Language research, language curriculum and language teaching

Howard Nicholas

Graduate School of Education

La Trobe University

Bundoora

Australian Association for Research in Education, Adelaide, 29.11-3.12,1998

Introduction

Since the election of the Cain Labor Government in Victoria in 1982, and reinforced by the publication of the 1987 Lo Bianco Report, the *National Policy on Languages*, Victoria has been steadily expanding the range of languages it has had on offer in its schools and increasing the year levels in which languages are a compulsory area of study. The goal is that by the year 2000 languages will be compulsory for all students between Prep and Year 10 as well as being studied by 25% of Years 11 and 12 students (Directorate of School Education and Ministerial Advisory Council on Languages Other Than English, 1993:2). In this, Victoria is similar to the practice in all States and Territories in Australia (Nicholas et al, 1993). However, Victoria also differs from other States in two fundamental ways.

First, Victoria has consistently had a well-developed consciousness of migrant or community languages as part of its linguistic repertoire since the inception of formal attempts to re-introduce languages into schools. This consciousness can be seen in the early support of languages spoken in the community through the appointment of the initial supernumerary language teachers from 1983. It was no accident that the first officially supported bilingual programs (in Richmond and Collingwood in the early eighties) were in Greek. Neither was it an accident that the arguments for the introduction of German in various locations and modes in the outer eastern suburbs shortly thereafter were couched in terms of German as a community language (see Clyne, 1986 and Victoria, State Board of Education and Ministerial Advisory Committee on Multicultural and Migrant Education, 1984).

This direction was made explicit in Ministerial Paper 6, *Curriculum Development and Planning in Victoria,* which emphasised the importance of languages already used in Australia by recommending that students be enabled to gain "proficiency in another language used in the Australian community" (Education Department of Victoria, 1985:17). This focus has been maintained, albeit not without some angst, in more recent documents (cf. MACLOTE, 1994).

Second, and consistent with the above approach, Victoria has had an active policy of promoting a wide range of languages in all school sectors. Consequently, when the Federal government introduced the notion of priority languages in the 1991 White Paper (*Australia's Language*) (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1991) in an attempt to reduce the range of languages offered in schools and to promote Year 12 language learning, the Victorian Department of Education and other bodies found ways of also identifying "non-priority" priority languages.

Thus, the Victorian *Languages Other Than English Strategy Plan* ended up with the following categories: 'Key languages in mainstream schools', 'Languages for priority development', 'Languages of particular community significance' and 'Other languages' as units for planning for language program delivery (Directorate of School Education, 1994:4-5).

Similarly, formal government policy released under the authority of the Minister (Directorate of School Education and Ministerial Advisory Council on Languages Other Than English, 1994:i/2) reinforced the general approach to inclusive conceptions of languages:

> In 1992 the Commonwealth Government requested that each State nominate eight languages which would attract per capita funding for Year 12 enrolments. Victoria's choice of Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek and Vietnamese is based on present demand and enrolments and is a reflection of community interests and consensus. The determination of the eight languages will not impose any limitation on the teaching of other languages within and outside mainstream schools.

> Twenty languages are offered in mainstream schools, thirty-seven through the Victorian School of Languages, seven through the Distance Education Centre and thirty-four through After Hours Ethnic Schools. ... Some of these languages are studied primarily by first-language learners and play an important role in the education and community life of those students. Other languages are studied mainly by second-language learners and offer those students an opportunity to broaden their educational and vocational opportunities. Some languages serve both purposes, being languages of the community and languages of international importance. All of these languages are significant in a community as diverse as Australia's.

Consequently, the 1994 *MACLOTE Report to the Minister of Education,* overtly argued for the promotion of the widest possible range of languages (Ministerial Advisory Council on Languages Other Than English, 1994:18):

> 4. The goal of preserving and expanding the linguistic resources already present in the Victorian community and the need to respond to regional and international factors require a broad policy of multilingualism.

Framing the dilemma

As a consequence of these dimensions of language planning in Victoria, attempts to introduce common curriculum frameworks for all languages have had to find ways of coping both with language diversity and with the relationship between first and second language development. Victoria has gone through four steps in this. The first step was the creation of a common framework for all languages other than English in the Victorian Certificate of Education between 1985 and 1990. This process shifted the perceptions of teachers away from a view that they were engaged in separate activities of teaching distinct languages. This was replaced by a view of an identity as a teacher of LOTE, where no distinction was made between that LOTE as a first or as a second language. Progress within the VCE was, however, clearly defined by completion of the Common Assessment Tasks. Importantly, this definition of progress did not rely on any model of language acquisition derived from research, but rather from a model of improved performance on a theorised model of language. This meant that no clear distinction had to be made between first and second language pathways, because the pathways were made common by the assessment processes which shaped them.

The second step assumed a view of common progress, but did not articulate a theoretical motivation for this and did not draw on any specific theory of either first or second language development. This second step was the 1988 Frameworks document for LOTE (Victoria, Schools Division, Curriculum Branch, 1988), designed to cover the years before the final two years of the Victorian Certificate of Education. For example, neither the section of the document on 'The nature of language' (pp. 26-28) nor the section on 'The organisation of language' (pp. 29-33) systematically distinguish between first and second languages. The section entitled 'First- and second-language development' (pp. 34-35) contains, among other things, the following statements:

> Differences:
>
> First language [development] goes through predictable stages;
>
> Second language [development] has stages of development which are more variable and not always predictable.
>
> Similarities:
>
> All learners share certain difficulties. There seems to be some commonality across groups in the mastery of some language rules.
>
> Strategies:
>
> ... [extralinguistic and linguistic] knowledge will differ for first-and second-language learners. ... When they lack certain preknowledge, both first- and second-language learners will compensate by using various strategies, including the following:
>
>> simplifying, overgeneralising, paraphrasing, inventing, restructuring, transferring words and or culture-specific expressions from one language to another.

While differences are acknowledged, the overwhelming sense is the desire to emphasise similarities. The comments are characterised by a very general sense, mainly as a result of having to deal with statements that will be valid across the multiplicity of languages and contexts that the framework attempted to address.

The third step, the 1995 Curriculum and Standards Framework, was, along with other material promoted by recalcitrant Victorian educationists, designed to distinguish Victorian thinking from the level of national thinking embodied in the 1994 documents, *A statement on languages other than English for Australian schools* (Curriculum Corporation, 1994a) and*Languages other than English - a curriculum profile for Australian schools* (Curriculum Corporation, 1994b). Chief among the concerns was a view that the national document was too dominated by a view of the learning of languages other than English as the learning of second languages. Consequently, the Victorian approach sought ways in which to profile the participation of both first and second language learners in the languages other than English Key Learning Area within a single developmental framework.

The first step to achieving this was establishing that progress in LOTE was not simply equated with progress through school (Board of Studies, 1995:16)

The levels in LOTE relate to developmental stages in learning a language and not to year-levels of schooling. The following names have been used to emphasise this difference from the levels in the other key learning areas:

Extension	LOTE level 7
Advanced A	LOTE level 6
Advanced B	LOTE level 5
Intermediate A	LOTE level 4
Intermediate B	LOTE level 3
Beginner	LOTE level 2
Preparatory	LOTE level 1

This is explained in the following way in a later document (Board of Studies, 1998:3)

Level 1 is designed for all learners who cannot yet read or write in any language. This will include learners who may already have some background in the language, but who cannot yet read and write.

Level 2 caters for those learners who can already read and write in at least one language. As well as learners with no previous knowledge or experience in a particular language, this level caters for learners who have some familiarity with a language, and provides them with the opportunity to consolidate their skills, particularly in reading and writing.

Levels 3, 4 and 5 are for learners who are working towards an expanding range of effective uses of the language. ...

Some learners may well achieve levels 6 or 7 ... These learners may, for example, have begun language study in a sequential program with frequent contact time in primary school, and have continued to study the language at secondary school. They may also have familiarity with the language through, for example, residence or education overseas, or through bilingualism or multilingualism at home.

This approach had two purposes. The first was to enable learners who had greater proficiency in the particular language to be recorded as working at a higher level, even if they are in a lower Year Level. The second was to provide formal 'space' so that teachers could incorporate learners of different language levels in the one Year Level class. There have been some unintended consequences of this. The most obvious is that LOTE teachers are required to keep on explaining why LOTE is 'different' from other KLAs. Allied to this is a perception that LOTE is too complex to be incorporated into cross-curriculum planning. The

other more pernicious consequence derives from the description of Level 5 as providing an adequate prerequisite for VCE, means that many secondary teachers want to have Levels 3 and 4 available for the first four years of secondary schooling. In part, this desire is also motivated by the fact that many learners still begin learning a particular LOTE at Year 7, meaning that these teachers will have Level 2 students in their classes. These two motivations mean that there is pressure to rate all students in Year 7 as Level 2 or at best Level 3.

As can be seen from the following descriptor for Reading, there is enough space within the description for a multiplicity of interpretations (Board of Studies, 1995:45)

> At the completion of level 2, a student will be able to:

> Demonstrate understanding of the main ideas read from a passage through verbal and non-verbal means, such as identifying a picture of a character or event, providing a caption, re-telling the story, or passing on several items of information.

The same ambiguity can be seen in the Level 3 descriptor for Writing (Board of Studies, 1995:61):

> Adapt models imaginatively to write new culturally appropriate versions of familiar text-types such as stories, sketches, postcards and letters.

These factors have had two outcomes. They have resulted in some students who have been rated at levels higher than three in primary school being reduced to Level 2 or 3 ratings upon entering secondary school. Alternatively some other students have been held at Level 2 for most of their primary school time, with the consequent impression that they are making no progress.

Thus, the attempt to integrate both first and second language development within a common framework is seriously jeopardised. This is because of the lack of a precise framework for distinguishing between first and second language progress and the complexities entailed in forming links between LOTE and other curriculum areas, coupled with the perception either that no progress is being made or that progress was unrealistically recorded.

There is now a review of the 1995 document underway (the fourth step) in order to introduce CSF 2000 and one of the issues which continues to emerge in the area of languages is how to accommodate both the diversity of languages and the diversity of learners. The specific issue is whether the LOTE key learning area can sustain the definition of levels within a framework of developing language proficiency or whether it will have to revert to a structure based on Year Level. If it does the latter, the issue is how to recognise diversity in learners and whether research is in a position to provide a useable suggestion.

The research basis for languages other than English teaching

Here I do not propose to rehearse the specific arguments about why and how languages other than English are necessary in the school curriculum. My interest is rather the type of research which has been attended to and how this has created both possibilities and limitations in the curriculum thinking about languages.

The 1988 *LOTE framework: P-10* makes no overt reference to research literature on the reasons for including languages in the curriculum, preferring to refer to the authority of other Government policy documents and the rationales included in them. The dimensions of the

research used in the documents such as the Ministerial Paper No. 6 was explicitly identified in the 1994 Ministerial Advisory Council on Languages Other Than English Report to the Minister for Education. That Report (MACLOTE 1994:13ff) identified the following dimensions of a rationale:

> The development of critical thought
>
> Enrichment of conceptual thinking
>
> Development of conceptual rigour
>
> Expansion of creativity and flexibility
>
> Cultural enrichment
>
> Increased understanding of language
>
> Increased cognitive skills.

In terms of the arguments developed, these dimensions reflect either (1) the outcomes and benefits of bilingualism (Enrichment of conceptual thinking, Expansion of creativity and flexibility, Cultural enrichment, Increased understanding of language and Increased cognitive skills) or (2) a view of languages as a specific discipline requiring sequential and systematic study (The development of critical thought, and Development of conceptual rigour). There is no view of the process of language development built into these dimensions. Likewise, there is no view of the research into some of the tensions surrounding inadequate distinctions being made between first and second language needs (c.f. Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984) or the problems of attending only to selected aspects of language (c.f. Long, 1991).

Perhaps there doesn't need to be research indicating potential difficulties if we reflect on the nature of the policy document being reviewed. In common with many policy documents released by governments in Australia, this policy document has a strong advocacy function. The purpose of the document is fairly clearly to 'promote' language learning. The Chairman of the Council, himself a government minister, noted (MACLOTE, 1994:preface):

> Victoria cannot ignore the need for young Australians to be able to communicate effectively in a range of languages - to adopt a recent theme, "Languages give you the world".

But while it is promoting the cause and providing strategies to ensure that languages can be provided in schools, it is not directly concerned with the organisation of these programs in schools - that is the task of the curriculum documents. However, the curriculum documents, whether they be the 1998 or the 1995 variety do not address this issue either. The *Curriculum and Standards Framework* (Board of Studies, 1995) contains no reference to research at all. In the section entitled 'Basis in linguistic and language teaching theory' (Board of Studies, 1995:10), the documents states:

> The LOTE curriculum draws on a range of approaches to communicative teaching and learning, as well as on theories of second language acquisition. Within this context, it draws most strongly on the current best practice in communicative language teaching and learning in LOTE classrooms in Victoria.

Despite the claimed attention to theories of second language acquisition, nowhere are they cited in the document and, given the overt view of LOTE as consisting of both first and second languages, then the exclusive attention to second language acquisition research would seem to be inadequate. Thus, the issue is why specific kinds of research are attended to at particular times such that they get constructed in different ways in different phases of the policy development process. What I think the Victorian LOTE experience demonstrates is the construction of research into bilingualism as research into a product as part of the advocacy role of convincing the community of the worthwhileness of learning or maintaining a language. One of the consequences of this is that the specific nature of the product is not enquired into in any great depth. As a corollary of that, the dimension of how one becomes bilingual (i.e. the process of language development) is not profiled at all in the early phases of policy development and consequently, some of the developments which crucially require such insight are insufficiently elaborated. As indicated above, instances also emerge where both the motivations for the advocacy and the specific findings of the research are overlooked in the face of other pragmatic considerations to do with the place of languages in the wider curriculum - a second phase of the curriculum integration process.

On the relationship between first and second language development

The *LOTE framework: P - 10* (Victoria, Schools Division, Curriculum Branch, 1988:20) pointed out:

> There are two categories of LOTE learners, designated in terms of their language background:
>
>> Mother-tongue learners (those for who the LOTE is their mother-tongue)
>>
>> Second-language learners (those for who the LOTE is not the mother-tongue - for some students it may be, in fact, a third or fourth language).

The 1995 curriculum document represents an increased level of sophistication in the arguments about the nature of language learners. The document includes the following (Board of Studies, 1995:10)

> LOTE learners come from a broad range of language and cultural backgrounds. Some begin the language with no previous knowledge of it and learn it only through schooling. Others have varying degrees of familiarity with the language through their family backgrounds or through contact with other speakers of the language. Learners are on a continuum from beginner to effective user.

This acknowledgement of diversity is made more explicit in local research reports (Clyne et al, 1997: 5ff) in which the authors highlight the multiple categories into which learners fit:

A. 'Non-ethnic' background learners

i. 'non-ethnic' background learners (e.g. graduates from primary school immersion programs)
ii. those who have spent time living and attending school in a country where the language is spoken

A. 'Ethnic' background learners

    i.   Recent arrivals with extensive schooling in another country in which the target language is the medium of instruction

    ii.   Less recent arrivals who may well have 'commuted' between Australia and a country in which the target language is used and experienced school instruction in both places

    iii.   Those with good knowledge of the spoken variety of the language, but with forms of literacy derived exclusively from the LOTE classroom

    iv.   Those with colloquial home use of the language only derived from a restricted range of uses

    v.   Those with a passive knowledge of the spoken language only

    vi.   Those with active and passive knowledge of the language, but derived from one parent only and perhaps grandparents

    vii. Those speaking a variety so heavily influenced by English that, while adequate for everyday communication, it does not adhere to "native" norms and may not be readily comprehensible to monolingual speakers of the language.

However, as the same authors point out (Clyne et al, 1997:9)

> From this discussion it is clear that the dichotomy between "native/non-native speaker" is both inadequate and misleading. It is also discriminatory in that students are likely to be categorized in such a way as to create proficiency expectations for them that they are unable to fulfil.

The relationship between first and second language acquisition would have to be one of the more hotly debated dimensions of language acquisition research. On the one hand, there is a strong argument in the school context that the fundamental difference between first and second language development is that the former precedes the acquisition of literacy while the latter usually follows it. One consequence of this distinction is that there is debate about how literate practices can either be used of influence the process of second language development. It must be said, however, that this view is not one which derives from research evidence. Rather it is a common sense observation. It is reinforced by teacher experience that learners ask to see things written down, comment often with consternation if they are exposed to a script differing from the one with which they are familiar and often appear to be influenced by first language patterns when they attempt to read (out loud) parts of the second language. There is little to no academic research which really attempts to explore how literate practices in a first language influence the internalisation of a second language. That work which does exist tends to do one of the three following things: (1) examine the relationship in the other direction i.e. what is the effect of learning a second language on literate or other linguistic practices, e.g. Yelland et al (1993), (2) attempts to map second language written rhetorical patterns onto first language patterns (c.f. Connor 1996) or (3) attempts to identify the consequences for overall achievement of different degrees of first language literacy (schooling) for second language achievement (cf. Collier, 1995).

Work by Clyne et al (1997) documents the extraordinary complexity and individual variation in the language produced by learners with different backgrounds and experiences. Clyne et al (1997:130) point out

> If the needs as well as the backgrounds of different groups of learners vary, a generic syllabus is not possible. We recommend enrichment options for those with a higher competence in the language, ones that are sufficiently interesting and worthwhile for students with backgrounds, either ethnic or non-ethnic, to take.

Yet, while this option appears to suggest that there is no place for a common syllabus, by recommending enrichment options, it seems to assume a common core. The challenge will be to identify the poles around which the core is established. If any literature can resolve it, it should be the research into the relationship between first and second language acquisition.

The research evidence for or against fundamental differences between first and second language development is formulated at an extremely abstract level, usually informed by competing theories of cognition. For example, work by Clahsen and Muysken (1986, 1989) is usually regarded as the classic argument for the fundamental difference between the two forms of development. They argue that first language acquisition is governed by universal grammar whereas general cognitive processes not specific to language control second language acquisition. From this perspective, all first languages share a single set of innate, common principles which shape the nature of the learning progress and exclude certain pathways and options. In contrast, according to Clahsen and Muysken, all second language acquisition is shaped by a different but common set of general cognitive principles. These principles are not linguistically-informed and hence permit language patterns to develop which are prohibited by the constraints of the language-dedicated universal grammar. From this perspective, it is impossible to place a common developmental framework around first and second language acquisition.

Pienemann (1998) offers an alternative perspective. Pienemann argues that first and second language development are fundamentally similar, both being governed by general psycholinguistic processing constraints. He makes reference to alternative theories of grammar, specifically lexical functional grammar (Bresnan and Kaplan, 1982) and incremental procedural grammar (Kempen and Hoenkamp, 1987) as part of his elaboration of this approach.

Dilemmas of application

From a common syllabus perspective, the attraction of the models outlined above is that they offer a consistent framework within which either similarities can be identified or differences pinpointed. They offer the further advantage that they are informed by cross-linguistic research. At one level, it doesn't matter which of the views is correct, providing the basis for identifying the features which are to be sequenced and taught is consistent. If this basis is consistent, then teachers can make consistent choices. Providing a model can say 'step one consists of the following elements for the following groups of learners and step two consists of these other elements' then teachers are in a position to select. Providing they can identify which group of learners they are actually teaching, they can proceed with identifying what the targets are and how well they have been achieved.

However, the reality is that the formulation of the principles which permit either commonalities or differences to be identified is at such a level of abstraction that they cannot readily be recognised in the kind of day-to-day student discourse encountered by most teachers in most school language programs. Thus, the very research which could inform practice is, in a practical sense, inaccessible. At the same time, the research which is located in accessible frameworks and contexts (Clyne et al 1997) demonstrates that no single framework provides a complete answer. While confronted with this situation, teachers and curriculum developers have to respond to a situation in which a framework created from the best of motivations is in serious danger of rendering unachievable the very goals which it set up for itself.

Where to now?

In trying to resolve these issues the committee reviewing the existing structure is probably going to be forced to ignore research. The pragmatics of the situation are still constraining LOTE teachers to adopt advocacy positions. For example the work of Peter Hill from the University of Melbourne on the issues of 'crowded curriculum' have provided a framework in which it is possible to revisit arguments for the exclusion of languages. Unless frameworks are provided in which LOTE teachers can readily work with other teachers to achieve common goals such as effective biliteracy and worthwhile cultural and identity understandings, the pressure to marginalise languages will increase. For these reasons if for no others, it is likely that the distinctive structure of the LOTE KLA will be replaced by a sequence of levels linked to Year Levels. If this step is taken, the challenge will be to preserve the inclusive nature of the original LOTE framework so that the challenges for the full range of learners are maintained. The difficulty with this position is that the existing research is telling us that we cannot be precise about the differences which need to be accommodated nor sufficient about what will constitute the challenges for these different learner groups.

One consequence of this is likely to be that teachers of languages will be given more challenging pedagogical tasks as a trade-off for a substantial reduction in political threats. In the process of solving the 'advocacy' part of the policy development, the 'implementation' part will need to be revisited with increased vigour. Interestingly, in these times of increasing attention to 'product', the challenge for languages may well be how precise they can be in the description and differentiation of the processes experienced by learners.

References

Board of Studies (1995) Curriculum and standards framework: Languages other than English (LOTE). Carlton, Board of Studies

Board of Studies (1998) Using the CSF: Languages other than English (LOTE). Carlton, Board of Studies

Clahsen, H. & P. Muysken (1986) The availability of universal grammar to adult and child learners: the study of the acquisition of German word order. Second Language Research 2:99-119.

Clahsen, H. & P. Muysken (1989) The UG paradox and second language acquisition. Second Language Research 5: 1-29.

Clyne, M. (1986) (ed.) An early start. Melbourne, River Seine.

Clyne, M., S. Fernandez, I.Y. Chen, R. Summo-O'Connell (1997) Background speakers: diversity and its management in LOTE programs. Belconnen, National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia.

Curriculum Corporation (1994a) A statement on languages other than English for Australian schools. Canberra, Curriculum Corporation.

Curriculum Corporation (1994b) Languages other than English - a curriculum profile for Australian schools. Canberra, Curriculum Corporation.

Department of Education, Joseph Lo Bianco (1987) National policy on languages. Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service.

Department of Employment, Education and Training (1991) Australia's language (White Paper). Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service.

Directorate of School Education and Ministerial Council on Languages Other Than English (1993)Languages other than English: Strategy plan. Melbourne, Directorate of School Education and Ministerial Council on Languages Other Than English

Education Department of Victoria (1985) Curriculum development and planning in Victorian schools (Ministerial paper No. 6). Melbourne, Department of Education.

Long, M. (1991) Focus on form: a design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. de Bot, D. Coste, R. Ginsberg and C. Kramsch (eds) Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective. Amsterdam, John Benjamins: 39-52.

Ministerial Advisory Council on Languages Other Than English (1994) Report to the Minister for Education. Melbourne, Directorate of School Education.

Nicholas, H., H. Moore, M. Clyne & A. Pauwels (1993) Languages at the crossroads: the report of the national enquiry into the employment and supply

of teachers of languages other than English. Canberra, National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia.

Pienemann, M. (1998) Language processing and second language development: processibility theory. Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing company.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1984) Bilingualism or not. Clevedon, Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Victoria, Schools Division, Curriculum Branch (1988) The LOTE framework P-10: Talking to the world. Melbourne, Ministry of Education.

Victoria, State Board of Education and Ministerial Advisory Committee on Multicultural and Migrant Education (1984) The place of community languages in Victorian schools. Melbourne, Government Printer.

Yelland, G., J. Pollard & A. Mercuri (1993) The metalinguistic benefits of limited contact with a second language. Applied Psycholinguistics 14: 423-444.