

○ AFTERWORD: TEMPTED BY TARGETS, TEMPERED BY RESULTS

Joe Lo Bianco

The studies reported in this volume are of intrinsic interest for the information they supply on learning achievements in response to teaching inputs, but they also represent a category of policy experimentation as well.

In the foreword and in the individual chapters we can see how learning achievements can be assessed individually in Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian or Korean. More research would be needed to permit a systematic move towards predicting what achievements we might expect under typical Australian conditions for “typical” cohorts of learners, in these languages. Unfortunately, the haphazard provision of research funding suggests that this latter step, an essential one for future evidence-based policy on language education, appears a considerable way off. However, since policy and teaching cannot wait for the arrival of all the knowledge that would be required to build confidence that the programs we establish will produce the aspirations we hold, knowledge, policy and practice will continue to grow together in an interaction across the three. Here lies the second of the interest categories identified in the first sentence, how these four targeted priority languages, as a policy experiment, are also symbolic of a wider and deeper phase of Australian language education planning.

Since the inauguration of the National Asian Languages and Studies of Asia in Australian Schools (NALSAS) program in 1995 Australian public investment in these four languages has been extensive, estimated by some to reach \$290 million in the 1995-2002 period of the NALSAS program, and an additional \$67 million in its successor program the NALSP from 2007-2012 or 2013. Despite these investments, massive by comparison with all other language education support, it is clear from both expert and media commentary over the past few years that language education in general, Asian languages in particular, and at least two, possibly three, of these four privileged languages, are still considered to be ‘under performing’. Here lies the practical significance of the research reported in this volume, and here too lies the correlated need to proceed with policy implementation research alongside acquisition research.

As a result of the extensive federal outlays under NALSAS between 1994 and 2002 there was accelerated growth in the teaching of these languages, with Japanese benefitting the most, continuing its growth spurt which had begun in the late 1980s and early 1990s when it surpassed French enrolments for the first time at the secondary school level. NALSAS was the culmination of the 1986 National Strategy for the Study of Asia in Australia, issued by a

national advisory body, the Asian Studies Council [ASC] (1986). This strategy shifted the previous arguments for Asian studies which had been predicated on cultural/civilisational grounds, towards pragmatic, economic rationales, often deploying the rhetorical language of “national survival”, and both it and NALSAS conceived Asian languages in foreign, rather than “community”, terms. However, as the chapters in the present volume show, learner groups are highly mixed, with, for example, heritage and new learners in the same class, an underlying demographic reality that will never change. Predictions about learning outcome will have to take account of these differences in the starting point that learners bring to the task of studying Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean in Australian schools.

In 2002 at the conclusion of NALSAS, enrolments in the four languages had expanded to 23.4 per cent of all school students, with the maximum at Years 5 to 7 levels. Over the course of its implementation there was a doubling of enrolments and programs in Japanese and Indonesian, while Chinese increased one and a half times (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009), though unfortunately growth was not so marked for Korean. Much of this growth, however, was in programs of short duration, and, it must be said, far too often in programs of low seriousness, and none of the NALSAS targets was even remotely close to being achieved, despite the program having completed more than 8 of its projected 10 years of life. As a result of the often unsatisfactory quality, when the funding was removed in 2002, quite a few of the gains were lost. This loss of effort is a fault largely of the kind of policy experimentation that NALSAS was, of the inadequate research base on which such programming was designed, and of the often shallow awareness among the wider population of what is involved in gaining language proficiency through formal education for new learners. By 2006, prior to the implementation of NALSP, total Australian enrolments in these four languages had returned to around 18 per cent (RUMACCC, 2007) and over the past two years there has been a growing awareness that matters had deteriorated still further, prompting many calls for a return to funding on a scale like NALSAS, or even far greater. A key example is the June 2009 report calling on the federal government to make an investment of \$11.3 billion (Asia Institute, 2009) in these same Asian languages, to make half the Australian population fluent in an Asian language over the next 30 years.

If Australia’s language policy effort and priorities are to continue this pattern of policy via the setting of ambitious targets, and if such a large financial commitment (far in excess of any previous funding) is even to be contemplated, much more research in policy implementation and learning achievements under different program conditions and for learners from diverse language backgrounds is needed. Policy makers are tempted by targets, which perhaps seem to those outside direct contact with language teaching and learning to be necessary to make educators and education systems ‘deliver results’. What the important studies in this present volume show, however, is that knowledge, teaching and policy need a better calibration, with more investment required in generating a better knowledge base about

what we can realistically expect from the kinds of programs that are usually implemented in Australian language education.

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