical, semantic and phonological properties. They are valid, rule-governed languages which, far from being impoverished, are rich stores of communicative resources. It is also recognised that while SAE and Aboriginal Englishes are mutually intelligible they differ in systematic ways.

SAE is a neutral term in linguistics description; it does not imply linguistic superiority. Yet both educators and many Aboriginal people acknowledge that a high level of competence in SAE will empower Aboriginal people in their dealings with the wider Australian community.

While speakers of Aboriginal English do not face a complete break between early childhood language and their school language experience, children are likely to have a strong attachment to their dialect, not only because they feel comfortable using it, but also because it gives them a sense of belonging and is a marker of their personal identity. The role of the English teacher is to help the speaker of Aboriginal English develop competence in the standard dialect, while demonstrating respect and tolerance for the speaker's first dialect. To this end the teacher offers a range of written and oral tasks that require the use of the standard dialect but do not condemn, nor seek to eradicate, non standard forms from all social situations. To criticise a linguistic practice can be interpreted as a condemnation of that society and as the denigration of one's family, friends and culture. It is important to stress the validity of choosing either Aboriginal English or SAE according to the linguistic demands and expectations of the social situation.

Many of the principles of teaching a second language apply to teaching a second dialect. However, there are additional factors to be considered. Teachers should be able to identify, accept and account for the different varieties of Aboriginal English that are used by their students. This involves students themselves having some knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal Englishes and being able to distinguish which elements of SAE students need to learn. These elements or structures are not taught in isolation but as part of meaningful language activities. Explicit teaching and modelling of language structures to suit a particular audience and purpose for a specific context are essential when teaching a second dialect. Developing knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal Englishes in the classroom as a strategy for fostering SAE proficiency should be approached with sensitivity and acknowledgement of the views of Creole or Aboriginal English which are held within the particular Aboriginal community of which the school is part.

More importantly there are significant sociolinguistic differences between Aboriginal English and SAE which can affect the quality of communication between speakers of these dialects. Differences may include the way in which information is sought, and the use of silences, gesture and eye contact. English teachers are aware of and must take these sociolinguistic differences into account when designing their programs and devising classroom structures and interaction patterns.

Teachers of English need to take all these matters into account when planning for users ESL and Aboriginal Englishes.