



**SUBMISSION TO:**

**THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

**INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING IN  
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

**Prepared by:**

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# **Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities Response from Speech Pathology Australia**

## **Introduction and Background**

Speech Pathology Australia thanks the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Australian Communities.

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 4,500 members. Speech pathologists are university qualified specialists who provide a variety of services to people with communication and swallowing difficulties that may present across the lifespan. Speech pathologists possess expertise and specialised knowledge and training in normal and delayed/disordered development of speech and language skills, in early childhood socialisation and communication, and in the relationship between language and literacy. Speech pathologists work with children who present with a wide range of communication difficulties affecting speech and language development, as well as literacy and learning abilities. Speech Pathologists work with children from a range of cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous Australian children. Indigenous Australian children speak a variety of language forms: Aboriginal English (which varies from 'light' to 'heavy'); creoles; and Indigenous languages. In some areas, children may speak more than one Indigenous language.

Our submission addresses the following terms of reference:

- The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages
- 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 benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages**

### **The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture**

Language and culture are inextricably related. Language is the used to reflect and transmit culture, and culture is the context in which language is learned and has meaning (Kayser, 1996; van Kleeck, 1994). Providing attention and recognition to Indigenous languages is a necessary step to maintaining and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture. A strong culture will assist in closing the gap in terms of both health and education.

Providing attention and recognition to Indigenous languages will allow for more accurate recognition of difficulties in language and learning which arise from an underlying language difficulty rather than from a difference in language ability which is due to different language learning experiences. Language learning difficulty will be present in both (or all) languages spoken by the child (Gutierrez-Clellan & Simon-Cereijido, 2009). For Indigenous Australian children whose first language is not English, consideration of language skills in English only will underestimate the level of their language abilities. This is true for all multilingual children (Fagundes, Haynes, Haak, & Moran, 1998). The language skills of children who speak Aboriginal English as their first language are also likely to be underestimated if their skills are judged against Standard Australian English (Pearce and Stockings, in press).





Attention must be paid to Indigenous languages in order to ensure that Indigenous Australian people are able to understand health information. See 'Sharing the True Stories' for evidence of miscommunication, communication challenges and guidelines for improving communication <http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/stts/home.html> .

Providing attention to Indigenous languages must include attention to difference in ways of interacting, meanings and world view. Such differences are less obvious than differences in the sounds and structures of language.

### **The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education**

Indigenous Australian children may enter the schooling system with little or no exposure to Standard Australian English. This will inevitably present challenges to their ability to interact with the primarily English speaking school staff, and their ability to acquire new concepts. The second language learning literature indicates that acquisition of conversational competence in a second language may require two years of exposure, and acquisition of the language skills needed for academic proficiency may require up to seven years of exposure (Cummins, 1979). In order for learning to continue in the early years of schooling, new concepts must be addressed in the first language. If learning of the first language is not supported, children may experience arrested development in that language, consequent disconnection from family and culture, and failure to acquire competence in the second language.

The inclusion of Indigenous languages in early education may help to reduce the effect of the extreme rates of otitis media and associated conductive hearing loss ((Couzos, Metcalf, & Murray, 2001; Williams, Coates, Pascoe, Axford, & Nannup, 2009) on literacy development. A study carried out in the Northern Territory demonstrates that Indigenous children with a history of otitis media / conductive hearing loss were better able to discriminate sounds in their first language (Tiwi) than in Standard Australian English (Aithal, Yonovitz, & Aithal, 2008). Discrimination of sounds is needed for phonemic awareness (awareness of sounds in words), a skill which underpins literacy development.

### **Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language**

The following measures are suggested as ways to improve education outcomes in Indigenous communities where English is a second language.

Teach in Indigenous language first. This will allow for continued development of concepts and the development of more sophisticated first language skills. Sound first language skills will support development of the second language.

Teach English as a second language, making explicit the differences between it and the first language. Transition to teaching in Standard Australian English. Use an additive model, which values to the first language, and aims to develop competence in both languages. This will require the employment of native speakers of the first language, and provision of education to non-Indigenous teachers which will allow them to recognise language difference.

Recognise the length of time needed to develop cognitive academic language proficiency in a second language. Don't require participation in NAPLAN testing for Indigenous children learning English as a second language. This sets students up to fail.

Recognise and address the educational consequences of otitis media and conductive hearing loss. Indigenous students with a history of otitis media have been shown to perform more poorly than their Indigenous peers on a range of tests of early literacy (Walker & Wigglesworth, 2001). Attention only to the medical issues may not result in improvement to literacy outcomes (Aithal et al., 2008).

Speech pathologists have the knowledge and skills needed to work collaboratively with Indigenous communities and teachers to drive improved educational outcomes.





## **The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities**

The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities may lie primarily in opportunities for interaction, understanding and employment in the wider Australian community. For some it may open up opportunities for work as translators / interpreters. English language competency should not come at the expense of competency in Indigenous languages. Within traditional Indigenous communities, ensuring strong first language may provide more benefit.

For further consultation, please contact:



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