

Language teaching and learning

Some hard decisions

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Bruxelles 22

In addressing the needs of second languages, the principle must be to build quality at all levels, especially in the design of programs and the rigour and seriousness of teaching and to maintain a consistent effort rather than to subject language planning to continual chopping and changing of priority.

Quality programs will need to be readily identified and have clear criteria, of the amount of time devoted to language teaching, continuation of study, teacher qualifications and support materials and opportunities for immersion as well as formal acquisition.

Explicit policy efforts must be made to secure student motivation. It is engendered by the quality of the learning experience, and by rewards for success. The aim should be to make languages a compulsory, unproblematic and celebrated part of the education of all Australian children. Achieving an entitlement to quality language courses

is the outcome it is hoped will flow from taking the hard decisions about to be outlined.

Hard decision 1

A critical aim must be to progressively discontinue programs which do not meet minimum criteria, such as those offering less than 1 hour per week, or programs in which teachers are required to teach very large numbers of students in different schools for brief periods of time. Serious language learning is unlikely to be achieved in such circumstances.

As part of the implementation process of phasing out non-substantial courses, it is important for education systems to consistently implement an agreed nomenclature for the full range of program types. One result of this would be an improved public capacity to know how to recognise what constitutes different levels of commitment to language learning.

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Hard decision 2

The key focus for any improvement in language learning must be on the teachers. There is currently a shortage and the skill set of many may not be sufficient or suitable for the new types of language courses being proposed. Significant increases in the number of bilingual and immersion programs, and greater effort at coordination across education sectors will require more and more specifically trained teachers. Some research suggests a need for a differential preparation, according to the languages to be taught. If there is to be more substantial and extensive second language teaching in schools, there is a need for significant national investment in the preparation of language teachers.

Hard decision 3

Debates about which categories of languages ought to be favoured should be set aside and a consensus negotiated that Australian education will focus on a core group of seven Asian, European and world languages in Tier 1 and six others in Tier 2.

Tier 1 should be the group which education ministries commit to offering as an 'entitlement of continuation' to learners for the duration of their schooling: Chinese (Mandarin), French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish. For each of these languages there should be a hub high school designated in each region so that students wishing to continue with the study of a chosen language may do so, even if this necessitates experimenting with delivery options. An entitlement of continuation represents an obligation that ministries of education will offer ongoing opportunities for any student to study one or more of these languages for the duration of their cycle of schooling within designated education regions or networks, through regular schools, with on-staff qualified teachers, and for which opportunities for post-school continuation at tertiary institutions in each designated region or network is available. Not all Tier 1 languages can be fully supported immediately, but progressively over the first implementation phase, as indicated below.

Tier 2 languages – Arabic, Greek, Hindi, Korean, Russian and Vietnamese – are to be offered extensive support as well; however, this may be provided via the specialised schools of languages, and in other ways, and no entitlement of continuation would be expected for the engagement of system-wide available teaching staff. However, in order to ensure good quality teaching and the prospects of tertiary articulation, each of these languages should be available in at least one tertiary institution in every state.

Tier 1 languages should be guaranteed to all learners in negotiated entitlements that seek to ensure that in the course of a student's attendance at compulsory schooling, education systems guarantee 150 hours of language instruction (or language immersion) for all students in each year, for a minimum of eight years.

Negotiated complementary implementation policy will need to be adopted in terms of the length of teaching time found necessary to achieve good learning outcomes in both tiers and in a variety of learning locations.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS STRATEGY

Prior to embarking on the implementation of these decisions, an examination of the teacher force supply, present qualifications, institutional staffing and potential in teacher education programs in all states and territories, is required. This will build on research undertaken in recent years and should be compiled to form a strategic map of capacity shortfalls, vis-à-vis the proposed changes.

Complementary providers and system-based specialist language schools should make every effort to support language demands beyond those offered by formal education institutions to enrich, extend and supplement the system-wide provision of the two tiers of language as needed in specific geographic areas.

Staging of implementation

A staged implementation of these proposals will require a focus on institutional capacity-building over a three-, five- and seven-year implementation sequence. Time is allowed for planning for Stages 2 and 3 to commence well before their implementation begins. Moving slowly will assist in achieving the goals.

- **Stage 1** should be given three years, and would include a tertiary capacity review, school program design, articulated system planning ensuring staffing deployments to guarantee continuity, and major teacher education recruitments.
- **Stage 2** should be adopted following Stage 1 with full implementation planned over two years and would include full implementation of staffing zone arrangements for teachers to guarantee student language continuation, training of new graduates, bilingual and immersion programs in all Tier 1 languages.
- **Stage 3** should be adopted following Stages 1 and 2, with full implementation planned over a further two years and would include extending the teacher education initiative to Tier 2, institute bilingual immersion programs in Tier 2 languages.

REFERENCES

For references visit www.acer.edu.au/research_reports/AER.html

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