

Developing an early literacy app in Dhuwaya, a Yolŋu variety

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Phonological awareness is a skill which is crucial in learning to read. In this paper we report on the challenges encountered while developing a digital application (app) for teaching phonological awareness and early literacy skills in Dhuwaya. Dhuwaya, is a Yolŋu language variety spoken at Yirrkala and surrounding areas in East Arnhem Land, and is the first language of the children who attend a bilingual school where Dhuwaya and English are the languages of instruction. Dhuwaya and English have different phonemic inventories and different alphabets, and although the Dhuwaya alphabet is based on Roman alphabet symbols, it has 31 graphemes compared to the 26 of English. The app was designed to teach children how to segment and blend syllables and phonemes, and to identify common words as well as suffixes used in the language. In this paper, I discussed the range of challenges we encountered in undertaking this activity. Amongst these was the inherent variation in the language, including glottal stops, the focus on syllables as a decoding strategy for literacy development, and challenges of finding one syllable words such as those initially used with English speaking children. A further challenge was identifying culturally appropriate images which the children could relate to and which were not copyrighted. In this paper I discuss these, plus a range of other issues that emerged and discuss how these problems were addressed and resolved by the interdisciplinary and intercultural team.

Bio: Prof. Gillian Wigglesworth is a Redmond Barry Distinguished Professor in the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne and chief investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language. She has published widely in both first and second language acquisition as well as bilingualism. Her major research focus is on the languages Australia Indigenous children living in remote communities are learning, and the linguistic challenges the children face as they enter the formal, usually English-based, school system. She has worked extensively with Indigenous children growing up in these remote communities in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Her focus is on their languages, the complexity of their language ecology and maintaining their home languages. Her most recent book, co-edited with Jane Simpson and Jill Vaughan, *From Home to School: Language Practices of Indigenous Children and Youth*, (Palgrave Macmillan) documents much of this work.