MOBILE LANGUAGE TEAM

University of Adelaide

Submission to:

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MOBILE LANGUAGE TEAM
Ms. Karina Lester
Dr. Mary-Anne Gale
Dr. Paul Monaghan
Dr. Ian Green

Background

The Mobile Language Team was established on October 2009 to support language maintenance, renewal and revival strategies for the Aboriginal languages of South Australia. The unit is based at the University of Adelaide, and has four part-time employees. It is funded by the Federal Government through the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for the Arts, as a Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Recording (MILR) program, with an initial three year grant.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages
For Aboriginal peoples, language is an essential part of cultural well-being. Language is identity, and having identity means having pride in oneself and one's community. According to the circumstances and history of a community, language identity can be achieved in different ways: by enhancing use of a still spoken language (language maintenance), or by seeking to build up a language which has declined in use (language renewal), or by recovering from archival materials a language which ceased to be spoken some time ago (language revival).

The Mobile Language Team, in partnership with TAFE, has been working with Aboriginal people across the state of South Australia, with a particular focus on core language programs in Wirangu (in Ceduna) and Ngarrindjeri (in the Coorong region). These programs are strongly driven by community, and are seen as key initiatives that contribute to a strong, distinctive and cohesive cultural identity, and that have resulted in a set of teaching materials that will form the basis for cultural education activities for generations to come.

Participation in well-run language programs, especially those that lead to recognised awards and which create employment prospects, has a strong personal impact. The Wirangu and Ngarrindjeri people are proud to be playing a key role in language work, and see this as integral to their cultural future.

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

a. Closing the Gap
The revival of Indigenous languages in many areas of the continent is contributing towards closing the gap in the key areas of education and employment. In Ceduna and Murray Bridge (SA), for example, an array of programs are being implemented in schools and in the wider community that provide hourly paid work for Indigenous educators as language specialists and cultural instructors. Students currently involved in a TAFE trial at Murray Bridge and Ceduna of the Learning an Indigenous Language Certificate are very hopeful of finding paid work upon completion, and

many may progress to the Teaching an Indigenous Language program, which will further qualify them for subsequent employment. In addition, through involvement in Indigenous Language revival activities participants engage in a range of activities that build knowledge of language, IT systems, literacy and confidence.

b. Strengthening Indigenous identity and culture
There is no doubt that programs seeking to maintain, renew and revive Indigenous languages have an almost immediate impact within the fields of personal, group and cultural identity. In the post-Native Title era such questions have taken on increasing importance right across the continent, with the ability to speak a heritage language has undergone a process of revalorisation over the past 30 years, following in many areas a loss of interest in or an active discouragement of speaking Indigenous Languages. Many language projects do contribute to a strengthening and re-flowering of traditional knowledge and cultural practices in hybridised or re-imagined forms.

The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education
There are a number of important benefits to be gained from including Indigenous languages in early education. Much could be said here, but we will restrict ourselves to the following three points:

First, childhood is the most efficient and easiest time for language learning. The education system can play an important role in supporting the use and revival of endangered Indigenous languages.

Second, promoting Indigenous language and culture at an early stage will negate the types of social ills, disconnection from the mainstream and personal alienation, that arose in the past when only 'the whiteman's history' was taught. There are obvious benefits to be gained by students in terms of building confidence and self-esteem in having their life-worlds recognised in the education system. Feeling less marginalised in the classroom in terms of the educational content will strengthen the possibilities for students' educational achievements.

Third, the inclusion of language teaching provides training and employment opportunities for Indigenous adults, who can be employed within the education sector to provide specialist services.

Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second Language
South Australia once had up to 45 distinct Aboriginal languages, and of these only two are still being acquired by the younger generation as a first language – Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara (and even one of these is now under threat). So if educational success over the past 175 years meant wiping out 95 percent of the state's languages, and replacing them with English, then we have had considerable educational success in SA schools! Unfortunately this rampant extermination of the state's Indigenous language heritage has not been accompanied by outstanding

educational outcomes for the Indigenous population. Those who have lost their languages are generally not the doctors, lawyers or university lecturers gracing our sandstone institutions with their newly acquired intellect. The loss of their languages (along with their pride, dignity and sense of self worth) has not rewarded them with outcomes that one would call outstanding success.

But if we are to look at the situation today, in those communities in the Anangu Pitjantjantjara/Yankunytjatjara Lands in the remote north west of the state of SA, there is still an opportunity to learn from the past. The young children are still learning their language from their parents and grandparents, and there are some supportive staff working in schools who are willing to listen and learn from the mistakes of the past. We suggest that we need to take the following measures to achieve positive outcomes in these remote schools in SA:

- Involve the whole local community and all parents in all educational decisions;
- Ensure that curriculum development is well informed by solid research into the language that school children actually speak, both in the school context and in the broader community;
- Talk and listen to the locally trained teachers - the Anangu who have been through the Anangu Teacher Education Program (AnTEP) and graduated with their degrees as teachers;
- Make school and learning fun, and something worth getting out of bed for in the morning;
- Employ local people to work in the school as active teaching team members, and not just as the disciplinarians, or cleaners or pencil sharpeners;
- Use resources that are meaningful and that have content that school children can relate to;
- Make learning purposeful, so the kids can see why they should put effort into learning to read and write and spell and do maths;
- Employ staff who are there because they have passion for what they do and empathy for their students;
- Employ teaching staff who have specialist TESL skills
- Induct all new staff before they arrive, and ensure they put some effort into learning about the local language and culture;
- Expect success from the students, and convince them they can achieve positive educational outcomes;
- Facilitate community-owned programs that promote regular school attendance; at the same time, develop school times and terms that respond to Aboriginal needs, priorities and perspectives.

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

There is no denying that all citizens of Australia have a need, and indeed the right to an education that offers them skills in speaking, reading and writing the national language of this country – English. There is no argument on this issue for those who

are bothering to write submissions for this Inquiry. The argument is whether this right to English should be offered at the expense of the first language or heritage language of the many Aboriginal people in this country who wish to maintain or revive their own language. Aboriginal languages should not be seen as an alternative to English, nor should learning an Aboriginal language (or maintaining an Aboriginal language) be viewed as a competitive threat to English.

The educational theory tells us that learning a second language in a formal setting, which actively recognises and encourages the maintenance of one's first language, has huge cognitive, educational and psychological benefits for the students – particularly for students from a minority language group (see Jim Cummins' many articles since 1979, and Brian Devlin articles on the Australian context, from the 1980s). Put simply, a bilingual education that builds on the language skills and understandings of one's first language, as students gradually acquire a second language (English), has more chance of success than an all-English monolingual education. That is, an appropriately resourced, well-run bilingual education program works a lot better than even the best intentioned all-English program, because learning comes easier in this context, and is less overwhelming for minority students who already feel threatened by school. If bilingual works better, why not use it!

Measures to improve Indigenous Language interpreting and translating services
The Mobile language Team has been a member of the reference group for the Review of Aboriginal Language Interpreter Services in South Australia. This review has been conducted by the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division, Department of Premier and Cabinet, South Australian Government, with involvement from many other Government Agencies, Interpreting centres and Non-Government Organisations. This group has been reviewing evidence that indicates clearly that there is a real need in this state for an Aboriginal Language Interpreter Service, in order to facilitate access to medical, legal, and other community assistance services, and to respond to the expressed needs of service providers such as SA Police, Legal Aid, Centrelink, Hospitals etc.

One very important issue is the need to providing training for Aboriginal interpreters and translators in the complexities and terminologies of the languages spoken in hospitals and the courts, and to assist them to develop ways of effectively translating some of these specialised western knowledge sets into Aboriginal languages.

The Mobile Language Team has one Anangu Interpreter staff member for the Pitjantjatjara / Yankunytjatjara Language groups.

The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous Languages
A number of Indigenous languages are undergoing revival across the nation. Each program needs to be specially designed to fit the needs of the social-historical situation of the language, its speakers, and its non-speakers (those who identify with a language label without speaking the language). Accordingly, programs typically

involve a great deal of preparatory research, consultation at the grassroots level, technical input from linguists and external (usually state or federal government) funding.

In terms of measuring effectiveness, one needs to proceed on a case by case basis. Some programs are highly successful in promoting Indigenous culture within the nation, but this might be the result simply of the erection of public signage as in dual naming without people developing linguistic competence in language undergoing revival. These are largely symbolic achievements.

In parts of South Australia there is a push by communities to develop language learning experiences as commercial activities (as with the Wirangu at Ceduna, for example) and to operate autonomously as a service provider to state and independent schools. These programs have been effective in providing employment to people and filling a void left by institutional providers (such as the state's Department of Education and Children's Services), whose services are focused more on the greater Adelaide metropolitan area than on the more distant communities.

More funding needs to be available for community language programs in the state's remote regions. The Mobile Language Team (at the University of Adelaide) is well-placed to assist in the delivery of these.

The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments

The 2009 Federal Language Policy for Indigenous languages[1], as outlined by Minister Jenny Macklin in her media release of August 2009, aims at:

- bringing national attention to Indigenous languages;
- encouraging the use of critically endangered languages to maintain and extend their everyday use as much as possible;
- making sure that in areas where Indigenous languages are being spoken fully and passed on, government recognises these languages when it interacts with Indigenous communities;
- helping restore the use of rarely spoken or unspoken Indigenous languages to the extent that the current language environment allows; and
- supporting the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australian schools.

The federal government has been funding the Mobile Language Team through the University of Adelaide for two years now, with one year remaining of our triennial

[1] See website: http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2009/Pages/preserve_indigenous_languages_10aug09.aspx

funding. Our MLT objectives align closely with the 2009 national language policy objectives, specifically with the aim of strengthening the viability and recognition of the Indigenous languages of South Australia.

It is extremely helpful to have formal government policies that promote Aboriginal languages at both the federal and state levels, but if these policies are not followed through with practical support and ongoing financial backing they can come to naught. There is a total of $9.3 million dollars allocated nationally each year for community Aboriginal language programs through the MILR (Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Recording) program (note that this is quite separate to school program funding). This has been the same figure for quite some years now, and it is a highly competitive grant application process, fought out between communities, all wanting to win a drop from a limited bucket of money, either on an annual or triennial basis. There is far more demand (and need) than there is money available. An increase in the total amount available from the federal government is well overdue.

Fortunately, we have been successful winning money from the federal government for the MLT in South Australia, but this is on a triennial basis, and the money is limited. It only permits the employment of a small team of four, all of whom are part-time, and we therefore struggle to meet the demand and need in all corners of the state. Similarly, in the school sector in SA, there is some federal funding available for Indigenous language programs, through the ALPI (Aboriginal Language Program Initiative), which is administered through the state Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS). Note that in 2009 there were 3,900 language learners at 60 sites in SA schools who participated in Aboriginal language learning classes, learning one of nine Aboriginal languages (see DECS "Aboriginal Languages Programs 2009: summary"). Again the amount of money available to schools is small, and what is dealt out is far outnumbered by the demand. It only touches on the need out there in schools for support in developing programs and in teaching the nine Aboriginal languages.

The needs in the community and school sector, however, are not just monetary. There is a growing need for awareness programs in schools and communities to increase the knowledge and understanding of the status and viability of Aboriginal languages. There is also a crying need for support from specialists such as linguists, language teachers and language workers to work with communities in their language endeavours. A similar need exists in remote schools catering for Aboriginal students, as well as urban schools with a minority of Aboriginal students. With educational outcomes being so low in remote schools, an increasing number of Aboriginal students are now attending schools in these urban settings. As a result there are schools in Adelaide that have Aboriginal students who speak English as their first language, and an ever increasing number of Aboriginal students who speak Aboriginal languages as their first language. One private boarding school in Adelaide, for example, has 34 Aboriginal students attending in 2011, on boarding scholarships, and many of these students are from the Northern Territory. Their aim is to graduate as fluent speakers of English with their Year 12 SACE certificate, but they don't want

this to come at the cost of losing their first languages, which are Aboriginal languages.

A student's first language should be viewed as an asset that can aid their cognitive skills development as well as their English language acquisition. If the first language of Aboriginal students is maintained, their emerging bilingual skills will open up future job opportunities as they move on into the workforce. But schools and universities aren't miracle workers. Even if they do manage to employ specialist teaching staff, they can only succeed in their educational endeavours if they have adequate funding and support, which is offered on a regular and uninterrupted basis from the top levels of government.