Accessing Standard English while retaining Indigenous languages:

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INTRODUCTION

The basis of this submission is the belief in equity for Indigenous students.
It focusses on how to provide a curriculum that caters for the language needs of **whole classes** so that all have sufficient understanding and control of Standard Australian English. It is necessary to focus on whole classes because in most schools, classes are comprised of both Indigenous and non- Indigenous students. Therefore, teachers need the skill to cater for the needs of both groups. This can be done through a language awareness curriculum.

My purpose is to provide all students with knowledge about language to enable them to develop academic and social skills effectively, and to provide teachers with a teaching practice that is genuinely helpful. I do this because my experience and research has led me to an awareness that, despite all the excellent school programs, there is often a flaw in what is now happening, with a significant number of students failing or faltering instead of experiencing success.

I understand that most people need and want control of the language perceived to be the language of success and in Australia this happens to be Standard Australian English. On the other hand, a person's first language or dialect must be respected as an integral part of identity and culture and this is the best starting point for learning.

Globalisation is opening up wider horizons to many, while at the same time, it is prohibiting the many people who have limited or no access to the technology or the common universal language - English. I, for one, do not want to lose the cultural diversity the earth now enjoys but I am aware of the reality that the divide between the haves and have-nots is accelerating fast, and that unless people have the power to control their lives to the point where they can choose what to accept from other dominating cultures such as the USA- or mainstream Australia - and what to reject, they will not have the power to preserve their own identity. When teachers support students in their acquisition of standard English; when they teach students how to differentiate between standard and non-standard dialects, and how to translate from one to the other and to choose a linguistic form according to audience and purpose; when they demonstrate respect for students' home cultures and languages - they are making a major contribution to world equity and therefore world peace.

People learn best when they are taught or can learn in the language of their thoughts. Yet this language is often not the language needed to achieve academic success. Without academic success students may develop attitudes not conducive to high self-esteem, a sense of useful and fulfilling purpose in the world and general happiness.

What is the language of thought? It is usually the language that a person first hears as a child, or uses at home and in social settings. It may be a traditional Indignous language but usually it is a form of Aboriginal English or another form of what I call non-standard English. Or a sign language such as Auslan. Or a mixture- an interlanguage. My argument, backed up by other researchers, is that we all need what I describe as a 'strong' language that includes a wide vocabulary and other linguistic features that can be used to understand new concepts. Having gained an understanding, the person is then in a position to transfer that understanding to another language such as Standard Australian English.

Summary of main points in this submission

1. LANGUAGE AWARENESS-WHAT AND WHY?,
2. ACCESSING STANDARD ENGLISH- HOW?
3. ACCESSING STANDARD ENGLISH -WHO?
4. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION which includes:
    *Some linguistic terms
    *Research findings

The author's background

My teacher training and tertiary education took place in both Burwood Teachers' College, Victoria, Deakin University and the University of Melbourne where I gained a M.Ed. in 1995. The subject of my thesis was 'Academic Success for Speakers of Koorie English: The Need for Teacher Intervention'. Over my teaching career I taught at all levels in a wide variety of educational environments including Papua New Guinea, the Kimberley area of Western Australia, inner-city Melbourne and rural Victoria. I trained as a teacher-librarian and as such worked in a Melbourne bilingual school for nine years where I developed a whole school literature program and, with others, a district Aboriginal Studies program. As an education consultant for the Victorian Department of Education I was employed to assist schools in the development of multicultural policies and practice and the teaching of English as a second language.

In 1991 I was fortunate in being granted the D.R. Brown Award by the Victorian Teachers Union which enabled me to undergo an extensive tour in Canada and California where I met with consultants and teachers involved in teaching English as a second language. In 1995, at the request of a group of Koorie women, I was seconded by the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Education Consultative Group to work with them in the development of a professional development resource which eventually had the title 'Deadly eh Cuz! Teaching Speakers of Koorie English.' The revised edition (1988) has since been published by Language Australia.

In 1995 I gained my M. Ed in TESOL from the University of Melbourne. Following this I became an educational consultant and worked in the following Indigenous schools in the Kimberley, WA- Yakanarra, Purnululu, Kulkarriya (Noonkanbah) ,Jarlmadangah Burru

and as a language consultant for the Endangered Language Project based in Derby (Nyikina language).

Since 2000 I, with my husband Bruce Mitchell, have written, illustrated and published the Sound English series of readers for 'pre-literate adults'.

1. LANGUAGE AWARENESS:WHAT AND WHY?

What is language awareness?

I use the term to mean knowing ABOUT language. Language has structure. It has various dialects within it. It can be formal or informal. It has tone and register.

This knowledge offers people choice so that they may communicate effectively to achieve a particular purpose and suit a particular audience. The term 'knowledge about language' is synonymous. Sometimes the term 'linguistic awareness' has been used to mean accessible linguistic knowledge. Whatever the term chosen, the intention is to provide a person with ability to think about language before making choices about its form. To do this a person needs a language to think - or speak or write - about language.
(You may like to look up the section on linguistic terms)

Aren't schools already teaching language awareness?

Yes and no. The teaching of English grammar can be incorporated into the curriculum in a range of ways from formal to informal, structured to not so structured. So, yes, knowledge about language is already there in guidelines. But there is a real need for a curriculum that ensures that what is in the guidelines is actually being taught and actually being learned. The needs of Indigenous students are sometimes (often?) overlooked if teachers have non-Indigenous students in the class as well as Indigenous.

So why is accessing standard English through a language awareness curriculum important?

Because there are still significant numbers of Indigenous students who:

* **can't speak a complete sentence/ are inarticulate**
* **resist putting pen to paper**
* **can't read and write**
* **can't access internet or email because of illiteracy**
* **can't spell, punctuate, find key words, summarise, can't understand what the teacher is talking about, can't understand the text, can't get the homework done or - if they do, don't hand it in.**
* **have learning disabilities and/or Attention Deficit Disorder or other disorders**
* **don't make it to tertiary study because they don't achieve the necessary entrance standard**
* **stay away from school**

*** suffer mental/emotional health problems/ commit suicide - or try to**
*** 'hate' school**
*** don't feel any connection to society/ feel alienated**
*** are miserable**
*** are in danger of breaking the law/being violent/ being destructive**
*** will find it very difficult to find employment**

Being able to access Standard Australian English may not be the answer to all problems but being able to achieve academic success will certainly go a long way in the search for solutions.

2. ACCESSING STANDARD ENGLISH: HOW?

Whole classrooms can be culturally and socially inclusive
The suggested sequence for a language awareness curriculum below has been written with whole classrooms in mind so that teachers can help all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to access standard English, while, at the same time, developing the knowledge and skills necessary to differentiate between the various dialects of English that are used by Australians. One of the outcomes of the whole classroom approach is that students learn to respect all varieties of language and to achieve control over which variety of English to use, according to audience and purpose. They also learn that it is acceptable to use a dialect of English as a way of achieving a sense of social and cultural identity, while, at the same time, developing confidence to use SAE to achieve academic success.

For Indigenous students it is important that they develop an awareness of Aboriginal English or Kriol and that they can translate from these forms of language to SAE when they choose to do so - and vice versa. Because people usually learn best when the language of instruction is their home language it is essential that texts be written in dialects as well as the standard form of English.

Suggested sequence for a language awareness curriculum

Introduction
Individual class teachers may use the following suggestions but, of course, it would be more effective if a whole school approach was adopted. In secondary schools it will be the teachers of English who, on first glance, seem to be the most appropriate to implement these suggestions. However, I cannot emphasis too strongly that language is used in all subject areas and that, therefore, all teachers can choose to be language awareness teachers. Please keep in mind that what follows is just a suggestion and that teachers are in the best position to know exactly what activities and experiences are appropriate for their own classes.

Early years of school
* Guessing game: Who is this? Tape people they know well saying the same thing. Children listen and identify the speaker.
* Guessing game: As above but this time tape people they know from television. Try to include a variety of accents.

* Role plays: Maybe using a telephone. Listen to the way children mimic adults.
* Auditory discrimination activities
* Computer stories such as 'Grandma and Me' which is in English, Japanese and Spanish. Allow children to experience all three.
* Give children the experience of looking at books in a variety of languages.
* Talk about the language backgrounds of all children so that they develop an understanding that there are many languages and that all are valid. Show pictures or photographs to match each language. Ensure that the children understand that, for example, Spanish is not only spoken in Spain. It is spoken in many countries including Australia.
* Count in a variety of languages.
* Provide experience of sign language such as Auslan.
* Children will copy the model provided by adults so it is important that teachers model a respect for all languages so that all children feel that their own language is worthwhile. In this way their sense of identity will be strengthened.

Middle years of primary school

* Introduce the concept of 'audience and purpose' and relate this to all aspects of language. Activities as for early years but with extension of concepts. e.g. When doing role plays such as talking and listening on the telephone, show children how the way a person speaks changes according to audience and purpose.
* Music from a variety of cultures.
* Stories about different cultures.
* Provide the experience of having an interpreter translate their talk for a speaker of a language other than English.
* By this stage the students will realise that not everyone speaks in the same way.
* Give the experience of communicating with people with disabilities.

Later years of primary school and junior secondary

* Ensure that the children have experienced language awareness as above.
* Provide learning opportunities re changes in writing and speaking according to audience and purpose. This includes both informal and formal language.
* Introduce the terms Standard Australian English (SAE) and non-standard Australian English (Non-SAE) and develop activities that demonstrate these. e.g. dialogue in stories may be written in non-standard. Most of us use Non-SAE to speak to family and friends. By this stage children will be able to identify both SAE and Non-SAE and will be able to switch from one to the other.
* Translate from SAE to Non-SAE and vice versa.
* For speakers of Aboriginal/TSI English or Kriol in the class, introduce these languages with examples. Teach children to identify the differences between these and SAE. Provide experiences for translation. (This means that the children will need practice at listening to the way AE/Kriol sounds, writing it phonetically. There is no standardisation of such. Therefore students must state that they are writing in AE or Kriol. If they are writing in SAE they need an awareness of standardised spelling.)
* Introduce computer and email language.
* Help students comprehend the language of text books by providing a context.
* Introduce some grammatical language so that students have a language with which to talk about language.
* Teach cohesive devices such as connective words and phrases. e.g. 'however', 'on the other hand', 'finally'. Teachers of subject areas that require report writing need to include the teaching of useful language such as these words because, on the whole, they are not

words or phrases that people use in everyday speech.
* Teach the 'shape' of particular genre.

Senior secondary and tertiary years
* All the above.
* Dialects and languages. What is a dialect? What is a language? Show that both languages and dialects have structure.
* Contextualised and de-contextualised language. The language of text books is different from the language usually spoken by students. Therefore there is a need to teach the de-contextualised language of texts. This includes linking or cohesive words not usually included in everyday speech such as 'however', 'nevertheless', 'moreover', 'finally'.
* Teach the meaning and use of words needed for subjects other than English such as science and maths. It is often the language in these subjects that causes students to fail because of a lack of comprehension.
* By this stage students should have control of language so that they can choose the tone, register etc of their communication according to audience and purpose.

3. Accessing Standard Australian English: Who?

No matter how much money is spent, no matter what great programs are introduced and no matter how good intentions are, the fact remains that too few Indigenous students...

* feel comfortable in school environments
* are enthusiastic about writing
* achieve academic success
* remain at school and go on to tertiary study
* attend school regularly

WHY? Of course, there are many reasons. The main reason is cultural identity. All students need to know that their cultural background is acknowledged and respected. A major part of a person's identity is their language. Schools that have an inclusive curriculum in a true, not token, sense of the word, will attract and retain students. To be inclusive, a curriculum needs to encompass language awareness teaching and learning.

HOW? The following suggestions are not the complete answer but will make a considerable difference.
* Teacher awareness of Indigenous language and culture, including learning styles.
* Teachers' knowledge about language including dialects, interlanguage and differences between standard and non-standard English.
* Classroom action research that empowers all who are involved.
* Use of assessment and reporting strategies that are culturally inclusive/sensitive.
* Planning based on Indigenous and non-Indigenous learning styles so that indigenous students learn to use both.
* A language awareness curriculum for the whole school

Linguistic features of Aboriginal English

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are bi-lingual (i.e. they do speak both AE or TSI and SAE). However, I know that few teachers realise that SAE is not the language that is spoken in many homes, especially in urban settings. On the other hand, they may judge the spoken language of indigenous students as a non-standard variety of English similar to that spoken by non-indigenous students, rather than as a distinct dialect.

However, as Eades (1993: 5) points out:
while there are a number of features (particularly grammatical features) which AE shares with other non-standard varieties of English, there are many others which are distinctively Aboriginal.

Spoken language

Some examples of Koorie English with Standard Australian English translations (taken from 'Deadly eh Cuz! Teaching Speakers of Koorie English' McKenry with GVAECG, 1998)

* *'e fairly busted out laughing.* He burst out laughing.
* *Real big mob over dere.* There are a lot of people over there.
* *When 'e comes back I'll flog 'im.* He'll be in trouble when he gets back.
* *We was ' avin' lunch.* We were having lunch.
* *Where was youse?* Where were you?
* *I seen 'im yesterday.* I saw him yesterday.

Non-verbal language - the use of certain gestures and especially of silence.
Here are a few examples of non-verbal communication:

*** Eye contact**
It is discourteous for indigenous people to maintain eye contact. In schools, students are often told to 'Look at me when I'm speaking to you.' by a teacher who probably misinterprets the hanging of the student's head as shyness or even rudeness, when in fact it can be a sign of respect.

*** Lip-pursing**
Indigenous people often use lip-pursing to indicate direction or to point to the owner of something. (See Paul's teacher's comments about this later.)

*** Gesture**
Indigenous students often touch another person on the arm before speaking. They may then sign a response rather than give a verbal reply.

It is important to remember that indigenous Australians may speak Standard Australian English (SAE) when interacting with non- indigenous Australians, and Aboriginal English (AE) within their own community. Eades tells us that we should not assume that even Aboriginal leaders with a high profile in mainstream society are not AE speakers, because :
like bi-lingual speakers, they can use their linguistic and communicative skills to participate effectively both in their own communities and in mainstream society. (Eades, 1993:3)

The ability to choose either SAE or AE reflects an empowerment. (Cummins,1989) This is the literacy standard that the Elders in the Kimberley and Koorie parents I met in Victoria insisted upon for their children.

Written language

Teachers have often asked Geraldine Atkinson and myself (Geraldine was my partner in presenting 'Deadly eh Cuz!' workshops and is a Koorie woman.) about the spelling of Koorie English (KE). The answer is that there is no standardised spelling of KE. Instead, students are encouraged to listen to the sound of the language they want to write and to record it phonetically. Therefore, teachers need not correct so-called spelling mistakes if the student writes in Koorie or any other type of Aboriginal English - AS LONG AS THE STUDENT KNOWS THAT IT IS A DIALECT AND NOT SAE. This is why it is essential to teach students the differences between the form of English they need. For indigenous students it is important that they are enabled to write in Aboriginal English for an Aboriginal audience, if they so choose, but to have the skills to write in SAE in they choose that - and to be able to tell the teacher which language they have chosen.

Geraldine and I have been advocating a structures transition process from Koorie English to SAE. It has been published in *Deadly eh Cuz! Teaching Speakers of Koorie English* rev.ed (McKenry,1998) and in *Assessment and Reporting Support Materials:# Koorie Students* (McKenry, 1998)
The purpose of this transition process is not to aim at replacing KE with SAE but to give the student access to both.

Transition from Koorie English to Standard Australian English

A possible sequence of literary development might be:
1. General language awareness. This would include an understanding that there are different languages and different dialects within a language, and that people change the way they communicate according to audience and purpose.
2. Awareness that Koorie English is different from Standard Australian English.
3. Awareness that Koorie English is respected by teachers and the school community.
4. Confidence to write in Koorie English.
5. Ability to decode spoken Koorie English and write it, spelling phonetically.
6. Ability to choose between Koorie English and SAE according to audience and purpose.
7. Development of SAE skills to communicate according to audience and purpose.

Interlanguage: are students using it?

People who use more than one language or more than one dialect of a language, often combine linguistic features of both. It might be described as a stage people go through when learning a second language. You might hear people say 'table wooden' instead of 'wooden table' because, in their first language nouns preceded adjectives. If you want to read more about interlanguage go to the section on <u>linguistic terms</u>.

Indigenous people, like others, often use interlanguage. It could be a combination of SAE and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island English. It might include vocabulary or grammar from a traditional language, or from Kriol. (See section on <u>linguistic terms</u>)

There was once a research program where Sydney Aboriginal students took participated in a writing competition. It could be assumed that entries were the result of careful, deliberate efforts. Both standard and non-standard forms of English appeared in single entries, indicating that both forms 'belong very much to the web of urban Aboriginal English'. Professor Robert Eagleson gave these quotes from the entries (1982:149). Eagleson commented about the students' interlanguage features:
They are so much part of the students' linguistic repertoire ....that they slip into writing unnoticed, automatically.

The following example is included as illustration of the inclusion of both standard and Aboriginal form of a verb:
One morning the girls that I hang around with said that they <u>were going</u> to leave home and <u>was going</u> to get a flat somewhere.

Non-Aboriginal/TSI teachers, therefore must recognise that there is an overlap of both standard and TSI/Aboriginal/Koorie discourse forms.

My concern is that Indigenous students need to know when they use interlanguage. They may choose to keep it, or to use it in particular circumstances. But without awareness as to the form of language they use, they are disadvantaged.

Students quickly pick up the language they hear, especially from peers because they want to be accepted by them.
We, as teachers, need to teach students who come from a non-English speaking background that there are many types of English. Here is a list:

Language varies :

1. **At register level**
   * Formal - meetings, texts, government communications etc
   * Informal - playground, home, with friends etc
2. **At genre level**
   * Narrative - stories, diaries, news items etc
   * Non-narrative - instructions, recipes, advertisements etc
3. **At international level**
   * American English, British, Australian etc
4. **National level**
   * Queen's English
   * ABC radio
   * State level
   * City and country
   * Non-standard - teenage language, Aboriginal English, playground etc
5. **Within dialects**
   * Murri English, TSI English, Koorie English

etc.

Students who use a non-standard English and don't know they do

Some examples of non-standard English are:

* I done me homework last night.
* Yesterday I seen a snake on the way ‘ere.
* We was ‘avin’lunch.
* There’s six people in our family.
* On Mondy night we had tea down the street.
* What did youse do last night?
* That’s my book what I got for my birthday.
* They’re an item.
* That is so you don’t want to go there.

You will know many others. And, of course, language evolves so new vocabulary and new forms of grammar will always come and go.

It’s important that people feel a sense of belonging to a group and being able to use the dialect of the group is part of that belonging. But it is also important that people know whether they are speaking standard or non-standard language and that they have control of their language so that they can choose which form to use according to audience and purpose. Without that awareness people are disadvantaged. Teachers must teach these realities of language for, if not, too many students will fail to achieve the power to live there lives to the fullest.

The suggested sequence for a language awareness curriculum will benefit all students, not just those mentioned above. Features of language such as tone and register need to be identified. Being able to write in a formal or an informal way is necessary for all as is the ability to use SAE grammatical conventions.

Accessing standard English does not mean that other dialects of English are perceived as inferior. They are simply a different linguistic form, suitable for particular audiences and purposes. All linguistic forms deserve respect as do all cultural and social identities. However, everyone needs the knowledge to choose.

4. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

* Some linguistic terms
* Research findings

Some linguistic terms

Contents of this section

* Aboriginal English
* Auslan
* Dialect
* Interlanguage
* Kriol
* Lexicon and lexical history
* Metalanguage or metalinguistics
* Standard and non-standard Australian English

Aboriginal English

Aboriginal English is a dialect of English spoken by indigenous people, but is not the same all over Australia. In south-eastern Australia most indigenous people use Koorie English while further north, Murri English is used. Further west there is Nunga English and so on. Each region of Australia has its own dialect made up of traditional indigenous languages, English, pidgin English and in northern Australia, Kriol.

Auslan

This is the sign language used by the deaf community in Australia. It differs from the sign language used in other countries such as the USA. It is not the same as 'finger spelling' of English words.

Dialect

The Macquarie Dictionary defines dialect as a *variety of language spoken in a particular district or by a social group*.

Dr Diana Eades, from the University of New England, defines it in another way:
A dialec t is a variety of language which can be understood by speakers of other varieties of the same language and which differs from other varieties of the same language in systematic ways. These differences can be found in sounds, grammar, words and their meaning as well as language use.

Eades shows that Aboriginal English (AE) and Standard Australian English (SAE) may be only slightly different but a SAE speaker might judge the indigenous person's way of speaking as bad or lazy or incorrect English. A speaker of American English may think much the same, listening to a SAE speaker.

Writing about the Canadian context, Dr Elizabeth Coelho, an education consultant and researcher, defines a dialect as *a variety of the language that is spoken by a specific group of* the *society*. She continues :

However, a dialect is more than just an accent, more than just a different way of pronouncing the same words. The grammar is different as well, and there are many differences in vocabulary. (Coelho, 1991a:5)

Hudson and Berry (1994) provide us with the following useful insight into dialect:
Dialects can also be the spoken language used by members of immigrant or minority groups or a particular social class. Misunderstanding and stereotyping occurs when people see these speech differences as "better" or "worse"than each other. Higher status is frequently given to some varieties of speech over others. In England, Australian English is considered lower class by some people.

Unfortunately this tendency to categorise people whose speech differs from so-called "standard" mean s tha t those people often suffer social, economic, educational and occupational disadvantage.

Interlanguage

Interlanguage is a transitional language developed by an individual for a particular reason. In other words, it links two or more languages. I once worked with a year twelve student I shall call Anthony. His father was Italian speaking while his mother was a Koorie who

spoke Koorie English. Anthony used an interlanguage that had characteristics of the language background of both parents and this influenced his spoken and written language, especially syntax and pronunciation.
Here is an extract from one of Anthony's text responses to *Letters from the inside* by John Marsden. In it you will notice some examples of Anthony's syntax that have been influenced by interlanguage... (I have left the spelling as it was.)

Dear Tracey,
It's Tracey Mother, I am writing to explian why Mandy hasn't written to you over a few weeks. You are not ging to like what going say. Something terrible has happened to Many, in a car accident, I will explain how it happen. The family were on the way to a holiday to the beach for the christmas brak. Then a truck reversed back onto the road, without looking and he collided with it. Mandy was badly hurt by the collision of the car and the truck. Then Mandy was rushed to a hospital for an operation, which, she didn't survive the operation. While the rest of the family was injured, we was sent to the hospital for at last three weeks because some of us had broken their arm or be badly brused up by the accident...

The difference between interlanguage and dialect can be seen in the word *transitional* and this is not the case with a dialect. A dialectic speaker may be bilingual and speak the dialect only on occasion but this is a matter of choice. The dialect is usually the speaker's first language - the language spoken at home, so there is an emotive element closely connected to a sense of identity.

Because communication is constantly being achieved by interlanguage speakers, some continue to use this form of language in the long term, not realizing that the way they speak does not have the same linguistic patterns as the standard language. In addition, peers who come from homes where SAE is used, often communicate socially at school in a very limited, informal way; thus, they are not providing non-standard speakers with SAE models. This is one of the main reasons why it is important to teach language awareness to all students.

Those with whom the student identifies may understand and use a particular non-standard dialect, but may not realize that this dialect is not necessarily the language of success in the wider community. This may be caused by ignorance or a strong sense of identity - or a blending of the two. Dialect and interlanguage speakers may not have the ability to alter speech according to context because they are not aware that theirs is not the same as the language in texts or the language they are expected to use in writing.

<u>Kriol</u>
Kriol is another language, often referred to as second generation pidgin English. It is the first language of most indigenous students (and their parents) who live in far northern Australia and has its own distinctive vocabulary and sentence structure. Again, Kriol differs in various places. For example, there are differences between the Kriol used in east and west Kimberley communities.

<u>Lexicon and lexical history</u>
The word lexicon can mean 'all the words and phrases used in a particular language' (*Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1987).* Words and phrases evolve with time so that what was seen as non-standard in the past may eventually become standard and vice versa.

Metalanguage or metalinguistics
These refer to words used for talking about language or linguistics.

Standard and non-standard Australian English
The Catholic Education Office used the following definition in 1994 which remains a useful one: *Standard Australian English (SAE) is a dialect of Australian English used by government, education and the media. Non-standard English dialects include Aboriginal English. Other dialects of English include Standard American and Standard British English* . According to the CEO, non-standard English should not be equated with sub-standard, because it is just as effective and rule-governed as the standard dialect.

Research findings

Contents of this section

* Contextualized and de-contextualized language
* Language is social and psychological
* Interlanguage
* Metalinguistic awareness
* Scaffolding, supporting, intervening, teaching!
* Implications for classrooms

Contextualized and de-contextualized language
Primary schools have long included language in context or language experience or concentrated encounters or whole language or some other term that really means using language to do real things for real purposes. In this way children gain natural experience in using language.

However, there is often an enormous jump from such experiences to scenarios where language is not in context. All of a sudden, often when a student goes to secondary school, there are some subjects at least where text is used without a visible or even remembered context. It is at that stage that many students start to feel lost. The language of text and sometimes the language used by teachers is different from the language they know. Of course there are many secondary teachers who do provide visuals or real experiences to give background to text but even so, a significant number struggle to keep up to other students. Once again, it is lack of language awareness or knowledge about how language works that is the problem. If students have only the communicative dialect in which they have been immersed they probably do not have the language skills needed to analyse and abstract.

Professor Jim Cummins is highly respected and well known in many countries for his research and many books about language. I met him in 1991 at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and was impressed by his knowledge and dedication to social justice through providing access to language.

Cummins pointed out that the level of language proficiency used in interpersonal communication skills may be comparatively shallow. What people need to manage in an academic setting is the ability to deal with concepts and abstractions, often in the second

language. Cummins suggests that a child from a language background other than English may give a misleading impression of his/her overall proficiency by appearing to have a native-like fluency when involved in everyday social topics. This may mask a lack of linguistic resources to deal with the complex cognitive demands of school subjects.

Cummins (1989:129) in his concern for underachievers, challenges educators and policy makers to redefine their roles so that their interactions empower rather than disable students.

If there is to be a real change in the way teachers and students interact, if students really are to be empowered, then cultural realities need recognition and respect. As a result curriculum will be changed.

The work of Cummins reinforced my belief that it is essential that teachers show ALL students the differences between the various dialects of English. Teachers must also provide support that helps these students acquire the decontextualised SAE they need to succeed.

Language is social and psychological

After studying a wide variety of research reports about language I came to the conclusion that there is a very strong connection between the way people use language and the way they behave. Another way of putting it is that all linguistic behaviour can be seen as socio-psychological action. People constantly modify their speech to mark their solidarity with, or difference from, another person or social group. Teenagers speak teenage-English, for example, because they want to be seen as part of a group. So they will say 'See youse later' even though they may know quite well that in 'correct' or standard English it would be 'See you later.' Indigenous Australians usually choose to use Aboriginal English when together and may tease someone who speaks standard English in that environment.

Giles and Byrne (1982:35-36) suggest that the social cost of learning the dominant group language could be very high despite the reality that to learn it would be politically and economically valuable. Students may refuse to learn SAE because they want to identify with their peers and do not identify with people who, for example, attend university. Such an attitude is reflected in the writing of Smolicz (1979:113):

the individual gradually constructs his own personal linguistic system from those linguistic values whose meaning he has learned through his participation in the group's life. (Smolicz, 1979:113)

<u>In reading too</u>

Students need to know that what they read has a cultural background and it may not be the same as their own. They also need some knowledge on which to base their understanding of what they read. Freebody and Luke (1990:9) write of 'the significance of the reader's having and using background knowledge resources in reading a text successfully'. An investigation of the relationship between cultural knowledge and reading comprehension showed that 'prior knowledge figures prominently in various versions of "reading". (Freebody and Luke,1990:10). Besides using relevant texts, it is essential, therefore, that 'explicit and guided instructional introduction to those texts and genres be provided'.

Freebody and Luke (1990:7) list four related *components of success* in reading, based on their own cultural perceptions of cultural expectations : a successful reader needs 'decoding skills, participation with text, a purpose for reading and the ability to analyse text.' The last involves a recognition of the reality that both the reader and the writer of a text have an

ideological position and that this influences the way the reader interprets the text and the way the writer presents it. When planning a language awareness curriculum we need to remember this.

Cultural knowledge has been shown to influence comprehension. Students need to be taught the cultural patterns of the text's genre, in addition to information about the cultural background of the text's characters. This is particularly important to students whose first language is not Standard Australian English.

Interlanguage

Interlanguage might be used because a person wants to identify with a particular group but also, he/she may use it simply because they know no other language.

While Bialystok and Sharwood-Smith (1985) propose that second language learners' use of interlanguage lies in a lack of competence, Coelho (1991:44), the Canadian researcher and education consultant I met in 1991, describes interlanguage as 'a learner's approximation of the target language. It represents various developmental stages between monolingualism and bilingualism.'

Coelho (1991:44), points out the difference between *fossilized* interlanguage 'when the learner is unable to detect the differences which remain between his/her language production and the target language, or does not perceive them as significant', and the situation where interlanguage helps identify the speaker as a member of a particular group thereby demonstrating allegiance to that group.

Metalinguistic awareness

To be able to detect differences between his/her language and that of others, a language learner needs a degree of metalinguistic awareness. Labov (1970) believes that all speakers possess several 'styles' and can therefore, adapt their speech to make it fit the social context. For example, when examining the use of Black English Vernacular in New York, Labov found that the use of the copula ('be') was largely systematic, depending on certain contexts.

Labov (1969) led Tarone (1983:152) to providing an 'interlanguage continuum' with the vernacular style (which is used when the learner is relaxed and not attending to his/her speech) at one end, and the 'careful style' at the other. Ellis (1985a:96) comments that the process explained by Tarone's continuum is motivated by the learner's desire to be socially acceptable, which made me think about how this must affect minority groups who want to use language as a symbol of their chosen identity - but who also want to be able to use a standard language when needed. It also made me realise that teachers need to plan language experiences that teach students that there is a continuum of language, ranging from informal to formal, standard to non-standard, 'careful' to 'relaxed'.

Scaffolding/supporting/intervening/teaching

It has long been recognised that learning is a developmental process and that, as teachers, we need to build on what a student already knows. For students who are learning in a second language, a strong first language is invaluable. My experience at Richmond Central Primary School where the curriculum was bi-lingual convinced me that when people have their first language as the language of instruction they gain understandings and grasp concepts that can be later transferred to a second language. Students from families where a decision has been made to speak only English at home often struggle, especially with written work or

de-contextualised concepts, if that English is limited in vocabulary or the grammar is influenced by another language. My work in northern Australia confirmed this. Indigenous students thought in Kriol, spoke in Kriol, but were taught in English. A very difficult situation for them!

Implications for Australian classrooms arising from my research in Canada.

Coelho (1991a) states that it is important to understand that some speakers choose to use interlanguage - which in some cases has become a Pidgin or Creole - as a symbol of identity, while others are not aware of the interlanguage characteristics of their speech or writing. However, the question arises as to whether or not those who choose the interlanguage for the sake of identity are really aware of the linguistic implications of their choice. Teachers need to show students the differences between SAE and other dialects of SAE to enable them to choose the linguistic form they feel is appropriate to a particular circumstance.

Coelho (1991a,b) who works with students who have migrated to Canada from the Caribbean, strongly believes that non-standard speakers need to be taught the differences between what they speak and *what the educated world speak*..Teachers, she says *should do an analysis of what their students are doing when they attempt but fail to use standard English, for example, noting where their errors in tense originate. All Creole dialects have rules, and students need to be taught first that their language has patterns. When they realize this, they will be ready to acquire standard English*. (Coelho, 1991:21),

Your language is your identity. I'm convinced the way to go is celebration of the first language - consciousness raising- that Creole is a language and contrasting it with standard English. (Coelho,1991b)

She is convinced the reason for the Caribbean students' high illiteracy rate is the fact that Creole is their first language but in school they are taught in standard English.

<u>Implications for Indigenous Australia</u>
Australian linguists Hudson and Taylor have similar views to Coelho. They acknowledge Kriol as a language in its own right and propose for indigenous Kriol-speaking children *a language program which capitilizes on the home language to lead into English and thus give a greater opportunity for genuine scholastic achievement which comes from proficient literacy.*
(1987:297)

They comment that ‘communities generally do not like the idea of using Kriol in a formal way in schools even when they are themselves using it extensively.’ Like Creole speakers in Canada they seem to look at Kriol as an inadequate language:

‘Using linguists' definition of what constitutes a language, there is no doubt that Kriol is indeed a language in its own right and spoken by a great many Aboriginal people.’
(Hudson and Taylor,1987:299)

They believe that interference between Kriol and English contributes to the lack of academic success by students and that ‘there is an extra complication for many Aboriginal people in that while they are speaking Kriol, they think they are speaking English’.

Hudson and Taylor write:
‘They need to be able to code switch - that is, switch between languages appropriate for the social circumstances, and not be at the mercy of a confusing and covert and largely unclarified situation.’ Hudson and Taylor (1987:300)

To remedy this they need to be taught the linguistic characteristics of both the standard and dialect.

The research I have quoted supports the concept of a language awareness curriculum being taught to all students. To do this teachers themselves need metalinguistic awareness. Hopefully this work will help.