



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TESOL ASSOCIATIONS

Response to First Languages Australia paper *Indigenous Languages Priorities*

21 April 2023

CONTENTS

General Comments	2
Some suggestions	3
1. Re mainstream policies and policy development	3
2. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap	4
3. Indigenous languages, learning English and education more broadly	4
4. The evidence base for the benefits of supporting languages	6
5. Responses to non-traditional and emerging Indigenous languages	6
Conclusion	7

General Comments

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) congratulates First Languages Australia on their *Indigenous Languages Priorities* paper.

ACTA is the peak professional body for TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) educators in pre-school, school and adult settings.¹ It comprises representatives from state and territory TESOL associations, whose members include teachers, consultants and curriculum developers and researchers in the field of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) education. ACTA's particular mission is to advocate for the educational interests of those learning English as their second or additional language in all sectors (Early Childhood Education, schools, VET, other adult, community and tertiary education) and for those who teach them in specialist and mainstream classrooms. These learners include First Nations people for whom traditional and new Indigenous languages are the first or main language in daily life, as well children, young people and adults from migrant and refugee backgrounds.² This response to the *Languages Priorities* paper has been prepared in consultation with the ACTA Consultancy Group on English as an Additional Language or Dialect, which currently consists of 29 teachers, school consultants, teacher educators and researchers who work in Indigenous EAL/D contexts across Australia.

ACTA's focus is pedagogy, and the content, resources, procedures, contexts, policies and research that promote quality EAL/D teaching and learning. We espouse the fundamental evidence-based principle that teaching and learning must respect, build from, develop and extend what the learner – as a thinking, feeling, culturally and socially situated person – knows. This is the foundation for a person's new learnings, including learning English as an additional language or dialect.

It follows that ACTA warmly endorses advocacy by the International Decade of Indigenous Languages Directions Group (Directions Group) for:

major reforms, such as legislation, increased investment in community language activities, and compensation for the destruction caused by assimilation policies that prevented language transmission and removed ... [First Nations] people from their lands. (p. 1)

In the pursuit of truth-telling, especially regarding “the impact of policies on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages”, ACTA acknowledges and apologises for the devastating impact that “English-only compulsory education” has had on First Nations languages, cultures, health and well-being, and for any part that English teaching and related policies have played or are playing

¹ [Australian Council of TESOL Associations – Australian Council of TESOL Associations](#)

² Our use of the terms “traditional” and “new” Indigenous languages is based on the following distinctions:

- **Traditional Australian Indigenous languages** are languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prior to colonisation, and the directly descended language varieties spoken today.
- **New Australian Indigenous languages** are languages formed since 1788 from language contact between speakers of traditional languages with speakers of English and/ or other languages. New languages have historical influences from their source languages, including English, but they are not automatically understood by Standard Australian English speakers.
- **Aboriginal Englishes** are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of speaking English which differ somewhat from Standard Australian English, but which Standard Australian English speakers can more or less understand. These are varieties of English just as American English is a variety of English.

The National Indigenous Languages Report (2020). Commonwealth of Australia, p. 9. [National Indigenous Languages Report | Office for the Arts, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts.](#)

in impeding the intergenerational transmission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultures (*Priorities* paper, pp. 2 & 5).

We support the three priority objectives and five priority policy reforms in the *Priorities* paper. All the Activities listed there are worthy of commendation. We find it impossible to single out any for specific endorsement but we especially appreciate the proposals for:

- developing a national languages policy and establishing a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages commission
- developing a stronger Australian evidence base around the benefits of supporting languages
- training local people to deliver government services, including in pre-school, school and adult education
- reintroduction of bilingual-biliterate education, support for existing bilingual settings secured by legislation, and bilingual schools in ‘strong Aboriginal language speaking’ communities.

Regarding the last dot point, we note that an over-riding principle in the Closing the Gap Agreement is that all initiatives require collaboration with local communities. It follows that Indigenous languages programs must be developed with the consent of and in partnership with communities that speak a given Indigenous language.

Some suggestions

ACTA respectfully offers the following suggestions that we believe would support and further develop the *Priorities* and Activities described in the *Priorities* paper.

1. Re mainstream policies and policy development

ACTA suggests that the *Priorities* paper discussion of the proposed national approach to Indigenous languages include locating an *explicit* mandate with a relevant authority to scrutinise, report and recommend on how mainstream policies under consideration should include measures to stop the loss of Indigenous languages, and – most urgently – on how aspects of proposed policies are likely to exacerbate this loss, even if unintentionally.

Specifically, we have in mind mainstream policies currently in development. For example, the proposed Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper is noticeably silent on arresting the demise of studies in languages, linguistics and education, all of which are crucial underpinnings for the Activities proposed in the *Priorities* paper.

Similarly, the 2023 Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper has adopted a highly abstract, seemingly rigid, one-size-fits-all approach to teacher education that takes no account of situated learning or research into specific First Nations educational contexts. This follows from silence on languages and language education in 2022 Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review.³

Along with almost all other mainstream policy documents, these reports and Discussion Papers do not explicitly refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and associated language education. At best, they may refer in passing to First Nations “cultures and knowledges”. Most mainstream policy documents persist with an underlying monolingual English mindset in which

³ [Final Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

reference to “cultural awareness” glosses over the substantive resources and effort required to support the objectives, priorities and Activities outlined in the *Priorities* paper.

This analysis of mainstream policy proposals could be a key role for the proposed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages commission / commissioner. However, because this proposal may not be accepted, the intent of ACTA’s proposed recommendation is that, no matter how or by whom, mainstream policy proposals must be scrutinised for how they might promote or undermine the proposals in the *Priorities* paper.⁴ The forces that drive the loss of Indigenous languages will not be countered while support for Indigenous languages is siloed from mainstream policy making.

2. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap

In regard to reversing siloing, ACTA’s submission to the Productivity Commission on the National Agreement on Closing the Gap detailed our concerns regarding the siloing of Outcome 16 from other Outcomes.⁵ We suggest that First Languages Australia give detailed attention to how *all* Closing the Gap Outcomes, Indicators, Disaggregation and Data Development can and should incorporate the Activities described in the *Priorities* paper.

3. Indigenous languages, learning English and education more broadly

Along with numerous other reports and Inquiries, the 2020 Parliamentary Inquiry *Parliamentary Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments* has recognised the complimentary relationship between supporting Indigenous languages and learning English in pedagogic contexts:

*Standard Australian English is the dominant language in Australia and there is broad agreement that all Australian children should be proficient in the English language. However, existing language skills, for example in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, can complement and enhance a student’s ability to become proficient in English. **The importance of supporting students’ development in English through recognising students’ existing language skills has been highlighted as being essential to literacy and numeracy development.***⁶ [our emphasis]

This point can be extended to include the fact that learning *any* additional language (including, for example, an Indigenous language through a language revitalisation program) will also enhance a person’s understanding of English and the way it works.

As indicated in our general comments, ACTA believes that maintaining and developing the learners’ first and other languages is the foundation on which EAL/D learning and teaching must build. We would like to see this connection acknowledged in the *Priorities* paper.

In line with our shared support for bilingual education, and the weakening of provision even in some bilingual programs, we suggest that clarification and strengthening of what is meant by “bilingual schools” might be useful. It would be clearer to refer to *bilingual-biliterate programs* or *schooling* to make explicit that the reference is to *curriculum and pedagogy* within the broad school environment. We believe that an authentic bilingual-biliterate program will seek to establish

⁴ [Submission 87 - Australian Council of TESOL Associations \(ACTA\) - Indigenous Evaluation Strategy - Project \(pc.gov.au\)](#)

⁵ [Submission 11 - Australian Council of TESOL Associations \(ACTA\) - Closing the Gap Review - Commissioned study \(pc.gov.au\)](#)

⁶ [Remote education full report.pdf](#), p. 84.

See also House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (2022). *Don’t Take It as Read. Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance*, sections 2.88 ff. [Don't take it as read – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](#)

literacy in the child's L1, i.e. the language/dialect that a child already speaks and understands, at the same time as introducing the learner to spoken English. Once the child is secure in both L1 literacy and spoken English (probably around the mid-Primary years), both literacy skills and spoken English can be drawn on and extended for learning literacy in English. The first language and culture should be further developed and drawn on in all subsequent levels of schooling.

We realise that this detail may not be possible within the constraints of the *Priorities* paper. However, we suggest that clarity is needed to avoid complacency about some existing bilingual programs that are, in fact, under-developed and/or under-resourced.⁷

We also suggest that mention should be included of (i) support for low-cost local publishing to support bilingual-biliterate programs, and (ii) the complementary role of improving a broad and rich range of resources for teaching on country.

Regarding Early Childhood Education, we draw your attention to ACTA's *Early Childhood Education Principles*, which provide strong support for children's first languages.⁸

Provision of bilingual-biliterate programs and, in any case, quality EAL/D pedagogy is impossible without properly trained teachers. We respectfully recommend that the *Priorities* paper include clear and explicit reference to teacher education (both formal qualifications and on-going professional learning), probably in the "sector strengthening" section. Programs should be directed to increasing the numbers of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages *and* English as an additional language/dialect. Further, *all* prospective teachers should be educated to understand the importance of Indigenous languages to First Nations people and the role of the mother tongue in learning English as an additional language or dialect.⁹

More broadly, the maintenance, consolidation and recovery of Australia's Indigenous languages crucially relies on Indigenous language(s) speakers. English literacy skills can substantially increase their contribution as, together with Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and linguists, they produce the grammars, dictionaries and teaching resources for documenting and learning their languages.

Bi/multilingual Indigenous language speakers are also crucial as interpreters and translators. We suggest adding the following to the "sector strengthening" workforce section:

- Support, strengthen and provide interpreting and translating services in service delivery to Indigenous language speaking communities.

Bilingual speakers of Indigenous languages will also provide the expertise to develop the proposed glossary of appropriate terminology in support of language usage in everyday life (p. 5). We suggest that this proposal requires clarification. It is unclear if what is intended are lists of local language words relevant to different kinds of provision (for example, for health workers) or something more general.

English language literacy campaigns that are community-guided and driven can play an important role in building the skills and confidence of many more Indigenous language speakers to equip

⁷ See Problem 4 in [ATESOL NT's Supplementary Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance - ATESOL NT](#)

⁸ [ACTA-ECE-Principles.pdf \(tesol.org.au\)](#)

⁹ A rich framework for these understandings can be found in [The National Indigenous Languages Report \(2020\)](#). Commonwealth of Australia, p. 9. [National Indigenous Languages Report | Office for the Arts, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts.](#)

them to interact with relevant agencies and demand from politicians and bureaucrats that they provide the funds needed to defend their languages. These bi/multi-lingual speakers are important role models and mentors in building pathways for those who wish to access post-school education opportunities, where they can acquire what they need to become more effective language workers and advocates.

Overall, building the English language competence of Indigenous languages speakers is crucial to the Activities proposed in the *Priorities* paper. First Nations language speakers, teachers, linguists and advocates also require confidence and competence in using spoken and written English for lobbying, employment, research and many other activities that will advance Indigenous languages. As we have identified earlier, support for Indigenous languages is undermined and impeded if it is siloed from mainstream policymaking. So too, if proposals to strengthen Indigenous languages and reverse their loss are siloed from consideration of English language learning (and vice versa), the potential contribution of each to the other will be lost.

4. The evidence base for the benefits of supporting languages

In regard to developing a stronger Australian evidence base around the benefits of supporting languages, ACTA is concerned by the monolingual English mindset that frequently dominates the evidence considered in regard to education for Indigenous EAL/D learners.

We note the increasingly important role in guiding policies and pedagogic practice by the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO). Its 2023 research priority is “Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people”.¹⁰

We suggest that First Languages Australia might consider advocating to broaden AERO’s research focus from literacy in English to include the conditions necessary to support substantive bilingual-biliterate and two-way education and to consider the well-established evidence of its effectiveness.

Similarly, the potentially vague and limited notions of “culturally responsive teaching” should also be expanded to include research into the effective teaching of Indigenous languages.

5. Responses to non-traditional and emerging Indigenous languages

ACTA respectfully suggests that non-traditional and emerging Indigenous languages and creoles urgently require consideration, especially in educational contexts. Policy-makers and teachers need information and guidance on best practice for linguistically heterogeneous contexts in creole-speaking speech communities. Best practice must involve and respect students’ creole mother tongue(s), such as established Kriol,¹¹ as well as heritage languages (Angelo 2021).¹²

¹⁰ [AERO Research Agenda 2023 \(edresearch.edu.au\)](https://edresearch.edu.au)

¹¹ NT Department of Education. https://meigimkriolstrongbala.org.au/en_au/resource/kriol-factsheet-from-nt-department-of-education/

¹² Angelo, D. (2021). Creoles, education and policy. In U. Ansaldo & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of pidgin and creole languages* (pp. 286-301). London/New York: Routledge.

See also:

Angelo, D., & Carter, N. (2015). Schooling within shifting langscapes: Educational responses within complex Indigenous language ecologies. In A. Yiakoumetti (Ed.), *Multilingualism and Language in Education: Current Sociolinguistic and Pedagogical Perspectives from Commonwealth Countries* (pp. 119-140). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Angelo, D. (2021). Creoles, education and policy. In U. Ansaldo & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of pidgin and creole languages* (pp. 286-301). London/New York: Routledge.

We hope that First Languages Australia could assist in providing this guidance and promoting practices that promote equity and reverse the problems that arise when contact languages spoken by Indigenous people are unrecognised or meet counter-productive responses.

Conclusion

ACTA welcomes the *Indigenous Languages Priorities* paper as an important and timely contribution to substantive reform by State and Territory governments and various educational and employment authorities.

ACTA will use this paper in our own advocacy.¹³ We would be pleased to contribute to the work of First Languages Australia in ways that utilise our expertise, experience and commitment to advancing languages education for all Indigenous people.

¹³ For other advocacy specifically regarding Indigenous language education issues, please go to: [Advocacy – Australian Council of TESOL Associations](#)