



# Differences, Not Mistakes

**Many Indigenous students in Canada likely speak English *varieties* or dialects which may lead to differences in the words they understand and use, their grammar, and the way they use language to communicate.**

Research in a community in Northern British Columbia showed the presence of at least 23 grammatical features in the oral language of First Nations students. Many of the features also appeared in their writing.

Students used fewer subordinate and embedded clauses when speaking. For students who speak varieties, less use of subordination and embedding may be typical for their variety.

**IF** other Indigenous children in Canada speak varieties similar to the variety being spoken by these children, then we need to:

## **Be cautious when assessing.**

- Consider the validity of rubrics and standardized tests if they assume that use of the grammatical features or lack of use of sentences with subordination and embedding are always indicators of language learning difficulty.

**IF** it is the community's wish that their children learn a more standard way of speaking in English, then we need to:

## **Use respectful, evidenced-based teaching practices.**

- Rephrase what a student has said using more standard grammar, without correcting (e.g., the student says, "He *look* there yesterday", then the teacher says, "He *looked* there yesterday?").
- Systematically and regularly compare and contrast the way ideas are expressed in the community's language with the way they are expressed in standard English.

**Stop referring to grammatical *differences* as mistakes.**



## Examples of Grammatical Features

Verbs	<p>Present for Past: <i>He <b>look</b> there yesterday; Then this kid <b>comes</b> over and looked like she was coming from a party</i></p> <p>Absent Copula or Auxiliary: <i>They ___ waitin'</i></p> <p>Regularization: <i>She <b>blowed</b> the balloon; She <b>poppeded</b> the balloon</i></p> <p>Absent 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular 's': <i>He <b>kick</b> the ball</i></p> <p>Absent 'ing': <i>The girl is <b>bounce</b> all over</i></p> <p>Absent 'to': <i>She was waiting for the girl ___ come back</i></p> <p>Subject-Verb Agreement: <i>They <b>was</b> coming</i></p> <p>Gots/Has: <i>The woman <b>gots</b> a ...</i></p>
Pronouns	<p>Undifferentiated Pronoun Case: <i><b>Her</b> blew that to him</i></p> <p>Absent 3<sup>rd</sup> Person Singular Gender Distinction: <i><b>He</b> (referring to a female) catches it</i></p>
Articles; Determiners	<p>Use of <i>That</i> for <i>The</i>: <i>He got in <b>that</b> lake</i></p> <p>Pronoun/Determiner; Absent Determiner: <i><b>Them</b> bees are going to get him; Then ___ bull breathe in her face</i></p> <p>Indefinite Article: <i>He gots <b>a</b> glasses; <b>a</b> apple tree; The girl is tryin' get _ apple</i></p>
Prepositions	<p>Different or Absent use of Preposition: <i>The girl got <b>along/out of</b> the way</i></p>
Non-verb related morphology	<p>Absent Possession: <i>The <b>bull</b> horns are stuck in the tree</i></p> <p>Absent Plural: <i>The <b>bee</b> are gonna come out</i></p> <p>Negation: <i>I <b>not</b> know; Now they're <b>ain't</b>; He <b>never</b> took his nose; He <b>don't</b> want him to see</i></p>
Conjunctions	<p>Use of 'And Here' or 'Then Here' for 'And Then':</p> <p><i><b>Then here</b> he is bouncing all over; <b>And here</b> the bus came</i></p>
Utterance- level features	<p>Absent Phrase: <i>___ waiting for her to come (the auxiliary is also absent in this example)</i></p> <p>String: <i>And then they come out, then help, sit down and have more apples</i></p> <p>Topicalization: <i><b>That bull, he was mad</b></i></p> <p>Repetition: <i>He got really mad and really, really mad; They were jumping out and jumping back in and jumping out and jumping back in and jumping out</i></p> <p>Different Word Order: <i><b>That you see she have a balloon</b></i></p>

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