

Bilingual works

Calling for bilingual education to be reinstated in remote communities where English is a second language, Northern Territory teacher **Yalmay Yunupingu** explains how a 'two way' program delivers English literacy.

I am a qualified bilingual teacher, a Gunjitjirr miyalk. I speak several Yolŋu matha languages and English fluently. I have 32 years' teaching experience. I have taught mostly in primary school, early childhood and middle primary. This is how I teach in a day in an early childhood class in our two way bilingual program. Imagine a group of 27 six-year-old Yolŋu students, bright as buttons, very energetic and ready to learn!

We start with a morning ritual, where we count days of the week, months of the year, school times, and we do a Breath, Blow and Cough program. This last one helps children with Otitis Media, a middle ear problem. Then we do the Yolŋu matha alphabet, where our students are learning their sounds and syllables, in the language they speak. Our culture is very much an oral one, so our students don't come to school with lots of understanding about books and literacy. My job is to help them understand what literacy is about, what it's for and why they should learn to read and write!



So we then do our handwriting, and reading a big book in Yolŋu matha. We talk about the story, why the author wrote this story, and how we can learn from stories, how information is inside books in the ŋäpaki world. After this the children write their own story—independent writing—then they read readers, all written in Dhuwaya, the language the students speak at Yirrkala.

Developing English skills

After tea, we do our oral English program. We use the Walking Talking Texts which is an English as a Second Language (ESL) Program. The students practise reading and talking the English language of the book, and we integrate other learning areas into the English program depending on the topic in the book. This helps the children develop English language skills. It's always great when you hear little Yolŋu students using their new English language skills they learnt in their Walking Talking Text in the playground or the community.

Then it's time for the hardest learning area for six-year-olds: mathematics! I teach number, space and measurement. I use Yolŋu matha in maths lessons to explain difficult concepts like addition, subtraction and place value to the children. We do lots of counting, bundling straws and paddle pop sticks, using a place value matrix and so on. Our language is a good language to use with the children because they think in Yolŋu matha and they respond to us very quickly because they can understand what I'm saying. This way they can understand how the Base 10 maths system works, in their own language, then as they get older they use more and more English in their learning.

“... two languages ... and two cultural views are in a careful balance.”

Yalmay Yunupingu

Teacher, Yirrkala CEC (on leave)
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I also teach two Yolŋu subjects, gurrutu and djalkiri, from our own Garma Maths program, which was used to form part of the Indigenous languages and culture component of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework. These are important subjects for Yolŋu children as they teach them the proper ways of behaving in the classroom, raypirri (rules and discipline) and how clans should work together. And there is all the Yolŋu knowledge the children need to learn about their land and their connections to the land and environment.

A careful balance

We have now been told we are not to use our students' first language, only English. Well, I already know that the children won't understand what I'm saying, they will laugh at me, and they may even misbehave because they'll be bored and won't know what the lessons are about. So perhaps I will cheat and use some Yolŋu matha—what will happen then? Will I have my mouth washed out with soap like in the mission times? Or will I have to stand on one leg outside the classroom? Or perhaps I will lose my job?

Well, I will of course use good ESL teaching strategies as I do in my English lessons already. But I know that the children will miss out on a lot of meaning and that makes me very upset. I am wondering why I studied all those years through Batchelor College (now BIITE), and why all the teaching experience I have in bilingual programs is being put down. What a strange role model I will be, a bilingual Yolŋu teacher, using only one of my languages!

Our Vision Statement for Yambirra Schools has a clear bothways approach, where two languages, Yolŋu matha and English, and two cultural views are in a careful balance. If either one overpowers the other, the educational system will fail, and cause our children to grow up unbalanced and unable to function well in the world. We are already struggling with a very high rate of youth suicide and substance abuse; and it needs to be said that many of our young people who have died tragically have been literate and numerate.

It makes me angry to hear the Minister for Education saying that none of our graduates are literate—all my six daughters can read and write well in two languages; the two youngest girls graduated with their NTCE in 2005. How could they do that if they can't read or write? The decision to make English the only important language in our schools will only make the situation for our young people worse as they struggle to be proud Yolŋu in a world that is making them feel that their culture is bad, unimportant and irrelevant in the contemporary world. ●

This is an edited extract of an article that first appeared on the *Friends of Bilingual Learning* discussion group website <http://groups.google.com/group/foblmail/web?hl=en>