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Language in Learning at Thursday Island High School¹

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Background, Objectives and Method

Last year I was approached by the Thursday Island High School in Torres Strait to analyse the major linguistic differences between Standard English and Torres Strait Creole — the language of the majority of the students — insofar as these affect the students' comprehension and production of written English texts. In this, the High School was responding to a request by its Management Committee and general concern about the students' acquisition of English literacy.

Torres Strait Creole has many names, among them Broken, Blaikman, Ailan Tok and Pizin and it is the *lingua franca* or shared language of Torres Strait Islanders everywhere. It arose at the turn of the century among the children of Pacific Islander and other immigrant fathers and Torres Strait Islander mothers, who adopted their fathers' own *lingua franca*, Pacific Pidgin English, as their native language, thus creolising it. It quickly spread throughout the Strait, indexing a new social and cultural pan-Islander identity (Shnukal, 1988). It is a sister language to Papuan New Guinea Tok Pisin, Vanuatu Bislama, and Solomon Islands Pijin and today is the first language of most of the students at Thursday Island schools. The other Torres Strait languages are Meriam Mir (eastern islands) and Kala Lagaw Ya/Kalaw Kawaw Ya

(western islands), which belong to different language families and are mutually unintelligible.

My tasks were to:

- carry out a linguistic analysis of oral forms of Torres Strait Creole currently spoken by adolescents on Thursday Island
- compare linguistically Torres Strait Creole with written forms of Standard Australian English
- write a report of the findings to be used as a basis for developing workshop materials in a form suitable for teachers.

My way of going about this was to hold informal conversations with Islander and European teachers and other education professionals at the Thursday Island High School, State School and TAFE, and with advisers, tutors and RATEP students at the School Support Centre, as well as participate in conversations with Torres Strait Creole speakers. I also formally analysed written English work by Year 8-11 High School students.

Students' Language Background

Incoming teachers are often not aware that Islander culture is still predominantly an oral one and all important knowledge is transmitted orally and in context through the medium of an Islander language. **Written** communication, however, is generally in English, the language of school instruction, despite the current availability of much written material, including dictionaries and grammars, in all three Islander languages.

Islander students come to the High School with a wide range of language and literacy backgrounds and competencies. The majority of eastern, central

¹ This paper is a shortened version of a 40-page consultancy report on the Torres Strait Creole Project, Thursday Island High School, written for the Thursday Island High School. It appears with the kind permission of the school. The research which led to the report was funded by the Queensland Department of Education, Peninsula Region, and carried out on Thursday Island by the author between 13 November and 9 December 1995. The bulk of the report deals with linguistic differences between Torres Strait Creole and Australian English, which are briefly summarised here.

and lower western island students are first-language speakers of either the eastern or western dialects of Torres Strait Creole (TSC), as are the children raised on Thursday, Hammond, Horn and Prince of Wales Islands, whereas the top western island students (from Saibai, Dauan and Boigu) are generally first-language speakers of Kala Kawaw Ya (KKY), a dialect of Kala Lagaw Ya (KLY), the traditional language of Mabuiag and Badu and a member of the Australian language family. Most Murray Island students also have knowledge of the traditional eastern language, Meriam Mir, a Papuan language.

Only a minority of Islander high school students speak English as their first language. (In a report for the Queensland Education Department based on 1994 primary and secondary school enrolment statistics, I estimated that 97.5% of the Torres Strait and Cape York school students spoke English as a second or third language.) Many factors affect the level of students' oral and written English and as a result their competencies vary widely.

School is generally the only context in which students are expected to understand, speak and write in Standard Australian English (SAE). Decontextualised written material may appear to lack any practical purpose and therefore students have no incentive to try to understand it. Nor do all students necessarily expect that a given text will make sense.

Students have a far greater passive knowledge of English than even ten years ago and this exposure will undoubtedly increase. They are also regularly exposed to a wider range of oral language varieties on Thursday Island than in mainstream communities, including different dialects of the western island traditional language, different dialects of the Creole, Standard Australian English, Non-Standard Australian English, Torres Strait English (see endnote), Aboriginal English and, through television and videos, varieties of American and British English. I mention these to indicate the extraordinarily rich language mix that Islander students regularly cope with. They do this largely unconsciously: rarely are they explicitly made aware of all the different language varieties around them or taught the differences among them. However, most Islanders are highly successful language learners and have a lively interest in language that manifests itself in puns (often multilingual) and other wordplay. Most have

developed strategies which allow them to appear more competent in English than is actually the case.

Non-Standard Australian English and Torres Strait English have a greater influence on students' acquisition of English than does the Standard Australian English of the classroom. Students are more often exposed to non-standard (and therefore stigmatised) Australian English grammatical forms such as past tense *done* and *seen*, than their standard forms *did* and *saw*, respectively; they are more likely to hear non-standard agreement *you was / they was* than standard *you were / they were*; the non-standard plural demonstrative article *them boys* than *those boys*. These are also features of Torres Strait English and students tend to reproduce them in their speech and writing.

TSC, although influenced by English, is a separate language, with a different grammar and lexicon. Because it superficially resembles English, teachers assume that the students should be able to cope easily with English. However, students say they are continually translating from English into the Creole and *vice versa* and are often embarrassed when called on to perform in English. Teachers with practical experience of communicating in a modern Indo-European language, such as French, Italian, Spanish or German, which would be closer grammatically and semantically to English than English is to TSC, will recall their frustration and empathise with the difficulties faced by their students. They will not be surprised that students use the Creole amongst themselves in class, to clarify instructions and explanations, to joke and to reclaim their identity. It has been claimed that to speak in a foreign language is immediately to lose 30 IQ points and half of one's sense of self.

Functions of the Thursday Island Languages

The functions of the three major Thursday Island languages, KLY/KKY, TSC and English, are distinct, although the last two are tending to overlap in more domains than previously and to gain functions at the expense of the first.

KLY/KKY

KLY/KKY mark the traditional context and on Thursday Island tend to be used more by middle-

aged and older people than by adolescents, though it is the home language of many Badu, Mabuiag and Kubin students and the mother tongue of newly-arrived high school students from the top western islands, Saibai, Dauan and Boigu.

TSC

Now into its fifth generation of speakers, TSC has a more problematic status than either KLY/KKY or English: because of its mixed origin, it is not considered a 'proper language'. However it has emerged as the regional and young people's *lingua franca*, the language of Islander as opposed to European identity, of the high school playground and increasingly of the classroom, and has replaced the traditional languages on a majority of islands. In recent years it has expanded its use into domains in which it was once rarely heard: government offices, church, radio, Bible translation, posters, advertisements, T-shirts, and it has acquired an orthography, grammar and dictionary. These factors have given it a legitimacy it previously lacked.

It is sometimes still claimed that TSC is merely a non-standard variety of English, despite linguistic and socio-linguistic evidence to the contrary. TSC has different phonological, grammatical and semantic structures from English (Shnukal, 1982), but these are constantly being influenced by English, just as Torres Strait English (TSE) is influenced by the Creole. About 85% of its vocabulary is borrowed from English (the remainder from Torres Strait and Pacific languages, Portuguese, Tagalog and Indonesian) but English-derived words do not necessarily sound or mean the same as their sources. For example, *an* (from *hand*) means 'lower arm and hand'; *leig* (from *leg*) means 'lower leg and foot'; *si* (from *sea*) means 'wave', whereas 'sea, ocean' is *solwata* (from *salt water*); *swim* (from *swim*) means 'to wash oneself, bathe, shower'; *angkel* (from *uncle*) refers only to 'father's brother' — 'mother's brother' is *awa*; *tize* (from *tease*) covers a range of behaviours from verbal to physical abuse, harassment and bullying; *spostu* (from *supposed to*) is used only of an event that did not occur as planned. These 'mismatches in meaning' are a source of miscommunication and may inadvertently promote stereotypes. Teachers may conclude, for example, that their students are unable to differentiate cognitively between 'leg' and 'foot': 'the kids always write "leg" when they mean "foot"'. In fact, all the Islander languages

make extraordinarily fine distinctions about natural world phenomena which have cultural value, but these distinctions are not necessarily those of English. Even more worrying is that conclusions about students' morality are sometimes drawn from these 'mismatches in meaning': on one outer island a student was accused of lying, because he'd obviously not had time to 'swim' during the recess period. The Creole's superficial similarity to English causes particular problems for students and teachers, both Islander and European. What is necessary is to make explicit some of the differences.

English

English is seen predominantly as the language of powerful European institutions: education, mainstream media, the courts and the bureaucracy. It is almost exclusively the language of writing and for many students is an alien and difficult language.

Despite current overwhelming support for education in English, there have recently been calls for the abandonment or curtailment of English instruction as the Strait moves closer to regional autonomy in education. At present these come from a small minority of Thursday Islanders, who have become disillusioned by the relatively poor outcomes in English literacy. Instruction (and examination) in English, the 'whiteman's language' will undoubtedly become an increasingly important political issue over the next decade as calls for self-government intensify. However, acquisition of English and participation in the State education system are still seen as politically and economically important by the majority of Islander parents and teachers. Educational theorists like Martin Nakata, despite reservations about the way English is taught, nevertheless recognise its value. In a recent article, Nakata (1995: 21) wrote:

to communicate with the rest of the world [we] Islanders need to use the language they have formed for us, and thus their perspectives. Without their language and perspectives we risk not making ourselves understood in their context. Inadequate use of them, which is often the case, can mean that we lay our views open to the logics of their world view, and in turn lay ourselves open to misinterpretation, ridicule, and setbacks.

English literacy, for Nakata, is a way to 'access Western knowledges and manage our own lifeworlds in the changing economies of the technological era' (Nakata, 1995: 23).

Thus, at the macro-level, there is general agreement on the importance of teaching English. However, at the micro-level, many families hold conflicting views, aware that their academically successful children will almost certainly leave the region for the mainland. A relatively new development for adolescent males (though not females) is to reject the use of English — an overt cultural and political statement about English as a symbol of European identity, knowledge, lifeways and control and a covert acknowledgement of their failure to achieve academically in English.

Contemporary Thursday Island TSC

The TSC spoken by the high school population on Thursday Island is rapidly evolving. It is spoken more quickly by the students than by their parents and Western language voice setting and intonation predominate. A more English-like pronunciation of individual words has become the norm, and new sounds have been introduced. Without a thorough analysis I cannot be sure whether these new sounds are phonemic or merely variants of the original phonemes; student errors in English suggest the latter.

TSC is marked by great variability in pronunciation and it is not unusual to hear different pronunciations of the same word from the one speaker on a single occasion. In older people's TSC, the only fricatives were *s*, *z*: today's adolescents have added the English fricatives *f*, *v*, *th* (*thin*), *dh* (*then*), *sh*, *zh* (*measure*), *ch*, *dj* (*budge*). The vowel values are also approaching their English values and now include English schwa (the unstressed initial vowel in *among*, *about*): while older people might pronounce the perfective aspect marker as *pinis*, with *i* midway between the vowel sounds in *feet* and *fit*. Thursday Island adolescents almost universally pronounce it *finish*, with initial and final fricatives, *f* and *sh*, and with a vowel sound much closer to *fit* than to *feet*. Similarly the verb 'catch', which used to be pronounced *kese* with an *e* vowel close to *fed*, is now pronounced almost exactly like *catch*. Neither the vowel sound of *catch* nor the final *tch* occurs in older people's Creole — 'the kids now are more sophisticated than before; they laugh at pronunciations like *shellfish* for *selfish*, whereas a decade ago they wouldn't have known'.

More rapid adolescent speech has brought changes typical of what some people call 'lazy speech', the kinds of elisions that occur when words are run together, e.g. *gotcha* for *got you*, *didja* for *did you*. In TSC a number of vowel elisions are now almost universal, e.g. the pronunciation of *ble(m)* for *blo em*. Final nasals *-m* and *-n* are usually omitted and the final vowel nasalised, e.g. *wane(m)* 'what', *ose(m)* or even *wose(m)* (from *olsem* 'like'), *bi(n)* 'past tense marker'. Adolescent speakers increasingly omit one consonant of a consonant cluster in high frequency words like *o(l)se(m)* 'like' and *s(p)ik* 'say'. Once bisyllabic words like *deya* 'there' and *dowa* 'door' are now invariably pronounced as single syllables, *de* and *do*.

The grammar of TSC appears to have changed less radically, although the progressive aspect with *-ing* is being introduced, as in *wiswei yu going*, which would be *wiswei yu go* in older people's Creole. The transitive marker *-e/-i*, once categorical on all but a small number of transitive verbs, is often dropped, e.g. *Spaida go get yu* 'A spider will get you'. *Bi(n)*, which was once only a past tense marker, is now being used as a copula verb as in English, e.g. *Em go bi de* 'He will be there'. The predicate marker *I* is now used only in impersonal and existential sentences, i.e. where it occurs at the beginning of sentences, e.g. *I ren nau* 'It's raining'; *I gad smol boi de* 'There's a child over there'.

Moreover, the language is constantly admitting new vocabulary, innovating from its own lexical resources and from English varieties (increasingly American Black English via films, songs and magazines, and Aboriginal English).

Language Mixing

Bilingual individuals world-wide tend to mix languages (code-switch) when talking with other bilinguals. Studies of code-switching reveal that it is governed by complex rules, which are sensitive to a number of factors: speaker relationship, relative status, salient identity, setting, linguistic structure and language mastery, among others. Islander students who code-switch between English and TSC are often not aware that they are mixing languages: they choose whatever code best

expresses their intended conceptual and relational meaning. They do try to speak English in class, but are often unclear about the boundaries between the two languages. While the school should probably attempt to make explicit some of those boundaries, given time and greater mastery of both languages, the students themselves will set parameters. However, code-switching will always be an option for bilinguals to expand their linguistic repertoires, especially when the languages concerned share a long history. It may not be possible to keep the two languages fully separate in speech, though writing is a different matter. However, the school — after consultation with teachers and students — might decide to adopt a policy specifying the classroom contexts in which either or both languages may be used. There is at present no agreement on this among the teachers I spoke to. For some, TSC was used to introduce and begin the discussion of concepts; for others this was anathema; others have no bilingual competence in the languages or do not recognise existing linguistic barriers to learning.

Formal Differences Between TSC and English

Most beginning high school students have acquired reasonable oral mastery of basic English constructions and vocabulary, though the standard varies according to the background. Written English is a different matter. Students find writing much more difficult than listening and speaking, citing difficulties with 'the little words that go in the wrong place'. Unstressed word endings, prepositions and auxiliary verbs tend to disappear in Australian English speech, but cannot be omitted in written work. This mismatch between oral and written English goes largely unnoticed by native literate speakers, but constitutes a problem for English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers, who are at the same time learning both English grammar and subject content from teachers who rarely model English explicitly.

Students often do not read or pronounce noun and verb endings even when they occur on the page, presumably because TSC lacks these endings and TSE variably includes them. When Islander students read back their own written work, they may not even notice their mistakes, because it reproduces their spoken English. Or they may

insert word endings that are absent from their written work and, if corrected, say that these are unimportant because the meaning is clear.

Generally speaking, TSC has a simpler structure than English — it has few irregularities and very little morphology, i.e. it has no endings for plural, past tense or past participle and lacks the predominantly written constructions, e.g. passive and subordinate clauses, which English gradually developed over one thousand years as a language of literacy. To communicate nuances of meaning in what is essentially an oral language, TSC speakers use home island language vocabulary, constantly changing idiom and in-group reference, as well as gesture, facial expression and an accompanying complex sign language with its own long history and regional variation.

However, in some ways TSC is more structurally complex than English. Its personal pronoun system, with three numbers (singular, dual and plural) and formal distinction between inclusive and exclusive first person pronouns, is more complicated than English; it has two ways of asking *why?*, distinguishing cause from purposes; two ways of asking *how?*, distinguishing manner from direction; two ways of asking *which?*, distinguishing humans from non-humans; it has six aspects, whereas English has only two; its spatial grammar of location and direction has only impoverished English equivalents; it morphologically distinguishes transitive from intransitive verbs. However, while you can say anything in TSC that you can say in English and *vice versa*, the languages privilege different things. English, especially the English for the classroom, uses a rich vocabulary derived from Norman French, Latin and Greek; TSC uses a rich vocabulary derived from the traditional island languages to talk about the natural world and matters of cultural importance, but these generally have no place in the classroom, e.g. *kutikuti* 'to dive, swim under water for a while and then surface'. TSC innovates internally, using its own resources to express Latinate vocabulary, e.g. *aute* (from *out*) 'to extinguish'; *pute insaid* 'to insert'.

It should be emphasised that spoken and written English are not the same. Although written English is based on spoken English, different conventions apply in the choice of vocabulary and constructions, and in the organisation and sequencing of ideas.

Punctuation was developed as a device to show grammatical structure: to mark possessive nouns; to make explicit the ends of clauses and sentences; and to show when a letter has been omitted from a word. From its primary purpose of making written sentence structure explicit comes its secondary purpose as an aid to intonation.

The students' written work indicates that a major source of error in English is the production of incorrect noun and verb inflectional endings, although it also reveals difficulties with English clause construction and subordination, punctuation, sequencing and acquisition of vocabulary, as well as residual problems with pronunciation and comprehension.

English, though not TSC, indicates noun plurality and possession, verb past tense, and verb perfective and progressive aspect by word endings, the inflectional suffixes *-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*. TSC indicates the same grammatical functions by means of analytic grammatical markers, which precede the word they modify but which may be omitted if the context makes the meaning clear. There are few irregular nouns or verbs in TSC.

<i>man</i>	man
<i>dem man</i>	men (definite)
<i>ol man</i>	Men (in general)
<i>em luk</i>	he/she sees
<i>em bin luk</i>	he/she saw
<i>em go luk</i>	he/she will see
<i>em pinis luk</i>	he/she has seen

Looked at objectively, most of the students' common errors in written English occur as a result of transference from their first language, or in areas of grammatical complexity, which typically pose problems of ESL learners, such as the use of definite and indefinite articles, copula *be* as a linking verb and negative, passive, relative and backshifted clauses. The construction of subordinate clauses in general appears to be a problem and students avoid them. There are a number of subordinate clause types in TSC but the rules for forming them are different from English rules of grammar. Prepositional usage is also different and students tend to translate from TSC in this regard. Islander students have no problems working from a more complicated to a less complicated system, e.g. from TSC to SAE transitive verbs. Their difficulties arise in working from a

less complicated to a more complicated system, e.g. from TSC to SAE noun and verb forms and in clause constructions not present in TSC, like passive and backshifting.

Certain common spelling errors also seem to be a result of transference from TSC. TSC has fewer significant sounds than English and its only phonemic fricatives appear still to be *s, z*. Spelling English fricatives and affricates, e.g. *h, f, v, th, sh, ch, j* can be difficult for students whose language lacks them. With only five vowels to English twelve, TSC-speakers may have problems in differentiating between English long and short vowels, e.g. between *live/leave* and *heart/hut*. TSC permits few consonant clusters at the ends of words, whereas the inflectional endings of English, which show grammatical relations within the clause, often result in consonant clusters. Students tend to omit the final consonant in speech in conformity with the sound structure of their own language, and reproduce, for example, plural nouns without *-s* and past tense verbs without *-ed*.

Moreover, the students receive unsystematic input for their English language learning, because they are exposed to a number of different English standard and non-standard varieties, and because many consonants disappear or are weakened even in SAW speech. This does not affect native English speakers, who have long since learned the rules of their language; for Islander children, many of whom have not received a thorough grounding in English, this unsystematic input and the lack of explicit modelling or explanation of the intricacies of English grammar add yet another impediment to mastery of English.

TSC, like other creoles, tends to gain new vocabulary through its own resources, either adding another function to an existing word (as English does when it uses a noun, e.g. *title*, as a verb), so that nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs have exactly the same form in TSC; or devising a new compound word or phrase, e.g. *amagel* (from 'grandmother' + 'girl') meaning 'girl named after her grandmother' or *an blo krab* (from 'hand belong crab') meaning 'pincer'. It also borrows from other varieties of English. The tendency always is to 'break down' complex and Latinate vocabulary into already existing language elements, e.g. *ausaid* (from *outside*) 'external, exterior', and teachers must learn to develop this same ability, especially for initial explanation. Better to develop good

relationships and leave phrases like 'visual image', 'poetic imagery', 'literate citizen' for later classes.

Beyond Formal Differences

Beyond the technical mastery of English grammar and pronunciation lie two even more difficult areas: (1) idiom, the non-literal use of language; and (2) the construction of written texts using complex rules of sequencing and signposting, developing a central idea or argument, anticipating audience reaction at each stage of the process, and expressing one's own 'writer's voice'.

Idiom

Idiom is so pervasive in English speech and writing that native English-speakers are almost entirely oblivious of its use, unless the effect is humorous, e.g. *The rebel MP Graeme Campbell finds himself in the soup and gets himself canned*. Even when Islander students manage to cope with new and more complex vocabulary, they still have difficulties with idiom, despite knowing every word in a given phrase, e.g. *to rain cats and dogs; to go to the dogs; to throw in the towel; to be game for / to do something* — 'There's no game in this book', students objected when the phrase first appeared. The condom ad: *If it's not on, it's not on* puzzled and then delighted students, when the idiom was explained. High school students, however, tend not to ask for explanations and idiomatic expressions can interfere with comprehension and shake confidence.

Construction

As to the complex task of structuring a written text, the primacy of oral tradition means that Islander students may not know how to write for an audience which does not share the same background knowledge. But how can the students imagine to themselves what an unseen audience knows or does not know, when their life experiences may be quite limited and they have not been introduced to other ways of thinking through literature or travel? What strategies are they taught to use in order to orientate other readers unknown to them? Students in effect transcribe stories as they would speak them, without developing the ability to separate the two modes — to distance themselves from the spoken language and enter the realm of the written.

This is similar to the phenomenon of incomplete or fragmentary sentences. Students often begin a

sentence but have difficulty in finishing it. This may be because they are uncertain about the actual English construction needed or because they assume that the reader knows or can reconstruct the rest from the context.

It should, however, be possible to teach with examples some simple rules of sequencing and cohesion. One problem is that most of us have learned to write connected, logically sequenced and signposted text so long ago that we have forgotten how we learned it and can no longer make explicit the strategies we use.

Stories written in English are conventionally said to consist of three parts: a beginning (which provides a setting and characters); middle (which narrates some problem or conflict and is the reason for the story being told); end (which resolves the problem in some way). This is true also of Torres Strait stories, as can be seen in the traditional myths and legends collected and translated by Margaret Lawrie (1970). Torres Strait stories also conventionally have beginnings, middles and ends and storytellers use a number of linguistic strategies to indicate the beginning and end of a story, e.g. the words *wantaim* 'once upon a time' and *pinis* 'the end'. During the narrative, they may use certain grammatical constructions or words like *nau* to focus on particular clause elements or show length of time of an action, when these are important to the story line. They also use adjectives like *seim* 'same' to track the story's characters, and adverbs like *nau* 'now' and *orait* 'alright' to shape and sequence the 'paragraphs' of the spoken narrative. It may be possible to use written island stories to make explicit the focusing and sequencing strategies used by their authors and translate them into their English equivalents.

Other Issues of Classroom Management

Thursday Island High School takes students from Thursday Island and outer island primary schools. Teachers must therefore deal with students speaking a number of different language varieties and with very different levels of oral and written English. They are in effect teaching larger than optimal ESL classes without ESL training or resources. These difficulties are compounded by cultural and linguistic differences.

My consultancy was designed to deal with the linguistic differences between English and TSC, especially those which impact adversely on the acquisition of English literacy. While at the high school, I was also asked to mention briefly some socio-cultural barriers to the learning of and through English in the classroom. The following notes were made on the basis of conversations with teachers. I fully endorse the High School's practice of using Islander teachers and RATEP students to in-service new teachers about cultural differences and acculturation — it was suggested that all teachers might profitably attend these workshops.

From my observation, three basic principles of traditional Torres Strait society are particularly relevant to classroom management:

- kinship is the basis of society and social relationships override other considerations, no matter what the context. Rules of kinship govern good behaviour (knowing how to address and behave in the presence of kinfolk, showing respect for them, making oneself less noticeable when in the presence of older relatives, etc.)
- knowledge is given, not constructed and not questioned. Mainstream schools are in the business of teaching students how to construct knowledge bases, add to them, question them and manipulate them.
- knowledge is not given freely and knowledge which is given to many is considered less valuable than knowledge given to very few. There are restrictions on what a person is allowed to know. Older people make decisions to impart particular knowledge to certain, usually related, individuals who have proved themselves worthy.

From this it follows that it is not considered good manners to ask for explanations of things that older people tell you or to question them either about the knowledge itself or the source of the knowledge. Similarly, there is reluctance to admit you don't know something that you are expected to know.

Shame is often mentioned as a reason for not coming forward when called upon in the classroom. *Sem* 'shame' is said to be a mixture of

embarrassment and discomfort caused by one's own behaviour or that of someone for whom one is responsible. The shame comes when other people know and talk about one's unconventional behaviour. Whenever Islander children are singled out from their peers, made to feel different, or act in a way contrary to expected behaviour, this occasions feelings of shame. The school practice of focusing on the most successful students makes many students uncomfortable. As long as they are



all progressing at the same level, this is felt to be right, and 'it is natural for them to help each other and find a comfortable medium'. Conversely, students who are slow to learn, or to grasp new concepts and information, or who are not ready to express their knowledge in English, feel uncomfortable when they are blamed and focused on in the classroom. A number of teachers mentioned 'wait time', i.e. giving children time to answer a question, rather than 'rushing to the next person'. This is not to say that individual Islanders are uncompetitive; but it is more socially acceptable to excel as a member of a team. This

suggests that group work, with rotation of tasks, may have more successful learning outcomes than individual work.

Another possibly relevant matter is a reluctance openly to discuss or hypothesise about one's own or other people's motives or to speak on others' behalf (unless one has the right by virtue of seniority, kinship or other authority). Past events and other people's actions are discussed and reflected upon and traditional stories explicitly and implicitly teach correct behaviour, but in my experience people feel uncomfortable talking about their own and other people's motivations, especially in English with unfamiliar white people. Many aspects of Islander life are kept private and discussed with only a few intimates. This again runs counter to the goals of much classroom discussion.

Although traditionally Torres Strait culture has been an oral one, today many parents read to their children and encourage them to read. As was pointed out, families are different: in some families children are encouraged to talk, to sing and to express themselves verbally — *I gad plenti yan insaid* 'There's a lot of talking and telling stories

going on' — and these children have an advantage at school, no matter what the home language; in others the children are not encouraged to talk or to express themselves and these children begin school with a disadvantage. Teachers should also be aware that in some communities the children of particular families are encouraged and expected to perform well at school, whereas the children of other families are expected to do badly — and the children will do their best to fulfil expectations.

Teachers complain that their students' poor general knowledge makes texts difficult to understand, even when the meaning of every word is known, and say they find it difficult to interest senior students in ethical issues which engage mainlanders, such as unemployment, nuclear arms and the environment. The anthropologist, Jeremy Beckett, has characterised much of the history of Islander-European contact as 'internal colonialism'. For many decades Islanders were segregated from mainstream Australia, minimally educated, and kept largely ignorant of and powerless to affect the economic and political events and trends which impacted on their lives. Hence their reluctance (though this is changing) to concern themselves with outside events, believing they cannot change them, that they might not properly understand them, that as Islanders they would not be listened to anyway, and that speaking out might leave them open to criticism for making fools of themselves.

Islanders often say that literacy and numeracy have to be put into meaningful context, that they must see some practical sense of what is being taught and literacy tasks must be appropriate to some wider context. 'Teachers need to target skills where students need to use those skills, the application of the skills must be clear from the outset, and then you can tackle theory'. They characterise Islander thinking as holistic, European thinking as linear. Thus, 'they are all the time assessing information and putting it into a wide picture: theory can't be isolated, because people will always be thinking: how does it all fit into a large area?' The task for the teacher, then is to present an overall picture before tackling its parts and translating the abstract into the concrete. (This learning mode is not unique to Islanders: the search for the whole is claimed by some philosophers to be the motivating force in all science, art and poetry.)

Conclusion

Returning to the discussion of linguistic differences between TSC and English and their impact on literacy, it is apparent that the kinds of errors which are usually mentioned by teachers and which appear in the students' written work have three main sources:

- influence from the students' primary language, Torres Strait Creole, on e.g. singular third person pronoun gender; on the production of English inflectional endings: noun plurals, past tense, progressive and past participles; and therefore on correct subject-verb agreement
- English constructions which typically pose problems for non-native English speakers, e.g. relative clauses, back-shifting, choice of prepositions
- hypercorrection, i.e. using a rule in more contexts than are required.

I would suggest that students be taught how to analyse the major word categories of noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition and conjunction, and how each basic clause in both English and TSC consists of subject and predicate. There should also be explicit modelling with examples for a range of clauses (copula, existential, modal, conditional, passive, negative and interrogative — all of which occur in TSC) and ways in which main clauses can be conjoined or subordinated to make explicit their semantic connection of time, place, cause, condition, result, purpose or relation. Teachers should explicitly model those areas of morphology which cause the majority of written errors, and build up general and technical vocabulary, encouraging students to discuss the differences in meaning between English and TSC.

The 'whole language' approach to literacy is based on a fallacy: that acquisition of literacy, like language, is a biological phenomenon and therefore will emerge naturally provided there is no impediment. Literacy, however, consists of a range of skills that must be taught explicitly and practised often, using a range of techniques. Literacy in English, for students who have learned the language imperfectly, poses particular challenges to teachers, most of whom have not been trained for the task. Moreover, technical mastery of English is merely one part of the complex task of writing clearly and expressively in English for a wider

audience. Other factors, historical, sociocultural and psychological, as well as literary, determine successful English literacy outcomes.

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Endnote: Torres Strait English

There exists no formal description of Torres Strait English, which may be viewed either as a regional non-standard variety of Australian English, centred on Thursday Island, or more accurately as an ethnic non-standard variety of Australian English, spoken mainly by both homeland and mainland Torres Strait Islanders.

I include some brief notes here for information, based on the speech of people who participated in the 5th National Torres Strait Islander workshop/seminar in Brisbane at the end of 1995. Teachers will notice that the non-standard written forms produced by their students are often typical of Torres Strait English.

Torres Strait English is not the same as Torres Strait Creole, though it has clearly been influenced by both the Creole and the traditional Torres Strait languages. This phenomenon was summed up for me recently by a colleague, Victor Hart, who said of the excellent English spoken by his relatives at Hopevale: 'I can hear the shadow of the language'.

Torres Strait English is characterised by a number of phonological, grammatical and lexical features, some of which also occur in other non-standard Australian English varieties, others of which are

no doubt unique to it. The voice setting appears to be different from other forms of Australian English, though similar to the other island languages. (Voice setting can be measured by phoneticians using sensitive equipment but is difficult to do. I am referring here to an impressionistic phenomenon.)

Of more interest here are the grammatical and lexical differences between TSE and SAE, because of their impact on literacy. Some of the non-standard features of TSE (which are not necessarily shared by all speakers) are:

Nouns and pronouns

- absence of noun plural affixes, e.g. *We know all our land mark, everything*
- non-agreement between subject and object, e.g. *The cannon is outside the Council Chamber and lie on the side of the shed*
- transposition of 3rd person singular verb ending to singular subject, e.g. *Its mean ... Its happen ...*
- absence of count/non-count distinction, e.g. *informations; Just one bread eh? (- loaf of bread)*
- pronouns, e.g. *Youmpla can't do everything one time; This is a national even which we find it very important*

Articles

- *them issues, them key issues; if we have to speak about the self-government; have meetings with all them communities*

Verbs

- past tense, e.g. *What you been done for us; So that's the resolution be come out from that workshop there; I leave him with my mother when I went to do the shopping*
- future tense, e.g. *Who actually go monitor them outcomes?*
- future tense after time conjunctions *when, before*, e.g. *When he will take me there, I...*

Verb negation

- *but no condemning anything*

Adverbs, prepositions

- *from that seminar now we sit down and discuss everything*
- *Them comments can go inside you; These are the four areas inside that paper; Our child was*

out there, I was scared from him; She had him down Cairns

Grammatical constructions

- *We no belong to sitdown, we belong to fightback.*
- *We need a cultural centre in major centres for practise our culture and to educate the kids*
- *Everytime when holiday comes ...*

Vocabulary

- traditional language vocabulary, e.g. *bethei* 'driftwood'; *sopsop* 'vegetable stew'; *yagar* 'sorry'
- TSC language vocabulary, e.g. *kumala* 'sweet potato'; *youmpla* 'we all'
- English vocabulary with non-English meaning, e.g. *This is not downing you* (= putting you down); *Youmpla can't do everything one time* (= at the same time); *Come here first /one time* (= at once, immediately); *They moved to one side* (= to the other side); *hand* (= hand and lower arm); *leg* (= foot and lower leg)

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