

Australian Society for Indigenous Languages Inc.

Indigenous languages in education:

what the research actually shows



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Charles E. Grimes, Ph.D.





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Indigenous languages in education: what the research actually shows

Charles E. Grimes, Ph.D.1

"Children learn better if they understand the language spoken in school. This is a straightforward observation borne out by study after study (Thomas and Collier, 1997; Dutcher, 1995; Patrinos and Velez, 1996; Walter, 2003). Even the important goal of learning a second language is facilitated by starting with a language the children already know. Cummins (2000) and others provide convincing evidence of the principle of interdependence—that second language learning is helped, not hindered by first language study. This leads to a simple axiom: the first language is the language of learning. It is by far the easiest way for children to interact with the world. And when the language of learning and the language of instruction do not match, learning difficulties are bound to follow." (World Bank 2006:3)

"The level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development." (Cummins. 2000)

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"The most powerful factor in predicting educational success for minority learners was the amount of formal schooling they received in their L1." (Thomas and Collier, 1997, reporting on an 11-year study of 42,000 minority language speakers in the USA.

www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/resource/effectiveness/)

The gap in the Northern Territory

With something like 30% of the population of around 200,000 of the Northern Territory being indigenous, and those indigenous citizens speaking several dozen heritage languages, it is clear that the Northern Territory is multilingual, perhaps to a greater degree than any other state or territory in Australia. (See www.ethnologue.com for a listing of languages in Australia.) This presents special challenges for education, health, the job market and the criminal justice system, just to name a few key sectors.

But with something like 80% of the prison population being disproportionately indigenous, and the disproportionate lack of indigenous people employed in the mainstream community (also as a result of being educationally disadvantaged), it is clear that past and current policies and practices of the Northern Territory government (both current and past) in relation to the role of language in education, and cross-cultural communication in other sectors such as health and the criminal justice system, are for the most part ineffective. And as the addage says, "If you keep doing what you've always done, you will keep getting the results you've always gotten." So it is time for the NT government to show the courage of taking a fresh look and a more informed approach to education in indigenous communities, and pursue a better understanding of the role of language in undergirding current problems in education, health, the job market, and the criminal justice system.



Around the world (including Australia), the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and English as a Second Language (ESL) have made huge advances in the past several decades, as have studies of issues facing speakers of minority languages in mainstream education (see attached bibliography). But there is a big gap between these fields, and the attitudes and practices of general educators, policy-makers, and the national curriculum in education for the subject of English as it is taught in schools, which has for the most part been fairly static for decades and assumes that students are native speakers of Standard English. The latter field is either ignorant of, or chooses to ignore the developments in the former fields, even though the demographic of English-speaking countries such as Australia is increasingly multilingual, and the proportion is increasing of children in schools who do not come from homes where Standard English is the primary language. There is a move in some countries to force the educators through legislation to become aware of and accommodate many of these advances in related fields which are directly relevant to the language-related challenges faced in education and society.

This gap between what the research actually shows and the policies and practices in Northern Territory schools relating to language issues is quite glaring. The specifics of this are well documented in Simpson, Caffery and McConvell (2009), and in Devlin (2009). It does not speak well of the NT government, nor of its commitment to making a real difference in indigenous communities. It is time for a significant change in direction—but one that is better informed on the issues.

The World Bank (2005:1) observes:

"Fifty percent of the world's out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition."

The Northern Territory government ultimately wants their indigenous citizens to be part of:

- stable communities, who are
- both literate and competent in the national language— English;
- have a strong sense of identity and pride in their unique ethnic heritage (there can be no community stability without this);
- stay in school at least through most of secondary school, and preferably beyond;
- are productive and contributing members of society in whatever rural or urban community in which they live.

Worldwide experience and decades of research (including in Australia and the Northern Territory—see attached bibliography) show an overwhelmingly unified picture that:

- People who speak more than one language competently are not only enriched by it, but true bilinguals can also see the legitimacy of and appreciate multiple perspectives in ways that monolinguals can't. They have greater opportunities of participation and advancement in multiple communities.
- People who can function competently in *both* the national (majority) language and the local (minority) language tend to 'succeed' in both worlds (*bilingual*). They are the ones who become respected community leaders within the community, can represent the interests of the community to outsiders, and can also participate fully in mainstream society.
- In contrast, members of indigenous communities who are not fully competent in *either* the national language *nor* in the local language (*semi-lingual*), tend to be frustrated. They do not have a complete or mature cultural or linguistic framework for problem-solving, and they also

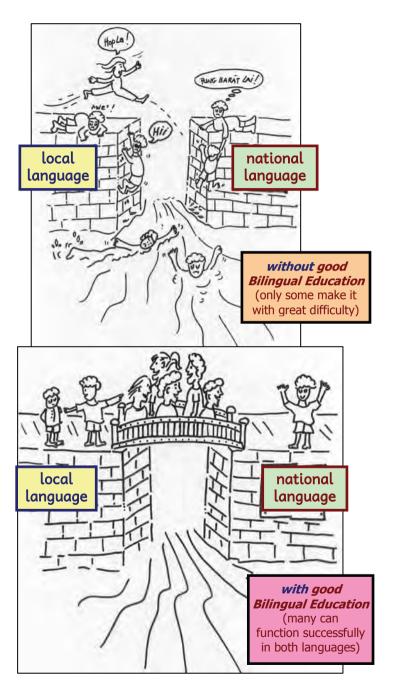


aren't accepted by their own societies as having a legitimate voice in community affairs. Semi-linguals are often involved in anti-social behaviour.

- Where the government and educational system promotes only the national language and does not make space for or actively discourages the legitimate roles and use of local languages, this has been shown to contribute significantly to lack of self worth, marginalisation, and for some, active resentment. These also contribute to anti-social behaviour.
- Literacy is far more effective when the basic skills are done in the 'mother tongue'—the language most actively used in the home. The research supporting this is overwhelming.
- Education that bridges from the local languages, eventually transitioning fully into the national language is far more effective and far less destructive than education that only functions in the national language from the start. This is especially true for communities in which a local language continues to have important roles for communication and identity, and the national language (i.e. English) is not the main language used in the homes. Again, the research supporting this is overwhelming.

A graphic illustration

The following cartoons are commonly used to graphically illustrate the experience and frustration of children speaking minority languages around the world without and with a good bilingual education program. The cartoonist of this particular version, June Jacob, is a native speaker of a stigmatized minority language and has experienced these struggles for herself. She is now an educator who advocates for good multilingual education programs. (Cartoons ©2003 June Jacob, used with permission.)



Perceptions contributing to the problem

- Bilingual education (or multilingual education), like other programs, can be done well or be done poorly. Policymakers often dismiss the whole idea of bilingual education where it has been poorly thought through or poorly implemented, even though the poor practice may be in only a small number of communities. This seems to be true in the Northern Territory as well.
- There is a misconception among some policy-makers that 'bilingual education' means the local language is taught, and the national language isn't. However, the 'bi-' in bilingual means 'two'. The goals of well implemented bilingual education programs are to help the students achieve full competence in *both* languages—not just one or the other. And this is healthy for the whole of society. Poorly implemented bilingual education programs may get this wrong.

Summary of research findings

The World Bank (2005) summarizes the findings of extensive and recent research relating to educating children initially in their own language and transitioning them to the national language. These are all outcomes that we assume would be valued in the Northern Territory.

- Children **LEARN BETTER**. This is supported by study after study.
- Children in rural and/or marginalised populations **STAY IN SCHOOL LONGER**.
- Children in rural and/or marginalised populations **REACH HIGHER LEVELS OF EDUCATION** overall.
- Children in rural and/or marginalised populations INCREASE SOCIAL MOBILITY.

- End-of-primary PASS RATES ARE HIGHER in statistically significant ways where effective MLE programs have been implemented.
- Use of a language that children understand allows teachers to use more active and MORE EFFECTIVE TEACHING METHODS.
- First language teaching has been linked to BETTER
 ACQUISITION OF LITERACY SKILLS that also bridge over to
 the second or national language.
- First language teaching has also been linked to RAISING ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS in a variety of academic subjects, including mathematics.
- Children in good bilingual education programs have been shown to be up to 5 times **LESS LIKELY TO REPEAT** a year.
- Children in good bilingual education programs have been shown to be up to 3 times **LESS LIKELY TO DROP OUT** of school.
- The two points above are all the more significant because children receiving instruction in first languages are OFTEN FROM MORE AT-RISK POPULATIONS.
- The use of local languages for instruction often leads to inclusion of MORE LOCAL CONTENT in the curriculum and GREATER PARTICIPATION of parents and community members as classroom resources. The whole community benefits by this sense of inclusion.
- As parents see their children successfully learn to read and write in their own language, the parents are often motivated to attend literacy classes as well. ADULT LITERACY improves.
- Cost analysis shows that after only a very few years, good bilingual education programs that are well implemented are actually cheaper for the budget, and also



tend to produce more productive members of society and fewer dysfunctional members of society than traditional "national language only" approaches to education.

Implications for the Northern Territory

It is not true that an 'English-only' policy (even if just for the first 4 hours of school) will necessarily help indigenous children learn English better. The research shows it is very likely to further marginalise them and contribute even further to low self-esteem and low achievement in learning outcomes.

The research also shows that indigenous students are **MORE LIKELY TO LEARN ENGLISH BETTER** if they have a well-designed and well-implemented bilingual education program in their indigenous language.

Furthermore, to try to claim that indigenous communities in the Northern Territory are the exception to the patterns found in similar communities throughout the world, elsewhere in Australia, and even in the Northern Territory itself, is not only ill-informed, but it is irresponsible.

Informal polling of teachers over a period of ten years around the NT shows that many can teach for years in communities like Tennant Creek and Katherine without ever realising that their indigenous students are not native speakers of Standard English. So the teachers never dream of approaching their students as second-language speakers of English, or benefiting from the many language-in-education studies that would help them be more effective teachers. The same informal polling also shows that many school teachers in the NT are unaware of the existence of Kriol and Aboriginal English, both of which are well recognised by sociolinguists—these varieties based on English are not Standard English, but have their own grammar and vocabulary. And therefore, these teachers also do not benefit from lessons learned about creoles in education that even have professional journals dedicated to the topic.

Many school teachers also do not recall having been given even basic orientation to the multilingual and multicultural nature of the Northern Territory. Surely there is room for improvement here.

Without the political will to implement good MLE programs, the best policies (which we don't yet have in the Northern Territory), the best curriculum, the best materials, and the best teachers, with full community support cannot pull off what is known to be the 'best practice' for education in indigenous communities. The research is unified and overwhelming. So it is puzzling why it continues to be ignored by government policy-makers and general educators in the Northern Territory.



Bibliography of research relating to language, social identity, social stability and education in multilingual societies

NOTE: Entries preceded by an asterisk (*) are either about Australia, involve Australian scholars, or are affiliated with an Australian institution.

273 out of 691 entries (39%) are marked in this way.

There may be others on this list I am not aware of.

257 of these are recent resources published since 2000.

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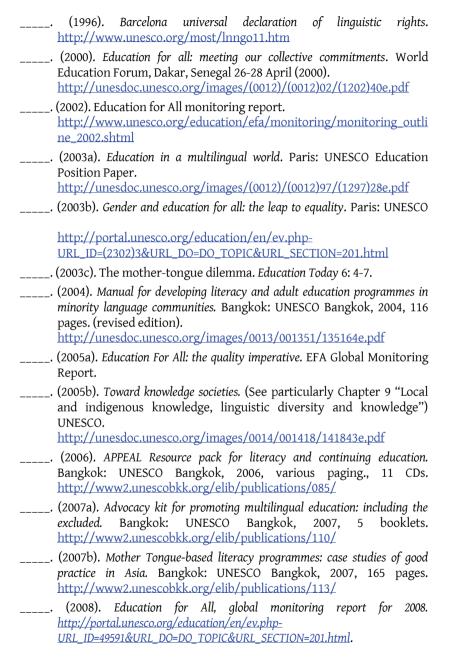
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