

# **Being a Language educator in North Queensland: Engaging initiatives to assist in the development of teacher quality**

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## **Abstract**

Australia is considered one of the most multicultural countries in the world. *Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census, 2012–2013*, a paper issued by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, showed that over 19% of the Australian population spoke a language other than English at home. Despite this figure, Language education has been in crisis since the 1960s.

In fact, in 2014, being a Language educator in our lucky country is not always so lucky. The literature shows that Language teachers can experience considerable challenges throughout their career. Demotivation, lack of resources, isolation and limited professional development are some of the main difficulties faced everyday by Language educators in Australia (Ingram, 2005; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009).

In the latest *Staff in Australian Schools Survey* commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2010), it was reported that there was a total of about 6700 Language teachers at a high school level, compared with approximately, 33200 for English, 36000 for Maths and 61000 for the Sciences. It is no surprise then that finding language teachers is challenging, particularly in rural and remote areas of Australia. This is a significant issue at a time when government priorities are resulting in increased periods of mandatory Language education in schools and are pushing for an increase in the learning of Asian languages.

This paper provides a critical review of past and present literature on the challenges faced by Language educators in Australia. It relates this research to the current situation for Language teachers in North

Queensland and presents a series of initiatives focussed on developing quality Language education in this region.

## **Introduction**

In 2014, Australia's Education Minister Christopher Pyne has on many occasions indicated his wish to see more young Australians studying foreign languages at both school and university levels. Through this message Australians have been reminded about the economic importance of its citizens gaining some foreign language skills in particular in Asian languages.

In 2013, the Department of Education of the Australian Government published a report indicating that the Australian Government was planning to revive the teaching of foreign languages in Australian schools within a decade. Their goal is to return the percentage of Year 12 students studying a language to at least 40 per cent, a figure that was last seen in Australia during the 1960s. According to language experts Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009), the most important factor in the equation of improving the language situation in Australia is to invest in Language teachers from the moment they start university and throughout the rest of their career. Supporting Language teachers is seen as crucial to ensuring they remain in the profession.

In a 2012 ABC report by Catherine McGrath and Ross Garnaut, Distinguished Professor of Economics at the Australian National University and both the Vice-Chancellor's Fellow and the Professorial Fellow of Economics at The University of Melbourne, explained that all around the country, Language educators tell the same story: a lack of teachers, a lack of resources, a lack of enrolments. In *The Coalition's Policy for Schools: Students First* published by the Liberal National Party in August 2013 it was explained that:

*There are only around 9,500 teachers teaching Languages Other Than English, out of a workforce of some 290,000 teachers. This needs to change if we are to ensure more children have access to language education over the next decade. (p. 14)*

## **Literature Review**

There have been many language policies in Australia that recognise the importance and value of foreign language education for the nation (Ingram, 2000; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). In 2011, a survey was conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics revealing that 19% of the Australian population was speaking a language other than English at home. Despite the obvious bilingual richness of Australia and the extensive research that demonstrates the benefits of second language learning, language educators across the country consistently have to battle for their subject within the school curriculum and argue that their role can be of significance for the education of young Australians and the future of this country. According to Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009), one of the possible reasons for this constant battle could be related to the negative perception of the community and students, who may not consider second language education to be critical.

It was only after the Second World War that the idea of a monolingual Australia started to change. Prior to 1945, the learning or use of languages other than English was discouraged in Australia; this is especially true for Aboriginal languages which at the time were being actively and deliberately discouraged by the Government (Lo Bianco, 1987). According to Muenstermann (2001), as language teaching was not popular in Australia, migrants decided to create their own “ethnic schools” in order to maintain some aspect of their cultural heritage.

However, the late 1960s were a period of dramatic political and social change for Australia. Ingram (2000) explains that prior to the 1960s the concept of multiculturalism was not as popular as it is today and therefore the English language was predominant in education and only some schools were teaching French, German and the classical languages (Latin and Greek). It was the introduction of the *Colombo Plan*, the abolition of the *White Australia* policy in 1972 and then, later, the implementation of the *Galbally Report* that significantly contributed to making Australia a more multicultural place with less space for xenophobia. In 1901, the *White Australia* policy was implemented and its main goal was to ensure that the future Australia would be made up of a homogenous group of British and European descendants with no space for people of colour. Ndhlovu (2008) describes this policy as being motivated by Australian's desire to guard Australian society against the perceived dangers inherent in allowing non-European, non-Anglo cultural groups into the country. One of the most disturbing restrictions of this policy was that to be eligible to migrate to the country, even European applicants had to undertake a dictation test in a language that was, in most cases, foreign to the applicants themselves. It was the immigration officers that could nominate in what language the dictation would be and it could be any of the European languages. Failing to be proficient in a certain language meant that you could be deported. It was only in 1947, under the Chifley's Labor government, that initiatives were put in place leading to the eventual abandonment in 1958 of the dictation as a requirement for migration (Ndhlovu, 2008).

The *Colombo Plan* in the 1950s was important in the history of Australia's international relations with Asia as it was the first significant step taken by the Commonwealth government to assist Australia in engaging with its close Northern neighbours (Oakman, 2010). The plan was put in place to provide assistance and greater opportunities for the people of Asia and by the same

token start a positive and long term bilateral relationship between Asian countries and Australia. However, it was not until the emergence of the *Galbally Report* in 1978 that the idea of a multicultural Australia, in which languages would be valued and cultures maintained, started to surface (Australia Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship). It is also relevant that 400,000 adult migrants had arrived in Australia from non-English speaking countries in the two years prior to the endorsement of the report. As a result, it was necessary for the government to implement programs and services that would enable all Australian society to achieve its full potential while at the same time being given opportunities to maintain its diverse cultural and linguistic heritage (Claydon, 1981).

According to the Australian Immigration Department (2012), these measures have benefited Australia at economic, humanitarian and social levels. Australia, which used to require all of its immigrants to learn English and British values, started to take further steps to encourage multiculturalism whilst acknowledging the new wave of cultural and linguistic diversity. Despite these official policies to boost multiculturalism in Australian society, immigrants were still being pressured to assimilate into the dominant Anglo-Celtic identity (Parry, 1998). However, language policies that were purposely focussed on addressing language issues in education started emerging in the 1980s (Ingram, 2000). In addition, funds were allocated to support ethnic schools, radio and television programs and newspapers in the languages of the Australian migrant communities (Ingram, 2000). These initiatives were of real value to Language educators. They allowed for language maintenance of migrants, the development of language awareness and, in some cases, a feeling of acceptance in the people of Australia.

While Australians may have accepted the fact that they are living in a country of multicultural richness where people speak different languages and share different cultures and beliefs, in

reality the take-up of language learning in schools is still relatively low. The numerous language policies that have been put in place to promote second language learning in Australia reflect this persistent attitude. Despite the recognition of the economic and social benefits of multilingualism to Australia, year after year, the question appears to have remained unchanged in Language education policy and practice: Should language studies really be mandatory for young Australians in school?

There are over 20 different languages taught each year in Australian schools. In 2005, a total of 1,735,754 students were studying a language at some level throughout their schooling years (Liddicoat, Scarino, Curnow, Kohler, Scrimgeour, & Morgan, 2007). At first, these figures may indicate that the situation is satisfactory; that Australians are very much engaged in second language education. However, the number of language students in the senior school continues to remain low in comparison with other Western countries. According to Lindsey (2007) only 13% of final year secondary students are graduating with a second language compared to 40% in the 1960s. A report published by the *Group of Eight* Australian universities\* in 2007 showed that the history of second language education is not very glorious at university level either with numerous language programs being closed down throughout the years, leaving the number of languages being offered at just 29 in 2011 compared to the historical figure of 66 in 1997.

Australia is a multicultural country and because cultures are always accompanied by languages, serious thoughts about the Language education situation in Australia have always been necessary. Language policies have helped to secure millions of dollars for Language education in Australia showing the commitment of the Australian Government to growing a multilingual country. For instance, the 2012-2013 Annual Report from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations explained that:

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\* *Group of Eight* Australian universities is a coalition of leading Australian universities

*The Government's School Languages Program provided \$112 million from 2005 to 2008 to state and territory education authorities to support the teaching and learning of Asian, European, Aboriginal languages, Torres Strait Islander languages and Auslan in schools and community language programs in ethnic schools. [...]The Government is also providing \$62.1 million over 2010–11 to 2013–14 through the Schools Assistance Act 2008 to support the teaching of Asian, European, Aboriginal languages, Torres Strait Islander languages and Auslan in non-government schools. (DEEWR)*

Recently, the Commonwealth Government provided \$9.8 million over two years from 2014-15 to conduct a one year trial to determine the effectiveness of early exposure to languages other than English through online language learning programmes (Australian Government Budget, 2014). However, this past and present investment does not seem to have had a major impact at the level of the daily Language teacher or on the number of Language teachers in schools. In fact, a report commissioned by Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Australian Parents Council, *The National Statement and Plan – making a difference or another decade of indifference?*, based on research conducted by Solved at McConchie Pty Ltd explained that:

*A shortage of language teachers remains a major impediment to the realisation of strong, universal languages programs. Replacing teachers who are transferred take leave or resign is a challenge for schools and jurisdictions. Sometimes a new language is started simply because a qualified teacher of the former language cannot be found. (June, 2007, p.33)*

In addition, Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009) stated that:

*Teacher supply is arguably the most significant challenge facing languages education in Australia and the departure point for investigation of current provision and uptake. (2009, p. 42)*

Finding teachers, especially language teachers, to work in rural and remote areas of Australia is even more of a challenge. James Cook University is the main tertiary educator providers to communities living in North and Far North Queensland with two of its main campuses being located in Townsville and Cairns. Despite both campuses offering students the possibility to earn a Language education degree, in 2014 JCU has less than ten future language teachers in their final year of study. According to the Queensland Government schools directory, there are just under 500 schools in North Queensland and Far North Queensland. In 2012, James Cook University discontinued the Bachelor of Languages and the Bachelor of Education due to falling enrolments. Studies to become a Language teacher in the North can now only be completed through a generic Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Education. In addition, students are now not able within these degrees, to select two languages as their teaching areas. This means they cannot graduate as a (solely) Language educator. This situation adds to the recruitment challenge for schools in sourcing qualified language teachers to work in North and Far North Queensland.

### **Transformation in North Queensland**

At present, the dominant languages taught in schools in North and Far North Queensland are Japanese, Italian and French. Some schools are offering Chinese (Mandarin) and German. Only a few schools offer Indonesian. In May 2012, a language teachers' meeting was organised at James Cook University campus in Townsville. This Language forum was a first for Language teachers in the region, the purpose of which was to create a stronger sense of community amongst existing Language teachers in the region. The forum was also the start of promoting second language learning to the people of North and Far North Queensland more broadly. A total of 28



language teachers participated in the free event. Throughout the forum, teachers completed surveys. The results showed that 42% of Language teachers feel isolated in secondary schools compared to 75% in primary schools. In addition, despite 74% of Language teachers agreeing that retention was a problem for languages in school and 48% believing that people in North Queensland are not interested in learning a foreign language, 92% of these Language teachers said they loved their job.

The survey results led to a renewed effort on the part of the university to assist and support these teachers and to see Language education growth in this part of Australia. A holistic approach was adopted underpinned by the work of Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009, p. 27):

*All too often it is assumed that the motivations learners have available to them are the prospects of employment and other material advantage that attach to language learning. This outsider perspective on motivation is less tenable today in light of the powerful shifting of emphasis towards the internal perspective and experience of learners, and on the quality of micro-school experiences in influencing motivation, persistence and interest among language students (Dörnyei, 2001a, 2001b, 2005, 2009) [...] policy is practice, in the hands of individual teachers and schools.*

By September 2012, a Language teacher's network had been established, the *North Queensland Language Teachers' Network*. Through this network, ongoing meetings have been organised and professional learning opportunities made freely available for Language educators in the region. Later, in 2013, an *Academy of Modern Languages* was launched at the Cairns campus of James Cook University in the hope of providing access to language education to the people of Far North Queensland but also to educate members of the community of the benefits of learning a foreign language.

As partnerships with schools became stronger, and teachers were able to communicate more effectively, James Cook University established a Language Mentor program in 2014. As part of this program, university students currently studying languages are working in collaboration with Language teachers in schools. These students are regularly attending language classes and working as mentors in the classroom. Teachers have found the program to be inspiring to school students while providing additional opportunities for authentic speaking and listening practice. The university students have also found the program rewarding as it helps them develop their leadership skills. For some of the students they have discovered a passion for teaching and are considering enrolling into a Graduate Diploma of Education upon completion of their undergraduate degree to become Language teachers themselves.

In June 2014, the discipline of Languages from the College of Arts, Society and Education at James Cook University received a HEPPP grant of \$31,742 to assist in the development of a *Young Language Ambassador* program. The JCU *Young Language Ambassador* program is a partnership between JCU and schools in the region that promotes the study of foreign languages while providing young people with the opportunity to develop their leadership skills. The program aims to reward outstanding Language students, promote internationalism in schools, increase students' retention in languages and continue to foster deeper relationships between JCU and the wider community. Students participating in this program will be invited to participate in young leadership workshops and an annual conference. Through this program, it is hoped that a vision for second language learning in the North and Far North Queensland region will be developed.

## **Conclusion**

Language teaching can be difficult in Australia but the described initiatives have helped to create a sense of community amongst Language educators in our region. Together, Language educators are working towards a common goal, restoring the profile of second language education in North and Far North Queensland and educating the wider community about the benefits of learning another language. As more young people participate in language programs, they will develop skills and attributes that will prepare them to make successful contributions to our region. Having more internationally-minded young leaders can bring a lot to any growing society, particularly when those leaders are local people. Finally, having more second language learners has the capacity to also increase the number of future language teachers, feeding into a cycle of growth for languages.

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