

# Making room for learning and assessing together in bilingual, bicultural teaching teams at a remote Warlpiri school in Central Australia

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This report describes two assessment-related activities conducted in a remote bilingual school in Central Australia as part of a PhD research project in 2018-2019. The examples presented highlight the challenges of conducting assessment in the context of small-scale indigenous languages and the value of collaboration among bilingual, bicultural teaching teams in developing effective assessment strategies that value and harness students' multilingual capabilities.

**Key words:** Warlpiri, Indigenous knowledge, bilingual education, language assessment, team teaching

## Introduction

Assessment of students' language and literacy capabilities is important for supporting teaching and learning, evaluating student progress, and defining learning needs. A prevailing challenge for dual language programs is capturing and assessing the skills and knowledge of multilingual students (Grosjean, 1985; Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003; García, 2009). These challenges are compounded in the context of small-scale indigenous languages and non-dominant cultural knowledge (Wigglesworth & Keegan, 2013; Jones & Campbell Nagari, 2008; McGroarty et al., 1995). At Yuendumu School in remote Central Australia in the Northern Territory (NT), which offers instruction in English and an Australian Aboriginal language, Warlpiri, educators have recognised the need for developing effective tools for measuring first language and

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literacy progress (Disbray et al., 2022), and assessing learning of content that draws on students' full language and learning repertoires (Browne, 2022).

This report describes some of the challenges of assessment in the bilingual program at Yuendumu School and then presents two assessment-related activities that were documented as part of a PhD research project on teaching and learning in and of Warlpiri in 2018-2019 (Browne, 2022). These were (1) workshopping first language (Warlpiri) assessment strategies with the school's teaching teams, comprising Warlpiri and non-Indigenous educators, and (2) trialling assessment in a bilingual science unit with a single teaching team. A key learning from both the workshops and the unit of teaching was the importance of educators<sup>2</sup> learning together in cross-linguistic teaching teams to generate effective, shared assessment practices.

### **The educational context: Yuendumu School**

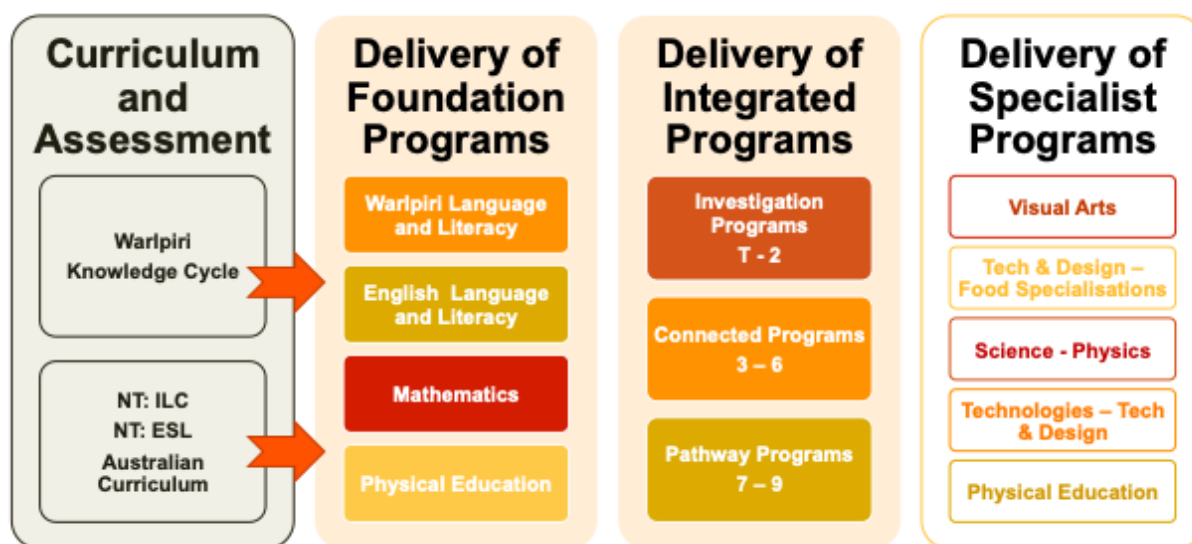
Yuendumu is a remote Aboriginal community in Australia's Tanami desert, 290km from the regional town of Alice Springs. It is one of four Warlpiri communities, the others being Nyirrpi, Willowra and Lajamanu, known as the Warlpiri Triangle. Yuendumu is one of the larger communities in Central Australia, with a fluctuating population of roughly 800 people. Warlpiri is the dominant community vernacular; English is learned as a foreign language and other Aboriginal languages are also spoken by some community members (Browne, 2019). There is limited recognition or understanding of the complexity of children's language backgrounds in Warlpiri schools (Disbray, 2014; Browne, 2022) and more widely in the NT (Moses & Wigglesworth, 2008). Yuendumu School, established in 1961, was one of the first Northern Territory schools to commence delivering a bilingual program in 1974 (Ross & Baarda, 2017). The implementation of the program has varied significantly over the years with waning resourcing and institutional support at both national and territory levels in recent decades (Devlin et al., 2017).

In 2018-19 when this research was conducted, Yuendumu School endeavoured to offer a bilingual with bi-literacy program in English and Warlpiri, to facilitate learning through two languages from early years to senior classes. Classrooms were resourced

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<sup>2</sup> L1 English speakers and L1 Warlpiri speakers

as bilingual spaces with learning co-delivered by English-speaking teachers and Warlpiri-speaking educators, some of whom were fully qualified teachers, and most of the others had certificate level training in education support. Teaching and assessment in the school is accountable to national and territory requirements and responds to local community expectations. In 2018-19, it followed the First Language Bilingual Pathway of the Indigenous Languages and Cultures (NTILC) curriculum (Department of Education (NT), 2017), the English as a Second Language (ESL) levels in the NT Curriculum Framework (NTCF) and the Australian Curriculum. The Warlpiri Theme Cycle (also referred to as the Warlpiri Knowledge Cycle or Warlpiri Curriculum Cycle) is a local innovation and a key component as outlined in the curriculum delivery model in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Yuendumu Curriculum Delivery model (Boscato, 2019)

The Warlpiri Theme Cycle is a curriculum that has been developed by Warlpiri elders and educators from the Warlpiri speaking communities over four decades of annual educator workshops called Warlpiri Triangle and Jinta Jarrimi 'Becoming one' meetings (Disbray et al., 2018). It is organised around 12 knowledge domains or themes which are central to Warlpiri people and their land, language, law, and culture (Disbray & Martin, 2018). Since 2018, decades of work, including lists of key concepts, vocabulary, stories, places, dances that Warlpiri children need to know, are being consolidated into a handbook with differentiated age-appropriate outcomes and explicit links to the Australian Curriculum (Macdonald, 2018). Curriculum learning

areas such as Science, Humanities and Social Sciences have been mapped to the Warlpiri Theme Cycle, and in the above curriculum delivery model, “Integrated Programs” were developed for subjects that aligned to the Warlpiri Theme Cycle and changed every term, depending on the Warlpiri theme for that term.

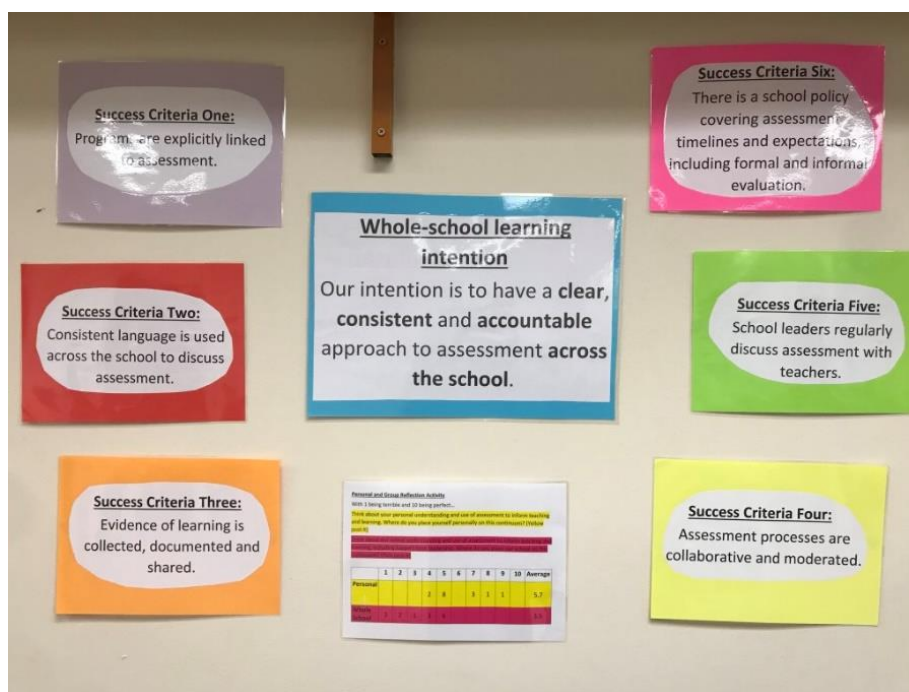
### **The issue: collecting Warlpiri language data collaboratively**

The stated goal of Yuendumu School’s bilingual program was to “develop students’ competence and confidence in all strands of language acquisition in two languages: Warlpiri and English” (Bilingual Resource Development Unit, 2015, p.15). However, differing perceptions of how to achieve and evaluate these have historically been underpinned by conflicting interpretations of policy and understandings of student language use by the various stakeholders. Discontinuities have abounded between traditional learning and knowledge systems and the school situation, particularly in terms of assessing language and content learned through Warlpiri. There are manifold tensions involved in negotiating a “mainstream” standardised curriculum and institutional monolingual orientation with delivery of culturally and linguistically responsive learning through a bilingual model (Browne, 2022). This has been a site of contestation for decades and remains so (Devlin et al., 2017). Concomitantly, the need for more consistent data collection on first language learning has been called for across NT bilingual schools (Browne, 2022; Devlin, 2009; Disbray et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2014). Not only is this beneficial feedback for students and families, but it would also feed into a much-needed evidence base supporting a bilingual approach. At Yuendumu school, however, the two language systems are currently assessed separately, and Warlpiri has not been systematically reported on.

### **Two assessment-related activities**

Collection and reporting of student outcomes were identified by school leadership as priority areas for improvement in 2018-19. The whole school learning intention for 2019 was to develop a “clear, consistent and accountable approach to assessment across the school”. This encompassed six success criteria: programs are explicitly linked to assessment; consistent language is used across the school to discuss assessment; evidence of learning is collected, documented and shared; assessment

processes are collaborative and moderated; school leaders regularly discuss assessment with teachers; and there is a school policy covering assessment timelines and expectations including formal and informal evaluation (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Photo of whole-school learning intention in Yuendumu School staff room, taken May 2019

All teaching plans were required to include learning intentions and success criteria. Culminating assessment tasks, rubrics and moderation activities were undertaken by teachers to discuss student work and reflect on teaching practices (Boscato, 2019). The school's leadership team recognised the need to consolidate the process of collecting evidence, analysing student progress, recording results, and reporting on students' achievement in Warlpiri language. In this section I will discuss two activities that were trialled in 2019: (1) workshopping Warlpiri assessment tools in teaching teams and (2) examining students' knowledge and skills across their full bilingual repertoire in an integrated science unit.

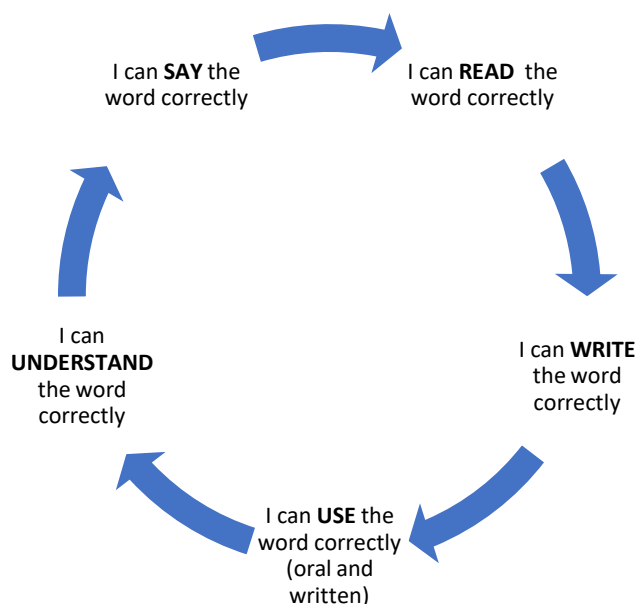
### *(1) Workshopping assessment tools in teaching teams*

In term 2, 2019, during my PhD fieldwork, I received funding from the Association for Language Testing and Assessment in Australia and New Zealand (ALTAANZ) to collaborate with Warlpiri educators Fiona Gibson Napaljarri, Nancy Collins Nungarrayi and Ormay Gallagher Nangala; Senior Language Resource Officer, Gretel

Macdonald and Senior teacher, Michele Forbes to deliver two workshops on assessment of Warlpiri language. The workshops involved discussion of topics and issues in language testing practice, explorations of assessment strategies and tools, and discussion of students' Warlpiri language –oral and written– as well as trialing of tools to assess discrete competencies. The workshops also offered an opportunity for teaching teams and Warlpiri community members to engage with research conducted in terms 3-4, 2018 and term 1, 2019, on teaching and learning in Warlpiri classrooms as part of the PhD project (Browne, 2022).

During workshops, teams worked together on a detailed scope and sequence for Warlpiri language and literacy related to the Warlpiri Theme Cycle to map out a sequence of specific language knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire as they progress in their learning (across multiple developmental ages, stages, and grade levels). This process drew on the teams' collective experiences. One goal for this planning was to guide the collection of evidence from assessment and thus develop an evidence base. This would be used for differentiated and diagnostic assessment, monitoring progress over time, scaffolding curriculum area learning, identifying curriculum literacy and numeracy demands and avoiding inadvertent reteaching of material.

One workshop attended by twenty-two school staff and community members, focussed on assessment of student mastery of theme keywords drawn from key thematic vocabulary items and high frequency words (in Warlpiri readers) in the Nyurru-wiyi 'Olden times' theme of the Warlpiri Theme Cycle. The workshop supported teaching teams to use a checklist to assess and record student mastery of these theme keywords (Appendix 1) and to use a learning progression for analysing student achievement of Warlpiri language-literacy behaviours/skills represented by positive student strengths-based "I can ...." statements (Appendix 2). The learning progression of Warlpiri vocabulary described (in English and Warlpiri) observable behaviours and skills associated with the language-literacy learning steps model shown in Figure 3:



**Figure 3.** A model of language-literacy learning elements

The workshop was opened by Warlpiri educator Nancy Collins, who familiarised teaching teams with a variety of literacy activities linked to the Warlpiri Theme Cycle. Warlpiri literacy production worker Ormay Gallagher shared the work she had done on differentiating learning of Warlpiri theme-related vocabulary for cohorts from Early Years to Senior classes. Both presented in Warlpiri and English (Figures 4 and 5). The assessment activities in the workshop included:

- Gallery Walk<sup>3</sup> of teaching activities teams can use to help their students develop vocabulary related to the Warlpiri theme and tools to track language-literacy skills including:
  - Individual reading running records.
  - Foundations for Early Literacy (FELA) phonological awareness test.
  - Warlpiri Magic 100<sup>4</sup> (high frequency Warlpiri sight words).
- Modelling of how to use the Theme Keyword checklist<sup>5</sup> and the Warlpiri Learning Progression (see Appendices 1 and 2).

<sup>3</sup> A Gallery Walk allows small groups of participants to engage with activities and materials in their own time during a workshop.

<sup>4</sup> A list of 100 high frequency words found in Warlpiri readers agreed on by literacy production workers at the Bilingual Resource Development Unit and validated by Warlpiri elders and senior educators.

<sup>5</sup> Comprising a list of key Warlpiri vocabulary terms agreed on by elders and educators for a particular theme in the Warlpiri Theme Cycle.

- Practice – teaching teams practise using the tool with each other.



**Figure 4.** Warlpiri teacher Nancy Collins demonstrating a syllable making activity with colleagues



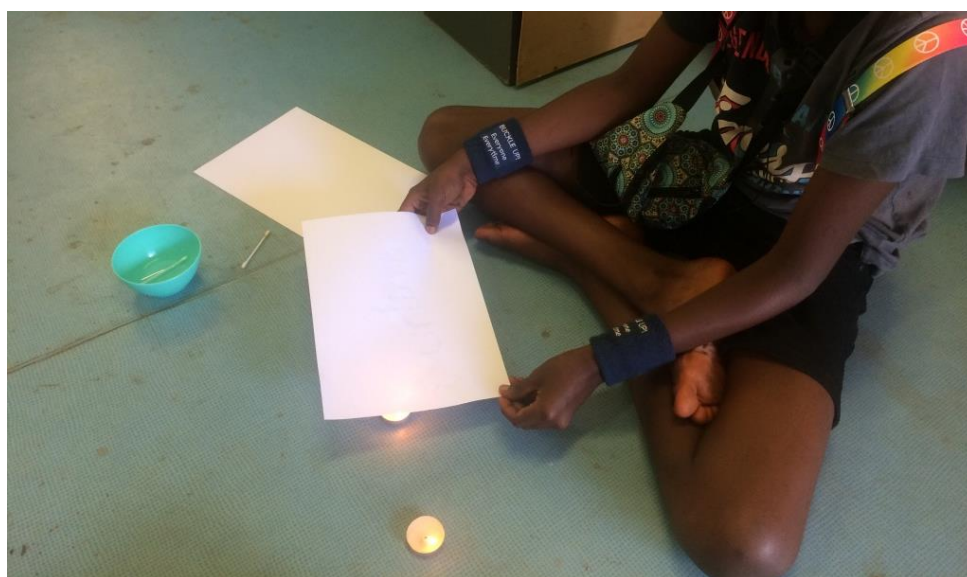
**Figure 5.** Warlpiri teachers Nancy Collins and Ormay Gallagher describing the Warlpiri resources related to the theme for term 2, 2019

A follow-up session was held two weeks later, as part of the Warlpiri Triangle Annual Workshop for Warlpiri Educators, to revisit the Learning Progression, this time with twenty-seven educators from teaching teams in the three other Warlpiri schools, Nyirрпи, Willowra and Lajamanu. Teaching teams developed a toolkit of Warlpiri language assessment tasks linked to the Warlpiri theme for that term. This allowed teaching teams to become more familiar with the documents and assessment processes and to be able to compile data of student mastery of Warlpiri vocabulary for that term. The assessment cycle developed initially in the workshops is one example of a formative assessment process in the Walpiri Learning Progression.



## (2) Integrated science unit

A science module in Warlpiri and English was co-designed and implemented with one upper primary teaching team. A key science understanding was chosen from the Australian National Science Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023) for the relevant upper primary grade level: Solids, liquids and gases have different observable properties and behave in different ways. Related concepts and vocabulary in both languages were brainstormed with Warlpiri and English-speaking team members, and student assessment questions and potential answers discussed. The teaching team designed four experiments that would reflect the different properties of materials and tie in with the Warlpiri Theme Cycle theme, *Jaru manu rdaka-rdaka* 'Communication and hand signs'. Students made "secret messages" using different materials such as heated lemon juice, oil, wax, glue, and sand (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Experimenting with lemon juice and flame

While a planned assessment method was to use a series of photographs of the process as prompts for students to describe what happened in each experiment and why, in Warlpiri and English, the team preferred checking learning during a whole group question and answer session and analysing the language used in recordings according to a rubric. Not only was this motivated by time and staffing constraints but more strongly by a preference for collaborative assessment by both Warlpiri educators and students.

A reflection made by both members of the teaching team was the strength of allowing students to draw on all their communicative resources, which extended beyond English/Warlpiri vocabulary terms to symbols, values and common practices of the local community, to make sense of complex scientific processes. For example, when discussing the properties of glue and wax, students discussed *palya* ‘spinifex resin’, and learning on a recent bush trip with elders to make tools. The importance of language assessment that is contextualised was noted by both Warlpiri- and English-L1 speaking educators.

### Conclusions

Overall, the activities described in this report highlight the challenges of teaching Australian Indigenous languages. Likewise, promoting multilingualism and non-dominant cultural knowledge in strongly monolingual education systems, even in a relatively established bilingual program such as Yuendumu, is an ongoing endeavour. Strong institutional support and well-supported collaboration between cross-linguistic teaching teams is essential to co-designing effective assessment strategies in schools that value and harness students’ L1 and multilingual capabilities - and those of local educators too. Both activities described in this report stimulated animated discussion among teaching teams around demonstrating skills, assessment, and reporting practices. Both activities made a very small contribution to a much-needed evidence base for developing future practice relevant to two-ways learning for this remote bilingual school in Central Australia.

The workshops were an opportunity for school staff and community to come together to develop a shared set of practices around assessment in and of Warlpiri language in a context where assessment of teaching in Indigenous languages is not well developed or supported. One teacher reflected, “it’s really valuable to have time to learn together”, and another said,

As teaching teams, we don’t get a lot of time to sit down together to have these conversations. It’s really good to work together and to be on the same page. We’re excited to continue to develop these practices as a team and as a school.

The sessions facilitated reflection between cross-cultural teaching teams on best practice assessment in L1 (Warlpiri) that could then be used in classrooms. Whole staff workshops guided by Warlpiri educators were an important means for determining culturally, linguistically, and educationally appropriate practices.

The bilingual science activity offered the classroom teaching team opportunities to reflect on their students' language and learning repertoires and prompted reflection on ways to scaffold and mediate conceptual learning. It highlighted the efficacy of teaching and assessing concepts in subject areas such as science through L1 and L2.

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**Appendix 1: Nyurru-wiyi keywords checklist (Transition-Grade 2, Term 2, 2019)**

	<i>Pina-jarrimi karna nyampuju yirdi</i> COMPREHENSION	<i>Wangkami karna nyampuju yirdi</i> SAYING	<i>Riiti-mani karna nyampuju yirdi</i> READING	<i>Yirrarni karna nyampuju yirdi</i> WRITING
wirliya (foot or track)				
yujuku (humpy)				
parraja (coolamon)				
wirlinyi (hunting)				
ngurлу (seeds)				
warnirri (rockhole)				
mulju (soakage)				
pirnki (cave)				
jurnarrpa (tool)				
karlaja (area around sleeping area opposite of windbreak)				
wirriji (hairstring)				
jimany-pinyi (ignite a fire using friction)				
pakarli (ceremonial headdress)				
kipirni (to winnow)				

## Appendix 2: Learning progression for Nyurru-wiyi theme vocabulary (Kurdu-kurdu wita-wita-ngurlu wiri-wiri-kirra kalu pina jarrimi ...)

	Pina-jarrinjaku	Wangkanjaku	Riiti-maninjaku	Yirrarninjaku
	Knowing/understanding the word	Saying the word	Reading the word	Writing the word
<b>Nyalali, wirriya-wirriya</b> <b>Preschool transition</b> <b>EYLF, Band 1 (NTILC)</b>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna pina jarrimi nyanjaku pija-wati eg. Nyarrpara jungarni marda? (which is the right one?) I can point to the key word from a set of pictures (no text)</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna match-imani pija-jarra, jungarni marda? I can match two pictures of the key word</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna pick-i-ngarrirni yirdi-wati jinta-kari-jangka I can pick out the key word from other spoken words</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna wangkami yirdi nyampu-piya jurrku-wati (e.g. yukuju) I can say other words that start with the same sound</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna jiily-ngarrirni yirdi-wati book-u-jangka I can point to pictures, words and spaces around words in a continuous text for nyurru-wiyi theme</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna wangkami kamparru sound pija-jangka I can say the first sound of the word by looking at a picture</p> <p>Ngaju karna jungarni yirrarni pija manu yirdi jinta-ngka I can match the written key word to a picture</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna yirrarni kuruwari yangka pipa-ngka manu walya-ngka I can represent the word using drawings and/or symbols on paper or in sand</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna trace-imani yirdi-wati pipa-ngka I can trace the word</p>
<b>Nyalali, wirriya-wirriya</b> <b>Year 1/2</b> <b>Band 1(NTILC)</b>		<p>Ngaju kaji karna yurnparni song-wati yirdi-nyampu-jangka-rlu I can sing a song with the word in it</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna wangkami kamparru sound yirdi-jangka I can read the first sound of the word by looking at a word</p>	

		<p>Ngaju karna yirdi-wati sentence-i-ngka I can say a sentence with the key word in it</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna riiti-mani pirdangirli –warnu sound yirdi-jangka I can read the last sound of the word</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna milya-pinyi sounds-wati yangka key word-jangka I know all the sounds in the key word</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna riiti-mani kamparru–warnu syllable yirdi-jangka I can read the first syllable of the word</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna riiti-mani kulkurru-ngurlu syllable yirdi-jangka I can read the middle syllable of the word</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna riiti-mani pirdangirli-ngurlu syllable yirdi-jangka I can read the last syllable of the word</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna yirrarni kamparru letter yirdi-ngka I can write the first letter of the word</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna ‘have a go’ yirrarninjaku yirdi-ki I can use ‘have-a-go spelling’ to write the word</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna copy-mani yirdi flash-card-jangka I can copy the word from a flashcard or poster</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna yirrarni kamparru syllable yirdi-ngka I can write the first syllable of the word</p>
	<p>Ngaju kaji karna use-mani nyampu yirdi-wati wangkanjaku panu-kari-ki I can use the word when talking to others</p>			
		<p>Ngaju kaji karna pick-i-ngarrimi yirdi sentence-jangka For example, ngajurna yanu wirlinyi. Kurdu kalu wangkami, “wirlinyi”! I can pick out the key word in a spoken sentence</p>		



<p><b>Kamina-kamina, yaparranji year 3-5 (Band 2 NCILC)</b></p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna wangkami yirdi-wati-ki pina-jarrinjaku I can explain what the key word means</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna wangkami tija-jangka sounds-wati I can repeat the sounds of the key word after my teacher</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna pakarni rdaka-nyanu-kurlu syllables-wati I can clap the syllables of the key word</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna wangkami yirdi yangka pija-jangka I can say the word from a picture</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna riiti-mani yirdi kuja: Yu- ju- ku yujuku I can blend the syllables in the key word</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna riit-mani yirdi-wati I can read the word in a list of key words</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna riiti-mani yirdi sentence-rla I can read the word in a short sentence</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna yirdi yirrarni nyanja-wangu-rlu I can write the word without looking</p> <p>Ngaju kaji karna yirdi yirrarni sentence-rla I can write the word in a simple sentence</p>
<p><b>Kurdiji-jangka, Wantijangu Year 6/ 7 Band 3-4 NTLIC)</b></p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna milya-pinyi yirdi wati ngula ka jungarni wangkami Warlpiri-rli I can find equivalents in Warlpiri for the key word</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna-jana jaru ngarrirni yirdi-wati I can use multiple key words from the theme to tell a story</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna riiti-mani yirdi-wati book-u-jangka I can read the words in a continuous text</p>	<p>Ngaju kaji karna yirrarni yirdi jaru-ngka manu recount-rla I can write the word in a larger text, story or recount</p>