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LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SCHOOLS :
SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS
FOR SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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The purpose of this paper is to help the practitioner in multilingual environments by making him or her aware of the need to establish a sound operational base from which to work before agonizing over the practicalities of the implementation stage. In essence, the paper seeks to show teachers that much of what is successful today in terms of school-based curriculum development is, in fact, grounded in theory: theory that is readily understood and useful to educators working in a variety of contexts.

Today, in the Torres Strait, the schooling process appears to be widening the educational gap between white Queenslanders and their Islander counterparts.¹ Teachers as curriculum developers, along with parliamentary heads and state education department dignitaries, must realize that problems of this kind can be grappled with initially only from within the geographical context. In other words, the problems of the oppressed must be solved by the oppressed who, first of all, need to understand their position and then transform it. But if problem transformation is going to take place from the inside, as has been suggested already, then it must include an examination of the role of the school for, according to Raskin²:

the school's long term effect is to create a consciousness amongst many that will stimulate the need for decolonization and reconstruction.

More specifically, any investigation into possible alternatives in Islander schooling must start with an acceptance of the need for curricula to be more culturally relevant: relevant in terms of priorities set by the Islanders themselves. Research carried out by Orr and Williamson³ would suggest that an initial focus upon an alternative in the language of instruction in Torres Strait primary schools could well be the pivot for a much wider

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scholastic transformation in the future. In fact, this study seems to suggest that Islander children would be better equipped to cope with formal schooling if they were taught first in an Islander language or Pidgin. The logic of such a statement is supported when one considers, for example, that many Islander clergy use Pidgin in order to teach effectively when conducting religious instruction classes in schools.⁴ This increased effectiveness in communication is not only limited to Islanders but also extends to white teachers who have learned to speak the local Islander languages. For instance, teachers at the primary school on St Pauls Island have taught Grade 1 students in Pidgin for the first six months, and in a mixture of Pidgin and English for the rest of the year. In the second grade some Pidgin was used, although English became the predominant medium by the latter part of the year.

Despite such experimentation, many leading Islander personnel accept the inevitability of English in schools but, in terms of ethnic equivalence with many Aboriginal communities in particular, they would like to see, within a decade, the introduction of a local language as the language of instruction in formal schooling. Mr John Clark⁵ has argued that many Islander teachers surreptitiously use Pidgin and even Islander language in order to communicate with students, particularly when attempts to do so in English have failed. In fact, when a number of Islander teachers from schools visited by the writer were questioned on the frequency of this procedure, those in charge of lower primary grades said that it occurred up to 50% of the time.⁶ Further investigations in schools found that many Islander teachers took problems to Islander colleagues on staff and not to their white principal.⁷ This, of course, enabled the teachers to converse in Pidgin, thereby minimizing frustration and uncertainty. When questioning a number of Murray Islanders, Orr and Williamson⁸ found that, in terms of an instructional language, they all gave English as their first choice but each wanted Eastern Islander to be included somewhere in the instructional process.

Because the English language has monopolized instruction in Islander schools, it can be asserted that Islander children have not mastered the dual heritage of Islander and Western cultures. In fact, the current language structure in schools appears to be destroying an Islander's intent to preserve his ethnic background. As well, the above-mentioned situational occurrences suggest that the exclusive use of the English language as the medium of instruction in Torres Strait primary schools is at least one social phenomenon leading to the decline of Islander identity, and certainly such a monopoly directly inhibits their exposure to democratic alternatives.

POSSIBLE LANGUAGE POLICIES

The alternative policies which might be implemented are:

1. That children entering school for the first time be taught initially in the Islander language of the area. An optimum program, according to Orr and Williamson⁹, would be:

Pre-school	Islander only
Year 1	Islander only
Years 2 and 3	Instruction in Islander with English taught as a foreign language
Year 4 +	English entirely

The implementation of this particular program would involve:

- a) the printing of literary and some other teaching materials in the two Islander languages¹⁰; and
- b) the training or retraining of all teachers in charge of the second and third grades in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

The disadvantages on the other hand are essentially twofold and they need to be examined in order to view this language policy in true perspective. First, the cost of the total publication routine would be proportionately greater than is customary with school requisites, because the number of children in each language group is relatively small. Nevertheless, the high cost in some way could be offset by the fact that neither the extent nor the complexity of such material would be very great since only the first three grades would be involved. Understandably, the second problem relates to the decrease in transfers for Islander teachers, but such a limitation inhibits only professional involvement and that, of course, is confined to those in charge of pre-school classes along with those teachers responsible for Grades 1 to 3.

2. The second language policy for Islander children would follow the structure of the previous scheme but here all communication would be in Pidgin. The rationale for using Ap-ne-ap (Pidgin) is that it has a substantial admixture of English words and phrases but, more particularly, the language is

Melanesian in its basic structure and ethos.¹¹ The field research by the author showed that, on Thursday Island, Pidgin is the universal medium and it is also widely used on Yorke, Yam and Darnley Islands.¹² In essence, it is everywhere more common among the younger generation, and even adults who address one another in their own language invariably switch to Pidgin when speaking to children.

In terms of advantages, the cost of the publishing program would be close to half that for the previous policy, and there would be no limit to the free movement of teachers throughout the entire region.¹³ Nevertheless, as in ¹ above, there are reasons put forward by Queensland lay-folk for the abandonment of Pidgin in any Islander school program. Because of imposed limitations these cannot be elaborated upon here, but the reasons for objecting to the use of Islander tongues or Pidgin as languages of instruction in the schools are only occasionally the real ones. A far too common basis for protest is the general unwillingness of white Australians to learn and use a foreign language.¹⁴ Schooling, however, must be provided for the benefit of the recipients as a first consideration, and the question of employment of teachers and other allied issues must be of lesser significance.

IDEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR A PROPOSED TORRES STRAIT LANGUAGE STRUCTURE: THE IDEAS BEHIND TEACHER PRACTICE

Having stated above what the alternative instructional languages are, it is the writer's intention in this section to show that one or both of the policies could be operationalized in future by school authorities and teachers as curriculum developers, if both were prepared to accept the dictates of an ideological amalgam. The ideological 'mix' reflects the positions of both the cultural-pluralist and the assimilationist ideologies, yet avoids their extremes.¹⁵ Such a synthesis would be located near the centre of a continuum which has the cultural-pluralist and the assimilationist ideologies at its limits. The emergent belief system could well be called the pluralist-assimilationist ideology and it appears to be very much in keeping with the realities and needs of Islander life.

Nevertheless, this ideological platform has never been a dominant force within countries whose populations are racially varied.¹⁶ A prime reason for this is that it is less developed theoretically and practically than either of the two 'pure' ideological positions. Yet there are proponents of the pluralist-assimilationist outlook who make a number of assumptions about the nature of ethnic

communities, the goals they espouse, and the peculiarities that ought to be symbolized in schools. This is exemplified by the orthodox Jews, who argue that the cultural-pluralist exaggerates the importance of the ethnic group in the socialization of individuals, and that the assimilationist greatly understates the role of ethnic groups in a multi-cultural society.¹⁷ Therefore, the pluralist-assimilationist ideology counteracts any distortion that may be emanated from either of the two polarized ideologies. Hence, the writer agrees with Banks,¹⁸ who stipulates that:

The pluralist-assimilationist proponent assumes that while the ethnic group and ethnic community are very important in the socialization of individuals, individuals are strongly influenced by the common culture during their early socialization even if they never leave the ethnic community.

In the light of this statement, it would be fair to say that the common Australian culture influences nearly every member of its society through such institutions as the school, the mass media and the law courts. Thus, the *practical* outcome of this acculturation phase for a pluralist-assimilationist supporter is that, while ethnic groups have some unique cultural characteristics, all people in Australia today share many cultural traits and it can be predicted that, as more members of ethnic groups become more pluralistically aware, ethnicity will become less important nationally but will not disappear because, according to Gordon,¹⁹

many ethnic group members who are culturally quite assimilated still maintain separate ethnic institutions and symbols.

Moreover, the pluralist-assimilationist supporter sees neither separatism (as the pluralist does), nor total integration (as the assimilationist does), as ideal societal goals. Rather, he envisions an 'open society' in the Karl Popper²⁰ mould, in which individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, and social class groups have equal opportunities to function and participate. In this particular concept individuals can take full advantage of the opportunities and rewards within all social, economic and political institutions without regard to their ancestry or ethnic identity.²¹ Thus, in the multi-ethnic open society envisioned by the proponents of this ideological amalgam, individuals would also be able to maintain their ethnic languages and, taking this democratic openness even further, they would be able to participate within the common culture as well as within and across other ethnic cultures.²²

Because of their perceptions of the nature of multicultural societies and their vision of the 'ideal' society, the proponents²³ of the pluralist-assimilationist ideology believe that the primary goal of any language reform program should be to help children learn how to function more effectively within their own ethnic culture, within the wider common culture, and within other ethnic communities. Thus, the language or languages selected for use in Torres Strait schools would, according to the dictates of this ideological amalgam, make for better clarification of Islander identity, and reduce the degree of alienation²⁴ that at present 'separates' the student from the school community. Hence, the pluralist-assimilationist ideology is the operationalizing mechanism for language reform because it is the ideological structure that:

- a) acknowledges the ethnic and wider interest of the student;
- b) indicates how positive implementation can be made of such recognition; and
- c) attempts to grapple with the old problem of how an individual functions within two cultures which sometimes have contradictory and conflicting norms, values and expectations.

In summary then, the current practice of teaching Torres Strait Islanders exclusively in English tends to negate the ethnic identity and democratic opportunity of the students involved. Acceptance of the pluralist-assimilationist ideology by school-based curriculum developers would probably give all languages equal exposure and much-needed recognition, but how does ideology actually influence such people? One way for the proponents of the pluralist-assimilationist ideology has been to launch some extremely popular policies which have been widely publicized. Such supporters as mentioned earlier²⁵ explain in detail what it is exactly that the ideological amalgam subscribes to, how it originated, and how its various components in application benefit minority students.

Hence, language reform in Islander schools can now be tied to and implemented through this ideological construct, and the extent of the acceptance of such a construct will be determined by the measure in which people try to understand its basic components as they relate to language instruction in the above-mentioned schools.

With such knowledge and understanding in the hands of all decision makers, teachers, and school-based curricularists, the pluralist-assimilationist ideology stands a chance of gaining greater

acceptability. It is internally coherent and plausible ²⁶ and, at the moment, it is recognized by at least two identifiable groups in Australia - the Aborigines (in practice), and the Torres Strait Islanders (in theory). In essence, it is the ideology and not the incidental side issues of a language program that will act as a base for the operationalization of instructional (cum democratic) reform. It is hoped that government hierarchies and curriculum developers in Australia will realize that all ethnic groups are worthy of equal recognition and promulgation - for the parameters have already been predetermined:

Today there are tribes such as the Navajo, who number some 50,000 or so and who still retain a distinctive culture, though it bears plentiful marks of long years of contact with European settlers. There are tribes in the east which have completely disappeared or will soon do so.²⁷

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9. Ibid., (p.22)

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11. Orr and Williamson, op.cit., (p.23)
12. Orr, op.cit., (p.79)
13. The extent of such transfer does not appear in any case to be very great. In 1976 for instance, there were only two Eastern Islanders teaching outside their language area, and one Western Islander teaching outside his.
14. Orr and Williamson, op.cit., (p.25)
15. In terms of language parameters alone, the *assimilationist ideology* postulates that:
 - 1.1 ethnicity and ethnic languages are fleeting and temporary within an increasingly modernized world;
 - 1.2 strong attachments to ethnic languages are dysfunctional;
 - 1.3 ethnic languages are a force inimical to the goals of a democratic society;
 - 1.4 ethnic languages promote divisions;
 - 2.1 the school in all situations should take a position of benign neutrality in matters related to ethnic attachments and ethnic languages;
 - 2.2 ethnicity and ethnic languages are to be promoted by religious agencies or non-state schools; and
 - 3.1 language learning styles are universal across cultures.

As a practical outgrowth (4.1) of these components, assimilationist supporters argue that the language of instruction in schools must be the one normally used within the common or mainstream culture.

Alternatively, the major language postulates of *cultural-pluralism* are:

- 1.1 ethnicity and ethnic languages are integral components of a multicultural society;

- 1.2 ethnicity and ethnic languages are dependent for survival on a high level of commitment by group members;
- 1.3 ethnic languages provide the individual with a sense of identity and psychological support;
- 2.1 public institutions such as the school should actively promote ethnic languages in terms of policy and curricula;
- 2.2 educational goals should include a desire to help ethnic students function more successfully in their own environment; and
- 3.1 that learning styles are culture specific.

As a practical outgrowth (4.1) of the above listed ideological components, cultural-pluralist supporters argue that the language of instruction in schools should normally be that used by the ethnic group.

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