

My Name : **Leanne Jardine Syron**

My Profession : **Teacher (Primary)**

My Workplace : **Ernabella Anangu School, Anangu
Pitjantjatjara Yankuntjara Lands, Far North
South Australia**

Contact details:



Please note: ***I am making this submission as a private individual and am not speaking for or representing my school site or employer in any way.***

I have been a teacher on the APY Lands for 5 years. My situation uniquely positions me to comment on this Standing Committee Inquiry. I have observed that for Indigenous students with strong (non-English) verbal language skills to be able to acquire mastery of another language – **they need to first have literate mastery of their First Language** (letter and sound recognition/how letters make words/how to sound out a word – how to read in their First Language).

Ernabella is the largest of the Indigenous communities in the APY Lands. I understand there are in the region of 7,000 Anangu residents on the APY Lands. Their Pitjantjatjara language is almost exclusively spoken by all members of the community, and the children in particular are orally very strong Pitjantjatjara speakers. The childrens' English language acquisition is very poor. The Lands (as this territory is referred to) has a 40+ year history of schooling, and many of the older and middle aged inhabitants have very good oral and/or written English language skills as well as those in their First Language. I do not see this amongst my students or recent graduates.

Until I had worked closely with Indigenous people/learners I thought my teaching and learning experience would be much like my mainstream experiences except involving explicit ESL strategies. I thought I'd just have to rely a lot on modelling good language, role plays, practice, explanations, giving students' lots of 'field' information (background information about English language literacies), using culturally relevant texts and learning situations, and encouraging positive classroom and personal relationships.

In my ESL teaching experience I have found that English language acquisition by my students is severely inhibited by :

- a) Not receiving instruction in their First Language. (not acquiring a solid language foundation in their First Language)
- b) Remoteness – both geographically and culturally (not seeing the 'importance' or 'use' of English as a mode of communication)
- c) Teachers not being bi-lingual

When we learn new things we are constantly referring to what we already know and integrate this new learning into our knowledge base. I have found that because the Pitjantjatjara speakers I teach

are not receiving instruction or a strong foundation in the literate construction of their own language (in their own language), they cannot bring any shared literate understandings into our predominantly English language instructed classrooms.

The students I teach are quick and clever and very autonomous, but my English language instruction does not allow them to grasp the concepts and nuances of what I am trying to teach (in any curriculum area) because they do not understand what I am saying. If they do not understand the instruction, how can they be successful? If they are not successful, why should they bother with 'school-time'?

My employer (Department of Education and Childrens' Services, SA) (DECS) does not require me to speak the Pitjantjatjara language as part of my employment conditions.

The very few lessons per week my students receive in their own language (called Anangu Domain – separate lessons about culture and culturally sensitive topics), the students are markedly more engaged and productive. Their behaviour is better. They learn more.

So I guess that my point is this : for the learners that I teach, to be successful readers and writers and understanders of English, they have to first be successful readers/writers/understanders of their First Language so that they can transfer their understandings of how language works to their English language acquisition. This will best be achieved by receiving instruction solidly in their First Language (by Anangu teachers, or Piranpa (white person) speaking Pitjantjatjara?).

Schools across the Lands are strongly supported by DECS to have English speaking teachers in Pre-schools and Kindergartens to provide instruction in English.

It is an intense time in the Early Years program as young Anangu students are grappling with learning school habits and learning the language spoken in their own homes - and are then confronted with instructions and teaching in English. They first need to learn that the funny symbols that say 'tja' and the other funny symbols that say 'l' and 'a' (that go together to say 'la') make the word 'tjala' (honey ant) (which we go out to gather after the rains, when the time is right). That word makes sense to them. Then we can allow them to transfer those literate understandings to English – 'a' and 't' together say 'at', and then if you put a 'c' in front of it you can read 'cat' (of which there are not many out here!). In this way they 'get' what the language does and how it is constructed.

To not support Indigenous language speakers in literate mastery of their own language is to actively participate in the dilution and eventual demise of their unique and rightful Culture.

Please accept my humble and heart felt knowledge and understandings that have been gained under the most beautifully wonderful and frustratingly challenging of circumstances.

Leanne Jardine Syron

(unable to provide scanned signature from home, and hard copy posted will not get to you in time (we get a mail plane once per week). I am more than happy to provide this if required.

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