

# Teaching English to Indigenous Australians

**Kathryn Canavan**

**University of Tasmania**

## Abstract

Teaching Indigenous Australians is an issue in the Australian schooling setting which traditionally has been seen as being generated by Indigenous learners, however, recent research into issues in classrooms with Indigenous learners found that rather than the learners being the source of the problem, the cause lies with the teachers. For this reason, teachers involved with or planning to become involved in classrooms with Indigenous learners, particularly where English is a second language, need to confront their attitudes to and beliefs about Indigenous Australian learners and understand how those attitudes impact on the learning environment and the learners' learning experience and how they can address imbalances in the learning environment.

## Disadvantage

The types of disadvantage experienced by Indigenous learners range from a twenty-year lower life expectancy, through dealing with issues of inadequate water supply, to high unemployment rates (38%). "In relation to education, Indigenous Australians start school later and finish earlier than non-Indigenous Australians, are three times less likely to complete Year 12, and are much less likely to be attending University (DEET in, McConaghy, 2000:137)".

Discussing the construction of 'Aboriginality', McConaghy (2000) argues against maintaining traditional approaches to analyzing issues facing Indigenous learners in the classroom such as postcolonial theories. "Rather, my approach considers that issues in Indigenous education are best approached from sociological perspectives, perspectives that foreground issues of power and knowledge, different degrees of privilege, how racism and gender oppressions are so often linked, how Indigenous people and their identities are constructed and stereotyped, how ideas about whiteness and blackness are produced in schooling, how schooling often works to maintain oppressive power relations rather than disrupt them and so on (McConaghy, 2000:135)".

Postcolonial theories—cultural difference, cultural deficit, cultural relativism, assimilation and radicalism—engender and maintain stereotypes through their use of fixed categories of people; categories that place behavioural expectations on the groups they have defined theoretically. In the worst cases, such as assimilation, Indigenous Australians are categorized as Aborigines who are inferior and deficient. However, Indigenous Australians have as many ways of being Indigenous Australian and otherwise as every other Australian. Thinking such as: To be a real Aboriginal is to be/like/have [stereotype].; To be a real Italian Australian is to be/like/have [stereotype].; or, To be a real angloceltic Australian is to be/like/have [stereotype], denies each Indigenous Australian the opportunity to identify themselves in any way they choose or to be self-determining or self-representing.

In addition, such theories reinforce disadvantage through a process of reproduction. Teachers need to remain wary of theories that purport to really know and explain Aboriginality, argues McConaghy, because they are only discursive regimes. Each theory expounds explanatory sets of ideas, narratives and discourse about Aboriginality and competes with other theories to reveal a true explanation of Aboriginality, however, little truth is revealed and the competition merely legitimizes and produces the competing theories.

Another characteristic of such theories is they often give reasons for Aboriginal education failure and those reasons become a self-fulfilling prophecy. "That is, teachers' explanations of the cause of Indigenous educational failure often also contribute to producing unsuccessful learning experiences for Indigenous students: the explanation of the problem becomes the cause of the problem (McConaghy, 2000:139)".

If these stereotypes, such as Indigenous Australian learners are lazy or unintelligent, are maintained by teachers in classrooms, they can only serve to reinforce the underlying oppression and disadvantage for which the stereotypes evolved to support. The task of the teacher is to eliminate, as much as possible, such stereotyping to enable Indigenous learners to enjoy the same access and equity as other learners.

The stereotypes should not become part of teacher discourse because, as Foucault (1978) pointed out, discourses are the source of knowledge and supporter of power relationships within societies. As representatives of educational institutions and holders of power within those institutions teachers' contribution to and maintenance of educational discourses are responsibility for the effect of those discourses on

Indigenous Australian learners, that is, for the disadvantage experience by those learners in educational settings. It's not so much as matter of the learners being powerless as teachers being irresponsible with their power and failing to take responsibility for the disadvantage, failure and reproduction.

- Postcolonial discourse manifests in descriptions of Indigenous Australians which Hodge (1990) terms as Aboriginalism. Attwood (1992) adds that there is an Aboriginalist project which takes three interdependent forms;
- Researching and speaking about Indigenous people—there is a fine line between speaking out and speaking for someone and, when research is not carried out or controlled by Indigenous Australian researchers about themselves, issues of ownership and representation become mixed up with objectification and dehumanization of the research subject;
- Constructing “them” as oppositional to “us”—the oppositional nature of research and theories obsessed with comparisons, differences, convergences and culture lists constructs a them/us binary where there can only be competition and therefore a winner and loser, or superior and inferior and, therefore, distance between the two sides; and
- As a corporate institution for disciplining, administering and ruling over Indigenous Australians—strategies of disenfranchisement and racialization practices and discrimination are ways in which existing education discourse and institutionalized power contribute to the ongoing disadvantage and impoverished material lives of towards Indigenous Australians (Guywanga, 1991).

## **Strategies for interrupting disadvantage**

In the classroom, teachers can disrupt the old power structures by engaging in a number of strategies.

Firstly, teachers can engage in critical reading of Aboriginalist texts (descriptions of Aboriginal culture, culture lists, policy documents and so forth) to uncover underlying assumptions about privilege and power and then consider their implications (Nakata, 1991).

Secondly teachers can work on developing respect at the individual level for Indigenous Australians and each person's right to define their identity. “Respect for people’s history, social and family situation, prior experiences with education, aspirations and cultural practices, in whatever way they themselves represent these

cultural practices, are key aspects of a post-Aboriginalist approach to Indigenous education (McConaghy, 2000:148)".

Malin's (1990) research into the treatment of Indigenous Australian learners in a classroom where the teacher held stereotypes about Indigenous Australian learners revealed that the teacher provided the learners with far fewer of the important classroom resources than non-Indigenous learners as follows:

- The availability for 'time on the task';
- One-to-one or small group-to-teacher instruction;
- Teacher time spent reflecting on his or her relationship with each student and the academic progress of that individual student, and how to enhance both;
- Teacher personableness through say, the sharing of private jokes and informal conversation;
- Gestures of affection and appreciation;
- Communication of high expectations for each student for both academic achievement and ability to handle responsibility; and
- Simple tolerance (Malin, 1990:27).

Next, understanding how shame is used a tool of oppression and that it is the victims who take responsibility for their own oppression when they experience shame—for example, the victims are led to believe that by simply being Indigenous Australians they have done something wrong and should be complicit in their own oppression such as by accepting less than others or enduring hardship in silence. By turning the tables, teachers can work instead on building pride and responsibility for one's liberation (Huggins & Huggins, 1994; McConaghy, 2000).

One approach to helping learners deal with shame culture is to encourage a sense of resilience in learners. Whilst many Indigenous Australian learners are vulnerable, disadvantaged and at risk, learning experiences can enable learners to deal better with the problems they confront both inside and outside the classroom. "Many professionals involved in the fields of child care, education, and psychology believe that children are uniquely vulnerable to emotional damage. We have lost sight of the fact that frequently a child develops new strengths in the aftermath of an emotionally difficult encounter (Furedi, 2002)". Furedi adds that luckily there is little empirical evidence to support the notion that children become damaged and scarred for life and that, in fact, such a mentality is a form or tool of cultural prejudice. Teachers should not accept disadvantage as a kind of determinism about which they or their students can do little about.

Also, to join Deleuze (1995) and other post-structuralists in suggesting ways forward and thinking about what life could be, teachers should encourage Indigenous Australian representations in education to ensure Indigenous Australian voices are heard equally with others—for example, through the exploitation of texts produced by Indigenous Australian writers about their oppression and experiences of being an Indigenous Australian.

“Discourses do not just formulate and express public consensus and satisfaction, fostering stability and hegemony; they also express discontent and engender cultural and social change (Rice, 1996:21)”. Just as discourses engender cultural stability, they also encourage social change. Teachers can build their learners’ ability to become advocates of social change by making them symbolic specialists. After all, who knows better the experiences of Indigenous Australians than Indigenous Australians themselves. By providing learners with the literacy and other tools of the core subcultural group, learners are better positioned to represent their subculture within the broader community and to win support and understanding from the majority whose beliefs and conduct form the basis of the controlling discourses.

And then, teachers need to be flexible in how they interpret anger in the classroom, that is, teachers have a choice of viewing a learner’s anger as negative and relationship ending or as a positive attempt to connect and to build on that attempt (Lorde, 1988).

The development of a healthy personality and sense of self enables teachers to step back from situations and analyze them critically rather than just react emotionally and compound negative situations. That is, teachers need integrity and ego strength to deal with many issues in the classroom and to confront their own beliefs and attitudes in order to overcome stereotypes and discrimination that lead to learner’s alienation and anger. Teachers then not only improve their learners’ environment but act as role models for their learners.

Erikson, (1963) formulated the following central concepts:

- Ego identity formation, by which he means that the ego (person) stands outside itself judging the continuity, reliability, and the consistency of life as it is lived;
- Developmental progression of the human life cycle through eight stages from infancy to old age. A human life is a psychological success for Erikson if the earliest achievement is the acquisition of basic trust in self and others and the last achievement is a sense that one’s life was good exactly as it was lived; and

- Ego strengths that mark each of the eight stages and that are actually classical virtues such as hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care and wisdom (Yates & Chandler, 1991:369).

Finally, rather than focus on the significant differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, teachers are better off focusing on explaining significant differences that affect each learner's experience in the classroom; "class, gender, ability, age, sexual orientation, history and so on (McConaghy, 2000:152)".

## Strategies for the ESP classroom

To encourage genuine achievement among all learners, teachers need to change old ideas about academic achievement which are value-laden and culturally determined. Too often schools measure intelligence as behaviour that contributes to the effective running of the school itself. Intelligent students are those that achieve according to the teachers' curriculum, testing, classroom techniques and so forth. The learner does not rate within such an approach, it's simply a matter of the learner being able to conform to and succeed in an unimaginative institutional environment. That is, they have been prepared for life in the workforce.

Teachers have a choice in how they approach learner differences in the classroom from two perspectives: learner styles and cognitive styles.

### Learner Styles

- One example of intelligence and learner styles is Gardener's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Gardener used criteria such as physiological location in the brain, development and so forth to determine nine areas of human achievement which have been adapted by teachers to classroom use to take into account variability in learner styles. The nine intelligences are as follows:
- Bodily kinesthetic intelligence—people who can and enjoy connecting mind and body during physical activities such as sport, have a good awareness of the body, like doing things and learning by doing and are constantly active;
- Existential intelligence—people who understand the universe in that it is infinite and infinitesimal, the human condition, can create psychological worlds and value profound experiences;
- Interpersonal intelligence—people who communicate well and enjoy all forms of social interaction even the negative which they resolve well, lead and cooperate and empathize with others;

- Intrapersonal intelligence—people who function well on their own and have independent hobbies, are self motivated and know their strengths and weaknesses, understand their relationship to others and concentrate well reasoning at high levels;
- Logical / mathematical intelligence—people who are good at discerning relationships and connections between ideas, situations and so on, who are good at experimenting, reasoning and classifying, enjoy puzzles and play with numbers;
- Musical rhythmic intelligence—people who are sensitive to sound and music, can create, remember and perform rhythms and melodies, and understand the structure of music;
- Naturalist intelligence—people who are good identifiers and classifiers of aspects of the physical environment, recognize patterns, are good at sciences and have scientific interests, keep pets, like to spend time outdoors and collect things from the physical environment;
- Verbal / linguistic intelligence—people who are good at languages and linguistics, analyze and play with words, have a good memory for facts and so forth and ask a lot of why questions; and
- Visual / spatial intelligence—people who perceive, form and manipulate objects well, can draw and imagine maps including their details, use graphics as learning aids and enjoy art, plays, graphics, design and space.

Knowledge of such intelligences is useful for teachers looking to understand their learners' preferences in greater depth and many teachers use the intelligences as a guide to design classroom tasks with the aim of incorporating activities that cater to all students' intelligences.

The reason being that all learners have all intelligences but some are more developed than others; from this standpoint intelligence can be assessed as something that is relative rather than fixed, comparative and competitive. It also enables teachers to move away from the traditional curricula biases toward verbal/linguistic intelligence and logical/mathematical intelligence, thereby expanding their own and their learners' repertoire for understanding and interacting with others. Another aspect of the theory is that just because learners are weak in one area that does not mean they are deficient but rather that it's an area for them to work on. All learners have the potential to develop all their intelligences and the classroom is one environment that can be adapted to contribute towards that development through the selection of appropriate tasks. The speed at which learners do so is a variable.

Yates (2000:349) reflected on the application of learning styles in the classroom asking, "But is such individualized teaching even desirable? Should students be exposed to different learning opportunities? And what is the basis for matching student characteristic to input experience? Gardner was striving to help educators recognize the broad range of human achievements, not attempting to restrict student instructional practice opportunities to specific domain tasks".

Further, Gardner's theory puts learners back into categories and is not supported by psychological processes—the process for identifying the learners' categories is a series of questionnaires; there is no evidence to show the data links with brain functioning or how learners cope with complexities. Also, learning is a cumulative process so how do the various intelligences actually work together? Should the teacher give priority to the learner's knowledge level and Zone of Proximal Development or think they're a musical learner so we'll do songs today? There is no strategy within the theory for dealing with learner difficulties.

The benefits of Gardner's theory may lie elsewhere; the approach could be adapted to classroom use for Indigenous Australian learners and it should be used as a discovery tool to identify each learner's preferences or to add variety to staid learner environments.

We know that learners have key areas and stages of development including capacities to focus, account for and exploit information, organize and interrelate information, form abstractions and generalize, take perspectives and hypothesize and reflect on and understand experience (University of Cambridge, 1994/5). This being the case, Gardner's theory needs to provide more of the psychological and cognitive aspects of learner styles.

Personality issues that affect classroom interaction include anger, as mentioned above, and also self worth and esteem. Typical examples of classroom personalities include the quiet child, the child with poor verbal expression, the dominant child, the disruptive child and the loner or uninterested child (Dalton, 1985).

Learners differ cognitively and those differences do not necessarily relate to any of the points mentioned so far. Cognitive styles relate more closely to the process of learning and the acquisition of knowledge.

Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives goes a little further toward recognizing the different cognitive styles of learners.

Learners use a series of thinking skills in the classroom which build on each other to aid learning. The levels range from most frequently used to the least used as follows:



1. Knowledge—the lowest but most frequent level of thinking, involves memory and recall of information such as facts but no complex thinking;
2. Comprehension—increases in the degree of intellectual complexity required and when tested indicates the level of the learner's understanding of a subject;
3. Application—learners can apply principles such as calculations using the knowledge developed at earlier levels;
4. Analysis—a process of breaking down and analyzing the parts of information begins to aid true understanding and enable the learner to reconstruct the knowledge to suit different circumstances;
5. Synthesis—learners include the knowledge in creative thinking and apply the knowledge to different scenarios to provide insights or solutions; and
6. Evaluation—the knowledge supports learners' judgments and justifications when they find they can evaluate movies, other people's behaviour and so forth and explain what and why they think both subjectively and objectively.

Looking back at McConaghy's (2000) strategies for dealing with disadvantage and stereotypes in the classroom—critical reading; respect; shame; Indigenous Australian representations in education; anger and significant differences—there is value in taking a cognitive learning styles approach. By working toward the development of synthesis and evaluation skills, teachers can provide themselves and Indigenous Australian learners with the cognitive technology to genuinely engage in critical reading, demonstrate respect based on reasoned thinking, identify and question shame tactics, creatively develop representations that enable Indigenous learners to contribute to and have a say in educational and other discourses and identify significant differences in society which in addition to stereotyping contribute to continuing disadvantage.

The challenge for teachers is how to set up classroom experiences that develop the cognitive styles of learners. For a start, it is important for teachers to design tasks at all levels of the taxonomy with a variety of tasks at each level which is where teachers might exploit Gardner's intelligences to add variety to the range of tasks available to learners. Demonstrating an environment of respect, teachers could encourage learners to choose the tasks they wanted to do at each level but also stipulate the number of tasks to be completed at each level.

In addition, the tasks could be assigned as group work with each learner taking responsibility for one key knowledge area, which when they contribute that to the group, not only develop a sense of pride and satisfaction thereby building their self

esteem and personal development, but also contribute to the success of the project overall.

In this way the learners are both independent and codependent in their learning. This is important if the teacher takes into account Gregorc's Mind Styles which he argues exists in two dimensions; one for perceiving the world (extreme through concrete); and another for organizing information (sequential through random). Learners may have any combination of the dimension as follows:

- Concrete sequential—these learners are practical, predictable, to-the-point, organized and structured; these learners order the environment and follow accepted ways of doing things, are exact, consistent and efficient, like predictability and seek approval of progress, apply ideas practically and understand how, trust other participants and follow practical examples;
- Abstract sequential—these learners are intellectual, logical, conceptual, rational and studious; these learners like references and expert sources, are sure of themselves, follow traditional procedures, take time to learn, work alone, have intellectual ability, are analytical, can write essays, use notes and research at the library;
- Abstract random—these learners are emotional, interpretive, sensitive, holistic and thematic; like working and sharing with other participants, personalize assignments, get personal and emotional attention and like play as well as work, interpret ideas, create good environments, use expression, communicate and are non-competitive, and
- Concrete random— these learners are original, experimental, investigative, option oriented and risk taking; these learners try new approaches to solving problems, are self directed and competitive, create answers and find many ways to do one thing, like trial and error, brainstorming and open-ended approaches, want to produce real and creative products, seek ways to improve and like hands-on experiences.

These styles enable learners to act and think in their preferred manners. Whilst the argument for learning styles is weak overall in view of the cognitive styles contribution, pointing out to learners that different learners in the group may have different ways of doing things and that each participant should try to respect each others methods, learners have the opportunity to analyze and evaluate each other's behaviour and to develop the basis of true respect.

By setting an example in the classroom setting of how students can work together whilst enjoying diversity teachers are perhaps providing Indigenous learners and themselves with a loose framework within which everyone works with and learns to manage and accept diversity and difference and to see each others strengths and weaknesses.

To address the types of classroom disadvantages highlighted by Malin (1990), at the start of tasks, teachers need to communicate that they hold high expectations for each student for both academic achievement and have confidence and trust in their ability to handle responsibility. During tasks teachers can ensure learners are allocated an equal amount of time for tasks and can provide all students with one-to-one or small group-to-teacher instruction. Whilst on task, the teacher can take time to reflect on their relationship with each student ensuring each has enhanced access to learning that enables their academic progress. Whilst participating in small group to teacher instruction, teachers can demonstrate personableness as suggested above, through the sharing of private jokes and informal conversation. If problems arise, teachers can show tolerance and encourage the learners. On the successful completion of tasks teachers can show gestures of affection and appreciation to each student.

Dalton (1985) provides other valuable insights into the effective management of cooperative groups by pointing out the choices and techniques that teachers can make which impact on the classroom setting. These include the teacher's ways of moving from whole class to small group discussion, types of groupings and how to develop cooperative learning skills.

Options available for setting up small groups whilst maintaining management of the classroom include helping learners to engage in learning independent of the teacher, making gradual transitions, starting with quite small groups, using group consensus, building from smaller to larger groups and encouraging shared leadership so that the whole class is involved in the group work. This is a long way from the strategies for disenfranchisement experienced by teachers such as Guywanga (1991) when working with peers and sets a positive example for modes of interaction available to the learners when engaged in the broader community outside the classroom. The problem can no longer be the teacher reinforcing disadvantageous beliefs and stereotypes but more the teacher's ability to manage their learners' learning experiences and to ensure they are equitable and productive.

The types of groups teachers can use include:

- Heterogeneous—as suggested above, this is the type of group where learners act as resources for each other where learners not only engage with the content but are engaged with the processes of appreciating and learning from each other, dealing with and accommodating differences, and learning to discuss their points of view;
- Friendship—these groups are good for new classes where learners are adjusting to a new environment during which the development of friends is crucial for their sense of inclusion and opportunity to successfully learn in heterogeneous groups;
- Ability—these groups are reminiscent of ability/intelligence graded classrooms and should only be used when the teacher aims to address differences in ability; these groups reduce opportunities for group interaction and learning;
- Interest—these groups build motivation as learners find they have things in common with the other learners; and
- Skills—better than ability groups, skills groups include strong and weak skilled students who help each other with the skill.

Another aspect of group work that helps provide strategies for dealing with disadvantage in education for Indigenous Australian learners relates to the learner's acquisition of cooperative learning skills; skills that could be viewed as life long skills. The teacher needs to help students understand that cooperation itself is a valuable skill and it involves turn taking, politeness and idea and material sharing. As learners approach the learning of new skills they need a clear understanding of what cooperative learning skills—for example, forming groups, managing groups, maximizing learning or stimulating higher levels of thinking—involves. Forming groups, for example, involves a combination skills including moving and staying in groups, using quiet voices, staying on task, using names and encouraging others. In addition, groups sometimes have roles so learners need to develop awareness of what each role involves or doesn't involve such as reader, checker, praiser or observer. Most importantly, learners need opportunities to try out all these skill and to get feedback on their performance of those skills. Learners too should be involved in evaluation of their development and be encouraged to persevere until they have integrated the skill successfully into their repertoire.

## Conclusion

As mentioned at the outset, it is time to stop blaming Indigenous Australian learners for their disadvantaged status and look at how education and social discourse instead sets up the power structures and controls the resources which contribute to the existence and continuation of disadvantage through stereotyping and other negative attitudes and beliefs. Through critical reading and self analysis teachers can start to understand how they contribute to disadvantage and look at ways to address the problem. One approach suggested here is to develop respect for and understanding of Indigenous Australian learners by moving on from stereotypes and focusing on the learner's cognitive styles and how they contribute to the learner's development. In addition, unfair power imbalances and stereotyping in the classroom could start to be addressed by supporting an environment of cooperative learning which not only serves to develop the academic abilities of learners but provides them with a model for positive social interaction and a forum to explore techniques to overcome the legacy of disadvantage.

## References

- Attwood, B. & Arnold, J. (eds) (1992), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, Special edition of Journal of Australian Studies.
- Dalton, J., & Smith, D. (1986), *Extending Children's Special Abilities; Strategies for Primary Classrooms*, Department of Education, Melbourne.
- Deleuze, G. (1995), *Negotiations*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Department of Employment, Education and Training. (1989), *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Final Report, AGPS, Canberra
- Ellis, R. (1999). *Understanding second language acquisition*, Oxford University Press, UK.
- Foucault, M. (1978), 'Politics and the study of discourse', *Ideology and Consciousness*, vol. 2, pp. 7-26.
- Furedi, F. (2002), 'The Myth of the Vulnerable Child', *Paranoid Parenting*, Chicago Review, Chicago, pp. 45-57.
- Gardner, H. (1999), *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*, Basic Books, New York.
- Guywanga, R. (1991), 'Hidden Curriculum', *Ngoonjook*, vol. 5, pp.26-34.
- Hodge, B. (1990), 'Aboriginal Truth and White Media. Eric Michaels meets the spirit of Aboriginalism', *Continuum*, 3/2, pp. 201-205.

- Lorde, A. (1988), *The Audre Lorde Compendium. Essays, Speeches and Journals*, Harper Collins, London.
- Malin, M. (1990), 'Why is life so hard for Aboriginal students in urban classrooms?', in *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 13/1: 9-29.
- Maxwell, T.W. & Nannes, P. (2003), *The Context of Teaching* (2nd ed.), Kardoorair Press, Armidale.
- McConaghy, C. (2000), 'Constructing Aboriginality, Determining Significant Difference, in Maxwell, T.W. & Nannes, P. (2003)
- Monte, C. (1999), 'Erik Erikson: Psychoanalytic Ego Psychology', *Beneath the Mask*, pp. 369-406.
- Nakata, M. (1991), in McConaghy.
- Rice, J.S. (1996), *A Disease of One's Own*, Transaction, New Brunswick.
- University of Cambridge. (1994/1995), Faculty of Education PGCE course notes for Language Learning and Cognition.
- Yates, C.R. (2000), 'Applying learning style research in the classroom: Some cautions and the way ahead', *International Perspectives on Individual Differences, Vol. 1 Cognitive Styles*, Ablex, Connecticut, pp. 347-364.
- Yates, G., & Chandler, M, (1991), 'The cognitive psychology of knowledge: Basic research findings and education implications', *Australian Journal of Education*, 35/4, pp. 131-153.