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Issues in English Language Assessment of Indigenous Australians

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Rationale

It has been suggested that language testing over the past half-century has tended increasingly to develop in directions which fail to acknowledge "differences between test takers" (Paran 2010:2). Where this is the case the distinctive needs of minority learners may be subordinated to the more apparent needs of the majority. In the case of English language instruction and assessment, Indigenous Australian learners are particularly vulnerable, since they constitute, in most cases, a small minority of school populations and they are often incorrectly assumed to be native speakers of standard Australian English. It is the object of this paper to explore the way in which Indigenous speakers of English as a second language, or of standard English as a second dialect, are assessed, and to provide some clarification of the linguistic and social contextual factors which differentiate them from other test takers. No claim is made that the issues being raised here are amenable to a single solution, but the intention is at least to see them being taken seriously into account.

Background

Educational authorities across Australia have agreed that all students in government and non-government schools should be expected to achieve agreed standards in literacy and numeracy and that their achievement should be measured by means of national tests at years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Standards (formerly called benchmarks) have been developed to show the minimum goals which are expected to be reached at each level (MCEETYA 2008:3). State and Territory authorities have collaborated to develop progressively the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and every May all students (with the possible exemption of students severely disabled or with less than one year of experience of learning English) undergo testing. They receive reports which show where they come on the ten band levels and how their performance compares with others in their year.

Confining our attention to literacy – which, in Australia, tends to be equated with standard English literacy – Indigenous students, on the whole have a history of achieving below the levels of non-indigenous students, and even below the level of students whose language background is other than English. This gap in achievement has been reported to be generally greatest in more remote areas and to increase as the grades tested go higher (MYCEETYA 2008:37).

The need for English literacy is widely recognised in Indigenous communities and the stated policy of the Australian educational authorities is to improve Indigenous participation and performance. The gap in achievement, as shown by testing, leads to the raising of a number of issues about Indigenous students as ESL[i] learners. Are their linguistic and cultural characteristics being adequately taken into account? Does their performance reflect on the ways in which they are being taught, or on the way in which they are being tested, or on other factors?

The viewpoint adopted in this paper is that there is no one factor which underlies the ESL/literacy achievement of Indigenous students. Their distinctive linguistic, cultural and political circumstances, and their unique history, require a multi-layered understanding of their performance to be sought. In the face of a pervasive "narrowing" of the curriculum (Brindley 2001; García and Menken 2006) and "reductionist view of language education where all that is taught is what can be easily tested" (Paran

2010:4), it is increasingly urgent that an attempt be made to look at what is involved in ESL language and literacy teaching and testing and to uncover some of the levels of meaning that need to be taken into account in understanding Indigenous achievement and, potentially in working towards its improvement.

The Testing of English as a Second Language

The development of proficiency in a second language, or a second dialect (see Siegel 2010) is incremental and multidimensional. It is partly dependent upon conscious learning and partly upon progressive advancement through communicative use. It defies the kind of tidy assessment which is possible in some other learning areas and which is favoured for purposes of accountability. In Australia the need for reliable, comprehensive and accurate means of assessing the proficiency of second language learners, especially ESL learners, has long been recognised. A major advance was the development by David Ingram and Elaine Wylie during the 1970s and 80s of the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating scale (ASLPR), now called the International Second Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR) (See Ingram and Wylie 1979/1999). This describes progression in the macro-skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking from zero (level 0) to what it calls native-like proficiency (level 5). Following this, there was extensive work sponsored by the Australian Government and the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (See McKay, 1994) to develop ESL Bandscales from junior primary (K-3) through to secondary school level to help teachers to map and report the progress of their students in the macro-skills and to relate it to cycles of teaching activity. Many ESL educators working with Indigenous students have built on this foundation, providing, for example, for shared learning, scaffolding support, observation sheets, assessment folios (e.g. Murray 1995), assessment criteria sheets, focused analysis and student self- and peer-assessment (e.g. Richards 1994). There have also been initiatives at adapting the Bandscales to make them more specific to the learning situation of Indigenous students (Turnbull 1999; Buist et al 2002).

More recently the situation has changed, partly in response to worldwide trends as illustrated in the United States by the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which "makes clear that states, districts, schools, and teachers must hold the same high standards for ELL [English language learner] students as for all other students and that educators must be accountable for assuring that all students, including ELL students, meet high expectations" (Wolf, et al 2008:1). In the US, there has been a growing demand for high stakes, standardized proficiency testing and, despite some "accommodations" to the needs of second language learners, concerns have been raised with respect to ESL speakers as to the reliability and validity of the tests in use (Butler and Stevens 2001:410) and their ability to properly distinguish between everyday English and English used in academic settings, to address all macro-skills and to measure progress towards proficiency (Wolf, et al 2008:22). García and Menken (2006:174) have discussed the effect of English language assessment "for accountability purposes" on linguistic minorities, in particular, Latinos, whose dialect of English is non-standard. They comment (p. 175):

> On the one hand, we have raised our expectations and made school systems accountable for language minority students, but on the other hand, we have failed to develop fair assessments that can distinguish what students know from the way in which English is used by plurilingual students.

According to Oller and associates (2000) testing in standard English misrepresents the abilities of minority students, in that "[t]oo many minority language users are seen as disordered and too few as gifted". This they relate to the underlying language dependence of both verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests, and the influence they have had on testing more generally. Gould (2008) has

recently documented the discrepancy, in the testing of Aboriginal students, between the results of standardized tests designed for standard English speakers and the use of "culturally and linguistically appropriate non-standardised language assessments" (p. 195), with the use of the former resulting in "an over-diagnosis of communication disorders among Australian Indigenous children" (p. 197). Brindley (2001) has expressed a number of concerns about the national literacy benchmark testing in Australia, including its washback effect on curriculum which caused it to be oriented to testing rather than learning.

Many of the problems of language testing considered thus far relate to all students of minority language or dialect background. The matter becomes increasingly complex as we proceed to a consideration of a number of contextual factors affecting Indigenous students.

The Historical Context

Over the period of contact, Australians of non-indigenous origin have sought to come to terms with Indigenous Australians in ever-changing ways, drawing on various strands of thinking in social theory. It would be over-simplistic to suggest that all non-indigenous Australians have followed the same trends of thought; however, public policy to some extent shows how Indigenous people were being positioned by the majority, on the basis of ever-changing legitimating ideologies, leading to a claim that Indigenous education has been a process of "internal colonialism" (Welsh 1988). Beresford (2003:28) writes:

> The dominant motive of colonisers was to socialise the colonised into an acceptance of an inferior status. Education was a major tool in this process as school became a mechanism to limit access to learning, to prescribe future lowly occupational status and to transmit white cultural values.

The deficit view of Indigenous Australians (AESOC 2006:16) initially led to no state provision being made for their educational needs (See, e.g. Mounsey 1979). Their vernaculars were, at worst, treated as if they did not exist (Siegel 2006:40) and the English they learned was an unacceptable English (Lo Bianco and Freebody 2001:40).

A more paternalistic concern for Indigenous Australians pervaded the 1880s-1930s, with the enactment of Aborigines Protection Acts and the appointment of white "protectors" of Aborigines. During this period, protection often meant removal from parents (Welsh 1988) or from schools (Mounsey 1979:397 ; Beresford 2003b:45).

From the 1930s to the 1960s, under ongoing pessimistic assumptions about the possibility of an enduring Indigenous culture in Australia, it was expected that Indigenous Australians, like "new" Australians coming from overseas, would assimilate into the mainstream culture (Beresford 2003b:51). In education, assimilation meant "subsuming Indigenous literacy needs under those of the mainstream" (Lo Bianco and Freebody 2001:viii). The culturally confronting nature of assimilation led in many cases to non-acquisition of literacy as an act of resistance (Malcolm 1999; AESOC 2006:17).

By the 1970s the term "integration" was coming to replace "assimilation," with its assumption of deference (at least token deference, Welsh 1988) to non-mainstream cultures. According to Beresford (2003b:64) "[t]he 1970s were the first era of reform in Indigenous education." International developments in sociolinguistics were supporting the view of minority languages and dialects as being "different," not "deficient." Yet recognition of linguistic difference did not always lead to appropriate

educational provision. As Indigenous educator Martin Nakata (2003) has observed, “difference” can be used as an excuse for fatalism with respect to Indigenous learners.

In the 1980s the public discourse of multiculturalism included a growing advocacy for the proper recognition of the need for provision for people not within the linguistic mainstream. However the linguistic situation of Indigenous Australians, as speakers of Australian-originating languages and contact varieties, means that their needs are distinct from those of immigrant groups, and Indigenous people were not always satisfied that this was recognised.

Since the 1990s there have been increasing calls for Indigenous students’ learning outcomes in English and literacy to be brought more into line with those of non-Indigenous students, and current instruments of policy at the national level are a national curriculum and a national testing system.

Over the years, the positioning of Indigenous people by the majority has led to a succession of often mutually contradictory educational prescriptions. It is understandable that Indigenous people are both confused and frustrated at the ever-changing ways in which their perceived problems are being diagnosed and the ever-changing educational solutions which are being proposed from non-indigenous sources.

The Linguistic Context

Standard English is but one element in the linguistic repertoire of most Indigenous people, yet Indigenous people’s entire linguistic competence is often judged on how well they use standard English. Thus, the Indigenous student’s bilingual and/or bidialectal competence and multiliteracies are effectively treated as of no account when “English” (i.e. standard English) or “literacy” (i.e. standard English literacy) are being assessed. This practice, as Nero (2005:205) has pointed out, prevails in many other settings, where multicompetent language users from minority groups are assessed linguistically only on their competence in standard English, their second language.

Three elements of the Indigenous linguistic repertoire need to be considered in relation to their learning and assessment in standard Australian English: languages, contact varieties and registers. Multilingualism and linguistic diversity characterised pre-contact Australia. Among a population of, perhaps, 300,000, there were upwards of 250 languages and many more dialects. Still, today, where Indigenous languages are spoken, it is often in a context of multilingualism. Where Indigenous people today are learning ESL, they are doing so on a linguistic foundation laid down by another language which contrasts with English phonologically, grammatically and lexically. The fact that students in remote areas where Indigenous languages are strongest are among those scoring at the lower end on the English literacy assessments is at least partly a reflection of the language distance between their languages and English.

Many Indigenous Australians speak a language which is the result of language contact: either Torres Strait Creole, Kriol or Aboriginal English. Contact languages are the long-term result of communication between speakers of different languages. Such communication typically begins with a pidgin developing, based on the language of the more powerful group (in our case, English). When children grow up speaking such a pidgin it develops into a fully elaborated language, a creole. Aboriginal English has ancestry in the varieties of English first brought to Australia, as well as in New South Wales Pidgin and other pidgins and creoles. It is intercomprehensible with Australian English, but, having been passed down through the generations in indigenous contexts, it is distinctively indigenous in many of its features and, especially, in its conceptual base, even when

spoken in urban contexts. Speakers of Aboriginal English and creoles are often mistakenly assumed to be able to learn, and learn through, Australian English without the support of a bidialectal or bilingual programme. Their problems increase when standard Australian English is put in an oppositional relationship to the form they speak (AESOC 2006:17).

The third area relevant to the linguistic context in which Indigenous students learn English as a second language is register. Registers are use-determined varieties of the language. Because many Indigenous speakers have not shared the same life settings as non-indigenous people, their English may not include registers which are a normal part of life for non-indigenous Australians. Research based at the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney has shown how substantial is the "translation" problem experienced by Aboriginal English speakers undergoing education in standard English (Williams, Gelonesi and Gow 1996).

The linguistic context from which Indigenous people come is inadequately understood in the wider community. Since it is the foundational knowledge on which any further language education (and associated language testing) is built (MCEETYA 1995:53), there is justification for calls that have been made for language awareness programmes for both teachers and learners (Groome and Hamilton, 1995; Haig et al 2005; Lo Bianco and Freebody 2001), and, I would add, for English language and literacy testers.

The Cultural Context

It is well known that cultural as well as linguistic variables affect students' performance on assessments (Wolf 2008:30). In studying assessments in multicultural settings, Luykx et al (2007:900) observed that:

> [a]lthough mainstream children are also subject to cultural influences, the linguistic and cultural knowledge that mediates their academic performance is more likely to parallel that which guides the actions and interpretations of teachers, researchers and test developers. Thus, the tacit knowledge of mainstream children is more likely to facilitate their performance than to interfere with it.

They distinguish cultural influences, i.e., "practices, norms, and beliefs characteristic of students' home environments" (p. 910) from "languacultual influences" (Agar 1994), i.e,, "academic genres, textual and graphic conventions around the visual organization of content, and culturally specific ways of framing responses" (p. 911). It is necessary to recognise, as Macken and Rothery (1991:4) have expressed it, that texts are "socio-cultural constructs."

Lo Bianco and Freebody (2001:40) have observed that:

> [l]iteracy education for Aboriginal peoples has a regrettable history [of] cultural bias and deficit images, of remedial and inappropriate developmental approaches and assessment models in education resulting in damaging educational and social outcomes from schooling for indigenous people.

Such an outcome has been despite frequent calls for the educational practices employed with Indigenous students to be supportive of Indigenous cultural identity (DEET 1988:2), to recognise community objectives (DEET 1994:6) and to be culturally affirming (MCEETYA 1995:53). The problem is that, to use Nero's term (2005:202), Indigenous people have a "multiply-positioned identity." On the one hand they are the custodians of their traditional culture, and on the other they recognise the need to share in the benefits of western education. Some, like Martin Nakata (2003), are opposed to Indigenous people being treated as "different" in the education system; others, like

Garlett and Roberts (1987), have argued for recognition of their difference through bicultural education. Education that is bilingual/bicultural, or two-way, has generally been supported in educational planning (DEET 1988:46; DEET1989:9; Lee 1993) but (as recent experience in the Northern Territory has shown) not consistently maintained in practice (See, e.g. Simpson, Caffery and McConvell 2009).

The Socio-political Context

Assessment and politics have been described by Brindley (2001:394) as "colliding worlds." While the receivers of language and literacy education have their diverse needs and objectives, the government providers are constantly under pressure from mainstream and global forces to unify outcomes and demonstrate equity (often perceived as equal treatment). Typically, linguistic homogenization is perceived by governments to be in their interests (Hussein 2008). According to Lo Bianco and Freebody (2001:viii):

> [a] comprehensive series of measures is needed...to ensure that the distinctive English language and literacy needs of children and adults of immigrant or indigenous background who speak languages other than English are addressed in their own right and not subsumed under mother tongue English literacy provisions.

The effect of homogenizing tendencies in language policy and practice is to give Indigenous students the sense that they do not belong in schools (Garlett and Roberts 1987) and to alienate them from the education system (Massey 1979). In many indigenous communities, in Australia and elsewhere, there is ambivalence towards education in standard English - cited as the "push-pull phenomenon" (Nero, 2006, citing Smitherman). There are currents of support and cross-currents of opposition. Thus, although Indigenous language maintenance is a priority within Indigenous communities, there is also, in some places, opposition to the use of the vernacular (rather than exclusive use of standard English) in schools, even by those who use it in the home (MCEETYA 1995:53-54; Lo Bianco and Freebody 2001:40; cf. Nero 2000:505). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *Education Action Plan* 2010-2014 attempts to balance these interests by advocating action to close the gap between Indigenous and non-indigenous progression towards proficiency in standard English reading and writing and in numeracy, while ensuring that assessment is linguistically and culturally appropriate. To achieve this the Plan recognises the need to increase the number of Indigenous teachers, principals and education workers and to carry out targeted development in focus schools(MCEECDYA 2010) .

The Educational Context

There is no educational consensus to inform the teaching of ESL to Indigenous students: some favour home language support, while others are wary of it (Malcolm 2003); despite research findings supporting the social and psychological benefits of bilingual education (Lee 1993) it remains a contested area, especially on the grounds that standard English should be the educational priority; despite the capacity of anthropology to enhance the understanding of Indigenous culture, there are Indigenous sources of opposition to its application in educational contexts on grounds of the ways in which it potentially disempowers Indigenous people (Nakata 2003); despite a growing body of support from linguistic research for bidialectal approaches (Malcolm and Königsberg 2007), there is also support for particular approaches to scaffolding in standard English which Leitner (2004) describes as "diametrically opposed" to them; some favour different outcomes for Indigenous students, while others favour the same outcomes as for all students (DEET 1994:32); some would incorporate the teaching of Indigenous culture into ESL (Nicholson et al 1997), while others favour exclusive focus on the genres of standard English (Gray 1990). Wherever educational assumptions differ in this way, there are implications relating to what kind/s of language should be assessed, in what way, in what community contexts, with what intended consequences.

Conclusion

Assessing ESL (or ESD) with Indigenous students is rendered complex by the operation of opposing forces at many levels. However, this is no excuse for many of the anomalies in present practice. It is hard to excuse the effective misrepresentation of the Indigenous students' language state (in the interests of convenience of assessment, but in denial of stated policy) as non-ESL and non-ESD[ii], and the making of unilateral inferences about Indigenous students' ability on the basis of performance on a dialect and register they do not customarily use. It is hard to accept the need to alienate Indigenous learners in educational settings to serve the purposes of a putative Australian linguistic and cultural homogeneity which is less demanding on the public purse than a 'two-way' approach - practices, regrettably, which may be paralleled in contexts beyond Australia (Nero 2006; Hussein 2008; García and Menken 2006; see also Gould 2008:199). It is possible to ensure that testing is framed at least as much for learning as for accountability, and to approach ESL assessment on a basis of recognition, rather than avoidance, of the actual facts of the Indigenous learner's situation.

Although the object of this paper has been to draw attention to perceived shortcomings in existing practice, this is not the whole story. It is possible, as Gould (2008:201-211) has demonstrated, to develop more contextually realistic approaches in which test bias against Indigenous students is reduced by translating test language into the language of the Indigenous learner, using interpreters in administering tests, identifying and replacing biased test items and, where necessary, abandoning standardized language assessment in favour of "alternative assessment methodology" based on language sampling. Where ESL bandscales or progress maps are being used to follow the path of students' learning they can be adjusted to show the distinctive developmental patterns of learners of standard English as a second dialect, as has been done by Turnbull (1999) and Buist et al (2002) in northern Australian contexts.

In short, there are alternatives to assessing minority students as if they are mother tongue standard English speakers, but a great deal more needs to be done to explore them: if we are assessing the language skills of people with a diversified linguistic repertoire, we should do just that, fairly assessing their communicative repertoire rather than assessing them as if their only communicative medium is standard English, and if we are evaluating the way in which Indigenous students are taught standard English, we should do just that, and not use assessments that subordinate the educational means to the ends (outcomes) we are seeking to achieve. To diminish attention to the cultural, linguistic, historical, socio-political and educational context of the lives of the people we are testing is to diminish the significance of any results we may achieve.

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[i] It is noted that the term "English as a Second Language (ESL)" has been supplanted in many places by the more literally correct term "English as an Additional Language (EAL)." In this paper, while the term ESL is used it is intended (as is commonly the case) that it should refer to second or subsequent languages.

[ii] The term ESD is commonly used in Australia to refer to students for whom standard English is their second English dialect.