

THE METHOD OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN VARIOUS SCHOOLS: NATIVE STUDENTS

Mrs. Geetanjali Yadav
Assistant Professor
Indus College of Education, Rohtak

ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the general literature related to teaching English in schools with Native students and reports the results of an interview of this topic with a group of practicing teachers in northern Saskatchewan, comparing their responses to the literature. Implications for teaching and suggestions for further research are provided. This article will be relevant to teachers, curriculum developers, administrators and policy-makers and to those who want to address challenges and issues in teaching Native students an academic curriculum delivered in English.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Native people have diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Goddard, 2002, Heit & Blair, 1993, Burnaby, 1982, Garret, 1996, Faries, 1991, Toohey, 1985). Most attend school in remote rural northern communities and on reserves and speak Native languages or an English dialect for most communications. Others attend school in urban and southern regions (Burnaby, 1982, 1987, Heir & Blair, 1993). For better or worse, the current provincial curriculum employs what is known as the Standard English (SE) dialect as the medium of instruction (MOI). This challenges Native students in schools because of little emphasis on addressing their English language needs (Burnaby, 1982, Faries, 1991, Hewitt, 2000).

This diversity presents compelling challenges for the teachers of Native students. Studies identify inappropriateness in policy and curriculum as well as the specific educational barriers facing Native students as issues in education. Suggested solutions are posed in the areas of appropriate language teaching approaches, effective pedagogy, policy and curriculum reform, and the essential inclusion of Native and post-colonialist perspectives in education decision-making at all levels. Several identify inadequate teacher awareness and training, too few Native teachers, little locally and culturally relevant curricula and resources, and low levels of funding as barriers to Native students' academic success (Beck, 2000, Burnaby, 1982, Frasier, 1995, Smith, 1999, Yurkovich, 2001). Research also focuses on the linguistic differences between Native-English and SE dialects and

negative attitudes towards dialects other than SE (Goodwin, 1998, Adger, 1997, Malcolm, 1999, Rickford, 1998).

Barriers facing Native students are embedded within the larger historical, social, and cultural context of education (Collier, 1995). Sociocultural issues in Native education, include history and issues of self-determination, school policy, Native control of education, socioeconomic conditions of Native students, maintenance of Native languages, and opportunities for students to express in their own languages (Barman, et al., 1987, Szasz, 1974, Garrett, 1996, Haig-Brown, 1995, Halfe, 2004, Beck, 2000, Smith, 1991). Poverty is cited as a major factor in the success of Native students, suggesting that "...unless the health, social, and economic conditions of Native lives are generally improved, the problems of language development and lower-than-average educational attainments levels will regrettably remain a part of the Native experience at schools" (Sullivan cited in BC Human Rights Commission, 2001, p. 49). In higher education some students identify "a need to overcome an abuse mentality, ...an inner struggle to eradicate a poor self-image brought on by years of family violence, substance abuse and deep seeded negative stereotypes about Indian people as a whole" (Guerrero, 1999, p. 128).

Historical inequities in the education of Native people is now recognized as a major cause of Native language loss, and the challenges they face to maintain their cultural heritage and identity (Barman, et al., 1987, Szasz, 1974, Garrett, 1996, Haig-Brown, 1995, Collier, 1995, BC Human Rights Commission, 2001). School curricula and instruction are cited as Eurocentric (Battiste, et al 2002) and irrelevant to Native students' lives, needs, and learning styles (Burnaby, 1982). Post-colonial discourse contends that the entire educational system has been and continues to be western- based and Eurocentric, perpetuating the notion of student deficiency, and the marginalization of Native people including the validity and status of their knowledge, languages and cultures (Battiste et al, 2002). Yoeman (2000, p. 121) cites post-colonial writers who argue against English as the MOI for Native students because of its colonialist nature and others who argue in favour of English as MOI so that it can be used to express Native reality to the world. Marie Battiste et al (2002) explore consciousness-raising and working together of Native and non-Native people to address these challenges and develop appropriate educational solutions for the benefit of all.

Studies conclude that the school learning environment is unfriendly and exclusive, has inequities, views Native students as deficient, and does not recognize the rich cultural and language experiences they contribute (Barman, et al., 1987, Szasz, 1974, Garrett, 1996, Haig-Brown, 1995, Collier, 1995, Toohey, 1985). Individual affective factors such as low cultural identity, lack of confidence and self-esteem, and anxiety contribute to Native students' educational challenges (Collier, 1995, Frasier, 1995). They may see school as socially and culturally alien with little connection to their home lives (Frasier, 1995). They may also experience racism, and conflict or confusion with mainstream school culture (Smith, 1999, Taras, 1996, Haig-Brown, 1995, Guerrero, 1999, Hewitt, 2000).

The combination of so many factors may lead Native students to feel there is no reason for attending and continuing school and their achievement levels remain low (Szasz, 1974), and high attrition continues across Canada.

TEACHING PROCESSES

Students who have difficulty understanding English, the current MOI in provincial schools, will have difficulties in their school subjects (Burnaby, 1982, Faries, 1991). Central to this is the impact of the language teaching process. Ignoring dialect differences, for instance, can affect the quality of education if dialect contributions and influences are not addressed and if dialect speakers are negatively stereotyped (Wolfram, et al., 1999). Teachers who have not discussed post the colonialist perspective and with respect to education in general, and language education specifically, may develop misconceptions and unjustified attitudes towards the value of Native languages and dialects in education. They may uncritically accept a foreign, non-Native curriculum (Goddard, 2002).

In regards to literacy development, the differences and unfamiliarity of written structures and conventions in SE appear to create additional challenges for students who speak Native languages or dialects, especially if they are from an oral tradition (Wolfram, et al., 1999, Bashman & Kwachka, 1989). Native parents maintain that schools fail to teach their children to read because instruction does not address factors of dialect (Christian, 1997) such as interference, pronunciation differences, spelling, grammar, and discourse patterns that are reflected in their writing (Toohey, 1985, Clarke, 1983). Consequently, teachers may focus on what they see as student deficiencies and error correction rather than on meaning (Clarke, 1983, Bashman & Kwachka, 1989, Blackburn & Stern, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

Research indicates that we cannot ignore the needs of linguistically diverse Native students and their teachers. The teachers interviewed confirm much of what the literature suggests and also extend those ideas. Further discussions with practicing teachers will ensure that their voices are heard for the benefit of all. At the same time, teachers and administrators can benefit from studying suggested strategies from the literature.

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