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ANSWERING TEACHERS' QUESTIONS *at* *the* ESL (ENGLISH *as a* SECOND LANGUAGE) CONFERENCE, BADU ISLAND, 15-18 MAY 2000

SUSAN SHEPHERD

South China Normal University, KangDa Education Zone,
 Zhenglong, Zengcheng, Guangzhou, People's Republic of
 China 511363

■ Abstract

In 2000 a program of English as a Second Language inservice provision was initiated by the Thursday Island State High School in response to teacher and community concerns about low literacy rates in Torres Strait, as measured by the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia Bandscales and other related difficulties. In mid-May of that year an English as a Second Language conference was held on Badu Island and was attended by teachers from throughout Torres Strait. During the conference, Susan Shepherd (Education Adviser English Language Acquisition at Thursday Island State High School) conducted a question-and-answer session dealing with some of the most commonly asked questions: What is English as a Second Language teaching? What is an English as a Second Language learner? What is an English as a Second Language school? Why is the students' English not improving in my school? Can we have learning support teachers? Why shouldn't the children's home language be banned from the school so that the students will learn English more quickly? Why can't the children understand more about what they read? Why, if the local creole is so much like English, do we need special programs in English?

■ Introduction

Welcome to our inservice on English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. I have worked in Torres Strait for one term and I have seen so many committed and enthusiastic teachers who are trying their best to teach students who do not speak English in the home. This makes the teaching so different from the mainstream and many teachers are ringing me for assistance. If you are new to the Torres Strait and daunted by the cross-cultural aspects and the teaching of these students then you are aware of the issues. You are also willing to acknowledge the specialised area of teaching. I was in Bamaga, Cape York, last week and every newly appointed teacher asked for inservicing and assistance with planning. Their enthusiasm was impressive but many were professionally frustrated and finding teaching very different from Brisbane.

I am going to quickly address some concerns that I have surrounding ESL in the Strait. Most of them are negative but by the end of the three days I sincerely hope we can turn them into a positive.

■ What is ESL teaching? What is an ESL learner? What is an ESL school?

Many people are confused as to what ESL is. I appreciate that you here today have the appropriate knowledge but I am going to venture down this path as my introduction. Someone took me aside before the Outer Schools Conference and by doing so thought he was doing me a big favour by saying: "Aren't there enough problems with English literacy up here without us having to take on ESL?"

Another teacher asked why we had to have the Bandscales when: "Aren't we meant to just teach the kids English? Why are we bothering to assess [Torres Strait] Creole?" Another said that "ESL does not suit our school as the students speak English and we are focusing on English learning".

For someone who has been in the area of ESL for many years I am still quite surprised to hear comments like these. Australia has a national policy on ESL, the Royal Commission

into Deaths in Custody made recommendations that many Indigenous people who come before the courts be recognised as non-English speakers and that appropriate curricula and programs be designed to assist literacy.

ESL is an acronym for "English as a Second Language". ESL teaching is the specialised area of teaching English to students who speak another language before they come to school. It is not the teaching of that language; it is about recognising and valuing the first language. It is about putting special programs into place to assist the teachers to teach the students and to assist the learners in meeting outcomes in English.

The students here have what is called a "home language". TSC is the home language of most of the students in the Torres Strait. Kalaw Kawaw Ya and Kala Lagaw Ya (KKY/KLY) and Meriam Mir are also spoken and the students are listening to these languages and have their ears tuned into the phonology. Most of the students do not speak English for five years before they come to school. The language they have spoken at home is functional and it serves every purpose to meet their needs. The language is not written down so many of the students have not seen their own language in print. They come from a unique culture and that has shaped their values, attitudes and beliefs (including religious beliefs). It has shaped their lifestyle, family life, social relationships and ideas of appropriate behaviours. Culture and language are strongly linked. Most ESL teachers have a Diploma, which is an extra year's study in the theories of language learning and in the area of teaching the students who have English as their second or third language.

■ Why is the students' English not improving in my school?

This is the most common phrase that I hear. After speaking with many teachers who have been teaching in the Strait for a number of years it is evident that there has been an improvement in this area but like all areas of education we are striving to improve outcomes. The students are bright, and naturally have a flair for languages, so I am confident that by building on existing good practice in some of the excellent schools, English will improve.

The programs will be strengthened when the students are recognised as ESL students and there is professional development for all new teachers. Competence in English is dependent on a number of factors. The English language learning environment, as well as the amount of appropriate support provided by the school, are critical. Other important factors include the extent of the English language environment which students have access to outside their school and the level of support for English language development which parents or other family members are able to provide.

Students' attitudes towards their English language development are also important and are influenced by themselves as English users. The community members do value English and they see it as the language of

choices and empowerment. The students have exposure to television and videos so English is in the home, but they are not familiar with academic English or the English for learning. They learn playground English and community English. Some teachers hear this and think the students have a good command of English - we call this "transparency" - but the fact still remains that the students generally do not speak English at home. Appropriate support in a school must mean that all educators have the opportunity to get professional development on ESL teaching.

There is a package called Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), which should be in all schools. It includes readings and exercises and, on the completion of the course, the teacher is entitled to credits towards a Masters degree. I would like to encourage teachers to complete the course as it helps to assist all teachers in teaching students who speak English as their second language.

Schools should have a philosophy on ESL and all staff should be encouraged to revisit the ESL national policy document and the *Partners for success* document that has just recently been distributed.

■ We need learning support teachers in Torres Strait

As much as we value all teachers' contributions, it is worth nothing that ESL is unrelated to learning support. The students do not have learning difficulties. In fact they have developed a part of their brain which we have not: they code switch, alternate between languages, which is a cognitive skill. Short term memory, adaptive behaviours, and hearing problems are a part of all schools, *but* if a student is having difficulty in grasping English then it is *not* a learning difficulty. My son took Indonesian for three years at high school and he scored 3% in his exam. He never had a learning difficulty. A principal in this region was telling me he could not learn another language at school but he now has a degree in science. He did not have a learning difficulty. Maybe some students do not have a flair for languages, maybe the interest is not there - there could be many reasons why, but it is no reason to have a student appraised or ascertained. In a school in Townsville the students from Torres Strait were put into a learning support unit, as they had accents and were not tuned into the language of a big high school.

■ TSC is broken English

Some teachers say that Torres Strait Creole is just "broken English" and the students need to be taught how to speak correctly. But TSC is a valid language and this should be valued at a community and a school level. It is in its fifth generation of speakers, is descended from forms of Pacific Island Pidgin English brought into the Strait in the 1860s by foreign marine workers and creolised around the turn of the century. To many people it is not considered a "proper"

language but it is the young people's *lingua franca*.

TSC is a separate language from SAE, since it has a different phonological, grammatical and semantic structure. About 85% of the vocabulary has come from English but the English-derived words do not necessarily sound or mean the same as their sources. The TSC's superficial similarity to English causes particular problems for students and teachers, both Islander and European. What is necessary is to make explicit these differences. Throughout the next three days we will be planning for the explicit teaching of English.

■ Why shouldn't the language of the children be banned from the school?

Some teachers believe that by banning the students' language from the school they will learn English more quickly. However, the mother tongue plays an important role in an ESL learner's development. ESL researchers maintain that a student's second language is only as good as the first. It can support the children's learning English as a second language, particularly during those beginning years at school. Most kindergarten children who enter school with little or no English are, by necessity, expected to learn within the confines of a very limited range of language - their current level of development in English. These children have full capacity for learning but in an English-only class they are without the language which will allow them to do so. In this situation their cognitive and conceptual development may be slowed down or hampered while they are acquiring sufficient fluency in English. There are many reasons to continue with the mother tongue or the primary language in the classroom:

- To continue conceptual development
- To help provide a social-emotional environment in which the basic conditions for learning can occur
- To maintain confidence and self-esteem, because use of the first language is a signal that the class accepts the child. A cycle of failure established at this time is hard to break as the student moves through the school.
- To build on a learner's competencies and abilities. Ignoring a student's mother tongue is wasteful, because it is ignoring a skill, a resource that they bring to school. This is not sound practice.

■ Why can't the children understand more about what they read?

I have heard a few of the students read and their graphophonic skills are impressive - in fact, the best I have ever heard, so teachers are very skilled in teaching this specific area of reading. However, reading is an active process and it involves reasoning. The model which we have been using here is known as the "bottom up" method, where the student processes print from letter, to word, to sentence, to whole text. This "bottom up" theory led to

reading schemes that focused on phonics in the initial stages of learning to read. Reading is an interactive process involving interaction between the text and the reader. A fluent reader predicts, confirms and rejects, looks at texts critically. Prediction is made on the basis of the three systems, semantic, syntactic and graphophonic.

■ Why, if the local creole is so much like English, do we need special programs in English?

Anna Shnukal was an academic linguist who researched the language differences between TSC and SAE. She concluded that only a minority of Islanders in Torres Strait speak English as their first language and that school was often the only context in which students are expected to understand, speak and write in English. Shnukal goes on to say that TSC superficially resembles English and many teachers assume that the students should be able to cope with English. However, students are continually translating from English to Creole and vice versa and are often embarrassed when called on to perform in English. Teachers with a practical experience of communicating in a modern European language, which should be grammatically and semantically close to English than English is to TSC, will recall their frustrations and empathise with the difficulties faced by the students. She also says that to learn through a foreign language, as our students do, is to immediately lose 30 IQ points and half of one's sense of self.

■ Conclusion

In concluding I would like to mention that I have only touched on a few issues. I have been quite negative in my comments. I am also aware of the many successes in schools and I believe we should be building on these best practices. After this workshop I do hope all of us will succeed in addressing these issues through discussing and planning. I wish you a productive and enjoyable conference.

■ About the author

Susan Shepherd trained as an ESL teacher in New Zealand and has taught across many language groups and cultures for 25 years in France, England, Britain, New Zealand, Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory, Torres Strait Islands and China. For seven years she lived on Groote Eylandt and taught English to the Anindilyakwa language group, all of whom spoke two, three or four languages. As an ESL practitioner in the Northern Territory her role was to put programs into place to address the EFL issue, train teachers working in the schools and mentor trained Aboriginal teachers who spoke three languages fluently. In 2000 she was appointed as the ESL advisor for Education Queensland in Torres Strait. Sue is now head of an English school in South China Normal University in Guangzhou Province in China.

