

# Aboriginal students: Cultural insights for teaching literacy

Dr Wendy Hanlen

## Introduction

Teaching literacy to Aboriginal students requires a holistic approach in both teaching and learning. Through the years there have been many myths and assumptions made about teaching Aboriginal students. It is now time to understand the educational needs of Aboriginal students living at the interface of two cultures, their own and Western culture, from their perspectives (Nakata, 2001). This paper assists teachers to contextualise their understanding of the cultural world views, home language, protocols, prior knowledge and experiences that Aboriginal students bring to school and the relevance of this information to teaching literacy. We need to understand why there is a gap in literacy outcomes in the first place before we can begin to address the issue.

Involving the Aboriginal community in equal partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Training is one way of doing this. The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AECG) is the Aboriginal Community organisation that provides the Department with the information about Aboriginal Australia that the community believes needs to be included in education. It provides information on the educational needs of Aboriginal children, the issues they encounter and how the community believes that these should be addressed. As teachers focus on how to bring all students, including Aboriginal students, to literacy and numeracy benchmarks, they need to look at where Aboriginal students are at this point in time and bring education to their students in a relevant and meaningful way (Hanlen, 2002).

The issues discussed in this paper are very much generalised. It is important to recognise that Aboriginal students, like all students, are individuals and the information provided here gives examples of cultural world views, home language, protocols, prior knowledge and experiences to assist teachers with issues that they may encounter in their classrooms (Hanlen, 2009).

The Quality Teaching model provides a framework for teachers to enhance learning in literacy and numeracy to ameliorate student outcomes.

Teachers need to focus on all three dimensions of the Quality Teaching model and reflect on their pedagogical practice to ensure their teaching and learning activities reflect elements across the three dimensions of Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance. When considering Aboriginal students, teachers need to be aware of the danger in narrowing the entire model to the Significance dimension or cultural knowledge element. An equal focus is needed on the Intellectual Quality and Quality Learning Environment dimensions together with knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal students (Hanlen, 2009).

It is clearly evident that there is an enormous amount of goodwill amongst teachers to help Aboriginal students achieve their potential. One reason why teachers have not been successful in the past is because they have not been equipped to do this. Teachers sometimes feel that the challenge is so big that they do not know where to start. Although many teachers respect and value Aboriginal English, many do not know what it really is or who really speaks it, including many teachers in schools with significantly high Aboriginal populations (Lester & Hanlen, 2004). As a result, some teachers prefer not to do anything rather than make mistakes. This paper provides teachers with a starting point to build confidence in teaching literacy to Aboriginal students.

## Literacy and Social Practices

In Australia most of our daily social practices involve literacy practices at some level. Literacy competency is required to read the directions for taking medication, assembling something that we have bought in kit form, street directions, traffic signs, filling in forms and other practices. Competency is also required to understand OH&S instructions in the workplace and many other examples. Aboriginal Australians are the most educationally disadvantaged group and experience

disproportionate rates of unemployment, often as a result of little or no literacy competency. This has, generally, profoundly marginalised Aboriginal families from accessing the workforce and other aspects of mainstreamed Australian society (Hanlen, 2002).

If children are not exposed to Western literacy practices before they enter school and are not provided with explicit teaching to navigate the Western domain in the classroom, they can be further disadvantaged through formal schooling practices. By the time Aboriginal students have reached Year 3, generally speaking, they are disproportionately represented in the lower bands of the national literacy tests. There are a number of things that teachers can share with parents of children who appear to be slipping through the cracks, that work for those parents who may have little or no literacy competency themselves. These include picking up a book with stories and pictures and the parents can tell the story using top down skills from their interpretation of the story which will assist in demonstrating the value of books, experience in book handling and so on. Parents can give children tasks in the supermarket such as pointing out the breakfast cereal that they have at home and get the children to describe the familiar writing on the pack (Hanlen, 2002).

## Aboriginal English

Aboriginal English (AE) is the home language that most Aboriginal students bring to school. It is the only truly regionally distributed dialect of Australian English as all the other dialects, cultivated, general and non-standard versions are class based. It is rule governed and is as linguistically complex as any other dialect of English (Eades, 1995). Language and culture cannot be separated, as our language develops as a result of our cultural world view (Eades, 1995). Language for Aboriginal students is one manifestation of our culture along with art, dance and music. It is this dialect difference that can create some of the greatest teaching and learning issues for both teachers and Aboriginal students, which have contributed to creating the inequitable outcomes gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. We need to look seriously at the notion of teaching Standard Australian English (SAE) as a second dialect to Aboriginal students in a similar way to meeting the needs of students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

## Non-English Speaking Background students and Aboriginal students

Why is it that non-English speaking students generally, not only go on to succeed but often go on to excel in their education where Aboriginal students born in NSW generally have poor educational outcomes? We need to look more widely than just what is happening in Australia for the answer. Children who come to Australia from other countries, for example, in Asia, Europe and the Middle East generally come from literate families whose social practices often involve literacy practices. The children generally, have been exposed to these and the value of literacy in education (Hanlen, 2007). These students do have a difficult time initially, while learning English as a second language as well as going to school. However, children who do their learning in the early years in their home language or dialect achieve better outcomes than their peers who are forced to learn in the second language or dialect (see Cummins, 1989; Eades, 1991; Hagen, 1987). The linguistic skills that these students gained while doing their early learning in their home language are easily transferable to the learning of the second language (see Cummins, 1989; Eades, 1991; Hagen, 1987).

Aboriginal students, on the other hand, do not generally speak SAE and their families may have little or no literacy competency as a direct result of the past failure of the education system to address their linguistic, cultural, social and demographic needs in teaching and learning. In the past, the reason given for this was that there was a deficit in Aboriginal children's learning and family backgrounds (Fletcher, 1989). The evidence tells us that this was not the case and that children speaking dialects of the standard language of their countries are among the most disadvantaged children there whether they are from the hills of Kentucky in the United States, Birmingham in England, African American English speakers, dialect speaking children from regional areas of France, Italy and so on.

## Otitis Media

Otitis Media is disproportionately prevalent in Aboriginal students and can have a big impact on first language acquisition and later literacy learning (NSW Board of Studies, 1994). There are some overlaps of sounds in speech with those in AE particularly in consonant clusters.

The handbook *Otitis Media and Aboriginal children* (1995) provides a number of indicators to help teachers discern whether students should be referred for medical examination to detect Otitis Media and provide treatment.

If teachers suspect Aboriginal students are suffering hearing loss, or are diagnosed with Otitis Media, they can support learning for these students by:

- collaborating with family, community, the AEO and other community workers to encourage treatment and develop a support plan for students' learning
- ensuring students can clearly see the faces of all speakers so they can use visual cues to help with hearing
- always getting students' attention before speaking
- minimising background noise when expecting students to listen
- developing and maintaining routines in classroom activities so students know what is expected, even if they have difficulty hearing instructions
- including group work as part of teaching so students can watch others to help them understand instructions.

## Cultural World View

This paper provides a brief window of understanding of the impact of cultural world view on teaching literacy to Aboriginal students. The world view of Aboriginal students is influenced by their traditional cultures and languages and their home language.

Every person has a cultural view of the world. This is how we interpret and make sense of what happens around us. The Anglo-Australian cultural world view is the most dominant in Australia. Australia's parliamentary, judicial, education and bureaucratic systems were originally based on British systems and have now developed into a distinctly Anglo-Australian character. Evidence suggests that there are cultural, social and linguistic issues that form the basis for inequity in educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians (Eades, 1995; Hanlen, 2007; Lester & Hanlen 2004). To help understand these issues, we need to know how some fundamental cultural ways of knowing in Western and Indigenous societies are almost polemic.

Descartes was an early founder of Western philosophy (Meyer, 1998). His notion of 'I think therefore I am' is egocentric in nature (Hanlen, 2002; Meyer, 1998). It looks at the needs, rights and desires of the individual, is the basis of competition and it eventually became the basis for capitalism (Hanlen, 2002, 2007). In many Western cultures, formal education, work, leisure, family, health and housing and so on are separated in different bureaucratic departments. Aspects of life are often separated from each other and can be conceptualised as being box-like or square shaped for ease of explanation (Hanlen, 2002, 2007).

Indigenous world views consider the knowledge of oneself comes through others' knowledge; that you exist through interaction with others (Meyer, 1998). All aspects of life are dynamic. For example, there are kinship relationships which determine social obligations to each other, and education is understood as a lifelong process, not separate from family and other daily routine activities (Hanlen 2002, 2007). Goals of the community are more important than the goals of the individual. All aspects of life are interconnected and dynamic and social practices are reciprocal and for ease of explanation, can be described as circular in nature. (Hanlen, 2002, 2007).

If we accept conceptually that Western ways of knowing are square and that Indigenous ways of knowing are circular then this produces difficulties for Aboriginal students when they enter formal school education and for teachers who may not realise that their teaching strategies, good intentions and programs are often not producing successful literacy and educational results (Hanlen, 2002, 2007). The children come to school waiting to learn in 'circular' concepts and the teacher teaches using 'square' concepts (Hanlen, 2002). Generally, what the teacher is saying does not resonate or make sense to Aboriginal students, and as a result they often cannot interpret the information linguistically or conceptually (Hanlen, 2002).

## Aboriginal English

Aboriginal students who are speakers of AE vary from those most heavily influenced by the traditional languages to those most heavily influenced by SAE (Eades, 1995). Even though most Aboriginal students in NSW may not have heard their traditional language being fluently spoken, the English that they speak is influenced by their ancestors' traditional languages. Their ancestors learned English in an oral manner with no written form and the type of English that they were taught was never intended to empower them to access the mainstream (Donaldson, 1985). They were only taught convenient forms of English as a means for governments and other people to control and manage the Aboriginal peoples (Fletcher, 1989; Donaldson, 1985). The following aspects of AE will be discussed briefly here:

- Phonology (sound system)
- Morpho-Syntax (grammar)
- Lexico-Semantics (meaning)
- Pragmatics (how language is used).

### Phonology

There are some differences in vowels for example *bird* may be pronounced *baird* (Eades, 1996). There are a number of retroflex consonant sounds in [r], [l], [n], [d] and [t]. These sounds are often noticed on television where you can hear an Aboriginal person speaking English but with a distinctively Aboriginal sound to it. There are generally no [h], [v], [f], [th] or [s] sounds in traditional languages and some Aboriginal people do not use these sounds in their English.

When we learn a second language we rely heavily on the sound system of our first language to help us through. For example, French and German speakers of English do not have a [th] sound in their home languages and the French may compensate with an [d] sound in *brother* [brudder] and German people may say [brusser]. In the same way AE speakers may say [dis] and [dat] instead of *this* and *that*.

The French speakers of English have no word initial [h] sound in their home language, so when they say in English words like *hat*, *house* and *hotel* they may not pronounce the [h] sound. This is also the case for AE speakers, they may not pronounce the [h] sound. Although most AE speakers are aware that there is an [h] sound in English, they may over-compensate by saying something like *Haunty Ellen* instead of *Aunty Hellen* (Eades, 1995).

Phonemic awareness develops in AE speaking students on the basis of their own AE/traditional language sound system (Eades, 1995). This is important to recognise when students are learning in the early days in their home language and the SAE form can be introduced in the teacher's instruction time. All Aboriginal students must be empowered in SAE but not at the expense of their home language, AE.

There may be differences in spelling and syllables based on the AE phonemic systems. For example, *butfli* in AE and *butterfly* in SAE and *catpulu* in AE and *caterpillar* in SAE. These can cause some difficulties for Aboriginal students, when developing their phonemic awareness.

### Morpho-Syntax

There may be no copula (verb to be) where the verb is required in SAE for example, 'e *big girl* in AE and *she is a big girl* in SAE. Generally in traditional Aboriginal languages there may be no gendered pronouns and there are some language forms that are used by men or women only within traditional languages (Eades, 1995).

### Lexico-Semantics

There may be differences in word meanings. For example, *deadly* in AE means *fantastic*, *great* or *good* in SAE and the word *gammon* in AE means *fib*, *joke*, *lie*, *fake*, *fraud* in SAE (Eades, 1995).

### Pragmatics

Pragmatics refers to the way English is used and is probably the most difficult aspect of AE for the teachers and the students alike as mostly each will recognise the words that are used but there is not necessarily mutual intelligibility in understanding of what each other mean. It produces many misunderstandings and incorrect assumptions on both parts.

In the Anglo-Australian classroom the most efficient means of finding out what students have learned from the lessons taught, is to ask questions either informally to the class generally, or in formal tests and comprehension exercises. The question/answer format is not generally part of normal Aboriginal discourses. Direct questions beginning with 'where', 'how', 'when', 'does', 'is' etc., are considered very confronting in terms of protocols and instead questions are usually formed as statements followed by the tag 'eh' (Eades, 1995). For example, 'The fish are biting, eh?' in AE and 'Are the fish biting?' in SAE (Eades, 1995).

There are other implications here. Aboriginal cultural protocols can determine how they use English and these protocols can often be misinterpreted by the teachers. If teachers use direct questions Aboriginal students may respond in ways that the teachers may misinterpret as they interpret the students' responses through Anglo-Australian linguistic and cultural responses. If a teacher asks a student, 'Do you play a sport on the weekends?', the student may answer 'yes' even when they may not. The student may not be saying 'yes', meaning I agree with you, but it could mean, 'yes, see how I am being obliging, friendly and co-operative.' This is NOT a lie, but could rather be a cultural protocol.

Another implication includes, when a teacher asks a direct question, 'From the story, how many children were at Nikki's birthday party?', Aboriginal students may answer 'Natasha, Billy, Sam, Greg and Susie'. When questions that ask for 'how many', 'how far' 'how big' and so on, the responses may be in relation to people, a place or an event rather than a measurable number, distance or quantity etc. The answer students may provide using the names demonstrates to the teacher that the Aboriginal student understood the text, however, in marking the answer the teacher would have to mark the answer as incorrect because the teacher would be expecting a number (Eades, 1995; Eades, 1992; Hanlen, 2007).

A useful strategy to develop teachers' understanding of the use of AE in their classrooms would be to conduct a contrast analysis of work samples, conversations and interactions between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers and teachers. Teachers can keep a record of instances where language and protocols used are different to SAE and Western protocols and note if any patterns emerge for individuals or for groups of students (Hanlen, 2009).

Teachers need to discern the difference between language difference and learning difficulties, and cultural difference and behavioural issues. This paper provides teachers with some skills in doing this and a starting point in bringing education to Aboriginal students in a relevant and meaningful way.

As Dr Chris Sarra (2007) argues:

We cannot be seduced by the ease with which we can point the finger away from us, and not have to ask ourselves hard questions like:

- What is it about my classroom that makes it so boring that children don't want to come back?
- What is it about my relationship with the child that it is such that the child doesn't really care if they see me or not?
- Is my classroom the type of place I would like to be if I was a ten year old?

Sarra, 2007.

If we get the teaching right then we should have the same high expectations of Aboriginal students that we have of all students (Sarra, 2007).

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# Professional learning suggestions

As a stimulus for the following professional learning suggestions, two key resources have been developed:

- a video *Aboriginal students: Cultural insights for teaching literacy* by Dr Wendy Hanlen
- a paper *Aboriginal students: Cultural insights for teaching literacy* by Dr Wendy Hanlen.

Schools who do not have Aboriginal students would still need to engage with the above two resources and use the Page 9 *Reflection on the paper* as a basis for professional dialogue.

## Background

Dr Wendy Hanlen is a Kamilaroi woman living in Darkinjung country on the Central Coast of NSW. Wendy is an Aboriginal linguist and Indigenous education researcher. She was a co-author for the NSW DET Review of the *Aboriginal Education Policy* in 2004.

Wendy was the first Aboriginal person to be conferred with a PhD at the Central Coast Campus of the University of Newcastle. Her thesis title was *Emerging literacy in New South Wales rural and urban Indigenous families*.

Wendy has conducted research throughout Australia and published nationally and internationally on Indigenous education. Her most recent publication is titled *Indigenous literacy: Learning from the centre not the margin* which investigates literacy learning from Indigenous perspectives at the interface of two cultures.

After viewing the video *Aboriginal students: Cultural insights for teaching literacy* by Dr Wendy Hanlen, use the following questions as prompts for reflection, discussion and action in stage or school teams, discuss the following questions:

- What did I learn that I did not know before?
- What do I need to know more about? Where/how might I find this out? From our community, from resources from further research?
- What am I currently doing in my classroom that connects with the Aboriginal students in my class?  
What will I continue to do?
- What will I start doing differently?  
What can I implement immediately (short-term) to better support the Aboriginal students in my class?  
What can I work towards (long-term)?

Record responses on the following page.

### CULTURAL INSIGHTS FOR TEACHING LITERACY

What can I implement immediately (short term) to better support the Aboriginal students in my class?

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What can I work towards (long term)?

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## Reflection on the paper

After reading the paper *Aboriginal students: Cultural insights for teaching literacy* by Dr Wendy Hanlen, choose any of the following extracts as a springboard for reflection and professional dialogue about key messages contained within the paper.

### Extract 1

Through the years there have been many myths and assumptions made about teaching Aboriginal students. It is now time to understand the educational needs of Aboriginal students living at the interface of two cultures, their own and Western culture, from their perspectives (Nakata, 2001).

*page 1, paragraph 1*

### Extract 2

Involving the Aboriginal community in equal partnership ... is one way of ... (understanding the educational needs of Aboriginal students). The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AECG) is the Aboriginal Community organisation that provides ... information on the educational needs of Aboriginal children, the issues they encounter and how the community believes that these should be addressed.

*page 1, paragraph 2*

### Extract 3

In the past, the reason given for ... (Aboriginal students and their families having little or no literacy competency) ... was a deficit in Aboriginal children's learning and family backgrounds (Fletcher, 1989). The evidence tells us that this was not the case and that children speaking dialects of the standard language of their countries are among the most disadvantaged children, whether they are from the hills of Kentucky in the United States, Birmingham in England, African American English speakers, dialect speaking children from regional areas of France, Italy and so on.

*page 2, paragraph 5*

### Extract 4

... children come to school waiting to learn in 'circular' concepts and the teacher teaches using 'square' concepts.

*page 3, paragraph 7*

### Extract 5

We cannot be seduced by the ease with which we can point the finger away from us, and not have to ask ourselves hard questions like:

- What is it about my classroom that makes it so boring that children don't want to come back?
- What is it about my relationship with the child that it is such that the child doesn't really care if they see me or not?
- Is my classroom the type of place I would like to be if I was a ten year old? (Sarra, 2007)

*page 5, paragraph 6*

*A useful strategy to develop teachers' understanding of the use of Aboriginal English in their classrooms would be to conduct a contrast analysis of work samples, conversations and interactions between Aboriginal students, and their non-Aboriginal peers and teachers. Teachers can keep a record of instances where language and protocols used are different to Standard Australian English and Western protocols and note if any patterns emerge for individuals or groups of students.*

*Aboriginal students: Cultural insights for teaching literacy, page 5, paragraph 4.*

In the paper, *Aboriginal students: Cultural insights for teaching literacy*, Dr Wendy Hanlen suggests completing a contrast analysis as one practical way that teachers can begin to observe and better understand how the language and protocols of their Aboriginal students may differ from that of Standard Australian English and Western protocols.

Following is a suggested process for developing a contrast analysis for an individual student.

- In your classroom, closely observe this student's conversations and interactions:
  - with other Aboriginal students
  - with non-Aboriginal students
  - with teachers.
- \*You may also choose to look at work samples produced by this student.
- On the contrast analysis proforma on the following page, note examples of language, behaviour and writing that are different from Standard Australian English and Western protocols.
  - What is happening?
  - What patterns are emerging?
  - What can you do to support this student?

CULTURAL INSIGHTS FOR TEACHING LITERACY

Student name:

<p>Observations What is happening?</p>	<p>How/why is this different from Standard Australian English/ Western protocols? Are any patterns emerging?</p>	<p>What can I do to support this student?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li>   <li>•</li>   <li>•</li>   <li>•</li>   <li>•</li>   <li>•</li>   <li>•</li>   <li>•</li> </ul>		