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Some Language-related Observations for Teachers in Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula Schools

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General remarks

Newly-graduated non-Indigenous teachers who go to remote Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula (CYP) schools may experience a range of difficulties. This paper makes some observations about one of them: the difficulty of teaching students whose first language is not English and for whom English may well be only one of several languages spoken. Moreover, none of these other languages belongs to the same Indo-European language family as English. The ramifications extend far beyond the intellectual recognition that language, normative modes of thinking and reasoning and social values are interwoven, mutually reinforcing and almost impossible to disentangle. Failure to understand that many student 'errors' in grammar and vocabulary choice across the curriculum are grammatical and lexical transfers from their own primary languages will force some teachers to confront stereotypes and prejudices of which they are largely unaware. As a result, some will fail to establish the necessary social bonds between themselves, their students and their new community. Rather than viewing initial misunderstandings as a problem, teachers should see them as a resource for achieving

better educational and personal outcomes for both students and teachers.

The days are long past when teachers could impose by fear and corporal punishment the use of English in the classroom, let alone in the playground and at home. In any event, the imposition of English in Torres Strait and CYP schools had an unintended consequence: many children adopted an English-based creole as their primary language which, within a generation or two, had gained speakers at the expense of the traditional languages. The creole, now termed variously Ailan Tok, Broken, Cape York Creole (Crowley and Rigsby, 1979), Pizin, Torres Strait Creole (Shnukal, 1988) or Yumpla Tok, is now either the first or second language of all but a handful of students. A useful lesson is that language engineering does not necessarily produce the outcomes originally envisaged and desired.

Recent policy and curriculum changes in Queensland state schools have introduced a more sophisticated approach to teaching of English through the medium of *genre*. While such changes are overdue, laudable and appropriate for native English-speaking students, we should question their effectiveness for students for whom English is a second language, who do not speak English at home, who have not formally been taught English structure and literary use at school, whose exposure to all written forms of English has been less than optimum

and whose own languages may lack certain English grammatical and generic forms (the product of over 1000 years of English literacy) or privilege others.

It should go without saying that Torres Strait and CYP parents are eager for their children to have the best education possible. To quote Revd Boggo Pilot: 'In our struggle against racism and other forms of discrimination and injustice, education is the key'. In 1937 better education was one of the chief demands made of the Queensland Government at the first Councillors' meeting on Masig (Yorke Island). Education and medical training were the three urgent requests made by Islander representatives to Governor Wilson (1943: 3-4) after the evacuation of Europeans in 1942. Passi's interviewees identified education as vital in enabling 'an Islander to develop his general culture, improve his social and political life, sort out facts from fiction, manage his resources efficiently, develop his sense of moral and social responsibility, to become a useful member in the Torres Strait island communities, and to raise his occupational status' (Passi, 1986: 90). The first Islander to gain a university degree was Mary Garnier from Puruma (Coconut Island), who became Sister Marietta AD and who graduated with a BSc from the University of Papua New Guinea in 1965. George Passi from Mer gained a Master's degree in Social Planning and Development from the University of Queensland in 1986 and Martin Nakata from Nagi/Thursday Island became the first Islander to obtain a PhD in Education in 1997. He is currently Director of the Aboriginal Research Institute at the University of South Australia.

'Good education' entails the teaching of 'good English'. Publication of the *National Policy on Languages* (Lo Bianco, 1987) may have marked the official end of monolingual Australia but English remains the major institutional language and *lingua franca* of Australia. It is the only home language of 79% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002) and knowledge of English is considered essential to national cohesiveness, inter-ethnic communication,

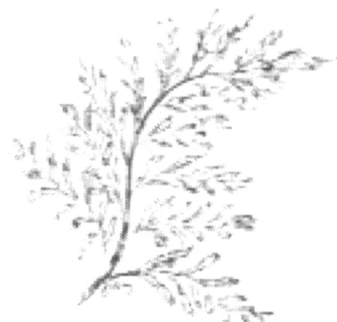
provision of equal rights and access to higher education. The doyen of Torres Strait Islander educators, Martin Nakata, spoke out publicly last year, echoing Fr Pilot by calling English 'the key to progress' for Indigenous communities (Nakata, 2001). While acknowledging the importance of maintaining Indigenous cultures and languages, he expressed frustration at a perceived resistance to promoting English literacy. He is quoted as saying:

Lack of English denies access to full participation in the life of the nation. It closes off higher education and employment in many workplaces. It denies access to information, the basis of the global economy. And still I sit and listen to argument after argument about why the English language is a dangerous thing for indigenous people and communities.

Despite the existence of so many educational and ideological hurdles, Torres Strait and CYP students have seized opportunities to achieve educational, artistic and sporting success (Shnukal, 2001: 28-31). They are increasingly studying at tertiary institutions in Australia and overseas and gaining not only undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, but valuable skills to contribute to the achievement of personal goals and the management of local communities.

Spoken vs written language

Torres Strait and Cape York Aboriginal traditional culture was transmitted not through written texts but 'through participation and experimentation' (Passi, 1986: 77). Highly specialised



environmental, socio-cultural, technological and ritual knowledge crucial to survival was taught by practical example and verbally, often as chant, like the Norse sagas and Homeric epics of other pre-literate societies¹. The first London Missionary Society school was opened on Erub (Darnley Island) in 1873, a government teacher was officially appointed to Mer (Murray Island) in 1891 and the larger islands had government teachers from the early 1900s. The *idea* of the written word has been pervasive for 130 years but it is still felt by many Islanders to be somewhat alien and very much part of the education domain. Writing is rarely anybody's first choice as medium of communication.

Most people in societies with a long history of literacy are not even aware of the many differences between spoken language and its written representation. For our purposes, the two most significant are:

- Spoken language is an instinctive faculty, 'hard wired' into each human being before birth. Provided there is no pathology and no withdrawal of the child from human contact, all children acquire language naturally and through progressive, well-documented stages.
- Written language is a system of symbols which has become conventional (sanctioned by usage) for a given language community and must be taught. Human beings do not acquire written language naturally and not all societies acquire it. Writing dates back only several thousand years, which makes it a comparatively recent phenomenon in the history of human intellectual development, and the majority of the world's societies were non-literate until recently. However, literacy has become both an index and icon of modernity, even though written language can represent only a small fraction of what actually goes on in any speech event. Like all skills, it must be taught, learned and practised. In a misguided attempt to save money and teacher time, education policy-makers once decided that simply surrounding children with books

would result in their 'soaking up' the skills of writing and reading. So much cheaper than paying teachers to teach. Of course there must be materials and the more the better, but by themselves they do not teach reading. Teachers teach reading and writing; children learn reading and writing by reading and writing; and the more they practise the better they become².

In Torres Strait and CYP schools, English is crucial to *all* subject-teaching. It is crucial also to assessment, being the medium through which teachers grade students' understanding of the subject matter, as well as assess their own successes or failures. In a report on literacy conducted by Jensen (1994), students told the investigators: 'When we try to write in English, it doesn't come out right.' Teachers were aware of their reluctance to ask for clarification or answer questions and confirmed that 'assessments often reflected poor literacy skills rather than knowledge of the subject'. The students realised that their English wasn't correct but, without explicit teaching of English, they were uncertain as to what errors they had made, why those particular errors, and how to correct them³.

Language and culture

Parallels exist between the ways human societies organise their experiences of the physical, social and cultural world (i.e. come to understand their environment and form their social and personal values) and the languages of those societies. Language (vocabulary, grammatical structure and metaphor), social organisation (kinship, clanship and their relationship to the resources of land and sea) and culture (behaviour, values and aspirations) are intertwined and interdependent, some scholars going so far as to claim that the forms of a language determine the ways in which its speakers observe and interpret the world. While that extreme view is probably unsustainable and the precise mechanisms linking language and culture remain undetermined, there is no denying the degree of interconnectedness, much of which is below the

level of conscious awareness. Unless we attempt to learn another language or live for some time in a country where English is not widely spoken, we are generally unaware of the linguistic foundation of our everyday lives. To learn another language is invariably to challenge our previous outlook and worldview, which had seemed so solid, so 'real', so uncontested (see also Lo Bianco *et al.*, 1999).

Language, therefore, is intimately implicated in teaching, whatever the subject matter and whether or not the teacher has any interest in language in general or English in particular. To add to the difficulties, several teaching generations have received little systematic formal English grammatical instruction and so lack the background understanding and technical vocabulary to discuss language structure and usage explicitly. In non-Anglophone countries, it is inconceivable that students would be permitted to graduate from high school without some formal grounding in the grammar of their language or consider themselves properly educated without it.

This is why teaching in a language matters *across the whole curriculum*. When teacher and students share a language, language is a given and everything truly important is agreed upon in advance. However, without a shared language, teachers and students find themselves adrift, constantly misinterpreting each other's motives, beginning to mistrust the knowledge bases they bring to the classroom and even their deepest held ideas of themselves as people.

Torres Strait and CYP are now part of Australia but were settled comparatively late (see Appendix I). The islands, originally inhabited by Melanesian peoples in waves of migration from coastal New Guinea, were annexed to the Colony of Queensland only in 1879, i.e. 100 years after Australia was first colonised by the British. Because of their remoteness and the lack of

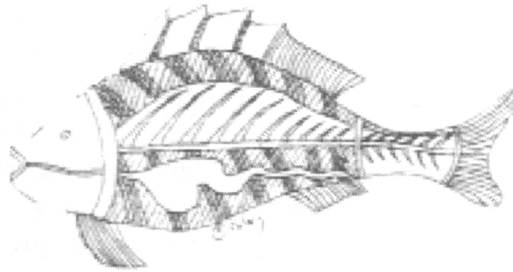
easily exploitable resources, the Islanders, despite many initial adjustments, were generally left alone to live on their traditional territories, maintain their traditional culture and govern themselves. The Aboriginal peoples of CYP also laboured in the fisheries but they were less fortunate in their post-contact history. From the early 1860s they experienced massacre and displacement, some individuals and clans being moved to missions, others coming together in c.1910 to establish Cowal Creek (now Injinoo), a settlement later recognised by the Government and Church (see Sharp, 1982). Bamaga itself came into existence only after World War II.

Thus, despite the fact that Islander, Cape York Aboriginal and European histories have converged in many ways, new teachers may experience the same kind of culture shock - and proceed through its well-known stages — as they would if they lived in a foreign country. They will not be the only ones: their students also experience culture shock, as they mix with and become more knowledgeable about

Europeans and mainstream Australian lifeways. The dislocation goes far deeper than language difficulties and has roots in cultural and familial dislocation. Bob Topping (1984:5), former Principal of Thursday Island State High School, pointed out that '[m]any students experience cultural adjustment problems, homesickness, unfamiliar curriculum and systems of knowledge that also make learning of all subjects difficult for the students.'

Regional language ecology

Originally two unrelated and mutually unintelligible traditional languages were spoken in Torres Strait: four dialects of an Australian mainland language in the western and central islands⁴; and two dialects of Meriam Mir (MM), a Papuan language, in the east. These two groups traded through established routes which led from the highlands of Papua New Guinea to Cape York and beyond,



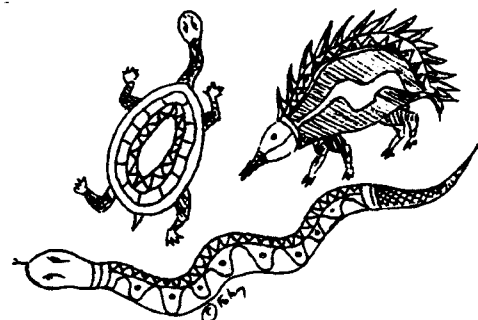
using the skills of a minority of bilingual speakers and a rich inventory of hand gestures.

The discovery of commercial quantities of *bêche-mer* and pearlshell from the 1860s brought into the region hundreds of disparate outsiders, who adopted Pacific Pidgin English as their common language (*lingua franca*). When, as also happened in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, this pidgin became the primary language of children in a Torres Strait community in the 1890s, it became by definition a 'creole' language. Since the children learned their fathers' pidgin along with their mothers' traditional language, there was mutual influence; hence the existence of several regional dialects of the creole, each influenced by the region's traditional languages. The creole survived and spread because of its usefulness as a *lingua franca*, when people began to cross ethnolinguistic boundaries for marriage, friendship and work. The new social context required a shared language that was recognizably non-European but not primarily associated with any traditional group. At an increasingly conscious level, the creole indexes facets of modern Islander and Cape York Aboriginal identity and ethnicity and has recently broadened in function to include education, radio broadcasting, provision of medical, social and interpreting services and Bible translation.

English, the only official language of instruction in Torres Strait schools, is generally learned as a second, third or fourth language. Students learn English 'for school work, job, read instructions, express yourself, understand things about the world, better communication and understanding of people and races, computer skills, live in the future. Practical needs were getting car licence, banking, shopping, letters, lists, wider world communication and recognition that internationally accepted language' (Jensen, 1994). English dominates written discourse (even TSC is written according to English conventions) and indexes formality of spoken discourse, acquisition of non-traditional knowledge and age stratification. Only during the past twenty years has English become part of the linguistic

repertoires of younger people and no longer the preserve of a few high-status males. Nevertheless, it is still largely perceived as a foreign language expressing alien and uncomfortable modes of thought. While facility in English is generally admired, attitudes towards it are ambivalent, those with mastery of English being suspected of having accepted European (as opposed to Indigenous) values.

After more than a century of linguistic accommodation to outsiders, the various regional languages today occupy distinct, though sometimes overlapping, functional, demographic, or geographic sites. Older people are generally bilingual or trilingual. The western island language, with an estimated 2,500 speakers, is still strong on the top west islands, Bamaga and Seisia, but less vital on the central west islands of Badu and Mabuiag. Only people born on Mer before c.1950 are full mother-tongue speakers of the eastern island language, although there is a concerted effort underway to revitalize the language. Atampaya and Wuthathi from CYP now have only a few adult speakers each, although a language preservation program was implemented in the Injinoo school in the 1990s. Torres Strait Creole (TSC) has around 3,000 first language speakers and 3,000 second language speakers in the region and is the most widely used children's language. As for English, a 1995 study of Thursday Island primary and secondary school students' language found that at most 3%-5% of the children spoke English as their primary language (Shnukal, 1996). This fell to 0% in the outer islands, the only exceptions being of the children of non-Indigenous families or families recently arrived from the mainland.



Common formal errors in written English

Most Torres Strait and CYP Aboriginal inhabitants of what is still a multilingual trading area are excellent language learners. They have also evolved strategies for appearing to know more English than they do to avoid being 'shamed' (publicly ridiculed). This means that many of the student errors identified below do not become apparent until they are written down.

Linguists draw a distinction between active linguistic knowledge, where people feel at home in a language and can express most of what they need to, and passive knowledge, a general, if imperfect, understanding of what is being said and the ability to respond more or less appropriately, if minimally. Active knowledge presupposes passive knowledge but not *vice versa*. Teachers will find a great range of abilities among students as far as their active/passive knowledge of English is concerned.

Teachers have identified the most common formal errors made in their students' written work as:

- absence of the English inflection *-s* (noun plural marker, noun possessive marker, verb 3 pers. sg marker) (TSC has only one inflection, the verb transitive suffix *-e/i*)
- omission of verb past tense inflection (*-ed*) (TSC expresses tense by preverbal markers)
- use of non-English tense markers (*go, be*) (TSC uses *go, bi*)
- incorrect use of personal pronouns (in TSC one form, *em*, means 'he, she, it')
- use of different prepositions (*frightened for* from TSC *prait po*; *jealous on* from TSC *zeles lo*; *tired for* from TSC *tayat po*)
- incorrect use of irregular English forms (TSC has very few irregular words)
- no distinction between mass and count nouns (*some informations*; *many equipments*) (TSC does not distinguish these two noun classes⁵)

English was historically an inflected language, like its closest modern relatives German and Dutch. Few noun and verb inflections (word

endings) remain and they often disappear in rapid or careless speech. The most common inflection is *-s*, which can represent the plural ending on nouns (*ship/ships*); the possessive ending on nouns (*man/man's*); the third person singular ending on verbs (*sit/sits*). The second is *-ed*, which indicates past tense. TSC-speakers express these grammatical relationships only when the real-world context makes the sentence ambiguous and then not through word-endings but through the use of prenominal or preverbal markers and prepositions. In a purely oral language it is usually apparent from context whether the speaker is referring to one or more than one item. All the regional languages have ways of pluralising nouns, some through noun endings, as in English, others through use of a number or other quantifier. Thus, when students write 'Many ship (rather than 'many ships') arrive in the harbour' it is quite clear from the context that the plural is meant and any extra marking is superfluous. 'Many ship' would therefore be the unmarked or 'default' construction. If speakers wanted for some reason to stress the plurality of the noun, they could employ various stylistic constructions. The same points could be made about the absence of the verb past tense inflection and the regularisation in TSC of the mass/count noun distinction (which is beginning to weaken in English).

All of these formal errors, therefore, are explainable as transfer phenomena or lack of mastery of irregular grammatical features of the 'target' language, here English. Transfer phenomena are those features of the learner's first language which she 'transfers' into the target language. Such phenomena are a well-researched byproduct of second language learning. As to the many irregularities of English grammar, they must be explicitly taught and practised by all English-learners. Prepositions and irregular forms, i.e. exceptions to general grammatical patterns, pose problems for all learners of a second language. Even native English-speakers have difficulties with English irregular forms and are given targeted instruction in their early school years. Some varieties of English lack the Standard English form altogether

and children who speak those varieties have to learn, e.g. that 'He give me a push' is not the 'correct' form but must be replaced — at least in writing — by 'He gave me a push'. Irregular verb forms (inherited from Anglo-Saxon), irregular noun plurals (ditto) and irregular comparative adjectives (a legacy from the Norman French conquest of England) pose problems and must be explained and drilled. TSC, like all creole languages, has largely regularised the irregular forms of its contributing language; also like most creoles, it is characterised by multifunctionality, i.e. the same form can be noun or verb, adjective or adverb, depending on its function in a given sentence. Thus, *preya* functions either as noun or verb ('prayer'; 'to pray'); *blok* as verb, past participial or noun ('to block'; 'blocked'; 'blockage'); *strong* as either adjective or noun ('strong'; 'strength'), *kwik* as either adjective or adverb ('quick'; 'quickly') etc. These forms and their functions will also need to be taught explicitly and drilled.

Moreover, students are short-changed by the poor fit between the properties of spoken English and its written form⁶. Written language normally follows some facility in the spoken language. If the input from teachers is unclear or ambiguous, then non-native speakers will fall back on the rules of their own language and 'transfer' those rules into their written English. They copy the English they hear around them and reproduce it, thus making written errors that would not necessarily be apparent in their spoken English. The two major linguistic influences on English learners in the classroom are their own first language, which provides the basic framework or scaffolding, from which learners transfer what they deem appropriate features; and the English that learners hear in class and elsewhere. The students listen carefully to native English-speakers, particularly their teachers: English is almost never spoken in the home and generally the only practice is at school. This means that all teachers, whatever their private feelings on the matter, become *de facto* English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. When English is not a student's first language, sentences like 'The trees seemed far away' or 'They were seen

together' are ambiguous. There is no phonetic (sound) difference between these and 'The tree seemed far away' and 'They was seen together', respectively. If the students' first language does not mark plurality by noun endings and they often hear sentences like 'They was out there in the boat' — not to mention the impact of *otitis media* on aural discrimination — then how can they reasonably be expected to produce error-free written English without being explicitly taught the rules of English?

Student 'errors' which are the result either of transfer, which all language-learners exhibit to some degree, irregularities which must be learned, or ambiguity of target language, are not evidence of intellectual inferiority or inability to grasp abstract notions. The concepts of plurality and possession, for example, are expressed in all the island languages but the formal representations are different from English and the correspondences and differences need to be taught.

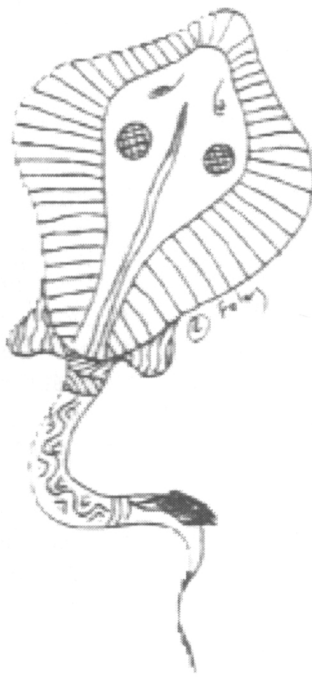
Students need time to process everything that is heard and said in English through their mother tongue. Not only must they think about what is being asked and what the answer is, but also how to express the answer in a way that will not bring ridicule from their teachers or classmates: 'Sometimes when we asked to answer a question or read aloud, we're ashamed, because we haven't been given any chance to practice speaking in front of the class' (Jensen 1994). No wonder so many students end up refusing to answer questions or making the simplest answer possible; but teachers should not necessarily infer that they have failed to grasp the material presented. They should accept the challenge as an opportunity to develop innovative assessments of student learning.

The problem of transparency

Grammatical errors are, at least in the early years, less important than the misunderstanding that can arise from subtle semantic (meaning) differences between partial synonyms in English

and the English-lexifier creole. This is referred to as a problem of transparency. Because most students in Torres Strait and CYP schools are speakers of an English-lexifier creole, i.e., one which derived the bulk of its vocabulary from English (although not necessarily with the same meanings) and continues to innovate largely through the medium of English, formally similar but semantically distinct (although overlapping) words can cause potentially corrosive misunderstandings.

TSC derived the bulk of its lexicon (word stock) from English and was until recently viewed as an inferior kind of English. It evolved in traditional language communities, where children were bilingual and the semantic systems of their mothers' and fathers' languages appear to have largely fused. The creole words, which were originally borrowed from English into Pacific Pidgin English, were then superimposed onto the pre-existing traditional Torres Strait or CYP pragmatic (language use) and semantic (language meaning) systems. This explains the ease with which traditional language speakers learned TSC and the difficulties posed by learning English. Simple relexification of a language is one of the simplest of all linguistic transitions to make; mastering unfamiliar and alien grammatical and semantic systems is far harder. To take one example among many, English divides the lower arm into *arm* and *hand*, whereas in the traditional languages the division is at the elbow. The area below the elbow to the finger tips is conveyed by one word: KLY/KKY *geth* or MM *tag*. TSC uses an English-derived word, *an* from 'hand', but semantically it reproduces the traditional language distinction. Thus, when students write 'hand' for 'arm', this is a case of both transfer and transparency. It in no way demonstrates that they are incapable of grasping the English distinction. There are hundreds of



examples of transparency in TSC, which pose problems for students searching for the appropriate English word: *broke* 'tear' (clothes, paper), *gerap* 'wake up', *lugaut* 'take care of'; *luk* 'see'; *si* 'wave'; *teke* 'adopt', *tok* 'speak'; *were* 'put on (clothes)' from 'broke', 'get up', 'look out', 'look', 'sea', 'take', 'talk', 'wear', respectively. Given that these are particular to TSC-speakers, teachers should be aware that strategies promoted through systemic initiatives, e.g., *First Steps* resource books 'brainstorm', may have to be adapted for use in Torres Strait and CYP schools.

A more extended example comes from my first fieldtrip on a remote Torres Strait community. The teacher there was highly respected and sympathetic to his students. He once brought up the question of their honesty and asked me what I thought. I said that I had always found them to be exceptionally honest and he agreed but said he had had to change his mind. After little lunch break, he asked a student how he had spent the break and was told 'I been swim'. As swimming would have involved a long walk to the sea and the boy could not have returned in the time available, the teacher reasoned that he must have been lying. But *swim* in TSC does not mean English 'swim'. It has a number of meanings involving the use of water to clean the body, which we distinguish in English as 'to have a bath, take a shower, wash one's hands', etc. To 'swim' in the English sense is *swim lo solwata*. Rather than rushing to negative judgment, teachers should view such an apparent discrepancy first as a puzzle to be solved through clarification from Indigenous colleagues and, secondly as a possible educational resource. Misunderstandings can lead to disappointments and, for some teachers, a psychic withdrawal from the classroom and the community, with unhappy consequences for all concerned.

Vocabulary strata

Most languages contain a number of lexical strata, i.e. different 'levels' of borrowed words which have more or less status. In English, the original Anglo-Saxon words are shorter, more concrete and more commonly used than those borrowed from Latin and Greek, which are longer, more abstract, have higher status and are favoured in academic discourse and literature. Language learners often find them hard to learn and they are particularly off-putting for students in Torres Strait and CYP, who see them as a bar to communication: 'Some teachers talk too much and use big words without breaking them down for us' (Jensen 1994). Teachers might like to consider reversing the practice they have followed since their late high school years and substitute Anglo-Saxon words for Latin words. If there is a simpler synonym, then teachers should use it first, only later introducing the stylistically more 'elevated' term, e.g. 'put in' vs 'insert'; 'take away' vs 'remove'. Basic English has a comparatively simple grammar but an extremely large vocabulary, estimated at over 100,000 words, of which over 95% are borrowed from other languages. Most English-speakers know between 5,000 and 10,000 and employ even fewer in daily life.

TSC has its own grammatical rules and a cultural vocabulary which is highly elaborated and specialised. It also has various lexical strata, borrowed from Pacific Pidgin English, British English, the traditional languages and occasionally Pacific and Southeast Asian languages. The traditional languages had a complex system of personal pronouns and words for kin. TSC makes fewer formal distinctions (*viz.* single, dual, plural, inclusive and exclusive pronoun reference) but English fewer still. It may also be instructive to compare the richness of the creole in another semantic domain with the poverty of English. The coconut is a staple of Islander life: for food, drink, medicine, fuel, manufacture, home management, cooking, building and as a metaphor for life itself (see, e.g., Mam *et al.* 1993). There are nearly 30 words associated with the life cycle and products of the

coconut in the eastern dialect of TSC, only two of which (*koknat* and *drai koknat*) come from English (see Table 1).

Table 1: Coconut stages of growth and products

1	<i>wai</i> 'coconut embryo'
2	<i>giru</i> 'coconut shoot'
3	<i>gad</i> (or <i>smol koknat</i>) 'immature coconut with jelly but no meat'
4	<i>kopespes</i> 'developing coconut'. The kernel has begun to develop, the jelly is becoming firm and the water is slightly sweet.
5	<i>pes</i> 'ripe coconut'. The flesh is white, slightly firm and easily scraped and the water is very sweet.
6	<i>u</i> (from Meriam Mir generic 'coconut'). The flesh is somewhat dry but the jelly is still soft.
7	<i>drai koknat</i> 'dry coconut, mature coconut'. The flesh is hard and firmly attached.
8	<i>ageg</i> 'overripe coconut'. The embryo fills the entire shell, there is no water left inside and it is ready to sprout.
9	<i>gayu</i> 'smooth-skinned coconut'
10	<i>kyai</i> 'shredded coconut'
11	<i>zyau</i> 'coconut meat remains' after scraping
12	<i>sabi(sabi)</i> , 'cooked in coconut milk'
13	<i>pesur</i> 'coconut stalk'. Dried <i>pesurare</i> also used for fuel.
14	<i>piru</i> 'coconut rubbish', the dry, fallen coconut palm leaves'
15	<i>bei</i> 'dry coconut leaflet'
16	<i>belid</i> 'midrib of a coconut palm leaf', once used in the manufacture of such implements as the <i>weres</i> 'fish scoop'
17	<i>keru</i> 'lower leaf', stronger and harder than the newer growth, which will hold <i>sopsop</i> well and prevent the <i>sabi</i> from escaping during cooking
18	<i>kupi</i> 'new palm leaf', softer than the other leaves and used for making baskets
19	<i>su</i> 'grass skirt'
20	<i>bosokop</i> 'coconut fuel' which, because it retains the shell and meat inside, burns for longer than <i>mes</i>
21	<i>mes</i> 'coconut husk and shell', the remains of the coconut husk and shell after the meat has been scraped out, which are dried and used as fuel or as scrubbing brushes
22	<i>ulid</i> 'scraped coconut shell', i.e. the huskless shell after the meat has been scraped out and which is used for fuel
23	<i>basor</i> 'coconut shell', used as a water container
24	<i>madu</i> 'coconut scraper'
25	<i>ked</i> 'sennit made of coconut fibre'
26	<i>keg</i> 'charcoal made from coconut shell'
27	<i>wet</i> 'instrument used for skinning coconuts'

Just as English philosophical, natural history, medical, legal, political, musical and fine arts vocabulary was expanded and elaborated by borrowings from Greek, Latin, Italian, Norman French and modern French, so TSC has been enriched by borrowing from the traditional languages in the domains of natural world phenomena, social organisation, religion and myth. These provide the creole's most elaborated vocabulary stratum, which teachers could exploit as a valuable resource in comparative language activities. An analysis of the lexical structure of TSC's eastern dialect demonstrates that in many semantic domains only the superordinate or generic category (*au nei* 'big/important name') comes from English, whereas species or other subordinate names (*kebi nei* 'little name') come from traditional languages. For example, *pizin* (a calque on *ebur*, 'non-sea creature') is the generic name for 'bird' but almost all the bird species are borrowed from the traditional language: *beuger*, *dibadiba*, *gau*, *gawei*, *geinau*, *kaubet*, *kedakeda*, *kipro*, *kor*, *kurukuru*, *kyau*, *sir*, *sirar*, *tole*, *waumer*, etc. Often more species are named than are recognised in Western terminology, differentiated according to closely observed physical characteristics. The same kind of lexico-semantic classification holds for animals, fish, stars, plants, winds and seasons, all of which may also have totemic significance.

'Key words' and core cultural values

Wierzbicka (1997:15-23) hypothesises that the key semantic concepts of societies, expressed as 'key words', are particularly revealing of core cultural values. Prime Minister John Howard has articulated the guiding principles of 'the Australian way' as 'self-reliance, fairness (a fair go), cooperation (pulling together), initiative (having a go)'. These, he said, are the 'core values' of Australian society. It is interesting to extend the idea by briefly examining some TSC 'key words' with implications for culturally-appropriate teaching: *ailan pasin/kastom* 'island custom', *gud pasin* 'good behaviour', *peibaik* 'harmony-producing', *prapa* 'appropriate', *rod* 'path' and *stret* 'honest(ly)'.

Ailan pasin or *ailan kastom* (from 'island fashion/custom') is one of the defining elements of shared contemporary Torres Strait Islander identity: a cultural hybrid unique to Torres Strait. The chief component is Melanesian traditional custom, adapted over generations to Torres Strait conditions, filtered through Christianity and 19th-century Pacific Islander sensibility and with the cultural deletions and accretions that give it contemporary relevance to the majority of Islanders. That *ailan pasin* is not restricted to pre-contact custom can be seen from the inclusion of the two externally introduced unifiers, Christianity and TSC. Major elements are represented on the Torres Strait flag, designed by the late Bernard Namok and first flown in May 1992⁸. The two green horizontal stripes represent the northern and southern land masses, separated by a wider blue stripe (the sea) and bounded by two thin black lines (the people). In the centre of the blue stripe is a white *dhoeri/dari* (traditional headdress) encompassing a five-pointed white star. White represents Christianity; the headdress traditional culture; the star the five island groups (now reinterpreted to include the Northern Peninsula Area) and the sea voyages that sustained and linked them. The emotional core of *ailan pasin* continues to be family/clan and land and the nexus between these. One Bamaga principal was told by his predecessor that family is no longer important to the modern Torres Strait Islander. This is not the case for the majority of Islanders and CYP Aboriginal people: family and land are as fundamental today as when the traditional stories arose to explain the appearance of the land, the connections among peoples and what constitutes moral behaviour. 'Blood' ties continue to be supremely significant in socio-cultural transmission and land is the basis of social organisation and subsistence, the connection between them being symbolised by the traditional planting of the umbilical cord on clan or family land.

Gud pasin (from 'good fashion') meaning 'good conduct, morally correct/publicly sanctioned behaviour, politeness, decorum' is taught through example, punishment and story. It is predicated on knowing one's place in society, showing

respect for authorities and conducting and expressing oneself modestly. Children, adolescents and women defer to older men, rarely proffer opinions publicly, boast or draw attention to themselves; they do not contradict older people, serve them the best portions of food first, and lower their heads when passing in front of them to show respect. Families teach *gud pasin* primarily through example: in some families it is enforced directly, through verbal or corporal chastisement; in others indirectly, through traditional stories which demonstrate the negative consequences of wrong (antisocial) behaviour such as gluttony, refusal to share food, failure to obey the commands of authorities, theft, etc. (see Lawrie, 1970). Friends tell me that, when they were children and behaved badly, their parents would tell them a story which illustrated the outcomes of such behaviour. They were supposed to understand both the motive for telling the story and its relevance to them. If they failed to understand and repeated the unacceptable behaviour, their parents repeated the story as many times as was needed.

Two aspects of *gud pasin* are the necessity to behave in a culturally *prapa* (from English 'proper') fashion. This refers to behaviour which is 'appropriate' or 'fitting' to the particular context. One must also make sure that one's speech and conduct are *stret* (from 'straight'), a calque on MM *barkak* (lit. 'without curves) meaning 'honestly, with integrity' (Cromwell, 1980). An individual's failure to behave appropriately or honestly may lead to public shaming as a means of social control. Haddon (1935:130) recognised that a 'very potent restraint against breaking a recognised custom or a public promise ... was the shame felt when such misconduct became public and was the subject of general ridicule. The good opinion of others was a very strong restraining influence...' The ideal of *gud pasin*, with its respect for authority and the public shaming of transgressors, has ramifications not only for individual and group student conduct but also for teacher assessment, behaviour management and classroom practice.

Peibaik (from 'payback') has a range of possible English translations of its core meaning of 'fair exchange'. It denotes the action required to rebalance society and has the added semantic attribute of 'it is good (*prapa*) for the previous balance to be restored' (Wierzbicka, 1997:23-30). The restoration of balance once entailed the obligation to avenge wrongs done to relatives ('retribution') or to demand and receive appropriate payment of some kind in order to restore the previous social equilibrium ('recompense, compensation'). Sharp (1993:xi) claims that reciprocity, as 'the key principle in the creation and re-creation of identities-as-diversities-in-unity', lies at the heart of Islander society. Acts of reciprocal exchange are among the manifestations of what appears to be an even more fundamental organising principle of 'ideal' Islander society, viz. the need to maintain or, if necessary, to re-establish a balance between oppositional elements. These may be either material or non-material, concrete or abstract. Sharp (1984:50), writing of the social organisation of the Meriam Le and the reciprocal bonds which sustain it, tells us that '[w]ithin each relationship of reciprocity lies its opposite'. The imperative to reconcile oppositions is reflected not only in language but also in Islander social relationships, religious expression, spatial organisation and aesthetics. Hence the widespread custom whereby a woman, who has left her birth family to marry, replaces herself by her first-born child or first female child, in order to fill the space she herself has left; it is exemplified also by the institution of *peibaik maret*, the 'ideal' marriage arrangement, whereby a brother and sister marry sister and brother, respectively. Hence, also, the daily aesthetic privileging of symmetry in the placement of dishes on the table, with two equally filled bowls of every dish placed equidistant and opposite each other; in the male-female-male-female ordering of dances; in the seating of men and women on opposite sides in church; in decorative style featuring sea and non-sea creatures engraved at opposite ends of a tobacco pipe (Haddon, 1935:304); in the preference for double outrigger on canoes.

Finally, *rod* (from 'road') refers equally to land tracks, sea pathways and the intimate personal connections which determine mutual rights and obligations and envelop people into dense networks of association. It is a calque on KLY/KKY *yabugud* and MM *gab* and is the principal strategy for including outsiders into a community to increase social capital (Shnukal, 2000: 68-71). Approaches by community members to teachers to join in local events are one incorporative strategy, a way of creating social relations ('roads') with new teachers and drawing them into established networks. A consequence of the fact that people are linked through many and complex bonds is that any comments about individuals will quickly spread.

Abstract expression

Abstract ideas in TSC tend to be expressed through the use of metaphor, often based on the physical environment, and through allusion to local or regional stories. Reflecting on the Islanders' concept of time, Matsumoto (1983:357) concludes that time as an abstract phenomenon has no meaning or purpose, unless linked to observable and meaningful natural phenomena. The night sky is thought to mirror the earth and events in both are seen as intimately, though not causally, connected — hence the need to follow the passage of the stars and constellations as a guide to planting and harvesting and hunting. During discussions on customary adoption, various outcomes and ramifications were demonstrated by conceptualising the family line as a coconut palm. This began with a physical drawing of a tree with its roots in the earth, strong yet supple trunk, and healthy branches, the leaves representing individual family members. Teachers might follow traditional practice by beginning discussion of new abstract concepts with familiar examples and diagrams from the physical world before proceeding to the purely verbal.

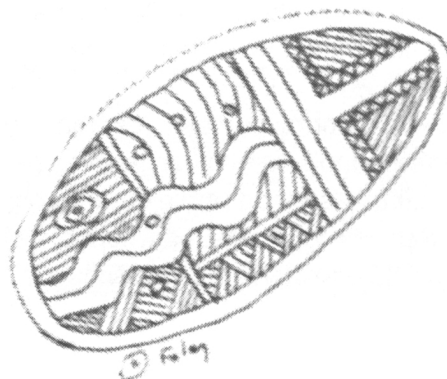
Space versus time in narrative

The spatial is central to Islander language, myth and storytelling; the temporal may be implied by the sequence of narrated events but is rarely the focus. The human geographer, Nietschmann, wrote in 1989 (82-3):

[t]he cultural history of Torres Strait Islanders has a strong spatial dimension. Events in the historical and mythical past occurred at places, not simply at specific dates. Exactly where something is said to have happened is more important than when it happened. In traveling about their islands, waters and reefs, Torres Strait people pass through their history, which is linked to land and sea environments. The concept that history occurred at places, not at times, is emphasized by many indigenous peoples, and certainly by Melanesians...

For Torres Strait Islanders there is a geography to history. Discussions of the remembered past and the mythical past, songs, legends and everyday conversations are filled with references to places. Myriad names provide cultural texture to islands and seascapes...

Conversely, modern Western culture, especially its education system, privileges temporal over spatial orientation and ordering. This is a fundamental difference and is revealed by the way students write English and order their written narratives and recounts. It is also reflected in TSC grammar. For example, in TSC it is grammatically incorrect to omit some marker of spatial orientation if the sentence refers to movement (towards or away from the speaker) or stasis (far or close to the speaker). English-speakers can optionally include such phrases as 'towards me' or 'near me' or 'away from me' or 'far from me' but the sentence remains



grammatical without them. Equivalent markers are not optional in TSC, a sentence is ungrammatical without them. Even movement which may not be apparent to English-speakers, such as telephoning someone or being phoned, must be encoded in a grammatical TSC sentence by the addition of a spatial marker. Teachers new to an island or CYP community will find that among the first things they are taught are the names of the various villages and named places and how to orientate themselves. Spatial ordering also demonstrates and emphasises the connections that bind people together. This fundamental difference must be made explicit when teaching the writing of narratives in English, because it goes against the preferred cultural ordering. On the other hand, the cultural privileging of space provides a foundation for teaching mathematics, geography and social studies.

Conclusion

Over a hundred years ago, the local Government Resident was urging the provision of schooling for Islanders, who, being 'Queensland subjects in every respect, [are] entitled to the privileges of our educational system' (Douglas, 1885-6: 83). But schools are cultural institutions, which, whether or not they explicitly promote social change, cannot help but affect individuals and communities. They are a focus of parental and community aspiration and people have expectations of their schools that teachers may find difficult to meet. Balancing apparently contradictory demands and expectations, e.g., provision of the full mainstream curriculum and promotion of traditional culture, is not easy but teachers can also make a real difference to the students and community. Today, Noel Pearson (2000) is telling the children of Cape York: 'If we get education right, the world is yours.'

When asked in many surveys over many years what kind of schools they favour, Islander parents overwhelmingly support 'mainstream schools'. But their demand for mainstream schools, where few of their children achieve the results expected

for 'mainstream students', needs to be unpacked. If the survey takers were to dig deeper, they would, I have no doubt, find that what parents really want for their children is access to, and good instruction in, a wide range of skills, including English language skills, which will serve them well in their adulthood, both personally and professionally. They want the kinds of choice available to most 'mainstream' students.

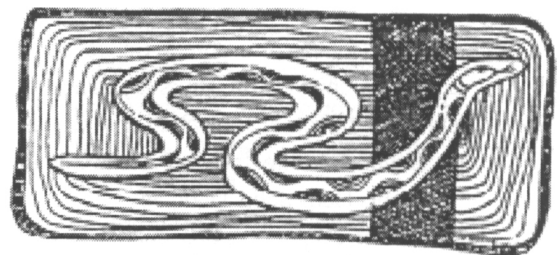
Children who are raised in Torres Strait and CYP, however, are not 'mainstream' students, whatever this means in contemporary Australia. Therefore mainstream schools cannot deliver the results that the students (and their parents and teachers) want for them. This has nothing to do with intelligence or aptitude and everything to do with policy, curriculum, teaching methods, and the respect accorded to students and communities. It defies belief that some contemporary educators believe that students whose first language is not English - but whose language of instruction is English - do not need to be taught at least some formal linguistic aspects of English. The fact that so many Islanders have succeeded against the odds is a testament to the individual and group efforts of teachers and students, but made so much harder by the latter's need to master a second, third or fourth language. This paper has attempted to show that some student difficulties are language-based but that misunderstandings based on language differences can be viewed as opportunities for mutual and respectful learning by students, teachers, education workers⁹ and parents.

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Appendix I: Historically important dates (with special reference to education)¹⁰

c.8,000 BP	Final severing of the land bridge between New Guinea and Australia, leaving only the peaks visible and inhabitable - the islands of Torres Strait	c.1910	Cowal Creek settlement (now Injinoo) established by Angkamuthi (Seven Rivers), Gudang (Somerset), Atampaya (MacDonald River), Yadhagana (Cairncross) and Wuthathi (Whitesand) people under the leadership of Alick Whitesand
1606	First recorded transit of Torres Strait by Luis Vaez de Torres	1912	The majority of islands are gazetted as 'Aboriginal reserves'
1863	First record of bêche-de-mer fishing in the region	1913	Aboriginal School opens on Thursday Island and all 'coloured' children are sent there from Thursday Island State School
1863	Founding of Somerset on Cape York, the first European settlement	1915	Church of England replaces London Missionary Society as responsible for Christian ministry in Torres Strait
1867	Mission Industrial School established at Somerset by the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel but is closed in 1868	1923	Official recognition of the Cowal Creek settlement with the provision of a priest and teacher, both Torres Strait Islanders
1869	Pearling begins and the Islanders are reported as 'pacified'	1924	First official inspection of Torres Strait island schools by the Department of Public Instruction
1871	Arrival of first Christian (London Missionary Society) missionaries from the Loyalty Islands	1929	Catholic Church opens school on Hammond Island Mission
1872	Queensland border extended to 60 miles from coast	1929	Church of England opens high school and hostel for girls at St Paul's Mission, Moa
1873	First school in Torres Strait opened on Erub (Darnley Island) by the London Missionary Society	1935	Training school established at Mabuiag for advanced pupils from neighbouring islands and to provide 'refresher' courses for local teachers and store managers
1877	Thursday Island becomes the site of the government settlement in Torres Strait	1939	Torres Strait Islanders legally recognised as distinct group from Aboriginal people
1879	Legal annexation of all islands to Queensland	1940	School for Coloured Children, Thursday Island, becomes State School for Coloured Children, Thursday Island, and both state schools come under the control of the Queensland Department of Public Instruction
1885	Opening of Thursday Island State School	1942-46	'Army time' and evacuation of most European civilians from the region
1887	First Catholic school in Torres Strait, St Henry's Thursday Island, established by the sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart	1947	Islanders permitted to leave their islands to work on mainland
1891	First government teacher appointed to Mer (Murray Island)	1948	After a tidal wave, Saibai people settle at Red Island Point and later Seisia and Bamaga under the leadership of Bamaga Ginau
1891	Mapoon Mission established on Cape York by members of the Presbyterian Moravian Mission	1951	Assimilation policies in place
1897	Beginning of the 'protection' era with passage of the <i>Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act</i> (Queensland). Torres Strait Islanders were not made subject to the Act until after 1904.	1952	Opening of Bamaga State School
1898	Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait, led by Alfred Cort Haddon	1954	The State School for Coloured Children, Thursday Island, officially changes its name to Wai-Ben
1899	First elected island councils	1962	Islanders permitted to vote in Federal elections
1901	Bishop's College and Church School opened for European children on Thursday Island	1963	Police evict the Aboriginal inhabitants from Mapoon to facilitate the mining of bauxite. Many
1904	Islanders become subject to the Queensland Protection Acts after the death of the Government Resident, Hon. John Douglas		
1908	Church of England opens school at St Paul's Mission, Moa		

	families moved to other Cape York communities, including Bamaga.	1988	First public call for independence of Torres Strait from Australia
1964	Islanders vote in State elections for first time	1985	Report of the National Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force
1964	State High School opens on Thursday Island and schooling there is desegregated	1988	Publication of the first grammar and dictionary of Torres Strait Creole
1965	Queensland Department of Native Affairs renamed Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs	1989	Launch of the first formally endorsed national Aboriginal education policy
1967	Constitutional referendum permits the Commonwealth to take responsibility for Indigenous people	1990	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission replaces Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs
1972	Commonwealth of Australia assumes moral and fiscal responsibility for Aboriginal affairs through the establishment of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs	1990	Following the success of AITEP, the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) is launched to offer Diploma of Teaching subjects in remote locations
1973	Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs opens Thursday Island office	1990	Queensland Department of Health takes over health care on islands
1973	Bamaga High School is opened to cater to students from Alau, Bamaga, Injinoo, Seisia, Umagico and Torres Strait island communities	1991	Queensland Land Act transfers island land to freehold
1975	Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs renamed Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement	1992	High Court decision on Mabo case
1975	Papua New Guinea achieves its independence	1992	Torres Strait flag flown for the first time
1977	Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Education Program (AITEP) introduced by the School of Education, James Cook University, to provide access to the teaching profession for Indigenous people who could not obtain direct tertiary entrance	1994	Formation of Torres Strait Regional Authority
1978	Border treaty signed between Australia and PNG	1994	Establishment of the Native Title Tribunal
1981	First move for Torres Strait sovereignty made by the Torres United Party but its arguments are rejected by the High Court	1995	First Torres Strait Native Title claim (for Saibai) lodged with the Tribunal
1982	Mabo case begins	1995	Trial of the Injinoo Home Language Program to make the transition to English through TSC, the home language of the community
1984	First members elected to Island Coordinating Council (ICC)	1997	Commonwealth government accepts the principle of regional autonomy for Torres Strait
1985	First radio programmes broadcast from Thursday Island using local languages and English	1998	76 Native Title claims now lodged with the Tribunal, only a minority being represented by the TSRA
1985	Queensland Department of Education takes over full responsibility for the provision of education in Torres Strait	1998	TSRA urges a collective regional and sea claim
1985	Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Committee (TSIREC) issues their 'Policy statement on education in Torres Strait', seeking more control of regional education	1999	First Native Title determinations granted in Torres Strait (for Saibai and Moa)
1987	First public call for independence from Australia	1999	Autonomy Taskforce formed to plan a system of self-government for Torres Strait
1987	First Grade 12 students graduate from Thursday Island State High School	1999	Each Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula child entering pre-school becomes eligible for \$3,000 from the Commonwealth ESL-Indigenous Language Speaking Students Program (ESL-ILSS)
		2000	The Federal Court of Australia sits in Torres Strait for the first time to hand down further Native Title decisions, more than doubling the number already granted
		2000	Kaurareg people gain freehold title over Miskin suburb of Thursday Island

- 2000 Education Queensland institutes the Indigenous Education and Training Alliance (IETA) program
- 2001 Cultural maritime summit unanimously supports the claim for sovereignty over Torres Strait seas and resources

Endnotes

- 1 Learners also knew the context, purpose and utility of an activity before they were formally taught by example and correction: only after mastery was achieved did individuals innovate and then within a narrowly-defined sphere. We may also note that the use of chant or rote learning as a traditional method of transferring knowledge could be useful to teachers in Torres Strait today. It is a well-established and effective ESL strategy.
- 2 Another consequence of this misguided policy is that since the 1980s few teachers have been trained to teach English explicitly, with dire results for general literacy.
- 3 Pauline Taylor points out that the 'new' outcomes-based curriculum in Queensland does allow for flexibility and creativity in the ways students are assessed.
- 4 Only two dialects are still spoken by people born since World War II: Kala Lagaw Ya (KLY) in the top western islands; Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY) on Mabuia and Badu.

- 5 For fuller discussion see Shnukal (1996). Pauline Taylor points out that these errors link directly to the 'areas of difficulty' identified in the FELIKS approach (see Berry and Hudson c.1997).
- 6 Many teachers are unaware of this fact, although, it must be said, the oral genres they are most familiar with do have more in common with written forms than those most familiar to their students.
- 7 It may also be useful to teach the major Latin/Greek/French 'roots' of such terms, so that students can become more confident linguistic analysts.
- 8 See <http://www.ausflag.com.au/flags/torres.html>.
- 9 A cover term for teacher aides, assistant teachers, classroom assistants, home-school liaison officers, Aboriginal Education Workers, Aboriginal Education Assistants or tutors (see Malloch, 2000:6).
- 10 This paper was already in press when I became aware of a similar chronology by Osborne (1991), who distinguishes five phases in the socio-historical context of Torres Strait education. I have incorporated some of Osborne's material and acknowledge his prior work, drawn like mine from the work of other scholars.

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