Tight budget, big dreams: Using university course credit in the creation of an online Kriol language course for English speakers

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Abstract

Kriol is an Australian contact language spoken in Australia's north, and it is the first language of the community of Ngukurr in southern Arnhem Land. For the past two and a half years, I have been using university course credit to create an online language course teaching Kriol to English speakers at the behest of the Ngukurr Language Centre. This paper conveys the challenges that arise in undertaking a large-scale project of this sort as an undergraduate student. It also summarises the advantages and disadvantages of teaching a language online, and provides examples of the tools and techniques available for this purpose. It is hoped that this paper will encourage other undergraduate students and the staff who support them to engage in large-scale projects and pursue similar opportunities during their coursework.

1. Introduction

For the past two and a half years, I have been creating an online course teaching Kriol to English speakers at the behest of the Ngukurr Language Centre ('Language Centre'). Kriol is the most widely spoken Australian Aboriginal language, and it is the first language of Ngukurr, a remote Aboriginal community in southern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory (NT).[1] Many of the professional positions in Ngukurr are filled by outsiders who stay for a few years before moving on, and the majority of these people are first language English speakers with no experience or training in Kriol. Because they are full-time workers, in-person training is often inconvenient. The creation of an online course for learning Kriol will provide English speakers in Ngukurr with a convenient platform for developing the basic skills for understanding and communicating in the community language. The course aims to improve cross-cultural understanding, enabling services to be delivered more efficiently and stronger interpersonal relationships to be established.

The purpose of this paper is to convey the challenges I have encountered during the process of creating the course and my solutions to them. The course is not yet complete, but it is my hope that sharing what I have learned so far will empower other undergraduate students and the staff who support them to engage in similar large-scale and beneficial projects. I have found that undertaking such a task is intrinsically rewarding, an excellent way to learn, and an effective means of using time at university to benefit the wider community.

This paper begins with an overview of Kriol and Ngukurr, and current approaches to teaching the Kriol language to English speakers. Section 2 discusses the challenges I have encountered so far in creating the course. Section 3 summarises the preparatory research that was conducted before beginning to assemble the course, including the advantages and disadvantages of teaching a language online and the

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[1] The number of languages spoken in Australia at the time of colonisation is often estimated at around 250 (e.g. McConvell, 2010), although an estimate by Bowern (2011) puts it at 364. Citing 2016 census data, Simpson (2019) reports that only 13 of these traditional languages are still being spoken by children. Languages which have developed in Australia since colonisation, such as Kriol, are not included in these numbers.

use of a constructivist pedagogical framework. Section 4 discusses the technological considerations involved in the project. Section 5 illustrates how I created and adapted content for the course, and the paper concludes in Section 6 by reflecting on how undertaking a large-scale project as an undergraduate prepared me for independent research in the form of an Honours thesis.

1.1 Kriol in Ngukurr

Kriol is an Aboriginal English-lexifier creole language spoken in Australia's north by approximately 20,000 speakers (Schultze-Berndt, Meakins, & Angelo, 2013, p. 241). Its first attested appearance was at the Roper River Mission, now Ngukurr, at the start of the twentieth century. Like many creoles, it has a history of stigmatisation as 'bad English' (Harris, 1986). Many Kriol speakers at Ngukurr, though, have long been proud of their language (Harris & Sandefur, 1984). Most Kriol speakers in Ngukurr speak at least some English, to varying degrees of proficiency. However, English is very much a foreign language in the community. The institutions at Ngukurr tend to be headed by non-Indigenous outsiders who do not speak Kriol.

1.2 The Kriol Awareness Course

The Language Centre runs a Kriol Awareness Course in Ngukurr approximately three times a year for English speakers who wish to learn the basics of Kriol language and local Aboriginal culture. However, the Language Centre receives no funding to teach or create resources for Kriol. As such, the courses are infrequent and require staff to work on weekends. In two days, they take the participants through a 58-page handbook on the history of Ngukurr and the Kriol language, grammatical and lexical features of Kriol, and local cultural practices. As of the latter half of 2019, there are also fortnightly Kriol classes run in Ngukurr by the Yugul Mangi Development Aboriginal Corporation.

The in-person courses are valuable for both learners and the community, but fortnightly classes and two-day intensives are not sufficient to provide much more than a general—albeit important—impression that Kriol is truly a language separate from English. Consequently, after seeing an online course for Bininj Kunwok, another Australian Aboriginal language (Bininj Kunwok Language Project, 2019), the Language Centre contacted Professor Jane Simpson at The Australian National University (ANU) to attempt to find a student who could create an online course that would teach the Kriol handbook material at a slower pace and in more depth. The student would receive course credit in lieu of monetary remuneration, bypassing the funding issue. This is where I came in.

2. Challenges in creating the course

Creating an online course is a major undertaking at the best of times, but particularly when there is no official funding and only one person dedicated to the task. I begin here with a discussion of the challenges involved in this project, as they help to frame my work and subsequent solutions.

2.1 Tight budget, big dreams: Creating a course with no funding

One of the most salient issues in the creation of this course has been the lack of funding. The Language Centre and I have been extremely fortunate to have the support of Jane Simpson and ANU in several respects. Firstly, Simpson arranged the administrative details so that I could receive course credit for my work. Secondly, Simpson's funding from the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL) allowed me to travel to Ngukurr twice. The time spent physically in Ngukurr was indispensable, both in terms of making and collecting materials for the course and familiarising myself with Kriol and a Kriol-speaking community (more on this in Section 2.2).

Creating the course in Kriol has been part coursework, part volunteer work. Even taking every opportunity to coopt university coursework into Kriol course work, I have still only managed to accrue 18 units to this purpose, or approximately three-quarters of one full semester load. The work that remains to be done following this article will not contribute to course credit at all. As an estimate, the overall amount of work and time required will end up corresponding to approximately one and a half

typical Honours theses. This is an important point for anyone wishing to undertake a similar project. Just like choosing an Honours topic, the scope of the project needs to be achievable in the given timeframe. A large project may need to be scaled back, or more students may need to be assigned to it.

The lack of funding for teaching Kriol also has consequences for how much feedback the Language Centre can provide. Staff at the Language Centre are perpetually short on time and must prioritise the work they are funded for. This creates a bottleneck, as the course needs to be approved by the Language Centre before it can be tested with third parties. This means students must be quite conscientious and able to identify for themselves areas where they can continue working even when they are faced with such an obstacle in one area of their project.

2.2 Working on an unfamiliar language

The second main challenge was my own unfamiliarity with Kriol and Aboriginal culture. I had never been to the NT before and had never even heard of Kriol. Thus, a substantial part of working on the Kriol course has been the process of chipping away at my ignorance.

I began by reading many texts about Kriol, such as the *Introduction to Conversational Kriol* written by Sandefur and Sandefur (1982) and Hudson's 1983 description of Fitzroy Valley Kriol, a variety of Kriol spoken in the north of Western Australia. I found references to Kriol on the internet, including YouTube videos, articles, and radio broadcasts.[2] I also had access to the Language Centre's Kriol Awareness Course handbooks. Further advice was provided by Denise Angelo, a PhD candidate at ANU who has been working with Kriol for many years. I skyped the Language Centre often, and was therefore able to meet some of the Kriol-speaking staff. Thanks to this preparation, I was familiar with the grammar and sound system of the language and a little of the culture by the time I first arrived in Ngukurr, at least in principle. I had also already experienced acquiring a language (German) to functional fluency. With this preparation in place, I made vast improvements in my Kriol skills, despite only being around Kriol speakers for a few weeks.

Being in Ngukurr and getting to know Kriol speakers was crucial to bettering my understanding of the needs the course aims to meet. This project would be greatly impoverished without such an opportunity. Ideally, anyone completing similar work should already be personally familiar with the context of the project.

3. Preparing to create the course

3.1 Preliminary research

Teaching a language online has its own unique challenges. Consequently, my first assessed task was to complete a review of the literature into online language pedagogy. This resulted in a 7,000-word paper, with key points summarised below on the advantages and disadvantages of teaching languages online, and the pedagogical framework I have chosen.

3.1.1 Advantages of teaching languages online

Teaching languages online can have some significant advantages over face-to-face teaching. According to Grazia Scotellaro, the Digital Learning Advisor for the College of Asia and the Pacific at ANU (personal communication, May 12, 2017), the major advantage is its adaptability for students at different levels. Students are able to learn at their own pace within a set timeframe, and are able to repeat lessons they find particularly challenging. With face-to-face learning, by contrast, students usually cannot ask the teacher to repeat a concept more than once. This is mirrored in the student feedback for the Bininj Kunwok course: the inspiration for the Kriol course. One student wrote: 'online learning has strong benefits like being able to go back again and again without embarrassment'.

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[2] Digital Kriol resources are now available from a centralised location: meigimkriolstrongbala.org.au.

Students who feel anxious in face-to-face contexts may also find online learning less stressful (Russel & Curtis, 2013).

Though it may be expected that student speaking ability would suffer from the lack of face-to-face conversation, this is not necessarily the case. Sun (2011) found that the speaking abilities of students who had taken an online class were as good as those of students who had taken the equivalent course in person. Sun attributes this to the fact that students online had access to an in-built voice recorder, enabling them to practice and receive feedback on their speaking directly from the teacher, without having the pressure of speaking in front of their peers. It seems that being relieved of the stress of speaking in front of peers as a beginner compensates for the lack of face-to-face practice.

Another key advantage of online learning expressed in the feedback for the Bininj Kunwok course is the flexibility of timing and location of learning that it enables. For many participants, taking the Bininj Kunwok course online was the only option due to both the physical distance between students and the language community, and the students' busy schedules. A study at Carnegie Mellon University reported that 'the benefits of providing language courses to students who might not otherwise be able to take them have thus far outweighed the problems encountered during implementation' (Murday, Ushida, & Chenoweth, 2008, p. 136). Given that most participants of the Kriol course are expected to be working professionals, providing the opportunity for them to undertake language and culture lessons without travel and without compromising their schedules is a great advantage.

3.1.2 Disadvantages of teaching languages online

According to Scotellaro (personal communication, May 12, 2017), the major disadvantage of online learning is that student motivation is often not high enough to overcome the lack of formal scheduling, resulting in students constantly putting off course work. This was also cited as being a problem by several students who undertook the Bininj Kunwok course, and who missed the motivation of face-to-face courses. I have attempted to counter this problem somewhat by the choice of a student-centred pedagogical method (see Section 3.1.3 below). It may also be possible to increase student motivation by offering certificates of completion and virtual 'badges'. Haug, Wodzicki, Cress, and Moskaliuk (2014) found that students working towards a badge or certificate of attendance showed higher levels of investment in a course.

Awarding badges to students is a form of gamification—the use of 'elements traditionally thought of as game-like or "fun" to promote learning and engagement' (Kapp, 2012, p. 9). Vaibhav and Gupta (2014, p. 290) found that gamifying the learning platform 'drastically increases' both student enrolment and engagement during the course. Haug et al. (2014) found that although all student involvement decreases over time, the rate of decrease is slower for students who are aiming for badges and certificates. These may also be more appropriate than ranks or other competitive gamification techniques, which may demotivate students who are consistently on the lower rungs (Franke & Schönbohm, 2016).

Another challenge in the online learning environment is technological difficulties. Though nearly all participants in past Kriol awareness courses have been computer literate, had internet access, and owned smartphones (Ngukurr Language Centre, personal communication, June, 2017), there should be supports in place for students with less experience. Unless students are provided with support and training for the use of the online platform, they can become demotivated (Sun, 2011). Fortunately, many of these technological issues were solved by our choice of teaching platform (see Section 4.1).

3.1.3 Pedagogical method

When it comes to selecting a pedagogical method on which to base online teaching practices, one theory that is particularly prevalent in literature is 'constructivism' (Can, 2009; Castrillo, 2014; Colpaert, 2004; Senior, 2010; Sing & Khine, 2006; Sun, 2011; 2014). Constructivism places students—rather than teachers or knowledge—at the centre of learning. Learners are not viewed as empty vessels ready to be filled with knowledge, but rather as autonomous beings who can and should take control of the learning process.

The constructivist approach is particularly applicable for language learning in the online environment precisely because of the shift of focus from teacher to student. Through the internet, students have access to a wealth of knowledge that they can use without being confined by the strict scheduling and lesson plans of a traditional classroom. Constructivism encourages the use of authentic materials, such as videos and news reports, in the teaching of language. Having students create materials as part of their assessment is typical of constructivism. Examples of constructivist assessment include having students create online decks of flashcards that can be shared with other students, or having students write stories using newly-acquired verbs with the intent of engaging fellow students. This kind of assessment has the added benefit in that good-quality content can then be reused (with the student's permission) in future iterations of the course.

Originally, it was undecided whether or not the online Kriol course would be regularly monitored by Language Centre staff. One of the key recommendations for online language teaching is to create an 'online learning community' (Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Rovai, 2002; Salmon, 2002; Scotellaro, personal communication, May 12, 2017). In an online learning community, students can interact with each other on forums, supervised by course administrators. Students can be assessed for their forum participation and group work. However, in recent talks with the Language Centre, we have decided that this approach will not be feasible, due to the lack of time (and, of course, funding) that staff will be able to dedicate to monitoring class forums and marking. The course will instead be designed to be as self-directed as possible, with all assessment to be marked by the computer. It will hopefully be possible for a staff member to answer participant questions every week or fortnight, but the success of the course should not depend on this availability.

3.2 Interviews with Ngukurr residents

The first time I visited Ngukurr, my official role was as an intern to CoEDL and the Language Centre under the Australian National Internships Program. For this, I was required to conduct and write up original research. In conjunction with the Language Centre, I chose to conduct a series of interviews with Ngukurr residents in search of answers to the following questions:

1. Should non-Indigenous outsiders learn Kriol?
2. What aspects of Aboriginal culture in Ngukurr (if any) should be taught to non-Indigenous outsiders?

For these interviews, I was joined by Charles Darwin University/Australian National University PhD candidate Cathy Bow. In regard to the first research question, we found that participants were overwhelmingly in support of outsiders learning Kriol. There is clearly both community need and desire for a Kriol language course. Regarding the second question, suggestions included teaching the history and geography of Ngukurr, and how the kin and skin systems work—systems which inform how people relate to each other respectfully in Ngukurr. General instruction on behaving in a culturally appropriate manner was also frequently provided: for example, dressing respectfully, not going to sacred grounds, not making excessive eye contact, and listening and asking questions rather than talking and making demands. These can and will be included in the course. There were some other suggestions that do not fall within the scope of an online language and culture course, such as bush medicine and *bunggul* (publicly performed traditional dance).

Conducting this research prior to developing the course was an important step. It established the general support of the community, and provided direction for the course content. Since I am not a community member myself, and am physically removed from the community, this consultation was indispensable.

4. Technical considerations

4.1 The teaching platform

For the online teaching platform, we decided to use Moodle. Moodle is an open-source learning platform (moodle.org) and Moodle Cloud is a website that hosts Moodle for a small cost (moodlecloud.com). The pricing level that the Language Centre currently uses is AU$88 per year,

which will be covered by participant fees once the course is running. This permits 50 users and 200 MB of uploaded data. We decided that Moodle was the best option for this project for several reasons. Firstly, there was support within the ANU School of Languages, Literature and Linguistics, as ANU uses Moodle. Indeed, Moodle Cloud was recommended to us by Grazia Scotellaro, the abovementioned Digital Learning Advisor for the College of Asia and the Pacific. Secondly, any website maintenance other than the actual course content is the responsibility of Moodle Cloud, and included in the yearly cost. This is a major drawcard, since it means that Language Centre staff neither have to fix technical problems themselves, nor ask their IT contractors to do so. Finally, Moodle is specifically designed for educational courses. It provides a large variety of options for creating different educational tools, such as glossaries, surveys, and quizzes. Badges for motivation, as discussed in Section 3.1.2, can also be easily added.

4.2 Gaining IT skills

As a moderately tech-savvy student with no prior coding experience, the ease-of-use of Moodle meant that I could create the entire Kriol course without acquiring any new IT skills beyond general familiarity with the Moodle Cloud website. However, there is a trade-off between ease-of-use and customisability. Moodle may provide a plethora of options for teaching delivery, but there is little customisability in design. Manipulating tables of data in a lesson, for example, is extremely unwieldy. There is no intuitive way to add a row or column to an existing table without being familiar with HTML coding.

Because of this, I recently began learning HTML coding for free through Codecademy (www.codecademy.com). Having completed the beginner HTML course, I am now more easily able to manipulate the designs of individual lessons, through the HTML option provided in each editing box. This opens up many possibilities that are not otherwise available to a Moodle user, such as changing the colour or font of individual pieces of text.

5. Creating the course content

5.1 The target audience

Although the in-person Kriol Awareness Course is most suited to those who plan to live and work in Ngukurr itself, it is also useful for those in other Kriol-speaking communities, such as Katherine—a large town approximately 300 kilometres south of Darwin in the Northern Territory—and Barunga, a small Aboriginal community east of Katherine. Most participants are monolingual speakers of Standard Australian English. The online course will initially target this same demographic. There is potential for the course to be expanded to a wider audience once it has been road-tested; however, this will depend on the wishes of the Language Centre board and the viability of the Language Centre managing such an expansion.

5.2 Structure of the course

The course is five weeks long, and the theme for each week was decided by Language Centre staff. In deciding which cultural and grammar points should be taught each week, I went through the Kriol Awareness Course handbook and the interviews with Kriol speakers described in Section 3.2. I assigned the topics and activities provided across each week, based on which topics were most relevant to each theme. Grammar tasks were then assigned to each week based on their relevance to the cultural topic. For example, the grammatical ability of using pronouns and possessive constructions is indispensable in the second week, when family and community relationship structures are introduced: it allows participants to start using terms such as 'my mother' and 'your grandson'. This syllabus was checked by Simpson for feasibility and the Language Centre for appropriateness.

Each week-long unit follows a similar structure, provided below. A unit begins with an introduction to a cultural topic, such as the history of Kriol in Ngukurr, which takes the form of explanations and examples interspersed with multiple choice questions. Quizzes placed between the presentation of

learning content have been shown to reduce daydreaming and improve learning outcomes, and are a simple method of assessing students (Szpunar, Khan, & Schacter, 2013). Then the main language focus, such as the sound system, is introduced in-depth with examples. Supplementary quizzes, which allow participants to practise key parts of the cultural and language topics, are found underneath their respective content. At the end of every week there is a dialogue. I co-wrote these with Kriol speakers in Ngukurr, and they are designed to incorporate the cultural and language topics for the week. For example, the dialogue in week 2 is a conversation between two people discussing where others can sit on a bus, taking into consideration their relationships to other passengers. This provides a review of kin terms, pronouns, possessive constructions, and the *la* preposition: the topics presented that week. There is then a summary of new vocabulary and phrases introduced in the dialogue, followed by a vocabulary quiz. Finally, any additional materials and external links mentioned in the previous exercises are linked to the main page for the unit, allowing students easy access.

Unit structure:

1. Introduction to cultural topic
2. Any associated practice quizzes
3. Introduction to language topic
4. Any associated practice quizzes
5. Dialogue
6. Vocabulary and phrases
7. Vocabulary quiz
8. Any additional materials

5.3 Adapting the handbook

I sought to have the online course mirror the handbook, since the handbook has already been tried and tested by the Language Centre. However, the handbook contains much linguistic jargon. This may not be an issue for the in-person course, where instructors are on hand to elucidate grammatical terms, but it would be confusing in a self-directed online course for those without prior linguistic training.

Initially, my approach was to make these grammatical terms more accessible by creating animations to teach the terms. However, the more I reflected on the purpose of the course, the more I became convinced that this was the wrong way to proceed. The course, after all, is intended as an accessible tool for participants whose goal is to understand and use Kriol. Understanding linguistic jargon is not necessary for success in this area. Consequently, in undertaking consultation with the Language Centre, we decided it would be better to avoid technical linguistic terminology as much as possible.

A further change was to adjust the prose on the history of Kriol and Ngukurr in the handbook to make it more accessible to people with varying levels of literacy. I followed the lead of Cheng and Dunn's 2015 study on the readability of Australian online health information and aimed for each prose-rich section of the course to be no more complex than an eighth-grade reading level. This was determined using the Hemingway Editor, a web application which automatically produces a readability level for any text pasted into its browser (www.hemingwayapp.com).

5.4 Applying the literature

In keeping with the constructivist pedagogical approach described in Section 3.1, links are provided throughout the course to real-world examples of Kriol, such as a recording of 'Waltzing Matilda' in Kriol (Anil Babu, 2010) and ABC Radio programming in Kriol (ABC Indigenous News Radio, 2019). Once the foundations of the course are finished, I plan to incorporate opportunities for students to create their own materials, most likely as optional learning tasks.

Denise Angelo (personal correspondence, May, 2017), an expert on Kriol, recommended that the language level of the introductory modules should be slightly overwhelming for beginners. Although material that is too challenging can be demotivating (Fulmer & Frijters, 2011; Schweinle, Meyer, & Turner, 2006), it would be more detrimental from the perspective of the Language Centre if participants were to take the first unit, be able to understand everything by virtue of Kriol's links to English, and

thus believe that Kriol is just 'bad English'. To address this advice, the first unit focuses primarily on Kriol history and its sound system. There are many sounds that are found in Kriol but not English, and participants are unlikely to be able to produce unfamiliar speech sounds with ease.

A further recommendation that has already been implemented is to keep the assessment workload low. Haug et al. (2014, p. 64) found that even students who did not drop out of self-guided online courses showed 'signals of poor interest' at some point. Difficult assessment creates a barrier to re-entry for students seeking to reengage with the course after this period of low interest. Thus, in order to retain students, it is best to keep the assessment workload light. This has been achieved by making sure that assessments are short and easy—so long as participants have engaged with the material—and do not require the participant to leave the website.

I have also followed Scotellaro's advice to provide the same information in multiple ways in order to allow students to find what form of practicing the language works best for them, whether reading, writing, hearing, speaking, or some other way of interacting with the language (personal communication, May 12, 2017). This is particularly clear in the weekly dialogues. Each dialogue page begins with a recording only, with the instruction for students to write down as many words as they can understand. This provides an opportunity for both listening and writing. The same recording is then presented with Kriol subtitles, then English subtitles. This progression from no subtitles, to target-language subtitles, to English subtitles is borrowed from the Bininj Kunwok course (Bininj Kunwok Project, 2019). The dialogue is then presented line by line, both written and recorded. Participants are asked to assume the role of each interlocutor: first by playing the recordings of the odd lines and providing the even lines themselves, then playing the recordings of the even lines and providing the odd lines. I adapted this task from Rocket Languages' Chinese and Japanese courses (Libros Media Ltd, 2019). The page finishes with the entire text of the dialogue written in both Kriol and English. In this one activity, then, there is opportunity for listening, reading, speaking, and writing practice.

Finally, the course is presented in a conversational, personalised tone, addressing the participant directly with first-person plural and second-person pronouns. Using personalised forms of address, according to research by Ginns, Martin, and Marsh (2013), not only comes across as friendlier on the part of the educator, but also makes learning seem easier and improves learning outcomes.

6. Conclusion

After two and a half years of development, the Kriol course remains a work in progress. Perhaps optimistically, I expect to finish compiling the resources that I already have available to me into Moodle before the end of 2019. Beyond that, though, there are still recordings that need to be made, sections that people with more expertise should write, and editing, testing, approval, and publishing processes to go. This is a long and daunting process, but the work is fun and—more importantly—has real potential to support improved cross-cultural communication in Kriol-speaking communities like Ngukurr.

Finally, I have found this process to be excellent preparation for writing an Honours thesis. Working independently on a large-scale project has required the skill of breaking down larger goals into many smaller goals. If the sub-goals are small enough, every session of work then carries a sense of progress and accomplishment. I have found this to be crucial for self-motivation during Honours. Developing the contacts and networks necessary for the creation of the Kriol course has also been invaluable. I thoroughly encourage other undergraduate students and the staff supporting them to seek out and embrace opportunities to use their studies to engage with the wider community, and develop these independent research skills at an early stage in their studies.

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