

Teacher Abroad: Australia

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Kia ora tātou

The themes I am sharing here are not new, but as for any teacher entering a different teaching and learning environment I have been seeing my language teaching in a new light.

For the last three years I have had a series of projects working with community members and university linguists for the revival of Gamilaraay, one of Australia's more than 300 Indigenous languages. Only around a dozen Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island languages are now spoken in families in Australia. There is no longer a speech community of Gamilaraay, which comes from inland northern New South Wales and southern Queensland. The last Gamilaraay speakers died in the mid twentieth century, but notes and recordings taken by missionaries, anthropologists and linguists have enabled an active 21st century revival process.

My experiences in working in Gamilaraay language revival have caused me to reflect on my language teaching approach as it applies more widely, to the teaching of English or any language. What follows is my description of these reflections, as they fall into a number of themes.

The relationship between language, people, and place

The Gamilaraay people have been living on their land for thousands of years; some estimates are around 40,000 years. At Brewarinna on the edge of Gamilaraay country are the oldest built structures in the world: the fish traps on the Barwon River. Together with the oral transmission of their language, the length of time Gamilaraay people have lived in their place means that in Gamilaraay, unlike in English, there is no migration story woven through everyday understandings of the language. The traditions of Aboriginal Australia are of both the land and the language existing *before* the people.

Wherever appropriate in the Gamilaraay learning materials, we now incorporate a formal statement of acknowledgement to the ancestors. Working "on country" in Australia has highlighted for me the need to show respect, however I can, to students' languages and the heritage they represent.

The psychological effects of forced language shift

The impact of colonisation over the last 250 years has been devastating for Australian Indigenous people and their languages, particularly in the eastern areas where the convict settlements spread out from Botany Bay. Although the massacres of Aboriginal people which were part of the colonisation process may now be more than a hundred years ago, the effects live on. Bans on Gamilaraay language use in schools and homes are within living memory for many Gamilaraay people. They cannot "just get over it".



The fish traps on the Barwon River at Brewarinna are said to be the oldest built structures in the world.



Gamilaraay educator Sheree Bilsborough taking the pre-school class roll in Gamilaraay at the Winanga-Li Aboriginal Child and Family Centre in Gunnedah.



Gamilaraay artist Anthony Conlan's design of an echidna used in our pronunciation poster.

The pre-school children I work with in an Aboriginal Child and Family Centre are proud to identify some words as “Aboriginal”, and I have heard them call the English equivalents “normal”. This feeling that Gamilaraay is not “normal” may explain why the concept of “shame” still prevents many people from using much Gamilaraay, even when they are proud to include Gamilaraay words in activities such as the water protest we attended earlier this year. It can be easy to forget that many people who speak English have been prevented from speaking their language, whether officially or not, and the resulting psychological impacts can carry on through generations.

I have been on a steep learning curve as I have tried to establish how the language work I am doing can fit into a reconciliation approach which supports a wider strengthening of community. The policy I have taken is to use only local artists and voices for the materials. The rewards of a strengths-based approach far outweigh the difficulties in any language learning and teaching situation.

The current language and literacy practices of family and community

While we respect the past we also need to recognise that communities are in a continual process of change. My work with Gamilaraay highlights the need to avoid “essentialising” or romanticising the way of life of Gamilaraay communities in the past. In my English language teaching I have often contrasted the students’ culture with “Kiwi culture”, and in some cases this may have been an artificial contrast for students who are not living a very different lifestyle. It may also have overlooked the diversity within other cultures.

One of our biggest challenges is to make Gamilaraay materials which have a distinctly Gamilaraay flavour, but which are relevant to 21st century children, many of whom lead an urbanised life. Recently we had a query about translating the “Happy birthday” song. After consultation, we settled on a translation of “This is your day”, which fits well into the internationally-known tune.

The opportunities provided by new technologies

New technologies are transforming the way in which language revival can take place. The Gamilaraay diaspora (in other states of Australia or beyond) can now take part in the language revival through Facebook or other social media, and young children can watch or listen to Gamilaraay materials on their YouTube playlists.

Teachers have an enormous variety of tools at their fingertips, and luckily there is a lot of free software available for anyone with the time to explore the internet. My current favourites are PowToon and Bitmoji, and in developing our materials we use phones for videos and recording. We can experiment for little outlay other than time, and the analytics in Facebook or YouTube provide feedback which we can supplement by face-to-face assessment with students.

Some final thoughts...

The International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 has renewed a focus on the plight of indigenous languages of the world. Even when our classrooms do not include indigenous languages, the relationships between all the languages in the room – those we teach and those our students speak – form a complex linguistic ecology. As a language teacher I am always fascinated by this, and hope I can find ways to strengthen the linguistic diversity of the wider community.

Ka ngaro te reo, ka ngaro tāua, pērā i te ngaro o te moa.

If the language be lost, we will be lost, as the moa is lost.

Further reading

Smith, H. A. (Forthcoming). ‘An approach to Gamilaraay culture in university courses.’ *Babel Journal*. AFMLTA Australia.

Smith, H. A., Giacon, J., & McLean, B. (2018). ‘A community development approach using free online tools for language revival in Australia’. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 39(6): 491-510.

Websites

International Year of Indigenous Languages website: <https://en.iyil2019.org>

YouTube channel: Speak Gamilaraay

Yaama Gamilaraay! project website: www.winanga-li.org.au



Kullin Long holding a sign saying “No water, no fish” at a community protest at the state of the Namoi River in Gunnedah.