

Languages education needs of Indigenous children and adults living in remote communities

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Indigenous children living in remote towns and communities grow up in environments with different types of language environments, or language ecologies, and the languages learning needs of the children differ according to the language ecology in which they live. A language ecology is the configuration of languages people in a specific place speak, hear and identify with (Angelo & Poetsch, 2019; Sellwood & Angelo, 2013), and there are three main Indigenous language ecologies in Australia. These are:

“Ecology A:

A traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as their first language(s), and English as a second or foreign language.

Ecology B:

A new language as their first language, and English, and in some places a traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language, as additional languages.

Ecology C:

English as their first language, and an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as an additional language.” (Angelo & Poetsch, 2019; Sellwood & Angelo, 2013; Simpson, Disbray, & O’Shannessy, 2019)

Ecology B is the least well understood, by educators and non-educators alike. Languages spoken in this ecology as the main everyday languages of the speakers are contact languages - those that have arisen over time because of interactions between speakers of traditional languages and English – and include, e.g. Kriol in the NT and WA, and Yumplatok in the Torres Strait and Queensland, both of which are spoken by thousands of people. In some places new contact languages have not been fully documented and educators might not understand that the home language of the children is an Indigenous language, quite unlike English (Angelo, Fraser, & Yeatman, 2019). Lack of understanding of this ecology means that the children who speak these and other new languages are not recognised as needing to learn Standard Australian English as a second or additional language, and therefore are often not taught with appropriate methods and programs. Further, their home language is often not fully recognised and respected in the education system and wider community (Angelo et al., 2019).

In Ecologies A and B students speak an Indigenous language as their main everyday language, and need targeted, explicit, appropriate instruction in Standard Australian English as a second or additional language in order to learn English well. The students need high levels of proficiency in the type of spoken and written English that is used in education to learn well in school, yet they are often treated as if they already have those skills, when they do not (Angelo & Hudson, 2018; Dixon, 2018). The education system fails them by not understanding their learning needs. In Ecologies A and B the students usually hear and interact in Standard Australian English only in the classroom and a few other limited contexts

– the learning contexts are restricted. Teaching methodologies need to take this into account and teach the intricacies of English explicitly and intentionally.

In ecology C there may or may not be systematic differences between the variety of English being spoken in students' homes and Standard Australian English. Where there are differences, schools and education systems need support to identify them and to implement teaching programs that teach Standard Australian English explicitly and appropriately, and respect the students' home varieties.

Many communities in Ecology A, and some in Ecology B, have repeatedly asked that children be educated in both their primary language and in English, and international research supports this approach (Collier & Thomas, 2004; De Jong, 2002; Devlin, 2017a; Garcia & Bartlett, 2007; Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa, & Rodriguez, 1999). A study of thousands of second language learners across the US showed that the highest academic outcomes were seen in programs that taught all students in both their first and second languages (Collier & Thomas, 2004). Studies also suggest that when children learn in their home language in school before adding in learning in their second language, they may achieve as highly in the second language as students who were in second-language-only programs (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2012). In these programs the students also develop higher-level language skills in their home language. This is the rationale of bilingual or dual-language education programs, where content learning is undertaken in both the home language and the second language. Parental use of the second language in the home does not necessarily increase their children's second language proficiency (Hammer, 2009; Paradis, 2011), but reading and using written texts in the home in either the first or second languages can be beneficial (Gonzalez & Uhing, 2008; Quiroz, Snow, & Zhao, 2010; Reese, Garnier, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2000).

In Australia, school education in children's home language(s) and English has often been under attack (Devlin, 2017b). There are currently several schools using this model in the NT, but in general they are under-resourced, in terms of training and professional development for the teaching and literature production teams, and for the education systems at local, regional and national levels. There are few young Indigenous teachers undertaking tertiary level teacher education. This means that there is a lack of younger teachers to take up teaching as older teachers retire.

Education and employment pathways for Indigenous teachers and languages professionals are at a critically low level in Australia. Previously successful programs, e.g. the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education's RATE program, and South Australia's ANTEP program, have been axed or function at a highly reduced rate. The employment of Indigenous teachers and people working in a range of programs related to their languages have provided focused, strengths-based, feasible pathways into higher education and continuous employment. It is often people who have been teachers in their home communities, and have achieved tertiary education success, who become the go-to individuals for many organisations because of their high levels of bilingualism, biculturalism and literacy skills. They are role models for the children in their communities. Many Indigenous teachers have worked for 30+ years in schools, accumulating and sharing a wealth of education experience and expertise (e.g. Anderson et al., 2017).

In some places Indigenous groups have invested heavily in remote education, for example, the award-winning Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT) in the NT (Disbray & Guenther, 2017). WETT is funded by royalties from Newmont Mining, and governed by a

committee of Warlpiri educators and community members, with guidance from the Kurra Aboriginal Corporation. The Trust supports, for example, series of educational visits to important cultural sites for on-country teaching and learning, and professional development workshops for Warlpiri educators. WETT supports training in several kinds of media in Warlpiri and English. It supports a youth development program involving community elders, and partners with Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in providing community-based adult education and training. However these activities do not replace fundamental teacher and interpreter training.

Many students in this Ecologies B and C aim to renew or revitalise their traditional languages, and there are many success stories (e.g. Angelo & Poetsch, 2019). In these ecologies also, more teacher training pathways are greatly needed. The University of Sydney Masters of Indigenous Languages Education (MILE) course is one successful pathway, but like many university courses with lower enrolments, faces significant internal pressures.

Interpreters in Indigenous languages are much needed and there are several interpreting organisations across Australia. Yet the education needs and pathways for more Indigenous interpreters also remain under-resourced. High-quality teaching and learning in Indigenous languages and English from an early age, in listening, speaking, reading and writing, are precursors to young adults taking a training and development path in this area.

In sum, the languages learning needs of Indigenous children in remote towns and communities, including their need for English language instruction, can be best informed by understanding the language ecology in which they grow up. From these understandings, aspirations for the learning of, and in, the children's home languages and Standard Australian English can be better operationalised in day-today practices. For all language ecologies, pathways for increased access to teacher and interpreter training for Indigenous adults would be beneficial, and have flow-on effects throughout their communities.

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