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Developing the Dhurga Program at Vincentia High School: the language teacher's perspective

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Abstract

This paper describes the introduction and teaching of Dhurga at Vincentia High School on the south coast of New South Wales. It begins with an explanation of who was involved in the initial research and planning phase and the rationale for implementing the local language in the school curriculum. It describes the relationship among community members, school staff, the linguist and the Board of Studies and focuses on the team teaching approach taken by the Aboriginal community language teacher and myself (an experienced teacher of Indonesian). The paper outlines how we overcame some practical challenges and describes the types of activities that we have found successful with the students, and which are supportive of learning through a communicative language teaching approach.

Vincentia High School is a comprehensive state high school on the south coast of New South Wales (NSW). It is within walking distance of Jervis Bay and a short bus ride to Booderee National Park, managed by the traditional owners of this land, the Wadi Wadi people. Of the 1100 students who attend Vincentia High School, approximately ten percent identify as Aboriginal. These students come from the surrounding towns and villages including Huskisson, Vincentia, Sanctuary Point, Erowal Bay, Old Erowal Bay, Wrights Beach, Hyams Beach, St Georges Basin, Basin View, Tomerong, Wandandian, Sussex Inlet, Woollamia, Jervis Bay Village and the Aboriginal community of Wreck Bay.

Since the opening of the school in 1993 Aboriginal students have featured prominently in its success in a variety of areas. Among these, there are students who have been school leaders, sports stars, those talented in the creative and performing arts and those who have achieved outstanding academic results. With the development of

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the *NSW Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW 2003) it seemed only natural that Vincentia High School would include an Aboriginal language in its curriculum.

The idea was the beginning of many hours of hard work for a dedicated group of people, whose dream was finally to become a reality with the trial introduction of a Dhurga language program to all Year 8 students in 2006. The journey to reach this point was at times both frustrating and exciting as many obstacles were encountered and overcome along the way.

Walawaani, ngayaga Karen Lane. You guessed it! I've just greeted you and introduced myself in Dhurga. I did not become involved in the Dhurga language program at Vincentia High School until after much of the preliminary research had been done. I have therefore relied heavily on information given to me by Gary Worthy, Head teacher of technology and applied studies at Vincentia High School, who has played a major role in developing Aboriginal education programs there. This is how the journey started.

Planning the journey

Interest in developing a program for an Aboriginal language at Vincentia High School began in 1995. Gary came to Vincentia High School having been involved with an Aboriginal languages program at another school at which he had taught. He was strongly aware that involvement with Aboriginal languages evokes emotional responses from people and that the language belongs to the community, not one individual. When he came to Vincentia, Gary built vital links between the school and the community, through his contact with Elders and community leaders who were researching local languages.

Between 1999 and 2000, Helen Pussell, the Aboriginal education officer (AEO) at Vincentia High School, together with the AEO at Jervis Bay Public School joined Gary and they were successful in obtaining funding from the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission to develop the Dhurga language program. A cultural heritage submission was made on behalf of the Wreck Bay Community Council.

In 2001, Helen and Gary spoke about the possibility of developing a language course for Vincentia High School with staff at the Board of Studies NSW (BOS), who suggested seeking linguistic support from and making contact with established language programs in other schools. Helen and Gary were joined by another teacher at Vincentia High School, Helen Ford, and another local Aboriginal community member, Colleen Brown. Together they visited two schools – the Gumbaynggirr language program at Bowraville Central School on the mid-north coast of NSW and the Kurna language program at Kurna Plains School in Adelaide. They observed then that Aboriginal students at Bowraville Central School learnt their language outside school, rather than the program being a formal part of the school curriculum. They were impressed by the programs at both schools, which included songs and games to motivate the students.

Jaky Troy, then manager of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs NSW Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre, facilitated some helpful meetings and, in 2003, the group travelled to Canberra where they spent three days receiving valuable guidance from the research and technical staff at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). The group was joined by a number of other community members including Wayne Donovan and Kerry Boyenga – both teachers at Broulee Public School – as well as Ursula Brown, Mary Duroux and Danielle Towers. AIATSIS staff provided advice on how to access and use the relevant resources. The wheels were well and truly in motion for the Dhurga language program now.

In 2004, Jutta Besold, a PhD candidate in the School of Language Studies at the Australian National University became involved with the project. She began researching the available archival materials and making connections with Aboriginal community leaders and members. Through collecting and analysing the language material for her thesis Jutta has been able to support the Dhurga language programs at both Vincentia High School and nearby Broulee Public School, as well as a number of community-based language programs.

This is when I joined the team. I had been teaching Indonesian for many years and have always been interested in other languages and cultures. Although in the beginning I did not know much about Aboriginal languages in general, or Dhurga in particular, I have been able to learn the language alongside the community members and work closely with the Aboriginal community language teacher, Mitch Martin. As a member of the program team I have been able to contribute my skills in effective language teaching methods and strategies suitable for high school students.

The journey begins

During 2004 and 2005, Pip Dundon and Dr Jennifer Munro, curriculum officers at BOS, coordinated a series of workshops with community members, school staff and the linguist. These meetings were an opportunity for us all to work together as a team to write a teaching and learning program. They were also an opportunity for Mitch to work on both his teaching and language skills. Although Mitch did not grow up speaking his language, through this program he has been committed to learning and preparing to teach it.

By 2006 the language was ready to teach at an elementary level. Mitch and I approached this initial stage with trepidation and excitement, as finally an idea was about to become a reality, even though it was only to be delivered to Year 8 classes for one 56-minute period per fortnight. Much hinged on this year.

In the beginning we faced some criticism from a few members of the school and community who questioned the value of teaching a language that was largely not in use and had little relevance. However, the supportive staff and community members constantly defended and promoted the benefits of its inclusion in the Year 8 curriculum.

Fortunately the school's principal, Steve Glenday, provided ongoing support and dealt with opposition in a very diplomatic but forthright manner, explaining that this subject was an extremely important and integral part of the school's focus and future plans. This strong leadership certainly helped to instil confidence and optimism in the program team.

In these early days Mitch and I travelled from one end of the school to the other wherever there was a vacant room, sometimes a science laboratory, an art room or a design and technology room. All resources had to be carried from room to room and occasionally a few were lost in transit. One day a Year 8 student in the Dhurga class commented that one of the particularly big, tough rugby league boys in Year 11 was walking around the school with one such resource stuck to his chest. The laminated Dhurga word read *minga* (mother). This did not really suit his image and the Year 8 students had a bit of a laugh.

With only an hour a fortnight set aside for the Dhurga language class, topics were limited in that first year. As a matter of fact, Mitch and I were only just keeping one step ahead of the kids. Jutta passed on new vocabulary and grammatical information as it came to hand as part of her research, almost on a daily basis. Sometimes she would discover that a particular word actually had a different spelling or meaning to what we had previously believed so there were often changes. An example of such a change was with the words *njin* (this) and *djin* (that). These words seemed to change meaning from one year to the next over the next three years, and both Mitch and I had to constantly remind each other which was which. Although this was sometimes frustrating, at the same time the changes and clarifications provided rich learning opportunities for the students allowing them to discuss the intricacies and difficulties involved in the process of revitalising a language. This is also consistent with the syllabus, which recognises that Aboriginal languages in NSW are being learned and taught in the context of language revival.

The topics covered initially included basic greetings, family members, animals and body parts. Of course, in conjunction with these topics we taught relevant cultural aspects, since language and culture are interdependent. For example, when students learnt Dhurga words for family members they also learnt about the traditional Aboriginal family structures and drew comparisons with other indigenous cultures around the world.

Learning vocabulary was based around games such as memory, snap cards and charades. Charades was great fun for learning Dhurga vocabulary for animals. This game was often used at conferences in demonstration lessons and was always enjoyed by all. One of the funniest moments was watching the principal of a south coast high school acting as a *burnaaga* (tree goanna). His team members were stumped, as he appeared to be trying to climb a wall! The value of games and songs should never be underestimated – in language classrooms it is often the case that the more noise, the more productive the lesson.

All in all this first year ended on a positive note. The students had responded well to the new course and morale among those involved in its development was high. After much consultation among community members, Aboriginal staff, the principal and I, it was decided that Dhurga would be the language taught for the mandatory 100 hours² for Year 8 students beginning in 2007.

Even though this was a wonderful opportunity, it was a daunting task, and now the hard work had really begun. Instead of just one period per fortnight students would study Dhurga for five periods a fortnight, which had to be allocated into an already tight timetable. None of this would have been possible without the ongoing support of BOS staff who worked with us on writing a full teaching program, including scope and sequence and eight units of work. Neither could we have done it without linguistic support from Jutta who taught us about the language and its structures. Mitch and I faced the challenge of presenting this material (which sometimes looked quite dry) to our students in creative and fun ways, and in ways that would facilitate use *of* the language rather than just discussion *about* the language.

Next steps

With the introduction of the 100-hour course in 2007 came much excitement. The lack of a homeroom was still the major issue but we were promised one for 2008, so we soldiered on carrying an ever-growing box of resources from one end of the school to another. It was a small price to pay for the chance to expand the language and have greater exposure throughout the school. The Year 8 students were more enthusiastic and there was a more serious approach towards Dhurga as it was now a subject that would be assessed and included in their school report.

Throughout the year students really began to extend their vocabulary, and they now could write more complex sentences and create short spoken and written texts on a broader range of themes and topics. An integral part of the program was an excursion to Booderee National Park guided by the park's Indigenous rangers. Students were able to learn about food sources, plants and their medicinal uses. This was a huge step forward as tangible connections were being made among the language, cultural knowledge and country.

These connections were also made through cross-curriculum content. A local artist visited all classes and her beautiful artwork truly inspired the students to tell stories in conjunction with their own paintings. Many previously disengaged students who struggled with learning vocabulary and grammar excelled in their explanations of visual representations of stories. Mitch and I helped them write their stories. They were extremely proud and felt a strong sense of personal achievement.

We launched in 2008 confident that we were teaching something of great value, which involved not only language skills but also increased understanding in the unique local

² In NSW all students must complete a minimum of one 100-hour language course as part of their School Certificate.

Aboriginal people, land and culture. We finally secured our own Dhurga classroom, somewhere to hang our posters and display students' work. This was a fantastic year. Classes displayed their skills to various dignitaries and visitors to the school and were also featured on Triple J Radio's 'Hack' program.

The classroom now has alphabet stepping-stones on the floor and the windows are adorned with Aboriginal print curtains. There are large cushions, kindly made by Helen Pussell, which students use when working in groups. Mitch has used his artistic skills to paint and stencil the walls. Posters around the room help to reinforce new vocabulary. Everyone loves coming to this room and laughter, singing and chanting can often be heard as the students engage in communicative activities. A garden of native plants has recently been designed which makes the room more inviting. Dhurga is now firmly embedded in the curriculum at Vincentia High School.

While my experience has predominantly been with the program at Vincentia High School, our efforts link to other schools in the area who are already teaching, or plan to establish, a Dhurga program. We are able to share resources and ideas for teaching and learning through workshops organised by BOS and the NSW Department of Education and Training. Further, there is a local Technical and Further Education program, which means that adult community members such as Mitch can continue to learn their language.

The journey continues

One of the great benefits of teaching Dhurga for me has been co-teaching with Mitch. He is strongly committed to both learning and sharing his language and culture with all Year 8 students. He views the team-teaching approach positively and as an opportunity to pass on his expertise in other areas such as art. This experience has also increased his appetite to continue to develop his language skills. His links to the community are strong and he is well respected, which adds credibility to the program. The Year 8 Aboriginal boys relate particularly well to Mitch and he provides a great role model for these students. This program could not exist without Mitch and much of its success is due to him.

By the end of 2009 all students in Years 9, 10 and 11 will have had the opportunity to learn Dhurga. This is a great achievement for those hardworking people who had a vision so many years ago. I acknowledge these wonderful people and their efforts for the Dhurga language. I feel privileged and proud to be part of the incredible journey. *Walawaani!*

References

Board of Studies NSW (2003) *Aboriginal languages K–10 syllabus*. Sydney, Australia: Board of Studies NSW [Online]. Available: www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_sc [Accessed 5 May 2009].