Implications of First Nations English Dialects for Supporting Children's Language Development

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Overview

This project addresses growing concern in Aboriginal Early Childhood Care and Development (AECCD) and in education that there is a lack of knowledge about culturally appropriate milestones to inform programs of support, screening, and early intervention for First Nations children's English language development. Some child care practitioners, educators, speech language pathologists, and First Nations leaders suggest that First Nations children may be disproportionately misdiagnosed with language impairments. There is speculation that this problem may be due in part to dialect difference rather than speech-language deficit or delay. Language and learning problems may be exacerbated by a mismatch in the communicative norms valued at home and at school.

This project is exploring:

1. perceptions of the nature and prevalence of problems associated with lack of knowledge of First Nations English dialect learning among young children; and

2. how communities and universities could begin research to develop and share knowledge of dialect learning among First Nations children.

This project summary highlights key points drawn from analysis of transcripts of focus groups and literature on First Nations English dialects among young children, including:

- the **nature of non-standard dialects** in general and of First Nations English dialects;

- the **significance** of First Nations English dialects for early learning;

- **guidelines** for pilot studies;

- **implications** for practice, training, and policy for AECCD, speech-language specialists, and educators working with First Nations children.

Supporting First Nations children's early learning

First Nations children in Canada are growing up in a variety of contexts (50% urban, 10% rural off-reserve, 40% rural/remote on-reserve) within a variety of cultural ecologies and languages. Some children, though not all, are exposed to a non-standard English dialect as the primary language of their family or community. In order to provide First Nations children with effective and respectful programs of child care, education and support, practitioners need to be aware of First Nations English **grammars** and **community-based norms of language use**. Research is needed to differentiate between language differences and language deficits in order to develop appropriate **training, policies,** and **practices** for educators and speech-language pathologists.

What are the issues for supporting early learning?

Children may enter school speaking the **non-standard dialect of English** that is the norm in their home and community.

- Child care practitioners, educators and speech-language pathologists may **misinterpret the child's use of an English dialect as a language delay or impairment**.

- Mis-diagnosed children may be given **unneeded remedial therapy** to correct the perceived disability.

- Some children who speak non-standard dialects and who have **genuine language disorders may go undiagnosed** and un-served.

Additional negative consequences

- **Children** may **miss valuable program or classroom time** for therapeutic sessions that are addressed to a problem they do not actually have.

- Limited speech-language therapy **resources may be wasted**.

- Children may be stigmatized as learning disabled, which can result in **self-fulfilling lower performance expectations** by practitioners, teachers, parents, and by the children themselves.

- Children's home and community ways of speaking may be pathologized, fostering a **negative concept of self** and of their cultural background, and a **negative attitude toward school**.

- Educators, child care practitioners' and speech-language pathologists' treatment of non-standard First Nations dialects as impairments can contribute to a social order in which First Nations people are **marginalized, devalued, and pathologized**.

What is driving these negative consequences?

- Language assessment tools and procedures are based on the Standard English dialect. This can result in speakers of non-standard dialects being mis-diagnosed as language impaired.

- Training of speech-language pathologists, child care practitioners, and educators often does not include an orientation to the nature and validity of non-standard English dialects as valid forms of speech-language development.

- Lack of valid assessment tools for non-standard dialect speakers result in under-identification of those children who actually do have a speech-language difficulty.

Project Activities

Literature review

- English dialects of Indigenous peoples in Canada, USA, Australia, Aotearoa / New Zealand

- Education approaches to non-standard English dialects in USA, Australia

Forum 1: February 2004

3 Topics explored in focus groups:

1. Significance of First Nations English dialects for First Nations children's education.

2. Recommendations for First Nations English Dialect Project's research focus.

3. Recommendations for a pilot project.

- **Participants:** Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speech-language pathologists, child care and development specialists, linguists, and Aboriginal community members.

- **Thematic analysis** of transcribed contributions of invited speakers and focus groups to identify features of non-standard English dialects among Aboriginal peoples and guidelines for pilot research.

Forum 2: December 2004

Topic: Implications of First Nations English dialects for understanding, assessing and supporting First Nations' children's early language development.

- **Participants:** Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speech-language pathologists, early childhood care and development specialists, and First Nations community-based program leaders.

- Thematic analysis and inventory of transcribed focus group discussions to identify challenges and possibilities for effective screening, diagnosis and early intervention, as well as education to normalize speech-language differences associated with First Nations English dialects.

Dialects: *Not* inferior versions of the "real" language

- What is called 'English' is in fact a large collection of **dialects**

(e.g., BBC English, New Zealand English, Boston English)

- A **dialect is not an inferior version of a "real" language**

  (the British 'Queen's English' is a dialect itself)

- All dialects have a complete **grammatical rule system** governing pronunciation, word formation, and the combining of words into sentences.

- **Grammars differ** slightly between dialects of the same language.

- A **standard dialect** is a dialect with prestige due to its associations with dominant social groups and its institutional support. It is not more logical or expressive, but is often perceived that way.

- **Standard Canadian English** is the dialect used in mainstream (dominant culture) institutions such as the news media, business writing, and importantly, schools.

- Children who **acquire the standard dialect at home** as a mother tongue are often seen as having more advanced development of language skills in early childhood and at school entry, giving them an easier transition into school.

- Children who **do not acquire the standard dialect as a mother tongue** can be perceived as having delayed or poor language skills, language impairments or even more pervasive developmental delays. This can result from bias in assessment tools and norms based on the standard dialect, and lack of information about dialects on the part of the educator or speech-language pathologist,.

- Just as distinctive grammar characteristics of non-standard dialects are ungrammatical by the rules of the standard dialect, any distinctive grammar characteristic of the standard dialect is ungrammatical by the rules of non-standard dialects.

First Nations Englishes are distinct dialects

- **Distinctive varieties of English are spoken by Indigenous peoples** in former British colonies around the world.

- Similar to other non-standard dialects, characteristics of Indigenous Englishes include both **grammar** and cultural norms of language **use.**

- Indigenous English dialects remain **under-described**.

Possible Features of First Nations English Dialects for Further Study

There is likely great variety among different First Nations English dialects.

Dialects can be distinguished in terms of grammar, discourse structure, and norms of communicative interaction. The following possible dialect features were identified by participants in the two forums as warranting further study and consideration in practice with First Nations children.

Grammar

Speech Sound use?

Speech sounds in the Standard English dialect and the First Nations dialect may differ. For example, the sound *d* may be used in places where Standard English uses *th,* in words like *that* or *other*.

Speech sound differences are often found at the end of words. When a word **ends in more than two consonants**, the final one is often deleted in some First Nations English dialects.

Verb and noun inflection (endings)?

Inflection, such as verb or noun endings that indicate person or number, may differ. For example, unlike Standard English, some Indigenous English dialects may use the same form for all present tense verb forms:

> *I go, you go, he go*

or

> *I goes, you goes, he goes*

This regularity is not evidence of language impoverishment. Mandarin, Indonesian, and many other major world languages have similarly regular verb paradigms.

Pronoun deletion?

In some First Nations and Native American dialects of English, pronouns are optional when they can be inferred from the context.

> *You hear about Mike? Drives into town yesterday....*

Optional omission of pronouns is also found in other languages, such as Japanese.

Vocabulary differences?

At school, language assessments for vocabulary may be based on words familiar to speakers of the standard dialect, but not to First Nations children living in rural or remote communities.

Cultural mismatch between assessment tools and children's experiences can result in mis-attribution of language impairment.

Discourse structure: narrative?

Discourse (strings of sentences) is subject to rules of organization that may vary across cultures.

Narrative is a discourse genre that includes storytelling and the reporting of events. Some language tests used in schools assess children's abilities to produce Standard English narrative structure. Some First Nations and Native American English dialects structure narratives differently.

Narrative structures

Standard English narrative structure	Alternative narrative structures
• Chronological sequencing	• Thematic sequencing
• Explicit connections between ideas	• Implicit connections between ideas
• Elaboration is valued	• Brevity is valued

First Nations children may tell a story without an introduction, without building a context, or in a non-linear sequence. Their story re-tellings may elicit less language than play-based language samples. Assessing a narrative according to the structural features of a different set of norms can result in misattribution of cognitive delay or deficit.

Communicative interaction?

People from different cultures may have been socialized into different sets of norms for appropriate **ways to use language interactively**. First Nations children's interactional norms may not match situations or expectations in preschool or school. Their responses, often in the form of **hesitation or silence, may be misinterpreted** as lack of comprehension, inability to respond correctly, lack of attention or even insolence.

Participation frameworks?

In mainstream preschools and schools, children are expected to speak in a wide range of situations. Some of these may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable for First Nations children. In many First Nations communities, listening and observing are valued as much as talking. Talk may be a low-frequency event that is more marked than in European-heritage cultures in Canada. Uncomfortable situations may result in First Nations children remaining silent.

Participation and comfort level, as observed in some First Nations cultures

Uncomfortable situations	Comfortable situations
• Being called on to speak when a large group is listening	• Speaking with a single person or in a small group
• Speaking when adults are present	• Speaking with peers in the absence of adults
• Being called on to demonstrate knowledge	• Children deciding when they are ready to demonstrate knowledge

Attention and listening behaviours?

Norms for listening vary across cultures. In mainstream Canadian conversations, listeners are expected to look the speaker in the eye, and provide active listening responses (mm-hm… really!). These behaviours may be seen as rude and interrupting in some First Nations cultures, especially when the speaker is an adult and the listener is a child.

Questioning and answering?

Questioning and answering are behaviours expected of children in mainstream Canadian programs and classrooms. First Nations children may belong to communities in which it is not appropriate to ask direct questions of adults. They may also hesitate to answer questions from adults, for several reasons.

- *Higher cultural tolerance for silence.* Research shows that in many First Nations cultures there is a longer gap between speaker turns and longer silences than in white middle-class speech communities. First Nations children may also hesitate to answer questions because of a cultural expectation that they take time to consider a question carefully before answering.

- *Unfamiliarity with display questions.* "*What colour is the sky?"* These kinds of display questions are not a universal cultural practice, and may confuse First Nations students who expect people to ask questions in order to gain new information, not to test their skills. They might remain silent, or say that the adult already knows, or respond to such an apparently 'silly' question with an equally 'silly' false answer.

- *Unfamiliarity with simultaneous learning and assessment.* In mainstream preschools and schools, children are asked questions in order to engage them and use their answers as starting points for teaching. Incorrect answers are an expected part of the process. This routine may be unfamiliar to some First Nations children, who are more familiar with a routine involving periods of repeated observation and practice in private before public

demonstration of successful learning. Often this demonstration occurs at the child's initiation, not the adult's. These children may be uncomfortable being asked to display their abilities while their learning is taking place, and may meet such questions with silence.

Other possible dialect features?

Other distinctive features of conversational interaction in some First Nations were identified in this project as important for assessment of children's real language ability.

Prosody. Some First Nations children may be accustomed to speech that is quieter and slower than mainstream Canadian speech.

Humour. Expectations of how humour is used may differ between First Nations communities and in the mainstream school classrooms. This includes the **kind, frequency**, and **timing** of humour.

Paralinguistic factors. First Nations children may be accustomed to different norms of **gesture** and **facial expression** when talking and listening. The kind and frequency of their "body language" to **indicate their comprehension, intention,** or **emotion** may not match non-First Nations teachers' expectations and therefore may be misinterpreted.

Future research questions

- What are First Nations Englishes in Canada?
- How do First Nations Englishes develop in children?
- What kinds of practices/ tools can effectively serve First Nations children?
- What can be done now to enhance self-esteem and educational success of children who use First Nations Englishes?
- Is this an important research topic?
- What are First Nations goals for children's dialect learning?

Principles for future research

The forums and literature review yielded principles for discussion with First Nations involved in future research.

- The **community needs to be centrally involved** in defining the research.
- Community members should be part of the team conducting research.
- **Respect and cultural sensitivity** should be shown by researchers.

Research begins with trusting relationships.

- Face-to-face contacts need to be made in order to enable **relationships and reciprocal learning** about language, culture, knowledge systems, and practices.

- Research needs to have a practical intent to **improve supports for children's optimal development.** This improvement should be measured in relation to community goals for supporting children's development.

- Researchers need to form partnerships with communities and to develop **clear written agreements** or contracts at the beginning of a project. Agreements need to specify research ethics, methods, data ownership, researchers' accountability, project control, outputs, and dissemination of findings.

- Research products need to be in plain language and **readily accessible** to the community.

Possible research methods

The forums identified elements for a program of exploratory research involving collaboration between language researchers and one or more First Nations as follows:

- **Identify community perspectives** on their English dialect

- Observe and record **naturally occurring** language situations to identify distinctive features of grammar and use.

- Employ explicit questions about apparent distinctive features, or experimental data, to refine understandings.

- Employ **purposeful sampling**

- Use non-representative samples of narrow scope to **develop hypotheses**

- Obtain speech samples from a **variety** of contexts, including variation in:

  - speaker demographic characteristics

  - number, demographics, and relationship of listeners

  - physical contexts

    - event types

    - discourse genres

Note: A **non-representative sample of narrow scope** may be useful for **hypothesis development**

Implications for practitioner training

It is important to teach practitioners that Standard English used in dominant cultural institutions and in screening and diagnostic tools is just one variety of English. Both the process of assessment and intervention, and the content need to be sensitive to the possibility that First Nations children may have a non-standard English variety as their home language.

Products of this project offer a first step in development of pre-service and professional development training of educators, speech-language pathologists and child care practitioners regarding First Nations children's language development and use.

Implications for language assessment

Standardized tests of vocabulary, language comprehension, grammar, articulation (pronunciation):

- disadvantage is that these are based on norms for Standard English.

Language sample analyses:

- naturalistic: play, conversation, story-telling

- can be collected by persons other than a specialist

- standard reference criteria can be developed for a language community

- can focus on non-verbal communication as well as verbal

- time consuming, but computerized systems help

Dynamic assessment (Feuerstein/Tzuriel procedures):

- focus on how a child learns and their learning capacity more than on what they already know based on prior exposure

Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (Seymour et al. 2004):

- a dialect-neutral tool

General principles for supporting children's language learning

- Ask what is average and functional within the child's own speech community.

- Family-centred practice, e.g., what are parents' language goals for their child?

- Observe child's language with people in their home (what dialect is used?)

- Individualized by goals, strategies, materials

- Use strengths to address needs

- Observe child in a variety of settings

- Provide many opportunities for learning – repetition, frequent input.

A promising practice: Standard English as a Second Dialect

Children who speak non-standard English dialects can acquire the standard dialect.

Their learning may be effectively supported by a <u>specialized</u> Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD) program, rather than by speech therapy, English as a Second Language, or general learning support.

SESD programs:

- draw the child's attention to differences between the child's dialect and the standard dialect

- help the child to recognize situations for appropriate use of each dialect, rather than identifying one dialect as 'correct'

- provide opportunities for the child to learn the grammar and phonology of the standard dialect

This approach has been successfully employed for Aboriginal English in Australia, and African-American English in some parts of the USA. Some school districts provide such programs in Canada.

Implications for intervention

Changing the way a child sounds and interacts in conversation may inadvertently alienate a child from their community. Standard English is useful in certain domains but its use at home might be inappropriate, symbolizing a rejection of cultural norms. A family may wish a child to become bi-dialectal. However, a child may actually function well using their First Nations English dialect, once other dialect communities learn more about the First Nations dialects. Accommodations in a linguistically diverse society should not always be in the direction of colonial norms and preferences. For mainstream practitioners and investigators, there are more questions than answers on this topic that is ripe for careful, community-university collaborative research.

Suggested readings

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