

***Languages for Victoria's future. An analysis of languages in government schools, 2002.***  
**Published by the Victorian Department of Education & Training.**

**Reviewed by Gerhard Leitner, Berlin**

This booklet is a report commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education & Training in 2001 into the future of the teaching of Languages Other Than English (LOTEs). The committee was headed by Theo Theophanous, former Parliamentary Secretary for Education, and comprised experts in education, multiculturalism, schools and linguistics and had the general brief "to identify ways of strengthening the learning and teaching of languages and to improve student outcomes in terms of proficiency and language confidence" (2002:2). Particular issues were the analysis of

- the development of a coordinated policy and strategic directions for LOTE and accountability mechanisms for LOTE delivery
- a survey of attitudes by those involved in LOTE teaching and learning
- the relationship of current LOTE provision to other key learning areas
- new organizational arrangements for future LOTE provision, taking note of rural and metropolitan Victoria
- the ulterior benefits of LOTEs to the wider educational objectives (2002:2)

The report is a part of efforts to improve the educational position of LOTEs in government schools: "The important economic, social and community benefits from the learning and teaching of languages are not widely understood in schools and the community" and "There is a need for an explicit public statement from Government about the role and benefits of learning and teaching languages in the school curriculum as well as a national policy and implementation plan for languages" (2002:3). I will confine myself to pointing out a few outstanding features of the report.

The place of languages in the curriculum is and has never been secure even though they have been mentioned in the *Key Learning Areas* or the core curriculum. They have had to compete with other KLAs and the time allocated to them has remained too short (often a mere 1½ units per week). Teacher supply is insecure, funding unstable, funds get misused for other sectors, etc. Students' and parents' attitudes, too, have often been unsupportive. The choice of languages – especially the mix between Asian and European languages – and models of provision – bilingual, etc. – have added to the weak place of LOTEs. To quote from a report by the Australian Linguistic Society of 1978:

It appears to be widely believed in Australia that foreign languages are essentially unlearnable to normal people, and that Australians have a special innate anti-talent for learning them. English, on the other hand, is learnable, and even those other languages which a normal and especially an Australian could never learn, can be learnt easily and effortlessly by people whose first language is not English (2002:13)

Only eight LOTEs are more or less widely taught at present, i.e. Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, French, German, Chinese, Greek and Vietnamese. If it is still true that some 40 languages are offered, their uptake must be minimal. Table 5 in the appendix has interesting details:

Language	Primary schools	Secondary schools	Primary students	Secondary students	Total students
Indonesian	398	137	82,421	29,082	111,503
Italian	305	90	78,167	21,384	99,551
Japanese	245	103	56,261	22,485	78,746
French	98	114	16,820	23,776	40,596
German	114	75	23,493	17,008	40,501
Chinese	37	29	8,781	3,657	12,438
Greek	21	16	3,736	1,229	4,965
Vietnamese	10	13	2,490	1,048	3,538
Total	1228	577	272,169	119,669	391,838

The most obvious observation is, of course, the great enthusiasm at primary level (69.5 per cent). The rapid decline at secondary level (30.5 % per cent) holds for all languages, except French. Of the European languages, French is still a highly regarded school language. It is interesting to add that German is taken by 42 per cent at secondary level, while Italian is only taken by 21.5 per cent. Regarding Asian languages, Indonesian the most widely studied language overall, suffers the most: only 26 per cent take it at secondary level. Japanese fares slightly better with 28.5 per cent. Of interest is the lack of uptake of the most widely used LOTEs, i.e. Greek, Vietnamese and Chinese. Greek is studied by a mere 4,965 students, Vietnamese and Chinese by 29 per cent each. Of course, one does not know if the students concerned are 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1.5 generation speakers or whether they come from outside but the low level is more than surprising. Fifteen years after the introduction of Australia's educational language policy little progress seems to have been made regarding LOTEs. Figures like those in the table above show that the challenge seems to be to convince students, schools and parents of the importance of languages to Year 12.

There are some other aspects about Australia's education system worth mentioning:

Currently, individual schools determine which language(s) are to be offered. An important consideration for schools in choosing particular languages is teacher supply and continuity. Other considerations include the language(s) used in the school community, the perceived relative ease of acquisition, and the potential instrumental or vocational value of the language. (2002:23)

The decentralization of educational decision-making can be an advantage in formulating responses to local demand and changes but they are a burden for teacher training and other aspects that are required to guarantee continuity. But despite many negative aspects one might mention, the report proves the enormous flexibility of the system. Thus, the report recommends the formation of school area networks or clusters that are to connect primary and secondary levels of education (2002:24). Such networks would facilitate resource sharing and could extend to cooperation between independent and state schools. Moreover, cooperation between the Department of Education & Training and the non-government school sector could be a model for such networks. A third interesting aspect of the report is the reference to very different models of teaching, such as bilingual programs, bilingual components in subject areas, vertical streaming, block timetabling of languages, video-conferencing and telematics, the use of online and multimedia facilities, outposting of secondary teachers to assist primary *feeder* schools, support from the Victorian School of Languages, links of languages with vocational components, etc. (2002:18). The report makes

recommendations on how to spread the use of such models and adds concrete proposals on how teacher supply, especially in the rural sector, can be improved (2002:31ff).

Without going into further details, let me conclude that the report identifies central areas of concern, is highly analytical and stimulating in the concreteness of its recommendations which show how seriously Victoria is trying to overcome serious obstacles to the success of the provision of LOTEs in the past decades. It will be interesting to see whether that will help overcome the ideological burden of anglophone countries referred to above, *viz.* that English-speakers cannot learn another language.