NAPLAN language assessments for Indigenous children in remote communities: issues and problems

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The home language of children in remote Indigenous communities

- Traditional language (e.g. Murriny Patha in Wadeye or Warlpiri in Lajumanu)
- Mixed language (e.g. Gurindji Kriol in Daguragu)
- English-based Kriol (e.g. Wumpurrani English in Tennant Creek or Kriol in Yakanarra)
Table 1: Characteristics of elective and circumstantial bilinguals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elective bilingual</th>
<th>Circumstantial bilinguals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristic of the individuals</strong></td>
<td><strong>Characteristic of groups</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose to learn another language</td>
<td>Second language required to meet needs of new circumstances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative opportunities usually sought artificially (e.g. in classroom)</td>
<td>Communicative needs may relate to survival, or success; communicative needs will vary across individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First language will usually remain the dominant language</td>
<td>Two languages will play a complementary role and the stronger language may vary depending on the domain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The school language of children in remote Indigenous communities

- Standard Australian English in an environment where SAE is not the language of the community (cf. children from immigrant backgrounds)
- Remoteness means cultural knowledge is likely to be very different from that of the wider population
Assessing Indigenous children

- NAPLAN test
- Indigenous children perform badly
- Indigenous children in NT perform worse
- Indigenous children in remote communities perform even worse

The Year 3 NAPLAN test of reading

- At year 3, “[s]tudents read and view simple texts that entertain, move, report, explain and give opinions... such as children’s stories, rhymed verses, fairytales and fables... reports, transactions and explanations. The texts they read and view contain ideas and information related to their real and imagined worlds, with illustrations that clarify meaning. The texts may be in illustrated books, school newsletters, local newspapers, children’s magazines, advertisements, films, and on television programs, CD-ROMs and websites.”
The Year 3 NAPLAN test of reading

- "...They can draw inferences from directly-stated descriptions and actions (e.g. infer a character’s feelings) and talk about how people, characters and events could have been portrayed differently (e.g. more fairly). They relate their interpretations to their own experiences."

  - Statements of Learning for English, Curriculum Corporation

The Year 3 NAPLAN test of reading

- Analysis based on sample test questions for year 3
- Consists of two texts each with a set of multiple choice questions
Potential problems with text

- Contains cultural knowledge the children may lack (no cinemas thus no promotional material)
- Language specific issues:
  - Reduced passive “a new movie directed by …”
  - Recognition of synonymy of “recommended for all ages” and “suitable for everyone”
Potential problems with questions

- Question 1 tests unfamiliar cultural understanding
- Question 2 uses unfamiliar terminology (e.g. session times; movie ratings)
- Question 3 concepts “recommended for all ages” unlikely to receive reinforcement at home
- Question 5 unfamiliarity with genre

Reading text 2

**PAPERBOY**

Mr. Dinkley, was born to deliver newspapers to his house on a daily basis. One day, Mr. Dinkley found that the paper was not delivered on time. He decided to take matters into his own hands. He went out to his letterbox and got his copy of the newspaper. However, when he got home, he realized that the paper was not in his letterbox. He got a bit upset and complained to the mailman. The mailman explained that the paper was stuck on the other side of the street. Mr. Dinkley, a bit frustrated, decided to take matters into his own hands. He went out to his letterbox and got his copy of the newspaper. However, when he got home, he realized that the paper was not in his letterbox. He got a bit upset and complained to the mailman. The mailman explained that the paper was stuck on the other side of the street.

**YEAR 3 READING**

**What was the name of the paperboy?**
- Dinkley
- Dinkley
- Dinkley
- Dinkley
- Dinkley

**What did Dinkley think the name of the paperboy was?**
- The boy was the morning man.
- The paper was not in the box.
- The paper could not be delivered.
- The paper was in line with the fence.
- The paper was in line with the fence.

**What did Dinkley say that the paperboy could do to the problem?**
- Fielding the paper.
- Ripping the paper in the box.
- Machine the paper to the fence.
- Complaining to the newspaper.
- Fielding the paper in the box.

**What did Mr. Dinkley say that he would do if he didn’t deliver the paper?**
- ‘Not deliver tomorrow’
- Talk to the head man.
- Deliver the paper in the letterbox.
- Deliver the paper in the letterbox.
- Deliver the paper in the letterbox.
Potential problems

- Unfamiliar context: newspapers are not delivered to homes in remote communities
- Language specific issues
  - “papers” as synonym for “newspapers”
  - must infer that the “Gazette” is a newspaper from the use of the word “Paper” in the preamble

Potential problems continued

Language specific issues

- must interpret the word “box” as “letter or newspaper box” - objects are very rare in remote communities
- interpreting “in line with the fence” in communities with no private letterboxes, and where houses are rarely fenced
- “jutting” and “poking out” unlikely to be familiar to ESOL/D
- Remote communities do not have “newsagencies”
- Highly idiomatic terminology “stuff and nonsense”
Potential problems with questions continued

- Question 3 also has the problem of interpreting the meaning of “paper”.
- Use of the word “stuffing” in this sense likely to be unfamiliar to the children.
- Again in Question 3 children are not familiar with “newsagencies” let alone the relationship between the newsagency and the paper boy.

Summary of problems with reading test

- Cultural contexts provided are unfamiliar
- Inferring meaning of unfamiliar words and constructions needs a familiar cultural context to be successful
Language conventions

- Divided into 2 types: spelling and “grammar and punctuation”
- Spelling actually tests knowledge of English grammar

Language conventions: Year 3 test

**YEAR 3 SPELLING**

The spelling mistakes in these sentences have been circled. Write the correct spelling for each circled word in the box.

1. I love going to **fun** at the weekend.
2. Sally has **grren** eyes.
3. I **know** all of my multiplication tables.
4. We **jumpl** on the trampoline.
5. My sister **plas** the piano well.
Language conventions: Year 3 test

Joe and the puppy

6. Joe wanted to know where the
7. littel puppy came from. If it did not
8. belong to anyone, he wanted to
9. taek it home as his pet.

Language issues: Year 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test item</th>
<th>Assumed knowledge</th>
<th>Tested knowledge</th>
<th>Likely form in many AE varieties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'jumpt'</td>
<td></td>
<td>SAE past tense</td>
<td>'been jump' [bin jump]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'plaes'</td>
<td>SAE third person verb agreement</td>
<td></td>
<td>'play' [plai]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wanted</td>
<td>SAE past tense</td>
<td></td>
<td>'want-im'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language conventions: Year 5 test

Language issues: Year 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test item</th>
<th>Assumed knowledge</th>
<th>Test knowledge</th>
<th>Phonetic form</th>
<th>Likely form in many AE varieties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The storm caused a lot of damage</td>
<td>SAE past tense</td>
<td>hard to hear final [d]</td>
<td>'been causim' [bin kozim]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy is running to get the train</td>
<td>double letters in SAE present progressive</td>
<td></td>
<td>'run'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language conventions: Year 7 test

**YEAR 7 SPELLING**

Read the text about recycling. The spelling mistakes in the text have been circled. Write the correct spelling for each circled word in the box.

**Recycling**

1. I've spent... (spent)
2. Recycle (recycle)
3. Recycle (recyclet)
4. I should (should)
5. To recycle (to recyclet)

**Hints:**

- Each sentence has one word that is incorrect. Write the correct spelling of the word in the box.

- Underline words only; no explanations necessary.

- Do not repeat that has too short.

- Do not underline sentences.

- Write direct editing for each item.

**Language issues: Year 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test item</th>
<th>Assumed knowledge</th>
<th>Phonetic</th>
<th>Likely form in many AE varieties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'botels'</td>
<td>SAE plural</td>
<td>hard to hear final [s]</td>
<td>'bottle'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Litter should not be left lying around in the playground.</td>
<td>SAE progressive verb as complement to verb 'leave'</td>
<td>construction not used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack finished editing the book last night.</td>
<td>SAE past tense</td>
<td>hard to hear final [t]</td>
<td>'finish-im' used instead</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grammar- Year 3

Grammar questions (1)

- What do uncontextualised questions about language tell us about what children know about language?
- E.g. *That car belongs to James. Give it back to .... immediately*
- Answer: *it/him/them/himself*
Grammar- Year 5

Which of the following gives an instruction?

- I have no idea where the car is parked.
- Make sure that you find a good parking space.
- I tried to park the car as close to the shops as I could.
- There were no parking places left when Sharon arrived.

Grammar- Year 5

Shade one bubble to show where the apostrophe (‘) should go.

Bess and Daniel haven’t played tennis together for many years.
Grammar - Year 5

4 Which of the following correctly completes the sentence?

By 8.30 am, the train would already __________ the station.

left  leave  have left  had left

Grammar - Year 7

1 Which of the following correctly completes the sentence?

She __________ the English Channel in record time.

swimming  swim  swam  swam

2 Which sentence is correct?

☐ There was two good shops nearby.

☐ There are two good shops nearby.

☐ There is two good shops nearby.

☐ There two good shops nearby.
Grammar- Year 9

Grammar questions (2)

- What justifications in terms of grammatical complexity or acquisitional difficulty are there for the choice of questions to ask at different years?
- E.g. which of the following correctly completes the sentences
  - Year 5: By 8.30 am the train would already ____ the station
  - Answer Left/leave/have left/had left
  - Year 9: Jane has ____ the car she wants to buy
  - Answer saw/seen/will see/see
Summary of problems with the language conventions test

- Language convention tests test how well SAE speakers have mastered the conventions of spelling and punctuating written English.
- They do not test how well ESOL/D speakers have learned the standard English language, let alone whether they are mastering written English, because some of the questions presuppose linguistic and cultural knowledge which the students may not have.

Conclusion

- The importance of the familiarity of cultural context cannot be underestimated.
- Test materials need to use contexts which will be relatively equally familiar (e.g. a classroom or a kitchen)
- NAPLAN tests test a first language learners mastery of the academic and written aspects of their first language; they are not tests of an ESOL/D speakers knowledge or stage of development of English