

The place of Indigenous languages in a National Curriculum for Languages

In February and March 2010 Federal Education Minister, Julia Gillard, has referred approvingly to the inclusion of 'grammar' in the English Syllabus which forms part of the evolving National Curriculum. Discussions are now in progress to shape the Languages Syllabus:

<http://www.acara.edu.au/languages.html> - accessed 2 March 2010:

ACARA has identified key issues to be resolved prior to writing the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages*. Some of the key issues identified include:

1. What is an appropriate rationale for learning languages?
2. How is the diversity of learners and their distinctive learning pathways understood?
3. What are the expectations about articulation, continuity, and intensity of learning in a national curriculum for languages?
4. How should the languages area be shaped?
5. Will language-specific curricula be developed? If so what criteria will be used to select the languages for development?
6. How will the languages curriculum be designed?
7. Will the national curriculum for languages be written on a year by year basis?
8. What is the process for the benchmarking of a world class curriculum for languages?
9. What matters will require resolution by other authorities?

In developing the position paper for the languages curriculum, ACARA has been assisted by a reference group composed of teachers, school leaders, academics, members of professional associations and curriculum experts.

It is therefore timely to consider the place of Indigenous languages in a National Curriculum for Languages. To date it has been possible to devise different approaches across the range of educational jurisdictions. In NSW and Victoria, for instance, the language situation has been presented in an homogenized form so that, potentially, any Indigenous language can be presented in essentially the same way. But in South Australia and the Northern Territory, a range of separate curricular strands has been developed to reflect the range of language situations from language maintenance to language revival. So one question is how a National Curriculum will deal with this diversity. Another question concerns the extent to which linguistics is explicitly a part of the curriculum. In NSW the Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_sc/aboriginal-languages.html] has as one its three learning objectives: Making linguistic connections. In senior years (essentially Years 9-10), students are expected to deal with such matters as:

Making Linguistic Connections

Outcome 5.MLC.1: A student demonstrates understanding of the nature of languages as systems by describing and comparing linguistic features across languages.	
Students learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ways to analyse and explain features of language in use, and their relationship to the system the need for consistent application of grammatical rules and conventions to achieve effective communication ways to support and sustain communication in extended text variations of the message according to context, purpose and audience. 	Students learn to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analyse aspects of language in order to identify and explain structures and patterns in text use metalanguage to explain linguistic structures and textual features encountered in text describe features of text structure, textual coherence and cohesion in sequencing ideas, eg conjunctions, the use of ellipsis reflect on formal and informal language, and when and where it is used.

Outcome 5.MLC.2: A student develops the ability to use their linguistic resources to support the study and production of texts in Aboriginal languages.	
Students learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the importance of being aware of the choices that are made to convey precise meaning the effect of linguistic choices on intended meaning meaning conveyed in words the impact of writing systems on Aboriginal languages the varied use of linguistic resources in a range of Aboriginal languages. 	Students learn to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> evaluate the accuracy and appropriateness of structures when constructing and editing text make linguistic choices to enhance their intended meaning, drawing on a range of linguistic structures analyse ways in which words are constructed, eg how words are modified for different grammatical functions develop an awareness of the impact of writing systems on Aboriginal languages evaluate the use of linguistic resources across a range of Aboriginal languages.

To achieve these outcomes requires fairly sophisticated linguistic understanding. One question then is whether a National Curriculum seeks this level of detail or allows a more generalized approach.

There is then the much broader issue of how much Indigenous languages might appear across the entire curriculum, given that ACARA requires: Indigenous perspectives, which will be written into the national curriculum to ensure that all young Australians have the opportunity to learn about, acknowledge and respect the culture of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders [http://www.acara.edu.au/cross_curriculum_perspectives.html]

This means that, ideally, curricula for English, Geography, Science, etc would include Indigenous perspectives. It seems to me that at least one part of such perspectives could include languages.

An even broader concern is to what extent Linguistics in the broad might inform curricular objectives. Consider one of the general capabilities intended for the National Curriculum:

Thinking skills refers to a range of kinds of applied intellectual activities that are involved in using information to achieve outcomes. They include elements such as solving problems, making decisions, thinking critically, developing an argument and using evidence in support of that argument. Thinking skills constitute the core of most intellectual activity.

Extending back to ideas from Ken Hale in the 1960s, Linguistics can be seen as a means for developing thinking skills as reflected in:

Honda, Maya & Wayne O'Neil 2007 *Thinking Linguistically: A Scientific Approach to Language*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

The recent development of OZCLO [www.ozclo.org.au] clearly indicates that Australian school students can develop a keen interest in Linguistics so why not take up the opportunity now to give Linguistics a wider exposure across the National Curriculum?

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