Bigges Mob Mirlimirli*
Teaching Two Way: Codeswitching Cultures and Dialects

Carolyn Bevan (Kija/Nyulnyul) and Denise Shillinglaw | Broome Senior High School, WA

Denise and Carolyn have been working together at Broome Senior High School for the past three years with groups of Year 11 and 12 Aboriginal students. Their aim has always been to re-engage students whose literacy in Standard Australian English is underdeveloped, yet who possess skills in their own culture which give them the potential to achieve. Carolyn’s expertise as a cultural consultant equips her to work as a teaching partner alongside Denise. Denise’s work has taken her from an English teacher to a teacher of the English language and she has a curriculum leader’s role within the school to grow and develop Two Way pedagogy with other practitioners. They work together delivering the West Australian English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) Course of Study.

It is 7.45 am, Monday morning. It is already 34 degrees and the humidity stifles the air. Students sit around in the shade, conserving energy; it’s no wonder there’s no urgency when the siren goes. We wait as the Year 12s cruise their way down from the hostel and the West Kimberley Football Academy (WKFA) where the boys have been at training since 6 am; I notice some of them are still sweating. The girls shuffle slowly, mobile phones and iPods disappearing from view as they approach us outside our classroom.

This group of students come from Broome, Jarlmadangah, Looma and Derby. In previous years, we have had students from Kalumburu, Oombulgurri, Looma, Kununurra, Bidyadanga, Warmun, Fitzroy Crossing and Muludja, as well as those who have grown up in Broome. The diversity of our students is also reflected in their linguistic backgrounds as students may speak Aboriginal English (AE) and/or Kriol as well as a traditional Aboriginal Language. But as Carolyn explain, AE is different in different regions, ‘If I were to go to Port Hedland, their AE, if I were to go up that way (gestures East) that’s different again, more Kriol strong up north, down south I’m not sure, but they will have AE and their traditional language words, how we use some in our sentences, so its all different it’s not the same, we don’t all understand each other, but we do understand each other’s [cultural set]’. Kriol is different again from AE as Kriol is a contemporary Aboriginal language; ‘if a person sat down and started talking Kriol I will hardly understand two or three or four words max of his whole sentence’.

Today the students are investigating the concept of story. In non-Aboriginal culture ‘story’ is a narrative. A narrative has many genres, can be fiction or non-fiction (but even when it is non-fiction, it is not the truth per se) and narrative has characters who may be real or not. Narrative is most commonly written in a linear structure, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Learning narrative or ‘story’ and reproducing this form of writing makes up a large part of the English curriculum and is also the official text form used to formally assess students’ writing ability across the years of schooling. In our class however, our students

*An Aboriginal English phrase using a Yawuru term meaning paper or books.
are Aboriginal and here we do not assume that the non-Aboriginal concept of ‘story’ is understood or can be easily replicated. So we teach it. To do this we investigate what the concept of ‘story’ is in the students’ own culture, and then bridge the gap to the concept of story which the syllabus requires us to teach. I ask the question ‘What does ‘story’ mean to Aboriginal people?’ Carolyn floats around the room rephrasing this SAE question into an AE phrase. There is silence. They are a quiet bunch. Then it comes … ‘dance’, ‘dreaming’, ‘knowledge’ … and keeps coming. I write the list on the board; the first half of a T-chart.

- Family
- Law
- Truth
- Country
- Painting, sculpture
- Elders
- Animals
- Spirituality
- Beliefs
- Told orally and often only in traditional language
- Link to other stories
- Exist (no authorship)

Carolyn adds ‘Story like what you’ve written down already, usmob you know we sit down with that storyteller we don’t look at them, not all information is for everybody, man business man business, woman business woman business you know, story is knowledge, our dreaming, is passed down to us’.

Then we have a look at what ‘story’ means in non-Aboriginal culture. I ask the question. This time there really is silence. Since I am the only whitefella in the room, I provide the information and we write up the other side of the T chart, the SAE cultural understanding about ‘story’ which is the focus of the lesson.

- Fiction
- Make-believe
- Pretend
- For entertainment or recreation
- Written in books, lots of books
- Clear structure
- Linear
- Lots of detail, lots of words
- Anybody can create, be an author or storyteller

Beside each other, these two sets of understandings are startling in their contrast. Together we discuss the differences and begin looking specifically at examples in both cultures. Carolyn explains ‘I grew up … to respect your elders, you listen to your elders, you shut up when you told to do something, you don’t question it you just do it and then you know they telling you right from wrong, they telling you a story and you all sit down you know, sit down and listen to stories’.

This is the beginning of a sequence of learning prior to setting an assessment task which requires students to ‘write a story’, or ‘tell a story’ in the whitefella way. This type of story expects ample descriptive detail, character detail, setting detail and the plot which unfolds in plenty of detail and with plenty of words. For us, this is why the Two Way Approach is so important in the literacy and language development of these students.

The Two Way Approach is essentially a bidialectal and bicultural approach to education with a focus on language (EDWA 1999a, EDWA 199b, Harris 1990). According to Baker
(1993), a bidialectal and bicultural approach provides a beginning in the attempt to address the literacy needs of Aboriginal students. Internationally in the literacy of indigenous people in countries where the dominant language is English, positive results come from respect and inclusion of indigenous students’ home language (King 2004), bilingual policy and practice in education (McKinley 2005), and from quality relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people (May & Aikman 2003). In Australia, the Two Way Approach includes these elements. The Two Way Approach occurs when representatives of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are involved in the education process, providing a balanced or Two-Way perspective on all aspects of schooling (Malcolm, Haig, Konigsberg, Rochecouste, Collard, Hill & Cahill 1999; EDWA 1999a). In this way, there is recognition and value of AE as a dialect of English (McRae n.d.; Malcolm et al. 1999) and Kriol as a contemporary Aboriginal language; but more importantly, there is respect for the Aboriginal worldview that lies beneath it (Malcolm, Konigsberg, Collard, Hill, Sharifian, Kickett & Sahanna 2002; EDWA, CEOWA & AISWA 2000; DOEWA 2002 & Williams 1988).

In practice, both educators work together, respecting and valuing each other’s culture and dialect in the classroom, developing both dialects while at the same time ‘codeswitching’ between the two (CEOWA 1994; Malcolm et al. 1999). The Two Way Approach employs the components of a codeswitching ‘stairway’ in the classroom described as Awareness, Separation, Codeswitching and Control (CEOWA 1997). The focus is on making explicit the differences between the dialects of SAE and AE and on the empowerment of Aboriginal students to know when and how to use both dialects in both cultural contexts (CEOWA 1997, Malcolm 1992). In Western Australia, the Department of Education recognises the Two Way Approach through pedagogy, assessment and reporting as articulated by the English as an Additional Language or Dialect Progress Map (DETWA 2007) and in upper secondary by the English as an Additional Language or Dialect Course of Study.

The tricky part for us as practitioners in applying the theory of Two Way is developing the linguistic and cultural awareness in the students whilst fostering their development of a metalanguage for their ongoing development. We formalise this metalinguistic process by providing our students with a codeswitching journal. In addition, our assessments capitalise on the intercultural nature of the pedagogy. We believe that the students are not only learning SAE, but are developing a heightened awareness of cultural differences – both subtle and obvious. We recognise that their growth to independent young adults will be enhanced by their capacity to move effectively between cultures and therefore operate fully in both worlds. Carolyn sees this as one of the most essential outcomes for the students; ‘slowly, slowly as we educate them you know, soon as you walk out that door you speaking Aboriginal English; we educate them and tell them and they know and they can …you know go Centrelink or where ever, they got the skills to speak SAE now, speak SAE because this Gardiya environment and teaching them that codeswitching is important’.

Each time Carolyn and I get together to have a cup of tea and a conversation, we reflect on the gravity of cultural assumptions made naively by non-Aboriginal teachers. Today we call to mind a conversation with one of our students the year before. At the time the students were writing a letter to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on the first anniversary of the Apology to the Stolen Generation, in February of 2009. In learning formal business letter language and layout, I was working one-on-one with Saul. Saul was a tall, athletic student who loved his football and was part of the West Kimberley Football Academy. In our conversation I was editing Saul’s first draft of his letter, congratulating him on his sentences in SAE and making some suggestions to improve here and there. The conversation went something like this:
‘Now this looks good here Saul, what I’d like you to do is to add a few more words in SAE here to this draft …’

‘E finished …?’

‘No Saul this is not finished yet, this is your draft.’

‘Draft …?’

‘Yes, your first draft’

Pause

‘Saul, I’d like to see your first draft finished today and then you can work on your next draft tomorrow,’

‘What you mean miss …?’

‘You know, this is your first draft which you can work on and improve and then go on to your next draft. You can do lots of drafts if you like …’

Frustrated – ‘Miss, why you keep saying draft, draft … is that like draft pick?’

Saul taught us a good lesson that day and we think of him often in our every day reflections about cultural disparity and the slippery nature of dialect differences. Carolyn sees this clearly

‘I find that AE is influenced by the American way of speaking and kids just making up their own words, it’s evolving and a mixture of traditional words’.

In many ways, working with students who speak SAE as a second dialect is much more difficult than working with students who speak SAE as a second language. From our experience we see three ways in which teaching dialect difference is more complicated.

Firstly, in our experience the students think they speak only SAE, especially students from Broome as this is the first time in their ten or so years of schooling that someone has raised their awareness about the way they speak and interact. Often this is the first time that the differences are set apart or separated from SAE. In addition to this, we are sensitive to the fact that many of the families of those students have experienced ‘English-only’ policies in their own schooling and in the services of government and the community. Oftentimes a suggestion of speaking something other than SAE reignites old fears from not so old government policy. Carolyn adds ‘I don’t think many of the parents realise that they’re doing it and its actually recognised as Aboriginal English, where as now I think it’s been valued, recognised and what we’re teaching our kids is codeswitching’.

Secondly, when SAE speakers hear AE they generally understand what is said. As a result they overlook the specifics of dialect difference and the cultures in which forms of AE are embedded (EDWA 1999b). More often than not, SAE speakers will continue a conversation with an Aboriginal person because of its approximation to SAE. In the school context there exist some complex factors. Aboriginal students who speak AE to their non-Aboriginal teachers need assistance in separating AE from SAE. In separating the dialects, teachers (and almost always students) can point out how these forms of English are different from each other. It is also vital that teachers are explicit in their expectation of which dialect is in use for a specific activity or task. In our experience, if a teacher does not make this expectation clear, then students who are speaking or writing AE may leave a situation thinking that they are speaking or writing SAE. Students then risk their AE being ‘corrected’ as it does not sound like or look like accurate SAE. Furthermore, we have observed that for many Aboriginal students the only time that they speak SAE is in the formal classroom environment, thus the practice of familiar and unfamiliar spoken SAE is an imperative.

Finally, there are regional varieties of AE as examined by Malcolm indicating that the dialect varies from place to place (DOEWA 2002). In our classroom this means that almost every student will speak AE with idiosyncrasies from their own country and many words
deriving from the traditional language of that country. These subtle differences make for very interesting class discussions when reflecting on language usage whilst reminding us never to make assumptions about our students. To complicate matters, many aspects of SAE and AE are the same because they are English based. However the cultural understandings, assumptions and conceptualisations are often very different and can be the basis of people misunderstanding each other (Sharifian 2001, EDWA 1999b).

One of our most successful assessments which capitalises on all these complexities and develops the codeswitching abilities of students is a Script Task which investigates subtle differences between SAE and AE, but in reality can have dire consequences (Sharifian 2001, EDWA 1999b). The task connects students’ own cultural knowledge attached to AE words, with new knowledge and new SAE words. In writing the script, students demonstrate their growing control of oral and written SAE. We are indebted to Jon Faulkner and Ricky Davey for the original idea.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCRIPT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your task is to prepare a script in Aboriginal English/Kriol and Standard Australian English which shows some misunderstandings between these dialects or languages. Where possible, show where words in traditional language are in use in Aboriginal English or Kriol. You will need to have about two or three characters of different cultures and the script is the written down conversation between the characters. Some sample scenarios are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A teacher and student at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A shopkeeper and a customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A parent and a doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A policeman and a member of the public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A judge and a defendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two young people of different cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two musicians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following is an excerpt from a student script:

‘FRED: Hey mate, can I get a game?
COACH: What, with my team?
FRED: yea, of course.
COACH: I’ll let you know, we train Monday, Wednesday, Friday and you have to come to two of those training sessions to get a game. Do you think you can do that?
FRED: (clicks* and nods)
COACH: So will you be able to come?
FRED: (clicks) Of course I’ll be there,
COACH: Sorry I didn’t know what you meant.
FRED: Hahaha that’s bust out**!
COACH: Who busted out of where? Did you just get out of jail?
FRED: Don’t be silly coach bust out mean laughing in our language.
COACH: Oh ok sorry I will understand you sooner or later.’

* Aboriginal people use a click sound as an affirmation.
** ‘bust out’ is an Aboriginal English term in Broome for laughing.
As we watch our class at work we reflect on some of the most significant results that we have seen in our work. We see students who are engaged in learning and whose willingness to write (at all) has significantly improved. In our class early attempts at writing (and drafts) are accepted and encouraged in AE or Kriol. We see that students have an interest in how language works and the many languages in our country. We hear developing metalanguage which equips students with the skills to read the context accurately and codeswitch between the dialects. Carolyn recognises the success of students having control over their own languages, ‘Us making them, teaching them I reckon the ones which have left us now, I reckon they know, they know they’re not going to go down to Centrelink and gib a blackbella goes’.

We see an awareness of differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture with the opportunities to talk about these differences without criticism or penalty. Carolyn voices this on behalf of the students; ‘I don’t have to be shame anymore, I can change and adapt and when I go home I can be me’. We see the confidence inspired by this recognition of culture and valuing of language as self determination.

Carolyn has noticed a clear increase in students’ ‘attendance, engagement’ and ‘numbers’. We recognise that our contribution to attendance is small as we have a school which has several well resourced engagement mechanisms of the Broome Residential College and the Clontarf WKFA. Our school staff is also dedicated to delivering inclusive curriculum programs, including the Integrated Vocational Program (IVP) which caters for the students in our classes. At the same time, we understand our roles in providing senior literacy and language programs where, as Carolyn puts it ‘graduation and English, you know you have to pass English to get a WACE [Western Australian Certificate of Education] certificate’.

Ultimately we see our own relationship as one of reciprocity, that we share and grow in our personal journeys and model our cultural exchange to our students. Together we spend time planning, reflecting, sharing tough management issues and talking through challenges, like when students are at risk or our sphere of influence is restricted. Carolyn adds ‘some of our planning ideas and how we teach worked, some didn’t’, but our Two Way pedagogy doesn’t change. In the future Carolyn hopes ‘this course keeps running and these Year 8s now will one day be in Year 12, or hopefully even earlier say ‘I do speak AE and I come to school to learn SAE way’, our course, there is two worlds out there and you are codeswitching’.

Our lesson is about to come to a close, Aidan is writing his Fairest and Best Speech in SAE (which includes a brief story) and we’ve run out of time again. We still haven’t got to punctuation, capital letters or maintaining a consistent tense, but he has been productive. After the five minute warning, I say to Aidan, ‘Just one final sentence here in SAE and then you are finished the whole thing!’

He looks up from his page of SAE paragraphs, ‘one more?’.

‘Just one more sentence …’

He sits back and in very good SAE says ‘But miss that means I’ll have to go over the page …and I’ve never written this much in my life!’
References


Catholic Education Office of Western Australia Kimberley Region (1994). *Fostering English Language in Kimberley Schools (FELIKS)*, Professional Development Course for Primary Schools, Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, Broome.


Education Department of Western Australia, Catholic Education Office & Association of Independent Schools WA (2000). *Deadly Ways to Learn*, EDWA, East Perth.

Education Department of Western Australia (1999a). *Two Way English*, EDWA, Perth.

Education Department of Western Australia (1999b). *Solid English*, EDWA, Perth.


