

Learning languages in Australia - too much like hard work?

This trenchant article appeared in 2003 – Has anything changed much since?

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Languages learning could be seen as one of the great failures of modern Australian education. Since the release of the National Policy on Languages (1987), dozens of Commonwealth and State reports and policy statements have emphasised the importance of foreign language studies for all young Australians. However, this rhetoric has not translated into any increase in the number of students committing themselves to long-term (and therefore meaningful) language programs.

Indeed, participation rates at Year 12 level across Australia hover around 12% at best, and are far lower in some States and Territories. In some States over 30 languages are offered at Year 12 level, although it is obvious that most of these courses were introduced for political rather than pedagogical reasons. The latter 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the number of primary school language programs, mainly due to dedicated Commonwealth funding, but a national evaluation of school-based language programs in 1998 concluded that: *"Although ... bottom-up programmes may provide a surge in language enrolments in the post-compulsory years, there is no evidence that this is happening yet."* (1)

The States and Territories vary enormously in terms of the value placed on language learning in the compulsory years of schooling. In New South Wales, for example, all schools are required to provide 100 hours of study of one language in one 12-month period in order to allow students to meet the minimum requirements of the School Certificate. The study of a language is not a core element of the primary curriculum, but appears as an optional component of the Human Society and Its Environment K-6 Syllabus.

In the other States and Territories, the provision of language study varies widely, particularly between government and non-government systems, with the general expectation being that students will participate in a language course at some stage during the compulsory years of schooling. In Queensland, language study is compulsory in Years 6-8, in Western Australia from Years 3-8, and in South Australia from Reception to Year 7. There are no compulsory programs in the Northern Territory. In the ACT most primary schools offer language courses and most students in Year 7 are required to study a language at government schools.

Language programs also depend on the whims and wishes of schools and teachers. Some students are lucky enough to be part of well-staffed, well-resourced language learning environments. Thousands are bewildered members of classes that depend entirely upon the goodwill of the current principal towards languages, the ability of the school to retain suitable teachers, the political realities of the particular area, or some equally complex issue.

Until roughly the middle of the twentieth century, the acquisition of a foreign language was regarded as an essential element of a good education in Western, English-speaking schools. Language study encouraged higher order thinking skills, enabled a general appreciation of languages as systems and underpinned the development of literacy. The study of the history and culture of ancient and modern civilisations was believed to be necessary to support an understanding of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the English-speaking world.

It is an extraordinary irony that as educators and policy makers around Australia struggle to design programs that will raise academic standards, encourage critical

thinking and analytical skills, as well as address deep concerns about literacy, the one subject area that can achieve all of those goals is rejected and disregarded in the rush to come up with new initiatives. My own work as a teacher and researcher has brought me into contact with hundreds of language teachers who battle each day to convince students, other staff and principals that the benefits of their subject area have been appreciated for centuries. However, these same dedicated people also recognise that other subjects that demand little or no intellectual effort, have next to no homework and are entertaining or rewarding in an immediate sense, now dominate the curriculum. Does this explain why, as Rae claims, *'many students find LOTE classes tedious'*?

Language teachers can all cite the frequent comments from their students along the lines of: *'I have learnt more about English from studying German/French/Chinese etc than I ever did in my English classes'*. It is my firm belief that a well-qualified Australian language teacher has a better understanding of language and is a better model of good *English* usage than any other teacher in the system. Yet they are rarely, if ever, consulted on any matters outside their own foreign language field.

Considerable research clearly shows that the higher-order linguistic skills acquired in effective language programs have a direct benefit for student literacy in the first language. Learning a language enhances listening and speaking skills and develops the ability to analyse and categorise, to find patterns and to express and defend opinions. The sustained, cumulative nature of language learning means the development of sound study habits and a better understanding of how to learn. Foreign language learners do better at cognitive and problem-solving tasks and their results in verbal assessments are higher than those of their monolingual counterparts.

Perhaps the best-known and most succinct statement about the value of language learning comes from a 1996 publication: *"... achieving proficiency in other languages is one of the great learning experiences in the human condition ... the compelling reasons for learning languages reside in the intellectual enrichment of the individual learner - a better understanding of the world, Australia's place in it, and the many communities within Australia."* (2)

As is the case in other English-speaking nations, some Australian policy makers are engaged in a belated struggle to reinstate effective language learning in the core curriculum. In the United Kingdom, the Nuffield Languages Inquiry (2000) made recommendations that can be applied directly to Australia:

We need to equip the next generation with the skills to move about the world and take an active role in shaping their relationships with others on a world stage. Given the global prevalence of English, it might be tempting to believe that it alone will be sufficient, but evidence indicates that the UK will not thrive with a single language - even English ... Much that is essential to our society, its health and its interests - including effective choice in policy, realization of citizenship, effective overseas links and openness to the inventions of other cultures - will not be achieved in one language alone. (3)

In the United States, the Federal Government endorsed a lengthy publication on the need for all students to engage in the study of other languages: *"This imperative envisions a future in which all students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical."* (4)

It is unrealistic for Australia and Australians to be complacent about language learning. The inability or unwillingness to become at least reasonably proficient in another language cedes power to those who are bilingual or multilingual. It means that Australians must always rely on others to be willing and able to speak English. Most importantly, it gives the impression of linguistic and cultural arrogance, which is an unhelpful reputation for any nation to have.

The diversity of language programs in primary schools and the complex nature of languages education at secondary level currently prevent the introduction of continuous, sequenced, high quality courses. Rather than starting from the premise that all languages should be represented in the curriculum, future policy development must begin by addressing the ways in which effective language programs can best be delivered.

I propose that the following criteria apply in all States and Territories:

1. All students should be required to study at least one language, as well as English, regardless of their linguistic heritage.
2. A maximum of five or six languages should be offered in Australian schools, reflecting the *capacity of each State or Territory to provide teachers and resources*.
3. Schools and systems must be able to demonstrate the capacity to provide sequenced, continuous courses in Years 5-10 that enable progress from primary to secondary school within the State or Territory.
4. A mix of Asian and European (including classical) languages may be offered.
5. Students wishing to obtain the Year 10 credential should undertake a minimum of four years of full-time study of one of the stipulated languages.
6. Syllabuses must be explicit in terms of what students should know and be able to do at each stage of learning. They must be practical documents, designed for regular and effective use by teachers.
7. All students should be able to reach an equivalent level of achievement, regardless of the language being studied or the location of the program.
8. Any school or system wishing to introduce the study of languages not already identified, perhaps at the specific request of a community or other group, could do so on a case by case basis and only if the criteria described in paragraph 2 are met. This would apply only to schools where there is a desire to have the language recognised for the Year 10 credential.
9. All other language programs would be provided by and for particular communities, outside the purview of school systems.
10. Students applying for university entrance should be required to complete the study of a language in Years 11 and 12.

It is time to acknowledge that English-speaking countries have everything to gain and nothing to lose by what Rae calls 'a systematic rethink' of language learning. Throughout the rest of the world the study of other languages (not only English!) remains a dynamic and vital part of the core curriculum, right up to the last year of high school. Why do we insist on being different?

References

- 1 *Advancing Australia's Languages: Overview Report*, 1998, Dept of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, p. 4.
- 2 *Language Teachers: The Pivot of Policy*, 1996, Australian Language and Literacy Council, National Board of Employment, Education and Training, AGPS, Canberra, p. 3.
- 3 *Languages: The next generation*, The Nuffield Foundation, 2000
- 4 *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century*, 1999,

National Standards in Foreign Language Education, Yonkers, NY, American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Executive Summary, p. 1.

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