

A Language Community Perspective on Adopting Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) as the Primary Teaching Method of Gumbaynggirr

Clark Webb

Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation

Abstract: This paper describes the role of Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) within the Gumbaynggirr language community of the south-east region of Australia. Since 2015 ASLA has become the primary method of Gumbaynggirr language teaching, and this paper details its ability to function in an array of preschool, primary school, high school and community settings both as a teaching method and an assessment tool. Gumbaynggirr language is formally listed as ‘critically endangered’ but, through the adoption of ASLA, Gumbaynggirr is beginning to produce highly competent and fluent speakers. Due to the success of ASLA in the Gumbaynggirr language community it is concluded that endangered language communities throughout the world could benefit through the introduction of Accelerated Second Language Acquisition.

1 Introduction

Gumbaynggirr is one of 250 distinct languages that was spoken freely on the continent of Australia before 1788, and one of 120 languages that is still spoken today albeit by very few people. Ninety percent of Aboriginal languages are considered ‘endangered’, Gumbaynggirr is formally listed as ‘severely endangered’ (Campbell, Lyle and Lee, Nala Huiying and Okura, Eve and Simpson, Sean and Ueki, Kaori 2017).¹ Gumbaynggirr Country encompasses an area in the south east of Australia approximately halfway between Sydney and Brisbane on the north coast of NSW. Due to their proximity to intense colonisation that began in Sydney in 1788, the languages of the south eastern region of the continent are perhaps some of the most devastated in Australia. Therefore, as a child I grew up with very minimal language of just a few words and basic phrases that usually combined words from the neighbouring language groups of Bundjalung and Dungghutti. As a child, I always knew that something was missing, and I always knew that my missing link was language. At the age of 22, I undertook an opportunity to learn Gumbaynggirr for the first time. In 1986, a group of Gumbaynggirr Elders became very distressed at the decline of their language and decided to get on with the work of revitalization (Morelli 2015:iii). This became the beginning of Muurrbay Language and Culture Centre, the staff to whom I owe my gratitude for my first language lessons. Staff members at Muurrbay have developed three versions of the Gumbaynggirr Dictionary (Morelli 2015), Gumbaynggirr Stories Book (Morelli, Williams, & Walker 2016) and recovered countless hours of voice recordings of Gumbaynggirr Elders of the 1960s. These resources are important to revitalisation and have been invaluable for me as I have acquired the amount of language required to navigate through the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) method of teaching.

This paper provides a brief overview of my introduction to ASLA as a Gumbaynggirr student, and a detailed account of my experience as a Gumbaynggirr teacher who uses ASLA as the primary teaching method.

¹ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies., <https://www.aiatsis.gov.au>

2 First Insight into ASLA

In 2010, I attended a presentation by Neyooxet Greymorning supported by his daughter Amber at Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour Campus. By this stage, I had been learning my language, Gumbaynggirr for just over three years. Although I was a highly motivated and a committed learner, for the most part I was finding my learning experience quite challenging and frustrating.

During his presentation, Greymorning spoke of the importance of revitalising Indigenous languages and highlighted many important points that stuck in the forefront of my mind. Themes such as the need to reconsider how languages are taught by moving away from traditional western methods; not overcorrecting pronunciation (so as to not hinder the enjoyment of student learning); and creating immersive learning environments were all sentiments that made perfect sense to me, even as a Gumbaynggirr learner who was not yet even at the level of a novice speaker. Furthermore, Greymorning made the point that as first English speakers we are immersed in English for at least four years of our early development before we are required to read and write the language. So, why would we expect an adult learner of their second language to read and write the target language in their very first lesson?

2.1 Progressing Students to the Ability to Tell a Story

Another highlight of the presentation was witnessing Greymorning's daughter Amber tell three stories in Arapaho; *Coo'ouu3ih'oohut* — Flies High, *Notkonii'hii* — The Scout, and First Among the Birds, and translate them into English. Amber had learnt the third story several days before the presentation. Greymorning also shared how Amber's brother had learnt Flies High during a four-hour car trip to a presentation where he told the story. Even as a person who had no knowledge of Arapaho, I could see that Amber struggled to tell two of the stories in Arapaho. This was observed from her long pauses whilst searching for words when telling the stories. Once Amber had finished telling the story in Arapaho, I assumed that she would be able to tell the stories in English with easy fluency. I was wrong. To my surprise, Amber struggled to tell the stories in English just as she had in Arapaho. How was this? I struggled with this question for a few years until I was able to start figuring it out.

2.2 My First Experience of Being Taught Through ASLA

A couple of years later, in 2012, whilst in a Gumbaynggirr class hosted by Muurrbay Language Centre, Greymorning dropped in to demonstrate his ASLA method. To do this, he started teaching Arapaho. I vividly remember learning four nouns approximately within just two minutes. One of the nouns we learnt was 'fish'. Greymorning then directed the learner to an image of a woman eating a fish. I was able to identify the image instantly. My mind was blown! How could I learn four nouns and a phrase 'woman eating fish' within three minutes? The other factor that struck me was that the noun 'woman' was not one of the four nouns I had previously learnt. And yet I was still able to respond to the phrase 'woman eating fish'. From that moment, ASLA became key to learning Gumbaynggirr. I started to put images together and consult with Gumbaynggirr mentors for accuracy in the language that I was assigning to each image. Later, however, I learnt that my early teaching of the ASLA method was fundamentally flawed.

2.3 Early Years of Teaching Gumbaynggirr

I began teaching Gumbaynggirr in 2013, and by September 2014 we could start to see our learners improving and gaining some, although very limited, language ability. In October 2014, Greymorning visited a Gumbaynggirr language conference that I had organised as a way to engage our community in language learning. Greymorning's visit was completely unexpected. He watched as I taught Gumbaynggirr using a version of ASLA and was able to provide immediate feedback. Greymorning stated that although there was promise in the work we were doing, he highlighted the gaps in our teaching program and strongly suggested that I undertake his ASLA workshop in its entirety.

3 Adopting ASLA into all Teaching

In 2015, Greymorning again visited Coffs Harbour and we undertook the entirety of his workshop over three days. This was an amazing experience. Present at the workshop were a few senior Gumbaynggirr Elders with language knowledge and our last first language speaker of Gumbaynggirr, the late Uncle Cecil 'Bing' Laurie. Since then, Greymorning has visited Coffs Harbour annually. Each time my knowledge of ASLA grows, and importantly, so does my ability to speak Gumbaynggirr. A key success of ASLA is that students progress through the language very quickly. This means that as a teacher I have to stay ahead of my students. This has meant that my Gumbaynggirr speaking ability has accelerated exponentially to the point of now being a highly competent near fluent speaker. I am mindful of the fact that my learning of Gumbaynggirr never stops. And unfortunately, due to the cultural genocide that our community has endured, I am still unable to find some words. However, when I do find new words, my knowledge of Gumbaynggirr allows me to insert these words into sentences and stories and have them make sense grammatically with ease. I am also finding that I can easily understand and comprehend Gumbaynggirr from the 1930s, perhaps the purest recorded form of Gumbaynggirr before greater devastation to our language and culture. Whites began intensively invading Gumbaynggirr Country from the 1860s (Morelli 2015:258). Two of my learners (Nathan and Kaleesha) in particular have challenged me to be a better Gumbaynggirr speaker. Both of these learners returned home to Gumbaynggirr Country in mid- 2018 after long stints in Sydney. Within 1.5 years, both of these learners progressed through 13 ASLA skillsets and now tell stories with ease. During his latest visit, Greymorning was astounded by Nathan's ability to re-tell an Arapaho story he brought with him, 'Flies High', in Gumbaynggirr after I had told it only once. Within one hour, a further five advanced learners were able to tell the story in Gumbaynggirr. Our small group of advanced language learners make a point of conducting lengthy conversations completely in Gumbaynggirr on a regular basis, which we enjoy immensely. All six of the aforementioned learners are now teachers and are having great success with their students. They have all undertaken ASLA training and use the method to teach.

4 Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation — Teaching of Gumbaynggirr

In 2019, the organisation that I lead, Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation (BMNAC)², exposed more than 750 people to Gumbaynggirr language through the array of in-

² bmnac.org.au

school and after-school tutoring programs that we offer. 300 of these people were engaged in direct language teaching instruction, and all were taught through ASLA.

4.1 Community Lessons

BMNAC offers 22 hours of weekly direct language instruction in a variety of community and school settings. Key to our language revitalisation is the offering of community lessons. These community-based lessons allow us to create the setup that maximises the functionality of ASLA and increases language learning without the red tape and time limitations of educational systems that hinder learning outcomes. Our philosophy, that the reward for engaging in our lessons is the ability to speak Gumbaynggirr rather than gaining an educational certificate, not only relieves the stress of institutional red tape, but also means that the people who do engage with our lessons do so for the right reasons — of language being the reward. Through our community offerings, six learners have surpassed 13 ASLA skillsets and are now on their way to becoming fluent speakers. All six of these learners also teach. And so our revitalisation effort grows.

4.2 ASLA as an Assessment Tool

In addition to the accelerated pace of learning that ASLA facilitates, the model also allows for the teacher to continually assess the ability of each individual student. The teacher is then able to customise the learning in order to ensure best outcomes. One tactic in this process is to use the stronger learners to help teach the other students by directing them through images the less advanced learners have difficulty with. Stronger learners help to correct mistakes and also draw out more language. However, teachers need to be well versed in the use of ASLA in order to customise learning for maximum student outcomes. The stages of each ASLA Skillset provide the teacher with absolute certainty pertaining to the level of acquisition achieved by each student. Not only can the teacher identify those students who need to catch up, but we can also quantify the number of words and phrases the learner is able to respond to and speak. For example, in our Gumbaynggirr context, when a student completes skillset one, they are able to speak 22 words and 8 phrases. Typically, this is achieved within 1.5 hours of direct instruction, hence highlighting an accelerated pace. At BMNAC, we continually assess the level of language ability of all students. At the end of 2019, we assessed 31 of our community-based learners' ability as follows:

1. Skillset One (1) (22 words, 8 phrases) — All students achieved this level.
2. Early Skillset Two (2) (38 words, 28 phrases) — All students achieved this level. Two didn't progress further.
3. Skillset One and Two (consists of 92 images). — Five students achieved this level. (66 words, 72 phrases)
4. Skillset Three (3) (92 words, 102 phrases) — Seven students attained this level.
5. Skillset Four (4) (100 words, 138 phrases) — Nine students attained this level.
6. Skillset Five (5) — Two adult students reached this level after six months of classes.
7. Skillset 13 and beyond. Six learners advanced through 13 ASLA skillsets to tell stories.

These learners are students who have committed to a greater consistency in attending community lessons and generally engaging with other speakers. In addition to having attended ASLA workshops in 2018 and 2019, they have now become language teachers. At each of these workshops, advanced learners were challenged to expand their language so that they would be able to deliver high quality lessons. An outgrowth of these

workshops has been the creation of a ‘language community’ whereby much of our social interaction tends to be with each other. We therefore spend much of our free time speaking and expanding our language knowledge.

It must be stressed what each student was able to achieve was largely influenced by their level of attendance at weekly lessons. Evidently, the most consistent students were able to achieve the telling of a story in Gumbaynggirr. Other students tested did not start their language learning journey until the later months of 2019, hence the varying levels of speaking ability. Despite their more recent engagement in language learning, two students demonstrated ability to speak to the images in skillset five. **4.3 Kulai Aboriginal Preschool**

Core to our Gumbaynggirr revitalisation work is to teach our language at Kulai Aboriginal Preschool. We send a teacher four days per week for one hour for both the three-year-old and four-year-old group. A total of 70 students plus eight staff are engaged in language. Mondays and Tuesdays at Kulai consist of three-year-olds only. Wednesdays and Thursdays consist of the four-year-olds. The children are split into two groups. Each group receives a 30-minute lesson. Therefore, in total, each Kulai student receives 1 hour of language instruction per week. Although the time in language for each student is not ideal, ASLA allows us to make best use of the limited time we have to instruct children in language.

At the end of 2019, we conducted an assessment on most four-year old students of Kulai, a total of 26 children were tested. In order to gain information pertaining to each student’s speaking ability, we set up all images from Skillsets one to four (1–4) and asked each individual student to speak to each image unaided. Through his process, we gathered the following information:

1. Skillset One (1) (22 words, 8 phrases)
2. Early Skillset Two (2) (38 words and 28 phrases). All 26 students achieved this level.
3. Skillset Two (2) (66 words, 72 phrases). Eight students achieved this.
4. Skillset Three (3) (92 words, 102 phrases). 13 students achieved this.
5. Skillsets Four (4), Five (5) and Beyond. Five students achieved this level.

A total of five of our strongest learners achieved through Skillset four and five, and further progressed to demonstrate an ability to tell a story entirely in Gumbaynggirr. It is important to note here that once a student completes skillset four, they have the proven ability to speak 100 words and 138 phrases. Therefore, our strongest five learners well surpassed 138 phrases and achieved a very high level of proficiency.

The students with the highest level of success were highly supported by their families whose parents are committed Gumbaynggirr learners and attend regular community-based lessons with their children. Therefore, these students are exposed to language learning at Kulai Preschool, community lessons, and at home. Another factor in the success of these students was their participation in our dance troupe. This added another layer of regularity and context to language learning.

Students who did not achieve a high level of proficiency were students who were less engaged in lessons, did not attend regularly, and whose families were not invested in language learning.

4.4 Learners Know More Than We Think

It is important to note that the assessment tool we used in 2019 only accounts for the images and phrases that we directly taught our students. It does not account for how learning through ASLA enabled our students to create their own Gumbaynggirr phrases.

A perfect example of this occurred on 15th May 2020. A parent provided feedback that her son reacted to a situation he saw and constructed the following phrase:

- (1) *Nyamiganambu* *yaanyji* *ngaarlu* *ngambii*
Girl (ergative). walking water drinking
'The girl is walking drinking water.'

This is noteworthy because we have not taught the above phrase to this student. He has learnt all of these words in different contexts, which has given him the ability to create a completely additional phrase to what we have taught him. What this student has been directly taught are the following:

- *Nyamiganam* ('girl')
- *Ngaarlu* ('water')
- *Jaanybarr yaanyji* ('man walking')
- *Nyami, jaanybarr yaanyji* ('woman and man walking')
- *Waanyjiiju ngaarlu ngambii* ('dog drinking water')

The point of this example is to highlight that ASLA creates language ability that allows students to express language in an array of additional ways that surpasses our assessment tool.

5 Speaking Gumbaynggirr at Home

Ironically, my wife Kamla and I met in 2010 within weeks of my first introduction to ASLA. And our daughter was born in 2013. Upon meeting, Kamla recognised my passion for Gumbaynggirr language and has therefore made learning Gumbaynggirr a priority. The intensity of learning language increased when Kamla became pregnant, as we both wanted our daughter Jayalaani to be brought up hearing and speaking Gumbaynggirr.

Over the years, from 2014–2019, Kamla mastered ASLA Skillsets 1–13, is able to tell two stories completely in Gumbaynggirr, and we are working on a third. Jayalaani therefore hears and converses in Gumbaynggirr with both her mother and father. Parental support and engagement in language alongside their children is paramount to revitalisation.

This highlights an important element of our community classes, which encourages intergenerational learning. Children and grandchildren learning alongside parents and grandparents allow them to understand the passion and trauma that surrounds language revival.

Over a long period of time through multiple generations, the Australian Federal and state governments adopted an official policy of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their parents. This is now known as the 'stolen generations.' The policy of forcibly removing children was a blatant act of genocide that attempted to 'breed out the Aborigine race,' which meant that the children who were most at risk of being stolen were the children who knew their language and culture (Knightley 2001). Therefore, every Aboriginal person that preceded our current generation was at risk of being stolen.

It is often said that our language was lost, but more accurately our language was stolen. As mentioned above, our language has endured an attempted cultural genocide. Intergenerational learning allows our youth to engage in these concepts on a personal level.

Regrettably, at the time of Jayalaani's birth in 2013, both Kamla and I had limited language ability. Although we attempted to raise Jayalaani with language around her, we simply did not have the ability to create a language-immersive household.

Jayalaani was almost two years old when I undertook my first ASLA workshop in 2015. She has therefore witnessed the hard work and understands the importance of language and culture. Jayalaani is a little more advanced than Kamla in her speaking ability and I now find that, instead of always teaching both Jayalaani and Kamla, we are simply having conversations in Gumbaynggirr. I am also able to teach intricacies of Gumbaynggirr without the reliance of telling them the answer in English. It is similar to explaining the English concepts of **their/there/they're** and **where/we're/wear**. And of course, a golden rule of Greymorning and ASLA is that you never give the answer in English, the teacher must find a way to explain such detail in the target language.

Jayalaani is now six and a half years old. I estimate that her Gumbaynggirr ability is equal to an average four-year-old's ability in their first language. Therefore, in comparison, she is approximately 2.5 years behind her English ability. It is my goal to transition Jayalaani into a fluent Gumbaynggirr speaker by the time she is eight.

Given the pressures of western society and the dominance of English all around us, the above-mentioned goal is a difficult one to achieve. But, if not for ASLA, the goal would not be possible.

6 Establishing our Gumbaynggirr School

At BMNAC, our goal is to now build and establish a Gumbaynggirr immersion school in 2022. As mentioned above, the pressures of western society and its undercurrent of white supremacy is creating difficulties in establishing our school.

Australia is the only country in the Commonwealth that has failed to sign a Treaty with its Indigenous Peoples (Australians Together 2020). In turn, there is no recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, and therefore very little opportunity to assert educational sovereignty. The education of our children is dictated by colonial state governments and in order to establish and legalize our Gumbaynggirr School we are required to meet the demands of the NSW Department of Education. Sometimes educational priorities between Aboriginal communities and governments differ, but we are prepared to make some concessions in order to open our school.

In spite of such obstacles, we continue to push forward with our plans to create our school and the goal is challenging our advanced learners to transition into fluent speakers. Again, if not for ASLA the very thought of establishing a school would be unimaginable.

7 All Learners Can Learn

Since committing to learning Gumbaynggirr, I have witnessed an undercurrent of thought that some learners have more natural ability to learn and speak the target language than others. More damagingly a belief occurs that some have an inability to learn. I have personally witnessed Greymorning shut down such arguments emphatically. His argument is that all learners can learn. The onus is on the teacher to inspire and facilitate successful learning among their students.

7.1 The Mistake

Often people make the mistake of assuming they know how to teach language using the ASLA method after only seeing a video or sitting in on a class. I was one of these people. I began teaching Gumbaynggirr using what I thought was ASLA in 2013 after experiencing the method as a student. What people fail to understand is that ASLA has many moving parts and subtleties that can absolutely enhance the learning experience. On the flip side, if the teacher does not know how to navigate the moving parts, learning can be hindered. For example, students learning any language, and even when learning their first language, make mistakes. The teacher needs the ability to navigate such mistakes. Often when a student makes a mistake, the teacher panics and does not know where to take the student next. This results in a dependence on English to navigate, which undermines the fabric of immersion as best practice to revitalise language.

7.2 Successful Use of ASLA

I undertook two ASLA entry level workshops before I became truly comfortable in its use. The second of these workshops in 2017 was particularly exhaustive. In addition to running the workshop, Greymorning attended a number of regular lessons I was teaching and provided constructive along with some very robust and critical feedback. It was after Greymorning's visit in 2017 that I finally had a full suite of images that allowed me to take students from skillsets one to five (1–5). From this time, my students began seeing true success in their language learning.

In 2018, Greymorning again visited and ran a workshop with our small group of advanced, most committed learners. Greymorning acknowledged significant improvement in the ability of these learners, evidenced by their ability to speak unaided to all images through skillsets one to five (1–5). However, Greymorning identified that my students had become too structured in the knowledge of their language. So, whilst they were able to speak to 206 images unaided, they struggled to answer questions, such as: 'Why is the woman standing in front of the car?', 'What is the boy looking at?', 'Where is the man going?', 'Where is the boy sitting?', etc.

I therefore needed to rectify this problem. The students and I worked at this over the next 12 months and also implemented skillsets six (6) and seven (7). By the time of Greymorning's next visit in 2019, my learner's functionality in Gumbaynggirr had improved immensely. They were ready to progress and learn stories. And, as highlighted earlier, Greymorning was surprised by their ability to, within one hour, learn and re-tell an Arapaho story that I had only learnt and translated into Gumbaynggirr the night before I was to teach it to my students.

8 Conclusion

Earlier I expressed confusion at Amber Greymorning's inability to easily tell, in 2010, an Arapaho story in English. Over the years, I have learned that language brings about cultural worldview. Therefore, Amber struggled with the English version as she was searching for the most appropriate English words and concepts in order to describe the Arapaho worldview that was embedded in the story. Years later, I also learnt that it was the first time she had been asked to translate the story into English. Successful Indigenous language teaching brings about cultural worldview, many of which can only be truly described through the target language.

Given that many Indigenous language programs depend on western methods of teaching, which require reading and writing, comment is often made for the need to decolonize the way in which Indigenous languages are taught and learned. ASLA is the only method that I have experienced that combines the process of decolonisation with highly successful language transfer. Through developing the ASLA method, Greymorning has deeply analysed how children learn their first language and adapted these findings into his teaching method. Initially, students

respond to what they see and hear and then are required to verbally repeat the language of the visual that the teacher has directed them to. Within a very short timeframe students are then able to describe the images in the target language unaided, and soon thereafter are able to respond to questioning, all through immersion. Within months of consistent learning, students acquire a language level that allows them to commence learning and telling stories.

ASLA is a decolonial method which creates an immersion setting that combines total physical response (TPR) with the learning of cultural worldview leading to proficient speakers of language. The structured skillsets of ASLA means that teachers can continually assess the exact level of proficiency of each student.

In my opinion, ASLA is important for all Indigenous language communities. Due to the dominance of English, Indigenous languages are continually under threat of being unused or changed into a 'pidgin' or 'creole' type language, this is the case even for strong languages. ASLA ensures that the target language does not become corrupted or unused. In cases where the target Indigenous language is critically endangered, ASLA provides a 'blueprint' for the committed members of the culture to begin puzzling their language back together. If a tribe, community, or group are seriously committed and are questioning how to bring about new fluent speakers, then ASLA may be the answer.

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