

Australia's Education Futures and the East-Side Neighbours

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Abstract

In 2014, the importance of providing all young Australians with opportunities to be actively engaged with and literate in the cultures and languages of Asia continues to be evident in curriculum documents and the media. Whilst there is wide spread agreement that the study of Asian perspectives is important for the successful future of many young Australians, one could question why none of the countries located to the east of Australia have been mentioned in either the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) or the Australian curriculum, as these countries are also some of Australia's closest neighbours. If Australia, as a nation, is truly aiming to develop its young people to be global citizens through the teaching and learning of different cultures and beliefs, then it does not seem unreasonable to say that young Australians also need to develop an appreciation for their East-side neighbours. However, as it stands the curriculum is argued as a crowded place; adding might result in the loss of something else. This article demonstrates how the French language classroom can be used as a means to contribute to developing the international-mindedness of young Australians in regards to their East-side neighbours without adding to the crowding of the current Australian Curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum; French Language; Global Citizens; Education; International-Mindedness

Introduction

The national priorities in education for a country are often widely contested and this contest is evident in the curricula that are present in every nation. As asserted by Pinar (2002) every curriculum is an autobiographical construct largely representative of the participants in its construction. Therefore, making informed decisions on what all young Australians should be taught throughout their schooling can be problematic. In 2008, the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs) articulated the educational goals set for the next generations of Australians and provided a series of action steps on how to achieve these goals. This document was also referred to by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in the development of the first Australian curriculum in 2012. In the development of the national curriculum, what is evident is the emphasis on three main cross curricula priorities, these being (1) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, (2) Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia and (3) Sustainability.

The second of these priorities, regarding Australia's engagement with Asia, was strongly supported by some of Australia's political leaders. Former Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd

explained his wish for “Australia to become the most Asia-literate country in the Western world”. In addition, Julia Gillard, who was the Education Minister at that time and later Australia’s Prime Minister said “It is impossible to conceive of a future Australian education system that does not take the study of Asia seriously”. As a result, this political vision of providing all young Australians with opportunities to be actively engaged and literate in the cultures and languages of Asia has been represented in curricular documents and media.

A clearer vision of what this Asian engagement might mean for the future of Australia is provided by Carrilo Ganter AO, in a report entitled *National Summit on Studies of Asia* by Asia Education Foundation written in 2003:

It is our shared vision that by 2020 we will live in an Australia in which our children can speak with respect and knowledge about Islam; an Australia that can communicate with its largest and nearest neighbour – Indonesia; an Australia that can take up the opportunities offered by the intellectual and economic powerhouses of China and India ... An Australia in which a unique, vibrant, creative culture has blossomed, a culture that understands its Indigenous connectedness to land and is fed as much by the influences of the great civilisations of Asia as by those of Europe.

This political vision for embedding Asian perspectives into the curriculum of Australian schools comes from a range of motivations. According to the Department of Education, Science and Training as well as the Asian Education Foundation, this vision of partnership between Australia and Asia is argued to be significant for the future of Australia for two main reasons. First of all, countries of Asia are Australia’s closest neighbours and major trading partners. Second, learning about and engaging with the Asian region is central to all young Australians so that they can become active and informed local, regional and global citizens. In addition, according to Kathe Kirby, Executive Director of Asia link and Asia Education Foundation, Asian perspectives need to be taught to all young Australians in order to bring to an end the Eurocentric tradition that has been held in Australian schools’ curriculum for many years. During an interview in 2009 about why Australians students should engage with Asia, Kirby responded:

Imagine a 21st century world if you did not have some understanding of your closest neighbours. We need to resolve global issues with our neighbours, environment issues, health issues, people movement. We need to be able to speak the languages of our region; we need to understand where our neighbours are coming from.

Literature Review

Whilst there is wide spread agreement that the study of Asian perspectives is important for the successful future of many young Australians, one could question why some emphasis has not also been placed on the countries located to the east of Australia (which I refer to hereafter as East-side neighbours). This part of the world remains very much invisible in the Australian curriculum and the *Melbourne Declaration* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). However, these countries are also some of Australia’s closest neighbours. Although some may disagree, Quanchi (2013) argues that there is a lack of attention towards our neighbours in the Pacific Islands as he explains:

Today, the presence of Pacific Islanders in Australia is rarely noted, and despite our long history of involvement, the region is only visible at times when Pacific is a focus for the media, mostly to record coups, cyclone and disasters (p.31).

If Australia as a nation is truly aiming to develop its young people to become global citizens through the teaching and learning of different cultures and beliefs, then it does not seem unreasonable to say that, if an opportunity arises in the curriculum, young Australians should also be given the chance to develop an appreciation for their East-side neighbours. According to former General Peter Cosgrove:

Good neighbours learn to speak each other's languages [...] Good neighbours learn to respect each other's religious and cultural beliefs. Good neighbours learn to allow for differences and to be inclusive. Good neighbours spend time with each other. Good neighbours understand that contentious issues should be resolved through negotiation. (*National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools*, 2006, p.4)

Australia could be a better neighbour towards the Pacific Islands. Dr Max Quanchi (2013), academic and expert in Pacific Studies supports this idea as he explains:

Australian governments have been unable to arrive at a long-term policy of mutually beneficial engagement with its neighbouring Pacific Islands region. A decade into the twenty-first century, Australia continues to struggle to establish a positive, forward-looking policy of collaborative engagement with the region. In the Pacific, the popular image remained of a wealthy, often friendly and generous neighbour but equally of a culturally-insensitive, indifferent regional bully. (p.35)

Given the predominance of the French language amongst the East-side neighbours, the French language classroom could assist in making the next generation of Australians better neighbours towards the Pacific Islands.

Historically, the Australian education system has been apathetic towards the teaching and learning of languages other than English (Ingram, 2003). However, the government support to promote Asian perspectives in schools is empowering educational institutions to revitalise their Asian language programs. Although this is a step forward for second language learning in Australia, it is to some extent marginalising other languages and cultures. Recently, in October 2014, a discussion paper written by Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) reminded the Australian public of the Australian government's aim to have at least 40 per cent of year 12 students studying a foreign language by 2020. The QTU also outlined that the Queensland government has a similar, although maybe less ambitious, plan as it also aims at having an increased number of school leavers with skills in a language other than English. Specifically, they aim to have 15 per cent of year 12 students studying a foreign language and ensure that a language is taught to students as early as the preparatory year. Will these plans be capable of revitalising the profile of second language education in Australia?

Research Purpose

This research project focuses on some of the less visible East-side neighbours: New-Caledonia, Vanuatu, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia. These countries may not be as large and economically powerful as China or India but they are closer neighbours of Australia's most populated cities. The dominant language used in this part of the world outside of English is the French language. Therefore the French language classroom can be

used as a window to reveal to young Australians about the currently invisible nations hidden amongst this great big blue patch of the Pacific Ocean.

In the long term, I believe that Australia must increase its engagement with its East side neighbours because these countries share a common, small corner of the world and their futures are interwoven in economic and environmental challenges that are unique to this region, the tropics. French has been taught in Australian schools since the 1800s, however, educators often teach the French language from a Eurocentric perspective, reducing the international value of the French language and culture by attributing it to France only (Ritchie, 2003). This is because of the experience that language teachers have been exposed to as learners of French themselves, but also because of the lack of resources and current school curriculum that teachers have to use.

Increasing the number of students who can speak French and know about their East-side neighbours could widen their social and economic horizon. However, just learning French will not alone create this engagement. A change in the geographical orientation of the curriculum must also be considered.

Research Questions

This project aims to develop a curriculum that assists teachers to respond to the linguistic requirements of the Australian curriculum as well as develop the international-mindedness of young Australians and their knowledge towards Australia's East-side neighbours.

The research questions in this study are:

1. What do Australian students know about Australia's East-side neighbours, specifically the French speaking countries?
2. How can explicit teaching about Australia's East-side neighbours in a French language context, contribute to greater international mindedness?
3. How can French language teachers transform their current work program to allow a focus on the East-side neighbours?

Significance of Research

Given the proximity of the French speaking territories to the East of Australia, this transformative French language curriculum can be justified with a similar rationale for Asian perspectives. Hence, it is necessary to expand the teaching of French in Australia from its current Eurocentric perspective to give due emphasis to the interconnections and interdependence of the histories and future in this geopolitical region.

This research project is motivated by my personal experience as a migrant from New-Caledonia and as a language teacher in North Queensland. After I migrated to Australia in 2004, I have often been in a situation where people did not know where New-Caledonia was and they were surprised to discover that French was the main language spoken in this part of the world. This might be explained by the fact that while there is much recent literature that notes the potential of embedding Asian languages and cultures into the education of young Australians to enhance the development of global citizens (National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools, 2006; Global Perspectives: A framework for global education in Australian schools, 2008.), there is lack of recent literature relating to the French language and its capacity to assist young people to become internationally-minded

and to promote active engagement with Australia's neighbours. As Lo Bianco (1987, p.9) explains "It is in Australia's interest to develop high levels of competence in languages of geo-political significance".

Australian teachers are best placed, due to their geographical position, to educate the next generation about a region of the world that would otherwise be invisible to many Australians and people from across the world.

Findings

This is an action research project that is underpinned by a transformative paradigm and uses a mixed method approach. The research can be divided into three main stages: the reconnaissance, the intervention and the evaluation. In this paper I discuss some of the findings from stage 1, the reconnaissance.

In the reconnaissance stage, the main participants were grade 8 students and language teachers drawn from one of the largest state high schools in North Queensland. All participating students were given a questionnaire that would provide the researcher with an indication of their level of international-mindedness. In addition, the students answered a multi-choice knowledge based questionnaire that would assess their general knowledge of the East-side neighbours. Finally both teachers and students took part in a series of interviews and small focus groups to help answer the research questions (see page 5).

In the reconnaissance stage, a teacher explained:

I think the reason why we don't teach about this part of the world, it is because it has been a long history; the resources are focus towards a French, French approach. I have found that the students have a preference to learn about France. It is extremely stereotyped. The students all want to go to Paris and climb the Eiffel tower. I think this new curriculum is going to be a good way to challenge their ideal of France and what it is all about. That's a good reason why we need to teach them about the neighbours next door. They can practice their French next door.

Although there is a place for the East-side neighbours to be integrated in the current French curriculum, teachers are not as confident teaching about the French language present in the Pacific in comparison to teaching about France. Most of their own learning experiences at university were focused on the French language drawn from a European perspective. Another teacher explained:

It is at the teachers' discretion to talk about the French Pacific islands. There are some opportunities in the curriculum because we need to teach about the language and the culture but we don't really do it. I am not sure why. Often I have found that the resources are a bit lacking. It has not been done very much at all. I think it is very important to try to include it in our curriculum now. I expect the kids to get a lot out of it. I don't feel as confident teaching about the French Pacific countries, I know more about France. When I went to university I was taught a traditional French curriculum. We studied Proust, Baudelaire and Moliere.

Another teacher suggested that the transformative curriculum was about challenging the current practice and personal views on the nature of the French language:

This new program is going to break the other preconceived ideas. Students think that only the white people speak French. The idea of what they have of a French person will be challenged. A French speaking person is not just a white person living in Paris. This unit is about opening their mind to something else and challenging that status-quo.

Aligning with the teachers' expectations, students indicated that they had little to no knowledge of Australia's East-side neighbours and felt more confident speaking about Australia's Northern neighbours.

I found the quiz was difficult. I used my deduction skills to answer some of them but I was not sure about the answers. Usually when you think of French, you think of Europe and France so it was a bit surprising to know that there are people who speak French in the Pacific.

I think I know more about the Asian culture than the East-side neighbours. I know about the food people eat in Asia, I know what countries are part of Asia, I know about their culture because we have learnt about it and we also had some students coming from China who came to our class.

I am not sure about what countries are located on the East-side of Australia, we have not learnt about it. I know more about Asia because we are learning about it now. At the moment when I think of "French", I think about croissant, Eiffel tower and Paris.

Responses in the reconnaissance stage indicate that students had limited knowledge of the East-side neighbours and that teachers were not as confident teaching about the French language from Pacific perspective due their personal learning experience. That said, both students and teachers, appeared interested in the transformative curriculum and students demonstrated higher level of curiosity for the target language after being informed that it was the language spoken by some of Australia's closest neighbours. These first reactions were seen as a positive start in to the transformation of the curriculum. The literature, including Lewthwaite (2001), highlight that successful implementation of any new curriculum is highly dependent on teachers' personal perceptions and knowledge link to the new program. During the next step of this research, the participants will be engaging in the various cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

Conclusion

All languages and cultures are equally valid and well worth knowing about, however, schools cannot teach everything due to lack of time and resources. Asia is important but there are also compelling reasons to know about the East-side neighbours. Knowledge of their closest East-side neighbours offers students a context to learn about how Australia conducts itself as a good neighbour. Australian educators have a critical role to play as they educate young Australians in becoming internationally minded citizens. For this reason, it is important that the East-side neighbours are emphasised in the curriculum and I believe that the French classroom is an ideal place to start. Ultimately, finding a place for the East-side neighbours in other areas of the curriculum is important to give visibility to this region.

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