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Queensland Department of Education and Training

Supplementary information - Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities



1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language speakers supporting parallel language development in Queensland pre-prep classrooms

To support parallel language development by speaking to students in their everyday language teachers, teacher aides or other adults must speak the same language as the students.

In Queensland pre-prep classrooms this is most likely to occur in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher aides will feel comfortable speaking their home language in a school context.

Schools where teacher aides are supporting students with parallel language development by using 'home language' in the classroom include: Bamaga, Injinoo, Yarrabah, Pormpuraaw, Cherbourg and Doomadgee.

Classroom teachers in Injinoo and Cherbourg also use 'home language' to support parallel language development in the classroom.

At present in Queensland there are no avenues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language speakers to gain qualifications in their languages or in the ability to teach their languages.

2. Numbers of Adopt-A-School teachers working in Education Queensland schools

Adopt-a-School is an ongoing Department of Education and Training initiative coordinated from the Language Perspectives Group based in the Far North Queensland Indigenous Schooling Support Unit (FNQ ISSU).

This initiative started on a small scale and at a local level, as a mechanism to support classroom teachers in linguistically complex classrooms.

The Adopt-a-School teacher co-plans and co-delivers units of work with a 'language perspective'. The success of the model hinges on an experienced teacher taking on language teaching pedagogies to model in each classroom teacher's own context with their own students.

The approach has grown from a single Adopt-a-School teacher or collegial language coach to:

- Ten Adopt-a-School teachers (mostly fractional positions)
- Ten former Adopt-a-School teachers
- 76 teachers who are developing their expertise with support of current Adopt-a-School teachers through the DEEWR funded Bridging the Language Gap project.

3. Further information about first language literacy

A “first language” is a child’s mother tongue and their strongest language as it is the language in which they have age-appropriate fluency due to having been exposed to it since birth.

Most “first language” literacy approaches in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts in Australia have occurred in communities where a single traditional language has been accepted as the “first language” of children and the vernacular (common, everyday spoken language) of community members. (There have only been two documented “first language” literacy programs utilising a local creole, one at Barunga in the Northern Territory and one at Injinoo, in Queensland, although the latter was arguably more a “parallel first and second literacy” approach).

In all likelihood it is due to the preponderance of traditional languages in “first language” literacy approaches in Australia, that this approach is sometimes merged with revival, revitalisation or maintenance of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander traditional languages.

In actuality, “first language” literacy is really quite a pragmatic approach to teaching literacy: literacy represents a language in print:-

Wer reitet so schnell durch Nacht und Wind (German)

Allouette, gentille allouette, je te plumerai (French)

Uffla goin riber, gidding joongi (Yarrie Lingo, the creole spoken at Yarrabah, FNQ)

So it is generally considered easier to teach children to read and write using their “first language” (ie. the one they know best). If their first language is the medium of instruction, they can understand what their teacher is saying. If their task is to “stick their own language down with letters” when they are writing, this is a much easier task than trying to write a language they do not yet know. Similarly, as beginner readers, they can tell if things “sound right” and they can predict how a sentence might go, if it is in a language they know. Once students have mastered literacy in their “first language” it is considered much easier for them to proceed to literacy in other languages, as this knowledge transfers.

Confusingly, some writings about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ languages in education are currently employing the term “First Language” to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ traditional languages, languages which they may not speak, depending on their own personal history and that of their family, community or language group. It seems that this term has been borrowed from North America whose Indigenous peoples are often referred to as First Nations.

Similarly confusingly, “mother tongue” is sometimes being used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ traditional languages, without any correlation to these students’ fluency in their traditional language. Perhaps this (erroneous and misleading) usage might have developed from heartfelt discussions about Indigenous rights and the rights of the child which sometimes refer to the use of “mother tongue”. This may then have been confused with the efforts to revive, revitalise and maintain traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, particularly because their loss is so emotive and evocative of the historical wrongs perpetrated on Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

4. Issues facing first language literacy approaches in Queensland contact language situations

Applying a 'first language' literacy approach in Queensland would be complex and would involve overcoming some significant obstacles. These obstacles are outlined below:

- Contact language spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students such as creoles, mixed languages and dialects such as Aboriginal English(es) generally lack recognition as real and effective languages. They are often not seen as languages/varieties in their own right but rather as poor or even corrupt versions of the standard language. Before the merits of any "first language" literacy approaches could be discussed in such contexts, educators and community members would have had to come to recognise and accept that the children's "way of speaking" is a valid and powerful means of communication in their context. Children have learned this "way of speaking" from their context, and therefore the language is useful and necessary.
- As the standardised language provides access to more services, education, employment, it is seen as being the only worthwhile language for doing literacy.
- Contact languages generally lack standardised orthographies. Fluent speakers have not experienced education, including literacy instruction, in their own language, so standardised spelling (orthographies) and terminology for-sound, letter, syllable, word, sentence-would need to be developed. This is not an insurmountable problem, as it has been accomplished the world over, but it takes time and commitment. Where community ideas, system improvement agendas and broader social values are not aligned with the basic purpose of "first language" literacy (ie. learning to read and write in the language children know), it might be difficult to sustain commitment.
- Many schools, including some remote communities in Queensland, are multilingual contexts, servicing perhaps "first language" speakers of (Standard Australian) English, speakers of several varieties of contact languages and in some locations, speakers of a traditional language. In such contexts, there may be no clear candidate for the language in which a "first language" literacy program should occur.