Submission to Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

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Summary

In this submission I draw on my experiences as an academic researcher working with Aboriginal community members in NSW and NT, in a range of language learning contexts, including language revitalization and second language programs, research into the structure of Aboriginal languages and child language and literacy development, including the mixed language Gurindji Kriol (NT) and in NSW contexts.

This submission has a focus on the following terms:
-The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education
-Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language

The submission also relates to the terms:
-Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services
-The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalization programs for Indigenous languages

In summary, the submission makes the following points:
-There is a wide range of language learning contexts in Indigenous communities, and language learning needs differ accordingly.
-Where children are learning an Indigenous language as a second language, exposure to the consistent spelling systems used in Indigenous languages may benefit children's reading in English; there is intrinsic value in learning an Indigenous language as a second language, however, both academically and in terms of cultural identity and reconciliation.
-Where children are first language speakers of an Indigenous language, there is great scope for improved recognition and support of their language learning needs in English and their first or traditional language as appropriate, in line with community wishes.

Detail of submission

There is a wide range of language learning contexts in Indigenous communities, and language learning needs differ accordingly. This submission comments on two specific kinds of contexts; it is helpful to distinguish these (Second Language, and First Language, below), from other contexts (Second Dialect, Revitalization):

(1) Second Dialect: where children are second-dialect speakers of standard Australian English, and speak a nonstandard variety of English at home which might be a form of Aboriginal English (from a linguistic perspective, but which may not normally have a name other than "English").
(2) Second Language: where children are learning an Indigenous language at school with little or no prior knowledge (this is akin to learning a foreign language, but it is

very different from a local cultural perspective, and material/human resources are also often sparse compared with foreign languages e.g. French, Japanese).
(3) Revitalization: where children are learning their heritage language in a revitalization program, and bring some knowledge from home.
(4) First language: where children are home language speakers of an Indigenous language – a creole (e.g. Kriol) or mixed language, or a traditional Indigenous language.

Comment on experience in Second Language context:
My general experience working in second language settings in NSW alongside Aboriginal people is that Indigenous language learning means a great deal to them, as adults and for their children's future, particularly in terms of culture and identity. In addition to this main benefit, there may also be spinoff benefit to children's progress in school literacy. Our recent research in regional and rural NSW (Jones, Chandler, & Lowe, 2010) shows that children learning an Aboriginal language at school as a second language perform better at sounding out new words in a standardized reading test, than children not learning an Aboriginal language at school. One possible explanation is that the children are being exposed to a consistent spelling system in an engaging second-language Aboriginal language program, and this phonics experience is boosting their general reading ability.

Comment on experience in First Language context:
Children and young adults under 40 years old in traditionally Gurindji speaking communities in the north central NT speak as their home language Gurindji Kriol, which is a systematic mixture of Gurindji and Kriol. Gurindji Kriol is a full language in its own right. It is an important part of child and adult identity, and is the rich language knowledge which children bring to school, and on which schooling should build. Our recent research into the sound system of Gurindji Kriol (Jones, Meakins, & Buchan, 2011; Jones, Meakins, & Muawiyath, in press) indicates that the knowledge of speech sounds which children bring from home in the mixed language Gurindji Kriol is similar to, but also significantly different from local Australian English: children know a different set of vowels, a different set of consonants, and are familiar with different sound patterns in words, than found in Australian English. They maintain, in their home language, a considerable knowledge of traditional Gurindji. In my view, the children are well set up from home to learn more Gurindji and to learn standard Australian English, but they need effective instruction to get there. There is nothing intrinsically deficient about their home language; it is simply that without excellent, linguistically responsive instruction, these children currently face a tough challenge in early education experience in preschool and school: in spoken language communication with non-Indigenous teachers, in learning phonological awareness for English reading in English, in their vocabulary development, their reading, language and wider academic outcomes in higher grades, and a lack of recognition or teacher knowledge about children's language hampers identification and support for children with language and communication difficulties.

There is a great deal of scope for improved educational outcomes, and to this end communities should be consulted about their preferences, and research data on effective approaches should be sought. Measures which are likely to be effective in improving academic outcomes (including English, home language outcomes, and traditional language maintenance) are increasing the number of trained teachers who

are from the local community, and reducing teacher turnover among non-Indigenous teachers, which could probably be achieved in part by better resourcing of schools to respond to their local language situations. For example, the following language-related measures would likely have positive effects on educational outcomes, community development, and regional town development, in north-central NT school and community contexts with which I am familiar:

-phonological awareness instruction tailored to children's home language knowledge,

-evidence-based language awareness programs for school staff,

-provision of interpreting services in schools, for Kriol and mixed languages – this has not to my knowledge been done to date but could be helpful,

-support for teachers to provide systematic English as Second Language instruction for children, and

-support for further home language development, according to community wishes, in children's traditional languages and/or their home language where it differs from standard Australian English.

References

Jones, C., Chandler, P., & Lowe, K. (2010). Learning an Australian Aboriginal language as a second language while learning to read in English. *Reawakening Aboriginal Languages*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 281-292.

Jones, C., Meakins F, & Buchan, H. (2011). Comparing vowels in Gurindji Kriol and Katherine English: citation speech data. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 31(3), 305-327.

Jones, C., Meakins F., & Muawiyath S. (in press). Learning vowels from maternal speech in Gurindji Kriol. *Language Learning*, 62.