
Language Policy and Education in Australia

Joseph Lo Bianco and Yvette Slaughter

Abstract

Australia's language policy history reflects the country's complex linguistic demography and multiple policy needs and interests. Languages and language policy have played an important and evolving role in the formation of Australia as a postcolonial, immigrant, and trading nation, moving from the suppression of Indigenous languages and a preference for British English norms through colonization, to greater assertion of language rights for Indigenous and immigrant languages, and onto economically motivated language planning. The policy landscape has been intermittently shaped by decisive policies for language policy and language education policy, as well as educational interventions such as the prioritization of English literacy. This chapter provides an overview of the historical, political, and educational influences on the language policy landscape in Australia, including achievements in addressing Indigenous and community language needs, along with supporting second language acquisition more broadly in the education system. However, the absence of a national language policy contributes to a weak language policy environment, where language rights are highly politicized and the loss of collaborative language policy processes has led to fragmented and fragile language program provision.

Keywords

Australia • Language policy and planning • Language education • Language rights • Bilingual education

J. Lo Bianco (✉) • Y. Slaughter
The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: j.lobianco@unimelb.edu.au; ymslau@unimelb.edu.au

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Introduction

As an immigrant, postcolonial, and trading nation, Australia has inherited a complex linguistic demography with multiple language policy needs and interests and diverse language education challenges. As a result, administrators, politicians, and educators have needed to address a diverse range of language categories across several policy settings and in response to often conflicting language ideologies.

First, English, the national and de facto official language that arises in Australian policy history under several guises. Originally conceptualized in its British norms and character as symbol and link to British Empire loyalty and civilization, English was later challenged by evolving Australian variations and local ideologies of communication (Collins 2014). Today, English is increasingly discussed either as a key tool for integrating minorities, for “closing the gap” in literacy achievements for Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders (Indigenous) Australian children, or commercially as a commodity traded in the delivery and accreditation of internationally oriented higher education.

Second, Australian Indigenous communication, comprising essentially three groups: (1) the original 270 Australian languages, (2) the remaining languages of today (Walsh 2014), and (3) a range of koines or lingua francas, mixed languages, and pidgins and creoles, both English-based and non-English-based, that have emerged through the dislocation and oppression of Indigenous language speakers but also through innovation and a growing esteem for contact languages as important vessels of heritage languages (Eades 2014; Meakins 2014). Indigenous speech forms, and how Australian communication has been influenced by them, feature in education and integration discussions of Indigenous Australians, but also, though less commonly, in consideration of national cultural directions (e.g., Meakins 2014; Nakata 2000; Purdie et al. 2011).

Third, immigrant languages other than English that comprise a substantial demographic presence in both urban and rural settings. Known as “community languages,” these are often intergenerationally vibrant, both through evolving local speech forms as well as through increasing access to nonlocal communities through technological innovations (see Hajek and Slaughter 2015). The local settings and contexts of their use support networks of social, religious, educational, recreational, and economic institutions. The visible presence that community languages forge

within the wider society gives rise to complex relations between the linguistic norms that have evolved in Australia, the “source” country authoritative norms and shifting language policies (Clyne et al. 2015; Leitner 2004, Vol. II).

Fourth, second languages with dramatic shifts in language choices over time. The study of second languages originally reflected British geography and a selection of the intellectual heritage of Western civilization but, in more recent years, have stressed Australia’s proximity to Asian countries, economic regionalism, and geopolitical interests (Lo Bianco and Aliani 2013; Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2016).

Restricting the present discussion to education we can say that, broadly speaking, the aspirations of language policy can be divided into three. First has been the goal of ensuring all Australian permanent residents gain access to the dominant language of the society, English, in both its literate and spoken dimensions. Literacy extends to all children and among adults, to disadvantaged sections of mainstream society, as well as to many immigrants, and as the critical medium for accessing employment, progressing through education and participating in the entitlements and duties of citizenship. Universal literacy is possibly the widest reaching language policy aim (Freebody 2007).

The second aspiration of language education policy refers not to state or public official action but to the vigorous community-based efforts invested in the maintenance of minority languages, seeking essentially to secure their intergenerational transmission. Since this goal depends on establishing community-controlled institutions and since these are by definition beyond the control of the dominant social structures, they have from time to time encountered opposition and hostility as well as encouragement and toleration (Cordella and Huang 2016).

The third goal has been second language acquisition, which has shifted from a narrow focus on language acquisition through literacy cultivation, to the active acquisition of languages, incorporating first, the languages of migrants in the 1970s, then to a greater emphasis on geographically proximate Asian languages. The construction of second languages as “outside” languages has resulted in challenges for bilingual education, particularly in Indigenous contexts, but for bilingual education more broadly, with greater esteem given to the acquisition of “outside” languages, and language maintenance and development judged as a kind of remediation of disadvantage (Lo Bianco and Slaughter, chapter “► [Bilingual Education in Australia](#)” in volume “Bilingual Education”).

Although it has only been in recent decades that these ambitions have been brought together in coherent policy statements emphasising complementarity, the divergent tendencies they represent have always been implicit in policy. This is a consequence of Australia occupying a vast territory by a small population, of having European origins but being located within an Asian geography, and of having a historically disputed process of settlement and national formation, particularly of relations between all newcomers with the Indigenous inhabitants, the oldest continually surviving cultures in the world, which are strongly language based (Evans 2013; Leitner 2004, Vol. I).

For the bulk of the colonial (1788–1900) and national (post-1901) phases of Australian history, the language consequences of colonialism, settlement, development and modernization, immigration, nation building, diplomacy, geography, education, trade, war, and culture have been dealt with not as language planning but as matters resolved in the interplay of power, representative democracy, Federation and federalism, and mostly within the overarching control of social attitudes, themselves reflective of the relationships among the component parts of the population (Indigenous, settler, immigrant). Language attitudes are most evident as ideologies of esteem or stigma attached to various kinds of speech or writing (Lo Bianco 2005).

Where formal policies have been promulgated, for the most part, these are found in rules and procedures that have regulated immigrant recruitment (such as the notorious “dictation” test which enabled the government to exclude immigrants by requiring them to pass a 50 word dictation test in any European language the officers chose, including languages unknown to the applicant.) (Ryan and McNamara 2011), the mostly assimilative biases of compulsory education and their literacy pedagogies (Simpson et al. 2009), foreign relations (such as diplomatic and strategic officer training), and the shifting curriculum status of foreign language teaching (Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2016).

From 1987, however, Australia embarked on a process of explicit language planning, formulating sociolinguistically informed language decisions, making explicit declarations of aims and objectives, setting in place evaluation and research programs. Initially very successful, then strongly contested, pluralistic language policy remains part of the policy framework of Australian language planning but with its immediate fortunes dictated by wider sociopolitical arrangements (Moore 1996; Scarino 2014).

Early Developments

Clyne (1997), citing his long-standing documentation of language policy, has argued that from earliest times Australian sociolinguistic history is marked by tension. The three nodes of tension are: “English monolingualism as a symbol of the British tradition, English monolingualism as a marker of Australia's independent national identity, and multilingualism as both social reality and part of the ideology of a multicultural and outreaching Australian society” (p. 127).

This long-term tension of sociolinguistic relations has been punctuated by phases whose ideological underpinnings can be described as follows:

1. Comfortably British: This is marked by preference for Australian national language norms to reflect prestige English models (with stigma attached to Australian forms of speech), mainly as a marker of identification with England (the local playing out of language-carried social distinctions). Second language teaching favored choices and methods of instruction reflecting the western canon of literary prestige, focused less on active use and more on reading and cultivation.

2. Assertively Australian: This is marked by literary and even sociopolitical assertion for evolving Australian norms of English, as a marker of independent national identity; this Australianist language ideology had ambivalent relations with domestic multilingualism, although it did occasionally align with preference for geographically close languages and with community languages. Following World War II, admission to Australia was linked to English instruction, which saw the birth of the Adult Migrant Education Program and was ultimately extended to migrant children in 1969.
3. Ambitiously multicultural: This contains two streams, Indigenous and immigrant, marked by a common discourse of asserting language rights for community language speakers; invariably multiculturalism's effect on Australian language policy has involved advocacy for English as a second language (ESL) teaching, for multicultural policy and for public language services, and therefore for wide-ranging cultivation of language "resources."
4. Energetically Asian: This is marked by an assertion of priority for the teaching of the key languages of select Asian countries, tied specifically to the North and South East regions of Asia, and accompanied by economic, diplomatic, and strategic justifications; sometimes Asianism invokes wider social and cultural changes for Australia itself, at other times it is a more restricted discourse embedded within short-term thinking about strategic and economic calculations of national interest; Asianism has had ambivalent relations with domestic multilingualism.
5. Fundamentally economic: This is marked by the favoring of market-based choices and commercial principles of efficiency over public policy and ethnic advocacy. Concerns around international economic competitiveness have concentrated on English literacy standards, as illustrated through the introduction of national assessments in literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN), the expansion of the commercial teaching of English, and competition for international full-fee paying students in higher education (based on Lo Bianco 2003).

Societies have distinctive national policy styles and in some ways Australian language education policy has evolved a distinctive "language problem-solving" approach, characterized by low-ideology pragmatism (Ozolins 1993). Perhaps, the clearest example is the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) established in 1947, initially as ship-board English tuition for postwar displaced and refugee populations and continually funded for almost 60 years. AMEP represents a pragmatic acceptance that intolerable communication and citizenship problems would result if immigrants were not assisted to acquire English, an apparently straightforward claim, widely held, but that in societies opposed to state intervention in social planning becomes untenable (Lo Bianco 2016).

Of course, at one level, this is also an ideology – one of social pragmatism and interventionism, responding to community expectations that state measures are warranted so that minorities do not form ongoing, economically marginalized linguistic enclaves. Policy making of this kind has received support from all political streams in Australia, and is therefore not sharply aligned politically, and represents

low-ideology pragmatism, a shared project of “problem amelioration.” AMEP has come to represent a major public investment, possibly the measure most responsible for facilitating the relatively high rate of economic, residential, and social mobility characterising Australian immigration. Other examples of language education pragmatism are 1970s schemes for interpreting and translating in community languages, alongside accreditation and certification procedures to encourage professionalism (Ozolins 2001).

Major Contributions

At the Federal level, there have been five decisive policies for language education in Australia, followed by series of texts and funding documents as de facto language policies. The formally adopted policies, in chronological order, are:

1. Report on Post-Arrival Programs and Services for Migrants (Galbally 1978)
2. National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987)
3. Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Dawkins 1992)
4. National Asian Languages Strategy (COAG 1994)
5. Commonwealth Literacy Policy (embodied in various reports, media statements, and funding programs since 1997)

Although not identical in remit, scope or style, these five policies are the key formally adopted and implemented language education programs of the past 35 years: receiving government endorsement, disbursing public finances, leading to implementation and monitoring processes. Each is a complex of discursive, textual and rhetorical components, an amalgam distinctive of the national policy style in societies lacking legalistic policy-making traditions (Lo Bianco 2001).

It is important to recognize that many other reports and investigations have informed, guided, or influenced policy and to acknowledge the policy-influencing impact of lobbying and pressure from key interest groups and occasionally from academic research (Lo Bianco 2001). But these are materially different from actual policy. The five listed policies represent therefore the explicit and implemented language policy frameworks in the 25-year period between 1980 and 2005 in the near quarter century from 1980 (Lo Bianco 2003).

The Galbally report was a government-commissioned review of services, not addressing Indigenous, mainstream English, literacy or foreign relations issues. Nevertheless, it represents a major language education policy, signaling the acceptance of multiculturalism by Australian conservative political forces. As a result, for the entire 1980s a broadly shared political program among policy elites prevailed. The Galbally report led to public funding for part-time ethnic schools; and by extension to part-time Indigenous language programs; and large increases in funding for all multilingual services.

Over time, the shared program of support for a pluralist interpretation of Australian society was seen to comprise three principles: *social cohesion, economic*

benefits, and cultural diversity. Language education policy epitomized these principles.

The *National Policy on Languages* (NPL) was the first comprehensive national language policy, which was also bipartisan, receiving public endorsement from all political parties. NPL operated four key strategies: “(1) the *conservation* of Australia’s linguistic resources; (2) the *development and expansion* of these resources; (3) the *integration* of Australian language teaching and language use efforts with national economic, social, and cultural policies; and (4) the *provision* of information and services understood by clients’ (Lo Bianco 1987, p. 70, emphasis in original). The NPL was fully funded and produced the first programs in many areas: deafness and sign language; Indigenous, community, and Asian languages; cross-cultural and intercultural training in professions; extensions to translating and interpreting; funding for multilingual resources in public libraries; media; support for adult literacy; ESL; and coordinated research activity such as the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA).

Although the 1992 ALLP positioned itself as a policy reauthorization (claiming to “build on” and “maintain and develop” NPL), it was widely interpreted (e.g., Moore 1996) as restricting its scope and ambition, of directing policy emphasis away from pluralism and towards a more “foreign” and less “community” orientation and inaugurating a return to divisive prioritizing of language needs. Still, the ALLP drew heavily on its predecessor, continued funding many of its programs (often changing only titles and procedures), and was far more comprehensive than policies which followed it. Despite its shortcomings, ALLP was supportive of extensive language learning efforts and boosted adult literacy tied to workplace education.

The National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) scheme made available extensive funding; federal outlays on its targeted languages, Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, and Korean were over \$220 million by the program’s termination in 2002. A second iteration of the scheme, the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP 2008–2012), continued some support for the Asian languages and studies, although predominantly focused on the secondary level. This vast investment in Asian language teaching was based on shared funding commitments with state, territory, and independent education jurisdictions. The program accelerated growth of a small number of Asian languages, surpassing school and university enrollments in European languages, but also distanced the focus of domestic community language contexts in language education (Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2016).

From 1997, however, a strong turn towards making English literacy a priority focus for educational intervention occurred (e.g., Lo Bianco 2001). There is no single policy document in which this “policy” was announced as a “turn.” Its antecedents in the electoral platforms of the political parties lack specificity; essentially what took place was a dramatic elevation in political discourse of concern about English literacy standards – rhetorically a “national crisis” (Freebody 2007). Arising out of interpretation disputes of research data on children’s assessed English literacy performance in 1996, all ministers of education since have made solving the problem of literacy underperformance a prominent goal. The flow-on effects of

elevating spelling and paragraph cohesion measures in primary school English literacy has been manifold: continuing media debates about categorical superiority of “phonics” or “whole language” literacy teaching disputes about what counts as literacy and the place of critical and technological literacy, with effects for adult sectors, non-English languages, Indigenous education, teacher education, ESL, literacy pedagogy, and teacher professionalism (e.g., Freebody 2007).

The culmination of these debates was the introduction in 2008, by the federal government, of national assessments in literacy and numeracy for students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9, in order to determine whether students were achieving above or below a national minimum standard. Although intended as a “snapshot” of student assessment and not as a replacement for teacher assessment, the introduction of NAPLAN has been highly contested. While assessment programs such as NAPLAN “create opportunities for meaningful exploration of teaching and learning practices” (Harris et al. 2013, p. 32), the testing has resulted in many unintended consequences, including contributing to the closure of bilingual education in Indigenous communities (see Simpson et al. 2009). Challenges have been made to the “cultural and linguistic appropriateness and accessibility of NAPLAN’s content” (Harris et al. 2013, p. 32) for Indigenous, EAL and remedial student groups, and the test’s narrow focus on a single mode of literacy, while unintended consequences that have been reported include the use of results to rank schools; pressure on schools to lift results at any cost; pressure on parents to keep children with lower literacy and numeracy skills at home on test day; and some schools and parents actively choosing to boycott the testing (e.g., Harris et al. 2013; Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith 2012; Simpson et al. 2009).

Problems and Difficulties

The absence of a national language policy and any clear directives and financial imperatives presents enormous challenges for language education in Australia. Following on from the five policy documents above have been a series of texts acting as language policies. These include the *National Statement and Plan for Languages* (MCEETYA 2005), the *National Indigenous Languages Policy* (Australian Government 2009), and the second iteration of the Asian languages plan, NALSSP. Lo Bianco and Aliani (2013) argue that:

the contradictions, lack of integration and differential status of these three separate texts are stark. The failure to reconcile and integrate them. . . suggests that the political framework for policy-making on languages is one of accommodating to and placating diverse constituencies and interests. (p. 14)

More recently, a national curriculum for languages has been developed in Australia, starting with a Shape paper (ACARA 2011), which provides a rationale for language education, a description of key theoretical components, and an overview of the curriculum structure and processes. In discussing her role in the framing

of Languages as a learning area in the national curriculum, Scarino (2014, p. 295) details the complexities “at the interface of different ideological positions and mindsets in Australian education,” arguing that central to all discussions in drafting the Shape paper for languages were each participants’ ideological positions and mindsets – either monolingual or multilingual in terms of both languages and education. Scarino (2014) argues that the effective implementation of the languages curriculum and the effectual teaching, learning, and assessment of languages across the curricula landscape are dependent on a shift in the monolingual mindset.

The Australian federal system can also be cumbersome and difficult for language planning; although there are only six states and two territories, these comprise 27 separate education jurisdictions. The implementation of the national languages curriculum is yet to be universally enacted and without a national policy directive and funding, the imperative to develop robust language programs is weak. The impetus, therefore, belongs to each state government and educational authority. There are progressive policies have been employed, including *The Victorian Government’s Vision for Languages Education* and the *Languages – Finding Your Voice 2014–2016*, a strategy in Victorian Catholic schools. Policies and strategies in other states and jurisdictions are compartmentalized, such as Aboriginal languages policies in Western Australia and New South Wales, and lack a coordinated approach to general languages education. Other state language policies have been seriously eroded (see Scarino 2014, p. 292). This is not to discount a range of excellent language programs and bilingual programs across the Australian education landscape (see Lo Bianco and Slaughter, chapter “► [Bilingual Education in Australia](#)” in volume “Bilingual Education”), but these programs thrive despite the feeble policy environment.

Another challenge arises due to policies and practices often having to compromise among competing demands, sometimes opting for wide coverage of languages, producing difficulties of continuation between sectors and levels of schooling, and issues of comparability, syllabus and program design, evaluation, and assessment. The language policy milieu, over many decades, has allowed for the teaching of an incredible number of languages in Australia, with over 150 languages taught in a range of educational settings and 50 languages examined through to the Year 12 level. The difficulties inherent in the wide coverage of languages lead to many students studying a number of languages throughout their schooling, with fewer and fewer students completing a language through to the end of secondary schooling (Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2009). One consequence of this is the proliferation of *ab initio* language courses at higher education level as fewer students enter the tertiary system as continuers in languages study (Nettelbeck et al. 2007).

A further difficulty arises with the construction of languages as “foreign” or “second” languages, particularly when some languages, principally Mandarin, but a broad range of languages, have significant communities of speakers across Australia. While iterations of language policies have elevated the study of Asian languages, the failure of these policies to adequately acknowledge linguistic repertoires existing within the student population and the failure of curriculum policy to effectively differentiate and address the language needs of different cohorts of

speakers have resulted in a growing avoidance of these languages by both background and nonbackground speakers (Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2016; Orton 2016).

The final difficulty, perhaps an amalgam of the others, relates to the loss of direction in language and literacy policy and the loss of the formerly collaborative nature of language policy. The sequence of policy changes discussed earlier highlights two key problems of language education policy “Australian style.”

The first is the rapidity of change, the chopping and changing of policy frameworks and ideologies. Although the effects of policies can be felt long after their termination, a consequence of distributed implementation arrangements, and of the power of positive discourses, the relatively short duration of formal policies produces problems of coherence, continuation and articulation across education sectors, and rapid changes are ultimately damaging to effective implementation.

The second problem is how policies undertaken in one area impact, whether by accident or design, contiguous areas. Policy changes in English literacy, for example, impact on the teaching of Indigenous languages, even if unintended; and policy measures for Asian languages impact on community language teaching, whether Asian or not, and other programs, even if these are unintended. The inability to quarantine the effects of policy suggests an interlinked language education ecology and highlights the benefits of comprehensive and coordinated policy, but governments in Australia appear to have lost interest in this kind of policy making at present.

Future Developments

Scarino (2014) argues that language policy in education in Australia is poised amid four realities:

1. Australia’s increasing linguistic and cultural diversity
2. A highly politicized multiculturalism agenda
3. A highly abstract expression of national educational goals that “acknowledge linguistic and cultural diversity while failing to recognize the central mediating role of these languages and cultures in student learning”
4. Fragility on the ground for those involved in languages in school education (p. 290)

Australia has, at a number of points, been a leader in language policy in education for English dominant, as well multicultural societies. The enduring effect of these successes can be seen both at an educational and a societal level, including in language study in education both formally and informally, the AMEP program, EAL support for students, and in the workplace, in, translating and interpreting services, and across modes of media networks.

Language education generally enjoys public esteem, even within a weak policy environment, when related issues of immigration and multiculturalism are embroiled in often-bitter debate and contest. However, the imperative of future development is to

once again create a collaborative policy environment which harmonizes “the work of professional academic researchers, with the demand and needs of parents and communities, professional educators and policy makers” ((Lo Bianco and Slaughter, chapter “► [Bilingual Education in Australia](#)” in volume “Bilingual Education”, p. 12). Australia has a rich cultural and linguistic diversity and many decades of accumulated language and literacy practices which, given adequate and immediate policy support by governments and educational jurisdictions, could quickly regain strength. These policies need to be more nuanced and inclusive – and more sociolinguistically informed.

Cross-References

- [Language Education Planning and Policy by and for Indigenous Peoples](#)
- [Language Planning in Education](#)
- [Linguistic Human Rights in Education](#)

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

- Joseph Lo Bianco and Yvette Slaughter: [Bilingual Education in Australia](#). In Volume: Bilingual and Multilingual Education
- Nelson Flores and Jeff Bale: [Sociopolitical Issues in Bilingual Education](#). In Volume: Bilingual and Multilingual Education
- Margaret Gearon: [Community Language Learning in Australia](#). In Volume: Second and Foreign Language Education
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