

## Languages in schools

December 16, 2021

Language is the primary tool we use for communication. It is what sets us apart from all other living things. We depend on language to express ourselves, to be heard and understood.

What we say matters and the language we use can influence us socially, emotionally and culturally. Whether speaking, reading or writing, we rely on language to learn and connect with others. It is an inherent part of being human, with the power to both unite and divide us.

As educators, we understand that the learning of language is not just useful for practical reasons. It in fact provides avenues for learning creativity, artistic expression and critical thinking, The learning of more than one language can further enhance this capacity as well as strengthen communicative skills.

More than a third of all students enrolled in NSW public schools speak English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), according to the

[Language Diversity in NSW: 2020 Factsheet](#) (published in April 2021). “Students who learn language will develop stronger communication skills, learn about languages as systems and explore the relationship between language and culture,” states the Department of Education.

So, if the learning of a second language has been linked to improved understanding of one’s first language, as well as other improved cognitive and expressive functions, why then do only one in seven of our EAL/D students continue learning language to year 12?

According to Professor Ken Cruikshank, director of the Sydney Institute for Community Language Education, Australia devotes far less time to languages than other countries in the developed world. “Australia is the bottom of all OECD countries in terms of language study, and NSW is bottom in Australia,” he said. “In NSW, students must study 100 hours of a second language in year 7 or year 8 and can choose to study one for the HSC, as an option. Public primary schools are only given funding for a language teacher if there are a significant number of speakers of a particular language in their local community.” With “just one in 20 from an English-speaking background” studying a language to the HSC level, and many LBOTE students not engaging in formal language lessons in their first language, Australia is lagging the rest of the world in this area of education — and some of our EAL/D students risk “losing” their first language competency. ([Sydney Morning Herald](#), 8 May)

Macquarie University’s Department of Linguistics senior lecturer Dr Jinhyun Cho has identified “Australia’s emphasis on an English-speaking background” as being a reason for first language loss, stating it “does not encourage cultural nuances to be nurtured”. ([abc.net.au](#), 29 March)

She believes that even though “Australia has lot of migrants and that number continues to grow, when you



consider where they [new arrivals] are situated in the social hierarchy, the answer is quite obvious... If you can't speak English, you can't get a decent job. It results in downward mobility ... the problem is not the English language itself, rather the lack of incentive for children to be bilingual."

If first language learning can't be easily continued at school, or EAL/D students disconnect due to competing subject choices or burdensome schedules, maintaining language will become hard or may even cease altogether. As language must be used to be maintained, those not learning language in school only preserve their first language if it continues to be used in the home or via cultural and community activities.

University of Sydney, Department of Linguistics Associate Professor Dr Ahmar Mahboob believes that "language, just like culture, needs to be performed to exist". ([abc.net.au](http://abc.net.au), 29 March)

"Parents who saw language as an inheritance, rather than just a tool for communication, were more likely to raise multilingual children...Language is a tool for communication, but not the same as communication. We learn it from our caregivers, parents, and ancestors. It has come down across generations," he said. "If we look at what it actually captures it helps us make sense of the world around us."

Students wanting to continue first language learning but who can't access formal lessons during the school week can enrol in the NSW Department of Education's Secondary College of Languages. This school environment is often where culturally and linguistically diverse students find connection and rediscover enjoyment in learning language.

Secondary College of Languages principal Sana Zreika believes that when students "come to Saturday school they find a group. It becomes 'cool', linguistically and culturally. Students tell us all the time they meet kids from their culture here and later become friends for life." ([abc.net.au](http://abc.net.au), 29 March)

"Language teachers would like to see students from all backgrounds, not just non-English backgrounds, learn languages," Ms Zreika said. "All students should be learning a language because it's about seeing a different perspective."

A report by NSW Parliament's education committee called for every student to begin learning a second language, at primary school rather than just in high school. This is in recognition of the hours required to develop fluency and an understanding of the cultural contexts that assist in language learning. Unlike the rest of the OECD, however, the NSW Government did not see the value of second language learning and did not accept or further explore those findings, instead, it only "noted" them. ([Sydney Morning Herald](http://Sydney Morning Herald), 8 May)

Some primary schools do have the option to teach languages, but this is not available to all students. With NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell recognising the language programs offered to NSW public school students as "world class" and stating, "It is a priority of mine to increase the access students have to learning a language in primary school," teachers could feel heartened that a K-6 or K-10 Language curriculum may soon come to fruition. However, the suggestion that a challenge to this is that "not every language teacher is a schoolteacher, so we need to find a way to bring people capable of teaching a language into the classroom" sets Federation alarm bells ringing.

When language is valued and visible, we empower individuals and our schools become more open to diversity, which promotes inclusivity in society.

Multilingualism is considered an asset to those interacting in a global society. Countries that value EAL/D programs and Language curriculums not only benefit socially, but also culturally and economically.

If we are to have a world-class Language curriculum and this is to be considered a priority of this government, then fully qualified teachers must be the ones to deliver Language curriculum and EAL/D support in our public schools.

Our students deserve the best, nothing less.