Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities
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English as a Second Dialect (ESD) for Indigenous Students in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia

This submission will address the following points:

- The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture
- 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 educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities

The majority of students in Kimberley schools are Indigenous, and most of these speak Kriol or Aboriginal English as their first language (L1). A smaller number still grow up speaking one of the traditional Indigenous languages as L1.

Whether L1 is a traditional language, Kriol or Aboriginal English, the acknowledgement of this L1 as different from Standard Australian English plays an essential part in Closing the Gap. As well as strengthening Indigenous identity and culture, it will have educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities.

Kriol is an Indigenous language spoken by thousands of people across the north of Australia (areas in Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland). It is an English based language with influences from the local Indigenous languages. (See Berry and Hudson, pp 17-24)

Aboriginal English is the name given to dialects of English that are spoken by Indigenous people in many places in Australia. Aboriginal English dialects are spoken in the Kimberley.

Linguists have studied Kriol and Aboriginal English and have identified them as legitimate, rule-governed languages that are in no way inferior to traditional Indigenous languages or Standard Australian English (SAE). SAE, however, is the language of power in Australia and Indigenous parents want their children to be literate in this language. The acquisition of SAE is critical to Closing the Gap for Indigenous students.

Kriol and Aboriginal English are strong identity languages that carry the culture of the speakers. As long ago as 1984, linguists were putting the case for

acknowledging the L1 of Kriol speaking students. "The key to understanding how Kriol and English work together in education is to know that English does not replace Kriol but is added as a second language." (Hudson, J. 1984 p.103)

Although English as a Second Language (ESL) strategies will definitely be useful in teaching Kriol/Aboriginal English students, the task for these students to acquire SAE is significantly different from that of the ESL learner. It is critical that English as a Second Dialect (ESD) strategies are implemented. To successfully teach ESD to these students requires that the differences between Kriol/Aboriginal English language and culture and SAE language and culture are highlighted and SAE language and culture is specifically taught. The aim is to give the students the ability to effectively code-switch (and culture-switch) to SAE when they need to.

The reason for using ESD strategies is that in many instances the Kriol/Aboriginal English speakers are not aware that their language is different to SAE. ESD strategies will help these students see the differences, separate the languages and cultures and more successfully become literate in SAE. If ESD strategies are not implemented, these students are unlikely to make the linguistic and cultural shifts and adjustments that are required to successfully become literate in SAE, thus they are in danger of failing to gain English language competency and so losing the educational and vocational benefits most people gain from the education system.

The success of Kriol/Aboriginal English students acquiring SAE language/literacy will depend on educators who acknowledge that:

- Kriol/Aboriginal English students come to school with knowledge of a language/dialect which is an integral part of their culture and world view.
- Kriol/Aboriginal English students learning SAE language/literacy are ESD learners.
- Kriol/Aboriginal English students require SAE language/literacy to be explicitly and systematically taught to them including knowledge of the culture and world view that is associated with the SAE language.

Use of L1 in the Classroom

Indigenous students' oral proficiencies in Kriol/Aboriginal English reflect many years of learning their own language and culture. The maintenance of these students' L1 should be encouraged to confirm and reinforce their cultural identity.

Research shows that using these students' first language in the classroom, to bridge to the language/culture of instruction, will have a positive effect on successfully learning the target language/culture. (see Siegel, 1999 p. 28)

Bridging from Kriol/Aboriginal English to SAE, in the classroom, requires leadership from, and a close working relationship with, Indigenous educators (teachers, Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs), Education Assistants (EAs) etc.) who are local speakers of the L1 of the students.

Conclusion

Most Kriol/Aboriginal English speaking students in the Kimberley are not being recognized, and taught, as ESD students. As a result 'the gap' between these students' educational outcomes and those of SAE speaking students is clearly evident, e.g. in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results. The irony of this, however, is that matching the SAE literacy results of students who speak another language (and who are beginning to learn the SAE language and culture) with those who have grown up speaking SAE is in no way a fair comparison.

In the main, the teachers of these students are not trained to be ESD teachers. When the teachers are informed about using ESD strategies they often ask, "Why weren't we taught this at Uni?"

The questions that come out of this submission are:

- Why is it taking so long for justice to be served to Kriol and Aboriginal English speaking students?

- Why aren't these students being taught ESD and thus being given the skills, ability and confidence to successfully code and culture-switch, as needed, between their L1 and SAE?

- Why isn't there government policy to ensure that
    - teachers who work with these students are made fully aware of their languages and culture, and
    - ESD strategies are embedded in all literacy/learning programmes, in the relevant schools and other educational institutions, from early childhood to adult learning?

References

Hudson, J. 1984, 'Why English should be taught as a second language in Aboriginal schools in the Kimberley', *Wikaru*, vol. 12, pp. 99-106.

Berry, R. & Hudson, J. 1997, *Making the jump: a resource book for teachers of Aboriginal students,* Catholic Education Office, Kimberley Region, Broome, WA.

Siegel, Jeff 1999, 'Stigmatized and Standardized Varieties in the Classroom: Interference or Separation?', *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 701-728.

Annette Millar has been a teacher/literacy consultant, in the Kimberley (W.A.) for nearly 30 years. Her main area of work and expertise is with Indigenous students who speak Kriol.

Annette's teamwork with Indigenous educators (at one of the remote schools in the Kimberley) won the school the *WA Premier's Reading School of the Year* award. They produced literacy materials in Kriol and the students learnt to read and write in their L1 before they were introduced to SAE literacy.

In more recent years, Annette has worked with (mainly) Indigenous, and also non-Indigenous, educators in up skilling them in the fundamental study of Kriol/Aboriginal English and the importance of teaching ESD to students who speak these languages.

Annette knows that without government policy that acknowledges the languages of these students, and their need to have educators teach them SAE as a second dialect, Kriol/Aboriginal English speaking students will have very little chance of experiencing Closing the Gap.

Joyce Hudson is a linguist who has worked in the Kimberley since 1967. For her Master of Arts thesis, she studied the Kriol language of the Fitzroy Valley in the Kimberley.

Working in education, Joyce participated in the development of a teacher induction course, Fostering English Language In Kimberley Schools (FELIKS). Later, building on the FELIKS Approach, she co-authored the book *Making the Jump: a resource book for teachers of Aboriginal students*.

Working with her colleague and co-author Rosalind Berry, Joyce travelled to north Queensland to train teachers in the use of the FELIKS Approach.