



Sound move ... a young Warramiri language speaker from the Northern Territory who took part in the literacy program.

Ancient path to universal language

By SARAH PRICE

A NEW program designed to preserve traditional languages is set to improve literacy rates in Aboriginal communities.

The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation believes committing the oral languages to paper will help indigenous Australians with their English language skills.

Foundation founder Mary-Ruth Mendel said the indigenous languages needed to be converted from oral formats into the written word.

"It's needed for the preservation of the language and to bring the language into the space of a living language again because, as the elders pass on, the knowledge and understanding . . . are passing with them," Mrs Mendel said.

Warramiri language speakers from Gawa, on Elcho Island in the Northern Territory, had

already undertaken the foundation's first-language and literacy course.

Mrs Mendel said the initiative to preserve traditional languages would help with English literacy rates because a beginner reader, no matter the language, needed to connect speech sounds with words in print.

"Any early or beginner reader needs to connect their speech sounds and have an understanding of speech sounds with what's in print," she said.

Forty-four per cent of Australian adults have poor literacy skills, a UNESCO International Adult Literacy Survey found.

About 12 per cent of 15 year-old students in Australia are not able to do basic reading tasks.

The foundation is hosting a celebrity chef fund-raising dinner at the Shangri-La Hotel in Sydney on September 20. You can email aln@bigpond.net.au for tickets to the dinner.