

# ***Aboriginal Literacy: bridging the gap***

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## The development of Aboriginal writers at the School of Australian Linguistics

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### Background of the School of Australian Linguistics

One of the most enthusiastic introductions to the School of Australian Linguistics (SAL) can be found in R.M.W. Dixon's recent book, *The Languages of Australia* (Cambridge, 1980):

The most exciting development was the founding of the School of Australian Linguistics within Darwin Community College, in 1974; its purpose is to train native speakers of Australian languages as linguists . . . It is hoped that before long Aboriginal linguists will be taking their place on the staff of the SAL, and that there may even be some interested in pursuing further academic studies so that courses on Australian linguistics in Australian universities may one day be taught by linguists whose native language is an Australian tongue. [pp. 17, 93]

With the recognition of Aboriginal languages brought about, in part, by the advent of bilingual education, the 'College of Australian Linguistics' was conceived with the beginning of discussions between the Education Offices in Canberra and Darwin in 1973. Both offices felt that it would be more efficient and beneficial to train a fluent speaker in linguistics than to train a European in *both* linguistics and complete fluency in an Aboriginal or Island language. Graduates of such a programme would assist in several phases of language work (developing a writing system, devising primers and other vernacular reading materials, producing dictionaries and grammars, etc.), and should be employed by the Department of Education. As it was believed that the employing agency should be distinct from the training authority, negotiations were made to attach this 'College' to the Darwin Community College (DCC). After considerable consultation with linguists, anthropologists, educators, and institutions (such as the Australian National University, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics), the original emphases of SAL were defined:

1. to train *only* Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders,

2. to accept students from *all* Australian states,
3. to preserve the distinctive nature of the School under the structure of DCC without amalgamation into any of the general courses (hence, the School had a Committee of Council as its initial course advisory committee), and
4. to further assist the Bilingual Education Programme.

The first session began on 30 September 1974 at the Casuarina campus of DCC with six full-time and two part-time students. After Cyclone Tracy, one session was held at Alice Springs and two at Yirrkala in 1975. Thereafter, it was felt that SAL could best operate from Batchelor in order to achieve close co-operation with the Aboriginal Teacher Education Programme (now Batchelor College). However, on-site courses are taught throughout the Northern Territory, and in Western Australia and Queensland. A branch has been opened in Alice Springs this year, following successful courses and developments there since 1978. In the interests of decentralising, a 'pilot course' is running at Maningrida. There, local linguists teach SAL units under the supervision of SAL staff.

To date, the School has had 62 sessions with 1081 enrolments (including both full- and part-time students) representing 60 different linguistic groups from 77 communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. In 1978, accreditation was gained for four certificate courses: Literacy Attainment, Transcription, Literacy Work, and Translation/Interpreting. A proposal for an Associate Diploma in Linguistic Studies is currently undergoing revision and one for a Post-Graduate Diploma in Educational Linguistics is in preparation. Some 69 certificates have already been awarded with two graduates undertaking graduate studies in Linguistics at southern universities and four graduates serving as tutors at SAL.

### **Background of SAL students**

Students are Australian Aboriginal or Torres Straits Islanders who speak their respective languages fluently. Some entrants come to SAL with virtually no knowledge of how to read and write their language, and a few also represent language groups with no previously established orthography. They speak English as a second or third language — which, until the introduction of bilingual education in 1973, was the only formal medium of instruction in their schools and is the medium of instruction at SAL.

Students vary in their ability with English, ranging from fourth grade (primary) competence to first-year high-school achievement

(that is, a reading age of 10 to 14 years old), although they are adults ranging in age from 16 to 50. Graduates of SAL certificate courses are expected to be employed as literacy workers or language assistants, and produce materials in their own languages for use within the bilingual programme in primary schools, or adult education.

As students can already read and write English (printing, rather than cursive longhand is most common), they do not have to learn the Roman characters employed in the orthography of their languages. In most instances, however, certain habits carried over from the sometimes chaotic spelling of English must be unlearned, such as the representation of [a]-sounds with <u> or the use of (silent) <r> to indicate long vowels, e.g., [bala] as <bula> or [ba:pi] as <barpi>, etc.

Most Aboriginal writing systems use slightly modified letters or digraphs which must also be learned, such as <ŋ> for <ng>, <'> for glottal stop, <ä> for long [a:], <e> for long [i:], <o> for long [u:], and underlining for retroflex consonants in Yolngu-Matha of North-east Arnhem Land, <: > for lowered vowels in Kriol (<e: > = [ə], <o: > = [ɔ]), and the following special digraphs: <h> for interdental, <r> for retroflexes, and <y> or <j> for palatals [See Table 2]. In fact, the largest hurdle to be overcome is the realisation that their languages are spelt phonetically, so that sound-symbol correspondences are systematic and virtually identical.

Students come from preliterate societies, which do not necessarily recognise the value of literacy in one's own language. The need for literacy in English is not challenged, but communities and students must be motivated to recognise the importance of first-language literacy. Following upon Gudschinsky (1973), one learns to read only once, and does it best in a language he or she understands. I trust that this principle need not be argued here. However, if this value has been challenged by white educators, it certainly has not been taken for granted in Aboriginal communities, although more and more elders and leaders are becoming convinced that first-language literacy is the key to subsequent transfer to English.

Because some students come from communities where no established writing system for the language exists, the School has been involved in developing orthographies for Kriol, Ngankikurungkurr (Daly River), and Eastern Aranda (Santa Teresa). Staff, in conjunction with local linguists, have served in an advisory capacity for the establishment of several others. In these instances, staff work with the students towards developing and testing a writing system so that books can be produced for the

community. Having devised a trial orthography, one of the best ways to test it is through a unit in Creative Writing, whereby the students produce a number of stories (at least ten each) and then read them back to the lecturer. Problems encountered are discussed and any necessary adjustments are made.

## **The SAL programme**

### **The overall syllabus**

After considerable experimentation and consolidation, three certificate courses relating to literacy were accredited in 1978. The basic aims of initial study at the School are: becoming literate in one's own language, understanding the basic elements of linguistics, and upgrading one's facility in English (oral and written expression). The units studied are outlined in Table 1, although the overlap of content is not immediately obvious.

For example, Beginning Linguistics introduces the concepts of phonetic writing (via the International Phonetic Alphabet) and sufficient grammar to assist in differentiating between words (written independently) and morphemes (written bound to words), each of which assists in developing literacy skills. Furthermore, when literacy is mastered, the student can better achieve a grasp of the various linguistic mechanisms operating in his or her own language (such as the role of suffixes, noun and verb classes, clause and discourse marking, etc.).

Linguistic Readings at the initial two levels are not directed at linguistic theory so much as towards articles on or about languages or language issues; this unit supplements the English programme generally. In brief, at the Introductory Level, approximately 50 per cent of the syllabus is dedicated to literacy skills, 30 per cent to linguistics, and 20 per cent to English. As the programme progresses, the weighting shifts to 50 per cent on linguistics and 30 per cent on literature production skills by Level 4. Note that each session lasts eight weeks. Students may stagger their study by completing one level, going back to their communities for practical experience, and then returning to the next highest level the following year. A number of teaching tactics are used for transfer to vernacular literacy.



**Table 1: The Literacy Certificate Programme at SAL.**

<i>Hours/ week</i>	<i>Units taught</i>
<b>Level 1 (Introductory or Briding)</b> [8 weeks × 27 hours per week]	
6	Beginning Linguistics 1
2	Language and Culture
3	English as a Second Language 1
2	Linguistic Readings 1
2	Graphic Techniques 1
12	Electives in literacy (Reading and Writing Own Language, Orthography and Punctuation, Language Analysis 1)
<b>Level 2 (Award: Certificate of Literacy Attainment)</b> [8 weeks × 26 hours per week]	
4	Beginning Linguistics 2
4	Phonetics
3	Applied Linguistics
3	English as a Second Language 2
2	Linguistic Readings 2
2	Graphic Techniques 2
8	Electives in literacy (Reading and Writing Own Language, Orthography and Punctuation, Language Analysis 2, Developing Literacy Materials, Translation)
<b>Level 3 (Award: Certificate of Transcription)</b> [8 weeks × 27 hours per week]	
4	Phonology 1
4	Grammar 1
2	Semantics 1
3	English as a Second Language 3
2	Linguistic Readings 3
2	Graphic Techniques 3
2	Creative Writing 1
8	Electives in literacy and language analysis (Language Analysis 3, Developing Literacy Materials, Transcription, Translation)
<b>Level 4 (Award: Certificate of Literacy Work)</b> [8 weeks × 28 hours per week]	
4	Phonology 2
4	Grammar 2
3	Semantics of Translation
3	English as a Second Language 4
2	Linguistic Readings 4
2	Graphic Techniques 4
2	Creative Writing 2
8	Electives in literacy and language analysis (Language Analysis 4, Developing Literacy Materials, Translation, Dictionary Making)

### **The phonetic method**

The most commonly used approach at SAL is the *phonetic method*, whereby the orthography is presented in a table corresponding to a standard phoneme chart (places and manners of articulation), and the students are required to produce and spell examples of words with each sound. Examples of a few orthographic systems are found in Table 2. The lecturer works through such a table, illustrating the presence of sounds in initial, medial, final, and cluster positions. This system works well with students who are well-grounded in English literacy and who have strong academic abilities.

If students need extensive tuition in transferring to writing a vernacular, the *syllabic method* has proved helpful. All of the open syllables (consisting of consonant + vowel) permitted in the language are placed on flashcards and the students combine the various cards put before them into real words. They then copy these words down and later read them back to the teacher. After they are able to do this with ease, they are then given cards with the final letters permitted in closed syllables (consisting of consonant + vowel + consonant), which, again, they combine into words of increasing complexity, write down, and read back to the teacher.

### **Language games**

Language games assist greatly in motivating students to acquire literacy skills and an understanding of basic linguistic concepts. For example, Dr Paul Black has devised a *Gupapuyju Bingo Game*:

The game consists of a deck of 40 cards, each with a different Gupapuyju word on it, and any number of sheets containing 4 by 4 arrays of the same Gupapuyju words; twenty such sheets have been prepared.

To play the game, one person acts as a caller, i.e., after shuffling the cards, he or she proceeds to go through them one by one, reading the word on each card. Each of the players has one or more sheets in front of him. Each time a word is called, the player looks for the word on the sheet, and if he finds it he marks it by placing something (e.g., a scrap of paper) on top of it. The first player to get four words in a row across, up and down, or diagonally wins.

On the playing sheets the words are arranged into columns on the basis of the articulation of their initial consonants: words beginning with bilabials are in the first column, those with apicals in the second, those with laminals in the third, and those with velars in the fourth. The possible initial consonants are listed at the tops of the columns. Thus, the player doesn't need to scan the entire card to see if a word occurs on it: if the word starts with g, for example, the player need only check to see if the word is one of the four in the last (velar) column.

**Table 2: Examples of some Aboriginal Orthographies in Phonemic Tables**

YOLNU-MATHA (Gupapuygu, Gumatj, Djambarrpuygu, Rirratjigu, Gãlpu, etc.)							
	LABIAL	DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	PALATAL	RETROFLEX	VELAR	GLOTTAL
LAX	b	dh	d	dj	d	g	
TENSE	p	th	t	tj	t	k	
NASAL	m	nh	n	ny	n	ŋ	
GLIDE	w		rr	y	r		
LATERAL			l		l		
VOWELS	i	u	e	o			
(SHORT)	a			ã	(LONG)		
WARLPURI							
STOP	p		t	j	rt	k	
NASAL	m		n	ny	rn	ng	
GLIDE	w			y	r		
LATERAL			l	ly	rl		
RHOTIC			rr		rd		
VOWELS	i	u	ii	uu			
(SHORT)	a		aa		(LONG)		
KRIOL							
VOICED	b		d	j	rd	g	
-STOP							
VOICELESS	p		t	tj	rt	k	
FRICATIVE	f	th	s	sh			
NASAL	m		n	ny	rn	ng	
GLIDE	w			y			
LATERAL			l	ly	rl		
RHOTIC			rr		r		
VOWELS	i	u					
	e	e:	o				
	e	a	o:				

Crossword puzzles and word games (with jumbled letters, in which students must circle real words) have also been most successful.

### Programmed literacy

Programmed literacy is a method designed to teach reading, pronunciation and writing simultaneously. It operates on the principle that lessons should be presented in an orderly, graded series, with the simplest elements first, then further steps building on the basic elements.

The first letters taught are those that are easiest to write, read, and identify. Depending on the orthography developed for a given language, such letters are those made up of lines and circles (l, o, p, b, d, i, a, t). However, the overriding aim of building up a large vocabulary of meaningful words and sentences must also be considered so as to determine the order in which letters are taught. Thus, the next series of letters are those most crucial to the language and allow the student to form simple sentences or questions. These include letters (or digraphs) that recur in function words (like *the, this, that, they, then, their, who, what, which, where, when, why, I, am, he, we, it, is*) or basic vocabulary (*all,*

*tall, small; sit, hit; sleep, keep, deep*). In certain instances it may be necessary for such letters to take precedence over the 'easy to write' letters, either (1) if sentences or questions could be formed sooner by postponing some earlier letters, or (2) if the introduction of letters similar in shape (p, b, d) proves to be an insurmountable difficulty.

Once the students have a command of questions and statements and a fairly large vocabulary, the remaining letters and symbols are taught, from the most to the least productive. In the case of digraphs it is important to teach the individual letters forming the digraph (e.g., <n> then <g> before <ng>, <d> then <j> before <dj>) unless one of the letters is not otherwise used alone (e.g., <d> before <dh> or <t> before <th> in an orthography where <h> alone has no value). [This has pedagogical repercussions when selecting a writing system. It is important to choose digraphs consisting of letters each of which has a value. For example, it is not practical or useful to choose the digraph <ch> if neither <c> nor <h> is otherwise used in the language.]

This method has been used with great success in the Philippines for languages such as Aklanon (Zorc 1969), Ilianen Manobo (Shand 1979), and Kalamian Tagbanwa (Ruch 1978). The method was adapted for Australian languages and presented at a Bilingual

**Table 3: Example of programmed literacy for Kriol (Roper River)**

UNIT 1	(Teaching the first letters to simple sentences with full stop.)
1. o O	o
2. l L	ol <i>hole</i> , lo <i>law</i>
3. a A	alo <i>hello</i> , ola <i>all (the)</i>
4. b B	bol <i>ball</i> , lab <i>love</i> , olbala <i>old</i> , lobala <i>low</i> , bobala <i>poor-fellow</i>
5. i I	bi <i>bee</i> , loli <i>lolly</i> , lilbala <i>little</i> , lilboi <i>little-boy</i> , ai <i>I, eye</i> , billi <i>billycan</i> , boil <i>boil</i> , oil <i>oil</i>
6. n N	na <i>now</i> , ni <i>knee</i> , bin ( <i>past-marker</i> ), binana <i>banana</i> , onli <i>only</i> , no <i>no</i> , not, nain <i>nine</i> , nalanala <i>fighting-stick</i> , bon <i>bone</i>
7. m M	ma <i>let's go</i> , mi <i>I, me</i> , mami <i>mother</i> , mani <i>money</i> , mibala <i>we (exclusive)</i> nomo <i>no more, none</i> , im <i>he, she</i> , namba <i>number</i> , ilm <i>limb</i>
8. .	Bobala mi. <i>I'm a poor bloke.</i> Bobala im. <i>He's a poor bloke.</i> Main baba im lilbala boi. <i>My brother is a little boy.</i> Imin boilim billi. <i>He boiled the billycan.</i>

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 UNIT 2 (Other important letters and simple questions.)
 

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9. d D di *remove-lice*, dai *die*, dolidoli *doll*, dina *dinner*, boldan *fall down*, labda *must*, dola *dollar*; Imin boldan. *He fell down.*
10. u U u *who?*, mun *moon*, duim *do*, abum *have*, lau *allowed*, dubala *two*  
Dubala bin buldan. *Those two fell down.*
11. w W wan *when*, win *win*, wada *water*, wadi *stick*, wud *wood*, wandim *want*, wi *we (inclusive)*; Wi wandim wada. *We want water.*
12. g G go *go*, bogi *swim*, daga *food*, gada *must*, gin *can*, gudbala *good*; Ola biginini gin go na. *All the children can go now.*
13. e E eg *egg*, beg *bag*, dedbala *dead*, men *man*, wei *way*, dei *day*; Main dedi bin guwei la Dawin. *My father went away to Darwin.*
14. j J ja *jar*, jag *jug*, bujigad *cat*, jidan *sit*, jagim *throw-away*; Wi jandab mijimid. *We stand together.*
15. y Y yem *yam*, Yalawada *Yellow-Water (place)*, imiyu *emu*, yowai *yes*; Yunmi goda gu la Yalawada. *You and I must go to Yellow-Water.*
16. ? U *yu? Who are you?*; Wanim yu bin duim? *What did you do?*

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 UNIT 3 (Digraphs and Reduplication)
 

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17. ng NG ngugu *water*, ngaliligi *turtle*, enijing *anything*, moning *morning*; Yu Ngandi, ngi? *Are you a (member of the) Ngandi (tribe)?*
18. r r rum *room*, ran *run*, roud *road*, ring *ring*, rein *rain*, raun *round*; Jad riba im ran la Animlen. *That river runs through Arnhem Land.*
19. rr RR dirrawu *dive*, burrum *from*, irrim *hear*, irriwul *ear*, janurr *mucous*; Main lambarra bin gajim wanbala barramandi. *My father-in-law caught a barramundi.*
20. rl RL yarlbun *water lily seed pod (edible)*, garlga *tadpole*, warl *covet*; Numo jarl la mi. *Don't copy me!*
21. rn RN barnim *burn*, bornim *give birth to*, warngugu *rock-wallaby*; Ngarni, yu bin barnim jad olgamen! *Oh no, you burned that woman!*
22. rd RD ardim *hurt*, bard *bird*, gardi *oh-no!*, Bangardi *(subsection)*; Gardi, yu ardim mi! *Oh, you're hurting me!*
23. k K ki *key*, kinu *canoe*, ka *car*, kikim *kick*, bek *back*, kenggaru *kangaroo*; Ai bin budum jad kenggaru la kinu. *I put the kangaroo in the canoe.*
24. 2 [Denotes full reduplication of the word preceding.]  
doli2 *doll*, wili2 *whirlwind*, jalk2 *be poking*, rein2 *rain a lot.*
-

Conference (Zorc 1976). With the assistance of students, programmes have been developed for Ngankikurungkurr (Daly River) and Kriol (Roper River) [see Table 3]. Additionally, the method has been incorporated into existing literacy programmes for Kriol at Bamyili by Dorothy Meehan, for Gumatj at Yirrkala by Dawn Kenyon, and for Alawa by Margaret Sharpe.

### Literacy competence testing

Since the School, through the Darwin Community College, awards a Certificate of Literacy Attainment, it became necessary to devise a test that ascertained the level of *basic literacy* achieved, namely the ability to write or read what one can say and understand.

Tests have been devised and implemented that evaluate each student's progress in the mechanics of literacy, without prejudice to factors such as language differences, varying orthographies, and syllable structure. Some languages, like Nunggubuyu, have an average of 8.7 letters per word, while others, like Kriol, have as few as 4 letters per word. Hence, it would not be appropriate to score for the number of words written, but rather, the number of symbols. As most students are accustomed to printing (rather than cursive longhand), speed *per se* could and need not be a criterion of literacy attainment. Accuracy appeared to be the prime factor, and this was borne out in tests: texts generated that were within or above a margin of 80 per cent accuracy were fully legible to other speakers of the same language; texts below that mark proved difficult to decipher. Hence, 20 per cent error was the maximum tolerated in the recognition of basic literacy. A bottom score of twenty symbols per minute was ultimately set as a minimum. Faster speeds and a lower margin of error have been set for higher certificates, since transcription and literacy work (story and book production) require greater efficiency, speed and accuracy.

Two methods are used for delivering the test. One involves the transcription of a brief language text from dictation or a tape recording. Dictation works for individual testing, or where students are of approximately equal ability — otherwise repetition for one may slow down another. Transcription from a tape recorder is useful where the mechanics of running a dictaphone or cassette player have been mastered — unnecessary time and points can be lost in replaying a given segment, or where the recording is not absolutely clear and understandable to a native speaker.

The other method involves simple English stories for translation; these usually have been developed by the students themselves. The story is presented and the students copy it down with space between the lines for their own language. There is a general discussion of the

story and the various translations possible. Each student is encouraged to give an oral translation of the story to ensure that his or her writing speed will not be hampered by difficulties with the translation or understanding of the text. When the lecturer and students are satisfied that they can write fluently, the group begins in tandem, and the time each student takes to complete the assignment is recorded. In either method, a maximum of five minutes is considered sufficient to gain a good sample of the students' ability to write their language(s).

**Table 4: Facets of the SAL literacy competence test**

**SAMPLE STORIES FOR TRANSLATION METHOD**

<sup>1</sup>How are you brother?

Very good. And you?

Where are you going?

Fishing with my spears: Do you want to come along?

<sup>2</sup>Two old men went to the (point/river) fishing. One man caught a barramundi, the other caught a bream. They cooked those fish and ate them. Then they went home.

<sup>3</sup>Once upon a time, I went to the water(hole), and I saw a woman with her baby. She was fishing. Once she didn't mind her little boy, and he fell into the water. I jumped in after him and pulled him out. The woman was very glad, and gave me two big fish. I went home and gave them to my uncle, and told him the story.

MINIMUM STANDARDS	SYMBOLS/MINUTE	ERROR
Certificate of Literacy Attainment (CLA)	20	.20
Certificate in Transcription (CTS)	30	.10
Certificate in Literacy Work (CLW)	40	.05

**COMPARISON OF SCORES FROM TWO DIFFERENT METHODS.**

TRANSCRIPTION METHOD (RECORDING)			TRANSLATION FROM ENGLISH STORY		
<i>Symbols/ Minute</i>	<i>Error</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Symbols/ Minute</i>	<i>Error</i>	<i>Standard</i>
56	.04	CLW	*66	.03	CLW
*65	.06	(CLW)	47	.08	(CLW)
*61	.08	(CLW)	42	.06	(CLW)
*58	.07	(CLW)	42	.02	CLW
44	.00	CLW	*52	.04	CLW
*39	.08	CTS	21	.10	CLA
33	.22	(CLA)	*28	.12	CLA

\*Represents best score

()Standard not fully achieved.

In grading the tests, the student is made to read back what was written. The lecturer checks for errors in spelling, punctuation, diacritics, syllabification, etc. By reading back what he has written, the student's ability at reading is also ascertained. The total number of symbols (letters, diacritics and punctuation marks) are tallied, then divided by the time to arrive at a score of *symbols per minute*. The total number of errors is then divided by the total number of symbols to arrive at the *percentage of error*. An outline of statistics and information relating to these tests is contained in Table 4.

Results from the two different methods vary considerably, but the overall standard achieved is generally the same. Some students appear to perform better on the transcription method — others on the translation method. The differences appear to correlate with a student's particular abilities at translation or transcription, so that poor scores reflect problems associated with the method used (understanding if translation, mechanics if transcription, etc.). Students generally feel less rushed by the translation method, and hence generally make fewer errors than by the transcription method. If a student feels that he or she has had particular difficulty with any given test or method, he or she may apply for re-testing. In any event, a student's overall award is based on his or her best score in the entire series of tests. In this regard, it is perhaps important to note that regression is the exception, not the rule.

### **Creative writing**

Creative Writing has proven to be an excellent means of teaching and testing literacy in both English and the vernacular. Two units are offered, at the third and fourth levels respectively, and occupy only two hours per week — that is, a total of 16 contact hours per session. Although put relatively late in our programme, the units have been requested by communities and by the Northern Territory Department of Education in isolation for brief on-site courses. Needless to say, they have been popular, and have resulted in considerable literature both in Aboriginal English and in various Aboriginal and Island languages.

Hence, although these units form only a small part of an ongoing English and vernacular literacy programme, they have generated a good deal of interest and enthusiasm outside the School, and have led to several productive results. The stories written over the past five years have taught us a good deal about Australian Aboriginal English, which has in turn provided much input to our English programme (English as a Second Language units) — we are clearer on which areas of English grammar and vocabulary need particular



attention, and which appear to have been sufficiently mastered. Furthermore, even when a unit is taught with attention to an Aboriginal or Island language, translations into English (which invariably are published with the stories) teach us about the problems of style, genre, and readability confronted between the two cultures and languages (for example, the repetitive and conjunction-filled style of oral traditions versus the concise and flowing style of written language).

Experiences in several communities here and overseas have convinced us that the phenomena of *speech atrophy* (the inability to use English outside of the classroom) and *speech apathy* (the unwillingness to speak English) are present wherever a native vernacular is strong and used as *the* tool for everyday communication. English lessons, whether readings, exercises or drills, imprint basic vocabulary and grammar and prepare a pupil for a passive receptivity for the language (i.e., understanding English), but not for the desire or need to express oneself (i.e., speaking English). English movies and media reinforce and expand one's passive abilities. However, only the occasional tourist, government official or new-found friend offer both the opportunity and the motivation to venture into actual speech — and this is only the case if the person's initial embarrassment or shame can be overcome.

Creative writing is one of the few avenues where one can and does express oneself in coherent and extended (if not extensive) texts, and therefore it expands one's ability to communicate. Although actual speech would be preferable, creative writing has the added advantage of avoiding the shame problem — one quietly works within the limits of one's competence, unconcerned about either ridicule or approval from peers. Later, when rapport has been established in the classroom and a certain ease is felt, one can read and/or discuss one's stories, and hence also venture into oral expression. Furthermore, when a student has produced a piece that surpasses shame and induces pride, he or she is motivated to improve the story, correcting errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation and stylistics, and thereby entering a level of English expression rarely achieved inside or outside the formal classroom.

Thus, from the student's point of view, creative writing has three advantages:

1. it allows extended self-expression,
2. it encourages self-development (that is, having expressed oneself, one can re-write the story, re-arranging the ideas in such a way that it will have impact on the reader), and
3. it reduces (although it may not totally eliminate) the embarrassment felt in having to express oneself orally.

For the teacher, creative writing allows the analysis of several important pedagogical points: the student's command of English or of literacy in his own language, his narrative style, and also his variety of English. The latter helps the teacher set limits for what is accepted and tolerable, and what is not acceptable and must be taught in subsequent English lessons.

### Postscript

The above comments summarise some of the major thrusts and methods involved in the SAL programme insofar as they touch on training Islanders and Aborigines in literacy and literature production. The School of Australian Linguistics is one of the first institutions in the world (Africa excepted) training native linguists (similar programmes have since commenced in the United States [including Alaska], South America, Canada, Indonesia, and New Guinea). We find ourselves in an exciting and challenging role, and look forward to future developments and opportunities, provided resources can be made available to respond to them.

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