



Flinders University College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Adelaide, 19 May 2023

Relevance to the Royal Commission

Flinders University has a strong reputation for its Languages, Culture, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Linguistics courses. We pride ourselves on having already provided thousands of students with multilingual skills and intercultural awareness and on having trained hundreds of students who pursued a successful career as language teachers or English teachers, in Australia and abroad.

The Languages, Linguistics, TESOL and Communication (LLTC) discipline in the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) at Flinders University remains highly committed to providing the highest standards in the above mentioned courses, and students' evaluations of teaching in this area are consistently well above the institutional average. As members of this discipline, we wish to take this opportunity to present our views to the Royal Commission on a topic of great importance to us and the work we do.

Basis of recommendation

It has been widely demonstrated that a successful and cohesive multicultural society needs to understand and use languages other than English (UNESCO 2006, Newby and Penz 2009, Lo Bianco forthcoming). Additionally, an ongoing global trend for companies to hire a growing number of bilingual workers suggests that learning languages is an employability booster across all sectors (Lobell 2022). Nevertheless, there are clear indicators that Australian students are set on the pathway of monolingualism (Cruickshank 2023; Mason & Hajek 2021). This is in sharp contrast to the fact that Australia prides itself on being "the most successful multicultural society in the world" (Australian Department of Home Affairs), and having over 300 languages currently spoken in the country, 250 of which are Indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017; AIATSIS 2023). To remain credible and competitive in a world where thousands of languages are spoken daily, Australian students need to be proficient in one or more languages other than English (LOTE).

Language skills are not only essential for our citizens to be better equipped to thrive in our multicultural society and better communicate with the rest of the world. They are also a crucial component of early childhood development. It is in these early years that children begin to experience the co-existence of multiple languages and cultures in our society as a natural occurrence. Therefore, we are pleased to read that the recent Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care's Interim Report acknowledges on p. 42, "All children learn through play-based language learning experiences and live the languages and cultures that are available in their community as part of the everyday, that they are all participants in, rather than observers of, linguistic and cultural diversity".

Languages in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities are incorporated in various ways: LOTE that are still spoken by parents and family, languages that have been diluted but still retain cultural aspects, and languages which are supported by parents who want their children to be bilingual. Research suggests that a LOTE background child in Australia has a five in six chance of losing their heritage language by the time they finish high school (Cruickshank 2019), while a native English speaker will need between 575 and 1,100

hours to reach fluency in another language (US Department of State – Foreign Service Institute). To foster the use and dynamic presence of languages and cultures starting from preschool level, it is necessary to enable the education system in our State to do this in a sensible and effective way.

Recommendation

For these reasons, we recommend that the inclusion of languages in early childhood education become a major input for a holistic reconsideration of the delivery of languages to South Australian students, from early childhood to tertiary education. In particular, an updated and bold languages policy should focus on the points below:

- Languages should become a core component of the curriculum;
- Languages should be taught in an attractive way through children's literature and pedagogy through play and should take into consideration the latest research on the development of early literacies in multilingual contexts;
- There should be a continuity with languages being offered to children and pupils in pre-school, primary school and secondary school, enabling students to study the same language throughout their schooling and achieve high levels of proficiency;
- Synergies should be implemented between community language schools and formal schools;
- At least 3 contact hours per week in target language should become the norm, to the benefit of both students who could achieve actual improvements in their learning, and of their teachers, who would have the opportunity to deliver lessons more effectively;
- The local Indigenous languages should be taught to all students along with a foreign language;
- Incentives for Education students who take a language to advanced level at university should be implemented to improve the number and quality of teachers;
- South Australia should boldly follow and better the excellent lead of Victoria's 2022 Languages Education Policy.

Conclusion

Multilingualism is common practice for countries like Switzerland, Norway, Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa, just to mention a few. 65% of the European population can speak at least one language other than their native tongue (Urvoy 2023). This is possible, and this shall be our goal in South Australia. To achieve this goal, build a more inclusive society and provide our new generations with the tools they need for the challenges of the future, languages need to be taught as a core component of curriculum at every educational level.

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