

Strategies for doing the possible: supporting school Aboriginal language programs in NSW

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Abstract

Echoing the title of an earlier paper published ten years ago, ‘Strategies for doing the impossible’, this paper examines the role of school programs in language revival and reclamation. Since 2005 the Languages Unit of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training has employed a consultant to support the implementation of the Aboriginal languages syllabus in government schools. This paper describes and discusses the issues and challenges involved in supporting the teaching of languages that are incompletely documented and for which there are few published teaching resources.

What is possible?

Soon after I started working as consultant, Aboriginal languages, I was asked by a senior Aboriginal educator how long it would be before the languages were revived and were spoken fluently again by communities. Undeterred by my hedging admission that this would not be achieved quickly or easily he demanded a definite answer, suggesting ‘30 years?’ It is hard to be the bearer of bad news but I felt obliged to tell him what I really believed. The only language that I knew of that had been successfully revived was Hebrew. And that was a very special case, bolstered by being already widely spoken by Jewish men (albeit for limited religious purposes), then promulgated as policy by leaders of the Zionist nationalist movement in Palestine in the early twentieth century and, finally, by being adopted as one of the two official languages at the establishment of Israel in 1948 (Spolksy & Shohamy 2001). I was forced to admit that I did not think New South Wales (NSW) Aboriginal languages would once again be spoken fluently and regularly as the first languages of NSW

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Aboriginal people *in the forms in which they had existed prior to settlement*. However I explained that this was no reason not to teach them in NSW schools, for reasons which will be clarified here.

The sorry state of languages in NSW

NSW was where the first settlement took place in Australia and, within just over a year of the arrival of the First Fleet, the Aboriginal population around Sydney and inland along rivers had been decimated by smallpox. Ongoing disease and displacement ensured that, around the most settled areas of NSW, many language varieties were lost without known trace early in the history of settlement. Of those which have survived, Bundjalung is the only NSW language appearing on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) list of endangered languages which is defined as severely endangered, all the rest being defined as critically endangered (UNESCO 2003). The *National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS) Report* of 2005, which is far more comprehensive, similarly indicates that no NSW languages are spoken fluently.

Despite this history, NSW is the only state or federal jurisdiction in Australia with an Aboriginal languages policy (NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2004). According to an undated pamphlet produced by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) to advertise its launch, the policy was developed ‘... to preserve and rekindle languages’ with strategies to support its implementation, including the development of an Aboriginal languages syllabus (Board of Studies NSW 2003). Furthermore there is no evidence of any other jurisdiction in the world where *all* the indigenous languages are in need of revival² and yet are still formally recognised as meeting a mandatory language requirement for graduation from high school. It was an act of extraordinary optimism to create a Kindergarten to Year 10 syllabus, comparable in every way to the other languages syllabuses used in the state, for a group of languages that are all only partially documented.

Yet students who begin the study of the other languages such as French or Japanese for the 100 hours of mandatory language learning required in order to fulfil the School Certificate requirements, do not become anywhere near fully fluent speakers of those languages after just 100 hours of study. Indeed even for languages that are regarded as easy to learn for English speakers (and Aboriginal languages do not fall into this category!) achieving professional proficiency³ on the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) scale would take around 600 hours of study whereas, for difficult ones, the estimated time needed to achieve proficiency jumps to 2200 hours (American Educational Research Association 2006) (see also Hobson, this volume). I was confident that

² In other states in Australia where languages can be studied at this level, at least some of the languages are under maintenance rather than in revival.

³ Sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations.

many NSW Aboriginal languages could be learned to a level commensurate with that achieved by students of other languages in NSW schools. Even a limited knowledge of, and facility in, the languages that are sparsely documented can be enough to allow students to learn something of their complexity and their role in maintaining relationship to country.

There are currently programs in ten languages in NSW government schools. The extent of published resources available for each language varies, but is generally very limited compared to that available for other languages taught in Australian schools. In some cases language programs began in areas where there was not even a published sketch grammar or dictionary, although there may have been local people with some knowledge of vocabulary and expressions. Undeterred by the difficulty of the task some community organisations have employed linguists to help remedy the problem. For example the Darkinyung Language Group, chaired by Bronwen Chambers, worked with a linguist to produce a grammar and dictionary (Jones 2008). There are now plans to find a way for community members to receive training in the language so that there will be a pool of people available to teach Darkinyung in school language programs. Other communities too have worked with linguists through Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre to develop grammars and dictionaries (See Ash et al., this volume). The lack of well-analysed, professionally researched and accessible language resources is perhaps the greatest gap to be overcome in order to establish viable school language programs.

It is very recent in the history of humanity that any languages have been written and only 106 of the 7000 or so known languages ever developed their own written literature (Ong 1982, p. 7). Aboriginal languages remained unwritten until Europeans, often missionaries or government officials, attempted to represent them in written form. Orthographies, specially designed writing systems based on a careful analysis of the sounds of each Aboriginal language, are developed in order to accurately analyse and document the languages. Such orthographies usually form the basis of practical writing systems necessary to meet the demands of modern education. It has long been hypothesised that, as a consequence of new media technology, the written form may be bypassed completely (Postman 1970). Certainly there is technology available that could allow people to learn and be assessed on their proficiency in oral languages without the use of writing. However at this stage reading and writing form part of the curriculum and indeed, in the case of NSW languages, much of the data (the corpus on which language learning is based) comprises only written records produced before the advent of sound recording equipment. An example of one such language is Awabakal, recorded by the Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld in the mid-19th century, when the language spoken in the Hunter and Lake Macquarie region was 'all but *extinct*' (Threlkeld 1850, preface). It is not the role of the education system to undertake the linguistic research necessary to develop the language content that underpins languages education. It is made very clear too, in the guide published by the NSW Board of Studies (2001) that the role of the education system is to respond to community demand for language programs, not to initiate it. However it is clear that

the requirements of the NSW Aboriginal languages syllabus are one of a number of factors contributing to the perceived need for more good quality publications in and about NSW Aboriginal languages and may, indirectly, have contributed to the spate of publications from the Murrumbidgee Aboriginal Language and Cultural Co-operative in recent years.

While the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) does not undertake the development of language resources such as dictionaries and grammars, it does produce resources directly related to the classroom. The NSW DET Curriculum Directorate's Languages Unit and the Centre for Learning Innovation worked together to produce an interactive web-based Aboriginal languages resource for Stage 4 students. As well as introducing students to some of the common features of NSW Aboriginal languages, the resource also includes interviews with Elders and community language teachers across the state talking about their experiences, to help explain why and how Aboriginal people were discouraged or prevented from speaking their languages.

Working with the community

No Aboriginal language programs in NSW DET schools may be taught without the support of the local Aboriginal community. In order to obtain funding for a program in a government school,⁴ the school is required to demonstrate that it has consulted with the community, and that the teacher is an Aboriginal person who is teaching the local language⁵ with the support of that community. When the syllabus began to be implemented in 2005 the general pattern was that members of the local community would teach the language in the presence of a classroom teacher whose presence was necessary to ensure that legal duty-of-care requirements were being met. In the best cases there was genuine collaboration among the members of the school languages team, so that classroom teachers, members of the school executive and community members would work supportively together. Often the school staff would be learning the language themselves as well as helping with programming and classroom management. In other cases the community teacher was expected to teach the class with minimal support and the classroom teachers would simply be physically present.

In schools with a vibrant and ongoing language program there is generally a real commitment and interest shown by the principal or another senior member of the school executive. While schools are neither expected nor encouraged to push the establishment of language programs, which should be a response to community demand, the reality is that if the people with the authority or influence to make things happen in a school context do not give their support, nothing is likely to happen.

4 Funding for programs comes from the NSW DET Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate and must be applied for annually.

5 In rare cases the language is not the local language, but this is not encouraged, and protocols to obtain permission from both the community where the school is located and the donor community are necessary.

Community members or Aboriginal Education Officers who want to start a language program, without the support of someone with authority within the school system to help advocate on their behalf, tend to experience disappointment (see Lowe & Howard, this volume).

It can seem as if the requirement that there be a school language committee, bringing school personnel and community together to plan and develop a school language program, is simply another bureaucratic hurdle for educators. Seen from another perspective it can be viewed as an opportunity, a perfect excuse to bring community and school together. The experience of many schools is that when they genuinely involve the community in decision-making there is more likely to be community support, with parents coming to school events where the students are going to be performing in the local language. In a report on a joint presentation at the Rights, Reconciliation, Respect and Responsibility conference at the University of Technology Sydney,

Geoff Anderson (Member of the Wiradjuri Elders Council) ... asked some students what they thought about the Wiradjuri program at their school. He described a moving moment in which a seven-year-old Wiradjuri girl replied, 'I learn my language and my culture then I teach my parents'. Geoff believes Aboriginal languages have healing powers for both children and adults. He said, 'The languages each belong in that country, in the hearts of the people that learn, speak and teach them; but most importantly in the schools and in the mouths of our future of this country.'

Gary Worthy, a teacher at Vincentia High School, described how, as a non-Aboriginal person, he felt that he needed to earn the right to be involved in the Dhurga program. He feels privileged to be involved in this work and is honoured to work with Aboriginal community members to revive their languages. He does not assume it is his right to do this. He feels the responsibility of supporting their rights to their languages.

Gary also talked about the background research done by school and community members to set up the school programs. This research was a collaborative effort and took a number of years. This time was a worthwhile investment for setting up strong and successful programs. (Poetsch 2008 p. 3–4)

One decision that must be made by the community is whether the language should be taught to all students in the school, or only those who are Aboriginal. There was initial concern in some communities about the possible negative effect on the confidence of Aboriginal students if the local language was taught to all the students, but this was not borne out. In Parkes East Public School, where all students have the opportunity to learn the local language, it was reported by community members (at a workshop in Dubbo in 2008) to be a really powerful tool in breaking down racism (see also Anderson, this volume).

Another factor in the decision is that it is generally much easier to timetable classes if they are open to all students. Formerly, Indigenous students at Nambucca Heads High

School studying Aboriginal languages had to attend classes during sport time and this discouraged participation. Following a community decision the local language, Gumbaynggirr is now taught to non-Indigenous students too and can be timetabled at the same time as other language classes. Two Stage 4 classes of 25 students are running in the school in 2009 and the qualified Aboriginal teacher at the school attributes this directly to the changed timetable.

Teacher training and careers

Until 2006 there was no career pathway to enable anyone to become a qualified Aboriginal languages teacher nationally. To be a teacher of any language in a NSW school it is generally necessary to meet certain requirements, including two years of post-secondary education in the language being taught, but there was no tertiary institution offering such a course in any NSW Aboriginal languages. However, in 2006, the Master of Indigenous Languages Education offered by the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney sought recognition for providing qualifications that would allow someone to be designated as an Aboriginal languages teacher in NSW and, after extensive discussion and negotiation with all the parties involved, this was granted (see also Hobson, this volume).

While this is evidence of progress, and meets the needs of many, the reality is that the people who currently have the best language skills are often senior community members who are understandably unwilling or unable to undertake professional teacher training, and there is no other way for their unique expertise to be recognised. Currently community language teachers are paid at an hourly rate of between \$19.95 and \$25.25 per hour depending upon experience. However this pay scale does not reflect the difference between the skills and experience demonstrated by a young community language tutor who has just started to learn their language and a respected community Elder who learned their language as a young child at a time when it was still habitually spoken in the community.

There is some discrepancy between what would appear to be the most efficient system of delivering a school language program from an education system provider's perspective and the most effective way of delivering it from a community perspective. While it is commonly envisaged that, within a relatively short time frame, Aboriginal languages will be taught by qualified Aboriginal languages teachers who will be regular members of the fulltime school teaching staff, there are a number of reasons why this is unlikely to happen, at least in all schools, in the near future. Many of the middle-aged and older people who currently have the greatest degree of language skill are not inclined to undertake teacher training. Yet they are essential to the viability of developing school language programs in the communities and they need to be supported financially and otherwise to fulfil this role. In the longer term they will undoubtedly train up younger people in the language and these people will be the ones to subsequently undertake teacher training.

However, if the older people with language skills are not adequately recompensed at this stage, they are likely to walk away and no one will be able to learn the language. Secondly, even if languages are generally taught by an Aboriginal languages teacher, there will always be a need to involve other community members. A significant aspect of Aboriginal culture is the emphasis on community, as opposed to the individual, and to teach an Aboriginal language without being able to reflect the community context in which it is embedded would be to divorce it from its vital roots. Thirdly, working with the community is a wonderful channel for communication between school and community. Time and again Elders have expressed their sense of pride and delight at being able to participate in school language programs. This is part of the healing that one community language teacher, Murray Butcher was referring to when he said, 'People are starting to look for that language for a revival I suppose, for medicine for the soul, to start repairing the soul' (NSW DET 2009).

Professional development is provided to all NSW teachers in government schools and, in 2005, a team at the Languages Unit completed a package funded by the Australian Government Quality Teaching Project, entitled *Teaching Methodology for Aboriginal Languages*. This package drew on years of expertise in training languages teachers, particularly teachers of community languages.⁶ The package consists of resources for a two-day workshop that introduces Aboriginal community language teachers, and classroom teachers with no language-teaching experience, to the fundamentals of language teaching methodology. It also covers some basic aspects of the linguistic features of Aboriginal languages for teachers with no previous knowledge of the topic. In 2005 approximately sixty people from around the state attended the workshops. Since then a variety of further professional development workshops have been run in venues across the state.

Networks

Right from the start of working to support schools with Aboriginal language programs it was evident that it was going to be necessary for schools and communities in the same language area to work together. Because of the lack of resources to support language teaching of the kind available for other languages it would be beneficial for schools to share their ideas and expertise. It was also evident that those involved in the provision of support to the programs needed to work together. In two areas of NSW, which had some of the most developed language resources for use in schools, much of the linguistic work on which the programs depended had been done by Catholic clergy working in conjunction with teachers in the Catholic school system. In other language areas pioneering work was being done in the government system. Overall the numbers of people involved are small; there is usually only one linguist at most deeply familiar with any particular language, and only a handful of people

⁶ Community language teachers, in the context of the NSW DET, refers to teachers of the thirty-one non-Aboriginal languages spoken in the community and taught as a school subject such as Arabic, Hindi, Vietnamese and Spanish.

with language skills sufficient to teach in a school program in each language. For this reason those involved in supporting language programs in the NSW DET and the Office of the Board of Studies have often worked together, jointly convening workshops that brought together both government and private school personnel, staff from the regional education offices and diocesan offices, and the linguists and community Elders involved in those programs. Increasingly members of established school language teams from the local language area are encouraged to act as mentors to schools that are initiating programs and to form local language networks, both at the workshops and throughout the year. In addition, working in conjunction with other institutions like DAA and the Koori Centre, we have co-organised conferences such as Bayabangun Ngurrawa, the 2007 NSW Aboriginal Languages Forum and the Indigenous Languages Institute in 2008. These events brought members of Aboriginal language teams from across the state together with Indigenous languages experts from around Australia and overseas. Gary Williams, a Gumbaynggirr teacher speaking in an interview said, 'I do feel like language now has built New South Wales up into a community. We have something in common to talk about and you can recognise differences, you can recognise you know what's identical and all that kind of thing and you can talk about it ... I think it's opened up New South Wales' (NSW DET 2009).

Even in areas where there are currently no language programs, schools, regional offices and community personnel are encouraged to work together. However in some instances there are no programs because, even though many people would like one and there are some resources available, there is a lack of community agreement about the use of a standard orthography, who should be appointed as a teacher, or even which language to teach.

Conclusion

In September 1998 I bade farewell to Australia and to academia with a swansong paper called 'Strategies for Doing the Impossible' at the Foundation for Endangered Languages conference in Edinburgh. The title of the paper reflected a frustration bordering on despair with the difficulty of working to support endangered languages at a time when there was a strong tide of opinion against such activity in Australia. Core funding for Language Australia,⁷ a vestigial remnant of the 1987 *National Policy on Languages*, had been withdrawn, One Nation⁸ had risen to prominence and, according to Lo Bianco & Rhydwen, 'all considerations of language policy were sublimated to literacy' (2001, p. 418). At the time I had run out of any strategy other than tactical retreat. Returning some years later, and despite an overall diminution in activities to support Australia's endangered languages such as the continued erosion of bilingual education programs in the Northern Territory, I took up the newly-established position of Aboriginal languages consultant to support Aboriginal languages programs in NSW

7 The National Language and Literacy Institute of Australia under the directorship of Jo Lo Bianco.

8 A political party led by Pauline Hanson and committed to a policy of one language.

schools. To continue to do this I myself had to be convinced that implementing an Aboriginal languages syllabus in a place where every language taught was in need of revival, was possible. This paper explains both why it is, and what makes it so.

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