



TALKING LANGUAGE

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY ROGER STITSON

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This study guide contains a range of class activities relevant to each specific episode. There are also episode synopses at the beginning of each section. The activities on each episode are in self-contained sections throughout the study guide. Later in the study guide there is a section devoted to a general conclusion to the entire series. There is also a dedicated Media Studies section of activities relevant to the construction, purposes and outcomes of the series. This section may also be applied to individual episodes.

Series Synopsis

Talking Language, presented by Ernie Dingo, is a personal journey providing a unique understanding of how knowledge of Aboriginal languages is shaped by ancestral connections to the land, stars, water, sea and the air we breathe.

Ernie visits six people from across Australia whose stories of a spiritual connection to country highlight some of the benefits and current challenges people face to maintain, revive and create languages within their communities.

Throughout his journey Ernie explores the complex balance between language, stories and relationship to country. Importantly, he discovers how these relationships have been affected by a different type of relationship to country that has come to bear since European colonisation and development – a relationship that exists in ignorance of the sacred lore and customs that nourish Aboriginal languages.

Ernie's quest reveals a diversity of language that has a direct connection to how Aboriginal people listen, understand and speak to country. In return, country speaks to them. This raises an important question that each person

Ernie visits must answer: what is the future of Aboriginal languages in their community?

CURRICULUM LINKS

This study guide is mainly aimed at middle and upper-secondary school levels, with relevance to English, Australian History, Geography, Indigenous Studies, Language Studies, Sustainability, Interpersonal Development, Personal Learning, Cultural Studies, Ethics and Philosophy and Media Studies.

CREDITS

Made by CAAMA Productions for Imparja Television.

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Banduk Marika

Synopsis

Ernie visits an old friend Banduk Marika in Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land. She is one of 6000–7000 people who speak one or more of the many Yolngu languages in the region. Banduk lived and worked outside her community for many years and is a well-known Yolngu visual artist fluent in several languages.

Banduk guides Ernie towards an understanding of the relationship between the ancestral knowledge found in the local environment and the importance of the oral language on the creation and maintenance of local histories, her art and, ultimately, Yolngu identity.

Themes, topics and issues

- First, for geographical perspective, draw an accurate scale map of the northern region of the Northern Territory, including the nearby islands. Mark and label the general region of north-east Arnhem Land, Yirrkala (the Indigenous community settlement), the nearby town of Nhulunbuy, and Bremer Island. Also label the Territory's capital city, Darwin. Mark the area that shows the extent of the Yolngu nation. You may also wish to draw an enlarged map of the region regarded as Yolngu homeland. Mark the location of Port Bradshaw. Find out the Yolngu name for Port Bradshaw, mentioned during the program, and add it in brackets. Include a short explanation of the cultural and historical importance of this place to the Yolngu people.
- Carry out research and then write a summarised history of the Yolngu people of the region as shown during this episode, looking at their relationship with the Makassan traders (alternative spelling: Macassan), and with later Anglo-European settlers. Include reference to Christian missionaries, and land rights and mining in the Nhulunbuy region.
- From the program and elsewhere, plan and write a short description of the life and work of Banduk Marika. Explain why, for example, she took up traditional forms of painting, and what those paintings represent.
- Describe and comment upon the reasons for and the importance of the short ceremonial greeting that

Banduk Marika gives to Ernie, and to the ancestors of the land, when she and Ernie visit the beach site of the creation of her people's nation (near Port Bradshaw).

- Discuss in class and then write your own account of what you think Banduk Marika demonstrates and teaches Ernie Dingo during the episode. Ensure you refer to the traditional ways of 'caring for country', with specific examples from the program. What kinds of lessons does she say are, and should be, taught to Indigenous children, and why? Comment on the central role of oral language in these learning experiences.
- View the sequence in which Ernie is shown talking to a group of children playing basketball. In what way is this sequence relevant to the issues raised throughout the rest of the episode? For example, at the end of the sequence, Ernie comments about the children's behaviour that, 'That's sad, eh?' Why is he saddened at what he's just seen and heard?
- Following from the previous activities, you may wish to view the Australian feature film *Satellite Boy* (Catriona McKenzie, 2012). Discuss in class then write a commentary about the ways in which *Satellite Boy* approaches similar themes of Indigenous history, learning, culture and language for contemporary times and contemporary children to those presented in this episode of *Talking Language*. (Note that there is an ATOM study guide on *Satellite Boy*.)





Tom Trevorror

Synopsis

Ernie travels to the Coorong in South Australia to meet Ngarrindjeri elder Tom Trevorror. Ngarrindjeri is a revival language with more than 250 speakers. Tom traces the impact that missionary and colonial history – along with environmental changes in the Coorong’s ecosystem – has had on the survival of the Ngarrindjeri language and culture.

A sudden turn in the story forces Ernie to reflect on the circle of creation that weaves new life. Finally, he understands the significance of the many generations that have fought to maintain and share the language and culture of the Ngarrindjeri people and why it is important to continue the journey.

Themes, topics and issues

- Draw an accurate scale map of the coastal region of South Australia, incorporating the homeland area of the Ngarrindjeri nation. Mark and label this area. For geographical perspective, extend the map to include the capital city of Adelaide. Label the position of Raukkan (also known as Point McLeay), the Coorong lagoons and the flow of the Murray River as it approaches the coastal wetlands. Find out what the Ngarrindjeri word ‘raukkan’ actually means in English and include it in brackets on the map. You may also wish to draw and label an enlarged map of the Coorong and Lake Alexandrina. (See ‘The Coorong’ in website references for Episode 2.)
- Carry out research then write a short account of Ngarrindjeri history and culture, looking at the effect of European contact in the early nineteenth century (e.g. whaling) and European colonialism and settlement.
- From the episode and further research, explain why Reverend George Taplin is considered a significant figure

in the history and language of the Ngarrindjeri people. Add a short account of Taplin’s life and work. (See ‘George Taplin’ in website references for Episode 2.)

- During Tom Trevorror’s discussion with Ernie Dingo about George Taplin’s book of Ngarrindjeri language, Tom says that men such as David Unaipon, who was born at Raukkan (also known as the Point McLeay Mission), followed in Taplin’s footsteps. Carry out some research about David Unaipon and write a short commentary on his life and work. One point you may wish to discuss is the extent of racism Unaipon may have experienced and whether this inhibited his life work. Also comment on why you think he is depicted on the \$50 Australian note.
- Explain why the Ngarrindjeri language is not fully known today, and the steps that Ngarrindjeri elders such as Tom Trevorror have taken to reclaim and ‘revive’ as much of the language as possible.
- In speaking about the natural environment, and how to live within it and draw sustenance from it, Tom teaches and maintains the lesson that, ‘If you take more than what you need, *everyone* gonna get punished!’ Explain what you think he means. Why and how might *everyone* be somehow punished by the actions or behaviour of one? Discuss whether this concept, or belief, might be applied to a wider context of civilised and socialised behaviour, perhaps to all of us throughout the land.
- From the previous discussion, plan and write a short fiction story based on Tom’s words, ‘If you take more than what you need, *everyone* gonna get punished!’ You may present it as a fable, a story for children or a contemporary drama.
- Listen to Ernie Dingo’s comments on what he has learnt from Tom Trevorror’s teachings, his life’s work and his passing, then discuss and write an account of what you have learnt from viewing this episode.



Vicki Couzens

Synopsis

European colonisation had a devastating impact on the numerous language groups in the state of Victoria. This episode, Ernie travels to Melbourne to meet Vicki Couzens, descendant of the Gunditjmara and Kirrae Whurrong clans located in the western districts of Victoria. Vicki is dedicated to language revival and shows Ernie the importance that museums and archival material play in reinvigorating language, culture and the relationship to country for her community.

Travelling to her country, Vicki shows Ernie how bringing back the knowledge of language into the country and the community is the most important aspect of reviving language and the sacred traditions of her ancestors.



Themes, topics and issues

- Draw an accurate scale map of south-western Victoria, extending westward to the South Australian border, and eastward as far as Melbourne. On the map, mark and label the Gunditjmara country, and show the location of Melbourne. Label Warrnambool, and trace the flow of the Hopkins River. Mark the location of Hopkins Falls. Offshore, mark and label the position of Deen Maar Island, adding its English name in brackets.
- At the beginning of the episode Vicki Couzens shows Ernie Dingo a possum-skin cloak, held at the Melbourne Museum. Comment on the cultural and historical significance of what this artefact represents. Describe the types of markings made in the various stitched panels of the cloak and explain what they mean.
- Explain Vicki's comment that Indigenous language and culture is not 'lost' but 'sleeping'. You may wish to discuss in class the possibilities to be drawn from this observation as preparation for writing a short fiction story.
- During the episode Vicki, and Ernie speak to Dr Christina Eira of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages about some archival research she is carrying

out on the observational writings of William Thomas. What do you think is the significance of this sequence in the program? (See 'Marngrook' in website references for this episode.)

- Following from the previous discussion, carry out some research and then write a short account of the objectives and work of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, for which Christina Eira works. (See 'Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages' in website references for this episode. Also see 'Language revival in Australia' in website references, general background for the series.)
- Write your own account of the reasons and arguments offered by Vicki Couzens as to the importance and necessity of Indigenous Australian language revival. Explain why she maintains that simply learning the words that constitute Indigenous language and dialect is not enough. What else is required, and why?
- Explain the significance to the Gunditjmara people of the Hopkins Falls, and the connection drawn between the Gunditjmara and the seasonal migrations of the eels that inhabit the river. What is the Indigenous name given to the Falls, as described by Vicki, and what does the name mean when translated to English? (For more, see 'Hopkins Falls' in website references for this episode.)
- Describe the purpose of the language lessons that Vicki gives to the rangers (and to Ernie) at the Tyrendarra property, later in the episode.
- Explain the cultural significance of Deen Maar Island (Lady Julia Percy Island) to the Gunditjmara people. (See 'Deen Maar Island' in website references for this episode.) Arising from the Dreaming mythology and its contemporary significance, plan and write a short fiction story in which the island, or what it represents, is an important narrative element.
- Discuss what you have learnt from viewing this episode.





Margaret Kemarre (MK) Turner

Synopsis

Ernie travels north-east of Alice Springs to Harts Range in the Northern Territory to meet MK Turner. Aunty Margaret is one of over 500 speakers of the Arrernte language, but is one of only a handful of people who speaks what she calls ‘the Eastern Arrernte old language’. MK’s son Raymond (Shorty) Webb shares a men’s dreaming story with Ernie at a local rockhole, while MK shows Ernie how to collect some bush medicine.

In Alice Springs MK and Ernie share some important tips on desert sign language. MK also teaches Arrernte and non-Indigenous primary school children her language. MK believes teaching young children is an important way to keep her language and culture growing for future generations. For Ernie the opportunity to be with MK provides a rare opportunity to hear, see, feel and understand the language of her country.

Themes, topics and issues

- Draw an accurate scale map of the Northern Territory. For perspective, indicate and label the positions of Alice Springs and Darwin. Show the location of Atitjere, north-east of Alice Springs. Include in brackets the English name by which Atitjere is known (Harts Range). Mark and label the general region regarded as Indigenous Arrernte country. You may wish to draw and label an enlarged map of the Arrernte region.
- Carry out further research about the life and work of Margaret Kemarre Turner (see ‘MK Turner’ in website references for Episode 4). First, write an account of her childhood and upbringing – her life growing up with her parents. Next, write a short account of what her book, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye: What it Means to be an Aboriginal Person*, is about. If you have read the book, you may consider discussing in class and writing a review of it for a wider audience (see the book references section of this study guide).
- During the episode, MK’s son Shorty takes Ernie Dingo out to his grandfather’s country, where Shorty is now the custodian of the site. Comment on what Ernie, and

we, learn about the site and the lives of the people who inhabited it from this extract of the program.

- When Shorty tells Ernie the story of how his grandfather found a wife, Ernie remarks that Shorty has narrated it in the form of a ‘Dreamtime’ story. Discuss what you think he means by this. In what way does it seem to be a mythic Dreamtime tale? Discuss the possible reactions to the story if it were retold to an audience in a more contemporary and realistic fashion.
- Describe what we learn about bush resources and the medicinal powers and characteristics of Indigenous Australian flora during the sequence in which MK Turner takes Ernie out into the bush. Carry out some further research about the medicinal properties and traditional Indigenous uses of a range of other Australian flora, that most of us may not normally be aware of. Consider presenting your findings as an illustrated poster display. (See ‘Bush Medicine’ in website references for Episode 4.)
- Comment on the reasons MK offers for why she believes that Indigenous children and their parents are being ‘driven away’ from speaking their own languages.
- MK says that she told her own children, ‘You speak English when you’re at school. When you come home you talk your language.’ Why do you think she insists on this rule? Do you agree with it? Comment on the possible outcomes and consequences of this learning procedure.
- Towards the end of the episode MK says, ‘Language is part of us, and part of the land, part of the trees, part of the place where you live and come from’. Drawing on her words, compose a poem or plan and write a short fiction story.





Pansy Cheedy

Synopsis

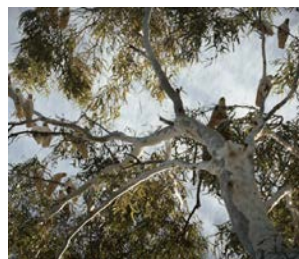
Ernie travels to Roebourne community to meet Pansy Cheedy, one of over 300 Yindjibarndi speakers in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. Yindjibarndi is a living language and Pansy explains to Ernie the diversity of languages in her region and the strength and challenges that come from being the last generation of language speakers who know the depth of the old language and its tradition.

Ernie visits the local radio station and archiving project to learn how language is maintained and preserved in Roebourne. According to Pansy, the largest impact on the survival of language and culture in her country is from mining. Ernie realises the importance of keeping the language and law of the land safe for current and future generations of Yindjibarndi speakers.

Themes, topics and issues

- Draw an accurate scale map of the north-western part of Western Australia. Show the region regarded as Yindjibarndi land and label the town of Roebourne. In brackets, add the Aboriginal name for the town, as spoken by Pansy Cheedy early in the episode (Ieramargadu). Also label Broome, Port Hedland, Karratha, and mark the general area known as the Pilbara (or, in this case, the western part of the Pilbara). Carry out further research and add a brief history of Roebourne to accompany the map.
- Comment on Pansy's childhood and upbringing, and the effects of being taken from her home – along with other Indigenous children – to attend school in Roebourne.
- Following from the previous activity, you may wish to plan and write a short fiction story, drawing in any way you consider appropriate, on Pansy's experiences.

- From the episode and the additional website links, write a commentary on the legacy and importance of Pansy's late father, Ned Cheedy, to the language, law and culture of the Yindjibarndi populace of the general Roebourne area. (See 'Ned Cheedy' in website references for this episode.)
- View the sequence in this episode where Ernie Dingo speaks to Tootsie Daniels at the Roebourne community radio station. Discuss the broadcasting work she and her Yindjibarndi colleagues at the radio station carry out, and its relevance and importance to the wider listening community.
- Describe the importance of the work carried out by Joanne Pritchard of the Juluwarlu Archiving Project in Roebourne. Ensure you comment on the special relevance of the contents of aural recordings. For example, what can be learnt and retained from them in terms of language usage? (Note that Joanne also features in an ABC radio interview about Ned Cheedy – see the third-listed website link in this episode's site references for 'Ned Cheedy'.)
- Examine the scene in which Pansy takes Ernie out into the bush for a 'welcome to country' ceremony. Describe the events and gestures of the ceremony and what those events and gestures symbolise and mean.
- View the sequence in which there are references to the mining operations in and around traditional Yindjibarndi land. From the episode and other relevant sources, discuss the impact to Indigenous law, ceremony, language, songlines, culture and history, of mining operations in the western Pilbara. You may wish to include information about the type and extent of mining, and whether there has been significant change to the landscape. Has the mining industry provided any benefits and advantages to the Indigenous populace? Present your discussions and findings as a newspaper report, and include maps and illustrations as required. Edit and format with headlines, captions and columns using desktop publishing software.
- Comment on Ernie Dingo's final words in the episode. Why, for example, does he strike a note of optimism for the future of the Yindjibarndi?



Bill Harney



Synopsis

In this final episode Ernie travels 200 kilometres west of Katherine in the Northern Territory to visit Wardaman elder Bill Harney. Between eighty and 100 people speak and understand the Wardaman language. Bill is the last fully initiated lawman of his country and is one of only eight speakers who know the old language.

Ernie explores the country of Bill's birth and hears the stories of first contact, traditional language boundaries and the creation stories that connect the night sky with the law and language of the land. Bill reminds Ernie of a 'proper bush gentleman', and it is through his generosity and deep cultural awareness that Ernie finds a special place of understanding and knowledge.

Themes, topics and issues

- Draw an accurate scale map of the Northern Territory, showing the location of Wardaman land. Mark and label the positions of Katherine and Mennggen Station. For geographic perspective, label the capital city, Darwin. (Note that an on-screen map appears at roughly the four-minute point of the episode.)
- View the sequence in which Bill Harney performs a 'welcome to country' ceremony for Ernie Dingo, a 'stranger' to the land. Comment on the significance of each of the various elements of the ceremony that are undertaken, and the overall purpose.
- Bill narrates an 'important story' to Ernie about the events that took place when a group of white explorers first entered the land, in an unnamed year during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Listen to the story and then discuss why Bill considers it important.



- The power and significance of oral storytelling is an important aspect of Bill's cultural makeup. Explain his Dreaming tale of the goanna and the water rat.
- Following from the previous discussion, view the sequence in which Bill speaks about the meanings inherent in the stars of the night sky. Drawing on the Dreaming story he tells about the 'Bowinin', or Milky Way constellation, comment on what the stars mean to Indigenous peoples living in country and within bush culture, and why particular stars are associated with the animal world below.

Note that a newspaper journal article about the teaching of Australian 'Indigenous astronomy' to students in the Pilbara is included in this study guide. See the item by Andi Horvath listed in books references. It includes an illustrated extract on 'How to find the Emu in the sky', mentioned by Bill Harney during this episode.

- Plan and write a short story or poem in which you draw, in any way appropriate, from the sequences relating to traditional oral narrative (see the previous two activities). For example, you might tell a story about one or more characters who travel at night by 'reading' the stars as though they were part of 'a map in the night', or you might tell a story about the night-sky creatures in the style of a Dreaming myth, with illustrations included.
- Comment on what Bill was taught by his mother about how to ensure that a newborn baby might grow up healthy, 'strong and straight'.
- Discuss the reasons given by Bill as to why the Indigenous culture, law, Dreaming and history in his region is under threat of dying. Why does he refer specifically to children's attraction to 'cartoons' on TV, and to 'Walkmans'? What is the significance of his joking observation that today, 'There are more whitefellas blowing the didgeridoo than blackfella does'?
- From your viewing of the previous episodes in this series, discuss how the problems Bill speaks of – the dwindling nature of his culture – might be addressed and perhaps redressed. Could, for example, the 'cartoons' and the 'Walkmans' that Bill refers to actually be employed to advantage in some way?
- Write a commentary on what you have learnt or newly appreciated from this episode on Ernie's time spent with Bill?



Conclusions

- We are informed in the series synopsis (see first section of this study guide) that the series is a 'personal journey'. In what way – or ways – might this be an accurate statement of the series? (Note that you will find questions about Ernie Dingo's role throughout the series in the next section, on Media Studies.)
- As we have seen throughout every episode in this series, the maintaining, restoration and revival of cultural heritage, history and language are important to a sense of individual and group identity. Discuss whether what we have witnessed throughout the series is adequate, or can be developed further, within a larger culture where English is a predominant force. For example, argue whether or not all children throughout Australia should be taught aspects of their own regional Indigenous Aboriginal culture, beliefs, bush lore (including relationships to land, environment and bush medicine) and language.
- Following from the previous discussion, discuss the relevance of the maintenance of cultural connections and language to your own family background. If your family background derives from elsewhere in the world, for example, comment on how it is sustained in your own life. Is there, or has there been, an educational role played by the elders in your own family towards sustaining and replenishing the elements that define your history in a rapidly changing world.
- Overall, what have you learnt from this series? Offer some examples of your observations and opinions from your viewing of the series.

Media studies

CARRY OUT THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES

- Discuss why the producers considered 'Talking Language' to be a suitable title for the series. If you were asked to give the series an alternative title, what would you call it and why? What might be the intended

viewing audience for the series? Do you think the series reaches out to a broad mass of people, or is it intended more for an Indigenous Australian audience?

- The same introductory sequence is seen at the beginning of all six episodes. Analyse and discuss the purpose, content and style of this sequence, explaining what you think it is suggesting to us about the rest of the content. Comment on the role played by Ernie Dingo in the introductory sequence and throughout each episode. Why do you think he was chosen as presenter? What does he bring to our appreciation and understanding of the program? How would you define his on-screen persona? Comment on whether it suits the purpose and intention of the series. Look, for example, at the way he interacts with the interviewee subjects in each episode, his on-screen personality and behaviour, and even the consistency of the way he is dressed throughout.
- Despite the differences in location and on-camera interviewee subject, each episode follows the same constructed narrative. Comment on how this is achieved and the intentions of this form of repetition.
- In each episode there are many elements that are inserted into the general narrative. Drawing on examples, comment on the purpose and effectiveness of characteristics such as lingering and extended shots, and time-lapse filming, of natural phenomena (sky, stars, clouds, water, wind, trees etc). Also examine the role of the accompanying soundtrack music during these sequences. What, for example, does the music bring to your viewing experience?
- In pairs plan, write, record and edit a 30- or 60-second promotional radio advertisement for the series. Consider how you will use the element of sound, in terms of music, sound effects, participants' dialogue and voiceover narration. Ensure you select an approach and style designed to attract a particular audience.
- Write a review in 250–300 words of the series, or of one of the episodes, for the weekly TV liftout section of a newspaper.





References and further resources

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- George Taplin (ed.), *The Folklore, Manners, Customs, and Languages of the South Australian Aborigines: Gathered from Inquiries Made by Authority of South Australian Government*, 1879; republished by Kenneth Romanis, Bridgewater, SA, 1989.
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Film and TV

Catriona McKenzie, *Satellite Boy*, Satellite Films and ABC, 2012.

(A contemporary Indigenous boy in the Northern Territory goes in search of his cultural heritage and identity.)

Interactive comic book

NEOMAD (Futuristic fantasy about 'Country', produced by Yijala Yala Project, involving collaboration between comic book artist Sutu, filmmaker Benjamin Ducroz, and thirty Indigenous children from Roebourne), 2013. (Note: available in interactive format for iPad, and in hard copy. ATOM study guide on NEOMAD is also available. Also see website references for Episode 5.)

Websites

General background

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Episode 1: Banduk Marika

Makassan traders:

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Episode 4: Margaret Kemarre (MK) Turner

Bush medicine:

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Episode 5: Pansy Cheedy

Ned Cheedy:

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NEOMAD:

<<http://www.yijalayala.bighart.org/neomad/>>, accessed 13 January, 2014.

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Roebourne (includes links):

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