Language test masquerading as literacy and numeracy test

Gunbalanya School in West Arnhem Land (Source: abc.net.au)

Last week, the results of the 2012 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) were published. As has been the case since NAPLAN was first introduced in Australia in 2008, the Northern Territory (NT) has, once again, underperformed dramatically. More than 30% of Year 3 students in the Territory perform below the national minimum standard in Reading, Writing, Spelling and Numeracy. For Grammar and Punctuation the number of NT students performing below the national minimum standard is close to 40%. Across Australia as a whole, these numbers are between 5-7%.

Around 40% of students enrolled in NT schools are indigenous. Across Australia as a whole, that number is 4%.

Putting two and two together, it won’t be long before we’ll see yet another highly politicised debate about aboriginal education. Conservatives will blame ‘underperforming schools’ and progressives will blame ‘systemic socio-economic disadvantage.’ As usual, both sides will be right and wrong in their own ways and after a while the failure of aboriginal education in this country will be shelved as too intractable for yet another year.

Meanwhile, few will stop to consider that NAPLAN doesn’t actually tell us anything about literacy and numeracy achievements in remote NT schools because NAPLAN is a test designed and standardized for first language speakers of English while English is a second language (ESL) across remote NT locations.

Those who do recognize the fact that aboriginal children are being tested in an additional language on a test designed for first language speakers usually dismiss that problem as minor, as, for instance, Indigenous Education 2012 does. The authors of that report argue that language is not an issue because it is not an issue for migrant children for whom English also constitutes an additional language. Indeed, the difference between migrant ESL test takers and first language test takers seems to be only 1 or 2 percentage points on average, with many ESL students outperforming their mother tongue peers.

A recent article in the Australian Review of Applied Linguistics explores the fallacies of the argument that language does not matter in low literacy and numeracy achievements in the NT. The authors, Gillian Wigglesworth, Jane Simpson and Deborah Loakes, argue that there are a number of linguistic challenges faced by aboriginal students in remote locations when it comes to literacy and numeracy assessment in English.

First, most ESL kids in cities grow up in suburbs where English is the language of wider communication. School is thus rarely the only domain where they are exposed to English. This is different in remote communities: English is often exclusive to the school.

Second, most migrants come from literate backgrounds where education is highly valued. This is usually not the case in remote indigenous communities.

Third, the problems inherent in speaking two clearly distinct languages are much easier to recognize and to address than the problems inherent in speaking a different language that is not recognized as such. While
aboriginal languages have become relatively rare, most indigenous people in remote locations now speak Kriol. Creoles spoken in Australia differ widely but most have English as the lexifier language and are structurally based in an indigenous language. Australian creoles thus often sound like English but may, for example, not have subject-verb agreement nor distinguish singular and plural. When examining Year 3 NAPLAN sample tests, the researchers identified many linguistic problems that would have made the test misleading to a Kriol speaker.

As an example they examine the spelling test item: "We jump on the trampoline." Test takers have to correct the underlined item. Leaving aside the fact that presenting an incorrect item to a learner is highly problematic in itself, test takers would need to identify that “jump” is in the past tense and that the final [t] sound is therefore graphically represented as <ed>. However, past tense in Australian creoles would usually be realized as bin *jamp*. This spelling item is thus testing grammatical knowledge that Kriol speakers are unlikely to have.

The problem is compounded by the fact that ear infections are extremely high in remote indigenous communities and about 70% of all children there are affected by some form of hearing loss. Final stops such as [t] are extremely difficult to hear with high frequency hearing loss.

The problem is also compounded by the fact that the reading passages in the test are littered with cultural concepts quite alien to the experience of children in remote Australia. The sample tests examined by Wigglesworth, Simpson and Loakes are populated by cinemas, paperboys, picket fences, letter boxes and parking meters – none of which exist in remote communities.

In sum, the researchers demonstrate that the NAPLAN test is linguistically and culturally problematic for creole-speaking children in remote communities. A standardized test designed for first-language speakers of English will always fail second-language speakers who are not even recognized as such.

In contrast to all the big problems bedevilling aboriginal education in this country, the language problem is actually relatively easy to fix: bilingual education with the use of the mother tongue in the early years of schooling and simultaneous systematic instruction in English as an additional language work well in minority contexts elsewhere. And, of course, tests designed for the actual population of test takers rather than an imaginary monolingual mother tongue speaker of Standard English.