

## **Monitoring Second Language Development using the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners**

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*This paper describes the adaptation of the NLLIA ESL Bandscales to accurately monitor the language and literacy development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners. It describes the issues for taken into consideration when varying the original scales and the proposed intent of the Bandscales for learner assessment.*

### **The Bandscales**

The NLLIA ESL Bandscales were developed in 1993 in response to the need for teachers to have accurate tools for monitoring and describing the proficiency attainment levels of students in English as a Second Language (ESL). These have been used successfully by ESL teachers in Queensland since the mid 1990's. These original Bandscales were created in response to the "need for teachers to have more reliable and accurate ways of measuring and describing the proficiency attainment levels of children in English as a Second Language." (McKay, 1994, p.vi) The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners are based on these NLLIA ESL Bandscales and have been devised using current second language and literacy research as well as advice from a wide range of teachers, education advisors and academics, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Both the NLLIA ESL Bandscales and the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners (Indigenous Bandscales) recognise the cultural and linguistic diversity of students and provide teachers with documents that reflect the language and literacy learning pathways of second language learners. By using the Bandscales documents, teachers are able to efficiently track students' language and literacy development, report on this development and use this knowledge to inform their curriculum planning to respond to the needs of their ESL students.

Within the original publication of the NLLIA ESL Bandscales, McKay (1994, p. A5) queried the applicability of the scales to cater for the needs and language learning contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Whilst the NLLIA ESL Bandscales provide scales of language progression, an adaptation of these scales was required for the following reasons to cater for the specific and unique features of Indigenous ESL learners in Australia:

- (i) Indigenous language varieties
- (ii) diversity of language learning contexts;

- (iii) language identification
- (iv) development of literacies;
- (v) the classroom culture, language and behaviour;
- (vi) social and academic language.

These are explained in more detail:

### **(i) Indigenous Language Varieties.**

European contact in Australia has resulted in the extinction of the majority of approximately 250 traditional Indigenous languages. Whilst some of these language varieties are still strong, in many communities new languages or dialects have emerged. These new varieties include Aboriginal English, and two creole languages, Torres Strait Creole and [Aboriginal] Kriol. These have incorporated features of traditional Indigenous languages, such as pragmatics, syntax, phonology and lexicon to varying degrees.

Both Aboriginal English and the creoles have a vocabulary base of English, which differ semantically from Standard Australian English (SAE). As Aboriginal English dialects and both of the creoles have evolved, the meanings assigned to many vocabulary items have changed and differ from SAE meanings. These meaning changes create potential for miscommunication between creole/Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English speakers. This language similarity or *transparency* may cause difficulties for students and teachers, unless they are both aware of explicit differences between the languages/dialects.

The formal recognition of Torres Strait Creole and Aboriginal English speakers as second or additional language/dialect learners has only recently occurred in Education Queensland (Partners for Success, 2000). In addition to this, the inclusion of these language varieties into the field of second language acquisition is still in its infancy. Whilst ESL strategies are supportive for traditional language speakers in urban settings, additional strategies which focus on issues such as transparency and foreign language teaching need to be addressed to incorporate the diversity of Indigenous language speaking students across Queensland and Australia. The Indigenous Bandscales have incorporated these issues and take an additive approach to language learning, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will learn Standard Australian English more effectively if their home languages are maintained and accepted.

### **(ii) Diversity of Language Learning Contexts**

The second language acquisition research underlying the NLLIA Bandscales was designed for immersion contexts, where immigrant ESL students are immersed in a

SAE-speaking classroom and community environment. The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners need to address the wide range of language learning contexts in which Indigenous students live and study. These contexts include environments where students are learning English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Within these contexts which could be in remote, rural or urban areas, Aboriginal English-speaking students are learning English as a Second Dialect (ESD).

### **(a) Remote Contexts**

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who live in remote communities where the *lingua franca* or language of interaction is Aboriginal English, Torres Strait Creole, Kriol and/or one or more traditional Indigenous languages, active engagement in Standard Australian English (SAE) on a regular basis is limited. In schools within these remote communities, one of these Indigenous language varieties is more likely to be the language of interaction *in the classroom* than SAE. In this English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, students can effectively communicate with members of their class in their Home Language (HL), with the use of Standard Australian English (SAE) for social purposes being somewhat contrived amongst peers.

### **(b) Rural Contexts**

Language contexts in rural areas of Queensland vary, with many communities also being classed as remote. In many rural towns in Queensland, Aboriginal students may use a range of English language varieties, including SAE and Aboriginal English, depending upon the varieties of languages used in the communities and their audience. Indigenous students who are boarding in rural areas are likely to use their home language with their Indigenous peers but interact in other language varieties in school and boarding facilities.

### **(c) Urban Contexts**

The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners recognise the diversity of language learning contexts of Indigenous ESL/ESD students. As well as Indigenous ESL students in rural and remote areas, the Bandscales acknowledge that in urban settings, many language varieties other than Standard Australian English are often spoken as a first language/dialect of Indigenous students. In Queensland, there are large urban populations of Indigenous language variety speakers. In some cities such as Cairns, there are entire suburbs where Torres Strait Creole is the major language of interaction on a daily basis for community members. Likewise, for Aboriginal students in urban settings in Queensland, Aboriginal English may be the *lingua franca* of the home environment. It is also recognised that there are Indigenous

students who speak Standard Australian English in their home environment. The Bandscales are inappropriate for those Indigenous students.

To cater for the varying language learning contexts of Indigenous ESL/ESD students, the Bandscales have been modified to incorporate language development issues specific to the classroom contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. The EFL context in which many Indigenous students interact affects the rate and progression of students' second language development. Because EFL students in rural and remote areas are unlikely to have continual real-life exposure to social SAE and the only environment where they actively engage in SAE will be in the school setting, second language learning is unlikely to occur as quickly as in immersion contexts. The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners recognises this by including additional levels at the lower ends of the scales to enable the monitoring of the finer gradation of language development and student progress. These additional levels also take into account the issue of language transparency for creole and Aboriginal English speakers and the fact that students need to develop awareness of language differences before they can engage in second language learning (Berry & Hudson, 1997, pp.25-32).

The Bandscales researchers recognise that accurate assessment of creole/Aboriginal English speakers at the lower levels of the Bandscales will be difficult for Standard English-speaking teachers. This is because the development of an additional language involves a period of interlanguage, where students experiment with and make gradual approximations to the target language. For traditional language speakers, the distinction between the home language and the target language is obvious, so interlanguage can be identified easily. Teachers can recognise the English words and phrases that the student is using.

When assessing creole/Aboriginal English speakers however, the distinction between interlanguage and language transparency create confusion and can cloud accurate judgements. For example, a teacher without a proficient understanding of the creole-speaking students' first language may not be able to identify whether students are speaking their home language or using interlanguage. To cater for this, the Bandscales recommend the use of competent bilingual adults if monitoring of spoken language is to occur.

### **(iii) Language Identification**

Because of the superficial similarities between SAE and creoles/Aboriginal English, and general lack of understanding of these language varieties, speakers of these languages have often been labelled as speakers of 'slang', 'rubbish' or 'incorrect' English (Shnukal [1992], p.4, Berry & Hudson, [1997], p.8, Malcolm, et.al, [1999], p.2). Subsequent stigma attached to speaking these Indigenous language varieties has

led, in many cases, to denial by speakers of these languages and by educators that these are legitimate and rule-governed languages. These language varieties incorporate Indigenous cultures, values, beliefs, understandings and retain elements of traditional languages which would otherwise have been lost as a result of contact. The denial that these language varieties exist is a dismissal of Indigenous cultures and can lead to teachers imposing remedial approaches to presumed language deficits.

In Torres Strait, formal identification of Torres Strait Creole by the linguist, Shnukal (1983a & b, 1991, 1996), as well as the use of the creole in local government offices, radio, advertisements and elsewhere has led to legitimate acceptance of the language. Because the students' language is accepted, discussions of differences between Torres Strait Creole and SAE are able to occur in classrooms, enabling teachers to focus on the development of the target language through additive approaches.

Education Queensland formally recognises Aboriginal English and Torres Strait Creole speakers as second language learners in recent publications (Hobbs & Murphy, Education Queensland), and attitudes and understandings are changing through professional development initiatives such as "The FELIKS Approach" (Berry & Hudson, 2000). Unfortunately, until widespread education occurs, Indigenous ESL students may be misdiagnosed as students who have learning difficulties rather than students who have language differences. Rather than valuing and adding to the students' linguistic repertoire, the student may be classed as underachieving because teachers have no understanding or experience with modern Indigenous language varieties.

Misdiagnosis of Indigenous ESL students' needs can subsequently affect the appropriacy of support that students may require and may negatively affect the students' attitude to their learning. Referral to intervention programs which remove students from their language-rich classroom may in fact impede language learning progress.

A model of improving literacy outcomes based on the concept of literacy intervention, as opposed to the notion of continuous literacy development of non-Standard-Australian-English-speaking students, creates a deficit approach to teaching. This encourages teachers to have low expectations of these students, with attempts made to 'remedy' a 'fault' rather than develop methods appropriate to continuous literacy learning in a second language context."

(Hobbs & Murphy, 2000, p.29)

The Bandscales aim to raise awareness of teachers to investigate and learn more about the home languages of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and ESL pedagogies, in order to more effectively cater for their needs in the classroom. Raising teachers' awareness of Indigenous language varieties is more likely to overcome possible deficit notions attached to Indigenous ESL students.

The Indigenous Bandscales work on the assumption that students will be involved in age-appropriate tasks of intellectual rigour. In this way, teachers can use the Bandscales to plan the degree to which second language scaffolding will be required in order for students to achieve success with academic tasks.

#### **(iv) Development of Literacies**

The reading and writing sections of the original NLLIA ESL Bandscales focus on the development of print literacy skills as, despite new technologies, the ability to read and write effectively is still essential in government, politics, media, industry, education and commerce in modern society. The high status attached to this print literacy places demands on teachers to employ effective literacy learning practices.

The development of early literacy skills have been included into the beginning levels of the Indigenous Bandscales to cater for students who come from non-print traditions or may have had limited schooling experiences. They identify that these students have strengths, abilities and home literacies that need to be recognised by the teacher and built upon. The Bandscales promote the development of school-community partnerships in order to make connections between home and school literacies.

The Indigenous Bandscales needed to support the intent of the original NLLIA Bandscales and ensure that levels were comparable across the two sets of scales. Additions to the Bandscales reflect current effective curriculum practices and include cultural and linguistic information and some references to multimedia skills. As pedagogies expand to include the teaching of new literacies, it is envisioned that the Indigenous Bandscales will be adapted to embrace these.

#### **(v) Time factor involved in Second Language development**

The expectation of Australian schooling systems is that Indigenous ESL students will automatically develop literacy skills at the rate expected of their English-only speaking peers. This fails to recognise well-established and accepted ESL research that it takes ESL students a minimum of 5 to 7 years to develop proficiency in a second language (Collier [1987], Cummins [1996]). Recent longitudinal research (Thomas and Collier [1997] p.33) has expanded on this work indicating that immigrant students 'who arrived between ages 8 and 11, who had received at least 2-5 years of schooling taught through their primary language (L1) in their home country, were the lucky ones who took only 5-7 years. Those who arrived before age 8 required 7-10 years or more!'

The Indigenous Bandscales draws from this research, but recognises that no long-term research has occurred in Queensland in the area of second language development for Indigenous students. As such, theories regarding the length of time it takes Indigenous language speaking students to develop proficiency in a second language are speculative. The Bandscales have attempted to incorporate current research findings from the second language acquisition field but are aware that as more specific research occurs, particularly in the pedagogical arena and with regards to more accurate data of Home languages, modifications may need to occur to reflect these findings.

#### **(v) The Classroom Culture, Language and Behaviour**

Within a Western classroom setting, there are unwritten rules about behaviour and interactions that teachers tend to assume students will be aware of. Many of these assumptions are based on Western cultural understandings and this can create unforeseen tensions if teachers are unaware of their students' cultural understandings. For example, in a western style classroom, students are expected to follow teacher directions immediately and take turns in speaking to the teacher. Confusion or teacher retribution can arise if students follow speech patterns that reflect their own cultures' values. Traditionally, in both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, co-operation rather than individual achievement is important and speech acts reflect this. Students often assist one another and respond 'en masse' to teacher questions. Teachers need to develop a solid understanding of features of the students' culture in order to accommodate students' behaviours in the early levels of their second language development and to explicitly teach alternative western behaviours when students are more competent in SAE.

Direct questioning and the use of silence are other features of Indigenous language varieties that can cause miscommunication to occur between teachers and their Indigenous students due to different cultural assumptions. In the case of Aboriginal English speakers, "the customary way of seeking much information is to use an indirect approach – establishing a two-way exchange, volunteering information of their own, and hinting at what they would like to find out." (Queensland Government, 2000). Aboriginal English-speaking students may find direct questions intrusive, or may not know that responses to teacher questions need to be given immediately. Alternatively, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander second language learners may give an immediate response to a question because they have implicitly learned this SAE communication 'rule', but may provide an inappropriate response because they don't yet have enough SAE proficiency to interpret and respond quickly with a correct answer.

The factors of 'shame' or "spotlighting' may discourage both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander second language learners from responding to teachers' questions in

front of the whole class. Alternatively, these students may use silence as a method of resistance to questions perceived as confronting. In the case of some Aboriginal English-speaking students, there may not be awareness that periods of long silence in a conversation may make non-Indigenous people feel uncomfortable.

Being silent and waiting until others are ready to share their knowledge are also central to Aboriginal discourse. Silence is a necessary part of the conversation because communication occurs during silence, and opportunities for silent exchanges are often lost in non-Aboriginal settings". Among non-Aboriginal people, protracted silences can indicate that something is wrong and every effort is made to fill such silences as soon as possible.  
(Queensland Government, p.27)

The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners include some information for teachers about possible cultural miscommunication that may arise because of these assumptions, yet recognise the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. They encourage teachers to engage with and develop partnerships with their Indigenous communities to learn about their local community cultures and their own cultural understandings, which may impact on interactions in order to develop two-way understandings about the languages and cultures of the home and school.

#### **(vi) Social and Academic Language**

Proficiency in second language at school requires the development of both social and academic language. This development is dependent upon the language learning contexts in which students engage. ESL students in immersion contexts generally acquire basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) [or social language] rapidly in response to meeting immediate interpersonal needs. For these students, the development of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) can take years. Initial research by Cummins (1984) and Collier (1989) indicated that ESL learners who are operating under favourable conditions are able to become proficient in BICS in approximately two years and CALP within five to seven years.

A recent study by Thomas and Collier (1997), however, has shown that this length of time is dependent upon the levels of schooling the student has had in their first language. In academic contexts, students with no prior schooling or bilingual support in the home language may take between **seven to ten years** to catch up with their SAE-only speaking peers. For Indigenous language speaking students who are learning English as a Foreign Language, this has major implications.

Students in foreign language speaking environments have no immediate need to speak in the target language unless they are engaged in real-life, purposeful language

events. Because of this, the development of BICS is likely to occur at a slower rate or be delayed until the need arises for this language to be used purposefully.

The development of BICS and CALP does not occur in any specific order, but is dependent upon the language learning context in which the second language (L2) speaking student engages. The NLLIA Bandscales follow a BICS to CALP sequence, as they were designed to reflect the typical progression of immigrant students in immersion contexts. However, it is not the only progression that ESL students take. As Cummins (2000, p.6-7) states,

The sequential nature of BICS/CALP acquisition was suggested as typical in the specific situation of immigrant children learning a second language. It was not suggested as an absolute order that applies in every, or even a majority of situations. Thus attainment of high levels of L2 CALP can precede attainment of fluent L2 BICS in certain situations (eg a scientist who can read a language for research purposes but who can't speak it).

The Bandscales adaptations have had to factor in the variety of language learning contexts which Indigenous students experience and recognise that until long-term research occurs in the field, the sequence suggested is tentative and may need to be varied.

## **Conclusion**

The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners are based on current second language acquisition research and developed using understandings from Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. They aim to provide teachers with broad descriptions of students' second language and literacy development and to expand teacher understandings of students' cultural and linguistic background in order to inform their work. As new and effective pedagogies in language and literacies development are developed and deemed successful with Indigenous students, it is envisioned that publication on the Bandscales website will incorporate these.

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