

**SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

**Submission prepared by Teachers & Students
of the Cert III in *Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language*,
Murray Bridge TAFE, South Australia**

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Submission from:

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Submission content:

1. Questionnaire
2. Personal Reflections from seven Ngarrindjeri teachers and students
3. Reflection from Dr Mary-Anne Gale

SUBMISSION is a TOTAL of 10 Pages

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QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What languages are spoken in your community

In Murray Bridge, Meningie and Victor Harbor we speak Ngarrindjeri, English and bits and pieces of other Aboriginal languages such as Narungga, Wirangu etc within Nunga English. Note Ngarrindjeri is the language belonging to the people of the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong region of South Australia. Nunga English is a style of speech that mixes up English and words from other languages. We also speak our own language Ngarrindjeri when there are non-Aboriginal people around and we don't want them to hear what we say. We still remember many Ngarrindjeri words that we still use in our English speech. There would be around 500 words remembered.

We are also reviving the Ngarrindjeri language and use whole sentences without any English for special occasions, eg. singing songs, giving welcome speeches. One family in particular has three generations living together who use the language at home for everyday discussions and when talking to each other about everyday things, and even when shopping together. Eg. Nginti wethun lingling? = Would you like a cup of tea?

2. How well are they spoken by children, adults and Elders?

Ngarrindjeri is spoken mostly by Elders who are teaching words and some short sentences to their grandchildren. There are some parents who are also learning the language formally at TAFE and are teaching it to their own children. The language is also taught in some schools at both the primary and secondary level in Murray Bridge, Victor Harbor and Raukkan, as well as in Murray Bridge South Kindergarten.

3. Describe your group and project

This submission is from the TAFE class who are studying Cert III *Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language*. This class is trialling the new Cert III course with MILR funding from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The class consists of 8 dedicated regular attendees who come every Friday to classes in Murray Bridge, plus another 5 or so who come quite often. Since this particular class began in October 2010 we have had over 30 people attend classes as observers or as active participants.

3a. Why was it important to start up?

We started the TAFE language classes because "our language was taken away from us and we decided to reclaim it. Some even said it was evil and of heathens". Our language helps us with our identity and our culture, and helps us work out where we fit in society, for example who we are related to. We are living on Ngarrindjeri land and we were forced to learn other languages, such as English. And then when they got to school they had to learn French, German or English and Chinese and Japanese. But Aboriginal children should learn their own language. They need to learn their mother tongue.

3b. How long have you been running?

We actually started pilot Ngarrindjeri languages classes at Murray Bridge TAFE in April 2007, and since then have had 12 intensive workshops or blocks of classes. A core group of 16 Ngarrindjeri students graduated with an IVEC Cert I (Aboriginal language) in 2007, and some of these are still with the new Cert III class running in 2011. The current class began in October 2010.

3c. What age groups have you been working with?

The TAFE class consists of people of all ages from 18 years to 76 years of age. There are more women than men in our class. There are always Elders present in the class and two of them are paid as language teachers and consultants to work alongside the non-Aboriginal teacher/linguist.

3d. How many people are involved?

As already mentioned, over 30 people have attended TAFE classes as active participants or as regular visitors since October 2010. We have 16 IVEC Cert I graduates from a 2007 course. We currently have 8 Ngarrindjeri students attending every week, plus an extra 5 who come most weeks, all studying the Cert III language course. Our current plan is to run weekly classes til the end of the year and expect to have at least 13 graduates of the Certificate III in *Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language* by December 2011.

4. What activities do you do to record or encourage the use of languages, including local languages?

As mentioned in Question 1, we are reviving the Ngarrindjeri language and now use the language for many purposes and functions in the community and the home. There are now Ngarrindjeri choirs, and both sing songs in the Ngarrindjeri language in public, especially our Rritjarukar choir. We sing at a lot of funerals as well as at NAIDOIC week functions etc. We also: write poems in language, give eulogies at funerals in language, greet and farewell each other in language, introduce ourselves to others in language, give 'welcome to country' speeches in language, name buildings in language, give translations for concepts to government departments (eg. a government welfare agent requested a term for 'happy families'), use the language in everyday conversations (eg. when shopping, 'Do we need milk?'), teach words and basic sentences to babies and young children, joke together in language etc. But most of all we have fun learning to speak and use our language more and more, day by day. Using our language makes us feel good. It feeds our souls.

4a. How are local schools involved?

As mentioned in Question 2, there are schools in Murray Bridge that teach the Ngarrindjeri language, but they struggle to find teachers. That is why we are running these TAFE classes, to train language teachers. The language has been taught, or is still taught, at Murray Bridge North Primary School, Murray Bridge South Primary School, Murray Bridge South Kindy, Fraser Park Primary, Murray Bridge High

School (since 1994), plus at Goolwa Primary, Victor Harbor Primary, and Victor Harbor High. Some of these programs are currently under threat due to the lack of language teachers, as well as a lack of career paths for any Aboriginal people wanting to take on the language teaching role.

The TAFE class often visits schools to perform songs and to participate in assemblies particularly to share songs we have translated into the Ngarrindjeri language, or to sing original songs in the language.

4b. What help do you receive from the government or other organisations for your activities.

We are very grateful for the MILR funding we received for TAFE SA to write the new Cert III and Cert IV courses, and for the money to trial these courses in two locations: Murray Bridge TAFE and Ceduna TAFE. We don't receive any other funding at present to run our classes, but we do have the support of other organisations. For example we now hold our classes (rent free) at the newly opened Elders House at Murray Bridge, which is overseen by the Southern Fleurieu Health Service, which is run by the Aboriginal Aged care Program. We also have the support of the local Murray Bridge Uniting Church, who send volunteers every week to do the catering for our morning tea and lunch. There is a happy relationship with these organisations, and we often have people dropping in to listen to our singing or just for a yarn. One of the local school principals also allows two of his staff to come each week for training on their work days which is a significant commitment, but this is exceptional.

4c. Can you describe how your project has helped the whole community.

The TAFE class has become the place where community people now come for assistance and help with the Ngarrindjeri language. We get a lot of requests to translate things or to provide words or phrases in the language for different organisations. It is probably fair to say that the TAFE class has become a key hub of Ngarrindjeri language revival. The class has formed a Choir (the Rritjarukar – the Willy wagtails) who have now performed songs in the language at many community functions. The Elders in the class were the key people involved in producing the language resources (Ngarrindjeri dictionary, Learner Guide, Alphabet and Picture books with CDs) that were funded by MILR in the past. These same resources are now used continually in the TAFE classes, as well as in schools and the community. This TAFE class makes the language available to all in the community who wish to learn the language, and we have many visitors popping in with language requests or just to talk about the language or language issues.

5. How are your languages, including your local languages, taught in school?

See Question 4a.

5a. What difference has the teaching of local languages made to children's attendance and achievement at school?

We have heard that the teaching of the Ngarrindjeri language to groups of Aboriginal students, as part of the Mother Tongue program, have had very positive effects on the

students who participate. It helps them reaffirm their identity where there is doubt and insecurity, as well as improve their self esteem. This is particularly so when they work towards doing performances in the language for school assemblies and other public performances.

6. What interpreting and translating services are available in your local languages? How useful and effective are they?

In this community the first language for Ngarrindjeri people is English, so interpreting and translation services are not really an issue. However there are cultural misunderstandings that can occur on occasions in some settings which need to be addressed.

7. What are the main difficulties facing your project?

Ongoing funding is a key issue for our project. We currently only have funding til the end of 2011. There are many other locations in the state that would like Ngarrindjeri classes, but there is not adequate TAFE funding to run classes in all of these sites. Another difficulty is for teachers and workers to get released from their work to attend classes that are offered during work time. Some students also have transport difficulties as classes are over an hour away for some students and they sometimes have car problems or lack petrol money. Further funding would assist with this problem.

8. What are you aiming to achieve in the future?

The aim of the Murray Bridge TAFE class in 2011 is for 13 students to graduate with a Cert III in *Learning and Endangered Aboriginal Language*. We would also like the course to continue to be offered so others can complete their Cert III. Once the Cert IV in *Teaching an Endangered Aboriginal Language* is listed on the scope of TAFE SA (which can be a lengthy process) we also hope to offer this course to all the Cert III graduates. This will then give the students the confidence and qualifications to go on and teach the Ngarrindjeri language to others, either in the TAFE sector or in schools or other institutions or just at home with family.

**Personal reflections from the Ngarrindjeri students studying
the Cert III in *Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language*
at Murray Bridge TAFE 2010-2011.**

Rita Lindsay (jnr). TAFE student & musician, 22 years of age

The Ngarrindjeri language TAFE course classes give an opportunity for our people to come together to learn the Ngarrindjeri language. From the learning of the grammar, structure, orthography and the vowel and consonant sounds, we are able to speak and sing in Ngarrindjeri, and also create and craft songs, poems and ‘welcome to country’ speeches.

I am grateful for all of the resources that we have today, from our Elders both past and present. We are fortunate enough to have Elders in our classes who are able to give guidance and support with the language, particularly in pronunciation.

I love both the beauty and complexity of our language, the Ngarrindjeri language.

Julia Yandell. Elder, 76 years of age

Coming to this language class means a lot to me. In 2003 was the first time I have seen my language in writing. I was so pleased. My mother told me that she was not allowed to speak the language. They had to learn the white man’s way.

But now things have changed for the better. If they can teach the foreign languages in school, why not Ngarrindjeri language? I am 76 years old.

Anyupa Giles, teacher at Meningie Area School

I love the time to learn and talk my language – Ngarrindjeri. Spending the time with my people – my family – is good for my soul. Language is not just learning to talk Ngarrindjeri – it is culture, family, heritage, and finding my land, my *laklinyeri* (clan). Learning how to read and write my language as well as expanding my vocab.

Most of all I am able to share my language with my darling grandchildren.

Phyllis Williams, Health worker with the Fleurieu GPs network.

This class means so much to me, spiritual, self esteem and my identity. It gives me a sense of connection, pride and wholesomeness.

I am always happy in the knowledge that I have learnt more about my language. We have come so far to date, where we now sing and speak the language (although not fluently) but we hope to get there one day. I would personally hope and strive to one day go out and teach it in schools etc.

Eileen McHughes, Elder 70 years of age

This course is extremely important to me, because it reminds me that I am a proud, strong Ngarrindjeri woman, who managed to accept and adapt to non-Aboriginal societies.

I want to pass on my language, culture, history, stories to me grandchildren and others so that our Aboriginality is always with us, and we were not descendants of heathens, or unintelligent beings.

We are survivors in our own land, a land that was stolen and destroyed by money hungry people in power.

Michael Lindsay, TAFE student 19 years of age

The Ngarrindjeri language TAFE course classes means a lot to me because we get to learn our true language. We have a great class on Friday with extraordinary people to work with. It is also extremely rewarding when we get to sing songs that we have so bravely translated. I am honoured to be a part of this intriguing and rewarding Ngarrindjeri language TAFE course classes. When I read the words in the dictionary it is like my sister says – that it is our old people who gave the words for us to carry it forward, and it is their voices that are speaking through with the words that they provided. I am happy to be working in my own language with a good lot of people who make it an enjoyable and interesting environment to work in. I hope that more people appreciate our language and would want to get involved. I am so pleased to be a part of this and I hope that it continues now and for generations to come. Because it is a sacred (thing) and it needs to be heard. When people hear us sing or speak they will be rocked by the sheer beauty and strength of this language.

Audrey Lindsay, TAFE student (mother of Michael and Rita Lindsay)

Our Ngarrindjeri language TAFE classes are absolutely fundamental to the continuation of language in terms of grammar in particular. The ability to be able to string words together is certainly a personal achievement. These classes have also sparked conversation within my family in the Ngarrindjeri language. It is wonderful to be able to just speak to each other in our language in entire sentences. We do many translations into Ngarrindjeri eg. songs, requests from the community, and that is allowing me personally to build a vocabulary and become familiar with grammar. We have valuable written sources, a supportive teacher, and our living resources - our Elders who guide us in correct words and pronunciation.

These language classes are helping to break down barriers and raise awareness of our language throughout the community through performances with the choir and the naming of buildings etc. It makes learning Ngarrindjeri very practical as we are putting the knowledge to use where it can be heard, seen and learnt by others.

Reflections from Dr Mary-Anne Gale

TAFE lecturer, Cert III in *Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language* & Linguist, Mobile Language Team, University of Adelaide

I am submitting the following reflections based on my experience of working in the field of Aboriginal education and Aboriginal languages as a teacher and linguist for over thirty years. I wish to address three of the terms of reference:

- **The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages**

I have been working with the Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray region in SA since 2003 in the revival of their language. Much of this work has been supported financially by the commonwealth MILR funding. The money and effort spent over this period working with the Ngarrindjeri people has proved to be of huge benefit to the well-being of those Ngarrindjeri people who have chosen to involve themselves in re-learning and reviving their language. This fact is confirmed in the seven personal reflections, which are a part of this submission, from the Murray Bridge TAFE language students.

I have been told by different Ngarrindjeri people that they feel that their language has been “stolen” from them, particularly during the assimilation era when the use of their beloved Ngarrindjeri language was actively stopped by white administrators. Now that attitudes have changed, and the community has some financial support to work on their language, they say they feel that they are being compensated for something that was taken away from them long ago. They say first their land was stolen, then their language was stolen, and then their children, and then their water. But now, at last, the water, the children and even the language is being returned.

The benefits of giving recognition and funding for Aboriginal languages are multiple. The bringing back of the language has personal, social, emotional, educational and cognitive benefits. I have worked on recording the language with many Elders, who now have a new purpose and outlook on life. They look forward to the days when they are paid, as custodians of the language, to provide valued words and phrases for the younger ones. Being asked to teach their language has increased the Elders’ sense of pride and self worth, which directly impacts positively upon their physical and mental state of well-being.

Other younger adults who have involved themselves in revival activities, particularly through TAFE classes, have also benefited in various ways. Three students have lost their husbands during our TAFE courses, and the supportive group we have created at TAFE gave these women important emotional support, as well as something meaningful to work towards as they worked through their grief. In class we chose to translate a number of popular English hymns which are regularly sung at Ngarrindjeri funerals. Singing these hymns in Ngarrindjeri at two funerals was a big comfort to the students who lost their husbands. We now get regular requests for our class choir to sing at other funerals.

Another 2007 TAFE student realised she had a passion for study, and after graduating, with an IVEC Cert I (Aboriginal Language), took up further study and is now training to be a teacher through external studies at a university in NSW. Other TAFE students have made themselves available as Ngarrindjeri language teachers in local schools, and have surprised themselves with the new skills and confidence they have developed in teaching their language to others.

Most of all, the process of reclaiming and relearning ones language is an uplifting and enjoyable experience for all involved. Students keep saying how much they enjoy their Fridays at TAFE. because they have “lots of fun”. It helps them to forget about their family problems and stresses for just a day. It recharges them and gives them strength for the rest of the week. They say “learning my language makes me happy” - and we all know that a happy mind is a healthy mind. This sense of well-being that classes provide also impacts on others in the family who benefit from the positive feelings that students take home. One of the biggest achievements of our TAFE class has been the formation of the *Rritjarukar* choir (the Willy wagtails), and the many opportunities we have had to perform publicly at events singing our songs in the Ngarrindjeri language. They say that singing together in a choir is “food for the soul”, but when we sing together in our choir, in a language that was once lost, there is a double benefit for the soul.

- **The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education**

I worked in three Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s in communities where the children spoke Aboriginal languages as their

first language. For some English was a second if not a third or fourth language. These were the boom years of bilingual education, when children were learning how to read and write in their own language before transferring formally to English literacy in Year 4. I was employed as a teacher or teacher/linguist at Milingimbi, Willowra and Yirrkala. I remember distinctly the moments of “Eureka” when particular children in the early childhood classes “clicked” with the whole literacy thing. They suddenly caught onto the fact that all those letters on their page represent sounds and words, and if they tried hard they could read and write anything they wanted to in their own language. This realisation came after weeks of the local Aboriginal teacher scribing each child’s own stories in their own language, modelling how to write and spell in the language. After that Eureka moment it is just a matter of practice before each child becomes a fluent reader and writer in their own language. It is also a relatively straight forward process for these literacy skills to be transferred to the English language (at around Year 4), and again just a matter of time and practice before they become fluent readers and writers of English.Well that is the theory. But without training for the local teachers, or without funding for local resources, this bilingual method can be challenging. But if well resourced, learning in a bilingual program can be a lot more effective and successful for Aboriginal children who begin school speaking a language other than English.

Unfortunately, in schools in the NT today operating under the new all-English language policy, the bilingual method has been scrapped. Instead the children are expected to begin their schooling in English, without the comfort of learning to read first in their own familiar language. For these children it is highly probable they will NEVER have that Eureka moment. This means they will never “click” with this mysterious literacy thing, and will quite likely leave school without literacy skills in any language.

- **The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages**

It would be easy to understate the effectiveness of the revitalisation language programs currently operating in South Australia. Some, of course, are more effective than others if one is to judge “effectiveness” in terms of community involvement and language outcomes. As a member of the Mobile Language Team, the feedback I receive from different Aboriginal people involved in language revitalisation, is enthusiasm, commitment and a desire for more specialised training and support. Initially much of the language work being conducted has focussed on retrieval work and the production of language resources, largely possible through MILR funding. One of the largest groups in SA is the Ngarrindjeri, with whom I work closely. We have produced a huge amount of resources (dictionary, alphabet & picture books with CDs, learners’ guide etc.). Similarly teams have worked in SA with the Narungga, Kaurna, Wirangu, Dieri, Kokatha, Arabana, Adnyamathanha and Ngadjuri to produce further language resources. The team process of producing these resources is an important part of the actual revival process itself. Then follow up activities, such as language workshops or TAFE based language classes, have seen these resources being used to further develop the languages for real everyday purposes. Different language groups in SA are developing their languages to:

- Translate and write songs
- Write poems
- Write and give welcome speeches

To acknowledge the owners of country / land
To greet and farewell each other
Name things / talk about things in the natural environment
Perform hymns at funerals
Sing songs at celebrations and community events
Talk about day-to-day activities (eg. morning tea talk)

Let me conclude by saying that the demand and need for further support for language revitalisation programs in SA are very real – this includes both financial and technical support. There is also a demand for support for the two stronger languages in SA, which require maintenance programs rather than revitalisation programs. These languages are Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara, which have extra sets of needs, especially in interpreting and translation services.

Finally, I wish to reiterate that there is a huge demand among Aboriginal community members, from both strong languages as well as languages under revival, for further language training. This is particularly for students to study the newly accredited Cert III in *Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language*, and later the Cert IV in *Teaching an Endangered Aboriginal Language*. Unfortunately, it is impossible for TAFE SA to meet the demand out there among the many different language groups to fund all the training being requested by each group. Further commonwealth funding and support is essential.

For further information about the revival of the Ngarrindjeri language in particular, see:

Gale, Mary-Anne & Sparrow, Syd (2010) “Bringing the language home: the Ngarrindjeri dictionary project. In Hobson, John et.al. (Eds.) *Re-awakening Languages*. Sydney University Press, Sydney.

Gale, Mary-Anne & Mickan, Peter (2008) “Nripun your ko:pi: we want more than body parts, but how?” In Amery, Rob & Nash, Joshua (Eds.) *Warra wiltaniappendi: strengthening languages: Proceedings of the inaugural Indigenous languages conference (ILC) 2007*. University of Adelaide, Adelaide. 81-88.

Gale, M; McHughes, E; Williams, P & Koolmatrie, V. AIATSIS 2009 Conference presentation: *Lakun Ngarrindjeri Thunggari – Weaving the Ngarrindjeri language back to health*. See electronic version at:
<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/conf2009/papers/LRE1.html#gale>