

Understanding contemporary contexts

KEY IDEAS

- Context of time and place influences purpose, shape and orientation of teachers' role in education
- Changes in the context of education influence teachers' personal and professional stance
- Globalisation has focused the importance of developing capabilities in languages-literacy-communication and intercultural engagement
- Languages have a central role in Australian education because they mediate the interpretation and making of meaning among people
- Advances in technology alter the way people use language, communicate and relate with each other, with information and with learning (especially the learning of languages)

All educational thinking and discussion is set in a particular context of time and place that influences their purpose, shape and orientation. This section of the Guide explores:

- some contextual understandings of our contemporary world
- the changing educational landscape
- Australia and the world of languages education

as a means of considering the contemporary influences on our personal, professional stance.

Globalisation

Globalisation, including the growth of a globalised knowledge-based economy has brought about unprecedented access to information, global conversations and relationships, and economic growth and, in some places, exploitation. The rapid movement of people, ideas and knowledge has highlighted the need to better understand the diverse nature of society, cultures and values.

Globalisation has increased the diversity of teachers, students and community members engaged in education, in face-to-face and 'virtual' learning situations, who bring extraordinarily diverse histories, experiences, and backgrounds to learning. Australian educators are increasingly aware that knowledge is not made only in English, nor made available only in English. There is an increasing emphasis on the 'internationalisation' of education, which brings a variety of real and virtual interactions.

The reality of globalisation has brought an increasing recognition that people in all spheres of life, and particularly in education, need to develop an *intercultural capability*, that is, being able to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures. It has also brought an increasing realisation that a capability in English only is insufficient, despite its status in the world, and that being a bilingual, or indeed multilingual, person has become the norm. Contemporary information and communication technologies have become integral to people's lives, and increasingly mediate learning, knowledge and communication. They have altered the very way people relate with each other, with knowledge, with the economy and, most particularly, with learning.

Languages have a central role in this context because they mediate the interpretation and making of meaning among people within and across languages.

A changing educational landscape

Recognising the linguistic and cultural diversity in our world doesn't just mean giving a place to languages in the curriculum. It alters the very fabric of education, emphasising that languages are integral to the national curriculum and education as a whole.

National collaboration sustains the diversity of languages formally taught and assessed in Australia and the recognition, nationally, of multiple purposes of assessment opens up the possibility of moving beyond a view of outcomes as levers of change to a focus on understanding and working with the complex interrelationship of teaching, learning and assessment.

Languages education is an integral part of education in general. An intercultural orientation to education moves it from a monolingual to a multilingual phenomenon. Some points to note about the current educational landscape and understandings about learning are:

- that learners, teachers and their relationships are central to languages learning as a 'peopled' activity (Candlin 1999)
- that learning focuses on what learners with their distinctive linguistic, social and cultural profiles, experience, interests, desires, motivations and values bring to their learning environments and how that shapes their interactions with those learning environments
- that teachers, with their schools and wider communities, create a culture of language learning and using in the classroom and beyond
- that teachers need to come to know their students profoundly in their social, cultural, linguistic as well as cognitive diversity as the basis for developing and sustaining learning
- that teachers need to have an expanded view of language, culture and the relationship between them
- that teachers need to recognise that languages change, depending on the context in which you use them
- that the act of teaching languages entails teachers and students bridging home and peer cultures, as well as their cultural life in Australia and the cultures of the communities making connections between the language being learned.

Australia – national initiatives in education

A number of developments are taking place at policy and curriculum level that will influence languages education in distinctive ways. Much collaborative development has also taken place in languages education in recent times at a national level and further development is anticipated. Teachers of languages need to continue to engage with these developments and use them as a basis for reflection on their work in their particular contexts.

The new *National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, a pivotal declaration in Australian education was released in December 2008. Languages have been included as a key learning area in the National Declaration, agreed by Ministers of Education of all states and territories of Australia. In 2007, a report prepared by the states and territories of Australia stated that:

“... skills for future participation in society must include *intercultural engagement, communication and understanding*, recognising the diversity in the Australian workforce and the significant number of Australians employed in companies operating globally.”

(Council for the Australian Federation, 2007:17 – emphasis added)

This report also, appropriately, includes languages among the learning areas that it proposes for all students. What is clear from the current context is that languages are integral to education in general and, as such, should continue to be an essential part of the learning experience of all students in Australian education.

Another dimension of the changing educational landscape in Australia is the contemporary work on a *national curriculum* resulting from collaboration between the states and territories and the Commonwealth and supported by the establishment of a National Curriculum Board. Languages have been highlighted as one of the areas to be considered in early discussions in this context.

National collaboration is a key feature of languages education in Australia and has always been based on a national desire to harness the full range of linguistic expertise available across all states and territories and to share the load in extending the range of languages offered.

One of the most distinctive accomplishments of languages education in Australia is that through collaboration nationally, across sectors and across states, and through a range of providers and technologies, the educational systems continue to offer a range and diversity of languages at different levels (beginners, continuers, background speakers) that are formally taught and assessed at upper secondary level (Mercurio and Scarino, 2005). The commitment to continuing to sustain and develop this degree of diversity is fundamental.

At a *policy level*, this has been achieved through policy statements such as the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987); the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1991); the report: *Asian languages and Australia's economic future* (Council of Australian Governments, 1994) and its accompanying National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) strategy. Most recently, at a policy level, national collaboration across states, territories and the Commonwealth has centred on the *National statement for languages education in Australian schools and the National plan for languages education in Australian schools 2005–2008* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2005).

At a *curriculum level*, there is a longstanding history of national collaboration which began with the publication of the *Australian Language Levels (ALL) Guidelines* (Scarino, Vale, McKay & Clark, 1988), and continued with collaborative, national curriculum development in four specific languages (Italian, Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese); national collaboration at senior secondary level, through the National Assessment Framework for Languages at Senior Secondary Level (NAFLaSSL); and the Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages (CCAFL). A further highly significant, national collaborative development was *Australia's Indigenous Languages Framework* (SSABSA, 1996a, 1996b). Since 2005, national collaboration has continued predominantly in the areas of research and professional development through national level projects funded by the Australian Government through its School Languages Program. These projects include work in investigating the state and nature of language learning in schools, teacher education, investigating Indigenous languages programs, the promotion of language learning, improving the national coordination and quality assurance of languages programs in after-hours ethnic schools, leading languages and implementing professional standards.

In addition, a large professional learning project, the *Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning in Practice* (June 2006 – December 2007), was funded under the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program to allow teachers to learn about intercultural language learning and conduct classroom-based investigations incorporating this orientation towards language teaching and learning (www.iltlp.unisa.edu.au).

National initiatives in *assessment* have recognised that assessment serves multiple purposes, only one of which is the reporting of learning outcomes. Additionally and fundamentally, assessment provides information that teachers, parents and other interested parties need to improve students' learning (assessment for learning). This usability of assessment information to improve student learning depends on richness and quality which entails much more than simply articulating outcomes. These two purposes of assessment can no longer be seen as separate. Rather, they are both a part of the complex interrelationship of contemporary teaching, learning and assessment processes.

Our profession has identified assessment and reporting of languages learning as a priority in our own further professional learning. As languages education emerges from the era of outcomes framed exclusively in terms of the typical curriculum development categories (ie skills, discourse forms, tasks, linguistic features, etc), there is increasing emphasis on the ultimate value of learning languages; that is, what is it that learners should/can take away from an experience of learning their particular language?

For over a decade, the focus of educational systems has been on prescribing curriculum and assessment requirements. What is needed now is a shift towards understanding how the complex processes of curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment actually work in particular contexts.

Early childhood and primary education

The focus, at a national level, on early childhood education and the centrality of the primary years involves discussion about important learning experiences for all young children. Languages will need to be part of this discussion, recognising both the range of languages that children bring to education and the need to expand the integrated language-literacy-and-communication repertoires of all students. In the past two decades, there has been a major increase in languages learning in the primary setting and this remains an important area for development.

Central role of teachers

Research highlights the central role of teachers in students' learning. At a national level, there has been an important recognition of the central role that teachers play in students' learning. The teachers' charter released by Teaching Australia in 2008 describes the complex professional, social and ethical role of teachers. The Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers' Associations (AFMLTA), the major professional body for the language teaching profession, has developed professional standards for the accomplished teaching of languages (Kohler, Harbon, McLaughlin & Liddicoat, 2006; Liddicoat, 2006). The AFMLTA's statement of standards recognises both the value, and the professional and ethical responsibilities, of language teachers. The overarching standard is described as follows.

“Being an accomplished teacher of languages and cultures means being a person who knows, uses and teaches language and culture in an ethical and reflective way. It involves a continuous engagement with and commitment to learning, both as a teacher and as a lifelong learner. It means more than teaching knowledge of languages and cultures and includes teaching learners to value, respect and engage with languages and cultures in their own lives and to interact with others across linguistic and cultural borders. It means creating a culture of learning which approaches language, culture and learning with respect, empathy, commitment, enthusiasm and personal responsibility.”

(Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations, 2005)

These aspirational standards developed by the profession, for the profession, describe the kind of teaching that will promote learning in our current times and shape the personal, professional stances adopted by languages teachers to their work, their students and their communities.

Role of parents and caregivers

The role of parents as participants in the educational experiences and decision-making of their child, in creating a culture of learning, has a distinctive flavour and purpose in languages education.

Contemporary understandings of education emphasise that learning is both continuous and lifelong and that it occurs at home, in the community, in school and beyond. Parents are not only a child's first educators, they continue to shape the learning and attitudes to learning of their children into adulthood. Parents seek opportunities to participate in, and contribute to schooling by sharing curriculum related information, knowledge, experience and skills, and through the understandings they have of their children and their aspirations for them. The professional stance adopted by teachers to their role and work will recognise parents and other community members as active contributors to learning, ensuring that parents receive meaningful information about the curriculum and teaching program, and about their child's learning and progress, so they can participate in their child's learning, achievements and decision-making.

In relation to learning languages, parents have distinctive roles and responsibilities. In intercultural language teaching and learning, parents can support their children in analysing cultural and linguistic similarities and differences within and across languages and cultures. Parents and community members can offer historical and regional perspectives on cultural and linguistic developments and engage in developing intercultural understanding with their children. Some parents will also be users of the language their child is learning and their contribution will be directly useful. Parents who speak other languages will be able to support their children in developing a broad linguistic understanding of how languages work and of interactions across language and culture generally. In all families, the child's language learning affords the opportunity to parents to work with their child to learn something new together by relating their own knowledge of history, geography and social systems and their own understandings of language and culture.

Questions for reflection

- 1 Think about your own personal, professional stance as a languages teacher. How does it reflect your particular personal social, cultural and linguistic make-up and values?
- 2 To what extent do your current beliefs, ethical values, motivations and commitments reflect the contemporary and global educational landscape?
- 3 What gaps in your current knowledge and understanding do you instinctively feel you need to investigate by learning more about? How does this influence your stance?
- 4 How do you currently engage with parents in relation to language teaching and learning? To what extent do you utilise the diversity of family experiences?