



NAATI SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

This submission describes the involvement of the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) with three initiatives in accreditation of Indigenous languages for the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs *Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities*. NAATI's submission relates to the sixth Term of Reference:

- Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services.

The submission also goes to the Committee's June report *Doing Time – Time for Doing, Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system*, in particular recommendations 24 and 25.

Background

As the Standing Committee is aware, there has been significant recent activity around Indigenous languages and interpreting, in particular the announcement in 2009 of an official National Indigenous Languages Policy which foreshadowed a *National Framework* for coordinated on-going action and a critical report by the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2011.

National Indigenous Languages Policy

One of the objectives of the Australian Government's National Indigenous Languages Policy is:

3. *Working with languages to Close the Gap: In areas where Indigenous languages are being spoken fully and passed on, making sure that government recognises and works with these languages in its agenda to Close the Gap.*

In respect of this Objective the Policy commits to strengthening interpreting and translating services as part of the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership (RSDNP) and working with States and the NT to introduce a *National Framework* for the effective supply and use of Indigenous language interpreters and translators.

Ombudsman

In April 2011 the Commonwealth Ombudsman published a report on the use of Indigenous language interpreters by six major Australian Government agencies *Talking in Language: Indigenous language interpreters and government communication*.

The Ombudsman found, inter alia, that while the linguistic needs of most established migrant communities are largely met by interpreter services the same cannot be said for Indigenous people. Also there is often lack of awareness of the significant barrier that language poses for communication between Indigenous and other Australians.

The Ombudsman noted that while there are several Indigenous language interpreting services, these are not available in all States and Territories and they face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining interpreters.

Specifically he identified a lack of accreditation at professional level for Indigenous interpreters by NAATI and observed that the *National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS)* report of 2005 had found Indigenous interpreting had been relatively neglected compared with migrant groups and had recommended that NAATI training be made available.



NAATI

NAATI is the national standards and accreditation authority for translators and interpreters in Australia. It is the only agency that issues accreditation or credentials for practitioners who wish to work in these roles in Australia. It is a not-for-profit company owned and part-funded by all the governments of Australia.

Government funding for NAATI comes through the departments and agencies responsible for migrant and refugee settlement in the various jurisdictions.

NAATI's primary purpose is to strengthen inclusion and participation in Australian society by assisting in meeting diverse and changing communications needs through setting, maintaining and promoting high national standards in translating and interpreting. It does this by accrediting translators and interpreters who can meet those standards. NAATI accreditation is not awarded lightly and can be won by specialised tertiary training and by accreditation testing.

NAATI also advises governments and agencies about best practice in translating and interpreting. It is currently working with the Commonwealth Department of Human Services on possible measures to improve the availability of accredited Indigenous interpreters.

Current NAATI Involvement with Indigenous Languages

While NAATI is funded to assist migrant and refugee settlement it assists where it can by applying its systems and expertise acquired with migrant languages to Indigenous interpreting when invited to do so. NAATI has now accredited three Professional level interpreters and 262 interpreters accredited at Paraprofessional level in:

Alyawarra, Anindilyakwa, Anmatyerr (alt name Anmatyerre), Burarra, Djambarrpuynu, Djapu, Dyirbal, Eastern Aranda (Arrernte), Eastern Arrernte, Gajerrong, Garawa, Gumatj, Gunwinkgu, Gupapuyngu, Hiri-Motu, Iwaidja, Jaru, Kala Lagaw Ya, Kariyarra, Kaytej, Kaytetye, Kija, Kriol, Kukatja, Kunwinjku, Liyagalawumirr, Luritja, Manjiljarra, Martu Wangka, Meriam, Miriam-Mir, Miriuwung, Modern Tiwi, Motu, Murrinh-Patha, Ngaanyatjarra, Nunggubuyu, Nyangumarta, Pitjantjatjara, Tiwi, Torres Strait Island Creole, Walmajarri, Wangkatha, Warlpiri, Warumungu, Western Aranda (Arrernte), Western Arrernte, Wik-Mungkan, Yankunytjatjara, Yanyuwa, Yindjibarndi.

Paraprofessional Interpreters assist non-English speaking people in general conversations or non-specialist situations. Professional level interpreters are recommended in particular for legal and health assignments where the consequences of inadequate interpreting can be significant for the non-English speaker. As the name suggests, Professional level interpreting is considerably more demanding than Paraprofessional and generally requires much higher levels of skill and experience.

The three Indigenous interpreting projects in which NAATI has been involved are in the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia.

Northern Territory

The Aboriginal Interpreter Service (AIS) is the Northern Territory Government's specialist Indigenous interpreting service. From the start of the AIS's operations in Darwin in 2000 it has faced a lack of trained interpreters in Indigenous languages.



The AIS has progressively trained people with the required English and Indigenous language skills with the assistance of Charles Darwin University and NAATI. It has borne the costs of developing test materials in Indigenous languages and running training courses to help Indigenous candidates pass the test for accreditation for Para-Professional Interpreter. The AIS organises and conducts the accreditation tests for NAATI.

The difference between Para-Professional and Professional interpreting in Indigenous languages is compounded by specific difficulties such as the relatively small numbers of speakers suitably fluent in both English and the required Indigenous languages and available to work as interpreters, the geographic separation of language groups and the absence of a written language history.

In 2008 AIS with Rotary support decided to seek to accredit its first interpreters at NAATI Professional level.

This involved Charles Darwin University preparing course material in AIS's language of greatest need Djambarrpuynu. AIS recruited skilled Djambarrpuynu readers to record all the audio components of the test where dialogues were in spoken language and engaged a NAATI approved moderator to quality assure the test results.

Delivering services and training to remote Indigenous Australia can be costly and this project was no different. However, lessons were learned which will be valuable in future such as how to improve the testing and delivery of preparatory course material so candidates understand the system, the need to develop an examiners course and the need to develop training modules in note-taking, reading and listening skills.

In 2008 AIS identified 14 potential candidates of whom 13 attended the preparatory course. Of these, 11 sat the test but two did not complete it. Of the nine candidates three passed and another three came close to passing.

When AIS embarked on this project they knew it would be difficult and were concerned no one might pass on first attempt. To have three out of nine completions pass at NAATI Professional level was a real achievement.

Queensland

NAATI was approached in 2008 by the Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney General to offer interpreter training and accreditation testing in Aurukun. The primary goal was to enable members of the Aurukun community who were not fluent in spoken English to communicate using accredited interpreters with authorities and agencies, particularly in criminal justice, legal and associated contexts.

NAATI engaged an experienced Indigenous language speaking legal interpreter (who had conducted accreditation training and testing in the NT prior to the establishment of the NT AIS) to conduct meetings with stakeholders and design a training workshop for selected speakers of Wik Mungkan, the dominant language in Aurukun.

A lesson learned earlier in the NT was applied, namely that the people most likely to gain NAATI accreditation were those who are mentally sharp, stable, fully bilingual and familiar with mainstream institutions. Such people tend to already be in high demand to work in community schools, clinics, councils and other service organisations.



Rather than poach such people the project sought the agreement of these organisations to release suitable candidates for the training workshop and occasional interpreting assignments subsequently. Releases were given readily as organisations saw the interpreting training as being valuable professional development for these employees.

Conversations such as these and with community members resulted in six individuals being nominated as suited for interpreting work based on their language skills and standing within the community.

NAATI further engaged a Wik Mungkan linguist to act as co-teacher, to help prepare test materials and to assist as an examiner. A non-Wik Mungkan speaking interpreter accredited by NAATI in another language was also retained to act as moderator i.e. to ensure that accreditation standards were maintained.

The workshop was conducted on-site in Aurukun over two weeks. There were problems with erratic attendance which required the workshop content to be modified. Plans to prepare candidates for legal interpreting were shelved in favour of concentrating on core interpreting requirements such as memory training, ethics, interpreting practice and dealing with social and cultural matters.

Lessons learned included the pros and cons of conducting such training in the community, the relative benefits of long versus short workshops, pointers toward the most effective selection of potential candidates and the need for employment conditions and opportunities for Indigenous interpreters which make it attractive for talented people to become and remain interpreters.

At the end of the project three of the original six candidates sat the NAATI Para-professional interpreters test in Wik Mungkan and all passed. This was a particularly good outcome given that unlike in the NT the use of Indigenous interpreters was new to Aurukun communities so there was no prior community knowledge of what interpreting was all about.

Again, as with the AIS in NT, the Aurukun project demonstrated that while relatively costly, the processes of interpreter accreditation used in migrant language interpreting can be applied successfully in the Indigenous context when delivered by skilled and culturally sensitive experts who can work with and gain the respect of communities.

South Australia

While AIS and the Aurukun pilot have taken the testing path to NAATI accreditation TafeSA opted for training. In 2008 it started delivering a Diploma of Interpreting course designed specifically for Anangu students living in remote communities on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands in north-western South Australia.

For the first two years the course was delivered primarily through a series of face-to-face workshops. There was online support provided on a fortnightly basis. While this had some success, distances travelled by lecturers to deliver the workshops, the logistics of transporting students hundreds of kilometres and the demands placed on students in their community, meant that not all students attended the workshops on a regular basis.

In 2010 the team running the course decided to completely re-think its delivery. As a result, the online delivery content and frequency was stepped up almost to an on-demand basis. During these sessions students talk to their fellow students and lecturers and practise interpreting using both audio and visual media.



This approach has proved very successful as it allows the students more frequent contact. Also, culturally, this medium is often more appropriate as it not as confrontational as face-to-face learning in certain delicate areas. Through the increased online content, contact hours for students increased dramatically while at the same time, their flexibility also increased allowing them to be available for family and community commitments.

Because of the shortage of interpreters in Indigenous languages, graduates are able to work as interpreters straight after graduation so the course leads to regular employment.

TafeSA has shown that radically different, culturally-based ways of experiencing the world – especially matters relating to time, priorities, ceremonial and family commitments, and literacy – can work together with training if the systems are flexible enough. For example, one student successfully completed in 2011 after 4 years of dipping in and out of the course.

So far, they have graduated 12 interpreters who are eligible for accreditation and several more are expected to graduate by March 2012.

TafeSA has achieved the successful accommodation of non-literate students, the construction of an efficient online methodology and broad communication about that methodology to other interested parties through conferences, seminars, and publications. The online component of the course is also suitable to be made available to interstate stakeholders through partnership agreements. This course was developed with significant input from language-speaking community members and co-teachers. TafeSA is therefore able to train interpreters in different indigenous languages by employing Indigenous language experts to judge performance and assist in developing glossaries etc.

After completion of the course, students who meet the necessary requirements are eligible to receive NAATI accreditation at the Paraprofessional level. The training received plus experience at work will form a solid basis for these candidates to then start training for Professional level interpreting.

In November the work of TafeSA was recognised by the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators which awarded it the 2011 award for Outstanding Contribution to Indigenous Translating and Interpreting.

Conclusion

These initiatives by the AIS, Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney General and TafeSA have shown Indigenous interpreters can be accredited within the national accreditation system alongside other spoken and sign language practitioners despite the complexities and difficulties involved. The experience and knowledge gained should be readily transferable to other Indigenous interpreting interests, subject always to local cultural and logistical circumstances.

NAATI believes these initiatives should be drawn to the attention of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

Canberra
December 2011