

A Contrastive Study Between Aboriginal Languages & Chinese: From the Writing System to the Second Language Teaching in the Framework of Australian Curriculum

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Abstract

In Australia, both Aboriginal languages and Chinese are the oldest but still alive languages taught as first and second languages in the Australian Curriculum. Although the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are supposed to be the “First Nation” in Australia, in fact, their languages are spoken dialects and languages without their own writing system. In the late 1830s, when the Bible was first translated into Aboriginal language through Latin symbols, the Aboriginal writing system was established. Basically, the existing Aboriginal writing system is only the English orthography based upon 26 alphabets and 3 vowels transcribing the sound of the Aboriginal languages without meaning. The major concerns of learning Aboriginal languages as a second language are to better understand local Aboriginal language and culture as well as why it plays such a big part in their lives in the country. In contrast, Chinese is a system of complete logographs consisting of a huge number of pictograms. Most of the non-English speaking students from kindergarten to L12 prefer to study Chinese mainly due to the fact that China is supposed to be the second largest economy in the world aiming at economic exploration and the huge market owing the population of 14 billion. However, when they learn Chinese-as-second-language, they find out that it is “too foreign” and “too difficult” as the hardest language to learn in the world. This paper investigates the writing systems and as-a second-language education of Aboriginal Languages and Chinese in Australian Curriculum from a contrastive approach.

Keywords: Aboriginal languages, Torre Strait Islander languages, Chinese, Australian Curriculum, Communicative Strand, Understanding Strand

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Introduction: Aboriginal Languages & Chinese in Australia

In Australia, both Aboriginal languages (including Torres Strait Islander languages) and Chinese are the oldest but still alive languages, and taught as first (L1) & second (L2) languages in Australian Curriculum. Although the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are supposed to be the “First Nations” in Australia, in fact, their languages are spoken dialects and languages without their own writing system.

In the 1830s, when the Bible was first translated into Aboriginal language through Latin symbols, the Aboriginal writing system was established. The major concerns of learning Aboriginal languages as a L2 are to better understand local Aboriginal language & culture as well as why it plays such a big part in their lives in the country.

In contrast, Chinese is a system of complete logographs consisting of a huge number of pictograms and phonetic compounds. Most of the English-speaking students for kindergarten to G12 prefer to study Chinese mainly due to the fact that China is supposed to be the 2nd largest economy in the world aiming at economic exploration & the huge market of more than 12 million. However, when they learn Chinese as L2, they find out that it is “too foreign”, “too difficult” and “too suspicious” (Neilson, 2021) as the hardest language for English (L1) speakers to learn (Perry, 2022), though is one of the most spoken languages in the world.

1. The Introduction and Contrast Between Aboriginal and Chinese Writing Systems

In this section, the writing system including alphabets and vowels of Aboriginal languages and the writing system consisting of different types of characters in Chinese are first introduced and analyzed. Secondly, there is a contrast between the Aboriginal and the Chinese writing systems.

1.1. The Aboriginal Writing System

Basically, the existing Aboriginal writing system is only English orthography based upon 26 alphabets and 3 long & 3 short vowels transcribing the sound of the word of the Aboriginal languages without meaning.

<u>Aa</u>	<u>Bb</u>	<u>Cc</u>	<u>Dd</u>	<u>Ee</u>	<u>Ff</u>
<u>Gg</u>	<u>Hh</u>	<u>Ii</u>	<u>Jj</u>	<u>Kk</u>	<u>Ll</u>
<u>Mm</u>	<u>Nn</u>	<u>Oo</u>	<u>Pp</u>	<u>Qq</u>	<u>Rr</u>
<u>Ss</u>	<u>Tt</u>	<u>Uu</u>	<u>Vv</u>	<u>Ww</u>	<u>Xx</u>
<u>Yy</u>	<u>Zz</u>				

Table 1: Table of Alphabets in Aboriginal Languages

The Vowels in Aboriginal Languages

Generally speaking, most Aboriginal languages gave three short vowel: a, i, u & three long vowels aa [a:], ii [i:], uu [u:]. Whereas, there is an exception in Barunga variety of Kriol in Northern Territory having five monophthongs - i, e, a, o, u & five diphthongs - ai, ei, oi, au, ou.

1.2. The Chinese Writing System

Modern Chinese characters are based upon & modified from the classical characters in Han Dynasty 2,000 years ago, are categorized into six types: (1) pictographs (2) indicatives (3) phonetic compounds (4) ideographs (5) borrowed words (6) transmissives, according to Sham's review in Chapter 3 (Sham, 2002).

Types of Chinese Characters

- (1) Pictographs are the iconic symbols which has the etymological origins of pictures of concrete objects. eg. 鸟 “bird” & 马 “horse”.
- (2) Indicatives represent those abstract notions, such as position & numerals, etc. eg. 上 “above” & 下 “below”.
- (3) Phonetic compounds, which dominate more than 90% Chinese characters, are formed by a semantic and a phonetic. While the semantic contains the meaning of a word, a phonetic indicates the sound of the word. eg. 河 “river” is a phonetic compound formed by 水 “water” the semantic & 可 /he/ the phonetic.
- (4) Ideograph consists of two or more semantics and forms a new idea by combining the meanings of the two. eg. 好 “to love” or “good” is formed by 女 “woman” & 子 “child”.
- (5) Borrowed words representing a large number of concrete-object words with association with the abstract concepts are borrowed. eg. 高 “tower” has become a borrowed word with the same pronunciation but means “high”.
- (6) Transmissives are regarded as a type of borrowed words, both involving a semantic and a phonetic. eg. 老 “old” & 考 “old man” can be transmitted mutually because they have the same radical 老 and their meanings are closely related.

1.3. The Contrast Between Aboriginal and Chinese Writing Systems

The relationships among the script, sound and meaning of A. Aboriginal languages & B. Chinese as follows:

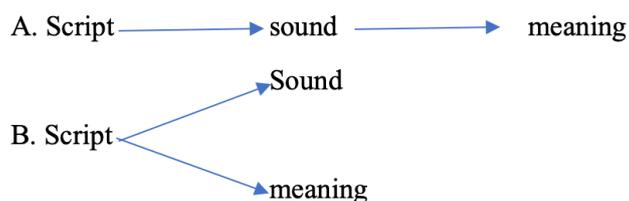


Figure 1: Relationship among script, sound & meaning in
A. Aboriginal languages B. Chinese

Aboriginal writing system are formed by English alphabets and 3 long & 3 short vowels and most of the words are disyllabic containing more than one morpheme. An Aboriginal script directs to sound first and then to meaning. Whereas, a Chinese character is a syllabic, a morpheme, which can stand alone as a word or serve as a morpheme in a compound, two-character or multi-character word. As more than 90% of Chinese characters are phonetic compounds, the scripts connect to sound and meaning simultaneously.

2. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Languages vs Chinese as L2 in Communicating Strand in the Framework of Australian Curriculum

Concerning development and design of languages in Australian curriculum, Scarino (2014) suggests, “Find ways of capturing the nature, scope and level of language learning” that meets the diverse needs and aspirations of contemporary language learners. Although both languages under the Framework of L2 Pathway in Australian curriculum, the nature, scope and level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages for meeting the needs of L2 learners are basically different from Chinese.

In Australian Curriculum, L2 teaching of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Languages with Communicating strand (CS) Understanding Strand (US) is through three stages: Foundation to Year 2; (2) Year 3 to 6; (3) Year 7 to 10, and CS is divided into six sub-strands. The major purposes are using the languages in interpreting, creating and exchanging thoughts, feelings and opinions.

Chinese L2 teaching in Australian Curriculum has both Communicating Strand (CS) & Understanding Strand (US) in five stages: (1) F-Year 2; (2) Year 3 & 4; (3) Year 5 & 6; (4) Year 7 & 8 ;(5) Year 9 & 10, as well as there are five Sub-strands in CS. Based upon the following CS tables (Aboriginal L2 in normal print & Chinese L2 in italics), we deal with the contrasts and differences between Aboriginal languages and Chinese L2 Pathways in the Framework of Australian Curriculum.

2.1 Contrasts Between Aboriginal Languages & Chinese L2 Pathways in Australian Curriculum

Socialising/ Interacting	Taking action/Collaborating	Developing language for classroom interaction
<i>Oral – Interacting, participating & taking action</i>	<i>Written -- Interacting, participating & taking action</i>	
1. Socialising		
Obtaining & using information	Conveying information	
<i>Oral – Obtaining, processing & using information</i>	<i>Written -- Obtaining, processing & using information</i>	
2. Informing		
Participating in & responding to stories, songs, dance & visual design	Creating & performing	
<i>Oral – Participating in, responding to, creating imaginative experience</i>	<i>Written -- Participating in, responding to, creating imaginative experience</i>	
3. Creating		
Translating Interpreting & Explaining	Creating bilingual texts	
<i>Translating Interpreting</i>	<i>Creating own Chinese translation</i>	
4. Translating		
Express identity		
5. Identity		
Reflecting in intercultural experience		
<i>Reflecting</i>		
6. Reflecting		

Table 2: Table of Sub-strands & threads in Communicating Strand (CS) of Aboriginal Languages and Chinese L2 Pathways in Australian curriculum

In Communicating Strand, there are six sub-strands containing Socialising, Informing, Creating, Translating, Identity & Reflecting in Aboriginal L2 Pathway whereas only five sub-strands in Chinese L2 Pathway ignoring 5. Identity in the previous one. This indicates that Expressing Identity of being Aboriginal people with particular speech communities & culture is significant in Aboriginal L2 teaching, but not for Chinese L2.

There are only three stages including F-Y2, Y3-6, Y7-10 in Aboriginal L2 Pathway, but five stages including (1) F-Y2; (2) Y3 & 4; (3) Y5 & 6; (4) Y7 & 8; (5) Y 9 & 10 in Chinese L2. Due to fact that the uniqueness and complexity of the Chinese orthography, Pinyin, writing by strokes, emphasis on reading texts and translation, as well as intercultural exchange with the adults & communities in the later stages, songs, music and art are not the major activities in the Chinese L2 pathway. Therefore, each stage containing around two years makes the threads become more specific.

Although the description of all the sub-strands are the same wordings, the threads for each of the sub-strand in Aboriginal L2 are completely different from those in Chinese L2 pathway. As the Chinese L2 divides Socialising, Informing & Creating into two parts: 1. Oral, & 2. Written equally which indicates both oral and written texts are significant in Chinese L2 teaching. Chinese is a visible language which consists of complete logography and the scripts correspond to meaning and sound directly, therefore, written texts plays an important roles in L2 teaching. In contrast, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander languages L2 are mainly spoken languages with the phonetic transcriptions of English alphabets in their writing system.

In Socialising, interacting with elderlies & visiting their communities are emphasised through all the stages in Aboriginal L2 pathway, but meeting with familiar or unfamiliar adults are encouraged in the later stages in Chinese L2 pathway. The major difference lies on the inherence of manner and culture from the elderlies in the Aboriginal communities through spoken Aboriginal languages but not from written text. Comparatively speaking, written texts are less emphasised whereas participating & responding to stories, songs, dance and visual design, and then creating & performing are the thread of Creating in Aboriginal L2 teaching.

In Translating, from using contextual cues to identify Chinese characters & words through Pinyin, the Romanization phonetic transcriptions of Chinese besides the writing system, in F-Y2 to creating bilingual texts, identifying similarities of Chinese & English syntax & vocabulary and explaining them for transferring cultural & context-specific concepts between Chinese & English in Y9&10. On the other hand, translating & interpreting a range of words & texts into English-Aboriginal L2 version and creating bilingual texts with others in the community are the tread of Translating.

Reflecting on the diversity between young Australians & the youngsters in Chinese-speaking community affecting individuals, identity and beliefs helps intercultural exchanges in Reflecting. Whereas reflecting on their own languages & cultures happens during interacting with Aboriginal peoples through songs, stories, games & art in intercultural exchanges.

2.2. Differences of the Understanding Strand of Aboriginal & Chinese l2 Pathways

According to Australian Curriculum, Understanding Strand (US) means analysing and understanding language & culture in intercultural exchange. The stages divided in US is the same as in CS, and the contrast of different stages in Aboriginal languages and Chinese L2 has been discussed in CS section already. In US, there are five sub-strands in Aboriginal

languages, thus three sub-strands in Chinese L2 pathway. In the following US table (Table 3), the sub-strands and the threads of Aboriginal L2 are in normal print, and those of Chinese are in italic.

Firstly, the sub-strands in Aboriginal and Torre Islander Peoples languages include 1) System of Language, 2) Language variation & change, 3) Language awareness, 4) Role of language & culture, 5) Role of language building. Whereas only the first two & the 4th sub-strands are found in Chinese L2 pathway.

Sound & writing system	Grammar & vocabulary knowledge
Ways of communicating & creating text	Links between language, kin & land
<i>Phonology</i>	<i>Orthography</i>
<i>Syntax</i>	<i>Text</i>
1. Systems of Languages	
Variability in language use according to social & cultural context	The dynamic nature of language
<i>Variations in language</i>	<i>Changes in languages</i>
2. Language variation & change	
Linguistic landscape & ecology	Protocols for working with Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander languages
3. Language awareness	
The relationship of language & culture	
<i>Language choice</i>	
4. Role of language & culture	
Maintaining & strengthening language	
5. Role of language building	

Table 3: Table of Sub-strands & threads in Understanding Strand (US) of Aboriginal Languages and Chinese L2 Pathways in Australian curriculum

Secondly, the thread in “Systems of Languages” in Aboriginal L2 pathway is divided into four:

- 1) Sound & writing systems: Producing sounds, stress, intonation pattern of Aboriginal L2, and developing phonemic awareness linked to the writing system;
- 2) Grammar & vocabulary knowledge: Understanding & using a range of grammar patterns with expansion of vocabulary including inflections & derivations in Aboriginal L2;
- 3) Ways of communicating & creating text: Analyzing the use, function & relationship of social processes and forms & structures of different types of texts;
- 4) Links between language, kin & land: Investigate the connections between stories, ceremony, people & land as evident in community.

Thirdly, the thread of Systems of language in Chinese L2 is also divided into four:

- 1) Phonology: Recognizing & reproducing the four tones with difference for the meanings of words, intonations & rhythms in different age & social groups;
- 2) Orthography: Recognizing characters as the form of Chinese writing system for reproduction by using strokes & Pinyin as the form of sound system, and infer the meaning & sound to unfamiliar Chinese words;

- 3) Syntax: Understanding & producing Chinese L2 sentences with nouns, verbs & adjectives in particular grammatical order, and distinguishing the sentences controls by effective Chinese authors;
- 4) Text: Familiar to text types for meaning prediction, compare the purposes, sentence & text structure of Classical & contemporary texts.

Fourthly, for Language variation & change in Aboriginal L2, the thread is separated into two:

- 1) Variability in language use according to social & cultural context: Recognizing & Analyzing different words & language pattern reflecting relationships, social & cultural contexts;
- 2) The dynamic nature of language: Understanding borrowed words, languages & cultures change as a result of contact of new ideas, popular culture, media & new technologies.

Fifthly, Language variation & change in Chinese L2 is similar to that of Aboriginal L2, & divided into:

- 1) Variation in language: Recognizing Chinese is a major community language in Australia & many countries unlike Aboriginal languages & how the dynamic language influenced by local & global cultures;
- 2) Changes in language: Identifying the formal language at school & explaining how Chinese language dynamic changes due to social & technological changes.

Sixthly, the third sub-strand in Aboriginal L2 is Language awareness, which is missing in Chinese L2. The thread is separated into two:

- 1) Linguistic landscape & ecology: Identifying, investigating & comparing the target languages with Indigenous language in other countries for issues of language policy & rights, reform & multiculturalism;
- 2) Protocols for working with Aboriginal languages & Torres Strait Islander languages: Learning & researching the target languages with respects and understanding of the norms & protocols.

Seventhly, Role of language & culture in Aboriginal L2 is the relationship of language culture exploring connections between identity & cultures of Aboriginal peoples shaping their ways of thinking, behaving & worldview as the role of language. Role of language & culture in Chinese L2 is Language choice reflecting cultural contexts, values & familiarity between participants within or across communities.

Lastly, the fifth sub-strand, Maintaining & Strengthening language, in Aboriginal L2 is missing in Chinese L2 pathway as Chinese is popular in Australia & many countries. It means recognizing the target languages are passed for generations, and should be kept alive & strong. As Indigenous languages, Aboriginal languages is necessary to be maintained & strengthened in Australia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Framework of Aboriginal language & Torres Strait Islander languages L2 Pathway is similar to that of Chinese language L2 Pathway in Australian Curriculum basically. The contrasts between them are mainly due to the differences between the two writing systems & phonetics, pedagogical approaches, values, cultures, popularity of the target languages in Australia and the world.

Comparatively speaking, the goal of teaching and learning Aboriginal languages L2 is for the maintenance of the Indigenous languages, whereas the design of Chinese L2 is more knowledge-based approach. In other words, Aboriginal L2 teaching is more vivid, creative and interesting through songs, stories, games & art, but Chinese L2 emphasizes more on written characters & texts in understanding context in addition to Pinyin.

Aboriginal L2 learners just learn the different sounds of Aboriginal language only as the Aboriginal English writing system without much difference from their English L1. However, Chinese L2 learners not only study the orthography of logographic Chinese characters in the writing system, which they must reproduce characters by strokes, and read the boring lengthy texts in addition to Pinyin as the form of Chinese phonetics and then guess the unfamiliar words. Therefore, English L1 learners learn Chinese L2 as a completely new foreign visual writing system consisting of logography with higher complexity, higher difficulty and higher cognitive levels creating heavier cognitive load (Sweller, 2011) consisting of logographs, strokes, pinyin and guess in Communicative Strand. This is based upon the psychological and educational psychological analysis as one of the major reasons why English L1 learners' complaint that Chinese is "too foreign, difficult and suspicious" (Neilson, 2021) as the hardest language in the world (Perry, 2022). In Australia, many English L1 learners drop Chinese L2 course after Y6 if they have started learning Chinese L2 in primary schools.

Furthermore, Systems of language in Chinese L2 pathway consisting of four parts different from that of Aboriginal L2 with some similarities except that Orthography in Chinese focuses on recognizing characters as the form of Chinese writing system for reproduction by using strokes & Pinyin as the form of sound system, and infer the meaning & sound to unfamiliar Chinese words. In other words, English L1 learners are expected to be able to read the logographic characters, write the Chinese characters by strokes as well as pronounce the Chinese words by Pinyin, and then guess the unfamiliar words as a visible language. In fact, most of the Chinese L2 learners could speak fluent Chinese through Pinyin but unable to memorize a large number of isolating Chinese logographs without any cues. That means they perform well in oral practice only because English L1 is a phonetic language containing 26 alphabets, but poor in recognizing Chinese orthography or reading and writing texts due to the distinctiveness of Chinese (Scrimgeour et. Al., 2014) which is far beyond their scope. This is the from the linguistics point of view to analyze the second reason why it is "too foreign, difficult and suspicious" to learn Chinese L2 (Neilson, 2021) as the hardest language for English L1 speaker to learn in the world.

Unlike Chinese is world-widely used as popular community language, Aboriginal L2, the Indigenous languages, has to be learned through interactions with the elderlies in the communities for maintenance and strengthening the languages with cultural identity, language awareness and respects as they have been transmitted from generation to generation. Meanwhile, the ecology of comparing the target languages with other Indigenous languages in the world concerns about issues of language policy & rights, social reform & multiculturalism.

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