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Topic Development in Australian Aboriginal English Texts

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INTRODUCTION

For the past 4 years I have been in the Northern Territory of Australia working on a number of projects involving the Australian Aboriginal people of the region. The experience has been very rewarding and one which has taught me much about cross-cultural communication and misunderstandings that occur in such an environment.

Some of what I have learnt can be summarized in one anecdote involving a linguist who had been travelling around the "Top End" conducting field work with Aboriginal languages. It was a hot and sultry day, as all days are in that area of Australia. He was near the ocean and eventually came across an inlet that looked perfect for a cool down swim. Naturally he was concerned about crocodiles. Noticing a small group of Aboriginal men standing near the inlet, he approached them and said in his best Aboriginal creole, "Goodday, jeya aligerra?" meaning, "Is there a crocodile in there?" "Na, jeya na aligerra, na crocodile, boss," was the reply. Relieved, he jumped into the water and swam around for quite a while. Eventually he got out and started talking with the Aboriginal men who had been lingering nearby. He asked them why they hadn’t gone for a swim and received the reply, "Na boss, plenty big mob, bigpela shark jeya boss."

The linguist had studied the Aboriginal languages and creole at the sentence level, but had not acquired the discourse rules of these languages. If he had acquired these rules, he would have known that when one approaches an Aboriginal seeking information he must first establish some form of geographical or personal commonality with the Aboriginal such as someone that they both know or a place where they had both been. One usually finds something in common. Once that is established, meaningful communication can commence. If this vital discourse rule is absent, then the Aboriginal may not answer the question, or will answer it with the barest of information as in the case above.

As this anecdote suggests, the sociocultural distance between Aboriginal Australians and other Australians is significant. Consequently, the process of acquiring standard English
communicative competence by the Australian Aboriginal people, particularly those living in the more isolated areas of the Northern Territory of Australia, provides a rich environment where areas of learner difficulty become highlighted. One such area of difficulty involves the "rules" or procedures to be followed if one is to operate at full communicative competence at and beyond the sentence level in written discourse.

Sufficient evidence is available to indicate that different speech act rules exist for different languages with these specific rules related to the cultural and sociolinguistic dimension within a particular speech community. Kaplan (1966; 1972) has demonstrated that discourse rules form patterns which can be related to cultural systems and that these patterns are evident when written texts are examined. Consequently, while numerous forms of developing meaning are available to all languages, each language exhibits clear preferences as to the presentation of that meaning. Thus, as Kaplan (1987) states, there are:

- important differences between languages in the way in which discourse topic is identified in a text and the way which discourse topic is developed in terms of exemplification, definition and so on (p. 10).

Or, as Clyne (1985) suggests:

- it is the cultural value system that determines whether, to a particular group, directness is vulgar or indirectness is devious . . . whether a letter should come to the point immediately or gradually build up to the central speech act . . . whether linearity in discourse is seen as the only logical or comprehensible structure, or whether it is felt to curb exhaustive discussion (p. 14).

The underlying hypothesis of this present paper is that one aspect of these language and cultural differences, namely the difference between the culturally influenced discourse styles of Aboriginal writer and native English speaking reader, and vice versa, significantly impairs the educational attainment of Aboriginal child and adult students. In other words, Aboriginal people tend not to develop meaning in the same manner as English speakers prefer to develop meaning. Hopefully, some of the conclusions from this study can be applied to all contexts where writers from one language and culture are required to write in the discourse patterns of a second language and culture.

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY ABORIGINAL SPEECH COMMUNITY

Before commencing with the study, it is probably necessary to
provide a brief description of the Northern Territory Aboriginal speech community. An estimated 300,000 indigenous people inhabited the Australian continent at the time of initial European settlement in 1788. These people spoke between 200 and 650 languages, depending upon which definitions of the terms ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ are used\(^1\) (Senate Standing Committee 1984). The two hundred years since European settlement have seen a dramatic decline in these languages to the point where only eight languages survive today with more than 1000 speakers (Baldauf and Eggington 1989), five of these languages are in the Northern Territory of Australia. Black (1983) estimates that, in addition to these five languages, there are twenty-five languages surviving in the Northern Territory with one hundred or more speakers. Thus, of the 35,000 Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory, there are 20,000 speakers of one or more Aboriginal language.

In the early days of European settlement in the Northern Territory an English based contact language developed which has followed the contact language, minimal pidgin, pidgin, extended pidgin, initial creole to extended creole continuum (Todd 1974; Muhlhausler 1974, 1986; Romaine 1988). This creole or ‘Kriol’ is becoming the lingua franca of the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory with an estimated 20,000 speakers (Sandefur and Harris 1986).

However, the English language remains as the dominant language in almost all domains requiring interaction with the ever-present non-Aboriginal society. It is the language of communication with government, health, commerce and education programs. Unfortunately, significant communication barriers exist due to a number of factors including inadequate English language proficiency levels among the Aboriginal people, cultural insensitivity among the English speaking non-Aboriginal people and huge differences in communication strategies between the two groups (Shimpo 1985). The English spoken by the Aboriginal people, Aboriginal English, exists as a non-standard, low status variety of the language.

In an effort to better meet the educational needs of the Northern Territory Aboriginal people, the Australian government introduced a Bilingual Education program in 1972. This program now consists of 16 bilingual schools and has had mixed results in achieving its stated objectives (Eggington and Baldauf, 1989). In general, educational achievement levels in the Northern Territory for Aboriginal people are significantly below national standards and well below Aboriginal student standards in other Australian states

\(^{1}\)See Chambers and Trudgill (1980) on difficulties faced when attempting to define the terms ‘language’ and ‘dialect’.
The reasons for this are numerous and frequently discussed, a general consensus being that language and cultural differences are major factors contributing to poor educational achievement (Eades 1985, Harris 1980, Christie and Harris 1985, Graham 1986).

TOPICAL DEVELOPMENT IN ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITTEN TEXT

In order to set a basis for a discussion of difficulties Aboriginal writers may face when required to function in English, it is first necessary to briefly review topical development in English academic written text. Lautamatti (1987) has examined the relationship between discourse topic and sub-topics explaining the development of topic:

in terms of succession of hierarchically ordered sub-topics, each of which contributes to the discourse topic, and is treated as a sequence of ideas, expressed in the written language as sentences (1987:87).

Topical progression comes about generally through two types of sub-topic development:

1. parallel progression where the sub-topic in a series of sentences is the same, and
2. sequential progression where the topic of a sentence is provided by the predicate of the preceding sentence.

It appears that essential elements in the expectations of the reader of English academic prose are that there is a hierarchical progression of topic and that there is a "a direct and uninterrupted flow of information" (Kaplan 1987:10). Consequently parallel and sequential topical progression must add to the topic within a narrow set of parameters seldom, if ever, digressing from the stated, clearly defined topic.

ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE DISCOURSE PATTERNS

Aboriginal languages are oral languages and it has only been during the recent past that serious attempts have been made to encourage the development of literacy. Therefore, to commence this research into Aboriginal English discourse patterns, the nature of oral narrative styles in two Aboriginal languages as given in Texts 1 and 2 will be examined. Text 1 is a direct translation from Nunggubuyu, a language spoken at the Numbulwar Mission and was chosen from a collection of ethnographic material translated by Heath (1980). Text 2 is a direct translation from the Tiwi language of Melville and Bathurst Islands (Osborne 1974). Both these texts were selected at random from within their
respective collections. In these and other texts discussed in this paper, discourse units are numbered for reference.

Text 1 describes culturally determined brother-sister avoidance procedures. These avoidance relationships are a very important feature of traditional Aboriginal culture.

Text 1 (Adult, Oral Narrative in Nunggubuyu)

1 That brother and his sister; that man should not go close. 2 If his sisters are sitting somewhere together, 3 he should not go close to them.

4 That man will not go close to there. 5 He will not stand nearby. 6 He will stop far away and he will speak. 9 He will ask them a question with words, 10 but he will not get too close. 11 That is how the Nunggubuyu behave (Heath 1980:342, Texts 77.1, 77.2).

The topic sentence (1) is developed through a series of parallel discourse units which are either repetitions, with slight variation, of the head topic "should not go close to them" (3, 4, 10) or synonymous phrases (5, 6, 7). Thus only four discourse units (2, 8, 9, 11) develop the topic further than given in the topic sentence. 2

Text 2 describes the origins of the crocodile.

Text 2 (Adult, Oral Narrative in Tiwi)

1 I am going to talk about Jerekepai (crocodile).

2 Long ago when he was a man, 3 he lived at Waiperali. 4 He had many wives. 5 They were cracking xamia palm nuts. 6 He was making spears, spears that spear, spear. 7 He was making them and his wives were cracking xamia palm nuts. 9 The others were all making baskets.

10 Some marauders crept up there. 11 They took a look, and, 12 'He is making spears', they said, 13 'he is making spears.' 14 They got ready, 15 and 'Oh!' they shouted. 16 He ran while he was making spears. 18 We gave him that name because he ran while he was making spears. 20 The sea! 21 He went under, under, under, under, under, and then -- the spear came up first. 23 'You are the crocodile now,' they said. 24 Tajuni, takampunga, they called him, jerengkepetuni. 25 They called him that because there are many crocodiles in the sea. 27 In the

2 The original text in Nunggubuyu repeats the word ana-warubaj (nearby) followed by the negative marker yagi five times and uses the word malang'a-nyanay (far away) twice.

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beginning he lived as a man (Osborne 1974:101-102).

It is obvious that the speaker is attempting to emphasize the relationship between Jerekepai, his spears and crocodiles. This emphasis is developed through either direct repetition of the phrase "he was/is making spears/them" (Discourse units 6, 7, 12, 13, 17, 19) or allusion to spears (22). Thus the main topic is developed through repetition. 3

From a body of data similar to the examples given above, it is possible to generalize that, in oral Aboriginal language narrative style, discourse topic tends to be developed through the repetition or synonymity of the head topic discourse unit, and that this repetition acts as a cohesive device unifying the text.

ABORIGINAL ENGLISH DISCOURSE PATTERNS

Text 3 was written in Aboriginal English and is taken from a booklet produced by the Northern Territory Department of Education containing samples of community (rural) Aboriginal children's writing in English.

Text 3 (Child, English)

1 We alway go fishing at Marrm every holiday. 2 And if you go fishing 3 you must carry food. 4 And I caught one fish. 5 When I go fishing 6 I alway put things ready 7 before I go fishing. 8 sometime we go swimming. 9 When me and my grandmother went for fishing at Marrm 10 she caught one turtle. 11 And we cook it. 12 And I like going fishing. 13 And some people caught one big fish. 14 And then we went home (Northern Territory Department of Education 1985:20).

The topic of "going" fishing is introduced (1) but then a digression is made involving preparation for the expedition (2,3). This is followed by a report on the catch (4); next a return to the preparation theme (5,6,7). The development of these themes is interrupted by a swimming digression (8), after which we are returned to the catch theme (9,10,11). An evaluation of the event is made (12), a further development of the catch theme (13) and then the text concludes through a return home closure (14).

It may be that this is an example of a developing loose chronological ordering style, but, from a native English speaker point of view, one cannot ignore the digressions and the lack of linear topical progression. However, the topic 3

3 The original Tiwi text mentions ju-wunti-kerem-ani arawuningkiri (he make spear) six times, and arawuningkiri (spear) an additional five times.
develops along similar lines as shown in Texts 1 and 2. The head topic "go fishing" is repeated five times (Discourse Units 1, 2, 5, 7, 12) with one synonymous reference (9). A sub-topic "caught one fish/turtle" is repeated three times (4, 10, 13). Consequently, it may be that the child writer is exhibiting those text developing procedures relying upon repetition and synonymity of the head topic inherent in her native language discourse patterns.

Note also the tendency to alternate sub-topics. Topic progression develops from "going fishing" (1, 2), preparation (2-3), catch report (4), go fishing (5), preparation (6), go fishing (7), swimming (8), went (go) fishing (9), catch report (10, 11), going fishing (12), closure (13).

Texts 4 and 5 were collected and analyzed by Richards (1985) and come from Aboriginal college students attending a teacher training institute at Batchelor in the Northern Territory. Most of these students have developed their English proficiency in an ESL context.

Text 4 (Adult ESL College)

1Batchelor College is at the township of Batchelor. 2This is the place where people come from many different places to do teacher training. 4The places where people come from is the Northern and Central parts of the Northern Territory, including other states as well, such as S.A., W.A., and Queensland. 5This is the place where one and all meet, work and also make friends too. 7Each year different student come to do the course of teacher training here at Batchelor College. 9They bring their families as well to live here with them. 11The town of Batchelor where Batchelor College is such a nice town to see. 13With its lovely garden in the park (from Richards 1985:60-61).

This text immediately establishes the nature and purpose of Batchelor College (1, 2, 3), and gives the impression that this is the topic. The nature of the student body is stated (4) and then we are reminded of the head topic with a near restatement of the second sentence (5, 6). The student body theme is reintroduced and developed (7, 8, 9, 10). The passage concludes with a near mirror repetition of the first sentence (11, 12). There appears to be a form of alternation in topical progression: location (1, 2), purpose (3), student body (4), location (5, 6), student body (7), location (8), student body (9-10), location (10, 11, 12, 13).

Once again, this text follows the pattern exhibited in Texts 1, 2 and 3, although a greater syntactic complexity is evident. Discourse units 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12 and 13 repeat, or are synonymous, with the head topic found in Discourse Unit 1.
The final example (Text 5) is written by an Aboriginal teacher with an urban Aboriginal background undertaking postgraduate studies at Batchelor College. This student’s English was developed in an ESL immersion context.

Text 5 (Adult ESL College)

1Aboriginal education is different 2because of the cultural differences. 3Aboriginal children do not relate very well to European teachers. 4Most are usually considered outsiders anyway. 5A lot of answers on how to teach the Aboriginal child can be found in Stephan Harris’s book "Aboriginal Learning Styles." 6Stephan Harris is a man who spent a lot of time studying the learning styles and techniques of Aboriginal children at Milingimbi. 7This book which is used extensively at Batchelor College, provides a definite and positive insight on how to teach Aboriginal children. 8The failure rate at secondary schools by Aboriginal children highlights the need for Aboriginal school teachers 9to get the children off to a good start while at primary school (from Richards 1985:103-109).

The head topic (cultural differences in Aboriginal education) is not directly developed (1,2). The theme progresses through a number of variations including the relationship between Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal teachers (Europeans) (3,4), reference to Harris’s suggestions on how to teach Aboriginal children (5,6,7), the failure rate of Aboriginal children (8), and the need for Aboriginal children to start well (9). Note how the phrase "Aboriginal child/ren" is repeated in Discourse Units 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Although this text does not have exactly the same properties as the previous examples, it is clearly obvious that it does not follow the preferred rhetorical patterns of English. As mentioned above, this example was written by a student from an urban Aboriginal background who has been educated entirely in non-Aboriginal urban schools.

DISCUSSION

From the incomplete analysis of Aboriginal texts presented above, it is apparent that there is some form of discoursal patterning of Aboriginal texts which is different than what we would expect in standard English. As Figure 1 indicates, repetition and synonymy of the head topic unit are used frequently perhaps as cohesive devices which allow the speaker/writer to examine the topic from various "unrelated" viewpoints knowing that each discourse unit will be tied to the repeated head topic unit.
**Figure 1**  
*Topical Progression in Aboriginal Discourse Texts*

Numbers refer to discourse units,  

Dashed and dotted lines represent discourse progression through coordination or subordination,  

Dashed lines represent linking due to repetition or synonymity,  

\( R = \text{repeat of } \),  \( S = \text{synonymous with } \),  \( () = \text{partly } R/S \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text 1</th>
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<th>Text 3</th>
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Thus, in the Aboriginal English texts (3, 4, 5), what appear to native English speakers to be a list of unconnected discourse units diverging from the stated topic are actually attached to the topic by repetition and synonymity. Likewise, what appears to be a series of unnecessary repetitions are actually cohesive devices required to establish topic and tie in discourse units to that topic. These cohesive devices have been carried over from first language procedures as shown in Texts 1 and 2. Carstensen (1987) has found a similar use of repetition and synonymity in an analysis of urban Aboriginal English discourse. What are the implication of such a finding?

From a theoretical viewpoint this information contributes to the ever expanding body of data confirming the presence of L2 writing styles being influenced by L1 discourse patterns. It may be that Texts 1, 2, and perhaps 3 are part of a universal oral language narrative style. Preliminary comparisons with the oral narrative styles of Chipewyan (Scollon 1979) and Alaskan Yupik (Woodbury 1985) suggest that repetition and synonymity play a significant part in the development of topic in these two predominantly oral languages. It is interesting to note Woodbury's comment regarding a text in English from an 8 year old Yupik boy. CAY (Central Alaskan Yupik) rhetorical structure is clearly present, carried over to English in the form of phonological phrasing, intonation, and sentential particles. ... Such replication in English of the form and content of CAY rhetorical structure shows then just how fundamental it is to speaking in CAY communities regardless of the kind of discourse involved (Woodbury 1985:171.172).

From an educational linguistics point of view, there are a number of major implications. Krulee et al. (1979), Kintsch and Green (1978), Hinds (1987) and Eggington (1987) have examined the relationship between discoursal patterns in written texts and memory recall. It would appear that optimum memory recall occurs when the writer and reader share the same discourse framework. When there is disagreement between these two frameworks short-term memory is not affected, but long-term memory shows a significant decline. Aboriginal children, especially at a secondary level are expected to gather information through the reading of English textbooks. The evidence presented above would indicate that this is a difficult task. It is not surprising to learn that not one Aboriginal child from a predominately Aboriginal cultural background has matriculated from a Northern Territory high school.

As mentioned previously, Example 3 came from a collection of 33 samples of Northern Territory Aboriginal children's writing. These samples were collected from all Northern Territory Aboriginal Community Schools operating with children from a "Stage 5" level. The samples were moderated and evaluated by a committee consisting of eight senior non-Aboriginal education officers involved in Aboriginal education. Table 1 shows the valuative labels which were attached to the texts together with the frequency of each comment. Table 2 lists a general observation on all the texts, with a selection of evaluations of individual texts.

Obviously the writing of these Aboriginal children is being evaluated using standard English rhetorical expectations. This disjunction between writer discourse pattern and reader discourse pattern has caused the readers to evaluate the texts negatively and to prescribe suggestions for further development in writing skills.

In contrast, a similar collection of children's writing from Darwin urban schools with predominantly native English speaking students (Northern Territory Department of Education 1983), indicates that repetition, lack of structure, lack of cohesiveness and so on are not predominant features. Most rater comments focused on writing surface features (spelling, punctuation) and on content (story depth). Likewise a collection of texts written by immigrant ESL children from Europe and South-East Asia reveals expected weaknesses in proficiency, but not a tendency to repeat discourse units.

A pedagogical implication derived from the above findings revolves around a common teaching methodology used frequently throughout Aboriginal schools and possibly used throughout much of the world's "progressive" educational systems. Often Aboriginal children are taught to write through a process entailing draft - conferencing - rewrite stages. In this model, written discourse is taught through "conferencing" where the teacher interacts with the student attempting to assist the student in discovering the appropriate rhetorical style. One wonders if conferencing can have any effect when reader (teacher) and writer (student) are operating from different rhetorical frameworks.

Forgive me for being anecdotal, but I would like to refer to an experience I had while learning the Korean language. Koreans often state the topic subject of the text once and then see no need to restate it. This subject is assumed shared knowledge and to repeat it is simply an exercise in redundancy. After being in Korea for 2 years, I believed I had fairly competent oral Korean. An occasion arose when I needed to write an important text in Korean. After producing my best effort, I gave the letter to a Korean friend who proceeded to re-write it to make it sound more "Korean". He stated politely that my text was repetitive and disorganized.
Table 1

Valuative Labels Attached to Aboriginal Texts

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<th>Frequency</th>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Label</th>
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<tr>
<td>lack of organization</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>lack of cohesiveness</td>
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Table 2

Selected Evaluations of Aboriginal Texts

General Evaluation of All Texts

[Aboriginal students] appeared to be unable to sustain the effort necessary to produce pieces of extended writing. This was obvious from the number of stories that began well but which progressively deteriorated in organization (N.T. Department of Education 1985:3).

Evaluation of Specific Texts

Even though the story is repetitive and some words have been overused, its length is such as could be expected from a child working at Stage 5 (p.20).

Even though this is a piece of extended writing, it is repetitive, disjointed and simple words have been overused (p.16).

This piece of writing merely lists a series of funny incidents not tied together by any main theme or story line. The writer has not understood the topic as the text of the piece is unrelated to the topic (p.12).

Some attempt has been made to make the ideas cohesive. However, the timing is awry because of the sequencing of these ideas (p.34).

The writer has conveyed his/her ideas and feelings, but has had some problems organizing the introduction to the story. It needs to be reread to determine who the main character is (p.38).
However I could not see how it was repetitive, and from my point of view, his rewrite seemed rather disorganized. At that time I didn’t have the meta-linguistic knowledge to negotiate the text to an understanding of what was wrong.

Likewise, in the Aboriginal context, a student can sit down with his/her non-Aboriginal teacher and experience the same frustrations as has been recounted above. From the student’s point of view, the text is well organized - it feels good and is a reflection of the way meaning is developed in that writer’s culture.

Before proceeding with suggestions on how to teach English rhetorical styles, it may be asked if it is really necessary to require Aboriginal students to function in standard English academic registers. As mentioned previously, not one Aboriginal child from a traditional cultural background has matriculated from a Northern Territory High School. This is not surprising considering the weight of evidence suggesting that often students pass examinations not on what they know, but on how that knowledge is delivered. Indeed, Clyne (1980) indicates the ability to write in a linear, hierarchical order was a key determiner of success in Australian Higher School Certificate Matriculation examinations for non-native English speaking students.

Martin (forthcoming) has described how certain discourse styles in English are related to gaining more power in an English dominated society. He suggests that these styles are part of a "secret" language which, when mastered offers empowerment. His reference to the language being secret comes from a number of sources including Bain (1979) who quotes an Aboriginal leader’s views of educational needs:

We want them to learn. Not the kind of English you teach them in class, but your secret English. We don’t understand that English, but you do. To us you seem to say one thing and do another. That’s the English we want our children to learn (Bain, 1979).

and von Sturmer (1984) who states that:

The specific complaint, then, is that balanda (non-Aboriginal Australians) withhold the secret of their power, and that much of this ‘power’ is tied up with the ‘big English’ to which Aboriginal people are denied access. According to one interpretation, schools are failures because they fail to teach this ‘power’ (von Sturmer 1984:273)

Academic discourse may not be "secret" in an oral society sense, but it is a restricted and exclusive code (Kachru 1986:61), which, when mastered, leads to greater opportunity in the dominant culture.
So how can the information discussed here be helpful in assisting students towards gaining access to this code?

1. First, by making teachers aware of contrastive styles, teachers can avoid thinking in deficit terms of Aboriginal or non-standard English writing. Aboriginal students' writing is not deficient, but rather an example of applying a different set of discourse patterns to English.

2. Rhetorical patterns can actually be taught. Eggington and Ricento (1983) have outlined methods where teachers and students can come to an understanding of culturally influenced discourse patterns and then apply that knowledge to their own writing.

3. When both writer and reader, teacher and student share the same knowledge of what is expected in writing then valuable conferencing can occur and real communicative competence is achieved.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize an indirect warning mentioned above which may be generalized to all areas of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural teaching. As teachers approach the task of assisting students from one language background towards developing meaning in a target language, there is a tendency to think in terms of a deficit model of education. It could be presumed that learners bring very little organizational ability to a text, and that all teachers have to do is feed learners the "correct" organizational patterns of the target language texts and the learners will respond with a reflection of these patterns. Hopefully, this paper has shown that students bring a whole range of first language influenced preferences for developing meaning to the text. In addition, these preferences greatly influence the development of meaning in the second language. The suggestions given above for dealing with this situation are but a few which could be developed once teachers become aware of the cultural depth of each student.

This paper has focused on the English of Aboriginal people. Many of the above concepts can be generalized to most cross-linguistic contexts. Since it would be a safe assumption to conclude that most ESL students have a discourse organizational style not in harmony with those patterns preferred in English, the conclusions reached in this paper have a certain validity in most ESL teaching situations.
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