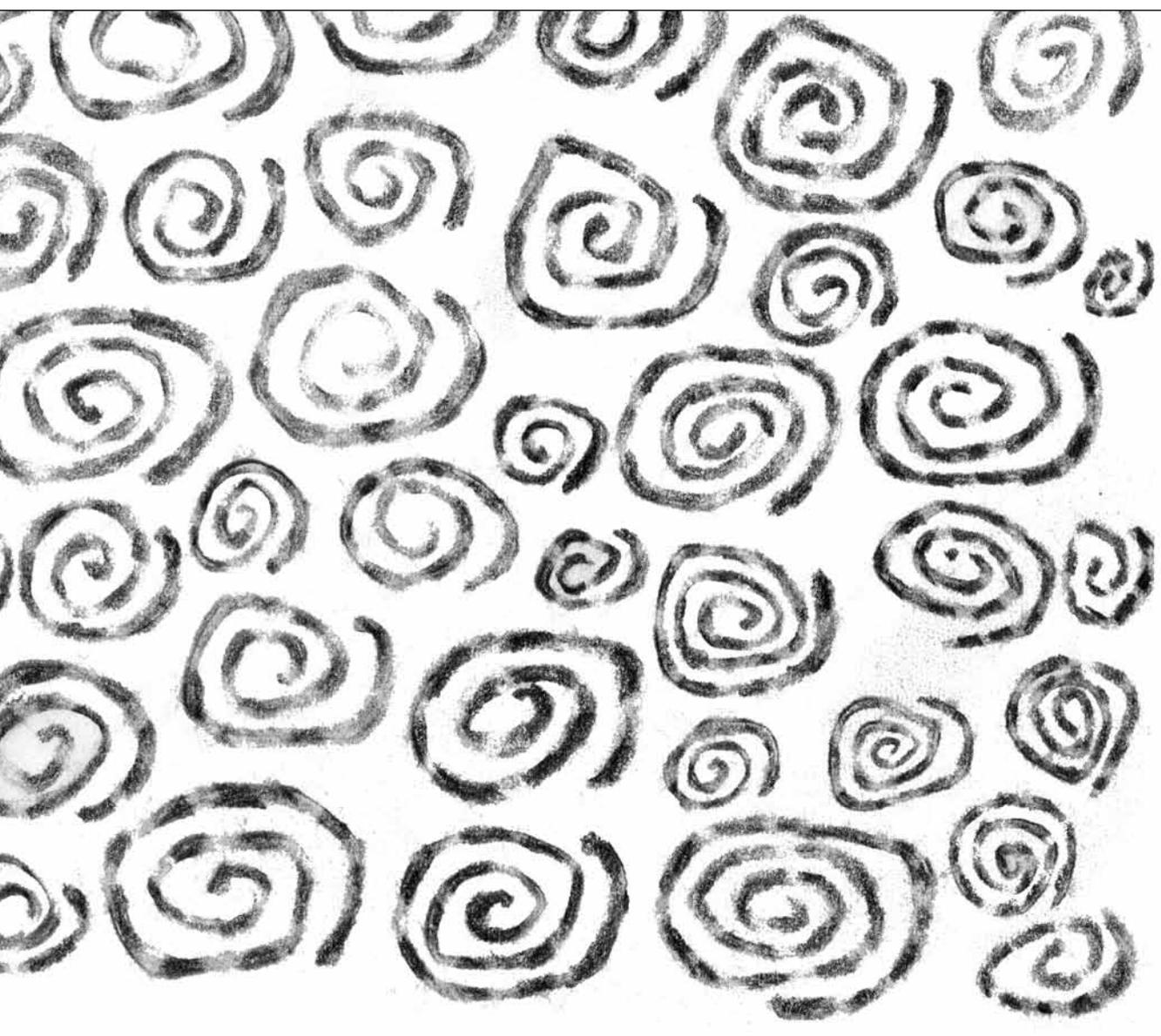


Part Four

Language in education



Introduction

Language in education

Susan Poetsch and Kevin Lowe¹

Indigenous communities often express a degree of reservation about language programs in educational institutions. They question the capacity and sustained commitment of those institutions to offer the kinds of programs they value. Schools are recalled or experienced as places where their languages are actively discouraged and devalued. Community mistrust also stems from the perceived power of the institution, with its seemingly innate tendency to take ownership and control in a range of ways – including restrictive timeframes and lesson locations, set pedagogical approaches, differing notions of the role of a teacher and unreliable sources of funding. Community wariness is further heightened because culture is embedded in language, and so the risk of losing control of both is greater. When community members become dissatisfied with a language program they often resist by using the main option available to them: choosing to disengage.

Another risk is that communities can simply leave the responsibility for revitalising and maintaining their languages to educational institutions alone. As McCarty argues, schools cannot have the impact that the primary language institutions of family and community can (cited in Hornberger 2008, p. 161). People's homes are where languages need to live. Ultimately, if the aims for any given community include considerable reinstatement of fluency and language use by community members, then educational institutions can only ever be an adjunct to the broader goals and tasks.

At the same time, however, educational institutions have the potential to be powerful sites for language learning and can have a positive synergy with community language revitalisation efforts. For example, as McCarty goes on to argue: schools are potential sites of resistance and opportunity; schools can become strategic platforms for more broad-based language planning (including orthographic standardisation, preparing teachers, elevating the status of oppressed and marginalised languages); and there are few instances of successful language revitalisation in which schools have not played a crucial role.

¹Both authors are from the Aboriginal Curriculum Unit, Office of the Board of Studies NSW.

Formal curriculum (including curriculum suitable for re-awakening Indigenous languages) has been developed for schools and post-compulsory educational contexts in several Australian states and territories.² However these are only documents; their value lies in effective implementation in local contexts. Educational institutions can offer a continuum of language teaching and learning, based on curriculum that sequences content and facilitates effective methodologies. They have the potential to offer support structures within their own respective systems, as well as develop links among sectors and providers. In this way language-learning pathways can be available from preschool through to primary, secondary, post-compulsory schooling and higher education.

For language programs to be successful in educational institutions, communities need to own and drive the programs; and institutions need to critically analyse the range of justified reservations held by communities, be flexible in course delivery, open real channels of communication and cooperation with communities, and establish programs which are genuinely responsive to Indigenous people's needs and aspirations for the revitalisation of their languages. Given the significant challenges of working in the context of re-awakening languages, planning cannot be piecemeal or ad hoc. There is a need to build a team that has members with relevant skills and capacities that can also take a strong advocacy role in the institution and in the community. The team needs to be strongly supported in its efforts to learn and develop the language, make teaching materials, and build the human resources and skills base.

The potential contribution of educational institutions to the re-awakening of languages, and the optimism of successful and effective partnerships between them and communities, are captured in the chapters that follow. The papers not only exemplify successful program development in a range of educational contexts, but also describe obstacles encountered in local situations and how these were, or could be, overcome.

Brown is committed to the journey of the revitalisation of Dhurga in her own community on the south coast of New South Wales (NSW). Her chapter deals with the challenge of the lack of resources for awakening languages, the importance of building up the store of teaching and learning materials and being efficient with those that are available. Her research with beginner learners clearly shows that resources and materials can have multiple uses and applications.

Through three adult language-learning case studies, Cipollone describes how the nationally-accredited Aboriginal languages qualifications – recently developed by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) NSW – are being successfully adapted for courses in Dhurga, Gamilaraay and Dharawal. Each community context has unique

² For example Board of Studies New South Wales (2003), Northern Territory Department of Education & Training (1998), South Australian Department of Education & Children's Services (2003), Technical & Further Education New South Wales (2007), Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority (2004, 2009), Western Australian Department of Education & Training (2005, 2007).

local human and other resources, and the paper canvasses the keys to success, the challenges and the future directions for each of the three locations.

Establishing and working on Dharug programs in Sydney, Green emphasises the importance of community links and developing direct and extensive Aboriginal involvement in language development and program implementation. He describes his use of both well known and innovative language teaching and learning activities which are motivating and effective for engaging students in a language program in early secondary school years.

Also working in the context of a high school program, Lane outlines the background research and the steady development of the Dhurga program in Vincentia. Her chapter illustrates the skills that a teacher of languages (in this case Indonesian) can offer an Aboriginal language program development team, including effective pedagogy for language learning, knowledge of the operation of the particular school site and the educational system more broadly. Lane also describes how she too is learning from a number of local community members through their sharing of language and culture with her and the students.

Lowe & Howard explore the critical tension points from community perspectives that underpin the establishment of a learning partnership between the Aboriginal educators and principal in a particular school in NSW. Findings from this case study, based on data collected through interviews, indicate that the long-term viability of the language program was largely dependent on the Aboriginal educators' view of the school leadership. The measure of success the educators applied to the program was the degree to which they believed their language was respected by the school through the privileging of their knowledge and culture.

A teacher at Parkes High School in central western NSW, Maier describes the growing relationship between the school and local community. This relationship provides a strong foundation for the planning and gradual growth of Wiradjuri courses in the school's curriculum. He describes achievements to date and future plans to continue to develop the program, and highlights the key role of the Aboriginal community language tutor in the success and integrity of the program.

McNaboe & Poetsch describe connections between adult learning and school programs, also for Wiradjuri. In recent years school–community partnerships have developed within and across individual school sites, as well as between the school and TAFE sector. These synergies have led to a notable increase in language teaching and learning in towns throughout Wiradjuri country. Community members' take-up of the range of available courses has been strong. In turn, school programs provide stimulus for further development of speakers and teachers. This paper illustrates these points through a description of the development of the teaching program for Dubbo College.

Meakins highlights the importance of considering language ecologies when designing revitalisation programs suitable for specific locations. She describes the mixing practices used by speakers of the Gurindji, Bilinearra and Ngarinyman languages of

the Northern Territory. Current language maintenance practices in these communities include code switching between a traditional language and Kriol (a strategy commonly used by older people) and systematic combining of a traditional language and Kriol – a fossilised form of code switching and a strategy commonly used by younger people. In these ways communities *are* maintaining aspects of their traditional languages. In the context of rapid shift Meakins argues for the value of the often-maligned wordlist learning approach to language teaching, together with a staged introduction of aspects of grammar of the traditional languages. Such teaching strategies, she argues, are more suitable than immersion methods to this ecology as they provide a means of increasing the proportion of aspects of the traditional languages in the new mixed varieties of younger generations.

Reid gives an uplifting description of the achievements of a group of Wotjobaluk people of the Wimmera region of Victoria. Through a very challenging course of study based on the *Indigenous languages of Victoria, revival and reclamation: Victorian Certificate of Education study design*, the community members have been playing an active role in an academically rigorous reconstruction of their language, Wergaia. As one of the course participants, Bronwyn Pickford put it, ‘I felt pride and greater confidence. I discovered an untapped talent – my linguistic skills’. Through their collaboration with Reid and their strong commitment to the process the class was able to produce a community consultation copy of a Wergaia grammar and dictionary.

Finally, Rhydwen’s paper acknowledges the very real and complex challenges involved in revitalising languages in NSW where language loss has been great and where languages typically have incomplete documentation and few resources for teaching and learning. Despite these challenges she provides sound reasons for pursuing language programs in schools and gives an overview of the range of effective strategies currently provided to support the implementation of those programs, including schools working positively with the community, training and careers for Aboriginal languages teachers and tutors, and establishing networks of schools to maximise the use and development of resources. Thus she provides us with an optimistic conclusion to this section.

References

- Board of Studies New South Wales (2003). *Aboriginal languages K–10 syllabus*. Sydney: Board of Studies NSW [Online]. Available: www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_sc [Accessed 18 December 2009].
- McCarty T (2008). Schools as strategic tools for indigenous language revitalization: lessons from Native America. In N Hornberger (Ed). *Can schools save indigenous languages? policy and practice on four continents*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Northern Territory Department of Education & Training (1998). *NT curriculum framework, Indigenous languages and culture* [Online]. Available: www.det.nt.gov.au/education/teaching_and_learning/curriculum/ntcf [Accessed 18 December 2009].

South Australian Department of Education & Children's Services (2003). *South Australian curriculum, standards & accountability framework: Australian Indigenous languages*. South Australia: Hyde Park Press [Online]. Available: www.sacsa.sa.edu.au [Accessed 18 December 2009].

Technical & Further Education New South Wales (2007). *Certificates I, II and III in Aboriginal language/s*. Sydney: Technical & Further Education NSW

Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority (2004). *Indigenous languages of Victoria, revival and reclamation: Victorian Certificate of Education study design*. East Melbourne: Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority [Online]. Available: www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/studies/lote/ausindigenous/ausindigindex.html [Accessed 18 December 2009].

Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority (2009). *Aboriginal languages, cultures and reclamation in Victorian schools: standards P-10 and protocols*. East Melbourne: Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority.

Western Australia Curriculum Council (2007). *Aboriginal languages of Western Australia study design*. Perth: Western Australia Curriculum Council [Online]. Available: www.curriculum.wa.edu.au/internet/Senior_Secondary/Courses_Aboriginal_Languages [Accessed 18 December 2009].

Western Australia Department of Education & Training (2005). *Outcomes and standards framework, languages other than English*. East Perth: Government of Western Australia [Online]. Available: www.det.wa.edu.au [Accessed 18 December 2009].