

OPINION

Languages education in Australia in 2008

Lia Tedesco 13 June 2008

This article provides an overview of the current situation in the teaching of languages by providing some data regarding student participation in languages, outlining activities being undertaken collaboratively at the national level and providing information about recent Australian Government initiatives.

Participation data

One feature of languages education in Australia is the large number of languages taught. The 2003 [MCEETYA Review of Languages](#) reported that 146 languages were taught in Australian schools (including ethnic schools). The recently released report [An Investigation of the State and Nature of Languages in Australian Schools](#) indicates that by 2005 this figure had decreased slightly to approximately 133 languages.

Data from both the MCEETYA Review and the *State and Nature* report found that:

- the top six languages (Japanese, Italian, Indonesian, French, German and Mandarin Chinese – in that order) are learnt by over 90% of learners (92.1% in 2001 and 90.5% in 2005). This leaves less than 10% of students studying the remaining languages.
- in government schools, an average of half of all students were studying a language in 2001 (50.9%) and slightly less in 2005 (47.5%).
- at senior secondary level, the data shows that student participation has remained relatively static (at approximately 13%). However, the data do not differentiate between international students and those students who are studying beginners courses – which have both been areas of growth in the last few years.

The [AFMLTA](#) finds this downward trend of concern – for how will we be the clever country when many of our students are missing out on a key learning area?

National activities

The most recent and significant initiative in recent times is the [National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools: National Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005–2008](#), agreed to by MCEETYA in 2005. The Statement describes the nature and purpose of languages education, it gives a strong profile to intercultural language learning and, importantly, it states that all languages are equally valid.

The Plan identifies six inter-dependent strategic areas for developing languages in Australian schools: teaching and learning, teacher supply and retention, professional learning, program development, quality assurance and advocacy and promotion .

The Plan is now in its final year, and it is not yet clear what will happen as of the end of this year – whether it is to be extended, rewritten or discontinued remains to be seen.

Since 2005, the Australian Government has allocated 5% of School Languages Programme (SLP) funds annually (approximately \$1.4m) to national level projects stemming from the Plan. The national projects which have been implemented to date include:

- improving the national coordination and quality assurance of languages programs in after-hours ethnic schools (this project is now in its second phase)

- investigating Indigenous languages programs (this project is almost complete)
- investigating the state and nature of languages education in Australian schools, as described above
- developing a nationally coordinated promotion of the benefits of languages learning (it is anticipated that these materials will be disseminated soon)
- publication of the [Review of Teacher Education for Languages Teachers](#)
- developing the *Guide to the Teaching, Learning and Assessing of Languages in the 21st Century*, to be completed later this year
- providing [professional learning](#) for school principals and leaders in the area of languages education
- conducting a national seminar in 2006 and again in 2007 for key stakeholders – the report of the 2006 seminar is available on the DEEWR website, and the website for the 2007 seminar will go live soon
- implementation of a [professional standards project](#), a nationally coordinated professional learning program for languages teachers to examine and reflect on professional standards
- the collection and analysis of student participation data for 2005 and 2006.

Other projects are yet to be identified and announced.

In addition, the following projects have also been funded through DEEWR:

- [Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning in Practice](#), a professional learning project funded under the Australian Government Quality Teaching Programme
- the [Endeavour Language Teaching Fellowships](#) that provide funding for teachers to improve their linguistic proficiency in-country, with fellowships offered to teachers of Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese and Spanish. Teachers of Korean will also have the opportunity to participate in the next round
- Collaborative Structural Reform for innovative approaches to the provision of languages in higher education.

These projects are having a significant positive impact on the field.

Recent Australian Government initiatives

Recent Australian Government initiatives are currently generating a certain sense of optimism, as well as a certain degree of caution.

The Council of Australian Governments ([COAG](#)), through its Productivity Working Group chaired by Education Minister Julia Gillard, has developed a comprehensive set of the aspirations, outcomes, progress measures and future policy directions in the key areas of early childhood, schooling, and skills and workforce development that will guide education systems across the nation.

The Schooling Working Party's agenda is being driven by the key education election commitments: the 'Digital revolution', trade training centres, a national curriculum and support for teaching of Asian languages.

In terms of Asian languages, the Australian Government has committed \$62.4 million to the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) – a program to promote the study of Chinese (Mandarin), Indonesian, Japanese and Korean in high schools. Over four years the funding will provide:

- additional Asian language classes in high schools
- teacher training and support to increase the number of suitably qualified teachers

- development of specialist curriculums for students who display advanced abilities in Asian languages and Asian studies programs.

This is the first time that languages have been given such close attention by a Prime Minister – and this certainly augurs well. Currently, DEEWR is engaged in an information-seeking and consultation process with the jurisdictions and key stakeholders to inform the development of a detailed implementation plan which will be in place from the beginning of 2009.

From 2009 the National Curriculum Board will oversee the teaching of languages in schools (note that this is all languages – not just Asian languages), working with the States and Territories to:

- increase the number of qualified teachers
- monitor language courses in schools to ensure consistency (the Rudd Government has now identified that languages and geography will be part of the second tranche of national curriculum development)
- provide incentives for students to become proficient in a language.

Finally, there are two other initiatives that will impact on languages that deserve mention. At the recent 2020 Summit one of the 10 topics for discussion was 'Australia's future in the region and the world'. The background paper developed to frame this discussion highlighted the need for students to have better language education and greater links with other countries.

The focus was on Asian languages for regional literacy. This emphasis is a deep concern for the AFMLTA, which maintains that all languages are equally valid, and that a broader range of languages should be available and supported. However, at least languages are very much on the national radar in a way they have never been before.

Students too are acknowledging the importance of languages. For example, at the 2020 Schools Summit, in response to the topic 'placing Australia as an international leader and role model', students said: 'We should encourage language learning in schools, so we can communicate with others'.

The federalist paper that was released last year, titled [The Future of Schooling in Australia](#) (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007) described six discipline areas (English, Mathematics and Science, Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences, the Arts, Health and Physical Education) as well as cross-disciplinary learning areas (technology, civics and citizenship, business) that were essential goals for schooling. At its recent [meeting of 17 April 2008](#), MCEETYA agreed that the current national goals are to be reviewed and that a new Declaration be released later this year – and, importantly, that the federalist paper form the basis of this review.

This too augurs very well for languages – and for our students. If we can strengthen the place of languages in the curriculum, and improve languages education in our schools, we will be well and truly on our way to providing our students with the sort of education that will equip them to participate actively and meaningfully in a globalised world.

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