

# Chapter 15

## Negative Attitudes Towards Learning Languages in the Middle Years: Can These Be Changed by Increased Awareness of Language Learning Benefits and Making Learning Easier?



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**Abstract** The difficulty of the learning process and negative attitudes towards language learning seem to be the major issue in languages other than English (LOTE) learning, and a majority of findings in the literature report negative associations with LOTE learning. More often than not parents and students see the long-term value of language learning in terms of employment-related skills but fail to see the bigger picture of the long-term benefits of language learning, namely, development and reinforcement of literacy skills, improvement on cognitive and problem-solving tasks, building of confidence and self-esteem and the increased cultural awareness and development of cultural sensibilities, which are needed now more than ever in an increasingly globalised world. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether students' attitudes towards LOTE learning in the middle years would change if the learning process was made easier and if they were aware of the long-term benefits that learning languages can have on their wider education and personal fulfilment. It supports the belief that increased awareness about language learning benefits and improved learning process for acquiring languages would change students' negative attitudes towards language learning.

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Students' complaining about having to complete yet another "boring" and "difficult" grammar worksheet in their book was not surprising to me. I was transported back into my own school days of learning the language in the same way, which consisted mostly of passing on the grammar structure and memorising vocabulary, topics that did not relate to the real world, and there were no additional tools other than the textbook to assist in acquiring the language. Today, I made a commitment to myself as a future language teacher that I will not spend time teaching grammar in this way. The focus should be on providing students with real language and real situations in context and letting them focus on gist, not form, then more specific meanings, such as grammar patterns after students have a good understanding of the resource being used. When I think of my own language learning I never really worry

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about focusing on grammar, and I believe the same applies to native speakers of a language. Speaking is natural in our native language. Why should it be different when we learn a second language?

## Introduction

Despite the importance of language learning for all young Australians being emphasised in many reports and policy statements, students' commitment and attitude towards LOTE in the middle years is minimal as is the number of students committing themselves to a long-term study of a language beyond the compulsory requirement. Research findings of students' negative attitudes towards LOTE learning revolve around recurring themes of uninteresting, not valuable and academically too challenging (Jung et al. 2007). These findings suggest that a reassessment of language teaching methodology and an increased awareness of language learning benefits may be beneficial to create more positive students' attitudes and thus an improvement of learning outcomes.

For this study, I investigated whether students' attitudes towards language learning would change if they were aware of the flow-on benefits of language learning and if the learning process of acquiring a language were made easier. Two classes of year nine students, a total of 47 students, were asked to rate each statement about language learning benefits/awareness (e.g. learning a language is helping me to understand how English works, learning a language can improve my confidence and self-esteem, learning a language enhances my listening and speaking skills, learning languages helps me with problem-solving tasks) and about language learning processes.

An open question was also asked to the students: If you believe that languages in schools can be strengthened, please comment on how you think this might be accomplished. When asked for suggestions about how languages could be strengthened in schools, the overwhelming number of students commented that parents and the general community need to be convinced of the benefits of languages education. A number of students suggested a media campaign by famous people who speak another language, sending information to parents about the benefits of languages and organising special days to promote languages at school. It seems that parental influence and enthusiasm, as well as a school's seriousness towards learning languages, play an important role in motivating students to learn languages.

The majority of students were not aware of the many flow-on benefits of language learning that was revealed to them in the questionnaire and commented how this new-found knowledge motivates them to change their negative attitudes as they now can see how learning languages have benefits on their wider education and personal fulfilment. A great number of students agreed that an easier learning process that incorporates technology would change their attitudes towards learning languages. The above findings indicate that effective, engaging and interactive language classes, as well as more general awareness about language

learning benefits in general, would bring about a change in motivating students to commit to studying languages and change their negative attitudes.

## **My Initial Thoughts**

As both a student of language for more than 25 years and a future teacher of language, I have been reflecting on how language is actually learnt. Before my two placements, I was full of hope that I would encounter enthusiastic language teachers who apply the latest theories and technology in language learning. Instead, I was disheartened to learn that the traditional language learning instruction is still implemented in the twenty-first century and very little or rather no technology is used to facilitate learning. It is outdated textbooks and classrooms without much indication that language learning is happening in them. There is no motivation for learning a language as the students see no purpose in what they are learning. No wonder the needs of today's language learners are not catered for in such classrooms, and they become disengaged and develop negative attitudes.

What did come out of this study is the evidence that today's teachers need to learn more about incorporating ICT into teaching to maximise engagement in learning and improve student achievement. The overwhelming majority of students commented that they would like more interactive classes supported by technology. ICT cannot be overlooked as it has an essential role in their everyday lives. Healey et al. (2008, p. 15) conclude that "teaching our students language in its traditional media is no longer enough and increasingly in everyday and professional life people need the skills of electronic literacy". My recently completed placement underpinned my views about the importance of using ICT tools in learning languages. Students enjoyed the interactive lessons, were engaged, stimulated and worked collaboratively, and most importantly commented on how their fear of speaking German dissipated. I think ICT has the capacity to transform the way students are learning, engage them, enhance their achievement, create new learning possibilities and extend interaction with local and global communities.

As part of my pedagogy, I feel it is important to help students' language learning to be a more positive experience so that they develop positive attitudes towards LOTE learning. Twenty-first-century learners are tech-savvy and want more interaction with technology, which can be an important tool, not only to facilitate language learning but also to encourage interest and engagement. I want to support my LOTE students by creating classrooms as a welcoming place respective of the twenty-first-century learners' needs for the challenge, stimulation and use of digital media.

Research suggests that the learner who is positively predisposed towards a second language and culture is more likely to experience greater success than a learner with negative attitudes (Emmitt et al. 2010). Middle school learners will generally not have negative attitudes towards a language. However, they can be influenced by adults' negativity and school seriousness about the subject. Research by Squires found that students are assigning language learning limited relevance are based on the grounds

of parental negativity or indifference towards language learning as they perceive it irrelevant (Jung et al. 2007). Yet, motivation and purpose for learning the language are very important. If there is a strong desire to learn a language, the learner will put in much more effort and achieve better learning outcomes (Emmitt et al. 2010). Hence, language programs need to be constructed in such a way that they are motivating and supportive of students' purposes for learning a language. However, if students do not have parental and school support, how are they to succeed? Attitudes are important because of their direct relationship with behaviour and as they determine how people behave towards things they like or dislike (Jung et al. 2007). It seems it is up to language teachers to continue to convey the flow-on and long-term benefits of language learning to the broader school community in order to change current negative attitudes.

## My Current Thoughts

A comment by a reluctant language learning student has etched itself in my memory: "I do not need a second language". During my placements, I have experienced language teachers battling each day to convince students, other staff and principals that the benefits of language learning have been appreciated for centuries. Considerable research shows that learning a language has a benefit on student literacy in their first language, enhances listening and speaking skills, develops the ability to analyse and categorise, to find patterns, to express and defend opinions, improves study habits and understandings of how to learn and increases problem-solving ability (Mueller 2003). Not surprisingly, the majority of students reported that their attitudes towards language learning would change after becoming aware of the many benefits of language learning. They commented on how they thought of language learning benefits in long terms (e.g. employment and travel), but many were not aware of immediate and ongoing benefits that language learning will have on their wider education, intellectual and social development.

This view is supported by contemporary attitudes towards education as being increasingly instrumental, valuing learning for its immediacy and functionality rather than as an accumulative process or an end in itself (Jung et al. 2007) and probably explains why students find language classes "uninteresting, not valuable and academically too challenging" (Jung et al. 2007) and choose other subjects over language classes as they are rewarding and entertaining in an immediate sense. The challenge is to make students and the wider school community recognise the value of languages. As Mueller (2003) comments,

it is extraordinary that as educators and policy makers struggle to design programs that will raise academic standards, encourage critical and analytical skills, as well as address literacy, the one subject area (LOTE) that can achieve all of those goals is rejected and disregarded

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It is not difficult to see why learning languages should be regarded as an essential element of good education in Australia and I believe languages can be strengthened by more people seeing it as of value.

## **Of This Much I Am Sure**

At the beginning of this study, I was not sure what the outcome would be. The results indicate unequivocally that students' negative attitudes towards language learning would change after being made aware of the many benefits of language learning and making the learning process of acquiring a language easier. It was not a surprising revelation that negative attitudes would change. A learner needs to know why they are learning something. If there is a purpose behind learning, students are more likely to put much more effort into it to achieve a better outcome. It follows that if we can identify a learner's purpose for learning the language and support it, we can enhance their learning progress. A language teacher needs to convey the everyday tangible benefits of language learning on a learner's education so that students can see and recognise its value as an accumulative process rather than seeing it as something devoid of meaning and purpose.

“Current language theory calls for recognition of the value of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences” and points out the “importance of language being used as a socially constructed cognitive tool and language learning occurring in collaborative dialogue” (Emmitt et al. 2010, p. 209). This assertion reinforces the notion that language learners are social beings who acquire language in social contexts. Filling out grammar worksheets is contradictory to this theory and belongs to the last century. After seeing disengaged students during my two placements, I now know and understand that I need to contemporise the experience of language learners to ensure that the learning environment is rich and varied in the context in order to promote learning. Outdated textbooks and grammar worksheets are no longer adequate to engage twenty-first-century learners. Language teachers need to support students in learning by allowing them to explore situations from social, personal, intercultural perspectives in a collaborative and non-competitive atmosphere. When the approach meets students' needs and interests, they will and can learn languages successfully. Engagement, motivation, purpose and the application of twenty-first-century tools are important.

## **Conclusion**

From the data collected during this study, the evidence is very supportive that a greater awareness of language learning benefits and an easier language learning process would change students' negative attitudes towards language learning. Students of

the digital age are social, and communication and collaboration are essential in their learning. Hence, they need ICT to become more engaged and attuned to their learning.

The needs of twenty-first-century learners for the use of digital media, challenge and stimulation must be reflected in their everyday learning. Incorporating ICT into language lessons and assessment can no longer be avoided. Otherwise, teachers run the risk of teaching to disengaged students.

In a time that requires students to develop a new range of skills as global citizens, acquiring a foreign language should be seen as an essential element of good education. This reflects a focus on a globalised world and an awareness that Australian students need to be able to communicate across languages and cultures to remain competitive in today's world. Luckily, this view is reflected in the National Plan for Languages Education which refers to "language skills and cultural sensitivity as the new currency of this world order" (MCEETYA 2005, p. 2) and in the new Australian Curriculum, which recognises the importance of the study of languages as being important to participate in the linguistic and cultural diversity of our interconnected world (ACARA 2014).

Sadly, these changes are only slowly finding their way into the minds of the wider school community as they are not aware of the flow-on benefits of language learning. Schools need to work on raising awareness of language benefits not only regarding work opportunities and the development of cultural sensibilities but also about the bigger picture of long-term benefits of language learning as discussed in this report. Also, language teachers need to have knowledge of current developments in language learning and teaching research and develop their knowledge further by engaging in professional learning regularly as well as use technology both to support learning and as a basis to communicate using technologies. This approach will engage and motivate the twenty-first-century learner. Languages can be strengthened by more people seeing them as of value. Maybe implementing and promoting National Languages Week (like Science Week, Harmony Day) as suggested by students in this study would highlight the importance of language learning and make language learning as equally valuable as other subjects.

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