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## **Needs analysis for task-based language teaching: A case study of Indigenous vocational education and training students who speak EAL/EAD**

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*Indigenous students enrol in vocational education and training (VET) programs because they provide a viable pathway into the workplace or further education. However, most high school VET programs use mainstream teaching methodologies which already assume that students speak the Standard Australian English required for the workplace. This approach can disadvantage Indigenous students, particularly those from remote communities who speak a traditional Aboriginal language as a home language. This paper describes a case study of a second language Task-Based Needs Analysis (TBNA) undertaken at a residential high school specialising in VET for Indigenous students, most of whom come from Western Australia's remote communities and speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). The study used naturalistic data collection methods (non-participant observation, unstructured interviews and document collection) to identify the actual language and literacy tasks that students are likely to encounter in various workplace settings. The main findings are presented in relation to work-oriented tasks, work-life tasks and cross-cultural interactions. The research described here provides a potential guide for undertaking a TBNA as the starting point for designing and implementing task-based language teaching programs, especially for Indigenous VET students (and others from non-Western cultures) who speak EAL.*

*Keywords: Indigenous, needs analysis, VET, task-based.*

### **Introduction**

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) emerged out of communicative language teaching. It has attracted considerable attention in the literature on both English as an Additional Language (EAL) pedagogy (e.g., Richards & Renandya, 2002) and second language acquisition (SLA) research (e.g., Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres, & Fernandez-Garcia, 1999; Platt & Brooks, 2002; Robinson, 2011;

Skehan & Foster, 1999). It is also increasing in popularity amongst practitioners. Designing a TBLT program starts with a task-based needs analysis (TBNA) to identify students' language and literacy learning needs (Long, 2005; Nunan, 2004). High school VET students need language and literacy skills they will use in the workplace. This paper describes a case study of a TBNA undertaken for students at a residential high school in Western Australia (WA) which specialises in providing VET courses for Aboriginal high school students. Most of these students come from remote communities and speak a traditional Aboriginal language and/or Aboriginal English as their home language. This research extends a scoping study (Oliver & Grote, 2010) which highlighted concerns about learners' relatively low language and literacy skills in Standard Australian English (SAE) and the effectiveness of the school's current approach to language and literacy teaching. School staff expressed a desire for a whole-school approach so that the students' vocational aspirations could be realised. A systematic TBNA was deemed the most suitable approach to identify their workplace language and literacy needs because of the general advantages that the methodology offered, and the specific purposes for which English was required.

The project aimed to develop a TBNA model that VET teachers at the research school (and others like it) could use to develop a task-based language and literacy syllabus that could integrate with their existing VET courses. The research findings led to a school-based website that provides VET teachers with:

- background information on languages and dialects (especially Aboriginal English),
- guidelines for investigating the language and literacy learning needs of their students,
- different ways of developing their learners' oral language skills, and
- code-switching skills and other resources for teaching and learning workplace language.

While the procedures described here go beyond what most EAL teachers need to do for their learners, they may provide a useful blueprint for undertaking a systematic TBNA as the starting point for designing such a syllabus.

There are important points to bear in mind when reading this case study. This Needs Analysis (NA) research was carried out to assist Indigenous VET students in their transition into the workforce. When describing some of their language and literacy learning needs it is not our intention to suggest that these students are 'deficient' in any way. While we support and advocate a two-way approach to bi-dialectal education, this is relatively new in the VET sector (WA

Department of Education, 2012). Unfortunately in non-Indigenous society in general and mainstream education in particular, many if not most, continue to put the onus of becoming bidialectal and bi-cultural on Indigenous learners. As applied linguistics researchers, we have a responsibility to better enable those who work within our education systems to assist Indigenous learners to reach their potential.

## **Background**

### ***Indigenous high school students***

Considerable evidence demonstrates that the language and literacy learning needs of Indigenous learners are not adequately met by schools in the early years. By the time these students reach high school, many struggle to meet minimum standards of literacy skills (ACARA, 2011). A cluster of interrelated factors associated with low socio-economic status and social exclusion contribute to this disadvantage, including poor physical health, low levels of social and emotional wellbeing, low rates of school attendance, insufficient academic support at home, and linguistic disadvantage (Partington & Galloway, 2007; Zubrick et al., 2005).

Indigenous students living in remote communities, face additional challenges such as inadequate school infrastructure, few Indigenous teachers, and the use of mainstream teaching methodologies that assume they are fluent in SAE (Grote & Rochecouste, 2012; Malcolm & Konigsberg, 2007). In fact, about a third of Indigenous children aged 4 to 14 living in remote communities speak a traditional language at home (ABS, 2010) and those who do speak English usually speak Aboriginal English or a creole, e.g., Kriol. Aboriginal English (and creoles) systematically diverge from SAE at all linguistic levels, including sounds, vocabulary, word structure, sentence structure, ways of speaking and cultural conceptualisations (Malcolm et al., 1999; WA Department of Education, 2012). Even those Indigenous learners who speak these language varieties find it difficult to learn when the medium of education assumes fluency in SAE.

Linguistic disadvantage and other factors, therefore, make it challenging for Indigenous adolescents to complete Year 12 (ABS, 2011). Today's competitive job market means early school leavers find it especially difficult to obtain employment, particularly those living in remote communities who also lack of transport, local job opportunities, and education or skills training. In 2008 young Indigenous Australians (aged 15 to 24) who were not engaged in the labour force (i.e., neither employed nor looking for work) were less likely to have completed Year 12 or obtained higher qualifications than those in the labour force. In remote areas, 53% of Indigenous youth who were unemployed (and not looking for work) had not completed Year 12 or acquired other qualifications compared with 36% of the same group in non-remote areas (ABS, 2012).

### **Indigenous students in VET programs**

VET programs offer Indigenous learners a potential pathway to the workforce or further education. Some Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) such as TAFE have begun to develop literacy support materials to assist Indigenous learners with the SAE language and literacy skills needed for particular occupations (e.g., DEEWR, 2011b). While the post-schooling VET sector is beginning to address the needs of Indigenous learners (Barnett & Ryan, 2005; Helme, 2005), little is known about the extent to which high school VET programs recognise their learning needs. The only survey that emerged in our literature search (Hill & Helme, 2005) indicates that high school VET teachers may lack sufficient understanding of how to assist Indigenous students. Hill and Helme (2005), for example, report a lack of confidence in a VET teacher's ability to teach communication skills because content was simply read from a book. Mainstream education research indicates that oral language skills other than those used in formal settings, such as oral presentation or debates, are rarely explicitly taught (Oliver, Haig, & Rochecouste, 2003). This is despite the importance of SAE oral language skills in the workplace (Holmes, 2005; Queensland Department of Education and Training, Queensland VET Development Centre, 2011).

### **Rationale for a TBNA**

TBLT is a form of Communicative Language Teaching which has attracted considerable attention in the pedagogical (e.g., Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989, 2004) and research literature (e.g., Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Gass, Mackey, & Ross-Feldman, 2011; Robinson, 2011). In TBLT, the *task* becomes the 'central element of language pedagogy' (Bygate, et al., 2001, p. 1) in relation to teaching, learning and assessment activities (Long & Norris, 2000). For the present discussion, a pedagogical *task* is defined as:

a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task has a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end. (Nunan, 2004, p. 4)

While meaning-making is the primary goal of TBLT (Long & Norris, 2000; Nunan, 2004), it also recognises the need for some focus on linguistic forms so that language learning occurs. Learners need to *notice* discrepancies between target language models and their own L2 production and to adjust their output to convey meaning more effectively (Gass, 1997; Oliver, 2009; Schmidt, 1990). In TBLT, teachers use naturalistic language interactions to provide opportunities for learners to notice and analyse a particular form,

usually when it has caused misunderstandings. This kind of analytical syllabus is the basis of TBLT and differs considerably from traditional synthetic language syllabuses (e.g., grammar translation, functional/notional, and situational). Unlike the analytical syllabus, the synthetic syllabus expects the student to learn the various components of language and their functions and then draw them together to achieve communicative aims (Long & Crookes, 1992).

A significant aspect of TBLT is that syllabus design must begin with a TBNA (Long, 2005) so that appropriate 'target tasks', i.e., the 'uses of language in the world beyond the classroom' (Nunan, 2004, p. 1) can be identified. For high school VET students, the target tasks are those occurring in the workplace. Therefore, an important advantage of TBLT is that the *task* is a non-linguistic element that serves as the unit of analysis throughout the process (Long, 2005; Long & Norris, 2000), as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Using the task as the unit of analysis in TBLT processes

| Processes      |   | Task = Unit of Analysis  |
|----------------|---|--|
| TBNA           | ↓ | Identifying target tasks in the workplace  |
| TB syllabus    | ↓ | Planning pedagogical tasks:<br>Selecting and sequencing relevant teaching and learning activities;<br>identifying appropriate learning materials (e.g., certificate course materials, authentic documents) |
| TB activities  | ↓ | Devising lesson plans centring on tasks  |
| TB assessments | ↓ | Organising tasks that closely resemble target tasks; establishing criteria for their assessment  |
| TB outcomes    | 👍 | Effective engagement in workplace tasks  |

Another advantage of the task-based approach for occupational purposes is that *task* is a non-technical, non-linguistic term that can be easily understood by most participants, including learners, employers, co-workers and other stakeholders (Long, 2005).

When undertaking a TBNA to identify the typical language and literacy practices of a given workplace setting, researchers underscore the importance of collecting data from a variety of sources (e.g., documents, participants) using a range of methods (e.g., non-participant observation, interviews). This maximises the quantity and quality of data obtained and provides opportunities to triangulate the data (Cowling, 2007; Gilabert, 2005; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999,

2005; Long, 2005). In fact data triangulation is an important component of NA, particularly when using qualitative methods as it enhances the reliability of findings by verifying information obtained from one source or method using alternative data sources or methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). TBNA researchers also emphasise the importance of including *insider* or *domain expert* (i.e., authentic workplace) perspectives and workplace observations (participant or non-participant), rather than relying on the intuitions of teachers or textbook writers. In this way, actual day-to-day language and literacy practices can be documented and incorporated into task-based learning activities and assessments (Cowling, 2007; Gilabert, 2005; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999, 2005; Long, 2005). Using tasks as the unit of analysis for needs analysis enables the teacher to develop a task-based syllabus that will provide students with learning experiences to prepare them to engage more effectively in the actual communicative tasks they will meet in the workplace.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research setting and participants**

The present study was undertaken at a residential Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed School (CAPS) near a country town in WA. Students receive instruction from 19 VET, English and maths teachers and support staff. In addition to English, maths and religious studies, the school offers Australian Qualification Framework qualifications in courses such as Land, Parks and Wildlife; General Construction; Stock and Station (Rural Operations); Automobile Mechanics; Business and Administration; Hospitality; Tourism; and Metals and Engineering. Students also participate in a Structured Workplace Learning (SWPL) once a week to obtain work experience. Coming mainly from remote Aboriginal communities, most of the approximately 70 students (aged 14 to 20) grew up in cultures where oral traditions remain strong and traditional languages are spoken at home; a few speak Aboriginal English or Kriol as a primary language.

Other participants included employers who participate in the SWPL program and an employment counsellor from the Aboriginal Workforce Development Centre. Lecturers from RTOs (including TAFEs) located near the students' home communities were also involved because many students seek further qualifications at these centres. Members of the learners' home communities, e.g., family members and Elders, were interviewed to triangulate data obtained from learners on cultural matters and to ensure that the NA model developed for the main project would be culturally appropriate.

#### **Data collection**

Data were collected at the school over an 18-month period during (approximately) monthly visits lasting three to four days. The process was iterative, with researchers returning to informants to

verify information as it emerged as part of the triangulation process (Cowling, 2007; Gilabert, 2005). A variety of data collection methods from various sources were implemented (Cowling, 2007; Gilabert, 2005; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999, 2005; Long, 2005) as follows:

**Non-participant observation.** Non-participant observations were undertaken in classrooms and training workshops on the campus, and in workplaces where students undertook SWPL. Handwritten field notes were typed up and analysed to identify tasks and other themes emerging in the data. These were used to guide the interviewing process.

**Interviews.** Semi-structured informal interviews were conducted with individuals or groups usually face-to-face or, in a few cases, by phone. Interviewees included students (5 females, 7 males), 15 school staff members, 10 employers, 1 employment counsellor, 5 RTO lecturers and 57 Aboriginal community members. Interview notes were handwritten or, when granted permission, audio-recorded. All the non-Aboriginal researchers had extensive experience working with Aboriginal English speakers, and took measures to ensure the quality of the data. For example, the researcher who interviewed students made several visits to the school, engaging with students in sports activities to build rapport prior to interviewing them. Likewise, the researcher who interviewed community members made multiple visits to the communities accompanied by an Aboriginal colleague. VET teachers and employers were asked to identify workplace tasks and related workplace language. All interviewees were asked about the language and literacy skills young Aboriginal people needed to succeed in the workplace.

**Documents.** A search for documents listing job titles with descriptions was undertaken (Long, 2005). This yielded the *Job Guide* (DEE-WR, 2011a) which provided job descriptions outlining the basic tasks for each job role. Learning materials such as certificate training course materials were collected from VET teachers and RTO lecturers. These proved to be a good source of both tasks and specialist terms for each trade.

### **Findings**

Due to space considerations the findings presented here are necessarily generic and only a few examples are provided. Nonetheless, the findings apply to most occupations that the learners were training for. (For a more in depth presentation of the findings for non-EAL teachers in Aboriginal Education, see Oliver, Grote, Rochecouste, & Exell, 2012.) The findings are organised in relation to three thematic categories:

- work-oriented tasks,
- work-life tasks, and
- workplace cross-cultural encounters.

Although each of these themes is treated separately, they are inextricably intertwined and interdependent. Teachers who have limited time and other resources to conduct a comprehensive TBNA, may find these categories useful to ensure that the syllabus design includes aspects of language and literacy (oral language, in particular) that address each area.

**Work-oriented tasks: Getting the job done**

Although some participants, including a number of the students themselves, believed that a proportion of the students had sufficient English language skills to work in jobs in or near their communities, most agreed that many needed to further develop their oral language skills in SAE in order to interact with non-Aboriginal supervisors, co-workers and, in some cases, clientele or members of the public. Specific, frequently cited, and observed, examples of the type of English language students needed to develop included:

- understanding instructions,
- asking clarifying questions,
- giving verbal (rather than non-verbal) confirmation,
- explaining processes undertaken (orally and in writing),
- giving directions/instructions (to co-workers or clientele),
- identifying problems and possible solutions,
- indicating verbally when a task is completed,
- using appropriate tool names and workplace jargon, and
- reading safety warnings and instructions.

Overall, most participants (again including those students who were interviewed) agreed on the importance of developing oral language skills to enable students to complete work-related tasks. Several employers noted a need for learners to speak clearly and loudly enough to make themselves understood. An aged-care facility manager, for example, indicated that 'old people are frequently deaf' and a mechanic workshop manager observed the difficulty of hearing students' 'soft voices' when 'there's a lot of noise in the workshop'. Others stressed the need to know whether the student has understood what they are told, 'While some are more outspoken and say they don't understand something, others will say nothing if they don't understand.' Students' quiet speech or silence may relate to various factors: a reluctance to communicate with white people, the notion that silence is an acceptable response, or evidence of *shame* (the latter is discussed in more detail below).

Safety in the workplace was by far the issue raised most frequently by VET teachers, employers and certificate training



material writers when discussing literacy for occupational purposes. All occupations require sufficient literacy skills for workers to read and follow safety instructions such as warning labels on how to handle and use hazardous products (e.g., cleaning products, weed killers), and to understand cautionary signs about using tools (e.g., power towels, kitchen equipment) and wearing protective clothing (e.g., steel-capped boots, safety glasses).

Both educators and employers pointed out the importance of knowing the technical vocabulary associated with the trade, including the formal and informal terms for tools or work processes. For example, one participant, when discussing automobile mechanics, said that students need to recognise different tools and to know those labelled with either imperial or metric measurements: 'A Philips screw driver [or a] flat screw driver, the difference between a hammer and a sledge hammer, a 12 millimetre or 7/16 spanner, an open-ended or double open-ended spanner, a timing light compared to a testing light.' The participant maintained that if students 'knew their tools, they would manage the hands-on better and may be more interested' in their job.

#### **Work-life tasks: Socialising at work**

Educators, employers and students highlighted the important need for learners to develop oral language skills for engaging socially at work. The most commonly mentioned (and observed) tasks for social interaction at work include:

- greeting and leave-taking,
- using politeness terms,
- asking permission, and
- engaging in small talk (with co-workers and clients).

Employers noted that learners needed to verbalise their greetings when they arrive at work and get into the habit of saying 'please' and 'thank you' (as appropriate for the context) when interacting with others. They also need to learn to chat informally with co-workers to get to know one another. This is important not only for the student, but to make the workplace a more harmonious place. Sharing personal information, such as where they come from, who their family might be and what they enjoy doing outside of work (e.g., sporting activities) can provide the foundation for developing relationships at work. One VET teacher added that students should learn how to engage in workplace banter and to 'use humour appropriately'.

According to Holmes (2005), the importance of engaging in 'small talk or social language' in order to 'gain acceptance' (p. 344) in the workplace is critical, especially in small businesses where

people work closely together on a daily basis. In this study the students related that socialising was a major concern for them, many described not having the oral English language necessary to do so. As one remarked, 'Communicating with [non-Aboriginal] people is the hardest.' Several more confident students attributed this to their inexperience in talking to non-Aboriginal people in general. As one pointed out, 'Most people [students] just get shame and just don't talk about it'.

### **Workplace cross-cultural encounters: Overcoming shame**

The discomfort experienced by many students and their consequent reticence when in the presence of non-Aboriginal employers, co-workers and clients were confirmed by students, teaching staff, employers, community members and non-participant observations. While non-Aboriginal staff and employers described it as a 'lack of confidence', Aboriginal students, staff members and community members used the term *shame*. The Aboriginal English term *shame* is frequently described as feeling shy or embarrassed, especially when becoming the focus of (positive or negative) attention (Eagleson, Kaldor, & Malcolm, 1982; Harkins, 1990). This frequently occurs when interacting with an authority figure such as a teacher or police officer; however, as one student noted just being 'the only blackfella in that [work] environment' can also be a trigger. Of particular concern were students who reported that they experienced *shame* when not understanding a supervisor's instructions: 'asking for a different way of explaining things' would cause them *shame*. Talking on the telephone was also reported as a 'frightening' experience, especially when speaking to an unfamiliar non-Aboriginal person.

Most participants agreed that learners needed more experience to help them overcome *shame* when communicating with non-Aboriginal people at work. Although some VET teachers advocated a 'tough love' approach, i.e., 'push[ing] them out' into the workplace, the students explained that 'most of them [students who get shame] don't know any ... white kids' [or adults] and need opportunities to 'be around more [non-Aboriginal] people they don't know.' Another noted the school 'should have lessons in how to have conversations, [ask] questions like their name, where they're from, about their life.' They expressed a desire to meet more non-Aboriginal people: 'Bring some people [into school] so we can talk to them, like we have to interview them ... bring some people that work at places and bring them out here and talk'. One student pointed out that her peers would be less likely to quit the first day of SWPL if they had more classroom practice for workplace situations and lessons on how to get to know non-Aboriginal employers and co-workers.

Another strategy suggested by educators and community members was to provide lots of opportunities for learners to

extend their existing code-switching skills. Some community members pointed out that, although students already know how to *code-switch*, i.e., change from one language or dialect to another (e.g., Aboriginal English to SAE), giving more attention to code-switching in the classroom would enable students to practise the language involved in work-oriented and work-life (social) tasks and learn ways of using SAE. This could help build confidence when engaging with non-Aboriginal people in the workplace and help to overcome *shame* in future encounters.

### Summary/Conclusion

This paper has outlined a TBNA study undertaken to help VET teachers address the language and literacy skills that Indigenous high school students require to participate in the workforce or further education. We used TBNA because of the advantages it offers: particularly having a non-linguistic task as the unit of analysis. This ensures continuity throughout the process from the identification of needs, syllabus design through to the assessments. Tasks are tangible and, therefore, easily understood by participants who may be unfamiliar with EAL teaching methods.

Our use of multiple sources and methods proved to be important because it enhanced the reliability of findings by providing opportunities to triangulate the data. The use of insider sources rather than relying on the intuition of outsiders (such as teachers or applied linguists) was also important: it provided useful examples of work-oriented tasks and associated technical language exemplars, and also highlighted the importance of social interaction at work. Being able to engage in social interactions at work is critical for developing the positive relationships that make it possible not only to function on the job but also to make one's work-life enjoyable (Holmes, 2005).

While the importance of accessing the perspectives of domain experts cannot be overemphasised, our study has also shown that when Indigenous learners (or those from other non-Western cultures) are involved, it is also essential to include the learners' own perspectives (as well as those in their home communities to verify cultural information). Input from these participants enabled us to understand that being the only Aboriginal person in the workplace dominated by non-Aboriginal employees and even having to talk with non-Aboriginal people can cause some students *shame*. The student informants also explained how debilitating this experience can be, how much they wanted to overcome it and some potential learning strategies that might help them to do so. Opportunities to learn and practise the language of various workplaces using classroom scenarios and getting to know more non-Aboriginal people are potentially useful strategies to help Indigenous learners develop the skills, experience and confidence they need to engage effectively in the cross-cultural context of the workplace.

Perhaps the most important overarching finding of the study was that mainstream pedagogies simply do not cater for the specific needs of Indigenous EAL students, particularly those from remote communities. This cohort of VET students needs to be taught using EAL methodologies. We suggest that curriculum design begin by undertaking a TBNA, such as the one outlined here, and sourcing data from a range of participants involved with the learning process and the target context, including the students, their teachers, future trainers, workplace colleagues and employers.

While the findings will differ for each classroom situation, teachers may find it useful to elicit participants' views of, and specific communication examples of tasks associated with, the three major themes that emerged in our study: *work oriented tasks*, *work-life tasks* and *issues that may obstruct cross-cultural encounters in the workplace*. Teachers can then develop pedagogical tasks to use in learning activities and assessments. Such practices can provide learners with positive experiences to better prepare them for the actual communicative interactions they will encounter in the workplace.

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