

First Languages Workplan 2021-2023

Monday, 23 November 2020 | **Yubbah Action Group**

Context

As a union of ~17,000 teachers, support staff and ancillary staff in non-government education institutions in Queensland and the Northern Territory, IEU-QNT has an active interest in industrial and professional issues confronted by members in the course of their work and the broader sociocultural environment in which they perform it.

In the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, access to First Language Instruction is a critical issue.

We recognise the phrase “First Language Instruction” to have two components:

1. The right of individual students to access the curriculum in their home language and;
2. The teaching of First Languages to students from all backgrounds to ensure that the language is not lost.

We believe that both components are essential to ensure that students are able to engage fully with formal education and achieve their full potential. Further, we believe that instruction in First Languages offers a unique opportunity to preserve and reinvigorate Australia’s First Languages [1].

Our union strongly supports First Languages Australia’s *Nintiringanyi – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Teaching and Employment Strategy* [2] and the call by World Vision for all schools in Australia to engage a First Nations educator/coordinator [3].

We also acknowledge the contested nature of First Language Instruction (and particularly bilingual education programs) in the Northern Territory and acknowledge the positive impact of the *Growing Our Own* partnership between Charles-Darwin University and Northern Territory Catholic Education [4], which aims to increase the number of First Nations teachers working in remote communities.

Our First Languages Campaign

Despite evidence that teaching in First Language (the language which the child and family use in the home environment) delivers academic, social and economic benefits [5], and strong international and national support for inclusive practice [6], in Australia, First Language instruction remains the exception, rather than the norm.

One possible limiting factor for provision of instruction in First Languages is the relatively low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. In 2016, just 2.02% (9184) of Australian teachers identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander [7].

Schools respond to this shortage in various ways, but a common approach is to engage community members as school officers or assistant teachers, who then work collaboratively

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with teachers to meet cultural and linguistic needs of First Nations students, and the school more generally.

The recent report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's *Inquiry into education in remote and complex environments* indicates that, while the Australian Curriculum recognises the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and culture, decisions about how schools offer learning programs, including bilingual education, are described as matters for state and territory education authorities [8].

This means it is appropriate for our union to work with the Queensland and Northern Territory Governments, and our employer groups in the non-government sector, with the goal of supporting and encouraging greater prevalence of First Language Instruction in non-government schools.

In considering how our union might best work with relevant stakeholder and employer groups to support and encourage more schools to offer First Language Instruction, we have identified three key areas for future work:

- 1) Documentation and dissemination of best practice case studies from our membership;
- 2) Advocacy for First Language Instruction (in both contexts – accessing curriculum in First Language and explicit teaching of First Languages) and;
- 3) Development of industrial guidelines for engagement of First Language Teachers and Instructors.

More detailed plans for each area of work are provided below.

1. Best Practice Case Studies

The non-government sector, throughout Queensland and the Northern Territory, contains a significant number of schools with high proportions of First Nations students. Teachers and support staff in those schools skillfully adapt their practice to cater for those students for whom English is an additional dialect or language.

Documenting the ways in which school staff work with their local First Nations communities, modify educational programs and incorporate First Language instruction, and sharing this information with other practitioners, will support and enable progression of First Language instruction in all schools.

This workplan commits our union to overseeing collection and collation of case studies throughout 2021 and concurrent promotion of these through member publications (print and on-line).

Following compilation of case studies, a second phase of the work will involve extraction of key principles and practices to inform guidelines for best practice, as a platform for ongoing advocacy and a precursor to development of industrial frameworks for First Language teachers and instructors.

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2. Advocacy for First Language Instruction

A growing public awareness of social and educational inequities experienced by First Nations Australians is gradually translating into widespread support for policies and programs that will work to reduce those inequities.

The Queensland Government, for example, has recently released its *Many Voices: Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Policy* [9] and now is an appropriate time to translate that policy into programs that make First Language instruction a key element of school education. Similarly, the Northern Territory has published a clear plan for the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures [10] and it is appropriate that the Northern Territory Government be held accountable for the enactment of that plan.

As a union of over 17,000 teachers and support staff in non-government education institutions throughout Queensland and the Northern Territory, our union is able to lobby governments to ensure that plans for First Language instruction translate to meaningful support for schools to engage with their local First Nations communities and ensure that local languages form the basis of local First Language programs.

This is consistent with our union's approach to supporting and enabling First Nations Peoples in their efforts to assert their own social and cultural values, rather than compelling them to conform to externally imposed norms and expectations[11].

Engagement of our membership with the broader campaign also provides an opportunity to persuade employers to complement the investment of government with development and implementation of clear plans to provide First Language instruction which incorporate meaningful career trajectories for language teachers and instructors.

It is anticipated that advocacy for First Language instruction will be an ongoing undertaking throughout 2021 and 2022.

3. Industrial Guidelines for Engagement of First Language Teachers and Instructors

Provision of quality First Language instruction is crucially dependent on access to the linguistic and cultural knowledge of local First Nations communities. To overcome historical inequities and injustices, this knowledge must be assigned appropriate and adequate economic value.

This requires a systematic approach to the engagement of employment of those who provide First Language instruction and development of a framework to guide that systematic approach will be the culminating element of our campaign.

Given the critical status of many of our First Languages, it is essential that schools work with communities to facilitate students' access to language instruction and this will, necessarily, mean that not all of those who design and/or deliver First Language programs will be registered teachers. One possible solution is the linkage of vocational qualifications to classifications such as "Assistant Teacher", which are in use in the Northern Territory. This is not, however, the only model available and, ultimately, the best model for a given school and community should be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

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First Languages Australia has conducted a comprehensive audit of qualifications and training in the field of First Language instruction [12], but these have yet to be mapped to an appropriate industrial framework.

Our union has over one hundred years of experience in ensuring that education workers are appropriately recognised and remunerated for their work and is, therefore, ideally positioned to work with First Languages Australia, and our major employer groups, to develop an industrial framework for the engagement of First Language teachers and instructors.

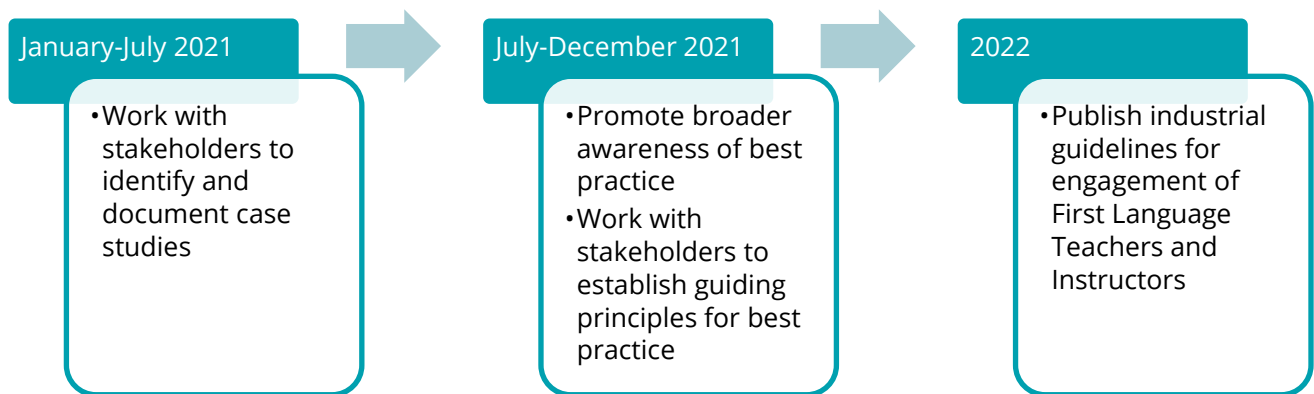


Figure 1: Project Timeline

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