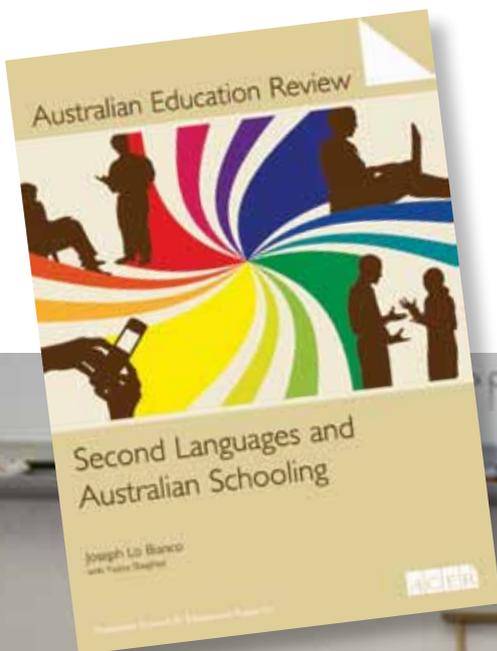


Second languages and Australian schooling



There are good reasons for all Australian children to study a second language from an early age according to the latest Australian Education Review.

Suzanne Mellor explains why.





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Second language education is a subject of continual public debate in Australia. While there is widespread recognition that the cultivation of bilingual skills among young Australians serves intellectual, cultural and economic needs, this recognition is not reflected in the uptake of second language courses. Second language learning in Australia is dogged by low school completion rates, high rates of attrition from university language programs and a decline in the number of languages taught, their duration, spread and level of seriousness. Of particular concern is the knowledge that by the time they reach senior secondary school almost 90 per cent (89.7%) of students have decided that languages are not for them.

The parlous state of second language learning in Australia is examined in detail in the latest edition of ACER's Australian Education Review (AER) authored by University of Melbourne Professor of Languages Joseph Lo Bianco. In *Second Languages and Australian Schooling* (AER number 54),

Professor Lo Bianco traces the history of language learning in Australia, outlines the findings of research from Australia and overseas and proposes a new rationale for language learning policy.

The review provides evidence that students who choose not to study a second language or, through the unavailability of language studies in their school, can't study a second language are sadly missing out on significant educational and personal benefits. In the foreword to the review Professor Richard Johnstone from the University of Stirling writes 'A life lived monolingually misses out on something that is essentially human.' These sentiments echo throughout the review as it argues that the case for increased second language learning in Australia is far better grounded in the personal benefits to individual learners than in arguments about economic and social benefits.

The review makes a very strong case for the studying of a second language by all Australian students from an early



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age. Professor Lo Bianco's summary of Australian and international research helps us to reach the conclusion that there are significant demonstrated educational benefits from studying a second language from the early years of schooling. Many are specified in the review and relate to children's meta-linguistic awareness, enhanced literacy and other improvements in general cognitive functioning. The research examined provides particular support for second language immersion programs. Professor Lo Bianco writes:

In broad terms the research concludes that immersion methodology is a valid, effective and durable mode for second language learning as well as for imparting the general curriculum to young learners, while supporting their English development.

Although the number of studies on immersion education is vast the results do not vary greatly.

Even limited contact with a second language can be beneficial. For example, a study of Grade Prep and Year 1 students at a Melbourne primary school who were exposed to just one hour of Italian instruction per week found that the language lessons had

a positive effect on the children's word awareness in English. This suggests that learning a second language can support and illuminate knowledge of a child's first language.

If evidence of the benefits of second language learning is quite clear, why is it that such a vast majority of Australian students still do not study a language to the end of their schooling? Professor Lo Bianco attributes this to a number of factors including a perception that second languages are difficult to learn. Another hindrance to the uptake of second language study is the role of English as the *lingua franca* of the world today. The dominance of English may dissuade native English speakers from studying a second language because they think they can travel and work in foreign lands using English. But as Professor Lo Bianco reminds us 'to buy one doesn't need to know other languages, but to sell, well that's a different story'.

Changing political and economic priorities over the past few decades has seen particular languages come in and out of favour. In the 1950s and 1960s learning a second language was seen as an elitist pursuit for those who desired careers in the diplomatic

service. The implementation of multicultural policies in the 1970s saw an emphasis on learning community languages including Italian and Greek. Since the 1990s a renewed focus on political and economic ties with Asia led to growing demand for Australians to learn languages such as Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian. The changing policy directions and arguments about which groups of languages should be favoured have had a negative impact on second language study in our country. As Professor Lo Bianco writes 'It is an unfortunate aspect of past policy that utilitarian rationales, and the often crisis-driven pressure to establish programs quickly, have resulted in a proliferation of rather superficial second language teaching endeavours.'

In addition, the promotion of language study by successive governments as being related to labour market and economic issues has not worked. Signals have sometimes been sent to students that future employment prospects will be enhanced by, or even dependent on, their ability to speak the language of one of our key trading partners or political allies. But, as enrolment figures prove, this message has failed to convince students, their



