

Yolŋu Languages in the Academy: Reflecting on 20 Years of Tertiary Teaching



Yasunori Hayashi

Abstract This chapter describes and reflects on the history of the Yolŋu Languages and Culture Program at Charles Darwin University (CDU), focusing on the language teaching aspects, particularly on curriculum and pedagogy. Features of this program are: a commitment to teach Yolŋu culture through Yolŋu languages; to cover all Yolŋu languages; to have those languages taught by proper authorities; and to avoid sacred knowledge of language and culture. Taught through the intellectual collaboration of Yolŋu lecturers and non-Yolŋu coordinators, those pedagogical protocols have been practised by succeeding generations of teachers in the program. Student learning experiences shared in this chapter indicate that as well as gaining some competence in using these languages, students came profoundly to respect, and even love a particular group of Australian languages and cultures.

Keywords Yolŋu languages · Yolŋu culture · Curriculum · Pedagogy · Pedagogical protocols · Collaborative teaching

1 Introduction

Yolŋu languages are constituted as a family of different but related Indigenous languages cared for and spoken by people in East Arnhemland. The languages were first brought to what are now the Yolŋu lands by spirit Ancestors such as the Djan'kawu sisters. The Djan'kawu travelled across the sea in a canoe carrying their people and their languages in woven bags and folded mats. People and their languages, along with various institutions and their symbols, were deposited in various places as the sisters and other Ancestors of other groups travelled, bringing the world into existence (Mawalan(1) Marika in Berndt 1953; Mawalan(1) Marika in West 2008). The languages along with the people and their cultural life are thus

Y. Hayashi (✉)
Charles Darwin University, Darwin, NT, Australia
e-mail: yasunori.hayashi@cdu.edu.au

invested in the land itself. Yolŋu speak, sing and dance these *Matha*, meaning both tongue and speech.

Like all Indigenous languages Yolŋu Matha (YM) is today a highly valuable Australian cultural resource. According to the second National Indigenous Languages Survey (Marmion et al. 2014), many Australian Indigenous languages are declining, some are gaining speakers and others remaining stable, but all of them are at risk of loss. Some Yolŋu languages along with Pitjantjatjara, Murrinh Patha, and Kunwinjku are among several Indigenous languages widely spoken in the Northern Territory (NT). The 2016 Australian Census figures for languages spoken at home in the NT notably show Djambarrpuyŋu (YM) as ranked third after English and Kriol, and ahead of languages such as Greek and Tagalog (Australian Government. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016).¹

The census figures also show that 25.5% of the NT population are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and this figure is expected to increase dramatically. Developing cross-linguistic and cultural competence in Indigenous situations is crucial for being able to work respectfully and carefully in the NT. The Yolŋu Languages and Culture Program at Charles Darwin University (CDU) is designed to enable students to learn the ways in which Yolŋu knowledge authorities nurture and care for their land and ancestral knowledge, and to develop Yolŋu specific language and cultural skills which are also relevant to other Indigenous people's worldviews and socioeconomic status. Commitment to teaching and learning with respect and care is the characteristic that should determine the forms and approaches of the curriculum and pedagogy in teaching YM.

2 History of Yolŋu Studies at Charles Darwin University

The Yolŋu Studies program was established in 1994 at CDU and won the Australian University Teachers of the Year award in 2005. In 2019 the program was delivered at both undergraduate (Diploma of Yolŋu Studies) and postgraduate (Graduate Certificate in Yolŋu Studies) levels, and also as a micro-credential course. These three courses are available on-campus in Darwin and via online study modes.² In the last 10 years CDU has recorded more than 1000 enrolments in total, alongside 20 or so micro-credential course enrolments every semester. A majority of postgraduate students are mature-age students who want to learn Yolŋu culture, particularly the kinship system, and YM for their professional work (e.g., school teachers, government officers, medical and law practitioners, national and international academic researchers). Most undergraduate students are beginners in learning Australian

¹ The figures show English (132,634 people—58% of the NT population), then Kriol (4390 people: 1.9%), Djambarrpuyŋu (4275: 1.9%), Greek (3245: 1.4%) and Tagalog (2994: 1.3%) (ABS 2016).

² For Yolŋu Studies internal and online learning, see Charles Darwin University. College of Indigenous Futures, Arts and Society (n.d.).

Indigenous languages and cultures, and select Yolŋu Studies units as electives within their Bachelor degree (e.g., in Education, Health or Arts).

At the very beginning of the process of its establishment, those working to institute the study of Yolŋu languages in the NT tertiary education sector explicitly articulated the principle that all aspects of curriculum, syllabus and pedagogy would involve senior and skilled Yolŋu speakers and knowledge authorities as decision makers and university lecturers. Those who own and love these languages worked with, and were supported by, non-Yolŋu academics who had learned to speak, love and respect the languages through committed study. Both these groups needed to work together to embed the teaching of Yolŋu languages in a modern university. Fostered by the calm persistence of the Yolŋu language authorities who were employed by CDU, and provided flexibility in the curriculum and syllabus, while accommodating Yolŋu pedagogical protocols, but also by the passion of students for learning an Australian Indigenous language with respect and in good faith, the program holds up extremely well 25 years after its birth. In this chapter I present short intellectual biographies of past and present teachers—three Yolŋu lecturers and three non-Yolŋu coordinators.

The Australian Government established the first five pilot bilingual education programs in 1973, and an additional six in 1974, in which Aboriginal languages and English were both used at Aboriginal primary schools in the NT.³ In East Arnhemland, the Gupapuyŋu language was chosen at both Milingimbi and Galiwin'ku Schools, and the Gumatj language at Yirrkala School (Devlin et al. 2017). Up until 1998, when the NT Government passed legislation to shut down those programs, the use of Indigenous languages in NT schools was highly supported and encouraged. In 1994 CDU demonstrated support for Indigenous studies by founding a new Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. In recognition of his 20 years working in Yolŋu languages and culture in East Arnhemland, Michael Christie was invited to establish an Aboriginal languages program. To establish the foundation for the program, Christie had to find ways of representing Yolŋu knowledge practices in a university context. He was advised by the Yolŋu steering committee that all Yolŋu languages needed to be taught, as well as culture since each language had its own territory with its own people and species (Christie 2009). Language, territory, people and environment are inextricably linked and must be represented in class by the right person, namely by an owner or a manager of the knowledge. This is an important protocol in knowledge production and its practice on Yolŋu lands.

Christie organized a group of Yolŋu advisers from different communities, different languages and clan groups to provide supervision. CDU appointed a full-time Yolŋu lecturer, Waymamba Gaykamaŋu, who was at that time designing a homeland school curriculum in the NT Education Department. Christie and Gaykamaŋu co-designed the first Yolŋu languages and culture courses at the university.

³Angurugu, Areyonga, Hermannsburg, Milingimbi and Warruwi were chosen in 1973, and Murrupurtiyanuwu, Galiwin'ku, Gunbalanya, Yayayi, Yirrkala and Yuendumu in 1974.

Dhuwala' mirri Gupapuyŋu was chosen as the first language to be taught. It had been chosen by early missionaries to be the language for the Milingimbi church, and was one of the first languages chosen for use in the bilingual education program in Milingimbi. As a result, it had extensive written resources, and was both the language known by Christie and the language of which Gaykamaŋu was an owner. In designing the learning of Dhuwala' mirri Gupapuyŋu and Yolŋu culture, the Yolŋu advisers and Gaykamaŋu clearly indicated that the experience of students in the classroom should reproduce the experience of Yolŋu children as they grew into Yolŋu life (Christie 2009). To meet the expectations of the students who were non-Yolŋu adults learning on-campus and online, Christie and Gaykamaŋu worked with the group of Yolŋu advisers to develop Dhuwala' mirri Gupapuyŋu Study Notes as learning aids providing linguistic analysis and description of the language.

One important concept from everyday Yolŋu life, *garma*, was situated at the centre of Yolŋu Studies pedagogy. Humans and other-than-humans (including Yolŋu languages) in East Arnhemland are either Dhuwa or Yirritja. As the Ancestral Beings journeyed through the country, shaped landscapes, communicated and sang at particular sites, everyone, everything and everywhere were declared as belonging to either the Dhuwa or Yirritja moiety. This does not mean that Yolŋu world-making-knowing is dichotomized, rather that individual Dhuwa and Yirritja beings play constructive roles in interrelating Dhuwa and Yirritja. *Garma* is a confluence of Dhuwa and Yirritja knowledge-making, the seeking of agreement by careful negotiation (Marika-Mununggiritj 1990), on open ground and in an understanding of Yolŋu Law (Gumbula 2009). *Garma* is a public place where all people are equally treated with respect and seriousness. Yolŋu advisers and lecturers, and university academics negotiated with care, working together to produce a public curriculum as a *garma* space—Yolŋu Studies at CDU—where non-Yolŋu adult students learn YM through Yolŋu pedagogy with the prepared language learning resources. To maintain the public Yolŋu Studies space under the Yolŋu knowledge protocols, support and understanding from the university were required so that this *garma* space and its practice could be legitimately run within a higher education institution, in the promise of mutual benefit. This has enabled Yolŋu Studies to continue since 1994 and retain its vigour and significance.

After working with undergraduate and postgraduate students, university authorities and researchers for over 12 years, Gaykamaŋu retired from the university. She was awarded an honorary PhD for her work, and is still actively involved in the program as a bilingual and bicultural consultant. After her retirement, Yiŋiya Guyula, a Ũiya-dhalinymirr elder was appointed as a full-time Yolŋu lecturer. Following the Yolŋu pedagogical protocol—only the owner or the manager of the knowledge is authorized to transmit it—the language taught in his class was shifted from Dhuwala' mirri Gupapuyŋu to Dhuwal' mirr Ũiya-dhalinymirr Djambarrpuyŋu. John Greatorex, a non-Yolŋu program coordinator who, like Christie, had worked collaboratively with Yolŋu since the 1970s, succeeded Christie and worked with Guyula in teaching Yolŋu languages and culture. After the resignation of Guyula from CDU, Brenda Muthamuluwuy, a senior Birrkili Gupapuyŋu woman, filled the

Yolŋu lecturer position. The language taught in class reverted to Dhuwala'mirri Gupapuyŋu, her own language bestowed from her patrilineal ascendants. She currently works with a coordinator, Yasunori Hayashi, who was a student of Gaykamaŋu's and had worked collaboratively with Yolŋu since the early 2000s. These three non-Yolŋu coordinators had developed sufficient language skills and cultural awareness to work alongside Yolŋu knowledge authorities, and had been adopted into different Yolŋu clan groups through the Yolŋu kinship system.

3 Protocols in Teaching Yolŋu Languages

While instituting the Yolŋu Studies program, the Yolŋu advisers placed four protocols at the centre of teaching Yolŋu languages at CDU:

- languages and culture should be taught together;
- all Yolŋu languages should be taught;
- languages should be taught by authorities;
- nothing secret or sacred of languages and culture should be taught.

Prior to the establishment of the Yolŋu Studies program in 1994, Raymattja Marika and Christie, who were both working at Yirrkala School used to visit Darwin to deliver short and intensive courses teaching Gumatj Dhuwala'mirri language. Marika was keen to talk about ways in which Yolŋu languages and cultural practices could be taught and learned at a tertiary institution. She focused on the fundamentals of Yolŋu culture (*rom*)—kinship (*gurrutu*), songlines (*manikay*), story (*dhäwu*), land (*wäŋa*) and art (*miny'tji*)—and used these fundamental words in Gumatj Dhuwala'mirri language as the basis of teaching and learning culture and languages. In a staff meeting at Yirrkala School about Yolŋu curriculum, a Yolŋu elder pointed out that all Yolŋu knowledge needs to be understood through those five dimensions (Christie 2001). Gaykamaŋu also emphasized that point during a presentation at the office of Prime Minister and Cabinet to celebrate the 2017 theme of the National Aborigines and Islanders Observance Day Committee (NAIDOC), “Our Languages Matter”. She stated that the land provides Yolŋu languages as well as those five fundamental dimensions placed by the Ancestral Beings who shaped the land ceremonially with singing and chanting in various languages. In teaching and learning Yolŋu languages, the CDU Yolŋu Studies program is a place of intersection for those five values—kinship, songlines, story, land and art.

Marika also sought to highlight the diversity of the languages of East Arnhemland. There are more than 30 Yolŋu languages which can be divided into several language groups. As Ancestral Beings associated with a species of animal or a human figure were travelling and shaping countries, they changed, twisted or made new sounds with their tongues (Djäwa 1977; Milappuma 2008) at certain locations, and placed the tongues as the languages for those territories. Yolŋu prefer to refer to those vernaculars with the English term “languages” rather than “dialects” since each

individual language has its unique Ancestral origin, and discrete linguistic characteristics that are different from those of other languages. For example, the forms of pronouns, demonstratives, auxiliary verbs, noun and verb suffixes, and so forth, differ markedly. In this regard the Yolŋu Studies program has to consider the way in which those discrete territorial languages should be introduced and taught.⁴

Considerable attention needs to be paid to the ownership of Yolŋu languages. When Yolŋu languages were first sung or chanted, as an innovation and invention by Ancestral Beings at certain locations, the languages themselves were (and are) a proclamation of land ownership (Djirrimbilpilwuy Garawirrtja, in Williams and Fidock 1981; Guyula 2013). Each and every language has its own territory, no language is owned by all, and speaking a particular language is an issue to be treated with an appropriate level of delicacy and attention to exclusiveness, as a part of kinship practice. This connection through language is practised within the kinship system and needs to be understood collectively. Gaykamaŋu (2017) claimed this collective ownership of languages as “Yolŋu Intellectual Property” at a special NAIDOC event titled “Our Languages Matter” at CDU. As mentioned above, with great kindness from the Yolŋu lecturers and advisers, the three non-Yolŋu coordinators adopted into the Yolŋu kinship system became part of a team teaching YM in the Yolŋu Studies program.

Lastly, Yolŋu advisers seek to maintain respect for secret and sacred knowledge. The terms “secret” and “sacred” are translated in many Yolŋu languages as “*djinagawuy*”, literally meaning “associated with inside”. The inside can be enacted in languages, in designs of objects, in songs, in dances, and so forth. This is knowledge to which only certain specific authorities are allowed to have access. It is never the case that someone has authoritative access to all inside knowledges across East Arnhemland. This is again solely due to the ineluctable localness of any Yolŋu language and the cultural resources indissociable from it. This fundamental localization, and the forms of inclusiveness and exclusiveness that go with it, constitutes a Yolŋu socio-cultural regime onto which Yolŋu lecturers are always very cautious not to trespass (Guyula 2015).

4 Yolŋu Pedagogical Practices—Three Teaching Duos

4.1 *Waymamba Gaykamaŋu and Michael Christie*

In this section I describe the curriculum and pedagogy that the three teaching duos have practised in the Yolŋu Studies program at CDU throughout its history. In the 1970s, during the NT’s bilingual education period, Gaykamaŋu was teaching at

⁴In the Graduate Certificate in Yolŋu Studies, two core units primarily focus on learning and teaching Dhuwala’mirri Gupapuyŋu and in two specialist electives (conversation and language research units) students are introduced to other Yolŋu languages such as Djambarrpuyŋu, Warramiri, Gälpu, and so forth, depending on Yolŋu consultants’ availability.

Milingimbi School as a bilingual teacher's aide. In the 1980s she became a qualified secondary teacher and continued working at the school. In the 1970s Christie started his job as a classroom teacher at Milingimbi School. He took learning Yolŋu languages and culture very seriously, and regularly attended a Gupapuyŋu language class organized by a missionary linguist, Beulah Lowe. Later, while still learning Gupapuyŋu language in class and also other Yolŋu languages within and outside of work, he took up a position of teacher-linguist in the literacy production centre where he worked collaboratively with Yolŋu colleagues, including Gaykamaŋu and other language authorities, in developing and collecting Yolŋu literature (Christie 1997). With this shared background, nearly 20 years later these two were crucial as the Yolŋu Studies program was established at CDU using the significant number of stories and books that were produced in Gupapuyŋu and other Yolŋu languages at the literacy production centre in Milingimbi.⁵

According to Gaykamaŋu, the principal pedagogy she practised in class was teaching and learning Yolŋu languages and culture through the “stories” shared and written by Yolŋu authorities. She described how Yolŋu culture and Gupapuyŋu language were articulated in those stories, which encompassed a selection of verb forms, pronouns, demonstratives, suffixes, and so on. Instead of learning linguistic explanations of Gupapuyŋu language, students were being immersed through the description and understanding of the inseparable concepts—kinship, songlines, story, arts, land. In addition, she ensured that the learning experience in class was not only about Gupapuyŋu, that is, her patrilineal language and culture knowledge, but also her matrilineal knowledges, that is the Djarrayapuy Djambarrpuyŋu of her mother and Walamaŋu of her mother's mother (Gaykamaŋu, personal communication, 2018). Under Yolŋu intellectual property practice, Gaykamaŋu lawfully has access to these three groups' knowledges, which are intertwined and validated through the Yolŋu kinship that ties Yolŋu individuals to mutual social obligations and responsibilities. As a senior Gupapuyŋu woman, Gaykamaŋu expands upon and simultaneously limits her articulation of each distinct corpus of knowledge. She did not explicitly explain this aspect of territorial governance in Yolŋu languages and culture in “theory”; it was through the stories shared with students that they spontaneously acquired a sense of how collective sovereignty and ownership of intellectual property are embedded in East Arnhemland and practised by Yolŋu.

After she shared her love of and profound immersion in her languages and culture in each class, Christie would then follow her lecture with teaching grammar explicitly, while responding to the students who were learning to appreciate Gaykamaŋu's methods. As Christie recalls, one of the primary reasons why he did not attend the first part of class was needing to restrain his own habitual pedagogical impulses:

⁵These resources have been digitized and archived in the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages (2012). For scholarly publications, refer to Bow et al. (2012), which explores technical, cultural and linguistic challenges that emerged during the process of creating, populating, and implementing the archive, and Christie et al. (2014).

I cannot trust myself not to be interrupting all the time, and letting students realize the work that needs to be done in order to understand each other across [the cultural boundaries]. Students have to learn how to treat [Indigenous] people [as knowledge authorities]. (Christie, personal communication, 2018)

The pedagogical practice Christie tried to achieve in class expressed the interdisciplinary approach which appears in his research works.⁶ He aimed to connect two different sets of knowledge practices, while simultaneously holding them apart so the differences were evident. This approach appreciates “the other” while expressing the intention to produce knowledge collaboratively together.

4.2 *Yiñiya Guyula and John Greatorex*

Guyula is a senior L̄iya-dhalinymirr Djambarrpuyñu man. He formerly worked in aviation as a mechanic, and became the first Yolñu to gain a private pilot licence. Even before being appointed as a Yolñu lecturer after Gaykamañu retired from CDU in 2008, he had known Greatorex for more than 20 years. Greatorex first went to Arnhemland in the 1970s as an English teacher at Shepherdson College in Galiwin’ku. When he realized that Yolñu were speaking their own languages, he immediately started to learn the languages, chiefly for communication, but more profoundly he regarded learning languages spoken by the people of the country where he was as a mark of respect and faith. As well as attending a regular Djambarrpuyñu language class coordinated by missionary linguist Dianne Buchanan, he spent an enormous amount of time with Yolñu family both before and after work. Greatorex started working with Yolñu Studies as a coordinator prior to Guyula replacing Gaykamañu in 2008. They delivered the existing undergraduate units and also modified the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of those units to develop a postgraduate level course (Graduate Certificate of Yolñu Studies) in which students focus on learning Yolñu languages and culture from appropriate Yolñu authorities.

When Guyula was appointed as a Yolñu languages and culture lecturer, the principal teaching resources used in the program were mainly limited to Gupapuyñu language. The resources featuring Djambarrpuyñu were not sufficient for teaching that language alone in the program. Following the protocols previously outlined, which stipulate that the languages should be taught by appropriate authorities, he made sure not to teach, but to “support” students wanting to learn Gupapuyñu, as well as teaching his Djambarrpuyñu language. What made him able and eligible to support the learning of Gupapuyñu language in Yolñu eyes, were the (socio)linguistic interrelations of the two languages, and the mutual social obligations in which he was positioned in the practice of Yolñu kinship.

⁶See Yolñu Research @ CDU (CDU. Yolñu Research n.d.).

Differences in the linguistic characteristics of Gupapuyŋu and Djambarrpuyŋu are by and large quite subtle. The major difference lies in whether grammatical morphemes possess vowels at the end of a word or not. This is most evident in suffixes on nouns and verbs as well as in the forms of pronouns, demonstratives and interrogatives. Take, for example, *dhuwala/dhuwal* which are the demonstrative forms meaning “this”. Switching these two languages linguistically does not require significant effort, and in fact Gupapuyŋu native speakers in some speech acts employ both these languages.

Sociolinguistically this code-switching is observed through the emergence of communilects in East Arnhemland. Mission stations were established by the Methodist Overseas Missions (MOM) at Milingimbi in 1923, Yirrkala in 1935 and Elcho Island in 1942. Following the introduction of Christian doctrine and industrial development under the official MOM policy of tolerance and acceptance of Yolŋu culture, beliefs and practices (Kadiba 1998, p. 229), Yolŋu from homelands with their own languages came to live together in those permanent settlements where Yolŋu and their languages came into extensive contact. As a consequence, Yolŋu formed a relatively homogeneous group, speaking Gupapuyŋu and Djambarrpuyŋu in Milingimbi (Gale et al. 1981), while Djambarrpuyŋu became a dominant language for communicative purposes in Galiwin’ku (Devlin 1985), and Dhuwaya emerged as a new dialect due to social needs in Yirrkala (Amery 1993).

Through the lens of Western kinship names, Guyula and Gaykamaŋu are together in an uncle (mother’s brother) and niece (sister’s daughter) relationship, named as a *yothu-yindi* relation in many Yolŋu languages. This phrase literally means “child-big” without specification, implying both sides have the responsibilities that come with any and every child-adult relation. This *yothu-yindi* is a remarkably profound and durable social unit expressing mutuality. Both sides play their role in fostering each other’s language and the inseparable cultural institutions that come with language. In this sense, Guyula’s support for the students learning Gupapuyŋu, a Dhuwala language, is a proper expression of a role he is obliged to practise as a knowledge caretaker. It was a role with which he felt comfortable. Thus Guyula had a great impact on the students, by giving them multiple opportunities in learning.

Right up until his resignation, Guyula was passionate about developing languages and culture resources using digital technology, and dedicated to experimenting with its effective use. He “missioned himself” to reflect and find a better way to describe and teach the cultural institutional practices that necessarily accompany language work: kinship practices, enacting songlines, articulating stories, conveying the realities of the land. Representing a shift from the text- and photo-based teaching style that Gaykamaŋu practised, this “mission” was triggered by a question from a non-Yolŋu: “How can we non-Yolŋu feel and experience the spiritual connection to goanna as you Yolŋu could do?” It led to him spending enormous amounts of time developing visual and audio resources telling and showing how spirit Ancestors metamorphosed themselves into trees, rocks or other entities. However in the course of manipulating digital technologies at CDU campus, he found himself unsatisfactorily trapped in front of his computer screen and detached from his

land—the very source of his authority. He explained that when one person holds a pair of clapsticks and sings and talks while standing on his land, his grandfather and great-grandfather also do it with you. On this account he felt disconcerted and disempowered in Darwin, distant from the land so crucial to his being an authoritative Yolŋu man (Guyula, personal communication, 2018).

Greatorex's faithful respect and sympathy for Yolŋu languages can be summarized in this statement: "I think I can logically understand and use Yolŋu languages, but I would never feel the languages how Yolŋu would feel" (Greatorex, personal communication, 2018). The more Yolŋu voices are heard by learners as they develop their own style of speech, the better. While this is not possible when the teacher is just one man distant from his country and countrymen, it is possible if classes are delivered from a distance. With this as its aim, a unique pedagogical experiment was developed under the leadership of Guyula and Greatorex, with assistance from Christie. "Teaching from Country" (2011) became an international award-winning project that investigated and evaluated distance education using a digital technology platform.⁷ Yolŋu authorities are teaching from their land and the students of Yolŋu languages and culture are learning on campus. After many years of dedicated commitment to the Yolŋu Studies program, Guyula and Greatorex moved on. Guyula returned to Milingimbi and started working for his community and people of East Arnhemland,⁸ and Greatorex filled the position of full-time teacher at Mäpuru school, one of many homeland schools in East Arnhemland.

4.3 *Brenda Muthamuluwuy and Yasunori Hayashi*

The next team comprised Muthamuluwuy and Hayashi. We currently deliver the program that has been handed on to us from the two teaching duos who preceded us. The material in this section has been developed in part from listening to Muthamuluwuy give presentations discussing her work, supplemented by a recent interview (Muthamuluwuy, personal communication, 2018), and from my experience as her co-teacher.

Muthamuluwuy is a senior Birrkili Gupapuyŋu woman who formerly worked at Shepherdson College in Galiwin'ku. For 10 years she played an active role as a bridge-builder attending to cross-cultural conflicts and facilitating negotiations. In 2012 she was appointed as an administrative officer at CDU for the Masters of Indigenous Knowledge of Mawul Rom, then, in 2015, with an agreement made by the Yolŋu advisory group, she filled the Yolŋu lecturer position. I was at the time working with a service provider NGO as a senior community educator and, much to

⁷ See the website at <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/inc/tfc/index.html>. For scholarly publications, refer to Guyula et al. (2010), Christie and Verran (2010) and Christie (2010).

⁸ In 2016 he was elected as an independent member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly.

my delight, I was appointed as the new coordinator of the program to support her in teaching Yolŋu languages and culture.

For me, learning Australian languages began with a commitment to communication with respect and modesty. This grew out of learning to play the traditional styles of didgeridoo in various regions across the Top End of the NT, a not uncommon interest for young Japanese men. On my first visit to Arnhemland I was encouraged by local didgeridoo players to learn languages because, as they explained, the players actually speak through this musical instrument.⁹ Quite transported by such a wonderful idea, very soon after I enrolled in the undergraduate Yolŋu Studies course at CDU to study with Gaykamaŋu and Christie.

Our approach to teaching began with a commitment to the idea that the Yolŋu Studies program should address the experience of students actually sitting in classes. We focus on the learning experience of these novice learners who are growing into Yolŋu life through our classes. In the first introductory class of Yolŋu languages and culture, the primary learning focuses on Yolŋu kinship relations, in which Muthamuluwuy and I see possibilities of employing the way young Yolŋu children actually learn from adults. Our approach thus contrasts with other approaches informed more by anthropological and ethnographic literature concerning Yolŋu worldview. Others (importantly, not all), generally begin with an abstract explanatory description of the “moiety system”. “Moiety” is an anthropological term, adopted from French, that Yolŋu have appropriated; it literally means “half”. While it is used in Yolŋu languages, this term would never feature in Yolŋu pedagogy with children. (To do so would be like explaining the meaning of past-present-future to a two year old child in an English speaking community.) Such anthropologically inspired teaching then proceeds to the description of various moiety allocations of particular entities: different types of flora and fauna, of rocks and winds, and waters, all belong to one or other moiety—they are either Yirritja or Dhuwa.

Muthamuluwuy quite properly points out that no Yolŋu child has ever started their life-long learning journey with an abstract understanding of the moieties. Other learning experiences in the world as a whole come to educate them about how a moiety—their side of the world—fits to them and with them. Abstract understandings arise through situated learning experiences. It is not the other way around when it comes to the learning process. Muthamuluwuy begins by identifying for her students a perspective of Yolŋu neophyte learners and knowers. She inducts them into what they are bestowed with prenatally and postnatally and through their kin relations such as songline, story, land and art. This links into discussions of the students’ social connections and particular mutual responsibilities as beginning speakers of a Yolŋu language.

Muthamuluwuy incorporates into her language teaching various formal linguistic components such as kin terms, suffixes associated with kin names, and pronouns, demonstratives and interrogatives. Learning to use these formal elements supports

⁹In Gupapuyŋu Dhuwala’ mirri language, the verb “to play the didgeridoo” is “*yidaki waja*” which literally means “the didgeridoo speaks”.

students, through their language learning, to develop their comprehension of deep layers of Yolŋu kinship relations. Subsequently, a description of moiety will later be introduced in class in order to cap and in a sense to “name”, what students already know, since they already enact the knowledge in their Yolŋu language utterances. This teaching and learning process avoids the necessity for students to build an awkward, disengaged, intellectual framework before learning to hear and say in accordance with the profound constituents of Yolŋu life and philosophy. It encourages them as initially inductive and constructive learners, proceeding in much the same way that Yolŋu neophytes actually learn on their country.

It is in the very “happening” of a class that “something” appears, maybe ephemerally. These “somethings” happening in class are profoundly respected in the CDU Yolŋu Studies program. *This* is what can ignite critical learning awareness among students as they come to understand how to treat people and communicate with them with respect and compassion. Sitting at the edge of class, I make every effort to remain silent and to let Muthamuluwuy and the students create the class as they will. I keenly observe the “somethings” that arise. By doing so, I can better judge the adjustments in teaching and learning and assessment practices required to maximize Muthamuluwuy’s capability as a Yolŋu native teacher. By adhering to the four Yolŋu protocols, every semester our teaching and learning processes involve attempts to react sensitively to the uncomfortable and the contested moments in positive ways to ensure our pedagogical practices continuously improve.

5 Concluding with Student Voices

Culturally and socially it is valuable for YM to be a routine part of the academic institution in the NT. A great deal of attention needs to be paid to ensure the maintenance of ongoing collective agreements with language authorities, since Aboriginal languages are recognized as contemporary living Indigenous cultural intellectual property that is collectively owned and practised.

The experience of the students themselves is also an important part of the process, and I conclude by giving them their voice. I thus present three students reflecting on their experience of learning YM and culture at CDU following the pedagogical protocols outlined in this chapter.

After graduating from the Graduate Certificate course, a professional working in educational content development and an enthusiastic linguist, interviewed Muthamuluwuy and me. Alex Payne later published an article in a community magazine, entitled *Mutha Tongue* (2017).¹⁰ Learning an Indigenous

¹⁰Mutha in the title of his article is a pun. Mutha is short for Muthamuluwuy and is often pronounced mistakenly by Balanda as how Yolŋu pronounce Matha.

[l]anguage felt like the first step to better understanding [...] of Indigenous culture [...]. Yolŋu language, kinship and culture are inextricably linked throughout the course: one cannot be properly grasped without some knowledge of the other [...]; the course has opened doors in to Yolŋu world to me.

As an undergraduate and while he was a student of Guyula and Greatorex, he spent several months in Milingimbi with a Gupapuyŋu family and their kin who adopted him. He deeply appreciated Yolŋu pedagogical practice in both CDU and the Yolŋu community, and acquired extensive YM skills in Gupapuyŋu. After graduation, this student became a respectful community educator working in a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic role in East Arnhemland. He has given permission to quote a reflection provided in a translation of an assessment task where Waymamba Gaykamaŋu introduces her family in Gupapuyŋu language (Anon., personal communication, 2018):

This story shows [...] kinship, which highlights the complex set of connections that form relationships. [...] I am getting better at knowing the *mälk* (one of the constituents of *gurruŋu*, kinship) system “off by heart”. I enjoyed using concrete examples of Waymamba’s real family rather than hypothetical situations as it shows the complexity of the various systems of connection in the real world.

Another student who, on completing undergraduate study with a major in Yolŋu Studies with Gaykamaŋu and Christie, was appointed to a position as a public servant in East Arnhemland, found himself working intimately with speakers of many Yolŋu languages. He took very seriously the need to engage with, and listen to, the people in Arnhemland communities and townships and sought ways by which policy making and decision making in community development could be respectfully and collaboratively achieved. He recalls:

I wanted to be able to sit down and talk with Aboriginal people in their language [...]. I began to understand how worlds are created, truths negotiated and agreed upon, how disputes are settled and how worlds are constructed [...]. It was through the Yolŋu Studies lecturers that I was able to form meaningful, long-lasting and committed relationships with Yolŋu. The Yolŋu studies program at CDU has been nothing short of life changing (Anon., personal communication, 2018).

Learning YM and culture at CDU prepares the students to be able to continue carefully and respectfully their professional lives in Australia. The course represents an intellectual shift, from rendering Yolŋu people and their knowledges and practice as study or research objects, to partnering with them as knowledge experts and collaborators. It is now 20 years since I began the intellectual journey which brought me to my current role. My interest in language had been ignited by traditional Yolŋu music accompanied by the *yidaki* or didgeridoo. The great generosity and patience of my Yolŋu Studies advisers, and my Yolŋu family across East Arnhemland, have nurtured me and I feel honoured to be the coordinator of the current Yolŋu Studies program and work under the guidance and supervision of Yolŋu knowledge authorities.

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Yasunori Hayashi is a Japanese man who currently works in the Yolŋu Studies Centre at Charles Darwin University as a coordinator and researcher. His collaborative research with Yolŋu knowledge authorities involves Yolŋu languages, governance and decision-making processes.