

Native American shows Indigenous Australians how to preserve language



Arapaho Native American anthropology Professor Stephen Neyooxet Greymorning visited Muurrbay Language Centre, Nambucca Heads, recently as part of a Board of Studies workshop to help identify better language teaching techniques with local experts. Pictured (from left) is Board of Studies curriculum officer Susan Poetsch, Muurrbay Language Centre teachers and linguists Pauline Hooler, Michael Jarrett, Dallas Walker, Gary Williams, David Prosser, Julie Long, chairman Ken Walker and Professor Greymorning.

BY JESSICA WELSH

Preserving indigenous languages is an important goal for teachers at Nambucca's Muurrbay Language Centre.

However, developing effective techniques to keep the language alive is the challenge, according to Professor Stephen Neyooxet Greymorning - a Native American anthropologist and Hino'einit man who recently visited Muurrbay.

Professor Greymorning, from the University of Montana, USA, worked with the Australian Board of Studies (BOS) office and local language centres to develop indigenous language programs, to ensure a high standard of teaching.

Teachers and linguists at Muurrbay took part in a BOS workshop with the professor on March 13, to establish more effective ways to teach the local Gumbayngirr Aboriginal language and recognise areas which may be slowing the teaching process.

In most indigenous language centres, arguing over correct pronunciation or word usage was the greatest factor slowing down the preservation process, Professor Greymorning said.

"People spend more time arguing about the right and wrong way to speak the language, instead of getting out to newer speakers," he said. "Meanwhile, all the speakers are dying out."

Professor Greymorning developed breakthrough methodology in teaching languages, called the 'Accelerated Second Language Acquisition'.

While the methodology was created in his Native Arapaho language, Professor Greymorning was confident in its adaptability to Aboriginal language.

His technique was based on engaging the brain, using problem-solving, rather than simply committing words to memory to learn a language.

Nambucca High and Bowraville Central schools introduced BOS Aboriginal language syllabus into their class curriculums over the past

few years.

Muurrbay Language Centre facilitated with teaching students the criteria, which included listening, speaking, writing, recognising grammar and studying culture background.

Nambucca Heads High School provided what it believes to be the first board-endorsed course for Gumbayngirr language at higher school certificate (HSC) level.

BOS Aboriginal curriculum officer Sue Poetsch said anecdotal evidence showed Aboriginal students were more engaged at school where Aboriginal studies was practised; and more local schools were creating more opportunities for indigenous curriculums.

While cultural barriers were slowly being broken down in Australia, Professor Greymorning said there was still resistance and criticism in America about learning native language.

"Some changes are slowly being made to these attitudes," he said.

"But they are not coming fast enough, because the language is dying out."

More than 500 distinct languages and hundreds more dialects resonated throughout ancient America.

Nowadays, that number had diminished to some 170 tribal languages with at least 250 combined dialects, Professor Greymorning said.

In Australia the numbers were similar, Muurrbay Language Centre teacher Gary Williams said.

Professor Greymorning grew up learning his native tongue of the Arapaho tribe - one of the oldest language groups in North America.

He started his career in preserving language and culture when he convinced Walt Disney studios to translate Bambi into native language.

The film was a success and encouraged communities to learn native languages.