

# Addressing the Language and Literacy Needs of Aboriginal High School VET Students who Speak SAE as an Additional Language

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Vocational Education and Training (VET) in high schools has had positive effects on the retention of Indigenous students, providing important pathways into further education and the workforce. However, low-level literacy (and numeracy) skills can make successful completion difficult, especially for students who speak Standard Australian English as an additional language or dialect. This article describes research undertaken to inform the development of a *second language and literacy needs analysis model* designed for high school VET teachers to address the needs of Indigenous students. The study draws on second language acquisition research, which demonstrates the value of using *tasks* as the basis for language teaching syllabus design, with *needs analysis* as a fundamental aspect of this. The project centred on Aboriginal high school VET students from remote and rural communities in Western Australia, who speak English as an additional language/dialect. Data collected included: individual and focus group interviews, training materials, and observation field notes on the language and literacy practices in classrooms and workplaces. The major findings focus on the development of oral language (for both job-oriented and social interactions in the workplace) and literacy skills, as well as the need to overcome 'shame' and develop confidence for speaking to non-Aboriginal people.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous education, needs analysis, language and literacy, second language acquisition, English as an additional language, English as a second language

The number of vocational education training (VET) programs in high schools has increased in recent years, having a positive impact on school retention rates for Indigenous students (Helme, 2005). Such programs can expand opportunities, providing students with a viable pathway to traineeships, apprenticeships, further education or direct entry into the workforce. However, many living in rural and remote communities struggle with the literacy (and numeracy) demands of their VET courses and of the workplace, making course completions challenging. Much of this can be attributed to the linguistic differences between the traditional home languages spoken by these Indigenous learners and the language of teaching and learning, that is Standard Australian English (SAE). Students who must learn to read and write in a language that differs considerably from their mother tongue are disadvantaged by mainstream methodologies, which assume competency in the standard language (August & Shanahan, 2006; Grote & Rochecouste, 2012; Siegel, 2010). This article describes research undertaken to enhance the ability of high school

VET teachers and trainers to assist Indigenous students, particularly those from rural and remote communities, as they transition into further education or the workforce. While the aim of the project was to inform the development of a *second language and literacy needs analysis model* to be used by VET teachers and trainers at the focal school and other similar schools, this article provides an overview of the study and the major findings that informed the model. It is important to point out that as needs analysis research, the present study focuses on what the students, as the main protagonists in this learning journey, may need as they transition to work and further learning. In doing so we are not suggesting that the students are in any way 'deficit'. We believe that it is the responsibility of the education system to assist all students to reach their potential, and it may be the case that for many students coming

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from remote communities, this potential has to date not been well realised within the existing structures. Our intention in this research has been to work collaboratively to identify needs so that these can be better addressed in the future.

### **Background: Indigenous Learners from Remote Communities**

The failure of schools to adequately address the learning needs of Indigenous students is evidenced by the continuing disparity between the literacy (and numeracy) scores of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). There are many reasons why Indigenous learners experience poor literacy outcomes, including low levels of school attendance, limited access to quality education at school and a lack of academic support at home, poor physical health, low social and emotional wellbeing, as well as other issues associated with socio-economic disadvantage and social exclusion (Gray & Beresford, 2001; Partington & Galloway, 2007; Zubrick et al., 2005). Other matters inhibiting literacy success include a lack of Indigenous teachers, inadequate school infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote communities and, importantly, being taught in a language that differs from their mother tongue (Grote & Rochecouste, 2012; Malcolm & Konigsberg, 2007).

A 2008 survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010) indicates that traditional Indigenous languages are the main home language for approximately 42% of Indigenous Australians living in remote areas, including 33% of children aged 4 to 14. It should be noted that even those who speak English at home usually speak Aboriginal English (AbE) or a creole. AbE is the term used to describe a 'range of varieties of English . . . which differ in systematic ways from Standard Australian English at all levels of linguistic structure and which are used for distinctive speech acts, speech events, and genres' (Malcolm, 1995, p. 19). Although language difference is only one of a cluster of interconnected complex reasons for Indigenous students' lack of success in school, it is the means through which mainstream education, including high school VET courses, is delivered and assessed. Resource materials used for teaching the main strands of literacy (reading/viewing, writing, speaking, listening) and other subcategories (e.g., maths literacy, computer literacy) generally assume that students are competent in SAE. Despite collaborations between researchers and some education departments to raise awareness among educators regarding the impact that differences between SAE and AbE can have on learning (e.g., Malcolm et al., 1999), many education systems and staff within them remain unmindful of AbE (Oliver, Rochecouste, Vanderford, & Grote, 2011).

Linguistic disadvantage may go some way to explaining the differences in literacy achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners, particularly those in

rural and remote regions. While there have been slight improvements in Indigenous students' test scores in recent years, disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students remain. The 2011 NAPLAN results for Year 9 students in reading, for example, indicate that nationally 71.9% of Indigenous students achieved the minimum standard (compared to 93.5% of non-Indigenous students). In Western Australia, where the current study took place, the disparity was even greater: Only 63.9% of Indigenous students attained the minimum standard, compared to 92.6% of non-Indigenous students (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). These outcomes represent an optimistic view because Indigenous students who are less confident in their academic skills tend to avoid school on test dates (Partington & Galloway, 2007).

Limited literacy skills, among a range of other factors, make it difficult for many Indigenous students to remain engaged in schooling (Gray & Partington, 2012). The relatively low school retention rates for Indigenous students are concerning, considering the widely accepted correlation between educational attainment and employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011a). Although Year 12 high school completions have risen for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the last decade, discrepancies between the two cohorts persist. This disparity is particularly the case for those living in remote communities. Only 41% of Indigenous young people aged 15 to 24, living in remote areas (and not participating in education or training), were employed in 2008 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). These figures are alarming considering that a significantly large proportion of this group receive their income through the Community Development Employment Program. Although classified as *employment*, this program draws on Commonwealth government income-support funding and its future is uncertain (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b).

### **High School VET Programs**

Many Indigenous students who leave school early or do not have access to a local high school can now access the language and literacy support they need to obtain qualifications in TAFE and other registered training organisations (RTOs) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011; McGlusky & Thaker, 2006). Programs in these *post-school* VET institutions have begun to integrate elements of language and literacy support into their training packages (e.g., Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). However, the nature of the assistance provided to Indigenous students in high school VET courses until now is unclear. Although the language and literacy needs of these students are acknowledged (Barnett & Ryan, 2005; Helme, 2005), there is scant literature on the way in which they are being addressed.

A survey reported in Hill and Helme (2005) suggests that high school VET teachers may have limited knowledge about how to attend to the language and literacy needs of Indigenous students. One student interviewed for the survey, for example, questioned the teacher's own understandings about communication skills, noting that she simply read to students about the topic from a book. This is not surprising in light of research demonstrating that teachers simply do not teach oral communication skills, except those required for formal contexts, such as oral presentations or debates, because these highly structured modes of oral communication are easier to assess than less formal social interactions (McDonald, Warren, & DeVries, 2011; Oliver, Haig, & Rochecouste, 2003). For VET students, oral communication skills and other basic forms of literacy remain 'key underpinning skills that will support their vocational learning, the development of their employability skills and their workplace communication skills whatever level of course or training they are doing' (Queensland Department of Education and Training, Queensland VET Development Centre, 2011, p. 5).

### Task-Based Second Language Needs Analysis Research

With the aim of addressing the language and literacy needs of Indigenous high school VET students, the present study can be situated in the context of task-based needs analysis research focusing on the language and literacy skills required for the workplace (Long, 2005a). This body of research is associated with task-based teaching and learning, an approach that is now widely accepted in second language and literacy teaching (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). This teaching methodology draws on contemporary research in second language acquisition, which recognises the importance of both innate and environmental factors in the language learning process. This *interactionist* perspective (e.g., Gass, 2003; Long, 1996; Oliver & Mackey, 2003) foregrounds the need to plan a language and literacy learning syllabus that is based on an analysis of the interactions or language *tasks* that learners are likely to encounter (Long, 1996, 2005a). In this context, a *task* has been 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)*

Of central importance for the purposes of the present study and the starting point of a task-based approach to language teaching is the *needs analysis* (Long, 2005b; Nunan, 2004). The needs analysis is fundamental because

it informs syllabus design and the development of relevant and meaningful learning tasks. Until recently, however, there has been very little scrutiny of the methodology applied to the needs analysis process. Long (2005a) points out that most needs analyses are not undertaken systematically, but often rely on the intuition of outsiders such as teachers, (pre-service) learners, or texts written by applied linguists. In an age in which 'best practice' must be supported by evidence, relying on intuition is unacceptable. A curriculum should be underpinned by reliable data so that learners are adequately prepared for the dynamic communicative interactions that actually occur in workplace settings.

The needs analysis process, therefore, should serve to identify 'domain specific language use' (Long, 2005a, p. 5), that is, the types of language and literacy skills required for communicative interactions that occur in particular contexts (e.g., a restaurant kitchen) and for specific purposes (e.g., receiving and storing kitchen supplies, food preparation). The teacher can then use this information to devise meaningful tasks that will enable students to progress from their current language and literacy level toward what they need to be able to do (with oral language and written texts) in the workplace.

### The Study

This qualitative study was shaped by the findings from a pilot study conducted the previous year, which involved classroom observations and initial interviews with school staff and students (Oliver & Grote, 2010). This process enabled the researchers to become familiar with the participants, the school facilities and setting, approaches to teaching/learning, and the main concerns of students, teachers and administrators about the language and literacy support provided in the school's VET programs. While numerous issues were raised by students and staff, a major finding of the pilot study was that the language and literacy support provided did not appear to adequately address the demands of the workplace. Thus it was determined that a systematic *second language needs analysis* was required as it would serve as a starting point to attend to students' learning needs. To ensure that the model would be a useful tool for high school VET teachers and trainers, it adopted a task-based approach. The model has also been strongly informed by all Indigenous stakeholders to ensure a culturally appropriate pedagogy. The study described here sought to meet these criteria so that the model could be developed for use by VET teachers at this school and others striving to address the language and literacy learning needs of Indigenous high school VET students.

### Research Site and Participants

The main site for the study was an independent, Christian, Aboriginal parent-directed school which specialises

in VET programs. Located in a regional centre in Western Australia, the boarding school caters to approximately 70 Aboriginal high school students (aged 14 to 20), mainly from Western Australia's remote communities. The majority of students come from cultural backgrounds with strong oral traditions; they speak a traditional language as their home language and Kriol or AbE as an additional language, all of which are languages (or in the case of AbE, a dialect) that are distinct from SAE. Therefore if these students acquire SAE successfully, it becomes yet another language in their linguistic repertoire.

Of the 19 educators at the school, half are trained teachers and half come from trade backgrounds; two of the latter group also have teaching qualifications. Half of those with teacher training received their qualifications prior to their appointment while the other half has obtained theirs since working at the school. All but two staff members have been employed at the school long term, with a core group having more than 20 years' experience teaching at the school. The staff deliver English, Maths, Religious Studies and Structured Workplace Learning Programs (SWLPs) linked to a range of VET subjects including: Stock and Station (Rural Operations); Hospitality; Tourism; Business and Administration; General Construction; Land, Parks and Wildlife; Outdoor Recreation; Automobile Mechanics; and Metals and Engineering. As a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), the school provides Australian Qualification Framework training packages and arranges for assessments.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Research examining the methodology of needs analyses (Gilbert, 2005; Jasso-Aguilar, 2005; Long, 2005a; Sullivan & Girginer, 2002) underscores the importance of using multiple sources and different data collection methods to gather information about the context and communicative events in which SAE is used. Triangulating data sources and methods also serves to achieve greater reliability and validity of the findings. These principles guided the data collection and analytical approach described below.

### Interviews

Data were gathered through individual and focus group interviews with key stakeholders. Participants interviewed at the school site included 12 students (five females, seven males; aged 16 to 18) and 15 of the VET teachers and trainers (including the principal and deputy principal and other support staff). Interviews were also conducted with 10 local employers who participate in the school's SWLP, and a representative from the local Aboriginal Workforce Development Centre, all of whom were non-Aboriginal. Because some students aspire to obtain higher post-schooling qualifications, five lecturers employed by TAFE and other RTOs (hereafter referred to as RTO lecturers) in regional centres near students' home communities

were also interviewed. To ensure that the Needs Analysis Model would be culturally appropriate, 57 participants from the students' home communities were interviewed. These included family members, elders and other members of their home communities in the Kimberley and Goldfields regions of Western Australia.

Semi-structured informal interviews were undertaken using open-ended prompts that invited participants to share their views about the language and literacy needs of Aboriginal young people, with particular regard to skills that would assist their transition into further education and/or the workplace. All the research team are familiar and reasonably competent in understanding AbE, which is the lingua franca used by students when speaking with other students from different language backgrounds and with non-Indigenous school visitors. Nonetheless, steps were taken to ensure that quality data could be obtained. For example, prior to interviews with students, the non-Indigenous research assistant spent time getting to know them, making multiple visits and engaging in sports and social activities with them. Because of the relationship that had been developed between them, meaningful interactions transpired. Additionally, the researcher who interviewed members of the students' home communities also made several visits to these communities prior to the interviews; she was assisted by Indigenous colleagues known to community members and who could act as interpreters if and when the need arose, which was rarely.

Hand-written notes were taken during interviews. When permitted (as was the case with students as well as RTO lecturers), digital recordings were made to enable the interviewer to capture more details. Expanded interview notes were subsequently analysed to identify key recurring themes with respect to the language and literacy needs of Indigenous VET students. To ensure culturally appropriate interpretation, these themes were verified with an informed Indigenous research associate.

### Observation Field Notes: The School and the Workplace

Field notes were taken by researchers at the school as well as in various workplace sites. Observations focusing on the language and literacy needs of students and current teaching and learning practices were recorded at the school site on an approximately monthly basis over an 18-month period. During visits ranging from 3 to 5 days, the research team observed classroom interactions and engaged with students and staff informally outside the classroom.

Field notes were also taken in selected work environments where students engaged in SWLPs. This served to document authentic language and literacy practices in workplaces similar to those where students might work in the future. These notes were analysed to identify the specific types and examples of language and literacy skills that the students would need to use as future employees (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005; Long, 2005a; Sullivan & Girginer,

2002). Field notes recorded at the school and at workplace sites were also analysed to triangulate data obtained through other methods (Long, 2005a).

### Learning Resources and Other Relevant Texts

In addition to interviews and workplace observations, samples of certificate training course materials used by VET teachers and RTO lecturers were collected. These texts were analysed to identify the types of SAE language and literacy practices that students were expected to engage in for various types of work. These data were confirmed and supplemented by information provided on the relevant occupations listed in the *Job Guide* (Australian Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). While these sources were used to inform the development of the second language needs analysis model, the level of detail provided in these data sources goes beyond the scope of the present article.

## Findings and Discussion

This section presents the general findings in terms of the major themes and subthemes that emerged with respect to the language and literacy needs of Indigenous high school VET students. These are discussed in relation to the following main categories: (1) oral communication; (2) reading and writing (paper-based and electronic documents); and (3) 'shame' and confidence.

### Oral Communication

There appeared to be agreement among participants that while some students speak English well enough to function in the workplace, others need assistance to improve their oral communication skills. For example, several community members expressed the belief that some young people speak English 'OK' or have a 'good standard'. Similarly, one RTO lecturer remarked that 'for what we are doing up here [in the Kimberley region], their oral language is adequate'. However, one student noted that the ability to communicate effectively with non-Aboriginal people depended on extensive prior experience of being around non-Aboriginal people. He pointed out that he 'grew up mostly around the white kids, which is why I can talk Standard Australian English and my language at the same time', whereas 'the students that didn't grow up around white people, they normally speak their own way of speaking. They haven't been around white kids [enough] to learn how to speak [SAE]'.

While there was awareness that some students had adequate oral communication skills, most participants felt that many students needed to raise their skill levels in at least some areas. Some community members, for example, focused on the need for young people to work on SAE pronunciation. One RTO lecturer concurred, pointing out that while some have the necessary SAE vocabulary and grammar, they may use Kriol pronunciation, making

it difficult for a non-Aboriginal employer to understand them. Several students expressed awareness that they need to adjust their speech for the workplace by speaking louder, slower and more clearly. As one student said: 'Most of the [Aboriginal students] have a good understanding of English, but they just talk quietly. They don't talk out loud much.' Vocabulary development also requires attention, according to some community members. Several students agreed, noting the need to learn enough words before they go to work, especially 'big words that we might not understand'. One indicated that if there was one word in a sentence they did not understand, they lost the whole meaning. An RTO lecturer observed this as well, pointing out that missing a few words in instructions can mean that they are not able to undertake the task properly.

Other participants, however, maintained that most students needed to raise their overall English language skills. Several community members, for example, stated that students needed to learn to speak 'proper English' (i.e., SAE) so they could communicate effectively with non-Aboriginal people if they want to get a job. Indeed, a number of students admitted that speaking English was a big challenge for them. As one learner put it: 'The hardest is talking to them [non-Aboriginal people], hard when the boss asks me to do something . . . I struggle with talking. I say some things too quick . . . I have problems asking someone to do stuff. They don't understand.' Most VET teachers/trainers and RTO lecturers generally agreed that many students need to work on their oral communication skills if they are to succeed in the workplace. One RTO lecturer asserted further that developing good SAE oral language skills was 'critical' because it is the 'stepping stone' to print literacy.

Employers tended to comment on more specific aspects of oral communication required in their own workplaces. Employers also noted the importance of the students' attitudes, reporting that the work placement experience will not be successful if the student is not motivated to be there. A further important factor, in retail and hospitality in particular, was learning the language, behaviour and appearance required for providing good service, and understanding that poor service was bad for business. Some employers noted that the students are not lacking in ability, but in social skills, and many commented that the short time that they spent in the workplace was inadequate for them to overcome their shyness.

Our discussion now turns to the skill areas most frequently cited by employers and other participants, including technical language and workplace jargon, work-oriented communication, social communicative interactions, code switching, and the nonverbal communication skills that accompanies spoken Australian English.

### Technical Vocabulary and Workplace Jargon

For employers, acquiring the technical vocabulary and jargon of the workplace was paramount for discussing

job tasks to ensure that trainees understand what they are expected to do. Learning the names of the tools and 'tool recognition' in the workplace was noted as rudimentary. Students also need to understand and use the names of variant forms of the tools of the trade (e.g., flat vs. Phillips head screwdrivers) as well as the different sizes they come in. This includes knowing both metric and the equivalent imperial measurements of various tools (e.g., 12 mm or 7/16 inch spanner). One VET teacher noted further that becoming familiar with abbreviated forms of tools was requisite, so that when a supervisor or co-worker says 'get me a 2.4', it would be understood which tool was meant.

RTO lecturers highlighted the importance of teaching specialist terms while in the workplace training context. Teaching and discussing unfamiliar technical vocabulary while doing 'hands-on' workplace training activities can make it easier for students to recall and use the terms. In a similar vein, another believed that learners could benefit by having to explain what they have been asked to do in 'straightforward plain language'. This can be especially useful for learners who need to keep log books of their work activities, as is required when doing field work for essential services in remote communities, or for stock and station jobs such as fence building and maintenance.

### Work-Oriented Communicative Interactions

Another frequently cited work-related oral language need centres on supervisor instructions. Participants from all groups underscored the need for students to understand directives, ask clarifying questions, and speak loudly and clearly enough to make themselves understood. VET teachers/trainers and RTO lecturers also highlighted the need for students to be 'pro-active' about asking clarifying questions when they are unsure of instructions. One RTO lecturer pointed out that many trainees may 'understand the words, but not the message' and that a consequence of 'missing the message' is that 'they go out and do something different'. Another reported feedback from students who had 'tried going to work', confirming that 'knowing what to do can be very confusing' for these second language speakers, so 'knowing what's actually expected of you . . . is the number one critical thing'. She added that learners also needed to understand the 'SAE cultural mores attached to that', that is, coming to a shared understanding of what is to be done, and the 'relevance of having drawn out question and answer conversations with supervisors'.

Other communication issues raised by educators included the need for students to acquire sufficient oral language skills in English to be able to explain processes or activities undertaken and the language needed for collaborating with workmates. They also drew attention to the need for students to develop the language and confidence to be pro-active about telling their supervisor that they have completed a task (e.g., being able to say 'I've finished'). They also need to be able to identify problems to be solved, to negotiate with supervisors or workmates, and to

advocate for themselves and/or others. Students also indicated their awareness of the need to develop oral communication skills for work and expressed the desire for teachers to 'start teaching us work stuff, like what . . . someone will say to you . . . [and] teaching situation stuff, like what to say in a job interview'. Educators pointed out that the extent to which learners needed oral English language skills to interact with non-Aboriginal clientele depends on their job role. Those working in land management, outdoor recreation or hospitality, for example, might need to be able to answer questions and give advice or directions to non-Aboriginal tourists. Those doing office work often need good telephone skills. Moreover, most students need sufficient English language (telephone) skills to arrange job interviews, and eventually when employed, to call their supervisor if they are unable to come to work.

### Social Interactions in the Workplace

The ability to engage socially in the workplace emerged as a major issue for employers, VET teachers and trainers, and students and has been recognised elsewhere as essential 'for successful integration into the workplace' (Holmes, 2005, p. 344). Employers indicated that students needed to work on the basic language to greet them and be able to chat socially with others. Being proactive about sharing some personal information such as where they come from would enable them to make connections with their employer and co-workers. Being able to 'use humour appropriately' with co-workers and in some cases being 'willing to take the mickey' were also noted as valuable social skills to learn. In some work contexts, students need to learn to engage in polite conversation with English-speaking customers or tourists. Furthermore, employers, teachers and trainers, and RTO lecturers all felt it important for students to understand cultural differences and learn non-Aboriginal 'cultural protocols' and 'mores'. Students also expressed awareness of the need to be able to engage socially with non-Aboriginal co-workers so that they would feel more comfortable at work. Indeed, one pointed out that 'communicating with [non-Aboriginal] people is the hardest' part about work because 'they don't understand me'. Learning to 'understand them and the way they talk' is the most difficult thing. One student pointed out that 'the school doesn't teach us that much about how to talk with other [co-workers]'. Community members also indicated that students need to be able to communicate their own interests, adding that they wanted their young people to be able to have conversations in English well enough to be able to express their opinions.

### Code Switching

'Code switching' is a linguistic term used to describe the practice of those who speak more than one language or dialect to change from one language or dialect to another in response to the situation or topic (Wardhaugh, 1998). Although the term and concept of code switching was not

familiar to all participants, most expressed the need for students to be able to adjust their language so they could make themselves understood by both Indigenous people with whom they live and work, and non-Aboriginal people they were likely to encounter. A few community members who had engaged in tertiary education actually used the term, pointing out that many young people already know how to change their speech when talking to non-Aboriginal people, though they might not be aware they are doing it. Nonetheless, they underscored the value of teachers talking about code-switching practices and explicitly explaining the specific differences between AbE (or Kriol) and Australian English expressions.

Although few VET teachers used the term 'code switching', most indicated the need for students to be able to talk to communicate effectively in a work environment. In most cases this means talking to (non-Aboriginal) supervisors and co-workers, and in some instances, customers. Educators believed it was important to provide opportunities for students to practise code switching by organising role-plays to raise awareness of the practice so that it eventually becomes 'automatic'. This position reflects a recent move at the research site school to develop the awareness of the staff regarding code switching through the provision of ongoing professional development.

As no studies exist (to our knowledge) on the level of competency required by AbE speakers to code-switch to SAE, the literature promotes the practice of explicitly teaching the differences between AbE (or Kriol) and SAE to Indigenous learners who speak SAE as an additional language or dialect (Western Australian Department of Education, 2012). Such activities can also serve to focus attention on the distinctions between AbE and SAE communication practices and idiomatic expressions. Unless the differences between SAE and AbE (or Kriol) language practices are made explicit, students are likely to overlook them. Educators pointed out, furthermore, that while teaching students about code switching, it was important to ensure that the students understood that their home language was accepted and valued.

### **Nonverbal Communication (Supporting Oral Communication)**

One RTO lecturer pointed out that a part of code switching that is often overlooked is the nonverbal communication associated with each code. Participants in all groups mentioned the need for students to engage in nonverbal communicative practices associated with SAE. Most notable for students and community members was the need to learn to make eye contact with the other speaker, a practice considered impolite in many (though not all) Aboriginal communities. One community member stated that young people need to develop the confidence to do this and to learn other ways of showing respect to non-Aboriginal employers. Another RTO lecturer indicated that students need to be aware that code switching includes verbalising

messages that they normally convey through hand gestures or other forms of nonverbal communication. She added that students also need to understand that the 'minimal discourse' practices (Sharifian, 2001, p. 130) and non-verbal communication strategies commonly used among AbE (and Kriol) speakers can be misinterpreted by non-Aboriginal people.

The lecturer explained that it is normal practice for AbE or Kriol speakers in the Kimberley to respond to a *hello* with a nod of the head; however, the expectation for SAE speakers is a verbal response. (Indeed employers often recalled instances where students needed to verbalise their responses to indicate comprehension or lack of comprehension.) The lecturer cautioned that 'for the AbE speaker to portray confidence to the SAE speaker, they may need to act in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable'. While trying out verbal responses that are new to students can make them feel 'uncomfortable' at least initially (as it does for anyone doing something for the first time), in the context of a positive, sheltered learning environment, teachers can implement appropriate strategies that encourage students to try out new language, for example, in role plays in small groups. Clearly this is an area in which more professional development is needed to enhance the educators' awareness of affective factors and to develop teaching strategies that will assist these students.

### **Reading and Writing Skills (for Paper-Based and Electronic Documents)**

For both students and community members, achieving the literacy levels required to fill in forms was a major concern. One student noted that they need at least a 'couple of weeks' to develop these skills. Community members looked further into the future, citing the need for young people to be able to manage their money, and therefore to be able to fill in bank forms and have sufficient computer literacy skills for online banking. Teachers went further to contend that in addition to being able to fill out forms, students need to develop computer literacy and associated keyboarding skills to obtain employment. This included being able to conduct internet searches, write resumes, and put together e-portfolios. One RTO lecturer noted, however, that many jobs in remote communities are obtained through personal connections. For example, community elders nominate individuals to be trained for jobs in essential services, such as maintaining local power and water supply facilities in the community. These individuals are then enrolled in RTO training programs. With respect to the literacy skills required on the job, educators and employers generally agreed that the level of reading and writing skills required varied depending on the job role. One employer recognised that literacy skills were not necessarily critical for some jobs, such as an auto mechanic's assistant. Nonetheless, even manual labour workers today need sufficient literacy (and numeracy) skills to be able

to read and fill out workplace documents such as rosters, time sheets and logs recording tasks completed.

Educators pointed out that while it is obvious that higher levels of literacy (and computer literacy) skills are required for office work and similar jobs, they are also becoming increasingly important in manual labour for managing health and safety risks. The emphasis on health and safety is reflected, for example, in literacy support resource materials for essential service jobs in remote communities (e.g., ANTA, 2003; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). Workers need sufficient reading and viewing skills to understand product labels displaying safety symbols, warning signs, manufacturer's instructions, first aid information and Material Safety Data Sheets for products they use on the job. Educators also maintain that students would be better positioned by increasing their literacy levels, noting the need to read and understand basic contractual language, such as the terms and conditions of their employment contract. Moreover, both teachers and RTO lecturers indicated that students need to be aware that literacy demands increase with higher qualifications. For example, those with a Certificate III need to be able to negotiate more complex documents such as reading safety legislation, filling out accident reports and writing basic work plans. Those aiming for Certificate IV qualifications would be expected to devise management plans, write evaluations, as well as read and/or write reports.

### Overcoming Shame and Developing Confidence

While issues of shame and the need for confidence were raised by all participants, mainly in relation to oral communication, they also emerged as having an impact on literacy practices. The notion of *shame* when used by AbE speakers is often equated with feeling shy or embarrassed (Harkins, 1990), particularly when one has been singled out from the group by a person of authority, whether for positive or negative recognition (Eagleson, Kaldor, & Malcolm, 1982; Grote & Rochecouste, 2012).

### Sources and Impact of 'Shame'

Students frequently raised concerns about 'getting shame' when talking to non-Aboriginal people they do not know. Talking on the telephone to someone they don't know was described by one participant student as 'frightening'. Being in a place of work where they are the 'only blackfella in that environment' is particularly difficult because they no longer have the 'security and anonymity of the group' (Eagleson et al., 1982, p. 99). One student participant who did SWPL at a primary school noted: 'I don't talk to the teachers much [at the primary school] because I don't know them much.' But even in the familiar context of school, talking to a teacher can bring about shame because 'other kids might laugh at them'. A more confident student noted that: 'Some of the mob, some of the boys I'm working with, they get too shame to ask "Sir, when

we're gonna knock off from work", and I say "Oh no, why don't you do it?" So I gotta ask for them.'

Students found it particularly difficult 'when you start off [a conversation], it does feel it [shame] a bit'. It was also noted that 'asking for a different way to explain things' can be another major source of shame perhaps because it suggests a lack of skill. This may go some way to explaining why a student might not ask for the clarification or confirmation of instructions, a practice employers and educators indicated as important. One student added that 'getting shame' when speaking SAE might be an 'identity thing as well'. Indeed, as with all languages or dialects, the linguistic distinctiveness of AbE and the world view that it embraces ensures that it serves as a marker of identity and an expression of solidarity with other AbE speakers (Malcolm & Grote, 2007).

Educators observed the impact that 'shame' had on learning in other areas. For example, one RTO lecturer noted that when students 'make a mistake or don't understand something, they won't have another go'; they just 'shut down'. Another observed that students are often afraid to write maths figures down on paper for fear of exposing their errors. In a similar vein, it was also reported that students often say or write what they think the lecturer wants them to, rather than expressing their own ideas. This equates to 'gratuitous concurrence', a communicative strategy in which an AbE speaker agrees with the other person as an easy way to deal with them, particularly those in authority (Eades, 2007; Liberman, 1981). The lecturer noted that students need to come to terms with the notion that making mistakes is an essential part of learning.

### Strategies to Overcome Shame and Develop Confidence

In terms of overcoming 'shame' and developing confidence, participants' ideas varied. Educators and employers talked about the need for students to develop 'confidence', 'self-belief' and 'resilience' so that they can get over their fears of talking (or writing) to non-Aboriginal people. A few teachers/trainers felt that adopting a 'tough love' approach by 'push[ing] them out' into the workplace was necessary because students receive too much 'cotton wooling'. In contrast, others suggested ways to avoid situations that bring about shame in the classroom, such as engaging students in cooperative learning activities and having one-to-one time with them. One RTO lecturer highlighted the value of providing students with opportunities to 'show what they are good at' and by organising 'programs that are success-oriented, right from the beginning'.

Students indicated the need for 'more lessons on talking in Australian English' and more opportunities to talk to non-Aboriginal people to help develop confidence for the workplace. One suggested that teachers 'bring some [non-Aboriginal] people [into school] so we can talk to them, like we have to interview them . . . just bring some



people that work at places and bring them out here and talk'. Another agreed, noting that 'just talking to them and being around them' will help them to get over shame and make it easier to meet others. It was also believed that this experience would help on the first day of work, so that they will be less likely to quit. Furthermore, working in a place for a longer time, especially at work they enjoyed, where they can ask questions would help them build confidence and overcome shame. As mentioned above, employers also highlighted the benefits of longer work experience periods in terms of overcoming shyness in social interactions in the workplace.

Community members who had had successful educational experiences suggested that students would benefit from confidence building workshops as well as team building and reflective activities that encouraged them to recognise their own qualities and values. One praised a residential workshop she had participated in which male and female students worked in separate groups and then together, claiming that this was particularly useful for building her self-confidence. Another proposed implementing leadership training programs in schools and instituting student councils so that young people could gain practical leadership experience that would be useful later on.

## Summary and Conclusion

This article has described a study that informed the development of a Second Language Needs Analysis Model designed to identify the language and literacy needs of Aboriginal high school VET students who come from rural and remote communities and speak SAE as an additional language. The findings indicate that stakeholders believe that the development of oral language skills should be prioritised. It is an area that tends to be neglected in schools, mainly because competency in oral language is largely assumed and because VET teachers and trainers have had little training in how to develop these skills in second language learners. Moreover, oral language proficiency is fundamental to development in print literacy as well as other forms of literacy that are required in many workplace settings, such as those involving maths and computers. Advanced literacy and numeracy skills are also becoming increasingly important for managing one's personal financial affairs and participating in the wider community.

With regard to the oral language required for the workplace, the study showed that learning technical vocabulary and jargon specific to the relevant workplace setting is also essential. Also critical is the language required in order to understand, clarify and confirm supervisor's instructions to ensure they carry out job tasks using appropriate processes. However, being able to engage socially with their supervisor and co-workers was also seen as very important. Such social skills enable them to develop and maintain relationships at work, which in turn, enhance the working

experience for all involved. Additionally, the development of code-switching skills was recognised as an area requiring attention. While most students engage in the practice to some extent, providing multiple opportunities for students to hone their skills can increase awareness of the practice and build confidence in their abilities. Furthermore, learning how to adapt their nonverbal communication practices according to the context and situation will also enable them to communicate more effectively with non-Aboriginal supervisors, co-workers and clientele.

The study has shown that the extent to which skills for reading and writing paper-based and electronic documents are required varies considerably according to the job role. Nonetheless, even manual labour jobs require sufficient literacy skills for managing safety risks when handling tools, machinery, and hazardous substances. Young workers also need sufficient reading skills to understand key aspects of their work contracts. Moreover, if learners want to obtain higher qualifications to increase their employability and remunerations, they need to raise their literacy skill levels. Overcoming shame and developing confidence was a major concern for all participants, especially with regard to talking to or writing for non-Aboriginal people. Few Aboriginal young people living in remote communities have extensive experience engaging socially with non-Aboriginal people. The student participants were well aware of the need for more opportunities to practice speaking SAE both in a variety of simulated role-play activities, relevant to their future workplace, as well as in informal gatherings and face-to-face meetings so they can socialise with non-Aboriginal peers and adults.

For Aboriginal high school students to succeed in their VET courses and in the workplace or in further VET education, teachers and trainers need to implement English as an Additional Language teaching and learning strategies. This includes explicitly teaching the differences between AbE (or a creole) and SAE with regard to the different levels of language — pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammar/sentence structure, discourse practices (or ways of speaking), as well as the cultural concepts and world views that underpin various communicative practices (Berry & Hudson, 1997; Malcolm et al., 1999; Western Australian Department of Education, 2012). This also means providing opportunities to learn and practise speaking SAE to develop both the language proficiency and the confidence required to engage effectively in workplace settings (Long, 2005a).

## Acknowledgments

Debra Bennell provided this advisory support and we acknowledge and thank her for her contribution. The pilot study for the project was funded by a grant from the Australian Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA). An ARC Linkage Grant, in which AISWA was the

supporting industry partner, funded the main study reported in this paper.

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