

○ NAPLAN LANGUAGE ASSESSMENTS FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

Gillian Wigglesworth University of Melbourne

Jane Simpson Australian National University

Deborah Loakes University of Melbourne

The National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) assessments are designed to assess literacy and numeracy of all Australian school children in years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and to act as diagnostics as to whether children are meeting intended educational outcomes. Tests began in May 2008, and have been run annually since then. Results of the 2008 tests indicated that Indigenous children in remote communities had the lowest test scores, and results were used to make a policy decision that effectively scrapped bilingual education in the Northern Territory.

In this paper, we evaluate the literacy component of the NAPLAN test for Year 3, and the language samples for each year level. Literacy components assess reading, writing and language conventions (grammar, spelling and punctuation), and we focus on the reading and language conventions components.

We argue that the NAPLAN tests need to be very carefully monitored for appropriateness for the assessment of children living in remote Indigenous communities. This is because tests are standardised on groups of English language speaking children. The content of some sample tests relies on cultural knowledge which Indigenous children cannot be expected to have. Spelling tests need to be monitored to ensure that they are testing spelling rather than grammatical knowledge. Finally, it is difficult to create language convention tests which are truly diagnostic because of the mixed test population of native English speakers, ESL learners and EFL learners in remote Indigenous communities.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous children being raised in remote communities usually grow up in complex language environments where they hear and learn various codes: traditional languages to a greater or lesser extent, non-standard varieties of English (such as various English-based creoles) or Aboriginal English (herein AE) and Standard Australian English (herein SAE) (Elwell, 1979; Harkins, 1993; Hudson, 1985; Kaldor & Malcolm, 1979; Munro, 2000; Ovington, 1992; Rhydwen, 1996; Sandefur, 1991; Shnukal, 1985).

While some of these children will acquire their traditional language (for example Murrinh Patha in Wadeye or Warlpiri in Lajamanu) for many other children the language they will be learning will be an English-based creole (Wigglesworth & Simpson, 2008). These creoles are diverse and cannot be considered as one language variety. However, whilst we acknowledge the diversity in English-based creoles in Australia, in this paper we use the name of the most widely known variety, Kriol (Munro, 2000; see McGregor, 2004, for more detail), as a shorthand for all the varieties. Additionally, there is considerable variation along a continuum of basilectal (heavier) to acrolectal (lighter) creoles, both within and between speakers. Within-speaker variation may occur depending on interlocutor, while between-speaker variation may occur based on region or social group. While creoles used in Indigenous Australia have some similarity with English, typically in vocabulary, they are often structurally more similar to the Indigenous languages in the areas they are spoken (especially the heavier varieties), and also have meaning properties and grammatical aspects that are vastly different from English (for more detail see McGregor, 2004). AE is another post-contact variety, distinct from Kriol in that it is considered a dialect of English. AE is characterised by some minor phonological, grammatical and lexical differences from SAE (see McGregor, 2004).

No matter which language they learn at home, when they enter the formal school system in Australia, Indigenous children will be exposed to SAE in the classroom, and they will be assessed on tests of literacy and numeracy standardised for native English speakers. In this paper we argue that the tests need to be very carefully monitored for appropriate content (linguistic and assumed knowledge) for the assessment of children living in remote Indigenous communities (and similarly for children coming from non English speaking backgrounds). This is because tests are standardised on groups of English language speaking children. This issue does not apply only to Indigenous children in remote areas. Research has shown that Indigenous children who live and go to school in urban areas, and thus might be expected to share cultural knowledge with their non-Indigenous peers, may actually have different (though partly overlapping) concepts for the same words (see Harkins, 1993). The impact of cultural knowledge on children's understanding of apparently simple words cannot be underestimated.

Indigenous children in remote communities have to learn SAE first in order to access primary school education. Ideally, this should then give them access to the goods, services and opportunities available to other Australians. They are, in Valdes and Figuero's (1994) terms circumstantial bilingual learners, rather than elective bilingual learners (those who choose to learn a second language). Circumstantial and bilingual learners have different characteristics, as shown in Table 1 below (adapted from Valdes & Figuero, 1994, pp. 13-14; Ng & Wigglesworth, 2007, p. 21):

Table 1: Characteristics and examples of elective and circumstantial bilinguals

Elective bilinguals	Circumstantial bilinguals
Characteristic of the individuals	Characteristic of groups
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

Elective bilinguals will generally choose to learn another language (e.g. to learn French at school, or to learn another language as an adult) whereas this is not normally the case for circumstantial bilinguals. Most commonly, circumstantial bilinguals have to learn another language because of where they live. Indigenous children in Australia are a typical case in point. Once they go to school, where the language of education is SAE, they must learn this in order to achieve in the formal school system.

Indigenous children in remote communities are not the only Australian children who attend school in an English-speaking environment, but come from a non-English-speaking background having had only limited access to SAE previously. There are very substantial numbers of children in Australia in the same situation. Two important differences, however, are first that many immigrant families come from societies with long traditions of literacy whereas this is not the case for Indigenous Australians. Second, most children from immigrant families grow up in the suburbs of large cities where usually (but not always) SAE is the language of everyday talk, whereas Indigenous children in remote communities are generally not immersed in an SAE environment. In this sense they are more akin to children learning English as a Foreign Language, than to those learning English as a Second Language.

For all of these children, a major issue which relates to the assessment of their language skills is the use of standardised testing material. The use of such norm-referenced tests is widely recognised as being problematic for assessing children who are circumstantially bilingual (Genishi & Brainard, 1995; Gutierrez-Clellen, 1996; Thomas & Collier, 2002). This is because such tests have generally been normed on populations which either do not include children from

non English speaking backgrounds (NESBs), or which only include small numbers of children who are NESB. The results of these tests can be to seriously disadvantage the children who are assessed as both linguistically and cognitively deficient. The consequences are often poor school performance, with concomitant limitations to future life choices.

While NAPLAN is designed as a diagnostic tool, we argue that it actually masks what Indigenous children know about English, which is a *second* language for many of them. A major problem with NAPLAN is that it does not measure achievement relative to starting-point. Mastery of a sentence like 'She likes cats' is trivial for a first language speaker of English, but it is an achievement for a child whose first language is Kriol, because they will have had to learn the difference between *he/she*, the subject-verb agreement of *likes*, and the plural of *cats*, all features which are not present in Kriol.

Apart from policy decisions, one of the side effects of NAPLAN testing is that it is used to judge the quality of the curriculum and quality of teaching and of schools, rather than in a more positive way to identify the needs of particular populations of children in different school environments (see for example Craig, 2009).

THE NAPLAN RESULTS FROM THE NT

In 2006 the Australian Government and the States agreed to set up a National Assessment Program to test all students in Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 on aspects of literacy and numeracy using the same year level tests across the nation. The tests were first run in 2008, and subsequently in 2009 and 2010, and they are now run annually in May. A summary of results from the first tests was released in September 2008, and the scores for Indigenous children in remote communities were so alarming that politicians were galvanised into taking quick decisions. In the Northern Territory this led to a snap decision that the first four hours of schooling should be taught in English. A consequence was the dismantling of the last remaining bilingual education programs, without replacing them with a coherent plan to improve the children's acquisition of SAE (Simpson, Caffery & McConvell, 2009, 2011).

In December 2008, more detailed figures were released which indicated that Indigenous children did poorly on the NAPLAN tests, more poorly if they were in rural communities, and more poorly still if they were in remote rural communities. The summary reports for 2009, 2010, and 2011 show that Northern Territory students performed worse than students in all other states and territories, at all year levels tested in literacy and numeracy.

With this in mind, we decided to examine sample materials available from the NAPLAN website in early 2009 and still available on the present website¹.

AIMS OF NAPLAN TEST

The NAPLAN test is designed to assess literacy and numeracy, and presupposes a standard to be reached by SAE speaking children (see ACARA, 2011a for further information). Literacy components, which we focus on in this study, assess reading, writing and language conventions (grammar, spelling and punctuation).

The NAPLAN test is also intended as a diagnostic tool – for teachers, schools, education systems and governments – as a way of identifying areas for intervention and support (see e.g. Masters, 2010). For this to be effective, the test needs to be based on reliable information on the standard of English that is reasonable to expect of second language learners at different stages of their learning. The standards achieved by L2 learners will also differ in terms of their exposure to English; an L2 learner with literate parents living in a big city will have more exposure to standard English than Indigenous children in communities where children speak a traditional language as their first language, and where their parents may or may not be literate. We might also expect differences between communities where the main language is a traditional language, and communities where the main language is Kriol or a variety of Aboriginal English, since the different categories of language tend not to be as easy to identify when one language is very similar to the other (see for example Rhydwen, 1996 and the discussion in Siegel, 2007).

ANALYSIS OF THE NAPLAN SAMPLE TEST QUESTIONS

The analysis undertaken for this paper was based on two sources:

1. the 2008 sample test questions for the Year 3 NAPLAN test of reading, and the language convention modules (spelling, grammar and punctuation) for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. These samples had appeared on the NAPLAN site by July 2008 (under the auspices of the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Youth and Training), and are still available as samples on the new NAPLAN site (under the auspices of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority) (ACARA, 2011a).
2. the additional sample questions that appear on the ACARA-auspiced website in 2011 under the headings of ‘Minimum standards’. (ACARA, 2011b, c, d).

The 2008 Year 3 reading assessment consists of two reading passages which are either imaginative, information or argument texts. At the time the website stated that Year 3 students, should, among other things, be able to:

read and view simple texts that entertain, move, report, explain and give opinions. They read and view imaginative texts such as children's stories, rhymed verses, fairytales and fables. They also read and view information texts such as 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.

..... 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* (MCEECDYA, 2009, emphasis added).

While the description of minimum reading standards has changed in the 2011 website, the emphasised statements are questionable with reference to Indigenous children, especially those living in remote communities. The issues raised are also salient for children from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

READING (YEAR 3) (2008 SAMPLE)

The first sample reading passage for Year 3 is a graphical representation of a poster for a film to be screened at a cinema (ACARA, 2011b). The passage shows the names of the cinema, the film (*Lucy's Holiday*), the director, and two leading actors. It also shows the film's rating, running time, prices and session times.

There are five multiple-choice questions relating to this poster, with four possible answers. Children are instructed to shade the bubble adjacent to the correct answer. The five questions are shown in the following table (ACARA, 2011b).

Table 2: Questions in Reading passage 1 (for year 3) (2008)

1	'Lucy's Holiday' was directed by
2	Which section tells when 'Lucy's Holiday' will be shown?
3	The symbol (G) in the rating section shows that 'Lucy's Holiday' is
4	How many times is 'Lucy's Holiday' being shown on Mondays?
5	This passage is best described as

For Indigenous children living in remote communities the passage is likely to present a general problem because it assumes cultural knowledge which these children are unlikely to have – there are no cinemas, and thus they do not have daily access to this kind of promotional material. Where they have access to films, that access is via television, DVDs or videos.

At a more specific level, Indigenous children, for whom English is a second language, are unlikely to be familiar with terms used in the poster. For example, the (reduced) passive constructions such as *a new movie directed by Lars Hoyle* is likely to be problematic as most Indigenous languages have no passive construction, and nor do the creole varieties spoken by many children as a first language. Therefore Question 1 is problematic because it is testing unfamiliar cultural understanding, as well as knowledge of a grammatical construction rather than general comprehension of the reading. Question 2 is problematic since children who have never seen a cinema are unlikely to be unfamiliar with terminology such as *session times*. Understanding ‘movie ratings’ in Question 3 may be bolstered by knowledge of DVD boxes, but, even so they are unlikely to receive the support from literate parents in such a way that this understanding will be reinforced in the home. Question 3 assumes recognition of the synonymy of *recommended for all ages* (shown on the poster) and *suitable for everyone* (the correct answer to this question). Again, these are concepts which are unlikely to receive reinforcement in the home.

The second passage concerns a paperboy delivering newspapers and a complaint from one of his customers. The passage consists of a small one-page story, with a picture of a newspaper (called *Gazette*), and another picture of a letterbox with a rolled up paper protruding from it. The title of the story is *Paperboy* and it is prefaced with text stating that ‘This is a story about a boy who delivers papers to people’s houses’. The text is as follows:

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.’
(ACARA, 2011b)

As seen for the first reading passage, there are similar cultural problems here: newspapers are not delivered to homes in remote communities, and so, despite the explanation provided in the heading of what a paperboy is, this remains an unfamiliar concept – although it would certainly not be unfamiliar to children living in large cities. There are also a number of specific problems in this passage.

Firstly, in the heading the word *papers* is used rather than *newspapers*. Given that the children are unlikely to be familiar with *paperboys* it will be difficult for them to interpret *papers* as *newspapers*. Related to this, the child must infer that *Gazette* is a newspaper from the use of the word *paper* in the preamble, or from the picture given. The child must interpret the word *box* as *letter-* or *newspaper-box* despite the fact that many communities have no private letter-boxes. Similarly, interpreting *in line with the fence* in communities where houses are rarely fenced, both *fences* and *letter boxes* will challenge the children.

Additionally, *jutting out* and *poking out* are low frequency phrases in Australian English (as are the terms *jutting* and *poking*)², and more challenging for children whose first language is not English. *Newsagencies* is another term likely to be difficult for children living in communities without newsagencies. Finally, *stuff and nonsense* is a colloquial spoken expression which is no longer widely used, and is more common in the UK than in Australia. Indigenous children, many native English speaking children, and certainly ESL children, are unlikely to come across this term unless they read British children's books – and even then they may well never encounter it.

The questions associated with the text present additional, related, problems. For this passage, there are four questions, with four multiple-choice answers. The questions (ACARA, 2011b) are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Questions in Reading passage 2 (for Year 3) (2008)

1	What was the name of the paperboy?
2	What did Splinter think was the cause of the problem?
3	Mr. Drake said that the paperboy could fix the problem by
4	What did Mr. Drake say that modern children do not do?

Question 1 is easier for children who know what a paperboy is than for children from communities without paperboys, who have to infer from the title *Paperboy* and the text that *a boy who delivers papers to people's houses is a paperboy*. In Question 2, the correct answer is *The box was the wrong size*. This assumes the child interprets *box* as a letterbox or

box into which the newspaper is put when delivered, but since they do not have these items in their communities, this is unlikely. Similarly, *paper*, which appears in the other three choices (e.g. *The paper stuck out one end*) assumes children will interpret the term as a newspaper, but in fact it could be any collection of papers. The same problem of interpreting the meaning of *paper* occurs in answers to Question 3. The correct answer is *folding the paper*. Another choice given is *complaining to the newsagency*, which presents the additional difficulty of unfamiliarity with newsagencies, let alone the fact that paperboys are often employed by newsagencies.

SUMMARY: READING (YEAR 3)

The cultural contexts provided in these questions aimed at Year 3 students in Australia can be seen to be unfamiliar to children living in remote indigenous communities.

The effect of the cultural context of the test is much more significant than a simple lack of familiarity. As we have seen in the 2008 NAPLAN testing guidelines, children are expected to be able to make inferences from the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases they come across in these tasks. However this is much harder if the cultural context is not familiar.

ANALYSIS OF THE 2008 AND 2011 SAMPLE TESTS

LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

The language conventions component of the NAPLAN tests is discussed in two sections: spelling; grammar and punctuation. Despite the statement on the ACARA website³ that ‘There is no published list of specific skills that will be tested in NAPLAN tests’, key skills are listed under each of these at each year level. The sample tests reveal likely problems for second language learners, and especially Kriol/AE speakers; we address each in turn.

SPELLING

The 2011 ACARA website sets out diagnostics for students at the minimum standard at each level. We first consider the material on the 2011 website, and then the 2008 sample tests.

Year 3

In Spelling, Year 3 students at the minimum standard generally identify and correct errors in frequently used one-syllable words and some frequently used two-syllable words with double letters.

For example, students can correct identified errors in:

- frequently used one-syllable words
- frequently used two-syllable words with regular spelling patterns (ACARA, 2011c).

In 2011 only one example is given for Year 3: *Simon doesn't like eating carrots*. This will present a grammatical challenge for children speaking Kriol/AE, as the normal form is not *like*, but *likim* using the Kriol transitive marker *-im*. *Like* is also a surprising choice since more generally silent letters are only explicitly mentioned at year 7 level: 'For example, students can identify and correct errors in: * one-syllable words ending with silent letters' (ACARA, 2011c).

The 2008 sample tests contain many more examples. Children are given the following instructions 'The spelling mistakes in these sentences have been circled. Write the correct spelling for each circled word in the box.' The questions for this section are given in Table 4 below, and we note that we have underlined the incorrect words in each case (these appear circled in the test).

Table 4: Spelling: correcting mistakes (Year 3) (2008)

1	I love going to <u>toun</u> at the weekend.
2	Sally has <u>grean</u> eyes.
3	I <u>knoe</u> all of my multiplication tables.
4	We <u>jumpt</u> on the trampoline.
5	My sister <u>plaes</u> the piano well.

We do not think that the challenges of items 1-3, *toun*, *grean* and *knoe*, would distinguish native and non-native SAE speaking children, except for children in transitional biliteracy programs who learn to read first in their first language. But items 4-5 will present a grammatical challenge to second language learners of English. *jumpt* tests knowledge about some grammatical rules of SAE, namely that past tense is represented by an ending which may be pronounced [t] but is written *-ed*. *plaes* assumes the knowledge that that third person singular verb agreement is represented by the letter 's'. This is a special problem for speakers of most varieties of Kriol/AE since the past tense is often *bin jump* and there is no subject-verb agreement. The problem is compounded for children with hearing loss, since most traditional languages and some Kriol/AE varieties do not allow words to end in [s] or [pt], and since fricatives and voiceless stops are difficult to perceive with high frequency hearing loss.

The sample questions showing how spelling is assessed also includes a short text with spelling errors, in which children are required to identify the misspelt word, and then write its correct spelling. The misspelt words are *whare* ('where'), *littel* ('little'), *wannted* ('wanted') and *taek* ('take'). For speakers of Indigenous creoles, the most problematic issue is *wannted*. This is intended to test children's understanding of how double letters should be used, but

again also assumes knowledge of the English past tense. It is also problematic for children who speak heavy creoles, because in such varieties the word would typically be *wantim* (i.e. without a past tense marker, and including the transitive verb marker).

By 2011, the point about the past tense appeared to have been taken on board in the minimum standards descriptions, since identifying tense forms is now explicitly mentioned as part of the Year 5 standard (see discussion below).

Year 5

Year 5 students at the minimum standard generally identify and correct errors in most one- and two-syllable words with regular spelling patterns and some less frequently used words with double letters.

For example, students can correct identified errors in:

- frequently used one-syllable long vowel words
- frequently used one-syllable words with irregular spelling patterns
- common one-syllable verbs with tense markers
- high-frequency two-syllable words.

For example, students can identify and correct errors in:

- frequently used one-syllable words
- high frequency compound words
- less frequently used multi-syllable words with double letters (ACARA, 2011c).

The 2008 sample tests for Year 5 students present similar problems. There are also five questions for this level. Two examples are shown in Table 5 below. We note that for this section, students in Year 5 are given the same instructions as described above for Year 3.

Table 5: Spelling: correcting mistakes (Year 5) (2008)

- 1 The storm caused a lot of damage.
 - 2 Andy is runing to get the train.
-

Caused is intended to test understanding of the alternation between ‘au’ and ‘or’ as representations of the same sound. But, as we saw earlier, problems for some Indigenous children will arise from the past tense ending and the lack of a transitive marker *-im*. In the second question, *runing* is intended to test the use of double letters when the *-ing* ending is added to certain verbs, but the fact that this form only occurs in light forms of creole is again an extra hurdle (in heavier creoles, we might expect the form *run*). A similar difficulty is

found in the 2011 example question: *Many dogs are good at swiming*. However, since tense markers are now explicitly mentioned in the 2011 standards, this at least gives some guidance to ESL teachers working with Indigenous students as to what to focus on in preparing for the test.

As for Year 3 students, students in Year 5 are provided with four misspelt words shown in a short text and are required to identify these and provide the correct word. Two examples are shown below.

Table 6: Spelling: correcting mistakes (Year 5) (2008)

1	His party travelled for <u>munths</u> with little food to eat.
2	The fearless <u>explorors</u> walked over glaciers.

The misspelt words *munths* ('months') and *explorors* ('explorers') are intended to test children's understanding of the spelling of vowels, but both have plurals which are not a feature of most Kriol/AE varieties, and so would likely cause confusion. A similar difficulty is found in the 2011 examples: plural: *I am visiting my friends*. There is no mention of knowledge of the plural in any of the Year level minimum standard descriptions.

Year 7

In Spelling, Year 7 students at the minimum standard generally identify and correct errors in most frequently used multi-syllable words with regular spelling patterns and some words with silent letters.

For example, students can correct identified errors in:

- less frequently used one-syllable words
- less frequently used compound words with regular spelling patterns
- two-syllable words with irregular spelling patterns
- less frequently used multi-syllable adverbs.

For example, students can identify and correct errors in:

- one-syllable 'soft c' words
- one-syllable words ending with silent letters
- one-syllable words with irregular spelling patterns
- frequently used compound words with irregular spelling patterns (ACARA, 2011c).

Problems with the 2008 Year 7 practice test are similar to those described for Years 3 and 5. A selection of examples is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Spelling: correcting mistakes (Year 7) (2008)

- 1 Plastic botels and containers could also be recycled.
 - 2 Litter should not be left lieing in the playground.
 - 2 Jack finnished editing the book last night.
-

The plural *botels*, the past tense *finnished* and the progressive participle *-ing* may be a grammatical challenge as well as a spelling challenge to some students. Similar challenges are found in the 2011 examples: *It has sharp claus on all four feet. Its stripes are helpful for hidding in long grass.* However, since the tense forms are now explicitly stated as part of the year 5 standard, there will be pressure on teachers to teach them explicitly.

Year 9

Year 9 students at the minimum standard generally identify and correct errors in most multi-syllable words with regular spelling patterns and some less frequently used words with irregular spelling patterns.

For example, students can correct identified errors in:

- less frequently used one-syllable words with double or r-controlled vowels
- less frequently used two-syllable words
- multi-syllable words with the suffix ‘ance’.

For example, students can identify and correct errors in:

- multi-syllable soft ‘c’ words
- multi-syllable words with regular spelling patterns. (ACARA, 2011c).

In 2011 no inflected forms are given; instead students are provided with the forms *performence, bilding, bravary, speacies, vidio, sertain, system.* This can be compared to the 2008 sample, where two inflected forms were provided, as shown in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Spelling: correcting mistakes (Year 9) (2008)

- 1 Jack was receeving the applause he deserved.
 - 2 There are great advanzes in technology.
-

These pose the same grammatical challenges mentioned earlier.

In sum, a test which is supposed to test knowledge of representations of words also tests knowledge of SAE grammar. Where the precise type of grammatical knowledge is explicitly stated in the minimum standards, this is acceptable, but where it is not, it makes the test less

valid as an assessment of spelling. A clear division between spelling which tests understanding of word-letter patterns, and spelling which also tests knowledge of grammatical endings would give a more accurate picture of whether the children understand word-letter patterns, and whether they understand grammatical endings.

GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

The other part of the language conventions tested by NAPLAN consists of questions about grammar and punctuation. While the reasons for the punctuation questions are clear, the reasons for the grammar questions are much less clear.

Year 3

In Grammar and Punctuation, Year 3 students at the minimum standard generally identify features of a simple sentence. They identify some common grammatical conventions such as the correct use of past and present tense and the use of pronouns to replace nouns in sentences. They typically recognise the correct use of punctuation in written English, such as capitalisation for sentence beginnings and proper nouns.

For example, in Grammar students can:

- identify the correct preposition required to complete a sentence
- identify the correct pronoun required to complete a sentence
- identify the correct adverb of time required to complete a sentence
- identify the correct form of a participle required to complete a sentence.

For example, in Punctuation students can:

- identify the correct location of a full stop
- identify proper nouns that require capitalisation (ACARA, 2011d).

None of these is a trivial task, as will be shown below.

Table 9 shows two of the three 2008 grammar questions for Year 3. For these questions, students see a blank space where the correct answer should be. They are given four options, and are instructed to shade a bubble containing the word that completes the sentence.

Table 9: Year 3 language conventions (2008)

1	Jenny will arrive [in/at/on/until Sunday].
2	Mum gave it to [he/his/him/himself].
3	Isn't it a nice day [today/yesterday/last week/next week?]
4	Lisa is [run/ran/runs/running] in a big race tomorrow

Each of these questions tests reading and spelling as well as an SAE grammatical rule (choice of pronouns, choice of verb form) through a set of alternatives. Question 1 will require teachers of Kriol-speaking students to focus on teaching the use of specific prepositions (since Kriol usually has one preposition *langa* covering the meanings of ‘in, at, on’). The choices in Question 2 are unlikely to be problematic for Kriol speakers, since *him* is the least marked pronoun, but it is odd as a test question in that they do not include the usual problem with the lack of a *him/her* distinction which affects many students from non-English speaking backgrounds, including Indigenous children. Question 3 indicates that children should have learned the English tense system, even though the focus of the standard is on the time adverb. As well, the structure will be difficult for beginning ESL students, since inverted word order is not used in many languages to form questions. Question 4 relates to 'identify the correct form of a participle required to complete a sentence,' and again indicates that children should have learned the English tense-aspect system.

In the 2008 grammar example questions the following was included: *My father told me to [chose/choose/chosen/choosing] a new shirt for the party.* This question may well be problematic for native speakers with the spelling of *choose/chose*, and is likely to be difficult for Indigenous children for extra reasons: the lack of a transitive marker *-im* on the verb *choose* (i.e. *choosim*) the lack of a phonetic distinction between *choose/chose*, and the absence of the participial forms, *chosen* and *choosing*, in many Kriol/AE varieties.

The 2011 punctuation example will be difficult for second language learners because it involves a complex noun construction (underlined): *John's new bike was red and silver Mike wished he had one like it.* Things that are not mentioned, but which clearly affect second language learners from the start, include: use of articles, use of plurals, subject verb agreement.

Year 5

Year 5 students at the minimum standard generally identify common grammatical conventions such as the correct use of conjunctions and verb forms. They typically recognise the correct use of punctuation in written English, such as the use of question marks and speech marks for direct speech.

For example, in Grammar students can:

- identify the correct conjunction required to join a pair of simple sentences
- identify the correct form of the verb required to complete a sentence
- identify which adverb in a sentence describes how an action took place
- identify the correct plural pronoun required to complete a sentence.

For example, in Punctuation students can:

- identify direct speech that uses capital letters, question marks and speech marks. (ACARA, 2011d).

Comparing these with the Year 3 standards it is hard to see why they are considered more difficult. The Year 3 standards explicitly required production of the present tense and progressive participle system, as well as requiring comprehension of the tense system to produce the right time adverbs.

Table 10: Year 5 language conventions (2011 samples)

1	Which one of the following is correct?
a	My sister didn't have any money. Or did I.
b	My sister didn't have any money. Either did I.
c	My sister didn't have any money. Neither did I.
d	My sister didn't have any money. Nor neither did I.
2	Which of the following correctly completes the sentence? The bell [ring/rang/rung/ringed] loudly.
3	Which of the following correctly completes the sentence? Her name was Rosie so the roses must be [meanted/meant/meaned/meaning] for her. First, Jess holds the ball high above her head. She stands with her feet
4	[slight/slightly/slighter/slightest] apart.

The negation in Question 1 is a grammatical challenge to speakers of Kriol/AE who use different systems of negating clauses, e.g. *He got no money*. Question 2 assesses mastery of tense, and of the past tense form of an irregular verb. It is a useful test of SAE mastery for speakers of non-standard Australian English, who may use *rung* as the past tense, rather than *rang*. But why is it a Year 5 level test? In fact in the 2008 test, a similar example is given as a Year 7 question: *She [swimming/swim/swam/swamed] the English Channel in record time*. Question 4 presumably is supposed to test 'identify which adverb in a sentence describes how an action took place', but in fact what it does is test knowledge of the adverb 'slightly' in contrast with comparatives and superlatives.

The 2008 Year 5 assessment contains two punctuation questions (one which assumes a grammatical construction), one question about speech acts, and one grammar question (see

MCEECDYA, 2009). The speech act question, where students are asked to shade a bubble for the correct answer, is seen in Table 11 below.

Table 11: Year 5 language conventions (2008 example 1)

-
- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Which of the following gives an instruction? |
| a | I have no idea where the car is parked. |
| b | Make sure that you find a good parking space. |
| c | I tried to park the car as close to the shops as I could. |
| d | There were no parking spaces left when Sharon arrived. |
-

This question assumes cultural knowledge about space for parking, a situation most likely to be unfamiliar to children from remote communities, where there are no problems parking. One of the 2008 Year 5 punctuation questions is shown in Table 12. Here, students must shade a bubble which shows where the apostrophe should be placed, out of four options given.

Table 12: Year 5 language conventions (2008 example 2)

Bess and Daniel havent played tennis together for many years.

This question is problematic for Indigenous children as it assumes knowledge of the SAE present perfect (which does not exist in many Kriol/AE varieties), and how it interacts with negation (which is expressed differently in most Australian creoles). As such, the word *haven't* will not be an obvious choice for Kriol/AE speakers.

The 2008 Year 5 grammar question, shown in Table 13, tests a difficult modal construction, *would already have left*, which involves knowledge of the present perfect, how it interacts with modals and adverb placement, as well as how to express inference about past events of which one has no direct evidence. These ideas are expressed quite differently in Kriol/AE varieties without using modal verbs like *would* and *have*. Finally, the verb *leave* would have the transitive marker *-im* in Kriol and heavy AE varieties, and most commonly past tense would be indicated by *bin*, rather than by using an irregular form, *left*.

Table 13: Year 5 language conventions (2008 example 3)

By 8.30am, the train would already [**left/leave/have left/had left**] the station.

A similar example appears in the 2011 Year 7 grammar questions (although it may be that the complex sentence is what is intended to be tested here): *She knew she [**finds/will find/has found/had found**] the perfect dress the minute she saw it.*

Year 7

Year 7 students at the minimum standard generally identify common grammatical conventions such as the correct use of relative pronouns and clauses. They typically recognise the correct use of punctuation in written English, such as the use of apostrophes for possession and of commas to separate nouns in lists.

For example, in Grammar students can:

- identify the correct form of the verb required to complete a complex sentence
- identify the correct personal pronoun required to complete a sentence
- identify correct subject-verb agreement in a sentence
- identify the phrase required to complete a sentence.

For example, in Punctuation students can:

- locate a comma to separate items in a list. (ACARA, 2011d)

Looking at the grammar description, first note that an example such as ‘identify the phrase required to complete a sentence’ is unacceptably vague. Second, this is the first time subject-verb agreement has been mentioned in the minimum standard. It is assumed knowledge in Levels 3 and 5. So it is surprising to find it here. It is of course a serious challenge for second language learners of English, and long identified as a stage which takes time to acquire. If the grammar tests actually were aimed at second language learners, one would have expected explicit tests of simple situations. But in fact, the examples at Year 7 suggest that what the testers are looking for are complex situations, such as when the noun head of the subject differs in number from a noun in a post-nominal modifier, or when there is a coordinate subject, as illustrated in Table 14.

Table 14: Year 5 language conventions (2011 examples 3 and 4)

3	The first of Tim Winton’s novels that I read [am/are/was/were] <i>Blueback</i> .
4	Which sentence is correct?
a	The coach and my brother is late for the match last week.
b	The coach and my brother are late for the match last week.
c	The coach and my brother was late for the match last week.
d	The coach and my brother were late for the match last week

The 2008 example also tests a complex subject agreement situation, when it tests mastery of the difference between colloquial spoken English ([*there’s*] *two good shops nearby*) and standard written English (*there are two good shops nearby*). None of the alternatives is

common in Kriol/AE varieties, but the closest is the form without a copula, which would be considered incorrect in SAE - *two good shops there close up*.

Table 15: Year 7 language conventions (2008 example 2)

- 1 Which sentence is correct?
- a There was two good shops nearby.
- b There are two good shops nearby.
- c There is two good shops nearby.
- d There two good shops nearby.
-

In both cases the intended audience is almost certainly people who have already mastered basic subject-verb agreement, and speak colloquial Australian English, rather than learners. A similar example illustrating the descriptor 'identify the correct personal pronoun required to complete a sentence' can be seen in the 2011 sample question in Table 16. The descriptor doesn't mean what it did at earlier levels (e.g. *he/him* as object of pronoun), but rather differences such as that between coordination in standard written English, as opposed to colloquial spoken English (using *me*) and the trend to using *myself* in formal speeches.

Table 16: Year 7 language conventions (2011 example 2)

- 2 Which sentence is correct?
- a Sara and I are in the team.
- b Sara and me are in the team.
- c Me and Sara are in the team.
- d Sara and myself are in the team.
-

Year 9

Year 9 students at the minimum standard generally identify in which tense a short passage is written and correctly use comparative adjectives. They typically recognise the correct use of punctuation in written English, such as the correct form of contractions, and identifying the purpose of italics and dashes in sentences.

For example, in Grammar students can:

- identify the tense of a short passage
- identify the correct form of a comparative adjective in a sentence
- identify the word that functions as a verb in a sentence.

For example, in Punctuation students can:

- identify the purpose of italics in a sentence
- locate commas in a sentence to emphasise a clause
- recognise that colons can be used to introduce lists (ACARA, 2011d).

The 2011 examples are about mastering a particular view of grammatical terminology (e.g. identify a text in the past tense), not about mastery of grammar. In the 2008 test there was one question on grammatical usage, and one on grammatical terminology. The grammatical usage question is shown below.

Table 17: Year 9 language conventions (2008)

1 Jane has [*saw, seen, will see, see*] the car she wants to buy.

This question tests the correct form of the perfect participle of the irregular *see*, and it is quite unclear why this was considered a Year 9 question, given the minimum standard aims described above.

SUMMARY: GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

Reviewing the examples shown in this section, the motivation for the questions on grammatical usage is unclear. Many do not seem to be based on common problems that students from non-English speaking backgrounds have. There also seems to be no staging of difficulty of structure - the 2008 Year 9 grammatical usage question on the present perfect is certainly easier than the 2008 Year 5 modal plus present perfect construction. And crucially, some of the distractors (i.e. 'wrong answers') actually represent constructions that are more acceptable in Kriol/AE varieties than the SAE 'correct' answer.

There has certainly been improvement between 2008 and 2011, in that some of the obvious problems of the 2008 tests have been ameliorated by laying out examples illustrating what the minimum standard should be. However, the lack of clear motivation for deciding what is grammatically complex and what is simple progression indicates that the testers have not clearly distinguished between different test subjects: those who speak SAE as a first language but have to learn the conventions of written SAE, those who are learning SAE as a second language, and those who are learning it as a second language but whose first language shares many lexical items in common with SAE, such as speakers of Kriol/AE. Each of these learners will make different types of error. The usefulness of a test depends on how accurately the results reflect what the students can do, and have learned.

Overall, we have seen from this analysis of the sample language conventions that the NAPLAN test measures how well SAE speakers have mastered the conventions of spelling and punctuating English. It is inadequate as a test of how well students from non-English speaking backgrounds have learned the English language. This is because some questions may be answered incorrectly simply due to the fact that students lack linguistic and cultural knowledge assumed by the question.

CONCLUSIONS

The NAPLAN test purports to be a diagnostic tool. However, the tests are simultaneously testing first language speakers and second language learners, and do not provide good information about the proficiency of these second language learners. It is clear that the NAPLAN test, while being suitable for most groups of SAE speakers, is both linguistically and culturally unsuitable for Indigenous children, especially for those living in remote communities. This examination of the test has indicated a range of areas in which the test is culturally and linguistically problematic for Indigenous children and it is likely that these contribute to their poor performance on the test. From a fairness point of view, the texts need to reflect 'ideas and information related to [children's] real and imagined worlds' and that needs to include all children being tested no matter what their living situation, so they will be able to 'relate their interpretations to their own experiences' (MCEECDYA, 2009).

The issues described in this investigation, where creole speaking students perform poorly on literacy tests of the standard (dominant) language variety, have similar consequences the world over. In Hawaii, Hawaiian Creole has been banned from the education system because of students' poor proficiency on a standard curriculum test, and in the U.S., African American students who speak African American (Vernacular) English consistently perform poorly in such tests (see e.g. Siegel, 2007). In Australia, it is clear that action needs to be taken so that Indigenous students are not simply seen as having poor English literacy skills, and so that the results are helpful in showing whether students are meeting normal EFL/ESL benchmarks for stages of acquiring English. Combining the findings of our study with the results of the first NAPLAN tests run in 2008, there are a number of implications relating to Kriol/AE speakers. Firstly, it is imperative that local Indigenous teachers and outsider-teachers sent to work in remote indigenous schools are not only trained in ESL methods, but also trained in EFL approaches for children in communities where there is no immersion in the dominant language of Australia. In those communities where the main language is a creole or variety of AE, both sets of teachers must gain enough familiarity to recognise the structural differences between SAE and Kriol/AE varieties so that variant forms and actual 'errors' can be treated differently, and appropriately.

Additionally, a curriculum should be developed for teaching Indigenous children using EFL/ESL methods. Such a curriculum should systematically develop their knowledge of standard English through explicit teaching, and, in the case of those communities where the main language is a creole or variety of AE, through explicit comparison of the home language structures with those of standard English as proposed in the FELIKS model (Fostering English Language in Kimberley Schools) (see for example Berry & Hudson, 1997). Finally if NAPLAN is to be used as a diagnostic test of achievement and of teacher accomplishment in teaching English, for schools with predominantly ESL or EFL students it makes sense to have two further tests based on the known progression of ESL and EFL learners, and on the kinds of difficulties they are likely to face at each stage of learning English.

REFERENCES

- ACARA (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority). (2011a). *National assessment programme: literacy and numeracy*. Retrieved April 27, 2011, from <http://www.nap.edu.au/>.
- ACARA. (2011b). *Reading samples*. Retrieved May 1, 2011, from <http://www.nap.edu.au/NAPLAN/About+each+domain/Reading/index.html> and <http://www.naplan.edu.au>.
- ACARA. (2011c). *Minimum standards – spelling*. Retrieved April 27, 2011, from <http://www.nap.edu.au/NAPLAN/About+each+domain/Language+Conventions/Minimum+standards+-+spelling/index.html>
- ACARA. (2011d). *Minimum standards – grammar and punctuation*. Retrieved May 1, 2011, from <http://www.nap.edu.au/NAPLAN/About+each+domain/Language+Conventions/Minimum+standards+-+grammar+and+punctuation/index.html>.
- Berry, R. & Hudson, J. (1997, October). *The story of Feliks - bidialectal education*. Paper presented at the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia Conference, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba.
- Craig, N. (2009, November 15). Teacher wages to be linked to test results. *The Age*. Retrieved from <http://www.theage.com.au/national/teacher-wages-to-be-linked-to-test-results-20091114-ifnw.html>.
- Elwell, V. M. R. (1979). *English-as-a-second-language in Aboriginal Australia: a case study of Milingimbi*. MA thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Genishi, C. & Brainard, M. (1995). Assessment of bilingual children: A dilemma seeking solutions. In E. E. Garcia & B. O'Laughlin, (Eds.), *Meeting the challenge of linguistic and cultural diversity in early childhood education* (pp. 49-63). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Gutierrez-Clellen, V. (1996). Language diversity: implications for assessment. In K. Cole, P. Dale & D. Thal, (Eds.), *Assessment of communication and language* (pp. 29-56). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Harkins, J. (1993). *Bridging two worlds: Aboriginal English and crosscultural understanding*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press.
- Hudson, Joyce. 1985. *Grammatical and semantic aspects of Fitzroy Valley Kriol*. Darwin: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Kaldor, S., & Malcolm, I. (1979). The language of the school and the language of the Western Australian Aboriginal schoolchild -- implications for education. In R. M. Berndt & C. H. Berndt, (Eds.), *Aborigines of the west: their past and their present* (pp. 406-437). Perth: University of Western Australia Press.
- Masters, G. N. (2010, August). NAPLAN and My School: Shedding light on a work in progress. *Teacher: The National Education Magazine*, pp. 22-25.
- MCEECDYA (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs). (2009). *National Assessment Programme: Literacy and Numeracy*. Retrieved from http://naplan.edu.au/test_samples/test_samples.html. 2011 available via the Wayback machine: <http://replay.web.archive.org/20090121152215/>.
- McGregor, W. (2004). *The languages of the Kimberley, Western Australia*. New York, Routledge.
- Munro, J. M. (2000). Kriol on the move: a case of language spread and shift in Northern Australia. In J. Siegel, (Ed.), *Processes of language contact: studies from Australia and the South Pacific* (pp. 245-270). Saint-Laurent, Quebec: Fides. [AGMV Marquis, Scabrini Group].
- Ng, B.C. & Wigglesworth, G. (2007). *Bilingualism, an advanced resource book*. London, Routledge.
- Ovington, G. (1992). Teaching English to Kriol speakers: the Kartiya game. In J. Siegel, (Ed.), *Pidgins, creoles and nonstandard dialects in education. Occasional Papers No.12* (pp. 87-98). Toowoomba: Applied Linguistics Association of Australia.
- Rhydwen, M. (1996). *Writing on the backs of the blacks: Voice, literacy and community in Kriol fieldwork*. St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press.
- Sandefur, J. (1991). The problem of the transparency of Kriol. In I. G. Malcolm, (Ed.), *Linguistics in the service of society* (pp. 115-130). Perth: Institute of Applied Language Studies, Edith Cowan University.
- Shnukal, A. (1985). Why Torres Strait Broken English is not English. In M. Christie (Ed.), *Aboriginal perspectives on experience and learning: the role of language in education* (pp. 29-39). Deakin, Vic: University Press.
- Siegel, J. (2007). Creoles and minority languages in education: An update. *Language and Education* 21(1), 66-86.
- Simpson, J., McConvell, P. & Caffery, J. (2009). *Gaps in Australia's Indigenous Language Policy: Dismantling bilingual education in the Northern Territory (AIATSIS Discussion Paper no. 24)*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

- Simpson, J., McConvell, P. & Caffery, J. (2011). Maintaining languages, maintaining identities: what bilingual education offers. In B. Baker, I. Mushin, M. Harvey & R. Gardner, (Eds.), *Indigenous language and social identity: papers in honour of Michael Walsh* (pp.409-428). Canberra, Pacific Linguistics.
- Thomas, W. & Collier, V. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students in long term academic achievement*. Final report. Washington DC: Centre for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence.
- Valdes, G. & Figuero, R. (1994). *Bilingualism and testing: A special case of bias*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.
- Wigglesworth, G. & Simpson, J. (2008). The language learning environment of preschool children in Indigenous communities. In J. Simpson & G. Wigglesworth, (Eds.), *Children's language and multilingualism: Indigenous language use at home and school* (pp. 13-29). UK: Continuum International.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Retrieved January 23, 2009, from http://naplan.edu.au/test_samples/test_samples.html. The old site is also still available through the Wayback machine at http://web.archive.org/web/20090121152215/http://naplan.edu.au/test_samples/test_samples.html.
- 2 In the ACE corpus of written Australian English, *jutting out* and *jutting* do not occur at all, while *poking out* occurs once, and *poking* occurs six times. In the ICE corpus of written and spoken Australian English, *jutting out*, *poking out* and *jutting* do not occur at all, while *poking* occurs four times. This includes all sources of material in both corpora, but none are specifically child-focused (such as children's books or children's speech). We can infer then, that children's exposure to these items would be even less frequent than adults'.
- 3 Retrieved May 1, 2011, from http://www.nap.edu.au/Information/FAQs/#_Toc289872511.