

# IT'S ALL FRENCH (OR ITALIAN) TO ME

Annie Facchinetti says teaching second languages in schools should be a priority

**“B**onjour!” a cluster of enthusiastic year 5 and 6 boys chorus spontaneously as a group of visiting teachers walks past. But we’re not in France. We’re at St Bede’s Primary School in the Melbourne suburb of Balwyn North. As we enter a Foundation classroom, the students are engaged in following instructions in French to take off their shoes and put on a hat, led by their everyday classroom teacher. In the year 3/4 classroom, students are formulating sentences to describe what they are doing, in French. It is impossible to move through the school and not realise that a

second language is not only taught, but actively embraced throughout many aspects of school life. Things have clearly changed dramatically since I was last involved in teaching languages.

While learning a second language is taken for granted in many other countries, the teaching of a language other than English in Australian schools is largely undervalued in our society. The proportion of students continuing foreign language studies through to year 12 has dropped from around 40 per cent in the 60s to just 12 per cent currently (Vukovic, 2016). In many ways, this decline is not for want of trying. Each state and territory has its own languages policy, and the Australian Curriculum denotes languages as a separate learning area, with specific curricula provided for 16 different languages and language groups. How-

ever, as Lo Bianco (2009, p. 6) observes, “Australia has an impressive record of policy development and program innovation in second language education, but a relatively poor record for consistency of application and maintenance of effort”.

It’s 12 years since I taught Italian, and in that time, my understanding of what constitutes effective pedagogy and engaging learning has been revolutionised. Although I used Italian stories as the basis for most lessons back then, my teaching was conducted primarily in English,

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and the students spent time most weeks completing worksheets. I had a strong sense that at the end of seven years of primary school, students could count to 20 and knew the colours but little else. The problem was, that I didn’t know where to start to make changes.

Working in the Catholic system, Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM) seemed like a logical port of call and I was lucky enough to be directed to Jennifer Brown-Omichi, Project Lead: Languages. An experienced language teacher herself who has lived and worked in Japan, Brown-Omichi describes her current role as partnering with schools to “consider strategies to enhance the learning of languages within the uniqueness of each school’s community and context.” Brown-Omichi’s work with CEM is driven by her vision that being multilingual becomes the norm in Australia. “We should expect that all students can and will achieve a basic level of proficiency in two



or more languages. To achieve this, we need to understand and create the conditions for success in our schools,” she explains.

Of the languages teaching approaches Brown-Omichi introduces me to, Content and Language Integrated Learning and gesture learning in languages education are particularly intriguing. Both have a strong emphasis on functional language – actually getting students to engage with and actively develop speaking and listening skills in the target language using words and phrases that have a clear application outside the classroom. The focus on spoken functional language in both approaches more closely mimics first language acquisition, which is initially entirely oral. Brown-Omichi observes, “When we ask students about their language learning, we don’t say ‘What can you write in Italian?’ or ‘What can you read in Italian?’, we ask, ‘What can you say in Italian?’ and this becomes the community’s mea-



Afternoon light in Paris

surement for success. Students also tell us they feel successful when they can speak a language.” This harks back to the numbers-colours ethos that I discussed earlier. Counting, for example, equips students with a sequence of isolated words, but not with the ability to meaningfully communicate, a point that is also acknowledged by Catherine Spurrirt, a secondary French teacher who is now working as a Languages Consultant with the CEM. In Spurrirt’s experience, “Functional language is the language that a student needs to communicate, with purpose, now. I think we better understand that for students to see themselves as successful, we need to provide them with opportunities to connect with their peers, communicate their ideas and be understood. Traditional vocabulary lists of nouns don’t often give students the opportunity to do this.”

Both Content and Language Integrated Learning and the gestured approach

are designed to maximise student participation and active language use. Content and Language Integrated Learning, or CLIL, involves teaching a subject such as science or art in a second language such as Italian. It is related to the immersion approach popular in many Canadian schools (Cross, 2014) but confines the use of the second language to a specific curriculum area rather than using it for every class. In a primary school setting, CLIL offers a way for language learning to be a valued and integral part of the curriculum, rather than a stand-alone subject with little connection to the rest of the school. Chosen carefully, the subject matter covered in a CLIL program can also ease the load on classroom teachers – if they know that the chemical sciences sub-strand is being taught in Italian lessons, for example, classroom teachers don’t need to incorporate it in their own work programs.

But of course, it is the impact on the

students that is most important. In a review of the literature, Cross (2014) found that “the impact of CLIL includes beneficial linguistic, academic and social outcomes.” On the academic front, research indicates that students learning curriculum content through a second language fare as least as well in assessments as those learning through their mother tongue. This might seem somewhat surprising but according to Muñoz (2002) CLIL encourages access to higher order thinking skills that promote understanding of both the target language and the complementary curriculum content. The engagement factor alone is likely to contribute to students’ knowledge acquisition. Students in my year 3/4 class were able to predict in Italian whether the shell, the colour and the chocolate part of an M&M were soluble or insoluble and to make simple observations about the results in the target language. Without knowing it, they were

## Learning languages



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using gendered nouns, adjusting adjectival endings for singular and plurals and using different words for 'the' in Italian, concepts that in the past I might have taught in isolation with nowhere near the degree of excitement and desire for expression that experimenting in science and in language simultaneously generated.

The gesture learning in languages approach has a similarly strong research base behind it. It involves using a different sign for each word or form of a word, not dissimilar to Auslan. Ozcelik and Sengul (2012) concluded that "gestures facilitate deep and long-lasting learning", with the kinaesthetic aspect not only helping to cement the accompanying language in memory, but also actively reducing the load on working memory. In my experience, students are often reluctant to speak in a foreign language for fear of not being perfect, a sentiment echoed by Catherine Spurrirt: "As a secondary school student and while at university, I was incredibly anxious about making mistakes when speaking. My listening comprehension skills were quite strong but I remember feeling paralysed by fear when it was my turn to respond. As a result, I try to en-

sure that students are speaking the language from day one and that they are exposed to vocabulary and structures that are recyclable across different contexts."

It's hard to understand what gestured language use looks like in the classroom without seeing it in action, and perhaps even harder to do it justice in a written description, but after participating in a demonstration lesson led by Spurrirt, its potential was very evident. Spurrirt had a group of slightly unwilling adults signing along with her and it was amazing how quickly we picked up the language (in this case French) as well as her expectations without a word of English being used. She adopted a question and answer format, encouraging the audience to chorus and sign along with her, and inviting participants to formulate a response modelled on the gestures and words used in the questions. In small groups, we then used cards with the words that we had learned in the oral language activities to construct sentences in French. To finish, Spurrirt had us asking and answering questions in gestured French in the form of a rap backed by a karaoke version of *Vanilla Ice Ice Baby*. The speed with which we were able to both respond and

then produce language of our own convinced me that gestured learning in languages was an approach worth exploring.

Spurrirt also gave participants time to work in small groups to identify the 100 most essential words in our target languages. This wordlist now forms the basis of my lesson planning, the idea being that if students can learn these words, they have the building blocks for basic communication in the language. In the space of a term, students in my year 5/6 class went from knowing 10 to 15 words and being able to produce a sentence of an average length of 1.2 words to demonstrating knowledge of upwards of 30 words with an average sentence length of three or more words. I was able to capture this improvement via *Speak Up!*, an app created by CEM in partnership with developer P4G. As a teacher, the ability to capture evidence of student learning in this way is satisfying in terms of both being able to see the growth and looking for ways to improve my classes. But it was observing students get excited as they saw their progress against their goals that made it most worthwhile.

The Foundation to Year 2 Band Description for Italian in the Australian Curriculum suggests that students, "identify and use Italian non-verbal communication strategies and experiment with formulaic expressions and one or two-word responses to prompts and cues". After a short period of experimentation with gestured language and CLIL, this doesn't seem to do justice to what students are capable of as second (or third!) language learners.

And while you might be asking yourself why, in an increasingly globalised world, students even need to learn another language, there are a number of compelling arguments that underscore the importance of bilingualism. According to a paper by Australia's Group of Eight Universities (2007, p.5), "Monolingual English native speakers are already losing the advantage in their own language because English language skills are becoming a basic skill around the world. With English now part of the school curriculum in many countries from Europe to Asia, Australians are increasingly competing for jobs with people who are just as competent in English as they are in their own native language and possibly one or two

more.” The paper also highlights the fact that Australian schools spend less time teaching second languages than any other school in the OECD, an interesting point given the link between second language acquisition and increased proficiency in first language literacy skills, and Australia’s sliding performance in OECD rankings.

Beneath these more lofty rationales, the experiences of languages practitioners reveal more personal and therefore in some ways more compelling reasons for not just giving adequate time to languages instruction, but to reconceptualising our approach to it. In the brief time that I have been working with gestured language and CLIL, I have seen students who struggle with reading and writing in English participate on a level playing field with their peers, picking up the oral language at least as quickly as their classmates. Catherine Spurrirt’s teaching experiences powerfully illustrate this phenomenon:

A few years ago, I taught a Year 7 student who had just been diagnosed with dyslexia. She was struggling across many learning areas, due to the volume of written text. But the oral focus of our Year 7 beginners French program enabled her to shine. She could make complex requests in French and respond to questions with accuracy and ease. For perhaps the first time

in her learning journey, she was outperforming her peers and supporting them in their learning. It is such a privilege to share these moments with students who discover previously unknown strengths in the context of the Languages classroom.

At the other end of the spectrum, students who have always found literacy easy are suddenly faced with not being the ones who know everything. They soon realise that some things take work to learn, and they develop resilience and persistence skills that they may not have previously needed.

The support and programs offered by the CEM are putting many schools on the road to languages success. Jennifer Brown-Omichi cites the journey of St Bede’s Primary School as an example that showcases the positive impact of a reinvigorated perspective on languages learning. “Staff and students are enthusiastic and confident learners, French is seen and heard all around the school and teachers are collaborating with each other and with outside experts to further develop their skills and pedagogy,” she explains. “Parents regularly provide positive feedback about student engagement and hearing them speak French at home and visitors to the school are amazed and also speak of the engagement and lan-

guage skills they observe at the school.”

Despite prevailing rhetoric that we should be moving on from the industrial revolution model of education provision, the methods we use with today’s 21<sup>st</sup> century learners do not always look substantially different from 100 years ago. New approaches to language learning show that we reap the greatest rewards when we are willing to stray from familiar territory. And it is certainly worth the effort - in the words of Frank Smith, “One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.”

### Further reading

- Cross, R. (2014). *Best-evidence Synthesis: Current approaches to Languages education*. Melbourne: Catholic Education Commission of Victoria.
- Group of Eight (2007). *Languages in Crisis. A rescue plan for Australia*. Manuka: The Group of Eight.
- Muñoz, C. (2002) Relevance an potential of CLIL. In D. Marsh (Ed.), *CLIL/EMILE: The European dimension – action trends and foresight potential* (p. 35–36). European Union: Public Services Contract.
- Ozcelik, E. and Sengul, G. (2012). Gesture-based interaction for learning: time to make the dream a reality. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43(3), p. E86–E89.
- Vukovic, R. (2016). Why learning a second language is vital to our global future. *Australian Teacher Magazine*, 12(1), p. 22–23.

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