




LANGUAGES ARE IMPORTANT

— BUT THAT'S NOT WHY I AM STUDYING ONE —

INTRODUCTION

Languages education in Australia is characterised by strong political trends and influences. Since the early 1950s we have had successive rationales for school language learning, e.g. *National Policy on Languages* (1937), *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (1991), *The National Statement and Plan for Languages in Australian Schools* (2006).

Prior to the changes in education policy in the late 1950s (e.g. Wyndham, 1957), languages were valued for their potential to provide intellectual rigour for 'bright' students. In the 60s and 70s – the era that marked the rise of 'community' languages and the introduction of language programs into primary schools – they were considered important for all students. The introduction of community language programs also acknowledged the diverse languages spoken in our migrant communities and helped spread the

concept of multiculturalism. During the 1980s, languages – particularly the languages of the Asian region – were heralded as vital for their 'economic' benefits. More recently, the economic rationale has been extended to enhance social cohesion and domestic and international security.

Yet, despite the many attempts by the Federal, State, and Territory Governments to increase student numbers in school language programs through a range of language policies over the years, student enrolments and retention rates in contexts where languages are not compulsory remain a challenge. Against this background of constantly shifting policy agendas for languages education, it is timely to consider what students themselves are *saying* about languages and how this is reflected in what they are actually *doing* when it comes to taking a language at school.

While there remain no comprehensive data on how policy directions impact on students' choices, it is worth considering small-scale studies that explore what students believe about the importance of knowledge of languages, what reasons they give for continuing or discontinuing their language study at school, and whether there is any connection between these. Furthermore, it is worth considering what this means for the language teaching profession as a whole, particularly in light of current activities occurring at the national level.

GATHERING STUDENTS' VIEWS

This study reports on what 57 South Australian Government and non-Government secondary students reported as being their reasons for continuing or discontinuing the study of a language once it was no longer compulsory, as well as what these students claimed about the

importance or otherwise of knowing more than one language. The data were collected in early 2007.

In order to get a range of opinions, we interviewed five separate groups of secondary students who had reached a point in their education where languages were no longer compulsory. Two of the groups were from Year 10 classes in a Government school in one of Adelaide's lower socioeconomic suburbs: one of these groups consisted of fourteen students who were still taking Indonesian, while the other group (of eight students) no longer took any language. Another two groups were from Year 10 classes in a non-Government school in one of Adelaide's higher socioeconomic suburbs: one of these groups consisted of fifteen students still taking Italian, while the other group (again of eight students) had given up studying a language at school. The fifth group consisted of twelve students who were learning Chinese, German, or Spanish at an after-hours Government language school. Of the 57 students who participated in the study, 40 were male and seventeen female. While we wished to ensure that the views of both boys and girls were canvassed, given the low retention rates of boys, we deliberately sought to ensure that their views would be well represented. We required the students and their parent or guardian to sign consent forms before they could participate.

Students' views were sought in a focus-group context, with the discussions held separately with each of the five groups. We decided on a focus-group approach rather than a questionnaire-based approach, as we were looking for unprompted responses rather than responses selected from a list provided — Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 208) note that 'group interviewing also maximises possibilities for unanticipated but highly pertinent matters being raised'. We felt that in the discussion setting, students were more likely to raise spontaneously the reasons that had motivated their decision to continue or discontinue languages, rather than choosing what they felt were 'appropriate' reasons from a selection of reasons supplied to them. The focus-group context tends to allow participants to not only indicate an answer, but also to talk more generally about any response they give in an environment that is 'as close as possible to the real-life situations where people discuss, formulate, and modify their views'.



TIMOTHY JOWAN CURNOW
MICHELLE KOHLER

Timothy Jowan Curnow is a research fellow in applied linguistics at the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures Education at the University of South Australia. He may be contacted at Tim.Curnow@unisa.edu.au.

Michelle Kohler is a secondary teacher of Indonesian and researcher at the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures Education at the University of South Australia. She is also a PhD candidate working on how teachers mediate intercultural language learning. Michelle may be contacted at Michelle.Kohler@unisa.edu.au.

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a small-scale study carried out in Adelaide. We asked secondary students who had decided to continue or discontinue their language study once it was no longer compulsory what had prompted their decision. We also asked them whether they considered knowing a second language to be important. While all the students in the study said they considered that languages were important — listing the same reasons that language teachers list attempting to motivate — almost none of the continuing students actually mentioned these reasons when discussing why they had continued. Instead, they focused primarily on academic achievement and issues of personal interest, relationships, and lived experiences. We examine what this means in practical terms for language teachers.

KEY WORDS

Language teaching, motivation, retention.

REFERENCES

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and make sense of their experiences' (Barbour & Schostak, 2005, p. 43). We also wished to see whether students linked their answers to different questions in any way, or whether they treated them as independent and unconnected.

The two main drawbacks of focus groups discussed in the literature are that results cannot be generalised and that a group culture or group mind can override individual expression, with a single speaker's views dominating (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 652). We attempted to reduce the possibility of a single voice dominating through the use of experienced language teachers as our interviewers. Teachers are accustomed to managing the interactions of high school students and enabling input from a range of students (Hopkins, 1993, p. 124). The teachers did not teach in the schools where the interviews were carried out. In fact, domination by a single student or small set of students was not a problem in any of our discussion groups; as has been noted before with classroom focus groups, 'far from inhibiting each other, the individuals 'spark' themselves into sensitive and perceptive discussion'.

The other issue with focus groups relates to the representativeness of the data. By the very nature of focus groups, quantification is not possible, because no participant is required to contribute or respond to any particular statement by another student. It is however possible to determine whether opinions are widely shared or held only by a small number of participants, that is, to obtain 'insights into group consensus or divergence on an issue' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 208). Given this, vague quantifications such as 'many students', 'most students', and so forth are more appropriate than specific numbers of particular responses, as these would be misleading or attribute too much significance to the participation of individuals.

Students were asked different sets of questions, depending on whether they had continued or ceased studying a language. The students who had continued to learn a language were asked four questions:

- Why did you decide to continue studying a language?
- Why do you think some of your friends stopped studying a language?
- What do you think would have encouraged them to continue studying a language?

- Do you think knowing more than one language is important? Why (not)?

Students who had given up their language study were asked three questions in their discussion groups:

- Why did you decide not to study a language this year?
- Do you think you will study a language again in the future?
- Do you think knowing more than one language is important? Why (not)?

Since we were interested in reasons that are transferable across contexts, students' views on the impact of their particular class or teacher were not explicitly sought for this study.

WHAT STUDENTS SAID

There was a great deal of consistency in students' responses about why they chose to continue or discontinue their language study, regardless of whether they were attending a Government or non-Government school, regardless of whether the language they were taking (or had previously taken) was a European or Asian language, and regardless of gender. Their responses as to why they continued or discontinued fall into three broad areas:

- academic success and achievement
- personal interest, relationships, and lived experiences
- career possibilities and relevance.

There are also very similar responses across all students to the question 'Do you think knowing more than one language is important?', regardless of whether students were continuing or had discontinued their language study.

Why did you continue studying a language?

The majority of students who continued to take a language after it had ceased to be compulsory indicated as their first reason their academic success and achievement. They expressed this in various ways: 'I enjoy learning it', 'I'm good at it', 'I was doing well in the language', 'I find it easy', and 'I was getting good grades'. This has been found in many other studies also, both in the Australian context (e.g. Baldauf & Lawrence, 1990) and overseas (e.g. Ramage, 1990). A few students indicated additional academic reasons, such as the existence of a bonus scheme for language

students at some universities. Of note, all continuing students also gave academic reasons as the reason why some of their friends had stopped learning a language: 'it was too hard', 'it was too much work', and 'they weren't doing well in it'.

Many students who continued with their study of a language indicated personal interest and relationships as important. Most commonly, this was in addition to academic reasons, although a few students gave only personal interest reasons with no academic reasons. Many (particularly among those who were taking a European language) indicated that they were learning the language to be able to talk with relatives who spoke the language or because of their own cultural background.

Only one student gave parental pressure as the reason, while no-one else mentioned parental influence at all, which is an interesting contrast to the questionnaire findings of Zammit (1992, p. 52), where 80% of continuing students ticked the 'parents encouraged me to learn a [language]' box. It is not clear whether this reflects a real difference in the influence of parents in students' subject selections in the last fifteen years, whether it relates to changes in policy over that time (meaning that students now make the choice to continue or discontinue language study at an older and more independent age), or whether it is simply a reflection of the particular methods we used to gather the data.

A few students (particularly those at the language school) indicated that one of their reasons for continuing was that they had been born in, or had spent a couple of years growing up in, a country where the target language was spoken. In the other groups, several students mentioned that their friends were also taking the language. And in one of the groups, several students indicated that the year-end trip to the country where the language was spoken was their major reason for continuing.

A small number of students stated that one of their reasons for continuing was career-related. In these cases, the justification was always very general and not related to any particular career goal: 'it might be useful when I get a job', 'it might help in the future', 'great skill to have in life', and 'can help in a future career path'. In no cases did students indicate in discussing this point that they had a particular career in mind and could see how knowing a language was relevant for this career.

Why did you stop studying a language?

There were a few students who had discontinued language study, even though they wished to continue, because the language they wished to learn was not available that year. For others, their reasons for discontinuing were either academic, or career- or life-oriented.

Many students who had discontinued indicated that language learning was a great deal of work, usually for relatively little outcome. Some suggested that by the time they got around to using the language they would have forgotten it, and others felt that they weren't engaged in meaningful learning. Some were focused on the 'here and now' and felt that non-language subjects were more important for them at that point in their lives; some indicated that non-language subjects were more relevant, given what they wanted to do in later life. This assertion was sometimes explicitly tied to career paths, for example, students indicated that 'you only need languages if you want to be an interpreter' and 'other subjects are more relevant if you want to be an architect'. But more often it was expressed in terms of life rather than career, usually simply making the point that, in their opinion, languages are not relevant unless you go overseas.

Generally speaking, these two sets of reasons correspond with those found in other studies in the Australian context. For example, McQueen and Brown (1992) found that the two main reasons for students discontinuing were that other subjects were more important and languages were difficult – cf. 'learning other languages is hard' (Zammit, 1992, p. 1), 'languages are hard' (Carr, 2002, p. 9).

While it does not necessarily correlate with their actually having dropped a language, it is interesting to note that the vast majority of students who had in fact done so stated that they might take a language up again in the future. In some cases the language that the students wanted to learn was not currently available; in other cases, they felt that learning a language would be good, but for one reason or another they could not do it right now. This seems to reflect one of the main findings of a large-scale study carried out in Scotland, which found that 'students saw long-term benefits in language learning but were less convinced of the short-term benefits, in relation to

achieving their immediate educational and career goals' (McPake, Johnstone, Low, & Lyall, 1999, p. x).

Is knowing more than one language important?

In this study we wished to gather students' opinions about 'knowing' a language. In most studies examining students' motivations for language learning, attitudinal questions relate more directly to language learning and to languages in their life as a student; but here we wished to see what students would say about the importance of *knowing* a language, unconnected to the learning process.

Almost all the students in our survey indicated that knowledge of more than one language is important; only a couple said that they felt that languages weren't important in Australia, and were only relevant if you went overseas.

Students' responses to this question were primarily career-related and almost always very general ('it might help you in life', 'could help in your employment', 'can help in a wide variety of jobs', 'can help in the workplace', 'in some jobs you need to know another language') but such responses were shared by the majority of the students, whether they were taking a language or not. Only four students mentioned explicit careers where languages would be an advantage: 'teacher', 'interpreter', 'you could be a pilot', and 'it would help working in the deli'.

Another common reason why students find languages important was related to travel, holidays, and student exchanges, either enabling students to go overseas or assisting if their families hosted an overseas student.

Finally, a small number of students gave 'diversity-related' reasons for why knowing more than one language is important: 'it is important in multicultural Australia', 'the world doesn't revolve around English', 'and it gives you different views'.

WHAT MIGHT IT ALL MEAN?

There are several interesting points that can be drawn from the student responses reported here.

First, practically all the students involved in the survey indicated that knowing more than one language is important, and the

responses match fairly closely the sorts of messages that we know language teachers give their students about languages.

'Languages are important for getting a job', 'languages give you options in the future', 'languages are good if you go overseas', and concepts about multiculturalism and diversity are precisely what language teachers attempt to transmit to their students. It seems, then, that these messages are getting through. Whether students act on these messages or not, or whether they continue to take a language or not, they are certainly aware of why languages are important.

Interestingly, however, despite students being able to regurgitate these messages, the messages appear to have little or no impact on why they say they continue or discontinue their language study. This aligns with Ramage's study (1990, p. 207), which suggests that 'realising the practical value of foreign language study does not appear to provide students with the motivation to continue'.

As noted above, none of the students who continued to study a language gave as their reason that they intend to have a particular language-related career; and only a small number gave a generalised career-related reason such as 'it might help me get a job'; even then, this was in addition to other reasons rather than the only reason for continuing.

This is an interesting contrast with some other studies; for example, McCannon and Medeiros's (1995) study found that the belief that French might be useful in a future career was the most highly ranked motivation for students to continue or discontinue studying French, and McQueen and Brown (1992) found career issues one of the three main motivating factors for continuing language study. It is not clear whether there is a real or only an apparent difference here in the ten to fifteen years since these earlier studies. It is possible that the difference relates to the different study designs, as perhaps in a questionnaire these students would have ticked career advantages as one of their reasons if it had been listed; but it would seem unlikely that a difference in research method would lead to the most highly ranked motivation (in McCannon and Medeiros's study) to simply not be mentioned by our continuing students. If the distinction is real rather than an artefact of our study design, it could relate to the

general economy, with our students having grown up in relatively strong economic times, being consequently less concerned in general about career opportunities. Alternatively, it could be a reflection of the Government languages policies of the times, as the other studies mentioned here were conducted during a period when languages were tied very strongly in policy and public rhetoric to economic imperatives and employment prospects, in a way that is not currently the case in Australia. However, it is important to note that students in our study do say that languages are important for careers; it is just that this is not *their* motivation for continuing to study.

There is certainly no logical connection between what students say about languages and careers and whether languages are relevant for careers. Continuing students generally didn't mention careers as a motivating factor, and those who did gave no indication of having a career in mind for which languages could be helpful. Students who had discontinued their language study did tend to mention the lack of relevance of languages to their future career; however, once again, there was usually little indication that they had any particular career in mind. This is of course similar to what has been found by others, such as Carr (2002), who found that even students who intended to pursue what could be considered language-related careers (such as becoming a pilot) considered that languages had no relevance to their career.

Just as with the lack of career-related motivation, only two continuing students gave as one of their reasons for continuing with language study that they intended to travel; and in one of these cases, the student only used this as a potential reason ('it is very useful if I want to travel to another country'). No students included the issues of cultural diversity or multiculturalism among their reasons for continuing to study a language. Instead, the reasons they gave as motivating them to continue with languages were to do with personal learning, achievement, and personal experiences. Furthermore, the motivating factors all appear to be short-term goals rather than indicators of any longer-term plans. These reasons do vary, but include both academic, short-term outcomes, and issues that impact on individual students' sense of identity. Students continue to study a language because they are doing well, because they somehow identify with the language and

wish to be able to connect with its culture, or because of a particular past or short-term-future experience, such as having studied overseas or because they hope to go on an exchange at the end of the year.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

While the findings from this study may appear to reaffirm the findings of previous studies, there are some key messages that may be usefully considered by language teachers. A major distinction in this study is the finding that, at least for this group of students, choosing languages in order to pursue a particular career did not feature as prominently as in other studies. This finding raises a number of questions for language teachers, such as whether students really accept that studying a language at school can lead to a career, or whether students are yet to consider a particular career (and hence languages are yet to feature). One thing is clear: students can state in general the relevance of languages beyond schooling; however, they do not necessarily connect this with their own reality. This suggests that as language teachers, we need to make time in our programs to explore these connections with students in order for them to see for themselves the ways in which languages might feature in various careers and life opportunities.

A further finding here is that students' perception of the level of difficulty and their ability to succeed in language learning plays a major role in their choices. They clearly make decisions based on their achievement and their view of the relevance of their second language knowledge to their current situation. While we know that language learning is a cumulative process and that significant gains are the result of long-term progress, students base their decisions to continue or discontinue on much shorter-term goals. The degree to which their language study has a positive impact on them (either in academic terms or because of student-exchange programs or in-country experiences) features highly in what they consider important for continuing with their language study. There is a clear role for language teachers here in addressing the way in which students see languages as relevant to their lives. While teachers often attempt to show why languages could be relevant in the future, programs also need to position languages as important in students' lives at the present moment through building in

opportunities to explore the place of languages and cultures in students' current lives.

Despite a number of policy reviews, forums, and national projects in Australia over the past decade or so, the number of students still taking languages at Year 12 level continues to remain around 12% (Topsfield, 2007). While this trend is of concern to language educators, and although this study does not directly address this issue, there is one finding that seems relevant to the discussion. Students in our study were almost unanimous in indicating that knowing a language other than English was important. It is not clear why students, even those who had given up language study, agreed on this. It may well reflect a shifting perception within the wider community that compulsory language programs — to whatever level of schooling — are gaining greater acceptance. This could perhaps relate to a feeling, fuelled by public discourse, that the world and workplace are becoming more globalised. Alternatively, it may be due to the fact that languages have become a key learning area in the Australian curriculum, however marginal they may appear to be at present.

The ongoing challenge for the language teaching profession in Australia is to continue to focus on quality teaching as the best means of retaining students so that students in future decades are not only saying that languages are important, but they are taking them too.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many of the data on which this article is based were originally collected for a different purpose, in the context of the Development of Nationally Coordinated Promotion of the Benefits of Language Learning in Schools Project being carried out by the Asia Education Foundation and the AFMLTA.

We would like to thank the project funding body, the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, for granting us permission to use in this article some of the data collected for that project.

We would also like to thank Nives Mercurio for carrying out some of the interviews for us; other interviews were carried out by one of the authors, Michelle Kohler.

