

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

**Gillian Wigglesworth  
University of Melbourne  
and  
Jane Simpson  
University of Sydney**

## **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

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

### The school language of children in remote Indigenous communities

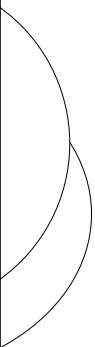
- Standard Australian English in an environment where SAE is not the language of the community (cf. children from immigrant backgrounds)
- Remoteness means cultural knowledge is likely to be very different from that of the wider population



## 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.”

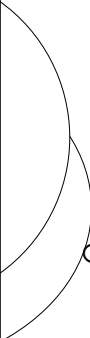


## The Year 3 NAPLAN test of reading

---

- ...“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


# Reading text 1

**Scott Park Cinema presents**

## 'Lucy's Holiday'

*a new movie directed by  
Lars Hoylen*

**Starring**  
**Daniel Toppi and  
Magda Lane**




**Rating:** (G) – recommended for all ages

**Running time:** 90 minutes

**Prices:** \$10 adults  
\$5 children aged 5–15  
Children under 5 free  
\$15 families


**Session times:** Monday to Friday  
1:00 pm and 4:00 pm  
Saturday and Sunday  
10:00 am, 1:00 pm and 4:00 pm



### YEAR 3 READING

Sample 1

**Read Lucy's Holiday and answer questions 1 to 5.**

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | <p>'Lucy's Holiday' was directed by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Scott Park</li> <li>○ Lars Hoylen</li> <li>○ Magda Lane</li> <li>○ Daniel Toppi</li> </ul>   |  <p>Shade one bubble</p> |
| 2 | <p>Which section tells when 'Lucy's Holiday' will be shown?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Rating</li> <li>○ Running time</li> <li>○ Prices</li> <li>○ Session times</li> </ul>   |   |
| 3 | <p>The symbol (G) in the Rating section shows that 'Lucy's Holiday' is</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ a brand new movie.</li> <li>○ suitable for everyone.</li> <li>○ only recommended for adults.</li> <li>○ being shown on the weekends.</li> </ul> |   |
| 4 | <p>How many times is 'Lucy's Holiday' being shown on Mondays?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ once</li> <li>○ twice</li> <li>○ three times</li> <li>○ four times</li> </ul>  |   |
| 5 | <p>This passage is best described as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ an advertisement.</li> <li>○ a timetable.</li> <li>○ a report.</li> <li>○ a list.</li> </ul>  |   |

## 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


*This is a story about a boy who delivers papers to people's houses.*

**PAPERBOY**

Mr Drake came out to his letter-box to get his copy of the Gazette. 'What sort of paper boy do you call yourself, eh?' he said sternly to Splinter. 'You left this paper jutting out of the back of my box. I've got a good mind to go round to the newsagency and complain.'

'Last time you told me not to leave it poking out the front because it wasn't in line with the fence,' Splinter said. 'Your box is the wrong size, Mr Drake. I've got to leave the paper sticking out one side or the other.'

'Stuff and nonsense,' said Mr Drake. 'Papers can be folded to fit any space. That's the fault of modern day children; none of you will take the time to do a good, honest job.'



### YEAR 3 READING

Sample 2

Read Paperboy and answer questions 1 to 4.

|   |  |                   |
|---|--|-------------------|
| 1 | What was the name of the paperboy?   | Shade one bubble. |
|   | <input type="radio"/> Drake<br><input type="radio"/> Mandy<br><input type="radio"/> Gazette<br><input type="radio"/> Splinter  |                   |
| 2 | What did Splinter think was the cause of the problem?  |                   |
|   | <input type="radio"/> The box was the wrong size.<br><input type="radio"/> The paper stuck out one end.<br><input type="radio"/> The paper could not be folded.<br><input type="radio"/> The paper wasn't in line with the fence.                  |                   |
| 3 | Mr Drake said that the paperboy could fix the problem by   |                   |
|   | <input type="radio"/> folding the paper.<br><input type="radio"/> letting the paper stick out.<br><input type="radio"/> stuffing the paper in any space.<br><input type="radio"/> complaining to the newsagency.                                   |                   |
| 4 | What did Mr Drake say that modern day children do <b>not</b> do?   |                   |
|   | <input type="radio"/> say 'Stuff and nonsense'<br><input type="radio"/> take time to do a good, honest job<br><input type="radio"/> leave the paper in line with the fence<br><input type="radio"/> leave the paper sticking out of the letter-box |                   |

© 2007 State of New South Wales, State of Western Australia, Government of South Australia, State of Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory Government, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Curriculum Corporation, and School of Education.



## 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

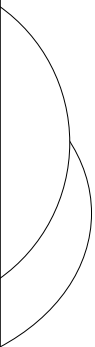


## Potential problems continued

---

### Language specific issues

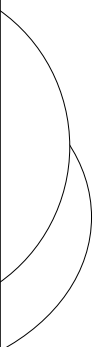
- must interpret the word “box” as “letter or newspaper box” - objects are very rare in remote communities
- interpreting “in line with the fence” in communities with no private letterboxes, and where houses are rarely fenced
- “jutting” and “poking out” unlikely to be familiar to ESOL/D
- Remote communities 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

Sample 1

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 (toun) at the weekend.

2 Sally has (grean) eyes.

3 I (knoe) all of my multiplication tables.

4 We (jumpt) on the trampoline.

5 My sister (plaes) the piano well.

ERIAL ONLY

## Language conventions: Year 3 test

### Joe and the puppy

6 Joe wanted to know where the

6

7 littel puppy came from. If it did not

7

8 belong to anyone, he wanted to

8

9 taek it home as his pet.

9

## Language issues: Year 3

| Test item | Assumed knowledge               | Tested knowledge | Likely form in many AE varieties |
|-----------|---------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| 'jump't'  |                                 | SAE past tense   | 'been jump' [bin jump]           |
| 'plaes'   | SAE third person verb agreement |                  | 'play' [plai]                    |
| wannted   | SAE past tense                  |                  | 'want-im'                        |

## Language conventions: Year 5 test

**YEAR 5 SPELLING** Sample 1

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

1 The storm caused a lot of damage.

2 Amy is runing to get the train.

3 Kim found it hard to catch the ball.

4 Joe could not complot the test in time.

5 My birthday is in Novamber.

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

6 His party travelled for months with little food to eat.

7 The fearless explorers walked over glaciers.

8 The scenery in Antarctica must have been amyzing.

9 The explorers will always be remembered for their bravery.

© 2007 State of New South Wales, State of Western Australia, Government of South Australia, State of Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory Government, Victorian Government and Queensland Government, Queensland Health Authority, Curriculum Corporation, Inc/SAEP/07/00

## Language issues: Year 5

| Test item                               | Assumed knowledge | Tested knowledge                          | Phonetic               | Likely form in many AE varieties |
|---|-------------------|---|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>The storm caused a lot of damage</i> | SAE past tense    |   | hard to hear final [d] | 'been causim' [bin kozim]        |
| <i>Amy is runing to get the train</i>   |                   | double letters in SAE present progressive |                        | 'run'                            |

## Language conventions: Year 7 test

**YEAR 7 SPELLING** Sample 1

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

**Recycling**

1 My school already does some genral things to help the

2 environment. We recycle paper, and we have bins for

3 obtainment cans. However, I feel more could be done.

4 Plastic botels and containers could also be recycled.

5 Litter should not be left lieing around in the playground.

6 To make recycling excesstive, people need to work together.

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

7 Video production today has sophistication and power.

8 It is aprant that Jane has talent.

9 He could not assemble the furniture.

10 Jack finished editing the book last night.

© 2007 State of New South Wales, State of Western Australia, Government of South Australia, State of Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory Government, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Queensland Quality Authority, Curriculum Corporation, the Council of Australian Governments

## Language issues: Year 7

| Test item  | Assumed knowledge                                  | Phonetic               | Likely form in many AE varieties |
|--|--|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 'botels'   | SAE plural   | hard to hear final [s] | 'bottle'                         |
| Litter should not be left lieing around in the playground. | SAE progressive verb as complement to verb 'leave' |                        | construction not used            |
| Jack finnishd editing the book last night.                 | SAE past tense                                     | hard to hear final [t] | 'finish-im' used instead         |

## Grammar- Year 3

YEAR 3 GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION Sample 2

1 Which of the following correctly completes the sentence?

That car belongs to James. Give it back to [ ] immediately.

it      him      them      himself

☐      ☐      ☐      ☐

2 Which of the following correctly completes the sentence?

My father told me to [ ] a new shirt for the party.

chose      choose      chosen      choosing

☐      ☐      ☐      ☐

3 Which of the following correctly completes the sentence?

"Never mind," said Mark. "I'll do it [ ]."

myself      himself      yourself      themselves

☐      ☐      ☐      ☐

SAMPLE MATERIAL ONLY

## 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

**2** 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

**1** Shade one bubble to show where the apostrophe ( ' ) should go.



Bess and Daniel havent played tennis together for many years.

Shade one bubble.



## 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

☐☐☐☐

Shade one bubble.



## Grammar- Year 7

- 1 Which of the following correctly completes the sentence?

She \_\_\_\_\_ the English Channel in record time.

swimming

swim

swam

swamed

☐☐☐☐

Shade one bubble.



- 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.

TRIAL ONLY

## Grammar- Year 9

### YEAR 9 GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION Sample 2

1 Which of the following correctly completes the sentence?

Jane has  the car she wants to buy.

saw

seen

will see

see

☐

☐

☐

☐

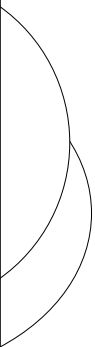
Shade one bubble.



## 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