

## Letter to the Editor:

from Dr Jane Orton

In response to Dr Hong Lijian's remarks (8 Dec.2008, Vol. 2. No 17) on my piece of 27/11 correcting errors in his representation of what is proposed in my report *Chinese Language Education in Australian Schools*, let me first apologise for not writing 's/he'.

On the substantive matter involved, however, I must once again point out that Dr Hong has continued to blatantly misrepresent what I have proposed, to the point of direct contradiction. The first recommendation of the report is that there are three streams of learner of Chinese in our schools, *all of whom have the need and the right to expect to develop their language at school*. This proposition is based on an understanding of linguistic development and education needs, not on statistics.

One stream I call 'classroom learner' - and, as I said to Sen Lam, "a classroom learner is somebody who does not speak Chinese at home, whatever their ethnic background is." This is the *definition of the term* for one of the three sets of learner I describe, based on where the learner first encounters Chinese language.

Another stream of learners I call 'background speakers': those living in Australia who have spoken Chinese at home since birth. By the age of five, such native speakers have a formidable phonological, grammatical and lexical proficiency (Chomsky said it would take more than 100 years to write down the grammar rules known by the average five year old). Hence I propose we get them "out of the way of the beginners", but not 'excluded from the classroom', just *into their own classroom*, and *for their own sake*, just as much as for the sake of the beginners. They are two quite different sets of learners and I propose two streams in primary, one for 'classroom learners' and one for 'background speakers'. Background speakers have work to do to develop their language, but it is not the same work as that of a child who at five is meeting Chinese for the first time for 30 minutes a week at school. The most obvious work for pre-literate background speakers, whether they were born here or only recently arrived, is to develop their reading and writing.

The third set of learners of Chinese in our schools encompasses those who have grown up and been educated in a Chinese society. Even by the end of primary school such students have developed their language and literacy to a standard way ahead of Australia-based background speakers. Hence I propose that they should become a third stream of secondary curriculum and assessment, for their own sake and to get them out of the way of background speakers, whom they can otherwise overwhelm. I also state that having separate streams does not mean the different levels of learners could not usefully do some things together.

Division always leaves some people caught on or close to the line. These would have to be dealt with case by case, with the goal of maximising the student's opportunity to develop in the language and do well in assessment. At the AEF-ACC National Forum to discuss the report held on October 28, senior education bureaucrats from around the country agreed to the logic of these proposals and declared that it would be feasible to provide the two primary and three secondary streams, though organisationally challenging in some places. ACACA is already at work on the proposal for three senior secondary streams.

*Dr Jane Orton, 11 December 2008*