

Australian Linguistic Society

Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous Communities

Submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal  
and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

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## SUMMARY

This submission seeks to focus on three matters relating to Language learning in communities. These are the national policy framework for Indigenous languages; Languages in schools programs and the role of languages in early childhood; and the measures to improve outcomes in communities where English is a second language. This submission makes nine recommendations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Commonwealth government should actively pursue the Recommendations (3.1-3.7) made by the Social Justice Commissioner in the 2009 Social Justice Report to develop the National Indigenous Languages Policy.
2. In particular, Recommendation 3.7, to '[c]ommence a process to recognise Indigenous languages in the preamble of Australia's Constitution with a view to recognising Indigenous languages in the body of the Constitution in future' should be acted upon.
3. Each State and Territory education department develops a strategy for training Indigenous language teachers, for ensuring professional development and career pathways and ensures in school support and mentorship to Indigenous staff where required, as part of its Language in schools program.
4. Each State and Territory education department dedicates resourcing to curriculum, syllabus and resource development, working in conjunction with Indigenous staff, community, local language centre and outside agencies where available, and in time, in response to the directions of the National Curriculum.

5. The Federal government should act immediately, working with the States and Territories, to support the development of local early childhood programs, such as Language Nests, which promote and support the use of first and heritage languages. Urgent priority should be given to communities where children are L1 speakers of an Indigenous language, to best serve the early learning needs of children.
6. The ALS recommends that the Australian Government develop a clear and coherent National Language policy regarding Indigenous Languages in Schools programs, with State and Territory compliance to the objectives stated in *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach*. Clear and coherent policy will include a mechanism for coordination and evaluation.
7. That the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training re-instate the Bilingual Education Program, with adequate resourcing and support
8. Universities should offer graduate and post-graduate level teaching programs that prepare teachers as Teachers of Learners of English as an Additional Language in Indigenous contexts
9. Education Departments develop on-going, high quality professional learning programs for staff teaching English as an Additional language.

The Australian Linguistic Society would like to first thank the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous Communities.<sup>1</sup>

### **About the Australian Linguistic Society**

The Australian Linguistic Society is the national organization for linguists and linguistics in Australia. Its primary goal is to further interest in and support for linguistics research and teaching in Australia.

The Society, established in 1967, publishes the *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, a journal of international standing, which includes articles from all areas of linguistics, although having a particular focus on linguistics carried out by Australian linguists or about Australian indigenous languages or Australian English.

Many of the Society's members work directly with Australian Indigenous communities, on community language projects, Indigenous languages in schools programs, and on linguistic research and documentation programs. The Society is committed to respecting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and has developed or endorsed policies and a statement of ethics (<http://www.als.asn.au/activities.html>) to ensure best practice in all professional dealings with Indigenous communities and individuals.

While advocacy for Indigenous language rights is not an explicit goal of the Society, many of its members are committed to and actively involved in local, national and international

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<sup>1</sup> The ALS is grateful to Dr. Samantha Disbray for preparing this submission on its behalf at short notice.

advocacy for the rights of Australian Indigenous peoples to maintain, revive and enjoy respect for their languages and cultures.

## Terminology

In this submission the term ‘language revival’ is used to refer to the efforts of documenting languages no longer spoken, or spoken by or known to few speakers, and the process of communities and individuals developing materials for and learning these languages as second languages (L2). This definition collapses the terms ‘revitalisation’, ‘revival’, ‘reclamation’ and language learning used in the Australian Indigenous Languages Framework (1993).

‘Language maintenance’ refers to first language maintenance, efforts to keep Indigenous languages, still spoken within families and communities as (a) first language(s) (L1) strong, and viable.

This distinction is important to highlight the different needs of L1 and L2 speakers.

‘Language in Schools program’ is an umbrella term used to refer to Indigenous Language and Culture programs in revitalization and maintenance settings.

## Introduction

For decades, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have demonstrated their commitment to the revival and maintenance of their languages. In the face of ebbs and flows in program funding, inadequate resourcing, government policy changes, personal and community challenges, working along side non-Indigenous colleagues, they demonstrate this commitment.

Much of this work takes place in schools – the focus of this submission. Important language maintenance and revival work also takes place in Community Language Centres, universities, in archives and museums. And new and important sites and kinds of language learning and teaching activities, such as those in Knowledge Centres, Land and Sea Management Programs (Submission 20. Fogarty and Kral) are emerging.

Much of this work is productive and effective. However, it remains under-supported and uncoordinated. Lacking a solid policy framework, Australia’s Indigenous languages are vulnerable, and the efforts to revive and maintain them lack sustainability. They remain, as the National Indigenous Language Survey (2005) stated, the most threatened group of languages in the world.

In addition, the pressures on the relatively few Indigenous languages, which continue to be spoken as first languages (L1) are growing. This threatens the intergenerational transmission of these languages and their future as full, viable languages of everyday communication and as rich stores of cultural and ecological knowledge.

## Maintaining Indigenous languages spoken as L1 is a matter of urgency

Pressure on L1 speakers of Indigenous languages to switch to English as the main language of communication is increasing. Speakers of these languages are far fewer in number than Indigenous people learning their heritage language as L2. L1 speakers live in remote areas, and have little access to government funding, grants and services for their languages, adding to the vulnerability of these languages.

Most L1 speakers of Indigenous languages live in the Northern Territory, northern SA, and north-central WA. Here, Indigenous people are increasingly encouraged to move to cities and ‘growth towns’ in remote areas, where English is the dominant language.

Children have less access to mother-tongue instruction in schools in urban schools and in remote communities. From the Northern Territory Department of Education there is a greater emphasis on more English language and literacy teaching and learning at an ever earlier age (T-9 Diagnostic Net<sup>2</sup>). This is despite the Menzies School of Health August 2011 review, which apparently underpins the Department’s policy, which finds that “[t]he “time-on-task” research demonstrates convincingly that more time on English instruction does not correlate with student outcomes (Silburn et al. 2011; 40).

These pressures will have a tipping effect, if decisive measures are not undertaken to address this. Once a language ceases to be acquired by children, it is very difficult to restore it as a living means of thinking and communication in a community. Such measures are discussed in Sections 2 and 3 of this submission.

## Outline of this submission

This submission seeks to focus on three matters relating to Language learning in communities. These are the national policy framework for Indigenous languages; Languages in schools programs and the role of languages in early childhood; and the measures to improve outcomes in communities where English is a second language. This submission makes nine recommendations.

### 1. The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Australian Indigenous languages

Despite the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their languages across Australia, in Indigenous Australians’ statements about the importance and benefits of their languages, common themes emerge. The Statement of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Language (<http://www.vaclang.org.au/>) provides a good example:

Language carries within information about who we are, how we express ourselves and culture and how we define the world around us... Education and language are the glue we need to maintain, revive and reclaim our culture.

Such messages are strong and unequivocal. They resonate in communities where Indigenous languages are no longer used in everyday communication, as in Victoria, and in communities, where language continues to be acquired as a first language by children, in the case of the North East Arnhem Land language, Yolngu:

Yolngu language is our power, our foundation, our root and everything that holds us together. [It] gives us strength; language is our identity, who we are. Yolngu language gives us pride. Language is our law and justice.

Yalmay Yunupingu, Teacher 'NT community tuned in', Koori Mail 437 p.33

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<sup>2</sup> [www.det.nt.gov.au/ data/assets/pdf file/.../NetDescriptionHowToUse.pdf](http://www.det.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/.../NetDescriptionHowToUse.pdf) (Viewed 31/8/2011)

In the 2009 Social Justice Report, these expressions were summarised:

Language and culture are interdependent. It has long been understood that language is the verbal expression of culture. It is the medium through which culture is carried and transferred. Stories, songs and the nuanced meaning of words contain the key to understanding one's world and one's part within it. Strong culture gives the individual a sense of belonging to people and places. For this reason, language and culture are deeply interconnected and core parts of one's identity.

Further benefits of languages to Indigenous people identified in social, medical and education research are documented in the 2009 Social Justice Report (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2009). These include individual and community resilience, improved health outcomes, improved education outcomes through the use of mother-tongue instruction, and improved employment outcomes.

Finally, Indigenous languages and cultures make a significant national contribution to tourism and science and ecological knowledge (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2009: 101). Internationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia contribute to linguistic and cultural diversity worldwide (Hobson et al. 2010).

The benefits of Indigenous Languages and commitment of many Indigenous Australians to languages are well documented. A policy framework to ensure the sustainability of current efforts and to strengthen these is required.

### **Australian Policy Framework for the recognition and support of Indigenous Languages**

Indigenous languages have no official status in Australia. Only one state, New South Wales has a dedicated policy for Indigenous languages, the *Aboriginal Languages Policy* (May 2004). This is a strong cross-agency document, with a clear set of guiding principles. In 2009 the Commonwealth government released *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach*, a welcome and valuable step in developing a policy framework. This is the first national policy to recognize the loss of Australia's languages and its impact on peoples in Australia. Further, it recognizes that reviving and maintaining languages has many benefits, and that the Federal, State and Territory governments have a strategic role in meeting the short and medium term goals identified (some discussion of specific goals will appear in the following sections).

However, this alone does not provide an adequate policy framework. A National Languages Framework must be enshrined in a formal recognition of Indigenous Language Rights. Australia has formally endorsed the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, 2007*. The 2009 Social Justice Report identifies Article 13 of the Declaration<sup>3</sup> as a basis for the development of policy and action for supporting Indigenous languages, and for the implementation of Australia's endorsement of the Declaration. Further, while the Federal government proposes a national approach, the document does not provide a means of creating uniform and co-ordinated policy across the state, territory and Commonwealth governments, which ensure compliance with the stated objectives of the National Approach.

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<sup>3</sup> Article 13 of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* states that:

1. Indigenous peoples have a right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

(<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html> Viewed 22/8/2011)

The Report makes seven recommendations to the Commonwealth government to accomplish this (Recommendations 3.1-3.7: p. 105). The Australian Linguistic Society strongly supports these recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. The Commonwealth government should actively pursue the Recommendations (3.1-3.7) made by the Social Justice Commissioner in the 2009 Social Justice Report to develop the National Indigenous Languages Policy.
2. In particular, Recommendation 3.7, to '[c]ommence a process to recognise Indigenous languages in the preamble of Australia's Constitution with a view to recognising Indigenous languages in the body of the Constitution in future' should be acted upon.

## **2. Indigenous languages and Culture in schools and early education**

### **2.1 Language in Schools Programs**

The content taught in Australian schools signifies what the society deems valuable. Children and young people in Australian schools have access to a wide range of learning areas, which are considered in some way(s) intellectually, culturally and/or economically valuable. The learning areas range from maths and English to history, art, computer studies, languages, sciences and physical education. All contribute to creating a cohort of students, who are culturally and vocationally competent.

In addition, some 260 Australian schools offer language programs in 80 different Indigenous languages (2006-2007 figures per Purdie et al. 2008). Dedicated Indigenous Language and Culture programs in schools give recognition to Indigenous languages, Cultures and identities, treating them as valued areas of learning, equal to other languages, and other subject areas.

There is diversity in the types, contexts, quality of Indigenous languages in schools programs. Local community aspirations, collaboration and on-going support are foundational and the basis for to all languages in schools programs. Most languages in schools programs teach (a) local language(s), and the type of program is determined by the student's and communities' knowledge of the language (e.g. Language revitalization, maintenance). Further, the amount of time dedicated to the language program and availability of curriculum and resources varies. *Indigenous Languages Programmes in Australian Schools. A Way Forward* (Purdie et al. 2008) provides a thorough and recent review of language in schools programs. Two issues from this report are highlighted here.

Language and Culture programs offer a significant opportunity for a connection between children's community and school. Indigenous teachers are the critical link. Indigenous children see adults from their own family and/or community working and taking active roles in their school. Language in schools programs provides opportunities for collaboration between Indigenous staff and non-Indigenous staff, where two-way professional learning between adults as peer learners can genuinely take place. The assistant principal of Alekarenge School, a language revitalization setting, in the NT reported:

*'The culture program is making a big difference to the students, who are really interested in the work they do. It has also been important for strengthening the*

*relationships between teachers and assistant teachers’. [...] ‘the best part of my job is working closely with the Indigenous teachers’.*

(Warlpiri Triangle Report, 2011. Northern Territory Department of Education and Training)

*Indigenous Languages Programmes in Australian Schools. A Way Forward* raises the need for recruitment of Indigenous language teachers, provision of training, on-going in-service professional development and networking opportunities, and improved employment conditions (Recommendations 3-9, xvi).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

3. Each State and Territory education department develops a strategy for training Indigenous language teachers, for ensuring professional development and career pathways and ensures in school support and mentorship to Indigenous staff where required, as part of its Language in schools program.

For such language in schools programs to work well, as Purdie et al. identified, there needs to be strong systemic support in terms of syllabus documentation, curriculum planning and provision of resources the use of digital technologies for the development of on-line curriculum content

Currently some States and Territories have curriculum and syllabus documents for Indigenous languages programs<sup>4</sup>. The ‘National Curriculum: languages’ is still in the planning stage, with the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages*, released in January 2011 under consideration. The shaping paper recognizes the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and recognizes the need for a diversity of program types to meet the language learning and language maintenance needs of students in Australia. It is yet to be seen whether the proposed directions of the shaping paper will be adopted.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

4. Each State and Territory education department dedicates resourcing to curriculum, syllabus and resource development, working in conjunction with Indigenous staff, community, local language centre and outside agencies where available, and in time, in response to the directions of the National Curriculum.

## **2.2 Benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education**

The recent review of the substantial national and international literature relevant to Indigenous Australian contexts by the Menzies School of Health (2011) provides strong evidence for the need for the use of first language in early childhood learning settings for long-term educational success. Successful programs supported community aspirations for their children’s education and development, and as such were culturally inclusive and culturally responsive, and involved family and community strongly in education settings (pp.33-37).

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the various State and Territory language in schools policy and curriculum documents, see Purdie et al. 2008, Chapter 3.

Federal government policy *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach* proposes to pilot Early Childhood Language Nests to address critically endangered languages. Language nests, early childhood learning programs, led by community members to provide children with age-appropriate, play-based learning, with a focus on language development, were proposed in the 2005 NILS report, “for all language categories (strong, endangered, and no longer spoken)” (116). In the Northern Territory, the Mobile Pre-school program operates in part as Language nest program, and could be further strengthened and expanded <sup>5</sup>.

Such programs should not be limited to critically endangered languages, but available to interested communities, where an Indigenous language(s) is still spoken and in language revitalization settings. Where a new variety, a local Aboriginal English or Kriol variety is spoken, communities should be consulted to plan programs, which best suit the early learning of their children.

Short, well-developed, play-based oral English sessions, suited to pre-school aged children could also be incorporated into such learning settings. This may require additional support for Indigenous and/or assisting non-Indigenous teachers, in age-appropriate ESL methodology and programming.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

5. The Federal government should act immediately, working with the States and Territories, to support the development of local early childhood programs, such as Language Nests, which promote and support the use of first and heritage languages. Urgent priority should be given to communities where children are L1 speakers of an Indigenous language, to best serve the early learning needs of children.

### **2.3 Language in Schools Programs: Policy Frameworks**

While schools may not have primary responsibility for language revitalization and maintenance, they have an important role to play, since school-time occupies much of children's most productive time for learning. This role is recognized in the Federal government policy *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach*. One of its five stated objectives is “to support and maintain the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australian schools”. To achieve this objective the Federal government has dedicated

[s]ignificant funding the states and territories to support Indigenous Language in Schools Programs, through the National Education Agreement for languages, allowing jurisdictions flexibility to determine how funding is allocated. Funding can be used to support and maintain Indigenous language programs operating in government schools.

Currently the *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach* objectives lack clarity in terms of their status and means of evaluation. While funding for Indigenous Language in Schools Programs is dedicated, these programs are not mandated. At both the national level, and across and within the various education departments, there is a lack of coherent, effective policy (with the exception of NSW). A mechanism for co-ordinating and reviewing Indigenous languages in schools programs should be developed.

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<sup>5</sup> The Mobile Pre-school program was monitored by the Menzies School of Health.  
<http://www.menzies.edu.au/research/child-health/developmental-health-and-education/mobile-preschool-program>



The Social Justice Commissioner notes that currently “language activity is endorsed in principle, but implementation of language programs is left to the discretion of local school administrations and school principals” (2009: 59). Recommendation 3.6 proposes that “through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), develop agreements with all governments to ensure consistency and compliance with Australia’s Indigenous Languages – A National Approach” (105).

Clear policy guidelines at the National, State and Territory level would ensure that where communities want to start, restart or continue a Language in Schools program, the process of consultation, collaboration and planning is mapped and resourced. The report *Indigenous Languages Programmes in Australian Schools. A Way Forward* (2008) addresses this lack of co-ordination in its recommendations (Recommendation 12), proposing that a position within the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to co-ordinate the development of sustainable Languages in Schools programs<sup>6</sup>.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

6. The ALS recommends that the Australian Government develop a clear and coherent National Language policy regarding Indigenous Languages in Schools programs, with State and Territory compliance to the objectives stated in *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach*. Clear and coherent policy will include a mechanism for coordination and evaluation.

### **3. Measures to improve education outcomes, where English is a second language**

As discussed in 2.2 above, the Menzies School of Health review (2011) of a large national and international literature has highlighted the importance of L1 in L2 learning. Mother-tongue instruction, particularly in the early years of schooling, is advocated internationally as the means of achieving bi- and multi-lingual education (see UNESCO, 2003). The use of first language in schools is not detrimental to second language learning, for early skill development in L1 is crucial. For second language learning to be successful, in addition to strong foundation in L1, second language teaching must be informed, expert and effective.

The bilingual programs and Two-Way programs, when well supported at a systemic, community and school level, showed positive learning, community development and language maintenance outcomes (DEET, 2004; Batten et al, 1998; Devlin, 1995; McKay, 1997; Gale 1990). The Menzies School of Health review indicated that only when programs could not be well-supported, should English as an Additional Language (EAL) within a "culturally responsive framework" methods be used. The present NT Government has decided (NT DET 2011) that it is not prepared to put the resources into providing adequate bilingual education education, but instead will adopt the EAL approach. Home languages may be used, but there is no commitment to support and develop their use, even to the limited extent of providing systematic training for explaining school concepts in the home language.

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<sup>6</sup> That MCEETYA fund a position within DEEWR for a national coordinator of Indigenous languages programmes in schools. The role of this person will be to promote the development of sustainable Indigenous languages programmes in schools; to facilitate networking of those involved in Indigenous languages teaching across States and Territories; and to be involved in policy coordination across government departments, in keeping with the whole-of government approach to Indigenous affairs (xvii).

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

7. That the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training re-instate the Bilingual Education Program, with adequate resourcing and support

For second language teaching to be informed, expert and effective, teachers need to have been trained specifically in Teaching English as an Additional Language. Where they enter service without the appropriate training, they must be supported with training and on-going support. In-service teachers, particularly in the first couple of years of teaching will best succeed with on-going professional development, to understand the specific language learning needs of Indigenous students (Oliver et al. 2011).

Further, “[h]ighly competent teachers of English need to be able to explicitly teach for the differences in children’s L1 and English at the phonological, morphological, syntax, semantic and socio-cultural levels” (Menzies School of Health 2011: 38).

Some Education Departments have invested in the development of professional learning packages to up-skill teachers in their understandings of this L1-L2 interface. These have focused on varieties of Aboriginal English and Kriol (Catholic Education Office, Qld (2003); Catholic Education Office, WA (1994); Education Department of Western Australia (2004); Education Department of Western Australia, Catholic Education Office & Association of Independent Schools, WA (2000)).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

8. Universities should offer graduate and post-graduate level teaching programs that prepare teachers as Teachers of Learners of English as an Additional Language in Indigenous contexts
9. Education Departments develop on-going, high quality professional learning programs for staff teaching English as an Additional language.

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