

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Language participation in NSW secondary schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Introduction

Language participation in NSW secondary schools has been in decline since the 1960s. Only around 10% of students in NSW now take a language for the Higher School Certificate (HSC), despite a range of policies¹ to try to arrest the decline. The decline in student numbers is particularly noticeable from the beginning of the middle years of secondary high school onwards.

This paper provides a brief overview of languages education in Australia and NSW, including participation rates and national and state policy. It then goes on to review the research around school and classroom factors which can increase language participation. This paper is intended as a companion piece to the Centre for Education Statistic and Evaluation's (2018) case studies on language participation in NSW secondary schools in Years 9 to 12.

Languages education in Australia and NSW

Why study a second language?

Languages education is highly valued in many countries around the world (BOSTES 2013). For example, instruction in foreign languages accounts for the largest share of the compulsory core curriculum at the lower secondary level in many OECD countries, including Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland and Portugal (OECD 2014). Similarly, in high-performing Asian countries the profile of secondary language learning is one of stable language enrolments over the period of secondary education (Liddicoat et al. 2007). In English-speaking countries such as New Zealand and the United States, there has traditionally been less focus on foreign language learning. This is largely due to English being the lingua-franca in many parts of the world, and students (and the broader community) not valuing languages education.

This is not to say, however, that less importance should be placed on languages education in English-speaking countries. Languages education has social, cultural, economic, cognitive and personal benefits (Group of Eight², 2007). For example, a study investigating the effect of foreign language learning on SAT³ verbal scores found that students who studied a foreign language outperformed students who did not learn a foreign language; these academic benefits were even greater for students whose verbal aptitude was lower prior to the study (Cooper, Yanosky & Wisenbaker 2008). Other studies have shown that learning a foreign language enhances knowledge of English structure and vocabulary (Curtain and Dahlberg 2004), improves listening skills and knowledge retention (Lapkin, Merrill & Shapson 1990; Morales, Calvo & Bialystok 2013) and increases the likelihood of students earning better grades at university and completing their degrees (Horn & Kojaku 2001).

1 Policy in this paper is used in its broadest sense to refer to statements, programs and initiatives as outlined by government and its associated agencies. It does not refer to mandated actions (unless otherwise specified).

2 The Group of Eight (Go8) comprises Australia's eight leading research universities - University of Melbourne, Australian National University, University of Sydney, University of Queensland, University of Western Australia, University of Adelaide, Monash University and University of NSW.

3 Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is a standardised test used in the United States to measure literacy, numeracy and writing skills that students need to get into, and succeed, in college.



The British Council states (in relation to the United Kingdom) that it needs to develop its citizens' competence in languages in far greater numbers in order to reap economic and cultural benefits (British Council 2014)⁴. Australian policy has similarly stated the importance of language acquisition for Australia's future growth. For example, as part of the Coalition's *Policy for Schools: Students First initiative*, the Australian Government has set a target of at least 40% of Year 12 students studying a language other than English by 2023. Speaking about the policy in 2014, Christopher Pyne⁵ explained that the inadequate study of languages, especially Asian languages, was negatively impacting Australia's economy and the job prospects of graduates. Further supporting the need to prioritise languages study in secondary schools, The Group of Eight (2007) notes that in Finland, a PISA top-performing country, all children take three languages throughout their schooling, 44% take a fourth language and 31% a fifth language.

Language participation in Australian schools over time

In Australia in the 1960s, around 40% of students took a foreign or classical language (usually French, Latin or German) for the HSC equivalent. However, in the late 1960s, universities began to drop the entry requirement for students to have a second language; and the Wyndham report in NSW oversaw the removal of languages as a core requirement of secondary education (Wyndham 1957)⁶. There was a subsequent rapid drop in the numbers of students studying a second language at the secondary school level from 40% in the 1960s, to around 10% in the 1970s (Lo Bianco 2009, p. 20). At this time, according to Lo Bianco (2009), languages education in Australia moved away from 'elite languages taught for elite reasons at high school' to 'community languages taught for community purposes in primary schools'. Liddicoat et al. (2007) states that primary school students now account for the largest proportion of school students studying languages in Australia.

Today, only around 10% of students take a language for the HSC (NESA⁷ 2016). The most popular languages studied for the HSC are French, Japanese, Chinese and Italian (NESA 2016). The majority of students who study languages are concentrated in metropolitan schools, particularly schools in Sydney's east or north (BOSTES 2013). Over the past decade, the number of languages offered in Australian universities has also dropped from 66 to 29 (Group of Eight 2007), presumably reflecting the decreasing enrolments in languages education in Australian schools.

Policies introduced in Australia to encourage languages education

There have been many government policies since the 1970s to attempt to address the issues around languages education in Australia. These include the *National Policy on Languages* introduced in 1987, which was the first comprehensive, bipartisan national language policy in Australia; the *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* introduced in 1992, which initiated a financial incentive to stimulate language learning; the *National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools* 1994-2002 policy for the study of Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean, which saw some languages growth, mainly of students studying Japanese (Lo Bianco 2009)⁸; the *National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program* 2008-2012, which aimed to have at least 12% of Year 12 students fluent in Chinese, Korean, Japanese or Indonesian by 2020; and the 2013 *Policy for Schools: Students First* document, which outlined a target of 40% of Year 12 students studying a foreign or classical language within a decade (BOSTES 2013).

In fact Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko, in 2006, noted that since 1970 there had been at least 67 policy-related reports, investigations or substantial inquiries into the problems and challenges of instituting an effective languages education experience for Australian learners. Despite the policy interest, there has not been a significant increase in the number of students studying foreign languages at the upper secondary school level and/or for the HSC. BOSTES (2013, p. 29) notes that languages policy in Australia has been 'piecemeal, contested, and at times, inconsistent', and that this has led to the continuing marginalisation of languages education. Liddicoat et al. (2007, p. 152) similarly say that 'languages education policy in Australia is failing in its goals and its recommendations have little impact on practice'.

Policies between states also differ. For example, Victoria is the only state to have set an explicit goal to have compulsory language learning for all students in government schools from Prep to Year 10 by 2025. Queensland's Department of Education, Training and Employment states that 'the provision of languages is required in Years 5 to 8'. In Western Australia, students in Years 3 to 8 are required to learn at least one foreign language but learning languages is optional in Years 9 and 10. Similarly, South Australia has made languages a mandatory component of the curriculum from Reception to Year 8 and optional beyond Year 8.

4 In 2014, languages education was made compulsory for all UK school children aged 7-11.

5 The former Commonwealth Minister for Education and Training, 2013-2015.

6 The Wyndham report was a NSW government policy but it set a precedent that was adopted Australia-wide.

7 The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) was formerly known as BOSTES. References in this paper prior to 2016 refer to 'BOSTES', references after this time refer to 'NESA'.

8 This is considered one of the most successful national language policies to date.

Languages education in NSW

In NSW, students must study 100 hours of one language in one continuous 12 month period in Stage 4 or Stage 5. This mostly takes place in Years 7 and/or 8. The NESA K-10 syllabuses in 17 languages are used to deliver the mandatory language requirement (BOSTES, 2013). At the Australian level, ACARA released Foundation to Year 10 Australian syllabuses for 14 languages in 2014 (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Modern Greek, Spanish, Turkish, Vietnamese and a framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander languages). Students can take a language as an elective subject in Years 9 and 10. However, the numbers of students taking a language in NSW schools drops off dramatically when languages become elective. For example, in 2016, only 5,850 Year 9 students (out of 50,365) and only 5,410 Year 10 students (out of 52,355) in NSW public schools elected to study a language (NSW Education Datahub 2017).

At the senior secondary level, numbers of students studying languages fall even further. In NSW, 66 language courses are available at the senior secondary level, including Beginners, Continuers, Extension, Language in Context (formerly Heritage) and Language and Literature (formerly Background Speakers) courses⁹. However, only around 10% of students choose to take a language for the HSC (NESA 2016)¹⁰. In 2015, the NSW Premier made an election promise to boost the number of students learning languages through an additional \$400,000 for community language schools in NSW and providing greater access for rural and remote students to languages through the new virtual high school (NSW Government 2015).

Between 2012 and 2014, NESA undertook a review of languages education in NSW called 'Learning through languages'. The review was guided by five terms of reference, including investigation of current languages education from pre-school to Year 12, both in and out of school settings, and review of student demand for languages courses in senior secondary school. Key stakeholders were consulted as part of the review process, including students, teachers, parents and community organisations. The findings revealed that the reasons why students do not continue with language study in Years 9 and 10 include: negative language experiences in primary school and Years 7 and 8 (including lack of progress, and lack of prior learning recognition in Years 7 and 8); the low parental and community value placed on language learning; the perception that language study is 'too hard' and/or 'only for more able students'; and the wide range of other subjects (including vocational education) available that are perceived as more vocationally relevant (BOSTES 2013). It is also known that policy changes in other areas of education can affect language participation. For example, when BOSTES reduced the number of electives available to students in Years 9 and 10 by making both geography and history compulsory in the late 1990s, the numbers of students taking up a language dropped.



Classroom- and school-based factors in language participation

According to Liddicoat et al (2007), languages education in Australia is not driven by languages policy, but rather determined locally without necessarily referring to overarching policy¹¹. Certainly, the fact that the variety of languages policies in Australia to date have generally not been effective in raising language participation supports this argument.

Liddicoat et al (2007) go on to say that local factors are some of the most important factors in determining the nature of language learning in schools, regardless of whether there are explicit policy requirements or not. These local factors relate to teachers (the qualifications, proficiency and passion of individual teachers), schools (the strength of support for languages, including high expectations for languages as a whole) and communities (engagement with, and support from, the local community). The Asia Education Foundation (2012) similarly states that the most important factors influencing student desire to study a language are the quality of the learning context, the teacher and self-perceived interest.

Some of these local factors, and their potential impact on language participation, are explored in more detail below, namely: high-quality teaching, student motivation, use of technology, whole-school approaches and effective leadership.

⁹ Not all course variations are available for all languages.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that there is also a small group of students in NSW who study the International Baccalaureate (IB) as opposed to the HSC in Years 11 and 12. Study of a foreign language is compulsory for the IB. The IB is not available in public schools, but is offered in a select number of independent and Catholic schools in NSW.

¹¹ This is not to say languages education cannot or should not be policy driven, just that in Australia this approach has been reasonably ineffectual to date.

High-quality teaching

Most of the literature on what works in education cites the importance of the teacher. For example, Rowe (2004) reviewed Australian and international research on educational effectiveness and found that while many factors influence students' academic performance, the greatest influence is quality teaching by competent teachers. Hattie also states that high-quality teaching is the greatest in-school influence on student engagement and outcomes (Hattie and Yates 2014). In addition, several Australian studies looking at how to improve participation in languages have identified high-quality teaching strategies as factors in improving both student outcomes and student participation in languages (see, for example, Browett and Spencer 2012; Conway et al 2012; and Asia Education Foundation 2013).

Browett and Spencer (2012), in their report on language teaching in Australian primary schools, note that one of the key elements to a successful languages program is the use of teaching methods and strategies that suit students' interest and develop students' enthusiasm. Conway et al (2012) suggest successful classroom language teaching methods should sit under an 'Engage, Ensure, Sustain, Reflect (EESR) framework' which works to: establish engagement (for example, provide opportunities for learners to work from known to new through revision), ensure learners can complete the task (for example, give clear, staged instructions), sustain engagement (for example, provide encouragement, feedback, clarification and timing) and reflect on learning (provide opportunities for learners and teachers to reflect on successes and weaknesses). This framework draws on explicit teaching practices, which are known to also work more generally in education (see, for example, CESE, 2014). The Asia Education Foundation (2013) also concurs that clear teaching strategies that are suitable for each level of schooling are necessary for effective language tuition.

In terms of what makes a high-quality language teacher, Orton et al. (2013), in their study of quality and sustainable Chinese language programs in Australian schools, state that language teachers must be hardworking, flexible, intelligent, willing and interested in working regularly beyond their comfort zone, willing to undergo formal and informal re-training, and prepared to reconsider deeply held, often hitherto unexamined assumptions when required. Similarly, Fielding (2015) in her study of successful languages programs in NSW independent schools, notes that high-quality language teachers are those who are passionate, skilled, dedicated, enthusiastic, capable of developing a rapport and can make meaning relevant. She also notes in her study that many of the language teachers interviewed had a vision of preparing their learners for life through language study, not just for school or university exams.

In 2016, the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers' Associations (AFMLTA) released a series of documents aligning its professional standards with the national teaching standards set by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). Each document focuses on specific languages and maps the AFMLTA standards to AITSL standards to make it easy for language teachers to develop their practice using both sets of standards (AFMLTA 2017). The AFMLTA professional standards¹² were developed in 2005 for the accomplished teaching of languages, and detail characteristics that languages teachers should develop over their careers, including knowing students and how they learn; planning for and implementing effective teaching and learning; and engaging in professional learning. AITSL introduced its set of seven national standards¹³ in 2012 to guide the professional practice of teachers in all subject areas and year levels in Australian schools. The purpose of aligning both sets of professional standards is to ensure that every language teacher improves their practice not only in teaching languages but also in teaching more generally.

¹² The AFMLTA standards are framed under the aspects of educational theory and practice, language and culture, language pedagogy, ethics and responsibility, professional relationships, awareness of wider context, advocacy and personal characteristics (AFMLTA 2017).

¹³ The seven AITSL national standards are categorised under the three teaching domains of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement, and outline what teachers should know and be able to do (AFMLTA 2017).



Student motivation

Another local factor that has received a lot of research attention, in terms of foreign language participation and outcomes, is student motivation. Dornyei (2014) states that understanding the motivational dimension of language classrooms can offer teachers powerful tools to combat a range of possible problems, from student lethargy to an unproductive classroom climate. If issues such as these can be addressed in the language classroom, both participation and outcomes can be improved.

Dornyei (2014) divides classroom motivational strategies into those that focus on the individual learner and those that focus on the group. He states that in a 'motivationally challenging' classroom, trying to cater to the individual learner's motivational needs is not enough. This is because the group as a whole often has such a powerful influence that it overrides individual learners. Strategies that can be used by language teachers to increase individual language learning motivation include: whetting the student's appetite (that is, arousing the learner's curiosity and attention), increasing the learner's expectation of success, making the teaching materials relevant to the learner, using a variety of strategies, making the learning tasks more interesting, increasing the learner's self-confidence, allowing learners to maintain a positive social image, creating learner autonomy, increasing learner satisfaction and offering grades in a motivational manner. Strategies that can be used in the classroom to enhance group learning motivation include those aimed at group cohesiveness and group norms such as ensuring the group learns about each other, cultivating shared group history, promoting extracurricular activities, having the teacher as a role model and ensuring public commitment to the group through spelling out common goals (Dornyei 2014).

McEown et al. (2014) state that language teachers can foster students' motivation by supporting their sense of competence and relatedness (as supported by Dornyei), but that fostering cultural understanding is also important to engaging students and enhancing student motivation. One way to foster cultural understanding is to encourage interaction between students and background speakers. The Asia Education Foundation (2012), suggests that demand for studying a language among students can be built through initiatives that create: opportunities for international peer-to-peer contact (both actual and virtual), regular opportunities for exposure to background speakers of the language being learnt in and out of the classroom, and opportunities to listen to professionals who work in or connect with countries where languages are spoken. Activities that speak to these initiatives may include: visits/study tours, active sister school relationships, and homestays and hosting. Orton et al (2013), in their study of successful Chinese language programs in Australian schools, also note that several of the schools studied have active sister-school programs with overseas schools which involve reciprocal visits. This has helped promote languages education in these schools. The Asia Education Foundation (2013) in a summary of key lessons learnt from Australian schools/clusters to improve languages education¹⁴, says that it is important for students to have 'persuasive personal encounters' with people from different language backgrounds, and access to inspirational speakers from other language backgrounds who have come to live in Australia, to motivate students to study and continue with languages education.

¹⁴ Between 2009 and 2012, more than \$7.2 million was distributed to Australian schools through the *Becoming Asia Literate: Grants to Schools* program to support innovative programs that were initiating, developing or consolidating curriculum and/or pedagogy for Asia literacy.

Use of technology

Languages education is an area where open-access resources, online courses, virtual classrooms and social networks based on information and communication technology (ICT) are being increasingly used to give learners access to information, promote interaction and communication and enhance digital literacy skills (European Centre for Modern Languages 2016). While teachers and schools do not necessarily have to have a comprehensive ICT suite for languages programs to be successful, ICT can be a useful tool both for teaching (particularly for creating student demand and maintaining motivation) and for attracting students to languages education, particularly in rural and remote regions where there might not be enough teachers or students to sustain languages classes.

Oakley (2011), in an Australian study into student learning outcomes and integration of Web 2.0 technologies in the teaching and learning of Asian languages, found that ICT has a positive effect on student attitudes to learning, their work effort and the quality of their work. Many students in this study stated how much they were learning through the use of the new internet technology in class and how this bolstered their willingness to continue learning a language other than English in the future. Fielding (2015) also notes the importance of adequate resourcing for languages, including equipment and technology. The BOSTES (2013) review into languages education in NSW was told that ICT in languages education, including online language learning programs and collaborative tools, can provide more authentic and better opportunities for students to practise their language skills than traditional means of language teaching.

ICT, particularly the use of video-conferencing, can also be a useful means of increasing languages participation in regional and remote schools, where it can be difficult to employ language teachers. For example, in NSW, the virtual school for rural and remote students – Aurora College – offers Italian Beginners, Japanese Beginners and Korean Beginners to government school students in Years 11 and 12 in regional and remote NSW. Similarly in Victoria, video-conferencing is being trialled in regional and remote contexts to boost the numbers of students who have access to languages programs. The BOSTES Review (2013) notes, however, that while ICT in languages education can be useful, it is not a panacea to teacher supply issues in regional and remote areas as videoconferencing requires the presence of teachers in classrooms at both ends.

Effective leadership

Effective leadership is important in any educational setting in order to improve student outcomes. In fact, Hattie states that principals have the second biggest in-school impact on student outcomes after classroom teaching (CESE 2015). In terms of increasing languages participation at schools, strong leadership is critical (Liddicoat et al. 2007).

Orton et al. (2013) state that strong leadership is the most important factor in maintaining successful languages programs in schools. They cite the need for a 'champion' (usually the school principal), who has the vision, commitment and authority to share, activate, drive and monitor a new languages program. This person recognises the educational importance of language learning. There also needs to be a 'facilitator' (commonly the deputy principal or head teacher) who takes on the vision and translates it into practice. This person needs to be able to work between the principal and the teachers to facilitate the strengthening of languages education in the school. The third critical leadership dimension are the teachers themselves who should have a willingness and capacity to learn and be interested in working beyond their comfort zone and to participate in regular professional learning. By putting these leaders in place, other critical aspects of languages programs – such as sufficient time and frequency, and enrichment with supplementary school activities – fall into place.

Fielding (2015) also noted that all schools in her case study review of independent schools, identified leadership as essential to successful languages programs. If there was strong support at senior executive level, it was possible to introduce key factors which ensured higher levels of success, such as adequate timetabling and multiple courses. Staff at Fielding's (2015) case study schools noted the importance of the school leadership's commitment to the continuation of the language learning program and that there was both top-down and bottom-up support. They also talked of the school leadership actively valuing languages and embedding language learning within the school culture. Similarly, Lindholm-Leary (2005) notes that a supportive principal can ensure the languages education program is integrated across the whole school, all teachers and staff understand the languages program and an equitable amount of financial and instructional resources are allocated to meet the content standards, visions and goals of languages education.

Whole-school approaches

One of the most significant issues to overcome in any languages education program is the notion that languages are not valuable. The general community, students, parents, school leaders and teachers in English-speaking countries often believe that other subjects are more important than languages and that there is no real necessity to learn a language at school (Liddicoat et al. 2007). As a result, languages are often ascribed low status in schools (Bense 2014). Support for languages education among the broader school community – including parents – appears to be an important factor in any successful languages program (see, Liddicoat et al. 2007; Orton et al. 2012; Fielding 2015, Asia Education Foundation 2012; Lindholm-Leary 2005). As Lindholm-Leary (2005) says, if community and school attitudes towards languages education are negative and languages education programs are only implemented as they are required, then the programs may receive fewer resources, and/or untrained and inexperienced teachers, contributing to minimal expectation for success.

This broad support for languages can be gathered through implementing a whole-school approach (see, for example, Fielding 2015). A whole-school approach to languages should provide clear and consistent messaging about the importance of languages to everyone, from teachers through to the executive. The Asia Education Foundation (2012) says that there also needs to be a clear course of action that is outlined and followed to increase support for languages from the broader school community. As Liddicoat et al. (2007) cite, schools need to have engagement with their community that generates support for language learning and shows that language learning is both valued and valuable.

Much of the research has pointed out the importance, in particular, of ensuring that parents are supportive of any languages education program. According to the Asia Education Foundation (2012), parents exert ‘a very powerful impact on both the choice to study, and on students’ subsequent persistence with language learning’. Foard (cited in AEC 2012), in a study of language students in a Victorian school, similarly stated that one of the most common attributes of successful and interested learners was strong parental support and encouragement. The Asia Education Foundation states that parental influence is particularly important at decision points: at the beginning of language study, at the point where the choice to continue is to be made, and during the periods of schooling where attrition rates from learning language are highest (generally Years 8-11). Strong parent and community support can also help ensure that languages programs are sustained when there is pressure on funding and resourcing (Lindholm-Leary 2005).

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of languages education in Australia, including why second languages are important, language participation over time, and an outline of national and state language education policies and language education in NSW. It has described the importance of local factors to language participation in schools, and summarised what some of these local factors are. These factors include high-quality teaching, student motivation, use of ICT, effective leadership, and whole-school approaches.



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