**Code Switching and Indigenous workplace learning: Cross-cultural competence training or cultural assimilation?**

**ABSTRACT**

For more than two decades, within numerous spheres of education, code switching (CS) – moving competently between two languages or dialects - has been promoted as a useful, if not a necessary skill for Indigenous students to develop. Linguistically it enables them to maintain communicative links with their home communities and at the same time provides functional access to the non-Indigenous language environment. In schools and training organisations the focus for the development of CS is often on the verbal aspects of language (e.g., ‘What does that mean in your English?’ or ‘How do we say that in Standard Australian English?’), but CS also encompasses the nonverbal. In this chapter we consider the cultural nuances that underpin the development of competent CS and its associated behaviours– what training organisations often refer to as *soft skills*. In doing so we examine the vexed question of whether the development of these soft skills constitutes competency in cross-cultural communication or whether it is another guise for assimilation.

**INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter we examine the results of a needs analysis which highlights the practical advantages that code switching (CS) skills can provide students, namely, that they can facilitate greater participation in the workplace. However, encouraging Indigenous learners to develop these skills raises other concerns as to whether inclusion of CS does not simply replicate the assimilation approaches which have dominated education for Australian Indigenous students for the past century.

The ability to code-switch, or to change from one language or dialect to another, enables bilingual and bidialectal speakers to strategically draw on their linguistic repertoires to achieve their desired communicative goals ([Bhatt and Bolonyai, 2011](#_ENREF_3)). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who speak a traditional language, Aboriginal English[[1]](#footnote-1) (AbE) or a creole, proficiency in their primary language enables them to communicate effectively in their home communities and display their membership through the distinctive linguistic features and discourse practices of the home language ([Malcolm and Grote, 2007](#_ENREF_33)). However, those who can competently code-switch from their home language into Standard Australian English (SAE) have the advantage of being able to interact with non-Aboriginal people in a wide range of mainstream contexts. For young Indigenous learners, CS skills can expand their options in terms of their occupational aspirations and workplace opportunities.

CS practices relate to verbal and non-verbal communication and encompass the *soft skills* mentioned by many VET teachers and by the Registered Training Organisation (RTO) lecturers who participated in a research project which focused on the second language learning needs of Aboriginal vocational education and training (VET) students. These soft skills include acting in ways deemed socially appropriate, demonstrating cultural awareness and understanding, and being receptive to different ways of doing things (The World Bank, 2002).

In a linguistic environment in which the language of the dominant culture (SAE) prevails, the onus for change and adaptation is once again placed on the Indigenous speaker. Therefore, despite the benefits, promoting the use of CS skills does present a dilemma: Is their promotion not just another guise for assimilation?

**CODE SWITCHING**

**Defining code switching**

There is little agreement in the literature in terms of how CS is defined. Some scholars take a broad view of what constitutes a *code* to include changes that monolingual speakers make to their *register* (from formal to informal language) or *style* by using specific terms or expressions that communicate socio-cultural meaning and identity ([Wardhaugh, 1998](#_ENREF_62), [Eckert, 2001](#_ENREF_18)). More often, however, CS research investigates instances in which bilingual or bidialectal speakers change from one language or dialect to another. CS can also be explored from a variety of different perspectives (e.g., sociolinguistic, psychological, anthropological, socio-cultural, socio-cognitive and educational) and focus on different aspects of the phenomenon, such as its use as a pragmatic strategy ([Gumperz, 1982](#_ENREF_24), [Sophocleous, 2011](#_ENREF_57)); the grammatical ‘congruence’ ([Deuchar, 2005, p. 255](#_ENREF_16)) of the sentence or word structures that are switched; or, the meta-grammatical rules that appear to guide CS practices among bilingual speakers ([Bhatt and Bolonyai, 2011](#_ENREF_3)).

In his Domain Theory, Fishman (1991) suggests that CS occurs in different spheres, whereby each language or dialect is used in a specific domain. The standard dialect may be reserved for the classroom or talking to the school principal, while the home language or dialect is used for family, friends and social situations. However, more recent examination of the occurrence of CS has shown it to be much more complex.

CS can also be classified in terms of when and with whom it occurs. For example, the term *Metaphorical CS* describes a shift from one language or dialect to another ‘within a single situation’ ([Saville-Troike, 1989, p. 60](#_ENREF_52)) to augment meaning, usually to convey one or more socio-cultural pragmatic messages ([Bhatt and Bolonyai, 2011](#_ENREF_3)). Such CS is determined by the relationship between speakers ([Saville-Troike, 1989](#_ENREF_52)), for example, for group identification, but it may serve many other purposes. In fact, Bhatt and Boloyai (2011) found 130 distinctive functions in the 120 CS studies of bilingual speakers that they surveyed. To categorise these, they propose five basic principles that may trigger CS, which relate to *power, solidarity, perspective,* *face* (i.e., preservation of public image) and *faith*[fullness](i.e., ‘language that more faithfully and economically captures the intended conceptual, semantic-pragmatic, often socio-culturally or ideologically grounded, meaning’ (p. 526)).

Unlike metaphorical CS, in *Situational CS* the bilingual or bidialectal speaker changes his or her language or dialect for one of two reasons: (1) to signal that the situation itself has altered, often in terms of the relationship between speakers ([Blom and Gumperz, 1986](#_ENREF_4)), or (2) to adapt to a new situation, such as when the context, other speaker and/or topic has changed ([Saville-Troike, 1989](#_ENREF_52)). Blom and Gumperz (1986) give an example of the former in the context of a Norwegian school in which the teacher uses the standard dialect to present a formal lecture during which there is no interaction between the speaker and audience, but switches to the local dialect when inviting questions

Situational CS also occurs in workplace contexts, for example, when an Aboriginal auto-mechanic uses AbE with a co-worker from his home community, but switches to SAE when speaking to a non-Aboriginal manager or customer. The Aboriginal mechanic would have used AbE to express solidarity and a shared identity with his co-worker, and then used SAE to establish a different level of solidarity with a client, to convey an authoritative perspective and/or to disambiguate meaning by using the associated technical terms.

These examples blur the distinction between situational and metaphorical CS somewhat due to the role relationships that they signal. Therefore, for the purposes of our present discussion, we use the term *CS* broadly to describe the practice of changing from one language (e.g., traditional Aboriginal language) or dialect (e.g., AbE) to another (e.g., SAE) to meet the needs of the situation in terms of the context, speaker and/or topic ([Blom and Gumperz, 1986](#_ENREF_4), [Saville-Troike, 1989](#_ENREF_52)).

**Benefits of CS skills**

***Moving between cultures***

The ability to code-switch from their home language to SAE enables Indigenous speakers to participate in their own community as well as in Australian mainstream society (and beyond). The distinctiveness of AbE phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary and pragmatics makes it easy for Indigenous and many non-Indigenous Australians to recognise the speaker as a member of the Indigenous community ([Gallois et al., 1984](#_ENREF_20)). AbE enables the individual to make connections with other Indigenous people as they construct and display their Aboriginal identity and communicate solidarity. Important also is the finding that a speaker’s home language facilitates power and respect within their community, as it affords them access to all the rights and privileges associated with group membership ([Malcolm and Grote, 2007](#_ENREF_33)).

Similarly, being able to code-switch into SAE enables Indigenous speakers to navigate mainstream society and avail themselves of the rights and privileges that it offers. Speaking SAE enhances Indigenous access to mainstream educational, economic, political, health, legal and justice institutions. For example, in education SAE is the language of the classroom: it is spoken by the majority of teachers and used in most learning resources. It has been argued, therefore, that being able to communicate effectively in both the home language and SAE provides Indigenous people with ‘double power’ ([Yunupingu, 1990, p. 1](#_ENREF_63)). Double power can also enhance understanding of both cultural worlds. As Peltier ([2010](#_ENREF_50)) - a member of Canada’s First Nation Peoples - explains, the ability to code-switch between one’s home language and that used in mainstream society facilitates the maintenance of ‘individual and social integrity and supports pragmatic and semantic bridges for living in two worlds’ (p. 126). Australian Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata ([1999](#_ENREF_45)) goes further to argue that having access to SAE also gives Indigenous people the power to communicate effectively in the international sphere.

***CS and the development of literacy skills***

While CS enables speakers to negotiate within (at least) two cultural worlds, on a practical level, it may offer cognitive advantages for literacy development. Evidence has emerged to support the hypothesis that CS from a non-standard dialect into the standard variety has a positive impact on literacy development in young learners ([Craig et al., 2009](#_ENREF_8), [Charity et al., 2004](#_ENREF_5), [Connor and Craig, 2006](#_ENREF_6), [Craig and Washington, 2004](#_ENREF_7), [Terry, 2006](#_ENREF_58)). For example, in research conducted with young African American English speaking children from low and middle socio-economic backgrounds, the density of African American English (AAE) features in their written texts was measured ([Craig et al., 2009](#_ENREF_8)). The results showed that those producing fewer AAE features in their writing were those who were able to code-switch from AAE to Standard American English. These students also achieved higher scores on their reading tests.

For the skill of writing, having an awareness of two dialects and an understanding of some of the grammatical rules of the standard dialect may assist the learner, particularly with regard to spelling. For instance, some AAE speaking children were found to apply morpheme inflections (e.g., on verbs  *-ed,* -*ing,* -*s* and on regular plural nouns –*s*) in writing even though they were not applied consistently in their primary dialect ([Terry, 2006](#_ENREF_58)).

It should be noted, however, that the relationship between CS, dialect awareness and literacy skills is manifestly complex, so while there may be some correlation, a definitive causal link has not yet been established ([Terry, 2006](#_ENREF_58), [Connor and Craig, 2006](#_ENREF_6)). There remains unfortunately evidence in the United States ([Craig et al., 2009](#_ENREF_8), [Leap, 1992](#_ENREF_30)), Canada ([Peltier, 2010](#_ENREF_50)), Japan ([Maeda and Okano, forthcoming, cited in Konigsberg, 2012](#_ENREF_29)), Australia ([ACARA, 2011](#_ENREF_1)) and elsewhere ([Siegel, 2010](#_ENREF_56)) that learners who speak a minority language or dialect as their home language tend to struggle in schools where the medium of learning is the standard language or dialect of the mainstream culture.

**CS in the Australian Indigenous context**

Numerous references have been made to the practice of CS by Australian Aboriginal people either between dialects of their traditional languages or between AbE or a creole and SAE. For example, Jernudd (1969, 1971) reports different functions for the use of the traditional language and the creole spoken in the Northern Territory: more specifically, the use of English for abuse and quarrels in a traditional language speaking community (see McConvell 2002 p242). McConvell (2008 p. 242) notes that many Aboriginal students “depart from the ‘domain-determined’ language to express social meaning” (p. 242), for example using AbE to signal resistance “against something going on at school” (p. 242) or using SAE to establish authority or to amuse one’s friends. Similarly, Malcolm and Rochecouste ([1998](#_ENREF_39)) report evidence of Aboriginal tertiary students who openly contest the academic (Western) framing of their discourse by querying or rejecting it or by substituting it with their own language variety (p. 15). As such McConvell (2008, p. 245) notes the use of metaphorical CS provides ‘social meaning’ about the ‘social area’, that is, “…an additional pragmatic force”. McConvell explains further that “[u]sing a language like a shared local dialect calls up a set of rights and responsibilities associated with the speaker’s and other participants’ position in the social arena – for instance, that people who belong to the same dialect group should share resources. In contrary fashion, use of another dialect can deny any such implications” (p. 245). These additional stylistic and social dimensions of the practice of CS support the claims for its linguistic and cognitive benefits (McConvell 2008).

**CS in the context of the VET classroom/training sites**

For many Indigenous Australian young people living in remote communities, regional training organisations (RTOs) such as TAFE have become important for those preferring to live near their families. Many of these institutions can respond to the needs of the local population as they collaborate with local employers and address the SAE workplace language learning needs of their learners ([e.g., DEEWR, 2012](#_ENREF_11)). Although local RTOs appear to be shaping their VET courses to meet the needs of AbE and Indigenous language speakers in their region, the extent to which high school VET programs do so is unclear. The limited research available indicates that teachers in these contexts may not have the background knowledge to explain matters pertaining to communication ([Hill and Helme, 2005](#_ENREF_26)). A survey reported in Hill and Helme (2005) aligns with previous research ([Oliver et al., 2003](#_ENREF_48)) which suggests that schoolteachers tend to avoid teaching interpersonal communication skills in favour of the formal speaking skills which are highly structured and therefore easy to assess. For example, it was found that teachers were more likely to have their students give oral presentations or participate in debates, than assess language for social or functional purposes ([Oliver et al., 2003](#_ENREF_48)).

At high school and in VET training institutions the skills that Aboriginal students/trainees need in order to engage effectively in the workplace are largely overlooked: perhaps because by the time they reach this level, it is assumed they should be proficient in SAE. This was demonstrated in a recent study[[2]](#footnote-2) undertaken at a regional residential high school in WA which specialises in providing VET courses for Aboriginal students from remote communities. ([For details of the study, see Oliver et al., 2012.](#_ENREF_47)). Most of the students spoke a traditional language as their home language and AbE or Kriol as a second language. The research aimed to develop a second language Task-Based Needs Analysis[[3]](#footnote-3) ([Long, 2005](#_ENREF_32)) model that VET teachers at this school (and others like it) could use to address the workplace language and literacy needs of Indigenous learners. It was undertaken using qualitative data collection methods (e.g., non-participant observation and interviews) and involved key stakeholders as participants (e.g., students, school staff, employers, community members and RTO lecturers teaching in the remote region in which many of the student participants lived).

Among the findings of this study are three that are relevant to our current discussion: 1) that students needed to develop verbal and non-verbal CS skills to enable them to communicate more effectively in the workplace; 2) that many students need to develop so-called *soft skills* - Zamudio and Lichter (2008) define soft skills as encompassing an employee’s ‘attitude, motivation, work ethic, and [interpersonal] interaction’; and 3) students needed to learn to overcome the feeling of *shame* in the presence of non-Aboriginal people. The term *shame*, usually refers to the embarrassment or shyness that Aboriginal people feel ([Harkins, 1990](#_ENREF_25)) when attention focused on them singles them out (from the group), often by someone in power such as a teacher or an employer. Even when the recognition is favourable ([Eagleson et al., 1982](#_ENREF_17), [Grote and Rochecouste, 2012](#_ENREF_23)), the discomfort of *shame* causes avoidance behaviours and reticence ([Oliver et al., 2012](#_ENREF_47)).

In terms of developing CS to enable students to engage more effectively in non-Aboriginal workplace settings, we describe the VET classroom Task Based Language Teaching practices developed as part of our project. These were informed by data obtained from the Aboriginal students, teachers and community members who, concerned about students’ ability to gain mainstream employment, indicated that the trainees needed more classroom opportunities to practise CS skills before entering the workplace.

The study demonstrated the need for learners to undertake work-related language tasks (e.g., to explain to an employer how a work activity is completed); and to interact socially with their non-Indigenous employer and co-workers (and sometimes customers, depending on the workplace setting). Only in this way could Indigenous employees become comfortable in a mainstream work environment, as Holmes ([2005](#_ENREF_27)) points out: learning to engage socially with co-workers is critical because it enables employees to gain membership in the workplace community.

To address these aims, CS in classroom contexts was recommended and its accommodation was adopted by the school. Students were made aware of their CS abilities and their freedom to do so. Classroom discussions examined communication scenarios and finding differences between the AbE and SAE words and expressions. This instruction was augmented by a website providing information for teachers on the benefits of code-switching and, for students, examples of when and where to code switch. In line with the previous needs analysis, examples were relevant to the students’ work experience environments (e.g., talking to a boss, providing service in a café). The success of this approach was captured in a statement by one student: “Miss, I’m the best code-switcher in the school”. Thus as a result we found that students could take pride in their new-found awareness about their CS skills.

Included in the recommendations for CS at the site was advice on the non-verbal aspects of communication which constitute some of the *soft skills* required by employees. For example, often two AbE speakers might simply nod their head when greeting each other, or use a hand signals or other sign language to communicate. Moreover, silence might be an adequate response to a request. In a work environment however, such interactional devices are not understood and might even be misinterpreted as disinterest and lack of motivation. To this end, the website includes explicit advice about some of the verbal and non-verbal differences between SAE and the student’s home language. For example, explanation is provided about responding to questions, articulating a lack of understanding, maintaining eye contact, saying yes and not just clicking, and, saying hello and not just nodding.

Overcoming the experience of *shame* was also highlighted in the needs analysis. While Aboriginal participants used the term *shame*, non-Aboriginal employers and VET teachers often described the trainees’ response during an encounter with a non-Aboriginal employer, co-worker or customer as silence or reticence. This in turn generates the view that the trainee lacks interest and motivation – the *soft skills* mentioned above. Overcoming *shame* and all that it encompasses, therefore, was seen as a major issue in preparing the students for their workplace experience. Specific reference was made to *shame* on the website and students themselves collaborated in making videos to contrast *shame* with more desirable communication practices for the workplace. This ‘page’ within the website proved to be one of the most popular with the students.

**CODE SWITCHING: A GUISE FOR ASSIMILATION?**

As discussed above, CS involves more than the ‘speaker-hearer’ situation (Liddicoat et al 1999, p182). It includes verbal and non-verbal behaviours which disseminate cultural behaviours and attitudes which can be misinterpreted as lack of motivation or lack of willingness to work or learn. As Liddicoat and colleagues point out, “Culture is inherent in language.. [for]… every time we say something we are performing a cultural act” (Liddicoat et al, p182, after Kramsch, 1993). So becoming competent at CS is more just than becoming proficient in two languages/dialects. It requires the learner to understand what to say, when to say it and to whom to say it. Moreover, it requires the learner to understand what people in the other culture *expect* you to do and say. CS is then more than just communicative – it also essentially involves moving within a new world ([Peltier, 2010](#_ENREF_50)) and developing understanding about concepts and ideas that are previously unfamiliar. Clearly we are asking a lot of learners to achieve a sufficient level of competency in all dimensions of CS – the linguistic and non-linguistic - to be able to integrate successfully into a mainstream workplace.

We might then ask ourselves whether we are not simply promoting further assimilationist educational practices. The Australian Commonwealth and state governments have a long history of establishing policies, which up until the 1960s and 1970s explicitly promoted the assimilation of Indigenous people ([Altman, 2009](#_ENREF_2), [Moran, 2005](#_ENREF_44)). It was not until the 1980s that research on the importance of recognising, valuing, and nurturing Indigenous culture and home languages (traditional Indigenous languages, AbE and creoles) gained traction so that it was finally acknowledged and promoted in Commonwealth government policy ([Lo Bianco, 1987](#_ENREF_31)).

While more recent and current Commonwealth and state government policy documents promote the recognition and valuing of Indigenous learners’ home language(s), when put into practice, the status of SAE, the language of mainstream society, eclipses Indigenous languages, including AbE ([Truscott and Malcolm, 2010](#_ENREF_59), [Malcolm and Konigsberg, 2007](#_ENREF_37), [McKay, 2011](#_ENREF_40)). Successive and current Commonwealth and state government policy declarations have promoted the acceptance and support for Indigenous linguistic and cultural diversity in schools. Unfortunately, when educational institutions (including vocational education environments) operationalize policies, SAE becomes the default language ([Truscott and Malcolm, 2010](#_ENREF_59), [Klenowski, 2009](#_ENREF_28)).

Although current Commonwealth and state government policies separately and jointly promote the value of and need to support Indigenous home languages, there is considerable evidence that when policy is implemented in practice, mainstream linguistic and cultural assimilation continues to be the goal ([Malcolm and Konigsberg, 2007](#_ENREF_37), [Truscott and Malcolm, 2010](#_ENREF_59), [McKay, 2011](#_ENREF_40), [Sharifian, 2008](#_ENREF_53)). Truscott and Malcolm ([2010](#_ENREF_59)) describe the discrepancy between policy and practice as ‘invisible policy’ (p. 6). While current policy appears to embrace linguistic diversity, few Indigenous language programs win government grants, and the funding periods tend to be short-term ([McKay, 2011](#_ENREF_40), [Truscott and Malcolm, 2010](#_ENREF_59)).

Our promotion of CS, however, does not equate the uncompromising assimilationist policy of the past or the default empowerment of SAE in policies of the present. CS accommodates the Indigenous students’ first language as a valuable learning resource: that is, it is the bridge that enables the AE and SAE divide to be crossed and provides the opportunity to maintain use of the first language in its appropriate place.

Considerable evidence exists of Aboriginal ways to accommodate the CS experience. For example, a quite different perspective on moving between cultures is provided by Lo Bianco et al (1999) who propose the notion of the establishment of a Third Place. The First Place is the home language/dialect and culture, the Second Place is that which is moved towards while the Third is an intercultural position which is a combination of the other two. The Third Place is dynamic, developmental and on-going, it is “renegotiated with every intercultural interaction and with every learning opportunity” (Liddicoat et al 1999, p181). Using this approach learners can choose what they take – or need to take - into the Third Place and what they choose to let pass, a learning strategy that may prove useful for all educators, including those working with VET students.

Liddicoat et al claim that “[L]anguage learning is not, in its ideal form, a process of assimilation, but rather a process of exploration. The native speaker norm is replaced with a bilingual norm as the desirable outcome of language teaching and learning” (p. 181). This contrasts with much past language teaching practice, particularly in the teaching of standard English to Australian Indigenous students, which “can be disempowering and can become a form of linguistic and cultural imperialism” (p. 185). By contrast “the teacher has responsibility to provide opportunities for students to develop their own intermediary place between their own culture and that of the target language community” (p. 185). A similar experience of CS and its cultural implications is related by MacDonald (1993) whose tertiary student judiciously constructed “an identity that is both Aboriginal and Western-educated or expanding the construction of what it is to be Aboriginal” (p. 11).

Therefore, while CS requires the adoption to some degree of western culture and conceptualisation (Lo Bianco et al, 1999), it does encourage the maintenance of the linguistic and cultural codes of practice that the learner initially holds. This is a considerable improvement on earlier assimilationist educational policy.

Further argument might claim that the onus remains on the Indigenous learner to learn the new language/dialect, the ways of using the language/culture, as well as the knowledge of content of workplace practice – which the non-Indigenous learner does not need to do. Such is the plight, however, of all minority groups and remains an issue to be carefully considered, if not overcome.

**CONCLUSION**

Although CS does present the dilemma of seemingly harking back to assimilationist principles, it is clear that Indigenous students, such as VET students, need to take on the language and culture of the mainstream to be able to compete on an equal footing with their non-Indigenous peers (e.g., other employees). At the same time it appears that in the real world there is no choice but to adopt the norms of the dominant culture in order to partake of its benefits, such as equal employment. Clearly, the currently alarming statistics regarding Aboriginal unemployment in general, and Aboriginal youth employment in particular, serve to demonstrate that earlier wholly assimilationist educational strategies which ignored the need for maintenance of language and culture have simply not worked. CS and its concurrent valuing of prior knowledge and background may work to address this situation, as indeed has been demonstrated by many successful Aboriginal professionals and academics today.

Therefore, it is important that the encouragement of CS in learning environments is overtly accompanied by ongoing reminders of the considerable value of maintaining one’s original language and culture.

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2. The study was funded by an ARC Linkage Grant in collaboration with Australian Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA). AISWA also funded the pilot study of the project. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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