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Aboriginal Languages Research: Impact of Learning an Aboriginal Language on Primary School Students' Literacy in English

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Introduction

Since the release of the *Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus* (NSW Office of the Board of Studies 2003) there has been an increase in interest in the number of schools and communities undertaking Aboriginal language activities and, therefore, the number of students learning an Aboriginal language. In 2006 there were 46 Aboriginal language programs operating throughout the state, most in accordance with the syllabus (Munro et al. 2007). Ten languages were being taught and approximately 5000 students across the state learning an Aboriginal language from Kindergarten to Year 12 (Munro et al. 2007).

Improving the participation and performance of Aboriginal students in New South Wales is a particular concern, especially since the release of the *Aboriginal Education Review* (2005). The review shows that educational outcomes for Aboriginal students continue to lag behind the state averages. There is, therefore, a strong motivation to instigate and promote innovative approaches to improving Aboriginal education, such as the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages, as a way of meeting key recommendations from the review (eg no. 26 for Aboriginal languages), as well as making a noticeable difference to Aboriginal student outcomes. In order to make informed decisions regarding such innovations, however, results from comprehensive research is required. While it makes sense that Aboriginal students would perform better when presented with relevant curriculum content, it must be asked whether the research backs this up. Current approaches to Aboriginal education also strive for curriculum content appropriate for the whole school. The impact on non-Aboriginal students from learning an Aboriginal language is therefore equally important.

While there are anecdotal accounts of improved attendance, participation and performance of Aboriginal students as a result of studying Aboriginal languages, no quantitative research to test such claims nor research into potential benefits to all students has been carried out. Without high-quality published research, these claims remain unsubstantiated. Now is a good time to start looking seriously at the impact on students who are learning an Aboriginal language.

For non-Aboriginal languages, research has already been carried out on impact on students' literacy in English. That research found, for example, that students developed better literacy skills in English (in word awareness and decoding) if they learned a second language (Yelland et al. 1993). So in this research we have started by looking at whether the same positive benefit comes from learning an Aboriginal language.

Rationale

When students learn an Aboriginal language, they learn new speech sounds that are not in English and they also learn a new spelling system designed specially for that Aboriginal language. So in the process of learning an Aboriginal language, they are very focused on learning about sounds and letters that make up words they are learning. It is well known that learning the connection between sounds and letters is vital for early success in learning to read English (eg Rayner et al. 2001). So it seems likely that in the process of learning an Aboriginal language at school, students are gaining knowledge and skills that are useful not just for that language, but also for English.

Students who learn an Aboriginal language as a second language tend to receive instruction which shows them that things can have different names in different languages. In technical terms, students are likely to learn *word awareness* skills. When teachers teach an Aboriginal language, they teach students a very regular spelling system and make it a priority to teach students to sound out letters to pronounce and spell words. In technical terms, this is likely to promote *decoding skills* in English.

In this research, we tested the idea that students who were learning an Aboriginal language would have stronger skills in word awareness and decoding than students who were not learning an Aboriginal language.

Methodology

The NSW DET gave permission to approach schools. With support from local AECGs, the researchers approached primary schools in two geographically separate regions of NSW. Four schools participated, two in each region. Two schools had an Aboriginal language program and two didn't. A total of 114 students in Years 1 and 2 participated: 56 girls and 58 boys. Parents/caregivers described 90 students as non-Indigenous and 18 students as Aboriginal. No information was provided on background for 6 students.

Each student completed a 10- to 15-minute session with a researcher in a quiet room at school. Students first did the Word Awareness Task, followed by the Martin & Pratt Nonword Reading Test (Martin & Pratt, 2001), a test of English decoding ('sounding out'). At the end of the session students received sticker and stamp rewards, and praise for participating.

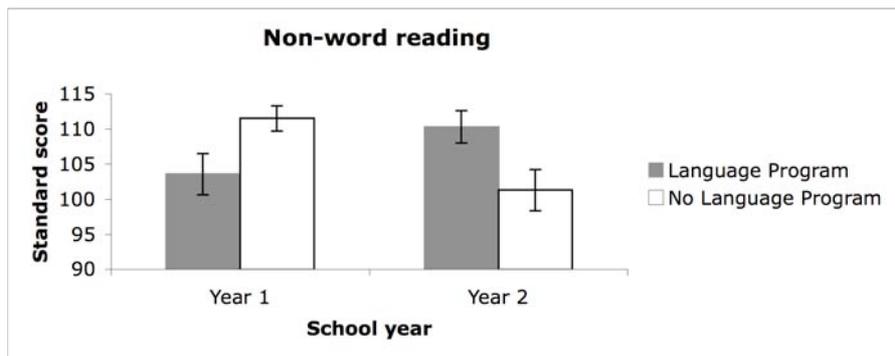
Findings

Decoding skill

In Year 2 but not Year 1, students learning an Aboriginal language had higher scores in non-word reading than students from schools with no Aboriginal language program. Figure 1 shows mean scores (and standard errors) for students in a language program

vs. those not in a language program. The scores are standard scores, ie average performance is a score of 100. Students in the language programs kept up with average performance while students not in language programs had relatively poorer skills in Year 2. This was true in both geographical regions. This result suggests that learning an Aboriginal language in school helps students maintain good decoding skills in English for their year of school.

Figure 1



Word awareness

Students did just as well at word awareness whether or not they were learning an Aboriginal language. This task was also quite easy for most students.

Effect on Aboriginal students

Aboriginal students were a relatively small group in this sample. Most students who participated were not Aboriginal. This means we currently don't have enough information about the effect of Aboriginal language programs on students of different backgrounds.

Conclusion

This is a pilot research study which is only a first step. More research is needed to confirm the findings so far. Further research is also needed to investigate more fully the impact of learning an Aboriginal language on primary school students' literacy in English. This investigation will require time and resources.

There are a few issues that can be investigated including:

- What is the impact of learning an Aboriginal language on students' academic achievement, their attitude and participation? To answer this, we need to follow a group of students over time (a longitudinal study) as they learn an Aboriginal language.
- Does learning an Aboriginal language help close the education gap for Aboriginal students? To find out, we need to do research with a larger number of Aboriginal students, as well as non-Aboriginal students.

Acknowledgements

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