

Who will Teach our Languages? *John Hobson, University of Sydney*

Aboriginal people in NSW have been fighting for over 200 years to keep their languages alive. Since the implementation of the NSW K-10 Aboriginal Languages Syllabus in 2005 there has been a significant increase in interest in the revitalisation of the state's linguistic heritage and a consequent expansion in school and community-based activity. Hopes for the future are at an all time high. But, there are still many issues to be faced in determining responsibility and capacity for teaching the languages. Various people, agencies and technologies are suggested as the likely answer, with Elders, language centres and technology all named amongst the best candidates. This paper examines some of the issues surrounding Indigenous languages revitalisation in NSW and some current strategies for substantially increasing the number of Aboriginal language teachers in the state.

Background

The invasion of Indigenous Australia by the English language has had a devastating and enduring impact on its linguistic heritage. Of the 250-70 languages believed to have once existed nationally, Yallop (1982) estimated that over 100 had become extinct, 100 more were in danger and only about 50 were still in daily use and being transmitted to the next generation. Less than a decade later Schmidt (1990) made the alarming assertion that 160 had become extinct, 70 were in danger and only 20 were still strong. While current linguistic opinion suggests the latter was probably an overstatement, unless substantial action is taken to arrest the decline, there is a grave risk that few will survive as strong languages beyond the coming decades. In New South Wales the process of extinction has come dangerously close to completion with only six or seven languages, of an estimated total of up to 70 before colonisation, still having sufficient speaker populations to be used on a regular basis (Walsh, 2004).

This is not to say that there has not been a great deal of effort exerted by individuals, communities, linguists and

sometimes governments to halt or reverse the damage, although it continues to be an uphill battle in the face of an overwhelmingly strong and well-supported national language. The Northern Territory and South Australia have over several decades embraced the task of preserving Indigenous languages in their jurisdictions, albeit with fluctuating enthusiasm over time, and South Australia continues to pursue revitalisation of its endangered languages through the education system. In Western Australia and the Northern Territory independent community schools such as Strelley and Yipirinya have developed models of bilingual education to maintain their languages while still giving their children access to the benefits of English fluency and literacy. In NSW, community language centres like Muurrbay at Nambucca Heads as well as committed individuals such as Stan Grant Senior and John Rutter have persisted over many years and against all odds to teach their languages and keep them alive. Even in inner-city Sydney, Aboriginal language classes have been offered over recent years in Darlington Public School and through Eastern Suburbs Community College; and there have been many others, too numerous to list here.

However, without significant commitment and investment by government it has always been difficult to see how the relentless trend towards continued loss of languages in this state could successfully be reversed. On that basis the implementation of the NSW Board of Studies' (BOS) *K-10 Aboriginal Languages Syllabus* (2003) represented a monumental and very welcome shift in the field of language revitalisation and the culmination of an extended period of consultation and policy development (Hobson, 2004).

For the first time students in this state have the potential to study an Aboriginal language to Year 10, and possibly beyond. In the primary years this is achieved by integrating Aboriginal languages into the Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) curriculum, while in high school it falls within the Languages Key Learning Area, requiring 100 hours of study in stage 4 and/or 5 (NSW Board of Studies, 2003 p.11). The NSW BOS currently has partnership arrangements with eight schools implementing the syllabus, and the Department of Education and Training (DET) estimates well over 50 are actively implementing Aboriginal languages teaching (personal communication).

While many concerns surrounding the offering of Indigenous languages in NSW schools have been voiced by communities and individuals, such as whether they should be accessible to non-Indigenous students or can be taught 'off country', etc (Walsh, 2003), as Hobson (2004, p57) notes, '...most of these issues will only be resolved locally by Indigenous Australian communities themselves and will require a good deal more discussion and time'. But, perhaps the most

pressing issue of all is; who will actually teach the languages.

Will Elders Teach Our Languages?

The initial response that is often heard from community members is that the Elders should be the teachers of the language. After all, it is normally they who are the best surviving speakers and who have acted as custodians of the language for decades. Certainly the capacity to speak any amount of an endangered language is to be highly regarded, and if such individuals have the interest and ability to pass on their knowledge and skills it would clearly be of great benefit. Indeed, it should probably be viewed as a priority of state, if not national, importance, as we cannot afford further attrition. However, it is not necessarily certain that the same people will always be the best teachers, or for that matter want to, or that they will have the capacity to deliver many lessons at different levels to several classes on a weekly or even daily basis.

Anecdotal reports suggest that for some who happen to be amongst the 'last' speakers of a language, taking primary responsibility for transmitting it to following generations is not always a welcome burden. There are also reportedly concerns expressed by Elders that they do not feel confident to control a school classroom, or indeed feel comfortable within the school environment at all. To respond by taking lessons into a more traditional environment could be an effective solution for some classes, especially if they have an environmental or immersion basis. But, it is unlikely that the mandatory 100 hours could realistically be delivered in this way, even for a single class. Across several, the logistics would clearly be impossible.

Will Language Centres Teach Our Languages?

It must also be faced that the ability to speak a language does not necessarily confer the ability to teach it. We are all, for example, fluent speakers of English. Would any of us therefore seek to assert ourselves as suitable to teach English in schools without specific training?

The DET requirement that all classes, regardless of subject, be under the supervision of a trained and accredited teacher creates another dilemma. While the best solution to an Elder's need for support in programming, assessment and classroom management may well be to work in partnership with a practising (preferably languages) teacher, such an arrangement necessarily involves a significant addition to teaching costs. Given the already uncertain status of Aboriginal languages education for most school principals and the pressure of eternally shrinking budgets, the prospect of implementing a language program that could cost substantially more to deliver than any other would not be favourably received by most. And, even if supplementary funding is made accessible for the initial stages of the syllabus implementation, experience tells us it will probably not be sustained in the longer term.

As unpalatable as it might be, if NSW's languages are to be taught on an ongoing basis to multiple classes in multiple schools across the large regions identified as their proper country, it is highly unlikely that the number of Elders who are fluent speakers, interested and equipped to teach could ever be spread thinly enough and adequately supported to satisfy demand.

A commonly suggested alternative to the provision of language teaching by Elders is that it could be supplied by community language centres. While there are currently several in existence and some, such as Muurrbay, are indeed providing this service to schools in their region as well as offering their own language courses to adult community members, the demand has clear potential to outstrip supply in the near future. Added to this is the concern that language centres already have quite substantial and urgent prior roles to fulfil, particularly working with Elders and linguists to document and develop resources in the language that can be used by multiple schools and communities into the future.

Although normally regional in their domain of interest and service, language centres are also usually centrally located and would face immense travel, staffing and infrastructure costs if required to service multiple school programs across their region. There is additionally the assumption that there are language centres currently in existence to service all the languages in the state, which is clearly not the case. And, at this stage, there is no indication of the substantial funding needed to either establish new centres, or underwrite the cost of significantly expanding those which exist. Like so many Aboriginal community initiatives, they are continually forced to operate with multiple short-term funding sources that barely meet their current needs.

While a significant number of the staff from language centres currently teaching in schools are, in fact,

qualified Aboriginal teachers, it is often also the case that they are not. Thus, although there is no intention to discredit the ability of some exceptionally talented and skilled individuals filling this role, those issues identified for the participation of Elders in languages classrooms above have potential to hold true for language centre personnel as well, if only at the level of staff duplication and consequent program cost. For all of these reasons it is suggested that language centres will ultimately not be able to satisfy the potential demand for Indigenous languages teaching in the longer term.

Will Technology Teach Our Languages?

Coming to terms with these unpleasant realities has caused many language revitalisation programs to look towards technology for devices that can deliver languages in the absence of teachers. As a consequence there have been numerous projects to produce CDs, websites, slideshows, videos and DVDs to 'teach' Aboriginal languages. While some of these are most impressive and integrate sound, vision and text in ways never before possible, they are really just modern versions of older technological teaching aids, such as the dictionaries, worksheets, flashcards and audio tapes that have served languages education very well over the years.

An indication of the interest and prestige such innovations are attracting in the Indigenous languages education field was the title of this year's Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages annual forum, *Technology, Language, Culture*, where some very cutting edge developments were showcased to well-deserved acclaim. Nonetheless,

whether technology should be allowed to take precedence over language and culture remains open to debate.

There have also been warning bells sounding internationally over the apparent rush towards 'high tech' solutions to teach Indigenous languages. Ostler has identified computer-based technologies as anti-traditional and deskilling in their nature, arguing that they alienate Elders, are unnecessarily expensive and subject to rapid obsolescence (Hinton 2001, p267), while Kroskrity & Reynolds observe, '...the most important thing in language revitalization is to increase the opportunities for speakers to use and learn their ancestral language in interpersonal exchange. Multimedia technology will never replace this as the highest order priority in language revitalization' (2001, p328).

Despite these concerns, many are attracted to such solutions because of their current high profile, apparent potential as a quick fix, and ease to fund as short-term, self-contained projects. But, as most experienced language teachers will attest, only exceptionally talented individuals are capable of learning a language alone through the unaided use of materials and, even then, are only likely to do so imperfectly. The most sophisticated materials still cannot take the place of humans communicating with each other, which is ultimately what 'speaking a language' means.

So, if Elders, language centres and technology are unlikely to be able to teach Indigenous languages across the education system in this state; who will? Clearly there is a substantial and pressing need for qualified Aboriginal languages teachers.

Aboriginal Teachers Will Teach Our Languages

Until recently there have been limited opportunities nationally for teachers to be trained in Indigenous Australian languages education. The lack of a coherent degree major (or minor) in any NSW university currently precludes candidates from undertaking options such as a Bachelor of Education and specialising in any of this state's Indigenous languages (DET, 1997; n.d.). Such qualifications are similarly not readily accessible in other States or Territories except in a few of their local languages. However, an innovative course to respond to the need was implemented this year by the Koori Centre, University of Sydney and is expecting to see its first cohort of students graduate in early 2007.

The Master of Indigenous Languages Education (MILE) emphasises linguistics and languages education theories and methods appropriate to Indigenous language teaching for teachers whose prior training might be in adult, primary or a range of secondary teaching disciplines. While the strong emphasis in linguistics might seem unusual in a languages teacher training program, as Hale notes teachers working in languages revitalisation '...will have to do what amounts to field work on the language concerned in order to plan organized and fully comprehensible lessons around its grammar' (2001, p.235).

Conversely, in recognition of the widely varying health of Indigenous Australian languages, the MILE does not impose a fluency requirement on candidates, but supports the development of greater proficiency in any language of their choosing. Thus students who are current speakers of an Australian language may pursue

research interests in that language, and those who currently have limited fluency have the option of undertaking study either within the University or through a TAFE or community language centre. In this context, the Koori Centre also implemented a unit of study in the Bachelor of Arts program this year; *Speaking Gamilaraay I*, in association with the Gamilaraay/Yuwaalaraay Language Project and is hoping to be able to offer others in the future.

The course aims to provide Indigenous teachers with the necessary ability and experience to implement Indigenous languages curriculum in a range of educational settings. Particular emphasis is given to the linguistic situation of students' own languages and the implementation of the NSW syllabus as a model for best practice. MILE units of study focus on problem-based and inquiry-focused delivery methods and emphasise cooperative and consultative approaches to knowledge and skills development.

To meet the access needs of students from outside Sydney, the course is offered on a mixed mode (block release) basis, requiring attendance at three week-long blocks of teaching each semester over a full year. Students' travel and accommodation costs are covered under Department of Education, Science and Technology *Away from Base Activity* funding. As an indication of the importance the University administration places on Indigenous languages revitalisation, the course is offered under the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, rather than requiring up-front full fees, as is almost universally the case for graduate study.

The following table summarises the arrangement of units of study across

the three strands of the degree.

Linguistics for Indigenous Languages	Languages Education Theory	Languages Education Practice
Semester 1		
Sounds & Writing in Indigenous Languages Words & Meanings in Indigenous Languages Sentences & Text in Indigenous Languages	Theories & Methods in Language Learning	
Semester 2		
	Language Curriculum Development Technology & Language Learning	Research Methods in Languages Education Research Project in Languages Education (<i>elective</i>) Learning an Indigenous Language (<i>elective</i>)

Although the units of study are notionally divided into *Linguistics*, *Theory* and *Practice* strands there is a strong emphasis on the practical application of knowledge and skills to Indigenous languages and languages education throughout the MILE. Thus, while the *Linguistics* units convey theoretical understandings relevant to many languages they do so through problem-based learning and the consideration of real examples based in NSW and other Australian languages. This theoretical knowledge forms the linguistic foundation for class activities in the *Theory* units to be, in turn, applied to classroom teaching settings by students in the *Practice* strand. The sequence of units in time is also designed to reflect this

progression of knowledge and skills development through *Linguistic* theories and practical understanding in the first semester, to languages education *Theory* and methods and, finally, to a strong classroom *Practice* emphasis towards the end of the course that marries all content.

The entry requirement for the course is successful completion of a four-year teaching qualification or equivalent that entitles the candidate to teach in NSW schools, or comparable qualifications from interstate. As the course is based on a professional development model, it assumes candidates already meet current requirements for beginning teachers and have some teaching experience.

Entry is only available to Indigenous Australians.

Initial response to the offer of the program was strong with 13 candidates enrolling in the inaugural year, including three from interstate. Of those, 10 are still progressing towards completion of the degree. Feedback from staff, students, and their colleagues has also been overwhelmingly positive. The following responses drawn from first semester student evaluations gives some indication:

Excellent organisation & structure.

Although the learning was very intense I really enjoyed it.

It was all useful, because it gave me access into how linguists think and behave.

Very good, employed a number of strategies that engaged students.

Very helpful to understand the current teaching methods/theories to see how we fit into the teaching of languages.

I have wanted to do a Masters since my BEd. To be able to complete one at the Koori Centre - and in languages - is just fantastic. Thank you all!

An application for accreditation of the degree was lodged with the DET Teaching Qualifications Advisory Panel in November 2005. A response is yet to be received. Informal advice suggests that issues of parity with other languages education teacher retraining programs, both in terms of students' fluency and the inclusion of a lengthy

practicum, are of concern. Naturally this will continue to be a dilemma until teaching in the languages has been allowed to develop over some years and there are more fluent speakers and opportunities for student placements to occur. But, even without accreditation, appointed Aboriginal teachers who are able and willing will still be allowed to teach their languages in schools. The award of the MILE will at least ensure they are highly skilled and experienced when doing so.

Other Training Options

Of course, it continues to be important that Elders, language centres, Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) and others remain involved in Indigenous languages education in NSW. And it is definitely not the intention that MILE graduates should replace them, only add to their important contribution and work alongside them. But it must be acknowledged that increased opportunities to provide training for community language teachers or tutors to work with teachers or outside schools are still needed. In this regard it is heartening to note that the DET, BOS, Department of Aboriginal Affairs and other agencies are currently in the process of examining the provision of pathways and training options that will encompass Adult and Community Education, TAFE, Corrective Services and Juvenile Justice leading to more speakers of languages and community and TAFE language teachers (personal communication).

The Koori Centre has also recognized this need and from 2007 will be offering additional qualifications to the MILE to provide a suite of articulated Indigenous languages education pathways. Thus, students who have

completed the two year NSW AEA qualification, Diploma in Education (Indigenous) or equivalent, will be eligible for entry to a new Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Languages Education course, composed of the first semester of the MILE.

Those students who complete the Certificate will be able to undertake a further two units of study in the second semester and upgrade their qualification to a Graduate Diploma. Alternatively, those who complete the Certificate with a credit average across all units of study will be able to enter the MILE program in the second half of the year. Graduates who follow this pathway will also still be required to complete a standard teaching qualification before they can be accredited as a teacher in NSW.

Conclusion

The revitalisation of our state's Indigenous languages has a very long way to go. Enormous progress has been made thanks to the hard work of many dedicated individuals and organisations who have been actively preserving and promoting them over the years. But, as Indigenous languages education rapidly expands into the NSW school system following the release of the K-10 syllabus, the current reliance on Elders, community language centres, technology-based solutions and others will necessarily come under increasing duress.

The best way to face this issue will be through the provision of qualified, skilled and experienced Indigenous teachers of their languages. The Master of Indigenous Languages Education and related courses offered by the University of Sydney's Koori Centre are currently the most promising options to meet this need and provide

an innovative and responsive curriculum to cater to the varying needs of our state's traditional languages and their prospective teachers.

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