13
Using identical resources to teach young and adult language learners

Ursula Brown[1]

Abstract

According to the *Report on school-based Aboriginal Language Program activity in NSW During 2006* there are several difficulties that arise when implementing an Aboriginal language program. Those difficulties may include funding availability, staffing, resource production, professional development and programming (Rhydwen, Munro, Parolin & Poetsch 2007, p. 4). Often one or more of these factors can cause discontinuity. This paper investigates the use of identical pedagogical resources to teach an Indigenous language to diverse age groups to ascertain whether they could be reused successfully, thereby reducing the overall costs of pedagogical resource production. During the course of this research project youth from Broulee Public School and adults from the Mogo Public School community were taught lessons in Dhurga, an Indigenous language from the south-east coast of NSW. Each class was taught using the same resources. I conclude that it is possible to use the same resources for various age groups while continuing to cater to the needs of beginning language learners of Dhurga from Stage 1 through to adult. This will enable funding for resources to be used economically allowing more money to be utilised in other vital aspects of Aboriginal language programs, including the employment and training of Aboriginal community language teachers.

As a child I knew words that other kids did not know, but I wasn't taught them at school. I wondered why some people were calling things by different names; were my words made up or were their words wrong? As a teenager I was taught that those words were part of my grandfather's heritage – his traditional language, Dhurga. As an adult I now know that these words are real and an important part of my heritage –

_____

1 Dhurga Community.

my Aboriginal language, Dhurga – which I hope to be able to pass on to my children. Today I see these words written and hear them spoken by people in my community, both black and white. As proud as I am of this I sometimes also wonder if this new-found interest in Aboriginal languages will be just another passing phase.

My hope is that research into Aboriginal languages in schools will demonstrate that there are many positive outcomes for all students and the broader community resulting from the revival and introduction of Aboriginal languages. Some positive outcomes may include raised self-esteem, improved retention and attendance rates, and better decoding skills in literacy (see also Jones, Chandler & Lowe, this volume). I believe that introducing an Aboriginal language into any school will not only benefit the students and community, but also help keep Aboriginal languages and cultures from becoming extinct.

Originally this paper was written for a research project I conducted as a component of my 2008 study in the Master of Indigenous Languages Education (MILE) offered by the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney. A module of the MILE required me to complete a research project based on my own teaching. My research question was, 'Is it possible to employ identical pedagogical resources to teach youth and adults Indigenous languages?' I was hoping that the research would show that pedagogical resources could cater to the needs of beginning language learners from Stage 1 through to adult, enabling more money to be used in other aspects of Aboriginal language programs, including the employment and training of Aboriginal community language teachers.

All research for this paper was carried out using Dhurga, a language from the south-east coast of New South Wales (NSW), which belongs to the country among Wandandian to the north, Wallaga Lake to the south, and Braidwood to the west. Dhurga is one of several languages used within the Yuin land boundaries (Eades 1976).

Description of the project

The project was a study that included two groups of participants; one group were primary school-aged students, or Young Dhurga Learners (YDL), and the second group were Adult Dhurga Learners (ADL). While conducting my research project, certain differences in learning Aboriginal languages between these two groups became apparent to me, including the use of metalanguage[2] by each group and how they to responded its use; the influence of the age of a learner on speed of acquisition of sounds, vocabulary and grammar; the importance of writing a program which caters for the varying needs, interests, age and stages of learning; and developing resources to support the program.

Community consultation was based on my own cultural knowledge as part of my obligation to the community that I live in, belong to, and work with. I also attempted to follow the *unwritten protocols* (Smith 1999). I had been raised by my family to

---

2 Language used to talk about language.

be honest and respectful, especially to Elders, use manners at all times, and trust in others. I also referred to the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL) *Guide to Community Protocols for Indigenous Projects* (2004) and the Board of Studies (BOS) NSW *Working with Aboriginal Communities; A Guide to Community Consultation and Protocols* (2001).

I approached Broulee and Mogo Schools about my research project. Both were positive about it, especially seeing that there might be benefits from the findings. I attended two community group meetings where I explained my proposal, which was endorsed through both the local parents and citizens association and Aboriginal education group.

The ADL lessons were delivered at Mogo Public School. The participants were Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members. The YDL lessons were carried out at Broulee Public School where each student from Year 1 through to Year 6 participated.

Mogo Public School is small with less than one hundred enrolments and a high Aboriginal population of about 43%. Mogo School was in the first year of their Dhurga language program. There were ten participants from the Mogo community in the ADL class, one of whom was an Aboriginal Elder. Broulee Public is a much bigger school with around three hundred enrolments and around five percent Aboriginal population. This school has been teaching Dhurga for about five years. Each of its 12 classes was observed during this study.

My research project was fundamentally an action research project (Dick & Swepson 1997). Lessons were planned, observations made, modifications employed, and the cycle continued. This seemed the most appropriate method for my investigation.

There were two different methods for collecting data, one being the use of student observation by the action research teacher of both language-learning groups. The other method was shared feedback from the ADL participants, either verbally or in written form.

Writing a program that caters to the needs of learners

The needs of the Mogo ADL class were assessed during the initial lesson. There were several requests made about content by the class. Most participants wanted to learn the same content as their children had – firstly, to understand what they were saying and, secondly, to reinforce their learning. There was a desire to learn local place and plant names and to be able to use Dhurga words in English sentences. I explained that at this point Dhurga is in the process of revitalisation and there are some words known, but the grammar is still being reconstructed, and these limits affect what students can learn. A program and sequence of lesson plans were developed based on the learning needs of this group.

There were six one-hour lessons for the ADL class. These lessons were based on Stage 4, Pathway B of the *NSW Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus.* Pathway B was chosen

because it is intended for beginning learners of Aboriginal languages but targets more mature ages, whereas Pathway A targets students from Kindergarten to Stage 3 who will continue with that language through to Stages 4 and 5 (BOS NSW 2003, pp. 11–13). The reasoning for this choice was that the students of this class, although adults, are beginner learners of this language. The participants were attending as an interest group rather than an employment course, so I decided against the use of the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) NSW certificate courses which focus on assessment tasks, employment and resource creation (TAFE NSW, n.d.).

The Broulee lessons consisted of 12 classes of one half hour per week. Broulee was already employing Pathway A of the NSW syllabus, which reflects the learning that will take place for students who begin the study of a language in K–6. Though the same overall language situation applied to Broulee, they had already been teaching and learning Dhurga for the past five years.

The two Dhurga language teachers and I met to discuss what they would like me to teach. Both teachers were open-minded and suggested that they would be happy for me to teach anything that would assist me in my research project. They recognised that whatever I taught would be relevant and either reinforcement or good revision. Therefore the lessons to the YDL group were for the students to practise or revisit past learning and to implement my pedagogical resources to compare their response with the ADL results.

Developing resources to support each program

After the topic matter was planned for the ADL, the development of the resources was the next step. I created resources that I thought would be suitable to both ADL and YDL. Each resource was created for primary school-aged students targeting language syllabus requirements, based on gaining optimal student attention and participation, and included the use of the four macro-skills – listening, speaking reading, and writing.

My concern was that the resources developed might be seen as degrading or belittling to the ADL class. However, class discussion suggested that being beginning learners of any language meant, 'it was almost like being in kindergarten again, so we need to go back to basics' (ADL participant, pers. comm., December 1 2008). The resources included a language map, English and Dhurga pronunciation guides, phoneme charts, booklets, magnetic cutouts, games and stencils. The use of metalanguage was also included within some ADL classes.

I tried to create thematic kits so that all macro-skills would be used within each theme. There were three kits created each containing an A4 big book, board magnets, card games, mini create-your-own booklets and stencils. One kit was based on kin terms, another on *Minja njin?* (What's this?), and the third on *Wanaga?* (Who?).

The ADL students were the first to see and use the resources. This group gave me a combination of oral or written feedback at the end of each lesson, while resources and methodology were still fresh in their minds. I took notes and discussed their ideas

within the class. Considering the comments made by the adult group I thought that I could easily use all of the resources in the next stage of the project, the YDL stage.

I was able to teach 12 classes to the YDL group. Most of those students had already covered the content that I was to deliver, so my lessons were taught with revision and reinforcement in mind, but employing the same resources as in the ADL class, all the while observing students' class participation, interaction with, and understanding of each resource.

Findings

The use of resources

Observations of both groups and feedback from the ADL class suggest that most resources created for Dhurga language learning were appropriate and effective to use with each group. Adults and school-aged students alike were positively engaged in each lesson; their participation was, more commonly than not, voluntary. The theme of each lesson was recurrent in every resource created for each lesson and incorporated each of the macro-skills, thus increasing the likelihood of new language retention. This approach seemed to be successful for each group because language retention and recognition from week to week was quite high, based on oral and written revision.

The use of metalanguage

At the onset of this investigation my hypothesis was that identical resources could be used to teach youth and adults alike. I believed that the same pedagogical resources could be used, but with adaptations to the teaching practice.

One of those adaptations might be the use of metalanguage. I thought that it would be best not to introduce metalanguage to the youth, as it may be too confusing. However, after doing so with some Stage 2 and 3 students I was surprised to find that these students were much more accepting of new terms, for example *interrogatives*, *labial*, *ablative*. Possibly the YDL had come in contact with these terms sometime within the past five years of their Dhurga lessons.

The adults, on the other hand, found the introduction of metalanguage quite daunting, and preferred not to make use of it. For example I thought that the ADL would prefer to learn about place and manner of articulation, but most found it to be 'too scary' (ADL participant, pers. comm., 14 December 2008). Most of the ADL wanted to use simple terms, such as *question words, lip sounds, from endings*. It seems that the YDL were more open to new and unfamiliar things while the ADL found it difficult and wanted information to be more accessible.

The influence of age

I had imagined that the ADL would be more likely to participate in class or group activities and that they might be less likely to be affected by the shame factor. However, the adult students tended to work in isolation not wanting to work in pairs or groups. It seemed the YDL were far more willing to volunteer, to have a go. The YDL were also more likely to ask for assistance when needed. Usually the assistance sought by the YDL was in relation to literacy, not about the Dhurga language itself, and particularly English words that they were unable to decode to complete class activities. I noticed that the YDL had a little more difficultly spelling Dhurga words than saying them. Maybe they had not actually mastered the relation between the spelling and the sounds. It was very hard to determine the differences in acquisition as the YDL had been exposed to the sounds, vocabulary and grammar of the language for much longer than the ADL class. What was noticeable was that the YDL classes were able to apply the rules of Dhurga grammar with a little more ease. After the six ADL classes some of the participants were reluctant to verbalise vocabulary at all, especially on an individual basis.

Conclusion

Since the development of the NSW Aboriginal languages syllabus in 2003 many NSW schools have introduced Aboriginal languages programs. Some have been put in place to help close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' education levels after the review of Aboriginal education found that Aboriginal students lag behind their non-Aboriginal counterparts (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. & NSW Department of Education and Training 2004). These schools have found that there are many other significant benefits to these languages programs within their curriculum.

Many communities have supported the introduction of Indigenous languages in schools. Bringing Aboriginal languages into schools is crucial to all students as a way of learning about and practising reconciliation and fostering awareness of cultural difference. For Indigenous students it is all the more important because learning an Indigenous language can increase their self esteem, improve decoding skills in literacy (BOS NSW 2000) and may positively influence attendance and retention rates of Aboriginal students.

Many Indigenous language programs in NSW schools are carried out only through successful applications for funding to various bodies. This research project is important because large amounts of Indigenous language funding are committed to developing pedagogical resources. When costs are reduced, language programs might be able to continue over longer periods with more funds to pay community language teachers, and to carry out research, development and production of grammars and dictionaries to aid our teachers in the revival process.

Teaching these two groups was an enlightening experience. Theories, methods and resources ultimately were tested, and all proved very different than I had anticipated.

As a matter of fact, there was very little need for the modification of my pedagogical resources. It was my teaching methods that needed to be changed more. My preconceived ideas about how to teach adults and youth Dhurga needed to change to be able to accommodate the needs of each group.

I suggest that we, as teachers, need to be capable of examining ourselves, our methods, our practices and preconceptions, and be receptive to change to better suit the needs of our students. I also firmly believe that we, as Aboriginal people, should work together sharing what we know. Let's form language teams that consist of whole language areas or boundaries, rather than individual school language teams. By doing so we will have a wealth of knowledge, skills, experience and resources that can be shared. Sharing is a vital part of our Aboriginal culture; let's not lose that along with our languages. 'One of the important lessons that's been learnt over the years, however, is that if experiences, resources and successful teaching techniques are shared, then Aboriginal language courses can continually improve to benefit everyone, but particularly our Aboriginal students' (BOS NSW n.d.). By sharing what we have learnt we will provide better opportunities for our youth, communities and languages to succeed.

Acknowledgements

References

Board of Studies New South Wales (2000). *Teaching Aboriginal language: case studies*. Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales.

Board of Studies New South Wales (n.d.). *Aboriginal languages.* Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales [Online]. Available: ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/go/aboriginal-languages [Accessed 6 January 2009].

Board of Studies New South Wales (2001). *Working with Aboriginal communities: a guide to community consultation and protocols*. Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales.

Board of Studies New South Wales (2003). *Aboriginal languages K–10 syllabus.* Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales.

Dick B & Swepson P (1997). *Action research faq (frequently asked questions file)* [Online]. Available: www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arfaq.html [Accessed 12 September 2008].

Eades DK (1976). *The Dharawal and Dhurga languages of the south coast.* Canberra: Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies.

Federation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders Languages (2004). *FATSIL guide to community protocols for Indigenous languages projects.* Melbourne: Federation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders Languages [Online]. Available: www.fatsil.org.au/FATSILCommunityProtocolsGuide/FATSILProtocolGuide/ [Accessed 21 November 2008].

New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc & New South Department of Education and Training (2004). *Report of the review of Aboriginal education.* Darlinghurst, NSW: New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

Rhydwen M, Munro J, Parolin E & Poetsch S (2007). *Report on school-based Aboriginal language program activity in NSW during 2006.* Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales [Online]. Available: ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/go/resources/languages [Accessed 5 January 2009].

Smith LT (1999). *Decolonising methodologies: research and indigenous peoples.* Zed Books: London.

Technical & Further Education New South Wales (n.d.). *NSW Certificate I in Aboriginal Language/s* [Online]. Available: www.nci.tafensw.edu.au/courses/general%20 education/17411-cert-i-aboriginal-languages.htm [Accessed 1 January 2009].