

Languages for Australia's Future

Andrew Ferguson: 17 November 2007

The report by the Australian Primary Principals Association, titled *In the Balance – The future of Australia's primary schools*, points out the reasons why primary schools are failing our students in the area of languages education. Firstly, literacy and numeracy presently dominate the curriculum. Across the nation, teachers spend 38 per cent of their instructional time teaching English and 18 per cent teaching mathematics – more than half the total. The other six Key Learning Areas share the rest of the instructional time, with languages averaging only two per cent. This is even though the basis of modern, progressive education in this country, as agreed by all state and territory ministers for education, mandates eight Key Learning Areas of equal status. Included in these areas are languages, the arts, health and physical education, as well as technology. As stated in the report, one of the most robust findings in research on teaching is that students' learning of concepts and skills is tied directly to the amount of time allocated: the more time, the better the performance.

Let's just consider my home state of Victoria where the provision of languages other than English, or LOTE, in primary schools is still very strong in comparison with other states and territories. The trends in our government schools are unfortunately, though, not positive, as detailed in the recent annual LOTE Report published by the Victorian Department of Educational and Early Childhood Development. In particular, the number of government primary schools offering a LOTE continues to decline, from 96 per cent in 2000, down to 83 per cent in 2006. Increasingly, also, 'language awareness' programs, which focus largely on culture, are taking the place of languages programs. For example, the program might concentrate on students learning about the foods and eating habits of a particular country, rather than teaching students the language of that country. In 2006 a majority, 54 per cent, of programs focused on culture. Furthermore only 2 per cent of primary LOTE programs ran for at least the recommended 150 minutes per week.

The first major reason why primary schools are failing our students is clear; not enough instructional time is being given to languages. The second major reason, as pointed out in the report, is that Australian primary schools do not have sufficient resources to achieve fully the goals set for them by governments. Over 40 per cent of principals reported that recruiting and keeping good teachers was one of the biggest challenges they faced. To quote: '...if a school is expected to enable all students to become proficient in a language other than English and it does not have a LOTE teacher, then it is self-evident that it needs the resources'.

A common misconception is that the development of literacy can be confused or hampered by learning several languages at the same time. In fact, research shows that that exposure to as little as one hour per week of a second language in the earliest years of primary school advances the age of reading readiness in English. What we learn to do in one language helps us with any other language we might encounter. This means that our first language and other languages work in partnership to strengthen and enrich our repertoire of literacy practices. Studies also show that learning another language enhances the academic skills of students by increasing their abilities in writing and mathematics.

In fact, research into the acquisition of languages indicates that cognitive development can be greatly enhanced by learning several languages simultaneously. Researchers from University College London studied the brains of 105 people, 80 of whom were bilingual. They found learning other languages altered grey matter – the area of the brain which processes information – in the same way exercise builds muscles. Children in languages programs have tended to demonstrate greater cognitive development and more creative thinking skills. Furthermore, people who learned a second language at a younger age are more likely to have more advanced grey matter than those who learned later.

Finally, through teaching and maintaining Indigenous and community languages, we help to maintain cultural identity and diversity. All communities take a pride in their customs, their way of seeing the world, their way of expressing themselves in language, in art, in music and in day-to-day living. By endorsing multilingualism within the nation's education system, we show that we value the rich cultural diversity which is Australia.

Before looking at Australia's official languages policies, let us consider examples from other nations. In Europe, the European Union action plan includes the promotion of the learning of the mother tongue plus two other languages, starting as early as possible. The United Kingdom is now moving towards compulsory languages learning. The UK strategy

...sets out an ambitious and radical programme to boost the number of people learning languages and increase the value which we place on language skills. The aim is to introduce languages into primary classrooms, and ensure that pupils have the opportunity to build on these foundations throughout secondary school and beyond. [and] By 2010, [for] all 7-11 year-olds to learn a language in school.

The overwhelming majority of countries in the world now embrace multilingualism in their education systems. Here in Australia, we are fooling ourselves if we believe that an English-only education will benefit us individually or collectively as a nation. Our students will not be able to compete in a global market or act as responsible global citizens if they are monolingual. Global citizens of the 21st century will have personal and professional lives which extend beyond national boundaries and operate between many cultures. Learning languages opens up personal and career opportunities. Students of languages have the opportunity to make new friends across the globe, as well as at home, by making links with local communities where the languages are spoken. They may also take part in international exchanges and tours. English may be generally accepted as the common global language, but 94 per cent of the world's population do not speak English as their first language. These global citizens will increasingly have their own language or languages and English. Monolinguals will be left behind.

Australia has a National Statement on Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008, which is founded on the commitment by all ministers of education to the vision of quality languages education for all students, in all schools, in all parts of the country. Through learning languages our students and the broader Australian community gain important benefits. This Statement on Languages Education is backed by a Languages Plan, with annual funding for strategic projects to support its aims. Some of these projects include improvement in the national coordination and quality assurance of ethnic schools, investigations into the current provision of

Indigenous languages programs and the state and nature of languages education in general in Australian schools, a review of teacher education for languages teachers, the development and distribution of a 'Guide to the Teaching, Learning and Assessing of Languages in the 21st Century', the development of a nationally coordinated promotion of the benefits of languages learning in schools and an annual national seminar on languages education.

So, what is the way forward? The learning of languages has been identified as a key element of futurist educational thinking in Australia. Documents such as the Federalist Paper 2, *The Future of Schooling in Australia*, and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) *10-year Blueprint for Education and Training* published in April this year, identify the learning of languages as a key element of education for the 21st century. The ACCI *Blueprint* points out that Australia needs to increase significantly its expenditure on education in general to catch up with other comparable countries.

The allocation of resources at state, territory and national levels, ensuring that our schools provide quality languages programs is, of course, a political decision. A recent public forum run by the Modern Language Teachers' Association of Victoria questioned representatives from the three major political parties contesting the upcoming federal election: the Liberals, Labor and the Greens. All three parties committed to supporting a renewal of the National Statement and Plan beyond 2008, with funding for projects dependent upon a review of the progress of current projects. Only the Greens spoke strongly in favour of languages being a compulsory subject in schools. Both Labor and the Greens both saw that languages education in Australia is inextricably linked with advancing multiculturalism.

This year's National Seminar on Languages Education, later this month, will bring together key decision makers from government, Catholic and independent schools throughout Australia to plan for improvements in the provision of languages education. The challenge for these directors of education, regional directors, curriculum managers and school principals is to make the vision of the National Statement a reality at state and territory levels, providing 'quality languages education for all students, in all schools, in all parts of the country'.

Given the clear benefits of learning languages for our students and our nation, why is there not greater public and institutional support for this vital area of education? Perhaps there is a degree of ignorance about languages learning. This problem is being addressed partly through the production of promotional materials in a nationally-coordinated campaign to explain the benefits of learning languages, that will be distributed early next year to coincide with the 2008 UN International Year of Languages.

There is no doubt that a large proportion of primary schools in Australia are currently failing our students in not providing quality languages programs. As well as commitment at political and institutional levels, a groundswell of public support for the learning of languages is needed to force our schools to prioritise languages programs. To support these programs, extra funding from state territory and federal governments must be forthcoming. Only then can we ensure adequate instruction time with suitably qualified languages teachers. If you are a parent of a school-age child and you are not satisfied with the languages program offered at your local school, you should be asking questions of your school principal and your local

politicians. Primary schools can offer young Australians so many wonderful opportunities through learning languages. We must ensure that all students have these opportunities.

*Andrew Ferguson is President of the Modern Language Teachers' Association of Victoria and the project manager for the 2007 National Seminar on Languages Education. This presentation appeared on the Lingua Franca program, ABC Radio-
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2007/2090591.htm>*