

Inquiry into language learning in indigenous communities

Submission for: **Language learning in Indigenous communities**

Karli Jozeps and Ursula Goetz
PMB 75 Pipalyatjara Anangu School
Via Alice Springs NT 0872

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Questionnaire

1. What are the languages spoken in your community?

Mainly Pitjantjatjara, with some Yankunytjatjara. English is used in the school, store and clinic.

2. How well are they spoken by children, adults and elders?

Pitjanjatjara is the first language for most community members and is spoken fluently by the majority of people. Literacy in Pitjantjatjara is generally very poor, with few adults able to read and write their own language.

English is spoken as a second language. Fluency in English varies with the majority having a very basic command of English

3. Describe your group and project:

The community is in the far west of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. In this vast area about 2500 are speakers of Pitjantjatjara. The language is well documented, being used in books, dictionaries and a recent translation of the bible. However, it is mainly the elders, and only a few younger adults, who are able to read Pitjantjatjara, as is also the case with English literacy in the community. Children learn English at school but rarely use it outside school hours. In previous years, instructions in Pitjantjatjara in the school were not used, in the belief that this would improve English skills.

However, in recent years the school council and staff supported the re-introduction of Pitjantjatjara lessons.

The Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) teach the language, with support and planning provided by one teacher, who has second language teaching expertise. We use a similar approach to teaching reading and writing as is used in teaching English. Children learn the Pitjantjatjara sounds, are engaged in regular reading activities and use a reading log, make their own books, and are engaged in writing activities. This approach has raised children's literacy levels in their first language, and also appears to have had positive influences on their English literacy skills.

Why was the program started?

English literacy levels of students at the school in English are low and in Pitjantjatjara almost non-existent. Through the introduction of a strong Pitjantjatjara language program, it is hoped to maintain and extend first language skills and support the acquisition of English literacy skills.

How long has it been running?

In 2009 the staff and school council decided to establish a Pitjantjatjara program, with Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) teaching the language in the classroom.

A tutor/teacher at the school was allocated time to work and plan with AEWs and assist them in the classroom. A Pitjantjatjara curriculum, developed by Anangu Education Services staff, was used, resources located and prepared, and a timetable organised to cater to all classes in the school. Some training was provided for AEWs to improve their Pitjantjatjara reading and writing skills, as well as teaching methodologies and planning skills.

What age group(s) are you working with?

Students between the ages of 3(in pre-school) and 17 are engaged in language lessons.

How many people are involved?

Approximately 60 students, 6 Aboriginal Educations workers and a teacher from DECS.

Some of the AEWs have very low literacy levels, but are still able to support students during oral activities.

4. What activities do you do to encourage the use of languages, including local languages?

The school values all languages, and in particular Pitjantjatjara and English. The school has implemented a literacy program to improve student's English literacy skills while at the same time recognising the importance of literacy in their first language.

Students need little or no encouragement to learn reading and writing in their first language. They are keen to read stories and learn to write in their first language.

The school receives some money from DECS (through FLMD funding), 0.1 Teacher salary, to manage and deliver the Pitjantjatjara Language program with Aboriginal Education Workers. An Anangu language and culture co-ordinator is also available on The Lands, to support such programs in schools. Anangu Education Services provide occasional training for AEWs involved in teaching Pitjantjatjara. There is no other government or agency help.

Activities to encourage the use of Pitjantjatjara: reading books, songs, rhymes, actions, games, stories, use of picture/word/sentence dictionaries, quizzes, puzzles, book making, photography, art, bush trips, animal and tracking identification activities, group problem solving activities, partner teaching, and integration of language activities with other subject areas.

The program is helping children to maintain and extend oral language and acquire reading and writing skills in Pitjantjatjara, which will assure future access to historical and contemporary written material, and for them to be able to read signs and notices in the community, which are written in Pitjantjatjara.

There is also a strong expectation that literacy skills in the first language will benefit the acquisition of English. The program will benefit the community as a whole.

5. How are languages, including your local languages, are taught in school?

At present Pitjantjatjara is taught:

- daily for 20 minutes to pre-school students
- 2 X45 minutes a week, as a first language maintenance program, for all other children, in classes Reception to Year 11 (i.e. 4 multi level classes)

English is the language of instruction for the rest of the curriculum.

The teaching of Pitjantjatjara strongly emphasises the importance of the first language. Students are very proud to be able to read in their first language, especially to parents and elders.

Early testing and evaluation show steady improvements in both first and second language literacy skills and in attitudes to learning. Attendance figures are much improved over the last 3 years.

6. What interpreting and translating services are available in your local language?

There are only limited translating services available. One AEW has completed her Translating and Interpreting Diploma, through TAFE. AEWs are mostly used to prevent misunderstandings and help with discussions with community members.

7. What are the main difficulties facing your project?

There is an acute shortage of Aboriginal Education workers or community members who are themselves literate and skilled in teaching the reading and writing of Pitjantjatjara. It would be beneficial to extend the program to offer more sessions, however, the school and community are unable to fund the employment of extra staff needed to run the program.

It would be necessary to train Aboriginal Education workers to further their own reading and writing skills as well as training in language teaching.

There are currently only 3 Aboriginal Education workers relatively able and confident to teach reading and writing Pitjantjatjara –but not all are always at school or are available to be freed from other school roles. This makes it difficult to sustain the program on a regular basis or extend it to be more effective. There is only restricted space available for the teaching of Pitjantjatjara, for displaying work, artefacts and language, and to store learning materials and texts.

8. What are you aiming to achieve in the future?

We soon hope to be able to set up a Pitjantjatjara language and culture learning area- a space for learning and to house texts, pictures, displays etc. Our school aims to provide skills to our AEWs to be able to confidently run a daily Pitjantjatjara program for all students. This program would not be dependent on a DECS teacher to organise and lead, but the planning, resources and teaching ideas all developed and led by Anangu. Ideally, there would be some trained Anangu teachers and even community members working alongside them to provide culturally relevant and interesting sessions.

Email: atsia.reps@aph.gov.au | **Phone:** (02) 6277 4559 | **Fax:** (02) 6277 4427

Postal address:

House of Representatives ATSI Committee
R1 106, PO Box 6021
Parliament House, ACT 2600