

- ▶ **Standard English Difficulties and Helpful Intervention Strategies for Aboriginal Students**
- ▶ **Difficultés à maîtriser l'anglais courant chez les élèves autochtones et stratégies d'intervention utiles**

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**KEY WORDS**

NON-STANDARD ENGLISH DIALECT

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VOCABULARY

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**Abstract**

This paper provides a reflective account of difficulties and differences that may cause Aboriginal Canadian students to struggle with Standard English. Special considerations for Aboriginal students and strategies for intervention are described. These clinical reflections are based on twenty years of cultural and working experience as an Aboriginal Speech-Language Pathologist in Central Vancouver Island, B.C., as well as personal observations and interactions with Aboriginal people from across Canada.

**Abrégé**

Le présent article rapporte le fruit de réflexions sur les difficultés et les différences qui pourraient expliquer le fait que les enfants autochtones du Canada ont de la difficulté à maîtriser l'anglais courant. Il décrit les éléments particuliers à prendre en considération pour les élèves autochtones et des stratégies d'intervention. Ces réflexions cliniques sont fondées sur vingt ans d'expérience culturelle et professionnelle à titre d'orthophoniste autochtone au centre de l'île de Vancouver, en Colombie-Britannique ainsi que sur des observations personnelles et des interactions avec des Autochtones de partout au Canada.

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Aboriginal youth have poor high school graduation rates in British Columbia (B.C.). A study by the B.C. Ministry of Education (2009) states that only 49% of Aboriginal youth are graduating from high school with B.C. Certificates of Graduation, compared to 73% of non-Aboriginal youth in the province. These findings may in part reflect the fact that many Aboriginal youth speak a dialect other than Standard English. Passing B.C. provincial English exams and school coursework is in part dependent on the use of “conventions of language” (B.C. Government, 2009). Since English classes and exams in B.C. and across the country require the use of Standard English, it is important to help Aboriginal students who do not speak Standard English to learn this dialect, even when they are competent in using an Aboriginal English dialect. This paper discusses issues of dialect difference and how Speech-Language Pathologists (S-LPs) might become important facilitators if they can offer early assessment, identification and intervention in key aspects of Standard English to Aboriginal students. If S-LPs were to offer such services to Aboriginal students who are speaking non-standard dialects of English, they would promote academic success for Aboriginal students in public schools, institutes of higher learning, work environments, and mainstream communities where Standard English is spoken.

The author of this paper has Aboriginal ancestry (Interior Salish, member of the Skuppah Band, Lytton, B.C.) and is an S-LP with over 20 years of experience in the Speech-Language or English as Second Dialect (ESD) programs of the public elementary schools in the Central Vancouver Island region of B.C. I have assessed many First Nation and Métis students, and a few Inuit elementary students living in Central Vancouver Island, B.C. In my experience, many of these children struggled with the acquisition of Standard English. Some lived on-reserve (Nanoose or Nanaimo First Nations) and spoke English as their first language, although the ancestral language for their tribe was Hul'qumi'num. Most of the Aboriginal, Métis and Inuit students I have worked with lived off-reserve, away from their ancestral tribal groups. They studied in mainstream classrooms where their teachers and student peers were Standard English speakers of non-Aboriginal descent. Whenever students lived on-reserve in a more segregated area and attended a school where Aboriginal students were the majority, non-standard dialect use was more noticeable. This is not surprising, as Aboriginal students living in more integrated communities, are likely to have more verbal interactions with Standard English speakers and therefore have more opportunities to learn the standard dialect.

## ABORIGINAL ENGLISH DIALECTS

Aboriginal English dialects developed from contact between an ancestral language and English, geographic isolation of communities of speakers and infrequent interactions with Standard English speakers. The first varieties of non-standard English dialects (pidgins) developed as a contact language when Aboriginal people began utilizing English without formal instruction and applied rules and patterns of their ancestral languages (Ball, Bernhardt & Deby, 2006). As new generations spoke the pidgins as their first language, creoles developed where language patterns became more consistent and regular. Over generations and with continued contact with English speakers, these creoles became increasingly similar to Standard English. In more recent Canadian history, Aboriginal children were taken from their families and put in residential schools. In these schools, children from different Aboriginal language and cultural background were grouped together. Children were penalized for speaking their native language. In this way, the residential school system may have inadvertently served to consolidate Aboriginal English dialects.

As noted by Labov and Harris (1986) and Ball et al. (2006), non-standard dialects can remain distinct even in urban settings due to social, economic and political barriers that cause segregation or divergence. Dialectal variations of English should not be treated as pathological (Crago & Westernoff, 1997) by labeling them as language delays or word-retrieval difficulties. Ball, et al. (2006, p. 27) quote Russell's (2002) statement that practices which treat Aboriginal English dialects as a disorder are a “vestige of the earlier, blatantly racist educational system that undermined, eradicated” and “marginalized native people's cultures.”

Ball et al. (2006) argue that students speaking non-standard English perform less well in school without specialized support. Such support would teach specific forms that distinguish their dialect from the standard dialect. Ball et al. (2006) argue that this type of intervention is very different from what is generally offered by English as a Second Language programs. It has been argued that the failure to specifically address second dialect issues may be the cause of limited oral and written Standard English skills in American students speaking English as a Second Dialect (Eades, 1995; Labov, 1972; Leap, 1993, Smitherman, 1977; Wolfram et al., 1999). I would therefore argue that it is appropriate to teach second language skills to children who speak a second dialect, including children with Aboriginal English dialects. Because S-LPs are speech and language specialists, they may be the best prepared members of school teams to assess dialect differences and determine whether lack of

knowledge of Standard English is impeding a Aboriginal, Inuit or Métis student's academic performance. In B.C., S-LPs may also have more teaching resources and staff time that can be allotted to assisting such students in school districts or schools where Standard English as a Second Dialect (ESD) programs are not available.

### AREAS OF DIFFICULTY EXPERIENCED BY ABORIGINAL DIALECT SPEAKERS IN STANDARD ENGLISH CONTEXTS

Aboriginal children who speak a second dialect have been observed to exhibit a variety of difficulties in Standard English contexts. Some of these difficulties may be due to cultural mismatches between discourse patterns used in the home and the classroom (Ball et al. 2006; Eriks-Brophy & Crago, 2003; Kent, Davis & Shapiro, 1978). Other confusions may be due to a lack of understanding of, or experience with, vocabulary or dialectal differences.

In my practice, I have often noted difficulties following verbal instructions. Aboriginal students in the early elementary grades often do not understand school readiness (e.g. letter identification, number symbols, counting, shape, comparison), direction, position, quantity, temporal and sequential concepts. In my experience, primary and intermediate school children seem to have difficulty with key concepts such as defining, comparing, contrasting and categorizing. When students are given specific instruction in these areas, teachers report a marked improvement in abilities to understand directions and verbally participate in class.

Less participation in discussions with classroom teachers or peers, individually or in groups, is also frequently observed, as are difficulties answering questions. Classroom discourse rules already known by mainstream peers are unfamiliar to children speaking Aboriginal dialects.

When these students speak, they often use features of an Aboriginal English Dialect. I have noted various patterns of morphological difference in the children I have worked with in B.C. These include:

- Pronoun confusion, deletion, or substitution;
- Deletion of inflectional endings for regular past tense, superlatives, or comparatives;
- Deletion of copula or auxiliary verbs;
- Limited use of conjunctions or *wh*- questions.

Ball et al. (2006) describe cultural discourse differences in patterns of asking and answering questions in a number of Aboriginal tribal groups such as the Northern Ute, Lakota and Cree. Peltier (2006) reported that Ojibway

people sometimes give answers that they think their interlocutor wants to hear rather than a factually correct answer. It is not uncommon to take an extended period of time to answer a really important question (e.g., up to three days), and see the need for communicating something that is obvious.

### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Some Aboriginal students have a tendency to speak with a reduced voice volume, or make less frequent eye contact with interlocutors in group interactions. These tendencies may be reported as concerns at school team meetings by teachers who are not of Aboriginal descent. This behavior may reflect Aboriginal students' concern about their ability to understand or communicate effectively in Standard English, or it may reflect different cultural patterns. I have noted several cultural patterns used by Aboriginal students and their families that may be misunderstood by individuals from the mainstream culture. These include verbal response time lags, eye contact differences, and hand-touching constraints. Each of these will be discussed below.

#### Response time lags

Some Aboriginal students or adults I have interacted with would not respond to Standard English communication partners for up to five or ten seconds, even after many years of living and working in an urban environment with a majority of Standard English Speakers. I have noticed this tendency in males from my tribal areas (e.g., Interior Salish tribes from Chilliwack to Lytton, B.C.). I have since observed this in male and female Aboriginal children in the Central Vancouver Island region, who descend from a variety of Canadian tribal groups. When this pattern is observed, main-stream teachers report that the child never speaks, even when multiple questions are asked. These response time lags may be due to different cultural rules for discourse. The child may leave a longer period of silence if they are waiting for a group response, showing respect or waiting their turn to begin. McLaughlin & Cody (1982) state that mainstream conversational partners in North America expect interlocutors to take an offered turn in less than three seconds, and that they generally are uncomfortable with waits of more than three seconds. When answers are not given in the expected time period, listeners feel uncomfortable and judge conversational partners as having limited competence. Slow or absent responses to questions may also reflect gender- and context-specific cultural differences. Peltier (2006) reported that Ojibway males are more talkative and have shorter response times to questions when they are outside or when children are watching them do an activity.

Cultural differences in learning styles may also ac-

count for differences in response time to questions. Little Soldier (1997) and Nuby & Oxford (1997) have found that Aboriginal students tend to have more reflective and cooperative personality types. Reflective personalities take time to stop and consider various options before responding, and depend less on feedback from external sources when making a decision. Cooperative personalities may become uncomfortable when singled out (Little Soldier, 1989; Nuby, Ehle, & Thrower, 2001).

### Eyegaze

Cultural differences in eye-gaze patterns (e.g., reducing eye contact to show respect to authority figures) may also be observed. Differences in use of eye contact are noticeable in large group discussions (e.g., whole class) or with authority figures. I have noted that many of the Aboriginal people from Central Vancouver Island or the Interior of British Columbia (e.g., Chilliwack to Lytton) appear uncomfortable with sustained eye contact as a speaker or listener, even when they demonstrate high competence with Standard English. Many students tend to look away when they are thinking and become uncomfortable when adults ask them to look at them. Some adults have reported that looking away helps them block out visual distractions and allow them to visualize and think about their ideas while they formulate answers. Some Aboriginal Elders have wondered whether this pattern first developed in residential schools when Aboriginal students looked down to avoid punishment and avoid being seen as “rebellious” (Bovaird, personal communication September 2006). On a personal note, I have a tendency to do the same when I pay particular attention to a response and want to minimize visual distractions.

### Hand touching

I have noticed that many Aboriginal, Inuit, or Métis people are unused to and uncomfortable with handshakes or other gestures involving hand touching. Some tribes, such as the Ojibway, believe that a person's spirit is transferred to another through hand touching (Peltier, 2006). I have often observed or received hugs or gentle over and under handshakes in greetings from Aboriginal peoples, rather than firm one-handed handshakes. These hugs or gentle handshakes are only used with people who deserve them because of familiarity, trust, or respect.

## ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES WITH ABORIGINAL DIALECT SPEAKERS

I have identified a number of assessment and intervention strategies that are helpful to students who speak an Aboriginal dialect when I provide services that

teach Standard English. I believe that these practices promote Aboriginal student academic success and support their communication with non-Aboriginal peers and teachers.

### Assessment

When assessing children who speak an Aboriginal Dialect, a number of English standardized tests or subtests can be useful for comparing a student's performance to same-age Standard English speakers and identifying patterns of difference. The S-LP must not interpret such differences in performance as an indication of delays. I have found the following tests useful for this purpose: *Bracken Basic Concept Scale-Third Edition: Receptive* (BBCS-3: R, Bracken, 2006), *the Test of Oral Language Development-Primary: Third Edition* (TOLD-P:3, Newcomer, 1997), *the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals, Fourth Edition* (CELF-4 Wiig, Semel, & Secord, 2003), and *the Language Processing Test, Third Edition* (LPT-3, Richard & Hanner, 2005). Phonological awareness errors may be evident on the *Phonological Awareness Test 2* (Robertson & Sate 2007) or when informal probes are completed with tools like *Phonological Awareness Chipper Chat-PACC Quick Test* or *PACC word-lists*.

### Intervention—second dialect learning

Demonstrating the contrasts between Aboriginal vs. Standard English dialect to students and their families is a good place to start intervention. Most families and students are not aware that they speak a different version of English at home compared to the dialect of English spoken at school. It is emphasized that no one version of English is better than the other but that, at school, people are graded based on use of Standard English. Terms such as “non-standard dialect”, “dialect”, or “bidialectal” are readily understood by students who are eight years or older. For younger children, terms like “the home way” and “the school way” are used instead. Feedback regarding when to use of the “home way” versus the “school way” is given during naturalistic interactions to promote bidialectalism. In school, the child is encouraged to practice Standard English. “Home ways” are not actively practiced in Standard English as a Second Dialect (ESD) lessons or classroom settings because the present mandate of B.C.'s Educational System and ESD Programs is to help the student learn Standard English forms rather than using a bidialectal teaching approach.<sup>1</sup>

### Intervention—discourse strategies

When working on cultural discourse differences such as eye contact or vocal volume, I consult first with the child's family to ensure that there are knowledge,

interest and support for an intervention in these areas. When an intervention is offered, cultural differences and mainstream expectations are discussed so that the child becomes aware of how the mainstream culture may be interpreting lack of eye contact and low voice volume, and how working on these areas could help them adapt to their mainstream classes.

### Intervention—general strategies

Evidence from researchers such as Das, Kirby, & Jarman (1992) and Irvine & Darlene (1995) supports the notion that many Aboriginal people may be holistic (global) learners. Holistic learners have a harder time breaking wholes down into parts or identifying important details in a busy background, but are aided when the overall concept is first presented. Setley (1995) suggests that moving from the whole to part helps holistic learners with the instruction of parts. Other literature suggests that many Aboriginal people may also be visual learners (e.g., Lipinski, 1989; 1990). Visual learners benefit from pictures, graphs, and demonstrations when they are acquiring new information. A concrete learning style was also identified in some Aboriginal people. Concrete learners benefit from examples that can be heard, touched, or seen and from contextual learning (e.g., More, 1990). McLeod-Shannon (personal communication, September 2006) reports use of a technique called the Total Physical Approach (Asher, 1969) by Aboriginal groups in the Sushwap area of B.C. This technique adds visual aids and movement to language training on reserves.

I have found intervention with Aboriginal students in central Vancouver Island most successful when context or overview is supplied. We work from the “whole” to the “part” and then back to the “whole”. This is especially helpful with grammar training. Another helpful strategy is to use visuals that integrate multiple experiences from the child’s school or community environment. This can be done by creating drawing templates on software like Boardmaker Plus v. 6 (2010). Concrete examples from the child’s school environment can be introduced and reinforced with *visuals and accompanying sentences using the target word with semantic webs, followed by hand-drawings by the child*. Visuals such as flip cards and high-lighting of morphological structures in written sentences draw attention to “parts” of sentences. When teaching sentence structures, adding directional arrows or hand-points in written sentences aids some Aboriginal children in understanding and learning grammatical rules of Standard English. Use of movement has also proven helpful.

### Grades K to 2

Letter identification can be aided through the use of

rote memory, the Alphabet song, and Alphabet puzzles and Alphabet books. If the Alphabet song needs to be learned, combining visuals and movement is helpful. This can be done by pointing to each target while singing the alphabet song, by pausing just before the target, or by holding up and placing puzzle pieces in an alphabet puzzle as the alphabet song is sung. If the helper pauses just as the target letter space is pointed to, the child can often come up with the letter name. This type of training can often easily be done by an educational aide (e.g., Aboriginal worker), parent helper, class teacher, or parent once the S-LP has offered consultation.

When teaching vocabulary concepts, visuals (e.g., semantic maps or webs) can be created using hand-drawings by students or software like Board-maker. Providing multiple concrete examples of the target words within the child’s school or home environments aides a child’s understanding and use of vocabulary. Adding hand-drawings involves the students and makes them more willing to take vocabulary sheets home to show parents. The sheets created can then be reviewed and expanded by adults in the classroom (e.g., educational assistants, First Nation liaison workers, student teachers, parent helpers or after-school care workers). Peers (buddies) from an older grade can also be helpful in carry-over work.

When an Aboriginal child has limited comfort or involvement with Show and Tell, class discussions or class journal entries, I have found that the child’s comfort level and the quantity and quality of their contributions can be increased if they first engage in small group practice (e.g., describing functional use, key parts, usual location, category membership, or answering Wh- questions). This training can be given from either the S-LP or an S-LP-trained adult helper, followed by carry-over support from the classroom teacher. Pictures of objects or people in action and game boards also aid instruction of both expressive vocabulary and grammar. I support abilities to talk about home and community events by organizing information into Who, What, Why, Where and How question headings. Picture icons can visually cue each of these question types. I also draw on social stories (Gray, 1994; 2000) to explain the meaning of each question type. While S-LPs frequently use social stories to teach pragmatic skills to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, I have found social stories helpful for Aboriginal students answering question forms. Other useful materials include the Wh-Chipper Chat materials (Crist, Sheedy, & Parks, 2002) or simply pictures of Aboriginal events in local publications.

Supported carry-over of the social story visual cues into the classroom by teachers has been helpful for both

class discussions and reading comprehension activities.

When teaching and practicing Standard English morphology and syntax, I recommend the use of picture cards and text sentence frames with high-lighted target structures. Picture cards are used interactively with the sentence frames. Movement can be used to help teach morphology (e.g., showing picture cards face up to teach present progressive forms in sentences followed by turning them face down to teach past tense form). I also like to create practice sheets with fold-over flaps. Picture icons for each target are placed on the tops of the flaps with the printed targets underneath. Students can practice the structure and then open the flaps to check their accuracy. These flap sheets are useful for home practice.

There are materials available that have Aboriginal people in them including "All Around the Village," (Guebert, McInnes, Upper, & Burnaby, 1985), "Rosie's Visit" or "Come Back Snow," (Upper, 1985), "Rosie's Feast," (Upper, Guebert, McInnes, & Burnaby, 1985). Useful category picture wordbooks include "First Thousand Words" (Amery & Cartwright, 1995), "Good Morning Words" (Foresman, S, 1990), and the "MacMillian Picture Wordbook" (Macmillian, 1990) Useful interactive picture kits are available for playground or classroom settings (Uniset 1986).

### Intermediate Students (Grades 3 to 5)

I have found that intermediate Aboriginal students may benefit from training of serial vocabulary (e.g., first, second, last), serial orientation, left-right orientation, and compensatory strategies to remember key words and sequence steps. Knowledge of counting rules and serial vocabulary is often absent or confused. Training in these areas has helped Aboriginal students perform better with serial orientation directions on the Bracken Basic Concept Scale (BBCS-3: R, Bracken, 2006) and "Concepts & Following Direction" subtest of the CELF-4 (Wiig, Semel, & Secord, 2003). Classroom teachers have also reported that row and column training reinforces eye tracking for reading in the classroom.

Left-right orientation training may start with "Left" vs. "Right." It is helpful to determine whether the student is Left or Right handed. Training visuals are created to go along with the appropriate mnemonic phrase of: "You write with your right hand," or "Make a picture frame with your fingers. The side that makes an 'L' is your left hand." Next, the student identifies which side of the body the helper is moving as the helper changes orientations from the student. The student is made aware how different walls are being faced. If the student has difficulty, they are encouraged to move to the same orientation, move the same body part and say their mnemonic phrase. Finally,

training moves to identifying left-right orientation in action pictures. Processing of complex oral instructions is aided by strategies of identifying key words, repeating key words and developing visual or tactile cues to remember these key words or chunks of information. Practicing clarification questions or checking the student's written assignments is also helpful.

Expressive vocabulary can be improved with primary and intermediate students using pictures and objects along with a Venn Visual Graphic Organizer (Irwin-Devitis, Bromley, & Modlo, 1999), picture cards of objects, and game boards. I would argue that aboriginal students may also benefit from phonological awareness training. Classroom teachers report that many students at this level have reading and spelling difficulties and phonological awareness testing by the S-LP often reveals phonological awareness difficulties. Ideally, this should be done in earlier grades, but I have noticed that some intermediate children also need support in this area. Visual graphics, kinesthetic cuing, and mnemonic phrases are helpful in this training for both long and short vowels. The long vowels "A," "E," "I," "O," "U" can be written on separate fingertips and "sometimes Y" on the center of the palm of a hand visual. Students can tap their fingers and palm as they say the above pattern. Mnemonics that give kinesthetic cues can be helpful for teaching short vowels. Syllabication rules are also often not learned without active intervention. Arranging for syllabication instruction by learning assistants or class teachers is helpful. I have found Sounds-A-Bounds interactive software (Catts, & Williamson, 2008) and Phonological Awareness Chipper Chat (Sheedy & Crist, 2004) useful and interesting to Aboriginal students for the above mentioned areas.

Discussing possible cultural differences can be beneficial to Aboriginal students, their teachers, and their families. Discussing these differences may also be useful with student peers if scheduling allows. The Aboriginal student can be taught about differences and encouraged to practice Standard English. The Standard English communication partners often increase tolerance for delayed verbal responses when coached to smile, look expectantly, then silently count to ten if they are waiting for a response from an Aboriginal student. When Aboriginal students have difficulty with sustained eye contact, they can be encouraged to practice compensatory strategies that will facilitate communication with their Standard English interlocutors (e.g., face their mouths towards the listeners' ears and look at their foreheads or noses). They can also be encouraged to at least make intermittent eye contact so listeners know they are attentive and interested.

Insisting on handshakes is not recommended initially. Training "Give me five" gestures instead of handshakes can

be useful. This is perceived as less threatening and allows an Aboriginal student to control how much of their hand is touched and how hard a hit is made. Offering more information about ourselves when meeting students (e.g., heritage, place you grew up, where you live, important family members) seems to make Aboriginal students and families more comfortable.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I describe some of my observations and insights about difficulties with Standard English experienced by Aboriginal students. I hope that other S-LPs will find my suggestions for intervention helpful. Since English classes and programs across the country require the use of Standard English, it is important to help Aboriginal students learn this dialect, even when they are competent in using a Non-standard English dialect. By supporting this training, higher rates of high school graduation may be achieved. Obviously, the observations shared here are personal and individual and may not extend to other Aboriginal populations. The Aboriginal students I have worked with live primarily in semi-urban settings where they are a minority culture. Some are geographically separated from their ancestral tribes and extended relatives. I hope that by sharing my observations, I will inspire other S-LPs to examine dialect patterns in the Aboriginal individuals and communities they work with and to develop interventions. Future study is needed to establish the possibility of developing formal S-LP test instruments for the assessment of Aboriginal Canadian students. I hope that through future research we can ensure that S-LPs will correctly recognize Aboriginal dialects of English and formulate effective strategies of intervention that will maximize a student's ability to perform in the classroom. Finally, future efficacy research is critical in order to test the validity of the intervention strategies with Aboriginal children.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>There are other approaches: The Australian school system recognizes the validity of non-standard dialect use by Indigenous peoples and has developed a bidialectal approach to classroom teaching (Ball et al., 2004). classroom teaching (Ball et al., 2004).

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