



#LanguagelsUs Decolonizing Our Languages and Communities

‘When I learn and speak Gumbaynggirr, I am no longer just an Aboriginal man, I am a Gumbaynggirr man.’¹ With this in mind, it is important to highlight that the terms ‘Indigenous’, ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Torres Strait Islander’ are terms that have been enforced by the colonial state, so the ability to further clarify one’s identity is empowering. ‘Decolonization has become one of the most important tools in an indigenous person’s survival kit.’²

Usually, these enforced terms carry negative stereotypes that have been concocted in order to make Aboriginal people believe that we are lesser and that we don’t matter. In highlighting that ‘Aboriginal’ is an enforced term, we understand the irony in continuing to use the term ‘Aboriginal’, but we do so in order to highlight that the process of decolonization is not immediate.

Decolonization is a gradual process that involves the return to cultural ways of thinking and being, despite the expectation of assimilation to societal norms of the colonial state.³ Decolonization takes form in lifestyle choices including diet, connectedness to family and country, and methods of teaching and learning. Of particular importance to our #LanguagelsUs campaign, the reclamation of language is decolonization.

The colonial act of indoctrinating oppressed peoples with the idea that they are lesser is a global tactic, as highlighted by Malcolm X in describing the experiences of African Americans:

They always project Africa in a negative light... In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it⁴

This can be related to experiences in Australia. By continually projecting the idea that Aboriginal cultures and languages are heathen, the colonial state so infected us that we began to become indoctrinated with colonial thought processes and believe that ‘white is right.’ We began to hate ourselves.

By understanding these colonial tactics, we then understand the importance of our language learner’s statement that he is no longer just an Aboriginal man, but a Gumbaynggirr man. This highlights that, through language, this learner has begun to decolonize himself due to his passion and love for his culture.

This love of culture can be heightened through culturally engaging teaching methods as they give credence to the processes that have existed for tens of thousands of years. This in itself makes the statement that, although advertently and inadvertently indoctrinated for just over 200 years with the idea that Aboriginal

¹ Lugnan, C., Live Communication at Community Gumbaynggirr Class, 2016

² <https://johansandbergmguinne.wordpress.com/2013/02/25/decolonisation/>

³ ibid

⁴ X, Malcolm., *Malcolm X Talks to Young People: Speeches in the United States, Britain and Africa*

cultures, languages, concepts and learning processes are heathen and lesser than western values, our 'old people' actually uncovered and instigated highly complex and intelligent processes that ensured community interconnectedness to country, language and each other. This therefore smashes the collusion⁵ that Aboriginal cultures are lesser, and that Aboriginal people are not meant to achieve. This is decolonization and it highlights the need for Aboriginal community control of our languages in order to direct how languages are passed on.

In highlighting that no small child is required to read and write the first language they learn, Greymorning asked why any mature learner should be required to read and write the second language they are learning and hence highlighted that the focus should be placed on getting learners to hear, respond and speak the target language.

Indeed, in Indigenous contexts around the world, this notion is of even greater significance given that our languages were never traditionally written. Through our experiences of learning and teaching Gumbaynggirr, we have actually witnessed learners become confused during the process of reading and writing of words they already know due to the perception of how English symbols should sound. Therefore, the frameworks and processes that the NSW Department of Education places on our languages actually inhibits the ability for learners to acquire the target language.⁶

In order for learners to acquire language and speak proficiently, we need to challenge them to think outside the dominant western system and worldview. Reading and writing tends to 'study' the structure and technicalities of the language rather than emphasize the importance of speaking and engaging in the culture that it carries. It could be argued that studying the language in this way is cultural appropriation as it considers the language and culture from a western point of view.

When we consider the unfortunate fact that, in general, Aboriginal students lag behind their non-Indigenous peers in terms of literacy we realize that the students most disadvantaged by departmental frameworks of teaching language are the students who actually belong to that target language. In this regard, we have witnessed Aboriginal students' sense of disempowerment at being 'not smart enough' to acquire their language, which therefore leads them to disengage with language learning, citing that 'language is a white thing now.'

Furthermore, the emphasis on reading and writing that the department enforces on our language actually indoctrinates our kids with the yester-year complex that 'white is right.' This isn't intended, but what our children are being told, inadvertently, is that Aboriginal cultural learning processes are not as effective as western methods. This collusion to the notion that Aboriginal is lesser needs to be nullified. We need to instead engage our community and youth with the notion that Aboriginal means success.

State government departments themselves acknowledge that the English language is incapable of carrying the sacredness of our culture and stories.⁷ It is only traditional languages that connect to this sacredness as they speak to the country and ancestors, thus highlighting the need to decolonize how our cultures and languages are passed on. By focusing language learning toward hearing, responding, speaking and connecting to country we emphasize and respect the learning processes that have existed since time immemorial and thereby, smash the collusion.

Although our programs are not perfect, upholding cultural ways of teaching Gumbaynggirr is a priority of our corporation. Within just 15 hours of instruction, more than 40 of our students, in both school and community settings, have acquired four songs and multiple phrases completely through visualisation and sound repetition. We purposely resist reading and writing as we want our students to learn through sound recognition. Our students continually highlight their satisfaction and enjoyment at acquiring language through a method that is different to their usual schooling.

⁵ Lead educator, Chris Sarra, coined the term 'collusion' to describe the process in which some people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, began to believe that Aboriginal people are lesser.

⁶ Greymorning, N., Live Communication, 2015

⁷ NSW Dept of Health, 2004., *Communicating Positively: A Guide to Appropriate Aboriginal Terminology*, p3

Here, one can ascertain that through language, our students are beginning to decolonize themselves and how they learn. This is the power that our language carries. 'Language is our soul'⁸, 'language is us'⁹ and language is our power.

⁸ Aunty Rose Fernando

⁹ Uncle John 'Sandy' Atkinson