

LANGUAGES EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

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Welcome to the seventh edition of the **Languages Education in Australia** Newsletter. Produced by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) jointly with the Australian Parents Council (APC), this Newsletter started as a monthly publication and is rapidly evolving to be a much more frequent event through 2007 - to inform school communities and other subscribers with an interest in languages education, about events, activities and initiatives around the country in this vitally important field of learning and development – one with implications for the future of every student in our schools and for the future of our country in the modern world.

We want this Newsletter, and the Languages Education in Australia Website (<http://www.languageseducation.com>) to become increasingly interactive, building two-way communication and providing a venue for school communities to put forward ideas, discussion topics, suggestions – and a gallery of good news stories and photos about how your school is engaging its community around languages education. **Contact us on:** info@languageseducation.com.

Note: Disclaimer - Any products or services mentioned in this Newsletter or on our Website are simply noted for your information; no such mention infers or provides any recommendation, guarantee or indemnity from ACSSO, APC or any of our members or employees in respect of any member of the public who may choose to follow up with that service or product.

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2008: THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF LANGUAGES

United Nations Sets Example

At its General Assembly on 16 May 2007, the United Nations declared 2008 the Year of Languages.

This step was taken as a recognition that "genuine multilingualism promotes unity in diversity and international understanding".

By way of presenting an example to the nations of the world in embracing multilingualism, the UN General Assembly "recognizing that the United Nations pursues multilingualism as a means of promoting, protecting and preserving diversity of languages and cultures globally, emphasized the paramount importance of the equality of the Organization's six official languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish)".

Further the UN Secretary General has been requested "to ensure that all language services were given equal treatment and were provided with equally favourable working conditions and resources".

Read more at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/ga10592.doc.htm>.

Australian Peaks Seek Commitment to Action

On 14 June 2007 ACSSO (the national peak body representing students in the public education system) and APC (the national peak body representing the students in the private education system) wrote to each Minister of Education at Federal, State and Territory levels, to each CEO of Education and Catholic and Independent Schools organisations across the country, plus the MCEETYA Working Party on Languages Education, seeking their commitment to work together to achieve the opportunities which the International Year provides to raise the profile and future sustainable development of languages education at every level and in every part of Australia.

Dear (Minister, etc)

As you may be already aware, on 16 May 2007 the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2008 as the International Year of Languages.

This timely initiative highlights UN commitment to multilingualism as a means of promoting, protecting and preserving the diversity of languages and cultures globally.

A copy of the General Assembly release of 16 May 2007 is attached.

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC), acting together on behalf of the families and school communities of the 3.3 million students in all sectors of schooling across the country, have been actively promoting the need for a greater and more strategically coordinated national focus on languages education in schools and education systems in all States and Territories.

This has been a constant theme through all our activities and efforts to promote languages education since the decision to terminate the funding of the NALSAS program in 2002. It was a theme of our presentation to the recent National Summit on Languages held in Canberra on 7 June 2007 (enclosed).

We fully support and applaud the National Statement on Languages Education which was progressively developed from 2002 through to its formal adoption and release by MCEETYA in latter 2005. We have also expressed fairly forcefully a range of reservations which our members across the country hold about the extent to which the first range of projects will deliver the desired levels of strategic and transformative leadership and action that we see as necessary to make real and sustainable advances in this area.

In particular, ACSSO and APC have formally proposed, to and through the MCEETYA Working Party on Languages Education, that 2008 should be designated as Australia's National Year of Languages, along similar but improved lines to such Language Year initiatives held in Europe and USA – drawing on their experiences and achievements as a guide to our effective action.

The United Nations has now made an enabling decision on behalf of Australia – and all other nations. This provides a unique opportunity for every country to move forward together.

We look forward to your advice of the ways in which you would seek to work in conjunction with the national parent organisations and our widespread membership networks across every State and Territory, to ensure that we jointly realise the opportunities this Year will provide to achieve major strategic advances in languages education and Australia's national languages

skills capacity, for the future benefit of every student, family and the ongoing prosperity of our nation.

We will keep our readers apprised of responses received.

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LANGUAGES IN CRISIS

National Summit

Last issue, we provided information about the **National Summit** on languages education held in Canberra on 7 June 2007 at the National Press Club, convened by the Australian Institute of Humanities jointly with the Group of Eight Universities.

We detailed the presentation to the Summit made by ACSSO on behalf of itself and the APC.

At this stage, the promised Communique on proceedings at the National Summit has not yet appeared - 25 June has been mooted as the likely publication date.

In the meantime, it may be useful to consider some of the other speakers and organisations they represented at the Summit. Many of these names will be familiar as ardent proponents of an increased investment of languages education in Australia:

- Anne Freadman, University of Melbourne
- Andrew Ferguson, Asia Education Foundation
- John Gatt-Rutter, Latrobe University
- Michael Kindler, ACT Dept Education & Training
- Jo Lo Bianco, University of Melbourne
- Nerida Newbegin, University of Sydney
- George Quinn, Australian National University
- Roly Sussex, University of Queensland

We look forward to bringing you more detail on the Summit as it becomes publicly available.

It may also be pertinent to consider one example of media coverage of the efforts of the Group of Eight to address languages education, and a response to it - both, in this case, from Queensland.

Lack of language skills

Tess Livingstone, Brisbane Courier-Mail education editor

AUSTRALIA'S top research universities, the Group of Eight, are doing the nation a favour in moving to kick-start foreign language teaching from infancy to postgraduate standard.

The imperatives for the case are compelling. In the 1960s, 40 per cent of Year 12 students studied a second language, compared with 15 per cent today. In Queensland, the fall-off is even more serious, with just 5.8 per cent of Year 12 doing so.

At university level, the number of languages available has fallen from 66 to 29 in the past 10 years, with just 3 per cent of students studying an Asian language.

In contrast, 300 million Chinese students are currently studying English, while in Finland, where school students consistently outperform Australia on international literacy and numeracy tests, all children take three languages throughout schooling, 44 per cent take a fourth language and 31 per cent a fifth language.

Today, the Go8 and the Australian Academy of the Humanities are co-sponsoring a National Summit on Languages in Canberra, bringing together language teachers and representatives from business and government. They are seeking bipartisan support for effective measures to develop our national language capacity.

Business is already firmly onside. A few months ago, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry issued a blueprint for education which advocated compulsory language lessons at school from the age of seven or younger, recognising the fact that languages can be learnt effectively and enjoyed from early childhood.

In a policy paper prepared for the summit, the Go8 shows how and why Australia's lack of language skills is putting future economic growth in jeopardy. The reasons are obvious in fields such as tourism and international education, but the impacts are also being felt in other industries and by individuals.

In Europe for example, Amazon moved its \$US8.4 billion retail customer service centre from the UK to Ireland to take advantage of the Emerald Isle's superior language skills. More than 40 per cent of adult Irish men and women speak a language other than English (and Irish).

As the Go8 paper noted: "Monolingual English native speakers are already losing the advantage in their own language because English language skills are becoming a basic skill around the world.

"Australians are increasingly competing for jobs with people who are just as competent in English as they are in their own native language and possibly one or two more. The London business world prefers graduates from European universities rather than British institutions because they speak English as well as at least one other language, and often two or three."

In Queensland as in other states, the chronic shortage of foreign language teachers will be a major stumbling block in overcoming the problem and, unfortunately, this week's State Budget did nothing to address the issue.

All schools have trouble filling language teachers' jobs and independent schools regularly have to look interstate to fill jobs.

While most of those Year 12 students learning languages are aiming to proceed to university, there is no reason that more vocational education students should not learn a second language at a top level as well, especially those interested in careers in hospitality, tourism and child care.

Apart from a much needed injection of government funds, which the Go8 says is vital, lateral thinking will also be essential to boost foreign language teaching and build up the pool of potential future teachers.

Schools with the resources to do so (or with generous community volunteers) could find a wealth of talent among local immigrants who could help children as young as Prep. In the past, such efforts have fallen by the wayside because of lack of classroom discipline, with some language specialists unable to control the children as well as qualified teachers.

Should such an approach be tried again, those brought in from outside deserve the backing of a classroom teacher present during the lessons, if necessary, to keep the children focused. Online learning, too, would probably have a place.

But the universities – which train teachers – will probably have the biggest role to play. Despite the shortages of secondary teachers in languages, Queensland is currently producing too many primary school teachers, many of whom find difficulties in securing full-time jobs.

How much more employable they would be if, as part of their three-year degree courses, they had studied a foreign language during their university years.

An Online Response

Posted by Josephine

I agree that teacher education is one strategy to increase the supply of language teachers. It is however, one strategy.

There are many qualified language teachers in Queensland yet because language learning is not prioritised, compared to other State and Federal education initiatives in curriculum, their language expertise is not used and these teachers move to other teaching areas.

In the past, there have been initiatives to support language learning, yet these programs no longer exist. One program, the NALSAS strategy of many Federal governments (which had bipartisan support), showed that this form of support had positive results, yet funding was discontinued.

The argument that Australians need to become fluent in English is well and good, however for many Australians, English is not their first language and support to continue study of their native language is static. Further, outside Australia, it doesn't matter if you are a labourer with limited formal education, or a manager with a MBA, most people can speak more than one language.

For Australians to believe that English is the lingua franca of business or any other area of social communication is the ultimate arrogance. To further assert that knowing another language is only important when they get to university is to deny the vast majority of Australians who do not access university courses.

As a language teacher, I have supported the literacy of many young people by making English explicit through another language. This has occurred where the English curriculum has surpassed these student's needs. These young people are often not our immigrants but young people born in Australia who have never been overseas. Until there is a real systemic support for language learning (not just English) as a right for all young Australians, regardless of their heritage, then Australia will not be able to compete effectively on the global arena.

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OPINION

Ignorance as a second language

by Robin Jeffrey, convener of the Australian National University's college of Asia and the Pacific

The Dutch do it. The Norwegians do it. Even the French and the Canadians do it. The Indians do it a lot. They all learn second (and third) languages. Australians do not. Yet there's broad though passive agreement: Australia's capacity to understand and talk with Asia and the Pacific is deficient, even pathetic.

Federal Education Training Minister Julie Bishop asserted that the Government was trying to do something about it by spending \$112 million on school language programs. Federal Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd promised \$65million towards learning the languages of Asia.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry called for more language teaching in a report in April. So have the Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Group of Eight universities.

The Australian Federal Police, the Australian Defence Force and non-government aid organisations cry out for linguists. The Flood report on intelligence did the same.

Although Australia has never been more enmeshed in Asia and the Pacific, its capacity to speak the languages and know the cultures is probably less than it was 15 years ago.

The consequences are evident. Would the ill-fated encounter with Jakarta Governor Sutiyoso last week, when police in Sydney apparently entered his hotel room unannounced, have happened in quite this way if senior officials had realised where he fitted into the politics of Indonesia?

This is not to argue that Australians should overlook bad acts for the sake of a gooey cultural relativism. It is, however, to state the obvious: if you choose a fight, know the ground.

Read more at <http://languageseducation.com/jeffrey070621.pdf>.

Why Not Choose an Easy Language as a First Foreign Language?

By Nicole Else

I do think that learning any foreign language has many benefits and therefore should be encouraged. It even helps English literacy as students who know a foreign language can often analyse English much better than other students. Learning foreign languages certainly opens the mind, helps to understand other cultures, etc.

Lots of different languages are spoken in the world, so which ones should we teach? I don't think we should teach only the languages most widely spoken.

There is one language well worth considering, but many people seem to know very little about it, even though there are millions of pages in or about it on the Internet. It is called Esperanto. It has been created 120 years ago and is now used by up to 2 million people from over 100 different countries. It has proven itself as a very good means of communication, it is much easier to learn than national languages, but nevertheless enables to express anything as well as other languages.

It seems to me that Esperanto would be an ideal first foreign language to teach. Many people put learning a foreign language in the too hard basket and you can't really blame them when it comes to have to learn all the irregularities of the French language, Japanese script, etc.

Read more at <http://www.languageseducation.com/else070621.pdf>.

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TEACHER TRAINING

Endeavour Language Teacher Fellowships

The Endeavour Language Teacher Fellowships (ELTF) are an Australian Government initiative which offer practising and trainee (pre-service) language teachers an opportunity to improve their language proficiency and cultural knowledge through an intensive, short-term study programme.

The 2008 ELTF programmes will include Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Arabic, Spanish and Bahasa Indonesia, undertaken in China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UAE/Jordan, Spain and Australia (Darwin) respectively. Programmes will take place over a three-week period from December 30, 2007 to January 23, 2008.

Practising teachers can apply for any of the above programmes. Pre-Service (Trainee) Teachers can only apply for the China, Japan, UAE/Jordan and on-shore Bahasa Indonesia immersion Programme.

Applications close on Friday, 20 July 2007.

Read more at http://www.endeavour.dest.gov.au/language_teacher_fellowships/.

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REMINDERS

Conference: Australian Society of Indonesian Language Educators biennial conference, 5-8 July 2007, Sunshine Coast, Qld.
<http://intranet.usc.edu.au/wacana/asile/>

Conference: "The Language Connection", Modern Language Teachers Association of Western Australia, 11-14 July 2007, Perth, WA. <http://www.mltawa.org/>

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