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E-Language

Language skills push for schools

The Age, Farrah Tomazin - March 24, 2008

THE Federal Government is moving to significantly increase the number of students graduating with foreign language skills by pushing the states towards a nationally consistent language curriculum.

New government research to be released tomorrow has found that students are being turned off languages because they believe the subject will affect their university entry scores or because they are told by parents and career teachers that language skills are not relevant to their future.

In an exclusive interview with *The Age*, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard said she was concerned that the lack of interest in learning a second language would lead to young Australians being less competitive internationally.

She has instructed the new National Curriculum Board — which is developing a nationally consistent curriculum in the four key areas of English, math, science and history — to also work out how languages can be standardised across all the states.

The move means more students will be encouraged to take on a language and current problems — such as lack of time devoted to teaching a language, staff shortages and whether they are taken as compulsory subjects or as an optional program — will be addressed.

"We want young Australians to be coming out of school with the tools that they need to work in that modern environment, and increasingly that environment will require them to be able to converse with people in our region in their own language," said Ms Gillard, who is also Education Minister. "But when you look at the content of these reports, there is a lot of reason to be concerned.

"The reports are basically saying that the study of languages other than English is the weakest part of the key learning areas in Australian schools, and they point to the fact that more than 85% of students who graduate from high school today do so without a language other than English.

"That obviously is a concerning situation when we know that this is a globalised economy."

In a broad-ranging interview, Ms Gillard also:

- Did not rule out giving teachers greater financial incentives to work in disadvantaged schools.
- Rejected suggestions that Labor's plan to abolish full-fee undergraduate places would leave universities short-changed.
- Described the Government's computer in schools program as a "shared partnership" and did not rule out the states picking up some of the additional costs, such as teacher training, power points or maintenance.

Statistics show Australian students spend less time learning a language than students in any other OECD country. The percentage of year 12 students studying a language other than English has fallen from 40% in the 1960s to 13% today.

The Government's language reports, obtained by *The Age*, found that fewer than half the nation's students studied a second language in 2005.

Enrolments tend to fall steadily at year 7, with parents and career teachers partly to blame for reinforcing the view that language studies are irrelevant.

Many primary schools spend less than an hour a week on language studies, and government reform has often been "episodic rather than long-term", the reports say.

Ms Gillard said the National Curriculum Board will create consistency in the key areas of maths, science, English and history, meaning students from kindergarten to year 12 will essentially be studying under the same curriculum framework by 2011.

The board will then look at revamping languages as part of its second tranche of work, to complement the Government's \$62 million election promise to provide more Asian language classes and bolster the number of language teachers in schools.

Ms Gillard has written to state education ministers and the chiefs of Catholic and independent schools seeking information about the extent of Asian language teaching and teachers, and inviting them to work with the Commonwealth to develop a shared approach.

Victorian Government spokeswoman Sofia Dedes said: "The State Government supports national standards for how foreign languages are taught in schools. We are keen to continue to work with the Federal Government on the national curriculum initiative."

Australian Secondary Principals Association president Andrew Blair welcomed the changes, but urged the Government to "be bold" and consider introducing HECS discounts for teaching students who take on a language degree or making languages compulsory from prep to year 10.

National Curriculum Board chairman Professor Barry McGaw agreed greater focus on languages was needed, but warned that any revamp should not be too prescriptive. "We've got such a diverse need that we wouldn't want to be saying we should all be studying this language or that language."

FACT FILE

- The percentage of year 12 students studying a language other than English has fallen from 40% in the 1960s to 13% today.
- Most states and territories had a reduction in participation rates in languages between 2001 and 2005.
- Most language study occurs in primary school and participation rates decrease steadily from year 7.
- The perceived low status of language teaching, coupled with a view that teachers have limited career paths, has been a disincentive for people wanting to become language teachers.
- The top five languages studied in government schools are Japanese, Italian, Indonesian, French and German.

SOURCES: FEDERAL GOVERNMENT REPORTS/OECD DATA

MAIN BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

Graduates from UOW enter an increasingly diverse workforce – much travel and work overseas. This project builds the flexibility and cross-cultural skills needed in today's work environment;
Several students going on to do honours research projects on the schools;
Planning follow-up project with community school teachers on professional development – developing continuing links;

- Encouraging community schools teachers to undertake further study through the university.
- The resources are developed to meet specific needs. For example, the Cook Island Maori School is the first of its kind in Australia. Teachers had no materials for songs in the language – with the students they have developed posters and teaching materials and will go on to make CDs of community songs.
- **The resources are interactive and motivating.** The materials were designed to look professional and to involve students. They reflect teaching methods from the day schools, involving games and students using the language. One example are the big books developed for Chinese and Macedonian schools: translations of

books like The Hungry Caterpillar were overlaid onto English versions for use with community languages.

- **The materials are recyclable.** There are charts in Turkish and Cook Island Maori for teachers to begin lessons with talk about the weather and other events.
- In the past having a second language and culture was seen as a 'problem'. Now we know and recognise the benefits of being bilingual and bicultural – academic, societal, vocational and personal benefits of having two languages and cultures.
- **Most important reason is for children's self-concept and knowledge of who they are.**
- Jane Henry from Cook Island Maori School gave the story of children who would never admit what their background was. Now she has students who will stand up at their day school assemblies and tell everyone that they have a Cook Island Maori background. Teachers and parents see the importance of children maintaining and developing language and culture often in the face of pressures from peer groups to 'fit in'. It is especially difficult in regional Australia, where communities are smaller and more isolated.

Best wishes to all involved and great project and great night!

**Photo Paul Chandler., Minister Burney, Stefan Romaniw, Edna McGill Ken
Cruickshank,
Children from Cook island School**