

Aboriginal languages programs in TAFE NSW: delivery initiatives and strategies

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Abstract

There is a recognised link between culture and language and each is dependent on the other. Language orders and makes sense of a group's culture, and a group's culture is bounded by language. Aboriginal language skills, then, can play a critical role in developing Aboriginal cultural identity. The recognition of the language–culture relationship forms a valuable part of the 'broader Indigenous development agenda that seeks to strengthen individuals and promote sustainable communities' (Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission 2004, p. 1). Consistent with this the *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* notes:

Students' knowledge and use of Aboriginal languages are fundamental to the development of their identity and enhance their self esteem. Since the teaching and learning of languages provide an important gateway to Aboriginal culture, this process also ensures that the school staff and community understand and respect their students' heritage. It is important that students are increasingly given access to the study of Aboriginal languages... (New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. & New South Wales Department of Education & Training 2004, p. 113).

The first part of this paper will outline a Technical and Further Education New South Wales (TAFE NSW) response to The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Training Policy Statement 2004–06, which led to the development of three nationally accredited Aboriginal language qualifications. The second part of this paper will present three case studies that show how Aboriginal languages programs are being delivered in TAFE NSW, and report on some of the successes and challenges experienced in doing so.

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Development of the Certificates in Aboriginal Language/s

Investigating need and demand

The NSW Department of Education and Training's (DET) Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate (AETD), in partnership with the TAFE NSW Social Inclusion and Vocational Access (SI&VA) Skills Unit, set about investigating the need and demand for the development of Aboriginal languages qualifications. Information was gathered by way of a series of focus group questions and follow-up consultation. TAFE NSW institutes and members of Aboriginal communities in NSW identified that there was a need to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal people to learn an Aboriginal language at an introductory level.

Findings

Existing practice

In NSW, according to research, there are around 70 different Aboriginal languages that have survived colonisation, although many have been lost. In NSW all the current language programs are associated with revival or reclamation. Indeed, many Aboriginal Elders in NSW believe that the languages are not dead, but are sleeping and waiting to be revived.

Workshops in some of these languages: Dunghutti, Gamilaraay (Kamilaroi), and Gumbaynggirr, were being delivered in NSW as part of General and Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses in response to local demand. The programs were being delivered in Armidale, Coffs Harbour, Coonabarabran, Dubbo, Kempsey, Nambucca Heads, Narrandera, Narrabri and Walgett. In addition, a Statement of Attainment in Indigenous Language (under licence from TAFE Queensland) was used to deliver Wiradjuri. Future delivery of Aboriginal language programs was being planned in Moree and Tamworth.

Identified needs

The information gathered indicated that there was sufficient widespread demand to develop a short course or entry level Certificate I qualification in local Aboriginal languages, with the permission of the relevant Elders and traditional owners. It was thought that such a course would help to rejuvenate and increase the use of the languages. The following languages were identified for delivery: Anaiwan, Awabakal, Biripi, Bundjalung, Dharug, Dunghutti, Eora, Gamilaraay, Gumbaynggirr, Guringai, Onerwal, Wangkumarra, Wailwan, Wiradjuri, and Yuwaalaraay. The members of each language group expressed an interest in undertaking a course in their own language. It was noted that cultural obligations had to be considered for those Aboriginal people who, due to their background, come from two language groups.

There was a range of potential target groups identified for the new course: school students, young people, and adults – in particular, members of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities such as Aboriginal education assistants and teachers and

other school staff. It was estimated – based on expression of interest, programs already running and anecdotal reports – that initial enrolment would exceed 100 across NSW. The spread of enrolments was expected to vary depending on the number of language groups in the regions.

Demand for higher-level courses at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Levels 2 and 3 was also identified. It was thought that such courses, in addition to revitalising Aboriginal languages, would provide formal recognition of Aboriginal people's knowledge and skills and could provide an accredited vocational pathway for graduates of the entry level programs. People with the higher-level qualifications, for instance, could go on to become teachers of their languages.

First steps to development

With the need and demand for certificates in Aboriginal languages firmly established, stakeholders turned their attention to specifics: what content such courses might cover, where and how they might be delivered, and who would deliver and assess them.

Content

There was widespread agreement that each of the four language macro-skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – should be an integral part of the course, and that development of speaking and listening should be given priority. In addition to communication skills three specific knowledge areas were considered relevant to include: Aboriginal cultural protocols, the use of basic technology, and an understanding of school structures and environments. It was also felt that such a course would enable participants to extend their knowledge about and protect their cultures, and to further instil Aboriginal cultural values.

Delivery

Flexibility was the overriding concept that characterised most of the discussion about course delivery in recognition of individual circumstances and learning styles. Options discussed regarding flexible location included that any site should be negotiated with the community before delivery, and the local Aboriginal land council venue should be considered. It was also suggested that courses should be offered in both part-time and full-time modes, of short duration, with achievable outcomes possible in one semester. Each course should flow into the next one to allow continual learning momentum, but the length could vary. The preferred assessment method should be spoken with options for written assessment according to the needs, abilities, requests and commitment of students.

Teacher qualifications

An Aboriginal language course should be delivered by an Aboriginal person with language knowledge or teaching skills assessed by Aboriginal Elders. If, in exceptional

circumstances, the course were to be delivered by a non-Aboriginal teacher, then an Aboriginal person should be employed as a team teacher.

Other

The general consensus was that there should be no formal entry requirements, only an interest and a desire to learn. Entry to the course should be limited to Aboriginal people only, if that is the decision of the local Aboriginal community. Ongoing support would be essential for people who may need assistance with literacy and numeracy. Allowances should be made and support provided for people who may have hearing disabilities and who may need sign language interpreters.

Accreditation and beyond

The Certificates I, II and III in Aboriginal Language/s were duly developed and accredited in 2007. As nationally recognised accredited courses the three qualifications are listed on the National Training Information Service (NTIS) database.

The Certificate I was first delivered in NSW in the second half of 2007, and the Certificates II and III were first delivered in 2008. In that short time there have been approximately 450 student enrolments in NSW with the bulk of these at Certificate I level.

There are advanced standing arrangements among the Certificate courses and units offered by the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney as part of the Bachelor of Arts, Graduate Diploma of Indigenous Languages Education, and Master of Indigenous Languages Education programs.

In November 2008 the TAFE NSW Keeping Aboriginal Languages Strong workshop was held in Sydney, and attended by people from across NSW. Participants shared their experiences about aspects of course delivery including community consultation, course promotion, challenges faced, and successful outcomes. Talking about what has worked is a good way to help get further language revitalisation happening.

Initiatives and strategies to deliver Aboriginal languages programs

Dhurga Buradja – Speaking Dhurga Tomorrow

Context and implementation

Following the introduction of the NSW Government's Draft Aboriginal Languages Policy in 2001–02 the chair of the Cobowra Local Aboriginal Land Council applied for funding through the Department of Communication Information Technology and the Arts' Maintaining Indigenous Language and Records program. The application was successful on the basis of the language's endangered status.

In 2007 the TAFE NSW Illawarra Institute's Aboriginal Development Manager (ADM) identified that there was a need and demand for the delivery of Dhurga language in

Moruya. The ADM liaised with the local community and sought its members' support to establish the teaching and learning of Dhurga in Moruya.

A language program had already been established at Broulee Public School taught by two experienced Aboriginal teachers, and Vincentia High School was offering a 100-hour course to Year 8 students taught by another Aboriginal community member (see also Lane in this volume). A doctoral student in linguistics from the Australian National University supported both programs. These teachers and the PhD student, together with the TAFE ADM, were the driving force behind the success of the Dhurga Buradja – Speaking Dhurga Tomorrow (Certificate I) course. They all felt that speaking, reading and writing a language is important and that the Dhurga language needed to go back to the people that own it.

The eight-week course was initially offered to 20 students. Preference was given to community Elders, the Yuin community and then the general community. The two teachers and the linguist were invited to teach Dhurga. A partnership was formed.

A professional development and information day was held at the Moruya TAFE campus. People from the TAFE AETD and the SI&VA Skills Unit were invited to provide professional development to teachers and staff involved in the delivery of the Certificate I. Participants were given an overview of the curriculum content and resources. The day concluded with a barbeque, which allowed teachers, students and community members to mingle and network.

Dhurga Buradja – Speaking Dhurga Tomorrow was ultimately delivered to 18 students at Moruya TAFE between October and December 2007, with 100% attendance. All 18 completed the course and both students and teachers looked forward to attending each Saturday; 13 graduated with Certificate I in Aboriginal Language/s, and five students completed at various levels of proficiency. Those five were given the opportunity to complete the course in Semester 1, 2008.

In April 2008 the students were invited to the *Dhurga Buradja* book launch, where each was presented with a copy of the book. The Cobowra Land Council provided a spectacular evening and feast at the Moruya Golf Club, where the Council's chief executive officer spoke highly of the Institute ADM's achievement in establishing an historical community partnership.

Resources used

All resources used in delivering the course were designed and made by the two class teachers and were based on the resources they had made and used at Broulee Primary School. The afternoon sessions each Saturday were devoted to the students producing their own resources to use when teaching the language to their own children or other community members. They were also intended to assist the students with their short projects, which were part of the course assessment requirements.

Keys to success

A vital component in the success of the Dhurga Buradja course was that it was underpinned by a community partnership. The real driving force were community members of the Cobowra Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) and the ADM from Illawarra Institute. The ADM had always felt strongly that language belongs to community, and she had waited for an opportunity to partner with the community.

Another partnership developed around funding arrangements. Moruya TAFE campus agreed to supply the venue and facilities, and the Cobowra LALC agreed to supply the teachers, meals and resources.

Community partnership also developed through community presence in the classroom and was seen as the biggest benefit of the program. Community presence allowed language to be shared, and it encouraged young and old to learn together. The social interaction during the course played a big part in the attendance of all of the students and the sharing that occurred also encouraged enthusiastic participation. Involving Aboriginal language speakers in running the program was also crucial to its success.

The two teachers delivering the Dhurga Buradja program worked very closely with the linguist and this specialist involvement was another key to the program's success. The linguist was able to use the recordings of Elders held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in order to 'know' language and teach it to others. In addition to her expertise the linguist was 100% committed to the establishment and success of the program and travelled between Canberra and the Moruya campus every week (a 350-kilometre, five-hour round trip).

The course has been a huge success with the grandchildren, children and Elders now incorporating basic language into their daily activities and communication. This has been very important for the Dhurga language revitalisation. The community was excited not only about reclaiming its language but to obtain a nationally accredited qualification as well. Many of the participants were already working in schools so an opportunity to promote language within the school sector was strengthened. For many of the Elders returning to education it was an opportunity for them to bring *their* language back into the classroom, where they felt comfortable having qualified teachers and a linguist supporting them with spelling and grammar.

Challenges and issues

Adequate funding is required to ensure that this successful program is ongoing. To deliver and assess the TAFE NSW certificates requires a minimum educational qualification of Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as well as knowledge of and skills in the relevant Aboriginal language. Language teachers who do not have the Certificate IV need to be supervised and mentored by TAFE teachers. The involvement of a linguist is a valuable human resource. Funding is also required for the purchase of existing resources and the development of new ones.

Community disagreement can be an issue in cases where there are some divisions in the Aboriginal community about language. For example, community members may have different views about the 'right' and 'wrong' language being used to describe things.

Student confidence is another matter that needs to be recognised and addressed. Sometimes local speakers lack confidence in their use of language – because of shame related to representations of Aboriginality or the banning of the use of Aboriginal language in policy and practices governing Aboriginal peoples – and need to believe in their own credibility as language speakers and users.

Experience showed that support of community was central to the ongoing success of the program. This could also indicate that the opposite might occur, with enrolment numbers declining if there are negative attitudes in the community concerning the program.

Outcomes and future directions

The recording and reclamation of cultural and language knowledge was considered paramount during the delivery of the course. Course outcomes included the intention to collect language information from the students to complement and reinforce language that the linguist had collated from her research.

As a result of the TAFE course delivery, three of the students ensured that a Dhurga language program was established at Batemans Bay Public School in 2008.

The college is in the process of delivering community workshops to four different communities within the Dhurga language area in an effort to encourage future participation in the TAFE courses.

It is anticipated that a community language centre will eventually be set up to collect, collate and store language material as a part of the reclamation process.

Gamilaraay in New England

Context and implementation

The Aboriginal Education and Training Unit (AETU) in New England Institute of TAFE has run several Gamilaraay (Kamilaroi) language workshops over a number of years in Tamworth and Moree. These were facilitated by a linguist who has studied and taught the language extensively. Workshop participants who mostly work in the health and education sectors came from a wide geographical area including Coonabarabran, Caroona, Coonamble, Dirranbandi, Tingha and Tamworth.

In the absence of an accredited course, workshops had been delivered under generic courses such as Statements of Attainment in Outreach and Workskills. The AETU team leader had keenly promoted these workshops and was subsequently able to assist in the development of the new Certificate I in Aboriginal Language/s. The accreditation

of a nationally recognised course was welcomed as a vehicle for enabling recognition of the existing skills of a number of Aboriginal people in the region.

The director General Education and Equity Services (GE&ES) in TAFE NSW New England Institute was keen to have a bank of Aboriginal people qualified to deliver training in Aboriginal languages in the region, and to assist with the promotion of the Certificate I in Aboriginal Language/s. The director's support has enabled this to occur, as well as the production of resources.

Resources used

Funding was provided to develop resources to support course delivery and learning. In addition, three Aboriginal languages assessment tasks and accompanying marking guides were produced. These can be used to assess the proficiency of course participants and can also be used as part of skills recognition.

Keys to success

Involving Aboriginal language speakers in running the program was a great asset. The Aboriginal teachers had studied Gamilaraay at the University of Sydney, and one had also worked extensively in teaching that language to children. They worked closely with the linguist and this co-facilitation of the workshops enhanced the program's success.

Good language pedagogy has a basis in theories about how language is acquired that inform teaching methodology. Access to information about widely accepted principles of language teaching and learning helps to ensure success. The use of a dictionary on its own is not enough!

The support of the GE&ES director for the promotion and delivery of Aboriginal language in the region also assisted in the program's success. Funding was provided for a small resource development project to produce songbooks, CDs demonstrating pronunciation and online resources. It has been identified that more resources need to be made available.

Challenges and issues

Providing adequate recognition of students' existing skills was seen as being very important, as there were a number of former students who had previously completed language courses that had been delivered under generic course titles. In acknowledgement of this a two-day recognition of prior learning workshop was run. Workshop participants sought to have their prior learning recognised by undertaking challenge tests that were based on the learning materials developed for the Certificate I in Aboriginal Language/s. The challenge test items were devised by the teachers of the Certificate I and were validated by TAFE NSW teachers of English for speakers of other languages, who hold specialist applied linguistics qualifications.

Ways of maintaining student attendance need to be investigated. Tamworth was the site for course delivery, but participants came from a wide geographical area. As a

consequence attendance declined in the face-to-face mode, so a shift was made to distance learning and 12 online lessons were developed. To try to manage this issue in the future it was decided to run the full Certificate I course at Tamworth with a more localised group able to attend the campus on a regular basis.

Outcomes and future directions

There is a sense in the community that the program and resource production protect the language and make it available to the community. Support and continued training is essential for course graduates so that delivery of the Certificates in Aboriginal Language/s by Aboriginal facilitators becomes an essential component in the development of cultural pride and identity for the whole Aboriginal community.

Dharawal in South Western Sydney

Context

Dharawal language (Biddigal dialect) had already been taught in some south-western Sydney schools for two years with funding from DET. The south-western Sydney region Aboriginal support officer had been instrumental in working with the schools and with the local community to gain its support for that work to occur. An initial question had been, 'Where do you start?' The schools had decided that teaching the language of the land, the traditional local language, was a good starting point and that other languages could be taught further down the track.

Community people expressed a wish to learn language too. In response to that local need and demand there was a series of community consultations with Aboriginal community Elders, Aboriginal groups and the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. The language program offered through TAFE builds on that work.

The program was jointly funded by one of the South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE faculties and by the Institute's Aboriginal Unit. The Certificate I in Aboriginal Language/s was delivered by two teachers: a teacher of the Aboriginal language with the support of a literacy and language teacher.

Twenty-one students enrolled in the Dharawal language course. They ranged in age from young teenagers to older people and ranged in experience from school students to a senior of the Dharawal people. The class was conducted on a Wednesday evening as that was usually the night set aside for community meetings. This meant that attendance varied because community members had a raft of other obligations. However, classes averaged 12 to 15 students on any evening. Four members never missed a class, whilst others missed classes only once a month. To manage this, all teaching and learning material was printed and handed to members in a special folder with relevant instructions. The students completed the course at the end of Semester 2, 2008.

Resources used

The resources available for delivery of the course were a dictionary of the Dharawal language and a CD of common phrases.

Keys to success

The success of the program was a result of the participation and commitment of a range of people. The teacher was a local language speaker but did not have the formal qualifications required to deliver the Certificate I course so the faculty decided to offer support from a specialist language and literacy teacher. This was a way of ensuring a quality program that satisfied the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework. The specialist teacher appeared to play a low-key role in delivery of the course by not entering the classroom, but supported the language teacher through collaboration on assessment and administration tasks. This collaborative partnership approach to delivery was underpinned by the community consultations that had already been established.

The design of the program also helped to make it a success. It was decided to package the core units so that the course could be completed in a semester. This approach helped to provide learners with a strong sense of achievement.

Challenges and issues

It was possible to deliver the program successfully by way of a mentoring and team-teaching approach. While this was satisfactory, it is likely to be an interim measure only. People who graduate from the TAFE courses will qualify to teach them by going on to gain the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. With the required experience in teaching language they will then be fully qualified to deliver and assess the TAFE Aboriginal language/s certificates in their own right.

Technology can support language acquisition but, of course, this requires funds. For instance, access to portable digital audio equipment would enhance outcomes by enabling learners to hear the spoken language at any time.

Outcomes and future directions

One of the most positive outcomes of the program has been the strengthening of culture and extension in knowledge of Country² through learning language.

Learning the local language has also helped those Aboriginal people who had been displaced or dispossessed to relate to the Country in which they now live. It awakened their sensitivity to the influence of Country on their lives, for example the connections created through placenames. This has made them feel more welcome and comfortable in a place that is not their homeland, but has become their adopted home.

Several of the class members have children who are attending the Dharawal language classes at school, and an unexpected outcome has been parents and children helping each other in their language learning thereby establishing an additional cultural bond.

² Contributors to this report required that the word 'country' be capitalised when used in specifically Aboriginal contexts [Eds].

It is hoped that the courses will continue, enabling several of the class members to go on to be able to teach Dharawal in schools. For the present there is only the one teacher and many schools are also demanding the right to have their children taught.

Conclusion

The most crucial key to success to date appears to have been the contributions of the people who know (quite literally) what they're talking about – the speakers of Aboriginal language and their communities. Where those contributions inform all aspects of course delivery, there are successful outcomes for learners.

The development of the TAFE NSW Certificates I, II and III in Aboriginal Language/s has been a recent and significant contribution to language revitalisation in NSW. It has also helped develop new partnerships, added another dimension to existing community participation, and established a new vocational pathway for Aboriginal people.

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