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# ***Remote Indigenous education and translanguaging***

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*Abstract: Indigenous<sup>1</sup> children living in the more remote areas of Australia where Indigenous languages continue to be spoken often come to school with only minimal knowledge of English, but they may speak two or more local languages. Others come to school speaking either a creole, or Aboriginal English, non-standard varieties which may sound similar to English, which gives them their vocabulary, while differing in terms of structure, phonology and semantics and pragmatics. This paper begins with a discussion of the linguistic contexts the children come from and the school contexts the children enter into before moving on to discuss a potential role for some use of translanguaging techniques in the classroom and discussing the potential benefits and advantages these may have.*

*Keywords: Indigenous children; language; translanguaging; classrooms.*

## **Introduction**

Deliberating on the state of language education in Australia, Michael Clyne (2004; 2008), a great proponent of multilingualism (and multilingual himself), adopted the term “monolingual mindset” to refer to monolingualism being viewed as the normal state of affairs. In reality bi- and multilingualism are widespread across the world with the majority of people being multilingual (Romaine, 2013). Most of the Australian population would consider Australia to be a monolingual country in the sense that English is spoken everywhere and most children learn English as their first language despite 25.3% of children born in Australia speaking a language other than English as a first language (Australian Early Development Census, 2019). This figure includes

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<sup>(1)</sup> The term Indigenous is used respectfully to refer to all people of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Indigenous languages and Australian Indigenous languages are used to refer to the languages of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders following NILS3 (2020).

Indigenous children born into communities where either Traditional Indigenous Language (TILs), or creole varieties, are spoken.

Indigenous children in Australia living in the more remote areas of the country (such as those in the north of Queensland, the Northern Territory, and Western Australia) are often born into a rich, complex and sometimes multilingual language contexts. I discuss these linguistic contexts briefly below before outlining the language situation as it relates to remote schooling environments where the children's languages, whether TILs or creoles, tend to be disregarded both in the classroom and in assessment processes. This is despite the considerable evidence that the incorporation of children's first languages into educational settings can both contribute to educational outcomes and can act to validate the languages the children speak. I then consider "translanguaging", a term that has recently gained considerable currency in the literature, which, if incorporated into educational context, could contribute to both teachers and students valuing Indigenous languages, both the remaining TILs and the newer Kriol varieties. This would also allow leveraging of the learners' broad language repertoires and work toward maintaining the linguistics knowledge they bring to school for learning.

### **Australian Indigenous languages**

The importance of Indigenous languages to First Australians cannot be under-estimated. For example, the quote below by Yalmay Yunupingu, a teacher from Arnhem Land, is from the Guardian newspaper, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2008:

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. (Guardian newspaper, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2008)

These sentiments have been echoed multiple times by Indigenous Australians in relation to their land and culture. At the time of invasion, Australia boasted over 250 separate Indigenous languages (Koch & Nordlinger, 2014), but today many are spoken only by the older generation (Marmion, Obata, & Troy, 2014) and others are no longer spoken at all. Languages have also undergone, or are undergoing, change resulting in new creole varieties emerging. Some languages are being revitalised,

such as *Kaurna* (Amery 2018; Amery & Buckskin 2012), *Gamilaraay* (Giacon, 1999), *Noongar/Nyungar* (Douglas, 1968), *Wiradjuri* (Rudder & Grant, 2001) and *Ngarrindjeri* (Gale, 2007).

Children are the custodians of language because, if children are not learning a particular language, this indicates that the language is in severe decline and will likely be lost along with the cultural history and knowledge invested in it. But the fact is that the number of TILs being learned by children is declining. At the time of the first National Indigenous Language Survey (NILS1) (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, 2005) there were 18 TILs being learned by children. However, the most recent report (NILS3, 2020) estimates that only 12 TILs remain strong and are being spoken across all generations. However, creoles are now widely spoken across the top end of Australia with Kriol<sup>2</sup> varieties and Yumplatok (the Torres Strait Creole) among the strongest and most widely spoken Indigenous<sup>3</sup> languages in Australia, and their use is increasing (NILS3).

Indigenous children living in these very remote areas, therefore, come from a variety of language backgrounds. They may speak a TIL as their first language, or they may speak one of the varieties of Kriol as their first language. Often these languages are be spoken in conjunction with, or with insertions from, one or more Indigenous languages. Kriol varieties, which are lexified by English, may appear more English-like (more acrolectal) or less English-like (more basilectal), often depending to some degree on the context, the speaker, and the topic. However, pronunciation, word meaning, and pragmatics many differ significantly. Syntax also differs from Standard English (Angelo, 2013; Eades, 2013; Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2018). Kriol varieties are widely used as a lingua franca by the Indigenous population in these areas of Australia.

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<sup>(2)</sup> The English-lexified creoles spoken by between 20-30,000 Indigenous peoples across the north of Australia are known as Kriols.

<sup>(3)</sup> In Australia, many of the creoles which have emerged as a result of contact between a TIL and English are known as Kriols, of which there are multiple varieties (e.g. Fitzroy River Kriol, Daly River Kriol, Ngukurr Kriol among others). Different varieties have resulted from contact with different traditional languages.

Indigenous children born into these contexts have little or no access to English in early childhood (although English may be pervasive in various ways – for example through the ever-present television, or radio, or other varieties of entertainment). For many of them, their first in-depth encounter with English will be when they enter the formal school system, either at preschool, or in the first year of school (Wigglesworth & Simpson, 2018). It is worth noting that this context is fundamentally different from that of children who have either emigrated to Australia with their parents, or have been born here to parents who speak another language, because although their first language may not be English, English is the language spoken in the more urban communities in which they live. For Indigenous children living in the very remote northern areas of Australia this is not generally the case since the whole community will speak a TIL, or a variety of Kriol.

Schooling in Australia is almost always in English. This means that very few Indigenous children have access to education in their first languages in the school system. On top of this, and this is particularly the case with the Kriol varieties, these varieties are often not recognised as a different language; rather they are viewed as “bad”, “broken” English or deficit forms of English (Siegel, 2006, pp. 40-41) in the school systems. This may in part be because many teachers are not generally provided with specific training in language or linguistics, or training in English as a Second/Foreign Language (see Lucas & Villegas, 2013 for further discussion). Creole languages are often “invisible” (Angelo & Hudson, 2018) in the sense that they are not recognised as languages in their own right. But because the children may sound relatively fluent as a result of the lexicalisation of Kriol varieties from English, fundamental grammatical, phonological and semantic differences may pass unnoticed (Vaughan & Loakes, 2020), leading to the view of such languages as “deficit”.

This means that Indigenous children growing up in the more remote areas of Australia are growing up in environments which are more akin to English as a Foreign Language environments than they are to English as a Second Language environments because English is not spoken either at home, or in the community. As a result, the most constant access they have to English is from their teachers once they begin to attend school (see Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Vaughan, 2018).

### **Language in the school context**

In most of the remote areas of Australia where Indigenous languages continue to be spoken, almost all classrooms will also have Indigenous Teaching Assistants who speak both English and the home language of the children. Their role in the classroom is variable, and depends to a considerable degree on how they and the classroom teacher interact. On the whole, language itself tends not to be discussed much in the classroom and little attention is given to the different language varieties used in the classroom including Kriol varieties, and/or the local TIL. Consequently there is a mismatch between English language input and English language output. This may reflect the Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia (AITSL, 2018) standards and procedures document in which ‘language’ is mentioned only twice: once with respect to proficiency for teacher registration, and once with respect to teachers’ abilities to “[d]emonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages” (2018, p. 19).

The advantages of childhood bilingualism are well attested (e.g. Bialystok, 2015; Cummins, 2014; Nicolay & Poncelet, 2015). For Indigenous children, bilingual education, where they begin their education in their first language, could potentially play a triple role; firstly providing children with early education and literacy in a language they are fluent in; secondly by contributing to reversing the current loss of Indigenous languages; and thirdly by the children learning Standard Australian English. Nicholls (2005) points to another compelling reason for Indigenous communities to maintain their languages related to identity, which plays a crucial role in children’s identity formation and their socialisation.

Cummins (2000) argues that because it takes years to achieve academic fluency in a second language, children are advantaged by initially learning in their first language since academic skills and competencies can be later transferred to the second language. While literacy skills transfer is a complex process, current research suggests that children who begin their education in their first language achieve better in both of their languages (Riches & Genesee, 2006). Importantly, they also maintain their first language, whereas children exposed early to an L2 may lose access to their first language which can result in subtractive bilingualism (cf. Cummins, 2014; Fillmore, 1991; Verdon, McLeod & Winsler,

2014). Early L1 education means that the first language is maintained, the second language is learned, and the process is additive in both languages.

However, currently, only a few bilingual programs remain across much of Indigenous Australia, despite all the research showing their educational benefits. The dismantling of bilingual programs, particularly in the Northern Territory, has taken place, piece by piece, over multiple years (see, for example, Devlin, Disbray & Devlin, 2017; Nicholls, 2005; Simpson, Caffery, & McConvell, 2009) for detailed discussion of the history of bilingual programs). The reduction in bilingual programs has also significantly changed the role of both Indigenous teachers and teaching assistants who can no longer mediate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous world views in the same way as previously (Ford, 2013).

### **Assessment in non-English speaking Indigenous contexts**

Assessment too needs additional attention where non-English speaking Indigenous children are concerned. Assessment should guide teaching and learning on the pathway to desired outcomes, and assist in managing educational provision. Such pathways are described as a framework or scale (e.g. the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) for reporting outcomes, the allocation of resources, or the focus of professional development activities. Assessment must also be appropriate and inclusive because of its potential impact on teaching and learning, known as washback, or teaching to the test. All assessment, particularly where language is central to assessment, needs to be sensitive to the linguistic development of the child and support progress toward, in this case, Standard Australian English. Assessment frameworks can be beneficial in guiding the efforts of teachers and learners, but they must be relevant, and based on understanding the children's backgrounds and language development. The standardised testing adopted in Australia – NAPLAN (The National Assessment of Proficiency–Literacy and Numeracy) – has been shown to be deficient in doing this (Macqueen et al., 2019) and one result has been additional discourses of deficit around Indigenous education. For example, in 2016 in its National Report, ACARA reported that:

For every jurisdiction except Tasmania, the percentage of Indigenous students who achieved below the national

minimum standard is more than twice the percentage of non-Indigenous students who achieved below the national minimum standard in all domains. (ACARA, 2016, p. 127)

Language background is almost never mentioned despite up to 100% of children in remote schools coming from non-English-speaking background, and this can be shown to have a greater impact on performance than the oft-blamed absenteeism (Freeman & Wigglesworth, 2020).

In current practice, there are several reasons that assessment for many Indigenous students is not as beneficial as it could be. For example, there is a strong focus on literacy skills and development, often at the expense of oral skills development. For Indigenous children coming to school speaking a language other than English, the children need to first develop competence in spoken SAE, and ideally to enhance their competence in their own language or dialect. Ideally this would occur before they are expected to acquire literacy skills in their second language (Cummins, 2000; 2014). There tends to be limited recognition of the often extensive language repertoires children bring to school, and particularly of multilingual/multidialectal Indigenous children who are speakers of English-lexified varieties such as Kriol varieties. The transition of the Torres Strait Islander creole, often initially referred to as Broken (Shnukal, 1988), to Yumplatok, is an example of this, and for some younger speakers, Yumplatok has now become a symbol of identity (Sellwood & Angelo, 2013).

In Australian assessment systems there tends to be a lack of empirical evidence and innovative theoretical bases for the scales and frameworks currently in use. We need to much better understand the pathways to spoken competence in SAE for multilingual/ multidialectal Indigenous students who are principally exposed to SAE as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) only when they attend school. Ideally, an assessment framework needs to recognise the importance of developing oral language proficiency in SAE as a pre-requisite to literacy development. A multilingual/multidialectal perspective could recognise Indigenous students' ability to use other varieties, and their skills in these. This would provide some validation for their languages. Understanding the level of oral competence needed in SAE by these multilingual students to succeed in school, and to be able to engage with the assessment regimes in place, would be a valuable first step.



## Translanguaging

For the most part, remote schools teach entirely in English. These schools tend to have low levels of attendance and limited community engagement which make for additional complexities for Indigenous speakers of Kriol varieties and other ‘invisible’ Indigenous language varieties. However, despite these programs being English only there are ways in which the languages the children bring to school can be valued in the classroom context, with some elements of the children’s languages being incorporated into the classroom and the curriculum. One approach to this is through translanguaging.

Translanguaging is a term that has recently gained considerable currency in the literature, particularly in relation to education. The term translanguaging can be differentiated from code switching by consideration of the differences between *product* and *process*. Code switching focuses on the production of different languages in the context of communication where speakers are multilingual, or at least bilingual. Code switching is focussed on the production of language, firstly on how, when and under what conditions the different codes are maintained when code switching is used; secondly on where, when and under what conditions shifts between the two (or more) codes occur, and how and to what extent these shifts are linguistically constrained. A third focus is on which items are borrowings from one code to the other and how they are incorporated into the other language (see for example MacSwan, 2013; Myers Scotton, 2017; Poplack, 2001; for a more detailed discussion of code switching).

By contrast, translanguaging is concerned with the processes required to achieve the best communication. As Canagarajah (2011, p. 410) argues, translanguaging refers to “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system”. How and where this is done within a sentence or an utterance is of less concern. Translanguaging has a much greater focus on communication in which speakers use all their resources without constraint for the purposes of achieving satisfactory communication between interlocutors. Thus with translanguaging, the concern is more about the process of arriving at successful communication which will enable learners to achieve their goals, than it is about which language is used, or why such changes of code occur, when they do, and what constraints there might be. It is about the speaker using and having access to their entire



repertoire, as appropriate to the context and to the other participants with whom they are engaging. García (2011) argues that translanguaging can help learning to occur across languages, at the same time as helping students to learn how to use language flexibly, strategically and appropriately according to context and their interlocutor.

Translanguaging is firmly grounded in the social world inhabited by bi- and multi-lingual speakers, in which, rather than thinking about such speakers as having two languages, bi- and multi-lingual speakers can be viewed as having one repertoire from which they can draw on as required to meet their communicative needs. This makes sense because, for the multi- or bi-lingual speaker, their language systems are not discrete linguistic repositories but form their full range of communicative options, with the option they choose determined by who they are speaking with, where they are speaking and about what they are speaking. Indigenous researcher, Robyn Ober, contrasts code switching with the term she coins “slipping and sliding” (2019, p. 10). This captures the idea of the way in which multilingual speakers can draw on their linguistic resources and move “in and out of the linguistic, social and cultural domains as opportunity, demands and necessity arose” (2019, p. 97). The term delightfully depicts the essence of translanguaging and the ways in which multilingual speakers can draw on all their language resources to achieve communication.

### **Bringing translanguaging into the classroom**

In the context of more remote Indigenous Australia, where Standard Australian English is the school language but not a language used at home, there is potential for translanguaging to contribute to enhancing pedagogical practices in several ways. It can support classroom practices through ensuring that multilingual students develop both their social and their cognitive understanding of classroom activities by contributing to their learning and ensuring their understanding, allowing the children to internalise the content they are being taught and as a tool to scaffold their learning. Previous studies have shown that using the language with which children are most familiar mediates the cognitive demands of learning and enhances their learning (DiCamilla & Anton, 2012; Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

Before the Invasion, Indigenous Australia was highly multilingual – communities of people were small, and people

moved around a great deal meaning that they needed to speak multiple languages to communicate with different groups. Almost all speakers were fluent in at least two languages, while many would speak four or more languages (Walsh, 1993), a situation which is still the case in some communities today. As Vaughan (2018) finds in analysing language events – a book launch at the local school, and a football match – in the multilingual community of Maningrida, participants draw on multiple linguistic resources in communicating with those who might speak several languages. She argues that translanguaging activity between English and Burarra (one of the local TILs) is both “unremarkable and unmarked” in those contexts (Vaughan, 2018, p. 141). It is from these backgrounds that many children entering the educational system in the more remote Indigenous communities come; we need to find ways to draw on their language resources in the classroom.

There are a number of studies which have demonstrated that in terms of learning in school, when students are able to use their full repertoire of language in the classroom and in school, this can become a learning and teaching resource. Setati and Alder (2001) argue that because of the conceptual and abstract elements of mathematics in particular it is useful to use the learners’ own languages as a resource and this provides opportunities for students to engage in the kind of “exploratory talk” that facilitates the learning process (2001, p. 246). Uys and Van Dulm (2011) demonstrate that using the full language repertoire of the students – which in this case involved four languages – has a variety of benefits which include behavioural management, as well as explaining content, while at the same time facilitating students’ understanding of classroom activities and enhancing discussion in the classroom, but also reflecting the bilingual identity of the students. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the use of more than one language in the classroom, even to a limited degree, can be used to develop and support links between Western social and scientific notions and Indigenous ways of understanding and knowing because, as Shizha (2007, p. 206) argues: “Language is not just a tool for communication, but expresses our cultural view of the world and our existence. It is a vital component for incorporating indigenous science into the school science curriculum.”

The current educational system disadvantages non-English-speaking Indigenous students culturally and linguistically for

several reasons. It is well attested that Indigenous communication styles are different from the Western English styles, but this is rarely taken into account when talking about teaching Indigenous students. In addition to this, cultural knowledge, and what is important culturally, particularly for Indigenous people who live in the more remote areas, is often markedly different from the ways in which non-Indigenous people think and know. Indigenous knowledge systems and practices have tended to be under-valued, although they are increasingly gaining recognition – for example, the new Indigenous Knowledge Institute to be opened by the University of Melbourne in 2020 (University of Melbourne, 2019) and in the context of the Institute, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum materials that have been developed by Marcia Langton and her colleagues (see <https://indigenousknowledge.research.unimelb.edu.au/>).

Indigenous children bring with them to school a wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge, much of which is often quite unfamiliar to their teachers. While teachers generally cannot be expected to learn the languages the children speak, they should ideally recognise the children's competence in other languages and value those languages. When children speak TILs, they are effectively the guardians, or caretakers, of these highly endangered languages and they are the generation which stand between their Indigenous language and its loss. They are the generation which not only holds the keys to their culture, and but the ones which can also transmit the language and pass it on to the next generation. We have a responsibility to support them in this. For teachers working in remote areas with Indigenous children, even where the teachers are not familiar with the languages, it is worth thinking about learning a few words here and there, and engaging with the children as the experts in the language. This has the dual role demonstrating interest in the children's language and enabling the children to recognise that their language is valued. In this way the children's knowledge can be used to build a bridge to mutual understanding and respect

Bizarrely, or perhaps not so bizarrely given the monolingual mindset that pervades Australia (as well as many other countries), teaching and assessment regimes fail to recognise that Standard Australian English is not the first language of much of the Indigenous population living in remote areas (Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2008) and there seems to be a persistent belief that people born in Australia, almost by definition, always learn

English as their first language. A translanguaging perspective may offer an appropriate framework for both conceptualizing how the language development of multilingual/multidialectal students can be monitored and assisted, but also for demonstrating to them and their teachers the value and significance of their languages. Translanguaging can bring home and school languages into the classroom potentially helping learning to occur across languages, whilst at the same time, assisting students with ways to learn to use language flexibly, strategically and appropriately according to context (García, 2011). This approach has benefits to remote Indigenous communities because it builds on practices which have been around in these communities for centuries.

### **The potential for translanguaging**

The ability to move between languages does not necessarily come easily, but with practice it can be developed as a skill. Essentially, learning to move between two (or more) languages means developing linguistic flexibility, a cognitively demanding skill which requires time and practice and, in schools, pedagogical support is vital as this type of linguistic flexibility cannot be acquired overnight. All teachers need to have an understanding of language: how it works, how it varies, how culture is incorporated into it and, ideally, to some degree how to teach it. Few teachers in any school will not encounter children who come from rich, and different, language backgrounds, and teachers need to learn how to maximise the benefits of these, not only for children from Indigenous backgrounds, but those from other cultural backgrounds as well.

There is a pedagogical imperative in these contexts to enable the development of content understanding which needs to be recognised in addition to the development of strategic and communicative competence in multilingual contexts. The new Victorian EAL curriculum recognises the importance of this and one of the strands across all areas of the curriculum is cultural and plurilingual awareness (VCAA, 2019). Ideally the kind of thinking encapsulated by this curriculum will become more widespread as there will need to be a significant shift in both curriculum and assessment for real and meaningful change to occur.

Translanguaging has the potential to contribute to and enhance the ability for children's first language/s repertoires to be recognised as valuable in the classroom, and to allow teachers to incorporate into the classroom, and potentially the curriculum,

ways of building on the strong oral language skills the children bring with them to school. Translanguaging can also demonstrate to the children the value of their languages, their cultures, and those of their community. Discussions can be held which identify the differences between languages, their range and their variability at different linguistic levels including phonological differences, how differently things may be said in one language versus another language, how similar sounding words may have completely different meanings, how different the pragmatic norms of a language may be, and the range of ways in which discourse can be structured. Such activities can be expected to enhance Indigenous children's performance in school, and, in the long term, potentially their improved performance on standardized tests which will ultimately result in better access to educational and employment opportunities. Equally, the importance of language for identity and culture can be discussed, as can the importance of maintaining the languages for the next generation so that they continue to be spoken, particularly in the case of traditional Indigenous languages.

### **Conclusion**

Rather than basing education on the idea of a binary system of languages, such as 'home language' and 'school language', in the Indigenous classrooms in the more remote areas of Australia we need to consider ways in which different languages can be incorporated according to audience, context, and need and with attention to the proficiency levels of learners (Oliver et al., 2020). Instead of banishing the languages the children bring to school, we need to acknowledge and promote the children's use of their linguistic resources in the classroom through discussion of language and language differences (and bear in mind that these may be endangered languages) and by drawing on the children's considerable cultural knowledge. Several positives may result. Firstly, the language learning of the children may be enhanced through better comprehension. Secondly, there may be an increase in linguistic awareness by both teachers and students about differences between the standard language and the children's languages and this may ultimately lead to greater equity among languages. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, attention to the children's first languages demonstrates the value of these languages have and the role they can play in the classroom, at home and in the wider community. Instead of considering the languages Indigenous children speak as inappropriate for school

– one that they need to switch from – the children’s entire linguistic repertoire should be utilised for the purposes of teaching, learning and engaging with their culture.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper was supported by DP170101735 from the Australian Research Council and I would like to acknowledge my colleagues on this grant (Rhonda Oliver, Tim McNamara, Susy Macqueen, Robyn Ober and Ute Knoch) for their contributions. I am grateful for the valuable input from the reviewers of the paper and for their insights. Any errors remain my own.

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