Three Provocations About Retention and Attrition and Their Policy Implications

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Abstract One of the recurring debates in relation to languages and cultures education in Australia concerns the issue of retention and attrition. The clarion call seems to have been continuous for the last 30 years or so. I want to offer three provocations around this issue:

1. We think it's our fault but maybe it isn't—research shows us that at each point of transition students will choose to change languages, regardless of their experience. A concomitant issue is that at university level some students have already decided how much of a language they are prepared to study (often due to administrative/structural constraints of their degree or for other personal reasons—cf. the phenomenon of the language tourist).
2. The curriculum wars—my recent experience of working with the Australian Curriculum: Languages has highlighted a fundamental philosophical divergence between how curriculum is conceptualized in schools education and at tertiary level. My question is whether this difference (which I will outline) is leading to attrition (or retention).
3. Gender and identity—while languages classes at all levels of schooling are typically dominated by females, and females make up a larger proportion of the language teaching corps in schools, at university level things can be somewhat different. I would suggest that there are some intriguing questions waiting to be teased out in relation to how students identify with staff in terms of gender and identity at tertiary level and whether this has an impact on retention (or attrition).

For each of these provocations, I will present some initial research and discussion.

Keywords Languages and cultures education · Attrition · Retention · Curriculum · Gender · Identity

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1 Introduction

A cursory survey of discussion about languages programs in education over the last 30 or so years would reveal a situation of constant crisis in the English-speaking world. In 1980, Paul Simon's book *The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis* tried to map this out, looking at 12 different issues:

1. the clash between American monolingualism/monoculturalism and cultural and linguistic pluralism;
2. shifts in world economics which bring new markets and the need for language capacity;
3. issues of national security;
4. language and culture and suspicion of "the other";
5. the state of language instruction in schools;
6. the variation in entry requirements and language programs at tertiary level;
7. the quality of language teaching at all levels;
8. different models of language teaching and learning;
9. examples of leadership in the language teaching field;
10. trends in the job market involving languages;
11. federal support for languages education;
12. ways to support languages in the wider community.

This catalogue could have been published yesterday, as the issues canvassed remain essentially identical to those which are presented in relation to problems in retention today. In 2007, the Group of Eight published its *Languages in Crisis—A Rescue Plan for Australia* which laid the groundwork for a national coordinated approach to stemming the bleeding. The plan notes that "[i]n 1997 there were 66 languages offered at Australian universities. Ten years later, just 29 survive" (Group of Eight 2007, p. 4). This is a loss of over 50% of programs in a short span of time. In 2018, I celebrated 20 years working in university language programs and I have noticed that alongside this crisis discourse there is another narrative from those who work in languages at university which typically constructs us—or, rather, our programs, subjects, course offerings, etc.—as the ones chiefly responsible for attrition. In this speculative paper, I want to offer three provocations which shift the focus away from this circular and ineffectual blame game towards a more sophisticated, layered idea of what other factors might drive attrition and retention. These provocations are chiefly directed at the profession itself in (what I hope is) a rousing call to appraise our programs and performance critically instead of simply falling back on hackneyed, routinely trotted out scenarios. It is also an invitation to consider how languages education exists across the years of schooling and a suggestion that at university level we need to perhaps revisit this with a view to collaborative efforts that lead to stronger outcomes.

2 We Think It's Our Fault But Maybe It Isn't

One thing that we know for sure, and which is consistently borne out in studies of all types, is that "all languages are enrolment shedders" (Lo Bianco 2009, p. 50). Essentially, at each juncture point in education—between primary and secondary, between secondary and tertiary, and, particularly, at the compulsory/non-compulsory transition point—rates of attrition are higher. Some studies have emphasized a constellation of factors affecting retention, factors which revolve around issues such as teacher and teaching quality, aspects of motivation, etc. Notably, there is crucially a strong realization that structural factors (rather than judgments of quality) have an equal, if not greater, effect on retention. A number of years ago, in a small study of university students' experiences of (dis)continuation of languages during their secondary education, I reported that one of the "predominant negative factors students described was related to the inflexibility of school structures to accommodate their needs or desires in relation to languages" (Absalom 2011, p. 19). The reverse case is also true that when structural innovation is accommodated this can have a positive effect on retention and up-take of languages. Brown and Caruso provide "substantial evidence that levels of language are in fact linked to hitherto overlooked issues of access and degree structure", noting that "language enrolments are directly related to degree structure and flexibility, rather than to other factors" (Brown and Caruso 2016, p. 454). With this in mind, I designed a small questionnaire to explore students' intentions in relation to continuation in Italian after a mid-year intensive subject in 2017, the results of which I will now discuss.

2.1 To Continue or Not to Continue? That Is the Question

In the mid-year break in 2017, approximately 110 students initially enrolled in a 3-week intensive version of Italian 1, with a final number of around 90 students. This version of the semester-long subject provides students with the same access to continuation of Italian in Semester 2 should they wish to go on with their Italian studies. Using SurveyMonkey,[1] I constructed a questionnaire with 16 questions which canvassed a range of issues around continuation of Italian. 61 students responded to the questionnaire which is a response rate of two-thirds. The responses were overwhelmingly clear. Notably, a majority of students were either unsure or definite about continuation (Fig. 1).

If we compare responses to the question "Why are you doing Italian 1 (Mid-Year Intensive), 2017?" and "If you aren't sure about continuing with Italian or definitely not continuing with Italian, please explain why not", students' reasons for this are transparent (Figs. 2 and 3). The overwhelming reason expressed by students for

[1] Available at https://www.surveymonkey.com

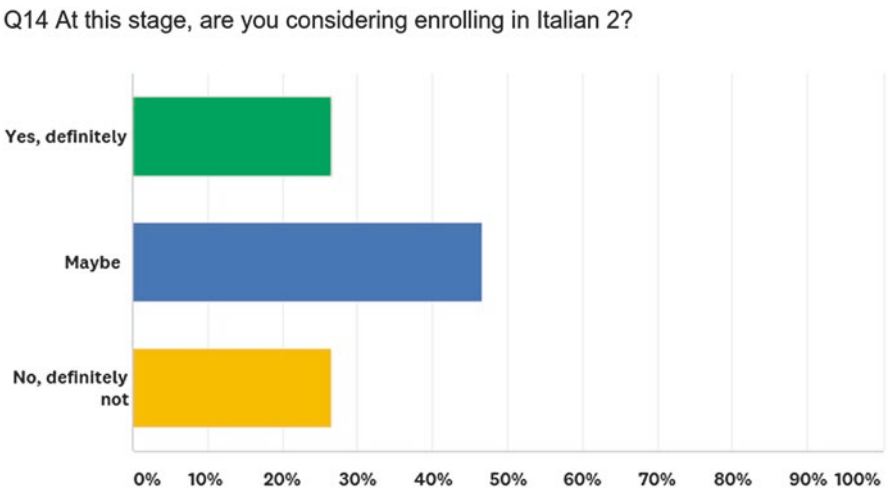

Fig. 1 Continuation or not?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
I love learning languages	55.00%
I had a spot to fill in my study plan and an intensive is perfect for this	48.33%
I like the idea of getting a whole semester of credit in 3 weeks	43.33%
I've always wanted to learn Italian	41.67%
I didn't like my other breadth subjects and wanted to try something different	23.33%
Italian is a language which I need for my studies/work	13.33%
My background is Italian	8.33%
None of the above	1.67%

Fig. 2 Responses to "Why are you doing Italian 1 (Mid-Year Intensive), 2017?"

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES
I can't fit Italian 2 in my study plan		60.47%
I only ever wanted to do Italian 1		4.65%
I'm not sure that I'm going to do well in Italian 1		13.95%
I'm not enjoying Italian 1		0.00%
I want to try different breadth options		11.63%
Other (please specify)	Responses	9.30%

Fig. 3 Responses to "If you aren't sure about continuing with Italian or definitely not continuing with Italian, please explain why not"

doing the Italian intensive was their love of languages but almost 50% of respondents also indicated a structural motivation for their choice.

The decisive reason for discontinuation was thus structural—60% of those who were not continuing attributed this to the impossibility of fitting Italian 2 into their study plan. Around 5% indicate that they had already decided to only complete one semester of Italian. The University's curriculum model (another structural factor) allows for students from other faculties to select languages as a breadth subject. However, the possibility of doing a range of breadth subjects was behind the decision of almost 12% of respondents to choose something different from Italian. Notable, as well as very satisfying, is the constatation that not one student indicated that dissatisfaction with the subject was the motivation for discontinuation.

My opening salvo was that those of us who work in languages and cultures in universities often attribute attrition to something we are getting wrong, which creates feelings of dissatisfaction in students who then decide to drop languages. I would like to suggest that this is an extension of what Claire Kramsch has described as imposture in relation to how language learners construct themselves.

> The term imposture presupposes a fixed norm of legitimacy against which individuals measure themselves or are measured by others—the sanction of the public or an internalized idealized norm repeatedly imposed by the community, the market, the publishing industry, or the media. (Kramsch 2012, p. 489)

The type of norm that we (un)consciously measure ourselves against is some notion that students progress through other subjects from the beginning to the end of their degrees with no glitches and with regular progression. This is heightened by the fact that there are rarely conversations around attrition in other subject areas. While there are discussions of issues such as the lack of girls doing science, the underpinning discourse is not one of crisis—this could be because the implication is that there are many boys doing science so it is not a question of numbers but of gender balance. My provocation is for us (and those who have direct impacts on university language programs) to see attrition, not as an emotional or identity question, but as the result of structural inadequacies in our system (ranging from timetabling, to degree structure, to flexibility of offerings, etc.) and that these are the factors we need to focus on in order to facilitate better retention.

3 The Curriculum Wars

Perhaps the bellicose metaphor is a little strong but what I want to represent with this second provocation is that there is a strong disjunction in the conception of curriculum in the passage from secondary to tertiary languages study in Australia. In fact, not unlike the issue of shedding of enrolments which we can observe in the passage of students between different levels of schooling, there are some deep philosophical and practical distinctions in the teaching and learning of languages. This is evident between the end of primary school and the beginning of secondary school,

between the end of Year 10 and the beginning of Year 11 (the beginning of the various senior secondary certificates of education around the country), and then between the end of school and university. Kathryn Hill (2010) outlines what happens in relation to classroom-based assessment in the shift between primary and secondary languages education, which provides good insight into the differentiated approaches to curriculum. She notes that one of the clearest indications of this difference is seen in the way competence is conceptualized: "[s]pecifically, competence in the Year 7 classroom appeared to entail *mastery* of a relatively narrow range of linguistic input compared to Year 6 where there appeared to be a greater focus on exposing students to rich cultural and linguistic input (without necessarily requiring mastery of it)" (Hill 2010, p. 12, original emphasis). I would suggest that a similar curricular clash occurs between Year 10 and Year 11 where students go from a more wide-ranging program to a narrower focus often based on preparing students for the final Year 12 exams (at least, in Victoria). This is then the opposite when students move from Year 12 to university. We can see this shift in focus by comparing some statements about language programs from curriculum documents (Table 1).

I am using these curriculum documents as emblematic of the differences at these levels of education. While it is clearly the case that the "Australian Curriculum: Languages" has not experienced uniform acceptance or implementation around the country, I believe it represents well a way of thinking and talking about languages education which contrasts with previous ways of thinking and talking about languages education. The most obvious difference between school language programs and university level programs is the emphasis on working with language through texts—if these lists are like the ingredients on a food packet, we can presume that those with the highest concentration come first in the list. In the University of Melbourne subject description there is a very obvious focus on equipping students to navigate the languages world through text and associated activities such as research. While the descriptions of school languages programs emphasize interaction and communication, the presence of this is balanced in the university subject description by references to "literary, linguistic and cultural aspects of Italian-speaking communities". This subtle allusion to literature is telling as it reveals the university's continuing focus on aspects of language learning which have a downgraded place in much school-based language teaching and learning.

Another aspect worth considering is the approach to curriculum/subject planning. In the context of school education, language programs at secondary level must respond to curriculum documents which aim at providing a consistency regardless of school context. University programs, I would suggest, on the other hand, are much less constrained and decisions about curriculum can often reside with single individuals. While there are attempts to manage this through activities like curriculum reforms, reviews of degree structure, alignment of program and degree learning objectives, etc., I propose that because many languages staff do not come from an explicit teaching and learning background, but are rather disciplinary experts, the approach to curriculum design and its implications can be idiosyncratic. This is not necessarily a bad thing as it allows for research-based teaching and provides room for university teachers to teach to their passion, which is potentially more inspiring

Table 1 Comparing curriculum documents

Australian Curriculum: Languages
The Australian Curriculum: Languages aims to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to ensure students:
Communicate in the target language
Understand language, culture, and learning and their relationship, and thereby develop an intercultural capability in communication
Understand themselves as communicators
These three aims are interrelated and provide the basis for the two organising strands: Communicating and understanding. The three aims are common to all languages. (https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/languages/aims/)
In the Australian curriculum, general capabilities encompass knowledge, skills, behaviours, and dispositions that, together with curriculum content in each learning area and the cross-curriculum priorities, will enable students to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century.
There are seven general capabilities:
Literacy Numeracy Information and communication technology (ICT) capability Critical and creative thinking Personal and social capability Ethical understanding Intercultural understanding
(https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/languages/general-capabilities/?searchTerm=general+capabilities#dimension-content)
The Australian Curriculum is designed to meet the needs of students by delivering a relevant, contemporary and engaging curriculum that builds on the educational goals of the Melbourne Declaration. The Melbourne Declaration identified three key areas that need to be addressed for the benefit of individuals and Australia as a whole. In the Australian Curriculum, these have become priorities that give students the tools and language to engage with and better understand their world at a range of levels. The priorities provide national, regional and global dimensions which will enrich the curriculum through development of considered and focused content that fits naturally within learning areas. They enable the delivery of learning area content at the same time as developing knowledge, understanding and skills relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia and/or Sustainability. Incorporation of the priorities will encourage conversations between students, teachers and the wider community.
(https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/?searchTerm=Cross-curriculum+priorities#dimension-content)
VCE Italian
This study enables students to:
Communicate with others in Italian in interpersonal, interpretive and presentational contexts
Understand the relationship between language and culture
Compare cultures and languages and enhance intercultural awareness
Understand and appreciate the cultural contexts in which Italian is spoken
Learn about language as a system and themselves as language learners
Make connections between different languages, knowledge and ways of thinking

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Become part of multilingual communities by applying language learning to social and leisure activities, life-long learning and the world of work.
(VCAA, 6)
First-year Italian
Intended learning outcomes
On successful completion of this subject, students should:
Be able to interpret and analyse a variety of texts and genres, both written and spoken, of a moderate level of complexity;
Be able to use appropriate linguistic structures and lexical resources, including specialised terminology relating to specific literary, linguistic and cultural aspects of Italian-speaking communities, to communicate in Italian both in writing and speaking;
Have gained an introduction to some aspects of the core areas of Italian studies, with specific focus on each through dedicated learning activities;
Be able to apply research methods appropriately to task;
Be able to demonstrate an appreciation of the diversity of Italian language and culture;
Be able to actively compare and contrast linguistic and cultural similarities and differences between Italian language and culture and other languages and cultures;
Through a range of tasks and class experiences, be able to apply a variety of learning techniques to further consolidate knowledge, understanding and ability in relation to Italian language and culture;
Have consolidated and extended linguistic repertoire and vocabulary.
Generic skills
At the completion of this subject, students should:
Have developed an ability to communicate knowledge intelligibly and economically both in writing and orally through assessment (including technology-mediated activities), tutorial and online discussion and class presentations;
Have developed confidence in self-expression through participation in the subject at different levels and assessable presentations;
Have developed a range of IT literacy skills through online multimedia activities;
Have developed a team spirit and collaborative approach to learning through group work;
Be able to demonstrate time management and planning skills through completion of assessment and other required in-class activities;
Have honed interactional and intercultural communication skills;
Have learnt basic research skills and the use of a variety of reference materials.
(https://handbook.unimelb.edu.au/subjects/ital10006)

than delivering a program devoid of personal investment and connection. Table 2 is an attempt to summarize the differences between approaches to curriculum in secondary school and university.

As Hill (2010) notes, there is a clear distinction between the types of assessment tasks and the criteria used to evaluate these between Year 6 and Year 7 (i.e., between primary and secondary education). A similar difference would be found between the expectations and tasks in Year 12 and those in university language programs. The other important shift is away from "hand-holding" or spoon-feeding approaches to teaching and learning in the final years of school to a style which requires much

Table 2 Comparing secondary and tertiary curriculum processes

Secondary	Tertiary
Rapid and regular change	A slow-moving beast
Increasingly removed from conventional content-led curriculum	Continues to remain heavily content driven
Process or praxis-based models of curriculum	Often, text based with certain *traditional* notions prevailing (such as, the importance of literature and of particular canonical works)
Much stronger focus on learner-centredness or learner-driven curriculum	Beginning to incorporate some of the aspects of school approaches but modified for university context

more self-direction and taking of individual responsibility for students. Ramma et al. (2015), discussing a project which looked at science and technology across secondary and tertiary education, note that students

> highlighted that the first year was truly challenging and shocking as they were not prepared to face such a drastic change. The interview also revealed that the transition was not as smooth as they would have expected. They mentioned that there is a world of difference between secondary and tertiary but admitted that if they had developed a critical mind during their secondary education, the transition would have been easier. They were expected to display a number of skills, such as creativity, independence or even innovation to be able to construct knowledge at tertiary level, and since they had not developed same at secondary level, it was a severe handicap to learn higher order concepts as a result (p. 12).

Taken together, all these divergences can create feelings of disorientation for students who often express this as a type of amorphous "big leap" between their final years of language study at school and their beginnings at university. My second provocation, therefore, is that this "curriculum war" could be responsible for the drop in numbers that we find in languages.

4 Gender and Identity

Anyone who works in languages after the compulsory years of education knows that both the student cohort and teaching corps are dominated by females. In the English speaking world there is a recent history of characterizing capacity in additional languages as an emasculating quality. Orwell (1941), for instance, in his essay "England Your England" famously wrote that "[n]early every Englishman of working-class origin considers it effeminate to pronounce a foreign word correctly" (III, para. 4). A large body of literature exists on gender effects in education which typically tends to focus on how male and female students respond. My provocation is slightly different and asks whether the gender identity of teaching staff has an effect on retention. It stems from the aforementioned constatation of female predominance but also on my informal observation that many males involved in language teaching demonstrate a variety of masculinities. Of note, in academia there is

a higher proportion of gay and lesbian staff. Tilcsik, Anteby and Knight reveal that "[s]ystematic evidence from large-scale datasets […] [shows] that both gay men and lesbians often work in gender-balanced occupations or occupations in which they are a gender minority" (2015, p. 450) and that "[g]ay men are more likely to be in female-majority occupations than are heterosexual men" (p. 446). This last statement squares well with my own casual observations. At my own institution in 2017, a majority of male tutors in Spanish were gay. In Italian studies, a similar situation was found. Notably, I would suggest that each language has a different type of gender ecology with some languages having a more stereotypically binary gender image. My question is whether there are fewer male students in certain languages because there are fewer males in teaching with whom they can identify. Or, conversely, do males continue in some languages due to the types of male teachers that they encounter? Furthermore, do languages attract LGBTQI individuals, particularly those identifying as male, because they identify more easily with a predominantly female workforce, as Tilcsik, Anteby and Knight suggest may be the case (2015)?

In order to explore these questions, I developed an initial research project with Kalissa Alexeyeff,[2] using a small anonymous questionnaire instrument of 23 questions built using SurveyMonkey which was sent to a range of first-year students at the University of Melbourne. The response rate was low with only 26 respondents, but certain comments did bring to light some useful information. In Table 3 I present some answers of interest.

While there is only a handful of comments which seem to support my notion that gender identity of teaching staff may affect students' responses to language study at university, I feel that this indicates that there is potentially more beneath the surface. The whole issue of gender representation has not really been addressed in relation to languages study in educational contexts. For instance, many university-level textbooks present a very stereotypical binary representation of sexuality which would clearly be at odds with the reality of the classroom. One respondent in response to a question about gender-related issues during school languages programs stated: "I was disapproving of how heteronormative a 'speed dating' activity (intended for practising conversation skills) in my Italian class was". This small observation speaks volumes about the uncritical way gender and stereotyped representations of grammar are tacitly promoted in languages education. This third provocation is an invitation to consider more carefully questions of gender at a number of levels in its possible relationship to retention and attrition.

[2] Ethics ID: 1750450 at the University of Melbourne.

Table 3 Selected responses

Q12 Have you encountered a wider range of gender identities in language students compared to other subjects? Please comment
#15 Yes. I have encountered a number of trans students in my language classes compared to my core science classes where I am not aware of any non-binary gender students.
#16 Probably a more narrow range, having studied romance languages. French is definitely a lot more female dominated and the guys who do keep taking it have more feminine/metrosexual energies. In Spanish classes there was still a majority of girls but not as large, and there were plenty of guys taking it who would fit into a more "blokey" traditional man stereotype. In both languages there was a much more even gender split in lower level classes but a lot of the guys had dropped off by the end.
Q14 Do you think the gender identity of teaching staff affects/has affected your motivation to continue studying languages? If so, how? Could you provide examples?
#3 Yes, it has affected my motivation of studying in a positive way, I feel in a more acceptable environment and I like it!
Q23 Do you have any further comments?
#9 This seems like a really interesting study! It would be good to find a way to get more males to keep studying languages because you really notice the disparity once you get to higher level classes, but it's such a rich and rewarding area.
#10 Upon reflection, I feel that the majority of teachers and students involved in language study are women. Also, studying certain languages in which I have to choose my own pronouns to use can be daunting, due to not wanting to stick out like a sore thumb (since my appearance does not necessarily match my gender identity).

5 Conclusion

In this speculative paper, I have put forward three provocations which attempt to reconfigure the typical discussions of attrition and retention away from the stale and, arguably, self-pitying blame game that takes up too much of our time and energy. The first provocation invites us to "take a chill pill" (as Kath from *Kath and Kim* would say)[3] since many students' reasons for discontinuing their study of languages have nothing to do with us and are out of our control. The second provocation implies the need for either better conversations between university and school colleagues to address the jolting transition from school to university or requires those of us involved in teaching and learning languages at universities to concentrate more systematically on helping students to transition more smoothly. The third provocation asks us to consider issues around gender and the impact that this little considered aspect might have on retention and attrition. As languages educators in universities, this might seem like another set of items to add to our to do list, but I would suggest that there is merit in considering these notions. The first provocation is important for the mental wellbeing of staff and programs—if we understand that some drivers of attrition are outside our control, we can both advocate more positively, but also reduce the weight of accusations that we are not doing enough to maintain enrolments. The second provocation which revolves around notions of

[3] A popular television comedy series in Australia (2002–2007).

collaboration is something which could usefully be championed by the Languags and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU), in concert with other national peak representative bodies like the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers' Associations (AFMLTA) or individual teachers' associations, as well as departments of education around the country. The final provocation sets out an innovative platform of research which I will start to pursue in the coming years and has the potential to revolutionize the way we perceive languages education in relation to identity.

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