

# Australian Government's National Policy on Languages

Australia

Language Policy



## Good Practice Executive Summary

The National Policy on Languages (NPL), 1987 was the first comprehensive national language policy. It was a bipartisan report receiving public endorsement from all political parties. The NPL was fully funded and produced the first programme ever in at least the following areas: deafness and sign language, indigenous languages, community and Asian languages, cross-cultural and intercultural training in professions, extensions to translating and interpreting services, multilingual resources in public libraries, media, support for adult literacy and ESL. It provided for the co-ordination of research activity, including the creation of the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia and its 32 constituent research centres across Australia.

The measures which have been adopted by Australian public authorities in response to pressing issues of language could be said to constitute Australia's language policy. This was based on a Senate decision that there should be the "Development and Implementation of a Coordinated Language Policy for Australia". The Senate's decision followed intense activity from professional and community groups advocating the development and implementation of a national policy on language. The Senate Standing Committee's report of October, 1984, assembled a large amount of data and considered in detail a wide range of relevant issues and recommended as its first recommendation: "Language policies should be developed and coordinated at the national level on the basis of four guiding principles, namely:

- competence in English;
- maintenance and development of languages other than English;
- provision of services in languages other than English;
- opportunities for learning second languages."

Australia's national languages policy involved a partnership between the States, Territories and Commonwealth of Australia working towards broadly shared common goals. Stating clearly the principles and content of Australia's language policy enabled a coordinated approach to be taken on questions of language.

This approach recognised the respective roles of the various governments and other bodies involved in the national policy on languages. Furthermore, it permitted the coordination of the efforts of the various bodies responsible for the implementation of aspects of the policy. This is particularly important because since the Senate's report some states have developed language policies in particular areas such as education. The precise form which the policy takes is that of a framework of nationally shared and valued goals which will require further elaboration and detailed implementation at the appropriate levels. An important aspect of the policy was also the establishment of a National Institute for languages

Although the original language policy has since been superseded it has resulted in significant investment at national and state level and the development of new policies on language and literacy, such as the more recent **National Statement and National Plan for Languages Education 2005-2008**.

The NPL identified nine 'languages of wider teaching': Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Modern Greek, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese and Spanish, and attached these to a programme of first language maintenance via complementary provision. The NPL was declared a watershed report, cited internationally as a model and was judged to be one of the events that changed Australia by the Macquarie encyclopaedia (1997), and to be unique among English speaking settings.

## 1. Reflects current EU and regional policy on multilingualism

Australia is a nation with a unique, complex and rich linguistic situation as a result of its history and geography. The Australian context is one of the most complex linguistic demographics in the world made up of three internally complex groupings:

- (i) the indigenous category, highly differentiated with several English varieties, pigeons, creoles and its original languages;
- (ii) the settler group with the transplanted southern forms of British English, the interaction of these with other languages, mostly Irish leading to the emergence of a relatively homogeneous English across the country and
- (iii) the immigration group of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, introducing more than 350 languages according to the 2006 Census, into the homes of Australians, each subject to modification reflecting the new landscape, new communicative ecologies and new statuses. This contemporary linguistic diversity is not a recent development. Traditional Aboriginal and Islander society was multilingual with between 200 and 250 distinct languages, representing approximately 600 dialects spoken at the time of European settlement. Most individuals and groups were multilingual.

The National Policy on Languages regards this as a resource which requires cultivation and development. The fundamental objective of language planning in Australia becomes, therefore, to ensure that Australia derives maximum benefit from its rich linguistic resources.

The action to utilize and develop Australia's rich linguistic resources in the nation's best interests starts from a consideration of the linguistic diversity of Australia, the need for national unity, the external, economic and political needs of the nation, and the wishes and needs of Australia's citizens. It involves co-ordinated effort at all levels, by responsible authorities, of intervention to:

- enable the nation to plan those aspects of its international, trade, economic and diplomatic relationships which relate to language in an objective and rational way;
- initiate action to alleviate and overcome problems, disabilities, inequality and discrimination which may be encountered because of language;
- enrich Australia's cultural, artistic and intellectual life;
- provide the component groups of Australia's population for whom language is a defining characteristic, or for whom a language other than English is an instrument of communication or a highly valued cultural possession with recognition and support;
- improve communication in written and spoken forms of language generally in society, but particularly in schooling;
- make clear the public expectations of language in all its manifestations to the community generally but particularly to school students, their families, teachers and education authorities, serving thereby as a constant reference point to all those involved in education;
- encourage and guide attempts to integrate technological changes with language use and learning. The form which this takes in the Australian context is the development of policy which is explicit and comprehensive.

The National Languages Policy involves a partnership between the States, Territories and Commonwealth of Australia working towards broadly shared common goals. It is

characterized by a co-ordinated and national approach that attempts to ensure that the various bodies associated with the enactment of the policy operate as far as possible with the same objectives, that there is no intrusion into the autonomous or particular responsibilities of State and Territory governments, and that as far as possible the roles of all groups are developed as a partnership.

Second language education is a subject of continual public debate in Australia, reflecting a widespread perception that the cultivation of bilingual skills among young Australians serves economic, cultural and intellectual needs. On the one hand, there is the positive appreciation of the importance of language learning. On the other, it often translates to low school completion rates in second languages, high rates of attrition from university language programmes and a decline in the number of languages taught, their duration, spread and level of seriousness. It is also noticeable that a deep and persistent malaise afflicts language education regrettably shared with other English-speaking nations. There is an ongoing debate in the pages of newspapers and through the electronic and digital media as well as policy development, political promise and public agitation related to the language learning problem. In this context in 2009 Australian education review was produced to reflect on the wider purposes for language study and some of the deeper issues involved in forging stable solution for their place in Australian schooling. It addresses the state of the national language teaching effort, reflects on the guiding purposes and offers pointers towards securing a permanent place for continuous, high-quality and representative second languages education in Australian schooling.

## **2. Includes incentives to enhance and sustain language learner motivation and employment benefits**

The National Policy on Languages represents efforts in an energetic and sustainable policy development effort lasting for more than 40 years in Australia. It is accompanied by an ongoing debate in the pages of the newspapers, through the electronic and digital media, media commentary and public agitation related to issues such as first and second languages in schools, English and languages other than English for all, adult literacy and adult migrant language education, national aboriginal languages, teacher training and education, community languages, etc.

Committees have been established throughout the years to oversee and implement the national policy on languages. A key and urgent role of the standing committee is to develop and disseminate national guidelines on language for discussion and, ultimately, for implementation by education authorities. A recent study surveyed the language policy history of 40 years from 1970<sup>1</sup> and identified at least 67 policy-related reports, investigations or substantial inquiries into the problem and challenge of instituting an effective language education experience for Australian learners. This is an impressive list of reports, studies, advisory committees and investigations as tools for dissemination of policy developments and guidelines.

For example, in intensive research carried out on the views and experience of learners of languages between 2005 and 2007 second language students were found to be interested and committed to their language learning and keenly aware of

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<sup>1</sup> Lo Bianco, J., & Gvozdenko, I. (2006) Collaboration and Innovation in the Provision of Languages Other Than English in Australian Universities. Melbourne faculty of Education, University of Melbourne.

what constitutes a serious language learning programme. Their commitment to the languages they were taught (Italian and Japanese in this particular survey) varied according to their perceived sense of progress and their opinion about the level of school seriousness regarding the subject. Students insisted that classes should be streamed, not distracted by students wavering in their intention of learning the language, insisted in catering to different groups of learners, their different motivations and backgrounds. The gearing of teaching to students' level of need and interest is a major concern. The findings coming from students constitute a strong demand for more seriousness in policy and implementation in second language provision.

Yet another example, in 2009 a report calling on the federal government to make an investment in Asian languages provoked considerable media debate about Australia's language policy effort and priorities. What stakeholders and policy makers say is a topic of public and expert debate in the country. This process involves Australian Learned Academies as well as universities who also have been demanding change. A series of incentive schemes to promote languages and reward students who study them have been put forward. For example, Go\* LOTE Incentive Scheme aims to establish direct incentives, an increased and universal bonus for tertiary entrance for students who graduate from Year 12 with a language. The goal is to extend such schemes from those few individual universities and education jurisdictions that currently offer incentives towards an increased and comprehensive system of incentives by 2012.

### **3. Reflects regional strategy for employability and intercultural benefits**

The terms 'the region' or 'our region' have been added to the Australian socio-political lexicon in the past 15 years and now appears and functions recurrently to mark future national directions and key relationships. The important aspect of the application of the concept is that it is a vast geographical zone, not naturally linked in particular ways, and increasingly used to mean a geopolitical structure for economic organization, military security and interpersonal relations. Today, regional integration enjoys a broadly bipartisan acceptance as a subset of the process of globalisation. In Australia teaching 'regional' languages is perceived as a project of widely endorsed national importance. The presence of English in Asia is not considered a factor that should negate nor minimise the case for Asian languages.

Australia's role as a member state of a large number of international organizations necessitates a policy of language teaching choices which includes important languages used in world forums or which are spoken by people in many countries. Languages of geographical and global significance must feature prominently among the languages acquired by Australians, whether these are their first languages (eg Chinese Australians studying Chinese), their second languages (eg English speakers learning Chinese) or third languages (eg bilingual Australians of Warlpiri and English or Greek and English background studying Chinese).

It is considered in Australia's interest to develop high levels of competence in languages of geo-political significance. Many such languages overlap with community languages and therefore there are many young Australians whose potential bilingualism ought to be fostered in their interest and in the nation's interest.

The distinction between 'European' and 'Asian' languages often obscures needs and issues that are particular to individual languages, rather than shared to languages belonging to the same classification. For example, Greek and Italian share with Chinese the quality of having large numbers of background speakers among their learners, while in most states Japanese has fewer. The obstacles, for example, facing a more secure future for Indonesian are unique to that language and are partly influenced by aspects of its relationship with Australia and issues such as travel restrictions on school groups planning a visit. The strong presence of Asian languages in Australian schools also makes Australian education distinctive, interesting and worldly.

For example, the adoption of the 1994 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) report made four trade-connected Asian languages (Japanese, Chinese (Mandarin), Indonesian and Korean) the exclusive priority of language policy funding.

The language pluralism of Australia is regarded as a valuable national resource enhancing and enriching cultural and intellectual life and as a valuable economic resource in its potential for use in international trade.

#### **4. Addresses local language minority and migrant community language resources**

The National Policy on Languages addresses local minority and migrant languages as languages available for policy attention. The linguistic context of Australia is one of immense indigenous variety of languages further supplemented and extended by immigration with large number of speakers of European and Asian languages. An overview of the history shows that a new ideology underlining language choices commenced during the early 1970s. The public rhetoric of forging a new Australian identity, fusing contributions from all parties drastically changed the emphasis in language policy from the eradication of problems to the assertion of rights. For the first time in Australian history languages other than English became the object of positive and direct attention. This shift was caused largely by the active engagement of second generation 'new' Australians in policy making. More secure in their knowledge of English, using the instruments of compulsory voting and secure citizenship, a new discourse of treating the community languages of the nation as a resource and seeking intergenerational multilingualism took hold.

In Australia's first explicit language policy, the National Policy on Languages, adopted by Federal Cabinet in June 1987, four overarching legitimations for explicit language planning were proposed. These broad aims remain relevant today and are a sign of the national language effort. The overarching goals were:

1. Enrichment: cultural and intellectual
2. Economics: trade, commerce and enterprise
3. Equality: opportunities for minorities to acquire English and maintain their other languages
4. External: facilitating Australia's integration into regional affairs and fostering global affairs.

The four aims of the NPL were then specified in the document as four broad statements/principles of ultimate language planning goals:



1. Literate English: the aim of universal acquisition of standard Australian English supported by an array of programmes for identified problem areas
2. Second languages: the aim of all Australians knowing languages other than English, with opportunities and encouragement for speakers of other languages to retain those languages and transmit them to their children and that English speakers would acquire a second languages through formal education
3. Indigenous languages: the endangered state of Australian languages was signalled as a priority for maintenance and support, but also that all Australians would at least learn about the unique Australian languages
4. Language services: the need for widespread and equitable language service such as interpreting and translating, and multilingual media, was identified.

Aboriginal languages have an ancient history on this continent. Aboriginal languages are the product of the unique cultural, historical and environmental identification of the Aboriginal people. Aboriginal languages have been used to define and interpret the Australian landscape and environment and many of these languages remain viable forms of communication. In addition, they are repositories of cultural values, information on socio-cultural organisation and law.

Commitment to support of community languages is another example of the National Policy on Languages. Australians speak a wide variety of other languages. These are usually labelled community languages and this term, for the sake of convenience, is retained in the policy. Community languages are used daily to fulfil a wide range of social, familial, cultural, economic and educational purposes. These languages are being developed and modified in the Australian context and remain the main vehicles of communication for large numbers of Australians and the first languages of many Australian children. Community languages are recognized and supported in the Australian languages policy. Community languages are typically supported by 'owned' schools, local clubs and societies, religious and cultural centres. In effect, a community languages is one which is available to learners in a setting through its presence in a range of institutional structures that aim to teach, reinforce or transmit the language. This supplies a potential and naturalistic context for the language bringing with a local occupational opportunities, local media in various genres, and local activities of recreational, economic, civic and religious life. These contexts mean that a community language is associated with a diaspora culture, so that local experiences and expressive norms arise in local settings in which the community language is the exclusive or main linguistic code. By contrast, a foreign language taught in mainstream schools relies overwhelmingly on teacher input and occasional foreign immersion.

Community Language Australia (CLA, 2009) is the supra-national organization charged with the co-ordination, representation and support for the sector of community schools of language and culture, traces the operation of its schools in the form of non-profit, part-time institutions. CLA, benefiting from small public subsidies and other support, offered classes in 72 languages in its Australia-wide community language schools in 2006, with student enrolments of 109.526.

The integration of children of migrant workers and population was a topic of policy making. It is related to the 'English for All' principle of the NPL. From humble beginnings in shipboard instruction of English emerged the Adult Migrant Education Program, Australia's largest language policy action, and in some ways the nation's



most successful language policy initiative. It was not until the 1969, however, with the adoption of the Child Migrant Education Act that the effort to teach the national language was systematically extended to children.

## 5. Provides for international networking and/or mobility

This is not a major aspect of the policy itself. However subsequent policy activity in Australia and in the States has promoted network and mobility. There are for example extensive programmes of teacher mobility for training in Asian countries. One key related aspect of the policy was, however, known as **Cross-cultural training**. Programmes were established to boost multicultural and intercultural studies in tertiary education institutions and post-school accredited educational authorities, with funding to develop courses in cross-cultural attitudinal training and community languages, to develop curriculum materials for teaching such courses, and to include cross-cultural awareness content in a wide range of professional and para-professional courses. The initial additional cost was \$1.5m

In many later documents the case has also been made about how language learning needs to be linked to real contexts, including those provided by the multilingual and multicultural reality of Australia. See for example Lo Bianco: Second Languages and Australian Schooling, Australian Education Review (ACER) 2009.

## 6. Incorporates the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with transparent validation/ credits

The policy precedes the development of the EQF and so this issue is not strictly relevant.

However from its inception the development of appropriate and consistent assessment/qualifications systems was an important part of the policy. One of the key language services proposed was language testing, involving “the establishment of a service for providing adequate, appropriate, fair and simple testing of languages for educational, vocational and other purposes”. In 1990 the National Languages Institute of Australia was set up by Prime Minister Bob Hawke, and one of its functions was to establish Language Testing Centres, including testing and assessment for translation and interpreting services.

Since then there has been much development of assessment in languages, and Australia has participated in discussions about the standardisation of accreditation on a world scale. One recent development has been the development of the Assessment of Language Competence Certificates. This is a program designed to celebrate and enhance the learning of Languages in Australia, New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region. The program is an initiative of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, in collaboration with ACER. The skills testing program includes listening and reading comprehension tasks in a multiple choice format designed to be both challenging and to enable all students to experience success.

The materials are designed to take into account current research in the assessment of languages as well as the experience of practising teachers.

## 7. Can be readily & usefully implemented

The Languages Policy is a major political initiative, which at the time was unprecedented in scope and ambition. Significantly it was based on widespread consultation and involved a non-partisan political approach. Clearly this is something which requires widespread support in society, as well as political will at the highest level, and significant resources.

The Australian policy has informed many major developments in the country since 1987. Even so even the main proponents and champions of the policy report ongoing challenges in implementation. One issue has been the absence of permanent structures to support the policy/ies – According to Professor LoBianco “Despite the adoption of a National Policy on Languages, severe deficiencies remain in Australia's response to the pressing issues of language. It is important that permanent structures for overseeing language planning be set up.” (1990). He (and others) also points out that the policy has suffered from a plethora of sometimes competing initiatives. (Second Languages and Australian Schooling 2009)

## 8. Transferability assessment

The Australian policy was ground breaking and it has had significant influence, in particular but not solely in the Anglophone world. It had a major impact on discussions throughout the UK for example in the mid to late 90s, discussions which led eventually to the English National Strategy and the Scottish policy document – Citizens of a Multilingual World. Both of these initiatives and related documentation shared a viewpoint for example that

- Language policy was more than an educational policy but impacted also on society and the economy
- An effective strategy required an evidence base
- A broad consensus was a pre requisite for change
- A language policy should take into account many uses of language, including the languages spoken in the community.

### 8.1. Evidence of transfer

The “Australian” approach based on reports, reviews, surveys, investigations and policy based on evidence and description of language situation, was therefore reflected in developments in the UK from 1998-2010. It also influenced the Dutch Plan and more generally became a key point of reference for language planning internationally, the Council of Europe has often made use of this work.

### 8.2. Innovation

In addition to the general approach which was at the time quite unique, the National Policy on Languages has been responsible for a number of key innovations in thinking about and planning language provision. In part because of Australia’s geographical position and economic priorities, as well as the unique linguistic composition of its population, it has been at the forefront of proposing and implementing a much broader approach to multilingualism than the one prevalent in Europe at that time.

From the outset the Australian Policy included both indigenous languages and also the languages of more recent immigrants (“community languages”) as part of the languages landscape and argued that they were a potential resource to be cherished and supported. It also identified the most productive sources of bilingualism as recently arrived immigrants and some communities of longer standing who have successfully managed to transfer their internal languages resources to later generations.

The Policy also greatly increased resources for the acquisition of non European, in particular Asian languages, at a time when this was a minority interest in Europe.

It also sought – through training and appropriate assessment – to professionalise language services, such as community interpreting.

All of these innovations in language policy are much more central to the European agenda in the current period, and there is therefore much that can be learned from the Australian experience.

### 8.3. Dependence on political context

As noted above, the policy depends on public support and consensus (built up over time, political will and appropriate funding. To that extent it does depend significantly on the political context. Although fundamentally an education policy it has involved all the resources of a multilingual society, civil organizations, traditions, and lessons from the past

### 8.4. and 8.5. Flexibility and Transfer

There are specific elements in the Policy which have developed our understanding of languages in society and in education – the “innovations” noted above for example - which are in themselves “transferable” to similar contexts. Perhaps more broadly, however, as with the Dutch National Action Plan (qv) it is the approach which is flexible and transferable.. By analysing policy, as an interplay between text, discourse and practice, (“laws and regulations”, “what people say and think” and “what people do”), the Australian policy gives us a tool to understand and develop policy in other, perhaps different contexts. It also enables others to see the relationship between policy and implementation. This for example lies at the heart of our recent work on European policy - “Languages in Europe, Theory, Policy and Practice” ([www.letpp.eu](http://www.letpp.eu)).