



## **Response from the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA) to the ACARA Draft Shape Paper – Languages**

ALAA believes that the Draft Shape Paper for the Australian Curriculum Languages is a solid basis for the development of the curriculum in the future and at a general level the document is endorsed by ALAA. As a paper designed to shape actual curriculum development, it leaves a number of issues unresolved especially in its delineation of content strands and the description of levels of attainment in relation to time on task. This means that the document is currently an abstract account of the Languages curriculum and that further work needs to be done in developing the curriculum form here.

ALAA believes that the development of a national level curriculum for languages at this time will give languages greater visibility schools. It is important that languages are recognised as one of the eight learning areas of the curriculum and given due weight in school programs at all levels of schooling. Ideally, we would hope that all primary school teachers would have a language other than English as part of their core knowledge. A world class nationally recognised and supported Languages curriculum is an essential support for teachers in planning and delivering language programs.

### ***Positive Features of the Draft Shape Paper***

In particular, we commend a number of features in the Draft Shape Paper.

1. We warmly welcome the explicit statement that all languages are important. Australia's language education is characterised by diversity of language programs which address particular needs at national, regional and local levels. It is important that the *Australian Curriculum: Languages* acknowledges the importance of all of the languages taught in Australia, and works to enhance and maintain them. In this context, we particularly commend the inclusion and foregrounding of Australian Languages (and their naming in this way) and the acknowledgement of the rights of indigenous children to learn their languages. It is important that the complexity of Australian Languages be recognised along with their community protocols and custodianship. The paper does not include specific mention of Australian Creole languages and does not give an indication of how these fit into the context of Australian languages in the curriculum.
2. We strongly support the intention to develop language specific curricula. This is an important move away from a generic curriculum for languages, which does not recognise the different characteristics, learning needs and processes related to different languages. We believe that this very positive move in the Draft Shape Paper represents a fundamental commitment to the way in which the Languages area of the overall curriculum is understood.

3. ALAA also strongly endorses the proposal to develop different pathways for learning and the recognition of different learning contexts and backgrounds as an important part of language curriculum development. The differentiation of learners into three groups (currently termed “first language learners”, “second language learners” and “home-user learners”) is very positive and reflects real curriculum needs in the languages area. However, we believe that these categories need further careful description and refinement. At the same time we acknowledge some problems in the ways these are operationalised (see below).
4. The document recognises the complexity of languages learning, the diversity of learners, and the various entry points into languages learning and articulates these in a clear way for the basis of curriculum development. We particularly support the concept of different end points for different pathways. Many of the current curricula for languages have an homogenising effect, so that the end point attainment is described in similar ways for students spending different amounts of time in study. For example, some curricula have the same end point for students who begin language study at primary school and those who begin at secondary school, who currently are often educated to the same level in most curricula. The proposed attainment levels for students need to recognise differences in time on task. We endorse the overall approach to this in the Draft Shape Paper.
5. We also welcome the allocation of indicative hours for the various levels of schooling. A fundamental problem facing languages in Australia at the moment is the extreme variability in languages provision in schools. The Australian Curriculum has an important role in ensuring that all students have access to meaningful programs of languages study. A clear articulation of realistic time allocations for languages learning is essential in achieving this goal. However, we have concerns about the actual hours indicated in the paper (see below).
6. We are pleased that the Draft Shape paper has avoided a narrowly focussed, instrumental view of languages learning and, in contrast, offers a strongly articulated and broadly based perspective on the role of languages in students’ development and education.
7. ALAA endorses the recognition of the required conditions for effective language programs: qualified teachers, ongoing professional learning, documentation, resources, time allocations, continuity of programs. These have often been lacking in the implementation of policy and curricula in the past and deserve particular attention.
8. We support the strong intercultural emphasis in the proposed design features of the Languages curriculum. The Draft Shape paper reflects the current body of research and theory in languages education. However, elaboration and broadening is required in this regard.
9. ALAA commends the use of achievement standards as more appropriate in a curriculum document than proficiency standards. Achievement standards represent the outcomes of student learning in relation to curriculum itself, whereas proficiency standards specify end points without reference to the specifics of teaching and learning. Achievement standards therefore represents an appropriate relationship between the assessment of learning and the development of curriculum and has the capacity to represent the diversity of languages in Australia.

Overall, we conclude that many aspects of the Draft Shape Paper represent a solid basis for curriculum design for languages, and will assist in strengthening languages provision in Australia.

## **Areas of concern**

### **1. Assumptions about languages learners in Australian schools**

It is clear that Shape Paper seeks to acknowledge and accommodate the diversity of languages learners in Australian schools. However, the Paper is inconsistent in actually following through this acknowledgement and often falls back into assuming that, aside from Indigenous students, these learners are monolingual English speakers (e.g., para. 19). We warmly endorse the explicit attention given to speakers and learners of Australian languages (e.g. paras. 45 – 48). However, this foregrounding should include equally explicit and different attention to those with backgrounds in other languages. The diversity of learners and learner backgrounds should be acknowledged strongly throughout the document.

The terms ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘home user’ language learner need further explanation as they do not adequately capture the complexity of the learning contexts for these learners. It is important not to assume, as frequently occurs in the Paper, that the languages in the *Languages* curriculum are students’ *second* languages rather than *additional* languages (e.g. paras 20, 23). This does not reflect a common situation in language learning that students may approach this curriculum with varying degrees of competence in a number of languages. The Paper appears to assume that all students, except those identified as first language learners, have had continuous schooling in Australian classrooms (paras. 50 ff). The Draft Shape Paper does not sufficiently acknowledge the presence and learning needs of those who enter Australian schools beyond the early years of schooling. These learners seem to be at best included in the broad category of home user. The term ‘home’ user represents a very wide range of language experiences, ability levels and identification issues and these vary from language to language. They will require careful use in development of pathways for the relevant languages to reflect the complexities of the contexts involved. The Draft Shape Paper also does not consider the presence and learning needs of those who have little or no previous schooling prior to entry into Australian schools. These learners have particular needs for language and literacy learning in multiple languages and the relationship between their learning of their existing language(s) and English needs to be acknowledged. It would appear that the three-way distinction is not enough to capture the complexities involved and the division needs to reflect distinctions at least between (1) those learning a language for the first time, (2) those who have acquired a language in their home context and have been educated in that language a substantial part of their schooling and who are acquiring English as an additional language; (3) those learning a language which they have developed at home and which they use actively in their lives along side English, (4) those learning a language which they have developed at home and who are acquiring English as an additional language; (5) those learning a language to which they have exposure outside the classroom but which they do not use actively.

While we endorse the intention to distinguish different types of learners, the terms “second language learners”, “home user learners” and “first language learners” are confusing (working out what is denoted by “first” and “second” language learners), misleading (students may be proficient in a language other than English that is not the language spoken at home or conversely may speak a language/variety at home that is not the “target” language), and missing some important categories. We suggest that more transparent labels

should be given to the groups identified in para. 55 and that the descriptions be clarified and that the complexities of learners' experiences of language be better acknowledged.

## **2. Curriculum Design and Strands**

ALAA supports the proposed strands – ‘Communicating’, ‘Understanding’ and ‘Reciprocity’ as a useful recognition of what is involved in language use, not just language learning as an academic activity. However, Reciprocity is not well defined and what is being proposed remains rather vague. This is not useful for a design feature for curriculum writers as the definition of Reciprocity will depend on writer’s backgrounds and levels of understanding of the term. The underlying concept of Reciprocity needs to be more clearly articulated to make its value more apparent and the better distinguish these form ways in which communicating and understanding can be understood as reciprocal process.

## **3. Time on task or indicative hours**

Time on task correlates fundamentally with students’ attainment in languages and so it is important that this be addressed in a rigorous and clear way. While we support indicative hours, we observe the following problems in the provisions in the Draft Shape Paper:

- The range of hours articulated is problematic because it reflects an unacceptable and unhelpful variation in what can be provide to students. The time ranges are far too large and represent very real differences in the quality of education provided. We are concerned that the minimum time allocations will be considered sufficient for languages programs, whereas in reality ALAA would see that the upper limit of the proposed time allocations would be a *minimum* adequate time allocation for language study. We recommend replacing the current ranges with the upper value, that is:
  - 400 hours of learning (undertaken across F-6)
  - 160 hours of learning (undertaken across 7-8)
  - 160 hours of learning (undertaken across 9-10)
  - 240 hours of learning (undertaken across 11-12).

Overall, it is not clear on what basis the allocation of hours is made. It would be useful to have some justification for why these allocations were chosen and how this allocation would influence what could be achieved in language programs.

- The proposed hours in primary school are also problematic as they do not seem to envisage a sustained program of learning across years. The indicative hours F-6 allows for administrators not to deliver languages in the early years, for example, when research suggests it is the best time for children to learn a language. ALAA would like to see a stronger formulation of the indicative hours at primary school which examines allocations across the various year levels F-6. This would be a better basis for curriculum development that the current formulation as it would enable curriculum writers to better match language learning to students’ cognitive development. ALAA would also recommend that the time allocation be increased beyond the current 400 hours.
- ALAA would strong support a statement that language education would be a normal part of curriculum for all learners F-10. We believe that languages should be equally represented with other curriculum areas as an essential part of the F-10 curriculum. Languages at primary school level should not be any less a less significant learning area than others.

#### **4. Achievement standards**

Diagram 1 suggests that the amount of language learning expected in 130-160 hours at Years 7-8 is equivalent to the amount of learning expected in 300-400 hours in primary school. This does not seem to be workable unless the goals for achievement at primary school are particularly low. This would undermine any sense in the value of primary school language learning. We think that the levels implied here need to be reconsidered and a more appropriate model of learning proposed which reflects the real possibilities for learning at primary school

#### **5. Stages in developing specific languages**

ALAA strongly supports the development of curricula for all of the languages stated and believes that these curricula need to be developed as quickly as possible. While staging may be necessary for logistical or other reasons, it is important that the staging not be seen as a hierarchy of importance or delay the development of curricula for some languages.

We believe that the current list of languages represents an absolute minimum number of languages for which curricula should be developed and that ideally the development of curricula should extend beyond these. We note in particular that one significant group of languages is missing – Classical languages – and that these languages have particular needs and requirements that are different from those of modern languages.

We acknowledge the usefulness of a framework for Australian languages, but would like to see greater explanation in the document about how this framework will serve particular languages and how it will be developed for them. Many of the details for Australian Languages seem to be left for the forthcoming Framework paper, such as. A description about how the document will be designed and implemented and the areas that will be covered and the due consulting process need to be included in the shaping paper to clarify the nature of the different process being planned for Australian languages.

We are concerned about what will happen to the large number of languages taught in Australia which do not have language specific curricula and would like to see evidence of planning to integrate these languages into the Australian Curriculum, possibly through development of a generic framework supported by an enlarged number of language-specific curricula being developed into the future. We are concerned that no acknowledgement is made of so-called “smaller” or “niche” languages. While it may not be possible to attend to the full range of these languages, it would not be difficult to acknowledge their value, not only to particular communities, but also to Australia in maintaining and forging relationships abroad. This acknowledgement could provide the basis for assisting and supporting local endeavours to develop curriculum for these languages. Collaborative processes at the national level would make this support entirely feasible and productive.

#### **6. Further considerations relating to Australian Languages**

Some excellent points are welcomed for their progressive nature in the following paragraphs:

- Paragraph 11: recognition of Australia's language rights responsibilities (which are not being met in most cases),
- Paragraph 14: recognition of language-as-subject programs, as well as content-based and bilingual programs,

- Paragraph 19: importance of Australian languages in learning, English literacy development, well-being and ultimately, reconciliation.
- Paragraph 37: recognition that learning a new language does not mean forsaking one's first language.
- Paragraph 44: recognition of importance of establishing literacy in the first language in order to develop English literacy and the importance role of bilingual literacy.
- Paragraphs 45-48: recognition of the uniqueness of the learning of Australian languages; and
- Paragraph 55: recognition that L1 and L2 language learners are on different pathways with respect to learning the target language, reinforcing the need for appropriate pedagogy such as bilingual rather than submersion models.

Paragraph 57 seems to imply that the learning of Australian languages is relevant only to indigenous people. This should be broadened to include non-Indigenous students learning an Australian Language as a second language. As implied by the Federal Government report on a national language policy , development of economies in Indigenous communities could be considered and will duly require Australian Language speaking staff.

Apart from the usual benefits of [second] language study, for some Australians, learning Aboriginal languages could be of more practical use than learning foreign languages. It would enhance their job prospects in the provision of services to the 300 Aboriginal communities in northern Australia (Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, 1984:91).

Of course, Australian Language speaking communities exist in other areas, including in Western Australia (such as the Ngaanyatjarra Lands) and in South Australia. This concept had been completely distanced from thinking through years of marginalising, and reflects an ideology (among many others) that economic benefits can only come from English or ‘big’ languages. It's always been expected that Indigenous people learn English because English is deemed as the default access code to economic success through access to the ‘wider community’. But if an English speaker goes to live and work somewhere in a place where English isn’t spoken, then surely there is at least some expectation that they would learn some of the local language? Truly valuing languages comes from valuing their speakers. Teachers, nurses, doctors, police, lawyers, interpreters, media related professions and a host of local community jobs (local stores, caretakers, administrators, and so on) are just some possibilities for learning Australian Languages as additional languages.

The rationale for languages is commended for moving beyond narrow instrumental purposes for learning. However, the rationale as currently articulated may not apply equally to all of the languages which are covered in the framework. For example, the statement:

“The major rationale for learning languages is that being able to communicate proficiently provides learners with essential communication skills in the target language, an intercultural capability, and an understanding of the role of language and culture in human communication.”

does not satisfy the learning contexts of at least some Indigenous people. For example:

- Indigenous learners who are learning English to be able to access the world of the dominant culture that is only available through this language.
- Standard English speaking Indigenous learners who are learning their ancestral language as part of, say, a language reclamation program.

A stronger acknowledgement is needed of the rationales for learning Australian languages in indigenous contexts.

Paragraph 44 is a strong paragraph, it does not consider the full possibilities of bicultural and bidialectal learning. With respect to “Strengthening bilingual literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is essential to improving overall academic achievement and success” (p.18), there are key developments in these areas in Indigenous education that will impact on pedagogy and should be acknowledged here. (See Malcolm and Königsberg, 2007. “Bridging the language gap in education”. In G.Leitner and I.G.Malcolm (eds.) *The Habitat of Australia’s Aboriginal Languages: Past, Present and Future*. (pp. 267-297) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter)

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