

Children Studying Second Languages

By Lauren Djakovac



Australia is one of the most multicultural societies in the world and second language education is a topic of incessant public debate.

It is essential that young Australians leave school with the tools they need to work in the modern environment. The development of bilingual skills serves economic, cultural and intellectual needs - therefore interest and skills in second languages should be cultivated at a young age. However, new SACE changes mean that languages will no longer be compulsory.

As a result, teachers fear that these subjects will be the first casualty when secondary students exercise greater flexibility in their choice of subjects.

Benefits

Research studies in recent years confirm the dramatic value in learning a second language. Professor Tony Liddicoat, from the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures at the University of South Australia, believes there are many benefits for children learning a second language. Some of these include:

- Developing communication skills, interacting with other cultures, establishing new relationships and opening up a wider range of experiences.
- Viewing the world from another perspective and to understanding the perspective of others - expanding intercultural understanding and openness.
- Opens new possibilities in adult life - influencing work and social opportunities.

Dr Giancarlo Chiro, Senior Lecturer in the School of Communication, International Studies and Languages at the University of South Australia, believes children should begin learning a second language as young as possible. He says, "As we grow older and certainly from adulthood, the deep language structures of the brain become less flexible in the way they respond to new language inputs. We begin to rely more and more on the existing structures of the mother tongue in processing language". Language learning at a young age makes it easier to learn others later in life and can also assist in the development of literacy in one's first language.

Should languages be compulsory?

The new national curriculum is still in early development and both Dr Chiro and Professor Liddicoat agree languages should be included. Professor Liddicoat says "language should be made like any other subject in the curriculum - taught to all schools, at all levels in compulsory education just like maths and science". He feels a government policy is needed to make languages compulsory for all students' and that a set minimum amount of time should be devoted to language learning.

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For example; Victoria recommends 150 minutes per week. While NSW announced last year that children (starting from kindergarten) will be required to learn and use an Asian language in the state's first bilingual classes – at least 90 minutes a day, across every class except English and maths.

Availability of qualified teachers

The shortage of qualified teachers has been documented in a succession of state and federal reports over the last 40 years. The current issue is that there are not enough teachers available for every school in the state to teach a language. Professor Liddicoat claims this is because language learning is not a normal part of teacher education for primary school teachers. "Very few primary school teachers have the opportunity to develop their language abilities to the point where they could use it for teaching."

Another issue is attracting people who speak languages into teaching. Professor Liddicoat states, "For primary school teachers in particular, there are often problems in finding full-time work at a

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Dr Chiro believes that limited communication between education departments and university teacher training programs adds to the problem. He explains that some state education

departments are doing better than others in establishing upfront to prospective language teachers what the minimum language requirements are.

For example, "in Victoria the minimum requirement is a three-year major in language, whereas in SA, the Education Department does not actually stipulate any minimum requirement".

In an effort to combat the language teacher shortage, State Education Minister, Jane Lomax-Smith announced last May, that more trained language teachers will be available to work in SA's schools through a new five-year scholarship program. 15 scholarships will be offered each year to provide aspiring language teachers with financial support to learn a language or undertake a teaching degree.

What parents can do

If a child is studying a second language, parents need to encourage positive attitudes to the languages and cultures they are learning. The information and

communication revolution means there is instant access to a myriad of language resources. Dr Chiro says "Parents should search and make these available to their children at the appropriate stage of development. For example; there are many downloadable language games, e-pals and other resources available on the internet".

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Changes needed

Dr Chiro states that the greatest hurdle to overcome is the programming and availability of languages in schools. He says "The educational community as a whole (consisting of state departments, principals, teachers, parents and children) is yet to be convinced that learning a second language is as educationally and socially valuable as maths or science". Professor Liddicoat adds that "in Australia we need to value the place of languages more than we currently do - rather than thinking that everyone else speaks English so we don't need to engage with others". ■