Review of Languages Retention from the Middle Years to the Senior Years of Schooling

Report to the Department for Education and Child Development

Prepared by the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures at the University of South Australia

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May 2014
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Introduction

This document reports on the ‘Review of Languages Retention from the Middle Years to the Senior Years of Schooling’ undertaken for the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development by a team of researchers at the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures at the University of South Australia. The Review aimed to determine the factors which may be impacting on students’ languages pathways in secondary education, analyse adverse factors, and consider strategies which may strengthen the participation of greater numbers of students in senior secondary schooling progressing towards the study of languages in the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE).

Following a quick examination of the numbers of students who continue language study to higher levels in South Australian government schools, there is a literature review focussing on what have been reported as enablers for and barriers to retention of students in language programs. We then hear from students and other voices their view of languages retention in South Australian schools. Finally, we discuss the various barriers and enablers which affect student retention that have emerged from the literature and the consultation process.

The review involved consideration of:

- the cultural, structural, operational and policy impediments and enablers for continuity of language programs beyond the middle years
- the pedagogies used to deliver language programs that are successful or otherwise in engaging students and leading to improved learning outcomes
- the role of school leadership in planning, implementing, managing and supervising language programs in secondary schools
- the attitudes of students to taking languages at the senior secondary level and their perceptions about the relevance of languages to their future, including careers and further study
- transition pathways and experiences for students moving from primary to secondary language programs
- the effective use of DECD language centres and the use of technology

As well as a literature review, interviews and focus groups were undertaken with students, teachers and school leaders at several schools in South Australia, with a range of language programs, and we would like to that the students and staff of the following schools for assisting us in this endeavour:

- Adelaide High School (Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Italian, Greek, Spanish)
- Paralowie R-12 School (Indonesian)
- Woodville High School (Indonesian, Vietnamese, Kaura/Ngarrindjeri)
- Reynella East College (German, French, Japanese)
- Murray Bridge High School (Chinese, German)
Additional interviews were held with representatives of other institutions with an interest in languages education in South Australia:

- Joe Van Dalen, President of the Modern Language Teachers’ Association of South Australia (MLTASA)
- Jan Paterson, President of the South Australian Secondary Principals’ Association (SASPA)
- Wendy Engliss, representing the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD)
- Tony Mercurio, on behalf of the SACE Board
- Julie Taylor from the Open Access College
- Lia Tedesco and Anne Reuter, South Australian School of Languages
Participation in languages education in South Australia

The provision of language programs for all students in Australian schools has been a goal of Australian education in general, but also specifically South Australian education, for many years. Some of its most recent formulations include, for example: the Melbourne Declaration having a commitment to languages as one of the major learning areas (MCEETYA, 2008); the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper having made it clear that ‘all students will have access to at least one priority Asian language’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 16); and within South Australia, the position of the Department for Education and Child Development as expressed on its website that ‘all Australian students are entitled to access a quality languages program’ (DECD website).

In general, the assumption is not just that all students will study a language, but additionally that students will study or be able to study at least one language over an extended period of time, until Year 10 or Year 12. The South Australian Languages Statement 2007–2011 indicated that ‘all … students will be engaged in quality languages programs to achieve [curriculum standards] Outcomes’ (SA DECS, 2007), and these outcomes were set for up to Year 10. The Shape paper for the Australian Curriculum: Languages is ‘conceptualised as a Foundation to Year 12 development’ (ACARA, 2011, p. 35). And the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper indicated that ‘All Australian students will have the opportunity, and be encouraged, to undertake a continuous course of study in an Asian language throughout their years of schooling’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 16).

With this as a background, then, it is interesting that if we look across all years of schooling, around 56% of students in South Australian government schools were in a language program in 2012, down from 60% in 2008. The percentage of students studying an Asian language is similar across those years, at around 29% to 31%, but there is a noticeable fall in the percentage of students studying a European language, as can be seen in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students in DECD schools</td>
<td>165,305</td>
<td>165,855</td>
<td>166,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number studying an Asian language</td>
<td>48,934</td>
<td>51,332</td>
<td>48,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage studying an Asian language</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number studying a European language</td>
<td>46,820</td>
<td>41,609</td>
<td>39,386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage studying a European language</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number studying an Aboriginal language</td>
<td>2,930</td>
<td>2,192</td>
<td>4,435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage studying an Aboriginal language</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number studying a language</td>
<td>98,684</td>
<td>95,133</td>
<td>92,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage studying a language</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Number of students in DECD schools studying a language (DECD, 2013a)

These figures are from across all years of schooling. Evidence from around Australia indicates that while the vast majority of students study a language at some point during their schooling, relatively few continue to study a language through to the senior years (see, for
example, Liddicoat et al., 2007). As with many other jurisdictions, in South Australia the largest drop is in the middle years of schooling. DECD figures indicate that there are approximately 16,500 students studying a language in Years 8–10, but there is a reduction of around 84% to approximately 2,700 students studying a language at senior secondary level (figures from the Request for Quotation). These figures are complicated by the issue that many students are required to study a language in Year 8, or some in Year 8 and Year 9, but no students are required to study a language in Years 11–12.

An additional concern for many has been a perceived substantial drop in the numbers of students taking a language for the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), following changes to the certificate, with the introduction of ‘the New SACE’ in 2010–11.

It is clearly the case that the number of senior secondary students studying a language at Stage 1 and Stage 2 has dropped in line with the introduction of the changes to SACE, as acknowledged in 2012 in the initial evaluation of the New SACE based on the 2011 data (SACE Board, 2012b, p. 8).

It is possible to compare the number of students in government schools in South Australia studying languages at Stages 1 and 2 before and after the changes to the SACE, by using the figures available in the various Annual Reports (SACE Board, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2013; SSABSA Board, 2008), as has been done in Table 2. Both 10 and 20 credit (1 and 2 unit) enrolments are included here; the overwhelming majority of Stage 1 enrolments are 10 credit, while Stage 2 enrolments are 20 credit. This data includes all levels of language: beginners, continuers and background speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Stage 1 students</th>
<th>No. of Stage 2 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2581</td>
<td>997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2738</td>
<td>974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2653</td>
<td>949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2288</td>
<td>939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2069</td>
<td>798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1746</td>
<td>651</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Number of students in SA government schools studying languages in the SACE

Representing this visually, as in Figure 1 and Figure 2, it is possible to see the drop in both Stage 1 and Stage 2 with the implementation of the New SACE in 2010–11 and since.
Taking the 2009 figures as a baseline, it is possible to compare the percentage reduction in number of students taking languages across the years, as is done in Table 3. Note that this assumes that the number of students overall taking the SACE is constant; in fact that figure has increased over this period by about 7% in total, and thus these percentages of student retention loss in languages are an underestimation.
Table 3: Percentage drop of students in SA government schools studying languages in the SACE compared with 2009 figures (ignoring increase in overall numbers in SACE)

It is thus possible to see that there has been a substantial decline in the number of students in senior secondary studying languages, following the changes to SACE. In the case of Stage 2, this is additionally more than can be accounted for by a simple reduction from 5 subjects to 4 subjects, assuming each subject had the same likelihood of being dropped. The continued drops between 2011 and 2012 are additionally concerning, because the direct effect of the SACE change from 5 to 4 subjects should have no effect here.

It is thus clear that there is a problem for retention of languages students in South Australia through to senior secondary levels; and that these already low levels of retention are declining sharply over recent years.
Literature review: Enablers of and barriers to retention

There is a great deal of literature on the participation and retention of students in language programs. Broadly speaking, discussions around why students study a language or cease to study a language can be divided into four types of factor, although there is often overlap between these factors:

- Structural factors
- Teaching and teachers
- Motivation
- Attitudes

Note that studies are often carried out in a broad range of contexts – with compulsory language study, with no compulsory language study; in different countries or different educational systems; in primary, secondary, senior secondary or tertiary contexts. Here there will be a particular focus on more recent studies at secondary or senior secondary level, particularly in Australia or comparable English-speaking countries, but other literature will be referred to where relevant.

**Structural factors**

There is relatively little specific literature which looks at structural factors which enable retention or inhibit it. In part this is because certain structural factors override all other factors. For example, if a language is simply not offered at a school, or if a language is compulsory throughout schooling, there is relatively little to say regarding retention. In discussions with school leaders, for example, they commonly mention the difficulty of finding staff for language programs, and anecdotally a substantial number of programs across Australia are discontinued because principals cannot find staff to continue the program; but this sort of structural factor for languages participation is not discussed in the literature. However there are certain structural factors which are often referred to in the literature on retention, particularly at secondary school level: timetabling and associated factors, and ‘competition’ between learners and background speakers.

It is very common, in both Australian and other literature, for students and teachers to discuss issues of timetabling – it is claimed that students cease to study a language because they cannot fit it into their program of study (Absalom, 2011; Hunter, 2013; Majeed, 2013; McGannon & Medeiros, 1995). In a study of NZ high school students, this was the second most common reason for ceasing language study (McLauchlan, 2006). One issue which is often hidden in these discussions (assuming the language was in fact offered) is that the timetabling does not stop the students taking the language, but rather the timetabling requires the students to choose between the language and another subject, which they consider more important.

Associated with what are more strictly timetabling issues, it is also the case that many studies find students cease studying a language at some point during their schooling because
the language ceases to be available after a certain year level (Absalom, 2011; Curnow & Kohler, 2007; Pauwels, 2007).

A structural inhibitor which is discussed in some literature, particularly in Australia with regard to various Asian languages, is the absence of separate streams, curricula or examinations for different ‘types’ of learners. Two clear examples of this are found with Korean and Chinese in Australia – heritage/background learners of Korean who could learn Korean at secondary level ‘are deterred from doing so by having to compete with students who have been raised and largely educated in Korean’ (Shin, 2010, p. 7); while for Chinese, second language learners are discouraged by ‘the presence of strong numbers of first language speakers, locally born or otherwise, who share their classes and overwhelm them in assessment’ (Orton, 2010, p. 4).

**Teachers and teaching**

The relationship between teachers and students is often considered the most important factor in determining whether students will continue to study a language or cease language study once it is no longer compulsory (Absalom, 2011; Hunter, 2013; Kent, 1996). However this literature has not examined what the relationship should be – much of the literature relies on questionnaire data, where students have indicated that the teacher was ‘good’, or that they got along with the teacher.

Studies of student participation and retention in languages tend not to discuss pedagogy as such. However there are certain features which students have often explicitly mentioned as having played a role in ceasing language study: in particular, the constant workload (Zammit, 1992), and the issue of rote learning, particularly of vocabulary (McLauchlan, 2006; McPake, Johnstone, Low, & Lyall, 1999).

In terms of features of teaching which are likely to enhance retention, two which have been discussed are the use of technology, and more immersive language programs. Thus, for example, a recent trial of the use of technologies such as blogs, wikis and web-conferencing (Web 2.0 ICTs) in Asian languages classes found that the technologies have an effect on student learning outcomes (Salt Group, 2011, 2012). However these reports also indicate that this can only be done effectively if substantial resources, time and support are dedicated to it. Immersion programs, or associated programs such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), are frequently claimed to have a strong impact on student engagement (e.g. Boudreaux, 2010; Cross & Gearon, 2013). As with the case of ICT, however, there is little research on any direct connection between the introduction of CLIL or immersion and its direct effect on student retention, rather than its effect on student engagement or motivation (which may in turn affect retention).

In a recent review of studies of attrition from language courses, Wesely (2010) suggests that when it comes to language instruction, the issues which lead to students discontinuing are not necessarily ‘bad teaching’ or ‘bad programs’ per se, but rather a mismatch between student understandings of and beliefs about language learning and the way in which they were instructed. She maintains that educators should explicitly address this with students. Similarly, she suggests that high levels of student anxiety around language classes lead to
students discontinuing, and that this should be dealt with through an examination of the instructional style and assessment procedures.

**Motivation**

A great deal of research has been done in the area of motivation and language learning, often associated with various distinct theoretical frameworks. Much of this work is done in contexts where language study is compulsory (and is often interested in connecting motivation with relative success in the language); or else it assumes a relatively straightforward link between motivation (or particularly types of motivation) and the retention or otherwise of language learners in non-compulsory language study. However many previously unconsidered factors are turning out to be at play in affecting retention. In particular, some more recent work has observed that a learner might be motivated to learn a language, but have little investment in the language practices in a class or society; thus issues of power and identity can affect the impact of motivation (e.g. Norton, 2000, 2013).

Some research also shows that in making decisions about studying a language or not, high school students are very much focussed on their immediate goals, whether these are the requirements for getting into university or requirements for getting a job. In these studies, quite a few students indicate that they believe, in general terms, that studying a language will be good for their future career; however it is not part of their immediate requirements, so they intend to study a language at some unspecified future point, not as a subject at school (Curnow & Kohler, 2007; Low, 1999; Watzke & Grundstad, 1996).

While there is little research on the area, it does seem clear that student motivations for studying languages can alter over time, with different motivations being relevant at different ages (Holt, 2006). It has been suggested that the older that high school students are when they are able to make choices about courses, the more likely they are to continue studying a language (Hunter, 2013). However it is unclear whether this is a simple age factor, or is connected to older students having studied a language already for more years, and thus having a greater ‘investment’ in the language – this is comparable with the results of a study of high school students in the US, where 65% of students who continued with Spanish after an initial year of study gave as one of their reasons for continuing that they ‘wanted to continue what I started’ (Pratt, Agnello, & Santos, 2009).

Perhaps related to this issue of changes in motivation over time is the conflict in otherwise similar studies about the influence that parents have over their child’s decision to continue with a language or not. Some studies on high school students suggest that parents wield significant influence on this decision (Baldauf & Lawrence, 1990; Hunter, 2013), while other studies report that parental influence was not a particularly important factor in students’ decisions (Curnow & Kohler, 2007; Holt, 2006).

Early theoretical work on motivation in language study was done in an approach taken from social psychology, and looked at how attitudes influence language learning. The most relevant distinction made was between integrative orientation versus instrumental orientation (Gardner, 1985), sometimes discussed as intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. This distinction is still commonly used in discussing student motivations for learning languages.
An important point about much of this work is that it relates to relatively stable personality traits and attitudes, which cannot easily be influenced or adjusted (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998).

In very general terms, integrative motivation (e.g. personal interest, connection with the culture) is usually stronger in students who continue with languages when they are not compulsory, while instrumental motivation (e.g. language is useful for a career) is weaker in those who continue. Thus integrative motivations have been found more relevant in high school students who continue on with a non-compulsory language in studies in Queensland (Hunter, 2013) and South Australia (Curnow & Kohler, 2007), as well as New Zealand (McLauchlan, 2006) and the United States (Meyer, 2013), and also for students who continue on with a language as they begin at the University of Melbourne (Absalom, 2011), to name only a few such studies. There are potentially some differences between different languages, however, so that in the New Zealand study more students were studying Chinese for instrumental (career) reasons than for integrative reasons (McLauchlan, 2006); however it must be noted that there were also far fewer students studying Chinese than the other languages represented in the sample. Similarly, an examination of students of East Asian languages at college (early university) in the US found that a slightly higher percentage of non-heritage students studied Chinese for career-related reasons compared with Japanese or Korean, but that personal interest was the major reason given for studying even for those studying Chinese (Ryu Yang, 2003).

Looking at more specific motivations, the factor which usually turns out to be the major motivation for continuing non-compulsory language study in all studies of students in high school and university is one or both of ‘I enjoy the language’ and ‘I get good grades in the language’ (e.g. Absalom, 2011; Aplin, 1991; DECD, 2013b; Harnisch, Sargeant, & Winter, 2011; McGannon & Medeiros, 1995; Pauwels, 2007; Pratt, 2010; Pratt et al., 2009). Where this has been quantified it varies substantially, but is still strongly ahead of instrumental reasons such as career – for example, 22.9% of students who had continued with a language said in a recent study in South Australia that they continued because they enjoyed the language, while only 8.3% said they chose it because it was relevant for their career (DECD, 2013b); a questionnaire in the UK of students who studied a language at AS (equivalent to Stage 1) and A2 (equivalent to Stage 2) found that 75% and 96% continued on because they enjoyed it at school, whereas 44% and 54% continued because of career prospects.

One motivational factor which is often discussed anecdotally, or in non-quantitative studies, but is relatively rare in more quantitative studies, is the idea of students being motivated to continue to study a language by trips or exchanges (but see Aplin, 1991). These events are much more common at relatively higher levels (Year 10–university), and are often not a motivation by themselves, but rather provide an initial ‘spark’ of interest (Shedivy, 2004) or introduce a personal element into the students’ lives which then causes their personal interest in the area (Asia Education Foundation, 2012).

Turning to more instrumental motivations, there are two major instrumental factors which are discussed in studies – requirements for later study, and career-related motivation. The first of these is very relevant in many studies in the US, where there is often a requirement that in order to be accepted at university, or in order to graduate from university, a student must have undertaken a certain amount of study of a language. Unsurprisingly, in
contexts where languages are an immediate requirement, many students are undertaking language study to meet that requirement. However those students with purely instrumental motivation, studying the language to meet a requirement, tend to cease language study as soon as the requirement is met, and only those who have stronger integrative motivations continue on with language study after meeting the requirement (Lemke, 1993; Majeed, 2013; Ramage, 1990).

Particularly during the 1990s, after a period when languages were promoted widely in the Australian community as being of great economic value, some studies found that high school students were studying a language because they thought it would be good for their future career (e.g. McGannon & Medeiros, 1995). However more recent studies, in Australia (e.g. Absalom, 2011; Curnow & Kohler, 2007; DECD, 2013b; Hajdu, 2005; Hunter, 2013; Ren, 2009) and elsewhere in the English-speaking world (e.g. Harnisch et al., 2011; Holt, 2006; McPake, Lyall, Johnstone, & Low, 1999), have tended to suggest that studying a language for career-related reasons is a factor, but that it is far from the major reason for continuing with a language at school. Thus as noted above, 8.3% of South Australian students continued a language because it was relevant for their career in a recent survey, while 22.9% continued because they enjoyed it; indeed, looking more broadly in that same survey, only 20.7% of all students indicated that their ‘choice of senior school subjects is strongly influenced by’ career pathway (DECD, 2013b).

It is interesting to note that, when it comes to high school students talking about whether a language will be relevant for their career, several studies using interviews or focus groups (e.g. Carr, 2002; Curnow & Kohler, 2007) have shown that there is no necessary connection between whether a high school student says a language will be relevant for their career and what might be considered reality. Thus a student can claim that they want to be an airline pilot, and that knowing a language is therefore completely irrelevant for their career; or that they wish to be a (generalist) primary school teacher, and that therefore knowing Vietnamese will be really helpful in their career. Whether students treat a language as relevant for their future career seems to depend much more on how they feel about studying a language and has little to do with what career they are considering.

While the relationship between language study and career is often treated as a one-way decision path (i.e. there is a belief that if a student wishes to have a particular career, they will therefore find a language relevant or otherwise), some more detailed research has pointed out that the opposite is perhaps more likely, at least for those who continue on studying a language. In a biographical study of six Australians who had learnt Japanese, Kennett (2003) points out that the original reasons that her participants had learnt Japanese were entirely non-instrumental – they learnt it because of travel, or because they enjoyed studying the language. However having then invested substantial time and effort in this study of Japanese, the participants wished to ‘capitalise’ on their ‘investment’, and consequently sought occupations which would ‘justify and satisfy their continued pursuit of opportunities for language use and learning’ (p. 369). That is, their career goals were modified to fit the fact that they wished to study and speak Japanese, rather than the reverse.

Some studies make a clear distinction between motivation to start studying a language and motivation to continue studying a language, although this is obviously more relevant in
contexts where all language study is non-compulsory. These studies tend to find that the motivations to begin study of a language where it is not compulsory are more instrumental motivations, but those students who continue have more strongly integrative motivation. Thus in one study of high school students in the US, for example, the strongest motivation for beginning to study Spanish was for a career, with college entry requirements and family background also high on the list. However the strongest reason to continue after the first year was because the students had received good grades (followed by college entry requirements), with career benefits being less important (Pratt et al., 2009). Similarly another study in the US found that the majority of college (university) students who began language study had instrumental motivations, but those who continued on after completing college requirements were those who were ‘interested in the language’ or had travelled to places where the language was spoken (Majeed, 2013).

In a review of studies looking at attrition of students from languages courses, Wesely (2010) strongly suggested that educators need to promote both instrumental but also integrative reasons for language study. She noted in particular that where instrumental motivations are strongly present, there is very commonly attrition of students because something changes in the context and suddenly the language is no longer ‘useful’; this change can be a change in the external world, but it can also be a change in the student’s idea about their future.

Moving beyond the instrumental versus integrative idea of motivation, more recent frameworks include this distinction, but also include other features, such as issues of the quality of instruction, the effect of the language teacher, and group dynamics (e.g. Dörnyei, 1994), features which can be more readily affected by intervention. Associated with this change in orientation is material which is specifically designed to develop strategies for improving teacher and student motivations in the language learning process (e.g. Dörnyei, 2001); however it should be noted that these strategies are very much reliant for implementation on the individual teacher in a classroom.

More recent still is the development of the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009) as a way of looking at language learning motivations. While integrating much earlier work on language learning motivation, it involves consideration of the language learners’ ideal L2 self (internal desire to become an effective L2 user), the ought-to L2 self (social pressure to master the L2), and the L2 learning experience (experience of being engaged in the process). Following this work, motivational material for teachers to implement in classes has been developed around the idea of ‘vision’, where teachers are expected to get students to relate their current selves to their future (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014); once again, these strategies are at the level of individual teacher interventions in their classroom.

Attitudes

Another area of research in student retention in language study looks at student, parent, teacher and community attitudes to languages in general, specific languages, and language learning; this is obviously connected to and in some cases underlies issues of learner motivation, but is theoretically distinct. However while it is clear that beliefs about languages and language learning have a big effect on the learning process and student success in
studying a language, it has been argued (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005) that this research is fundamentally about what the various attitudinal factors are, rather than focussing on what shapes these beliefs; and only the underlying causes of the beliefs could be altered.

It is nevertheless believed that students’ choices around languages commonly reflect the attitudes of the students, their parents and the broader community toward languages and language education (Byrnes et al., 2002; Curnow, Liddicoat, & Scarino, 2007). There are many different attitudinal factors which are discussed in the research literature, but there are perhaps four common attitudinal themes relating to languages and languages in schools which emerge very strongly; note that there are many other attitudes around languages in the community, which are also relevant but not discussed here.

One factor which is considered vital to having a successful language program in a school, which in turn affects the desire of students to participate in language study, is the support of the program by the principal and other school leaders (e.g. Fernandez & Gearon, 2011a). More generally, a school culture which is supportive of languages is vital if students are to choose to study a language (Hunter, 2013).

A second common attitude held by students (and others) is that languages are difficult, often more difficult than sciences or maths. Many studies have shown that students believe that languages are difficult, or alternatively that it is difficult to do well in languages at school, mostly because the languages are inherently difficult but sometimes because of beliefs around the outcomes of various processes of scaling (Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2003; Carr, 2002; DECD, 2013b; McGannon & Medeiros, 1995; McLauchlan, 2006; Pratt, 2010; Speiller, 1988; Zammit, 1992). This idea that languages are difficult is clearly expressed, for example, in a study of NZ students (McLauchlan, 2006). In a survey at the end of Year 11 of 765 students who had voluntarily studied a language in Year 11, 56.8% of them said that L2 study was ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’, with vocabulary learning being especially difficult. In this same survey, many students who at the beginning of Year 11 had reported that they would study a language until the end of Year 12 in fact discontinued after Year 11, with the main reason for discontinuing being that the language was ‘too hard’. While it is perhaps not directly comparable, it seems likely that the 24% of students who reported discontinuing language study because they didn’t enjoy it in a recent survey in South Australia (DECD, 2013b) were ceasing language study for the same reason.

Another important attitudinal factor to discuss here, once again commonly discussed in many studies of retention, is the belief that other school subjects are more important than a language (Majeed, 2013; McGannon & Medeiros, 1995; Pauwels, 2007; Ramage, 1990; Speiller, 1988). This is usually expressed in this way, but obviously it is also related to structural issues of timetabling – the language is not as important for those students as those other subjects which are timetabled against the language.

The final attitudinal factor relating to studying a language in school which is discussed in the literature is the belief that you do not learn anything by studying a language at school (Kirkpatrick, 2001; McPake, Johnstone, et al., 1999; Zammit, 1992). This may be expressed on its own as a simple claim, but it is also commonly backed up with the idea that ‘everyone knows’ that it is better to learn a language in-country. There is also a combination of this with the idea that languages are difficult – there is a constant workload in the language, you have
to remember a great deal of vocabulary, but despite this you do not (or cannot) learn enough in school to access the language outside the classroom. That is, what you learn is not enough to allow you to read a book, watch a film, or visit a website; it is not even very much help if you travel to a country where the language is spoken.
Student voices

This section of the report discusses the findings obtained from a series of interviews with secondary school students in language programs in a number of South Australian government schools. As most research in the area of retention has gathered data from students only via questionnaires, surveys or similar, the current study aims to give salience to students’ views. They are the key participants in language programs in schools, and we need to gain insights into their perceptions and decision-making processes as to whether or not they continue to study a language.

Interviews were conducted with a number of students ranging from Years 7–11 across five schools, with the majority of students being in Years 8–10. The interviews took place in the form of small focus group discussions, of approximately 40 minutes, guided by a series of questions (see Appendix 1). Students were asked about what they consider to be the impediments and enablers for language study at school; their attitudes towards and perceptions of languages in schools and in future work or study; their attitudes towards technology and language teaching; and their experience of transition pathways from primary to secondary school. They were also asked to comment on what they regard as effective teaching of languages in terms of enabling them to learn and keeping them engaged in the classroom. While a number of questions were used to guide the discussion, there was also flexibility for students to contribute any other comments beyond areas covered by the questions.

Data from the student interviews was collated and analysed using thematic analysis methodology. A number of key themes emerged across the data and these provide the structure for the discussion of the findings. The discussion begins with students’ perceptions of language learning, and moves to factors affecting their decision-making. Each theme includes descriptive commentary supported by quotes from students.

Language learning is not core learning

A common theme across the student responses is that language learning is an optional component of the curriculum. Students felt that language learning was not a core learning area and should be optional for students to study. This was particularly the case once students had been exposed to it in the early years of secondary school, then it should become a choice subject in subsequent years.

‘Languages should be offered but not compulsory.’

There appears to be a clear distinction in students’ minds as to what comprises core and non-core learning areas. According to the majority of students interviewed, languages clearly reside within the non-core grouping along with other subjects such as music and drama, while other subjects such as mathematics and English are regarded as essential.

‘Maths is going to help you whether you like it or not.’
Since languages are viewed as a non-core learning area, students have particular expectations of its availability in the curriculum. In the middle years, they often find it aligned with other electives that are broad, experiential enrichment type subjects from which students have to choose a limited number of electives (typically 4-6 semester units over the year). Language learning typically requires two semester units or two electives. Many students consider that junior secondary represents their last chance to have ‘fun’ within the scope of their electives before they ‘get serious’ in the middle and senior year levels. Hence, many opt for what they perceive to be less academically demanding electives or those that offer opportunities that may not be available in future. It would seem that languages are in a competitive subject environment and, given the other perceptions of the learning area, it is a competition that languages are not likely to win.

“If you choose a language it takes out 2 choices, same with music, so if you do language and music you have no other [elective] choices.’

School structures and the organisation of the curriculum also position learning areas as valued/integral or less valued/optional. Subject selection processes convey messages about required and optional learning areas. Students were not aware of alternative structures and arrangements in terms of curriculum offerings in schools. Some students indicated that they would be willing to continue to study a language in the middle and senior school years if there were a greater number of elective choices available. Some students also wanted a greater range of languages, with the potential to choose a language that they view as most useful.

'[I would continue] if there was more space in the timetable.’

‘I will continue to Year 12 if I have room in my subject choices.’

‘If I could do Chinese or Japanese I would choose that over tech or music because there are not many Indonesian people here, more Chinese and Japanese.’

‘I would have done two languages if it could be offered.’

Some middle school students were already aware of their preferred university or career paths and the necessary subject pathways into senior secondary school, hence they were not prepared to study a language in middle school when they felt that this would be ‘wasted’ as they did not plan to continue into the senior years.

‘There are other subjects that I need if I want to get into uni, there’s no space in my choices for a language.’

Students in middle and senior secondary levels reported that they were aware of schemes such as the Bonus Points System designed to reward language study generally with two additional university entrance points. While they acknowledged the value of this scheme, students considered it to be a reward for students who were already planning to study a
language rather than it attracting students who otherwise would not have studied a language. Indeed, some felt that by the senior secondary level, students had already made choices about the subjects in which they could perform at their best in order to achieve their highest possible result. Hence, it was their view that even the offer of bonus points would be insufficient to attract weaker language students to study a language as they would prefer to choose ‘easier’ options in order to maximize their scores.

**Language learning should be ‘fun’**

Aligned with the sense that some learning areas are core and others are optional, many students expressed the view that language learning should be fun. There is a clear expectation that choice should involve enjoyment and that this is not an expectation for core learning areas.

‘You should enjoy it if you are going to do it. Maths; you don’t have a choice you just have to do it.’

‘I came to high school thinking languages should be fun. Maths doesn’t need to be fun but subjects that you choose should be fun.’

‘Lessons should be fun.’

Students have an association between ‘fun’ and ‘culture’ with activities such as cooking and craft regarded by them as ‘fun’.

For some students, their sense of the value of language learning relates to genuine opportunities to use the language to communicate with others. A number of students explained that they had chosen to study a language in order to participate in experiences such as excursions, sister school relationships, student exchanges and study tours.

‘My brother did German, so I really want to go on the exchange.’

In fact, when students were asked what incentives would encourage more students to study a language, many suggested funded study tours. The interest in study tours and exchanges reflects students’ desire for opportunities to apply their learning and to experience the language and culture ‘for real’. There is a strong sense of language learning having a real world reference point and potential for ‘application’ or utility, and where this is not available, this reduces the perceived relevance of studying the language.

Several students were also aware of some of the broader educational benefits of language learning such as enhanced literacy and cognitive processing.

‘It might make you do better in English.’

‘Learning one language helps with learning others.’

‘It’s good for the other half of your brain.’
Language learning is ‘hard’ and it requires investment

A common theme across students’ responses was that they perceive language learning as requiring a substantial investment both in time and effort in order to achieve satisfactory gains. Students reported that the nature of language learning, such as the reliance on memory and continuous concentration in class, is such that it will necessarily preclude some students from being suited to this kind of learning. The students gave a number of reasons for this, including that the ‘non-suited’ students were not prepared to work hard, not academically capable or simply did not see that language learning had any relevance for their futures.

‘Some people think languages are hard, too much effort, or might not be very good at it so it will bring their grades down.’

‘I found Japanese too hard.’

According to the students, many people view language learning as challenging and too hard compared to other learning areas. This view creates a tension in that when language learning is regarded as too difficult and academic, it is also not perceived as ‘fun’ and therefore not appealing. Furthermore, the view that language learning is an academic pursuit is particularly marked in the middle to upper years of secondary school, when there is a greater emphasis on grammatical knowledge and preparation for examinations.

‘You have to be more motivated in Year 11, it’s more analytical.’

‘I heard that the speaking exam in Year 12 is really hard.’

While some students regarded language learning as difficult, others reported that the demands on them, in the junior secondary years, are not equivalent to those of other learning areas and that it was in fact easier to achieve a higher result in a language class than in other learning areas.

‘An A in languages is not the same as an A in Science.’

Students did not offer any reasons for this. It may be that, due to teachers’ awareness of low retention, there is pressure in the junior secondary years to lower expectations of achievement and orient the program towards use of first language and cultural studies, as a means of addressing student disengagement.

There was a recurring notion, regardless of perceived ease or difficulty, that language learning requires a substantial investment. Some students reported that their reasons for choosing to study a particular language in secondary school were that they had already invested in learning the same language in primary school (where such continuity was available). Other students echoed this sentiment as relevant to the transition from middle to senior years.

‘If you’ve come this far [Year 10] you may as well continue.’

‘You learn a lot if you stick with it.’
Where students were not able to continue to study the same language in secondary school as they had in primary school, some students considered their primary school language learning to have been ‘wasted’.

The concern about ‘wasted’ prior learning, where continuity was not possible, contrasted somewhat with students’ views that, in general, their primary school language learning experiences were of limited value. Many felt that their primary language programs had exposed them to the target language and culture but did not amount to substantive language learning.

‘It was fun but we didn’t learn much.’

‘We did the same stuff every year, numbers, colours. Boring stuff!’

One student reported that, having studied German in primary school, he had an initial advantage in the secondary program over students who were new to the language; however this was short lived and other students made more rapid progress in the secondary program.

‘[It] took about a term for everyone to catch up.’

Many of the students indicated dissatisfaction with their primary language learning experience, prompting one senior student to suggest that primary programs should either be offered more intensively or not at all. The perception that primary programs provide little lasting advantage in language learning is borne out in research studies focussing on achievement in language learning in schools (Hill, 2012; Hill, Davies, Oldfield, & Watson, 1997; Scarino et al., 2011). These studies attribute the situation to the conditions of primary language programs, with limited time on task, the lack of secondary programs building on prior learning, and differences in primary and secondary school cultures of assessment.

**Language learning depends on who you are**

Language learning is also regarded by students as inherently suitable for some and not for others, based on students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds and their future aspirations.

Students described connections between their family background, identity and values that influenced their decisions to continue to study a language or not. In particular, students from families with strong ties to particular language speaking communities were not only encouraged to continue to study the language but were expected to do so.

‘We do [the language] to score points [in the family]. It would be more useful to do another subject.’

‘My mum speaks 4 languages.’

‘I wanted to continue with Italian so I can communicate with my grandparents.’

‘We study it to keep the language and culture alive.’
For others, there was a less direct connection with a particular language but a general sense of valuing language learning as a means of relating effectively to others and developing a positive disposition towards diversity.

‘When I speak to someone in another language I feel like I’m taking on a part of their culture.’

‘Speaking a language shows respect for others.’

‘It’s good for personal development.’

‘It changes the way you think...changes your perspective of the world.’

A number of students, particularly senior students, reported having personal connections and experiences with people from diverse languages and cultures such as through overseas travel or exchange students, in the home or at school. They regarded language learning as essential for developing the capabilities to participate in an international community.

‘Australia is very isolated, it’s better to know other languages.’

‘Some people in Australia think English is enough. Learning another language in Australia is seen as daunting as we are so isolated and not really exposed to other languages, whereas in Europe people are exposed to languages all the time. People who think English is enough are not setting the bar high enough.’

‘So many opportunities for young people, you’re not going to get very far if you only speak one language.’

‘You might want to be a journalist and travel the world.’

‘If you don’t learn a language, you’re not getting the most out of life.’

‘[Learning a language] broadens your life skills.’

‘Primary school [language] gives kids an understanding of other languages and cultures.’

Similarly for non-continuing students, family views are influential in forming their aspirations and sense of how they relate or not to language learning.

‘I’m never going to go there.’

‘I don’t need it to do a trade.’

‘[Language learning is] not important if you are just going to work in a supermarket.’
‘My mum speaks German but my dad doesn’t see the point if you’re never going to go there.’

For these students and their families, there is a sense that ‘English is enough’, particularly as parents perceive students’ futures (primarily in terms of employment) as being locally based and therefore requiring English only. The responses indicate that there is a strong relationship between students’ aspirations and their sense of the relevance of language learning to their futures. According to some students, there is a connection also between students’ aspirations and their socio-economic status and ethnic background.

‘Usually you don’t see a white kid [in classes in this language] beyond Year 8.’

‘Bogan Aussie kids [don’t study languages].’

Based on students’ responses, their self-perceptions and identities as learners and as language learners appear to be quite well developed at the junior secondary level. Their primary language learning experiences would seem to be particularly formative in how students develop their relationship to language learning and these experiences are brought to bear on their attitudes towards language learning in secondary school.

Generally, there was a view that language learning should be relevant and have utility, immediate or future, and that students are best placed to determine the relevance to them individually.

‘Learning languages should have a use.’

‘It depends what you want to do with your life – whether you will use it for work or travel or if you enjoy it.’

‘[Languages shouldn’t be compulsory because] it depends on what you want to do with your life after school.’

Quality teaching makes a difference

There were many responses from students that highlighted quality teaching and positive relationships with the language teacher as major influences on their decision to continue to study a language or not once it becomes optional. Students’ responses reflect an expectation that in languages, where particular teachers are often closely associated with the learning area, students should ‘like’ their teacher.

‘Having a teacher who keeps everyone on board is helpful.’

‘If you have a bad [teacher] you’re at a disadvantage and you don’t want to continue.’

‘Teachers that have come before maybe didn’t engage all the kids in the class so people drop out.’
’Having a good teacher helps, one who is actually a teacher not just someone who can speak [the language]. He is actually pushing us, it’s actually really good.’

’I heard that the teacher was really good.’

This seems to align with the view that since the learning area is regarded as optional, then having a positive relationship with the teacher is more important than in other compulsory learning areas.

’Sometimes the teacher makes a difference between liking and not liking a language.’

’If I had a nicer teacher, I’d participate more in the subject.’

Some students raised concerns about the quality of teaching and the responsiveness of teachers to their needs, highlighting the role that identity and disposition play in language teaching and learning.

’I didn’t like the teacher, she shouted a lot. [I] couldn’t understand her. She mumbled instructions and didn’t teach us anything. She spoke to us in [the target language] and we couldn’t understand.’

Others who were continuing to study a language expected and wanted more rigorous programs.

’We like [the teacher] because he is actually pushing us, it’s actually really good.’

Students were also asked to comment on pedagogy in relation to the use of technology, specifically technology as part of pedagogy, and technology and program delivery. They were specifically asked about their prior experiences and perceptions of the use of technology in language learning. They were unanimous in their views that the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) enhanced language learning. They reported using ICTs to prepare visual presentations, to record their work such as dialogues and to participate in games and language exercises. They also reported that they seldom used ICTs for genuine communication with peers in the target language country or countries and many commented on their desire to do so.

’The best use of technology is to communicate with others.’

When asked to comment on the potential of ICTs to support the delivery of language programs, students were adamant that this should be a last resort and that it should not be at the expense of face-to-face teaching. When asked if it were the only means to provide the language program, some indicated that this would be preferable to no program at all but that it would be a likely disincentive for them to continue studying the language.
‘[If you had to learn a language online instead of in a classroom] you’d have to be really determined to be successful but it would be better than nothing.’

‘I find it easier to learn a language when it comes directly out of the teacher’s head.’

‘You wouldn’t get the one-on-one. [You] would lose the class aspect. I need to feel connected.’

‘Nothing beats a real teacher.’

**Conclusion**
The responses from students indicate one overarching theme in relation to the perceptions of language learning in schooling: language learning is optional and not as important as other ‘core’ learning areas. Other factors are also important in influencing students’ decisions about whether to continue studying a language or not, and many of these are interrelated and at times contradictory. For example, there is a view that language learning is optional and therefore should be fun, yet it is difficult and too academic for some. The view that language learning requires investment is also vexed in that some students perceive this as a reason to continue, while for others this means it is more difficult than other subjects. Languages are also viewed as being of relevance depending on students’ backgrounds, prior experiences and aspirations for the future. The culture of ‘electives’ and the structures of schooling also impact on students’ choices, with many of them aware early on in secondary school as to their likely trajectories and therefore whether or not language learning will ‘fit’ and whether (they consider that) it is necessary or not. There is a strong sense that languages are in a kind of market where students choose them or not based on various criteria, including the quality of the teaching and relationship with the language teacher. Thus, languages appear to be operating in a paradigm of curriculum-by-choice that impacts on students’ perceptions of the learning area and their decisions as to whether or not they continue to study them.
Other voices

As well as discussions with students, detailed in the previous section, interviews or focus groups were also held with teachers, school leaders, and others (see Introduction for details). The interviews or focus groups were semi-structured and guided by the questions in Appendices 2–5, looking in particular at beliefs about: students’ experiences of language learning; the attitudes of students and the broader community towards languages learning in schools; why students continue to study a language or cease to study a language; what could improve retention; historical changes in participation; structural issues affecting participation and retention; technology; the Australian Curriculum; and the role of the South Australian Certificate of Education.

While each of the different participants had somewhat different views on each of the areas covered, there is a great deal of overlap between the different voices, and sufficient commonality across the board to discuss the themes jointly, noting where there are differing views.

In what follows, we have grouped the various ideas around participation and retention expressed by more than one participant into themes. It should be noted, however, that there is often substantial overlap between themes.

**Teachers and their relationship with students**

Almost all participants began by commenting on the importance of teachers when it came to students continuing on with language study.

Teachers themselves tended to discuss the importance of the ‘relationship’ between teachers and students. If you had a ‘good relationship’, students were likely to continue. However it was very hard for teachers to indicate what would affect their relationship with students, beyond superficial features – teachers who do not show an interest in students’ lives would not have a good relationship, for example; teachers need to be ‘active’ and ‘involved’ in the classroom and with their students (see also the section below, ‘Aspects of teaching’). For many teachers, this appeared to be a fixed component, to some extent, in that there are some students who you get along with well, and others with whom you have trouble.

Members of school leadership and others tended to discuss similar issues in terms of student retention being achievable only when there were ‘good teachers’ in the language program at the school. Principals in particular commented on this, and that they found it especially problematic, as it was not an area where they felt they had a great deal of control. The pool of available language teachers was usually highly limited, so even where a teacher left and a new teacher could be appointed, there was little choice. As there were only a very few teachers of any language at a school, a single ‘bad’ teacher could exert a huge effect on the entire language program, not only during the time that he or she was present in the school, but extending into the future – once a language program at a school gained a bad reputation, it was difficult to shift that perception. One principal discussed having had ‘problems’ with a language teacher in the past, that staff and other students ‘hated’ the teacher, and that even after the teacher was replaced by a ‘really great’ teacher it took ‘over three years’ for the program to recover.
Clearly, language teachers need to be good teachers (in a generic sense) in order to encourage students to continue, and to support a good language program.

**Leadership and school culture**

As well as good teachers and a good relationship with students, all participants discussed the importance of school culture, and in particular the vital role that leadership plays in establishing that culture. Students were not expected to continue on in languages unless there was a strong message from the school leadership that the whole school believed that languages were important.

Teachers considered that if a principal was not active in supporting languages, then a language program would simply not survive at the school, certainly not beyond the point where it was compulsory for students. While all teachers in the current study indicated that their leadership team was supportive, several indicated experiences at other schools where a previously vibrant program was lost, which they attributed to a change in the school leadership leading to a less supportive environment. However, while a supportive school leadership was vital, many teachers felt that it was additionally important to have support from teachers in other learning areas; many teachers felt that this was lacking, and that other teachers did not really understand the position of languages.

School leaders also emphasised the importance of the leadership team in supporting languages; and all of the leaders interviewed expressed their own support for languages. However, with the obvious exception of those at the specialist languages school, all school leaders were definite in maintaining a distinction between supporting a language program, which they believed they did, and any particular privileging of the language program, which they did not feel was appropriate for them to do. Some of the leaders discussed finding innovative solutions to issues around the language program (usually involving the introduction of composite classes), but were generally clear that non-compulsory language programs in the school were in the same position as other non-compulsory learning areas, and operated within the same set of constraints.

In summary, language learning needs to have a valued place in the school culture and activities, and be supported by the school and particularly the leadership, in order for students to wish to continue on beyond the compulsory years of study.

**Community attitudes and policies**

It was generally held by all interviewees that the Australian community does not consider that languages are important for students. Whether this was considered problematic to any degree depended on the participant, with teachers obviously all believing that it is highly problematic, and often referring to the idea of a ‘monolingual mindset’. There was a general belief across all interviewees that this has a strong effect on the choices made by students around continuing to study a language.

While this idea was always held to be true of the Australian community in general, it was sometimes expressed more strongly at a more local level. That is, teachers and school leaders in some schools maintained that their local school community was different from other school communities, because it was not focussed on students going on to receive a university education, and thus ‘the parents of the students in this particular school’ did not
consider that their students should study a language (unlike in other schools they had heard about or taught at previously). Several principals talked about ‘defending’ languages against their local community of parents, usually noting that they were in an area of lower socioeconomic status.

Interestingly, several of the interviewees explicitly indicated that, in their opinion, whether a student spoke only English at home or other languages in addition did not affect the attitudes of families when it came to the relevance of studying a language at school. Where a home language was taught at the school, there was an increase in retention; but if a student spoke a language at home which was not English and not the language taught at school, it was felt that this did not make it any less likely that the family’s attitudes would be that language study was irrelevant.

One issue which is connected to these community attitudes is that language teachers feel they are often the only members of the school community and the broader community who are actively promoting languages; but that they are perceived as having a conflict of interest, in that they would naturally want students to study languages in order to ensure their own employment, whether this was in the students’ best interests or not.

Clearly, community and family attitudes towards language study affects students, in that their own attitudes are shaped by these, and this affects their subject choices, especially if these are discussed with family members. However interviewees also raised more complex relationships around these attitudes.

One particular factor which both teachers and other interviewees felt was affecting student retention in languages was the attitude of career counsellors or similar, who advise students on subject selection. With the exception of those working at the specialist languages school, language teachers believe that those who are involved in discussing subject choices with students do not understand the role of languages in school education or society more generally, and discourage students from studying languages. In some cases, teachers believe there is active discouragement; more generally, it is felt that students are never encouraged to study a language, regardless of their future interests.

One corollary of the attitudes of the Australian community toward languages education is the explicit and implicit enshrinement of this in policy. There are explicit beliefs held by the school community about the importance of numeracy, literacy and sciences in a students’ education. In indicating what they felt was their own strong support for languages in their school, several of the principals explicitly stated that languages were important, but ‘obviously they’re at the second level’, because they are not the really important subjects – literacy, numeracy and sciences (and health, for one principal). As one principal noted, ‘there are eight areas in SACSA, but the pie has to be divided, and it can’t be divided equally.’ Several of the language teachers themselves indicated similar ideas, noting that languages were vitally important for students, but continuing unprompted to note that languages are ‘not as important’ as literacy.

Thus students’ choices in continuing to study a language are affected by their own attitudes, but these in turn are shaped by the attitudes of the general community, the local community, their families and the school community in general, as well as by the attitudes of
specific members of the school community, particularly the school leadership, home-room teachers, and career counsellors or similar who advise students about subject choices.

**Structural issues**

There are a set of issues which interviewees believe affect student retention and participation in languages education that can be considered under the umbrella of structural issues. These issues affect students’ choices, either by playing a role in the decision-making process of students, or else by simply removing languages as a possible choice for students in later years of secondary school. Particularly relevant and frequently mentioned factors include issues of transition and continuity, timetabling and semesterisation of languages, and the lack of time in which to offer languages, because of the requirements of other subjects. Each of these issues can lead students who might otherwise undertake language study to decide to discontinue.

*Transition from primary school languages*

One issue which arose in almost all interviews and focus groups was that of the transition of students from primary to secondary school. Teachers were explicitly asked about this; but many principals mentioned it also. (Note that despite the following discussion, almost all teachers were supportive of languages being taught in primary school.)

In most schools, every Year 8 language class contained some students who had studied the language in primary school and some students who had never studied that language (although most had studied another language). This was even the case in the Reception–Year 12 school, as many students joined the school from other feeder primaries in Year 7 or Year 8. In none of the schools was there a systematic attempt across the board to deal with this issue. In the specialist languages school, some students in some languages entered an accelerated pathway. Otherwise, the general response to having students who had and who did not have prior study in the same class was that classroom teachers tended to ask those who had studied in primary to help the new students (and generally felt that this encouraged the students with prior knowledge, and made entry into high school easier for them).

Teachers indicated that the two groups equalised in terms of language ability very quickly; different teachers suggested different lengths of time, but all were within a couple of months or a term or so. Some teachers suggested that this could be detrimental for retention in languages, in that students quickly came to an opinion that you do not learn anything studying a language in (primary) school, and whatever you do in class at school can be caught up within a short period of time. As one teacher put it, the best one could hope for from a primary language program in terms of retention issues was that the students would get used to the idea that they had to do a language, so they would just keep doing it even once they had a choice.

An alternative view of the primary school study of language from a couple of principals was that it was a gamble. If the students had a good teacher in primary school, that was great, and made high school languages much easier. But if the students had a bad experience of the language in primary school (which was felt to be relatively common), the high school teacher and leadership team could do absolutely nothing to change the students’ opinion of language study.
There are thus clearly issues around transition from primary school. With no structures or policies in place, whether a student has studied a language in primary school or not makes no difference to which class they attend, and any such differences are ‘ironed out’ within a short period of time. That is, students come to understand that there is no point in studying a language at school – you end up in exactly the same place whether you have studied a language for perhaps four years (at primary school) or you have never studied a language before.

**Continuity and pathways through to senior secondary language study**

In many of the school contexts which were discussed by interviewees, there is an issue of continuity in languages through to senior secondary. At one of the schools, there was no tradition of language study beyond Year 8. At several others, it is possible for students to continue through to Year 10, or Year 11, or Year 12, depending on the language, and the particular year. In some years, for some languages, even if it is possible to continue, students are in composite classes, with perhaps students from Years 10–12 all present in the same class. In most cases, it is not necessarily clear whether languages at higher levels will be offered in future years or not.

One problem that faces many students wishing to study a language at senior secondary schools is that the existing dropout rate means that classes are not viable because of very small numbers, and that classes are therefore not offered. This means that students who wish to study a language at senior levels will not be able to do so within the school. Where it has become usual practice for a school not to offer a language at senior levels, this creates a perception among learners at earlier levels that senior secondary study of the language is not possible and that languages are a terminating subject that can be taken only up to Year 9 or 10. This provides a disincentive for students to consider the possibility of extended language study at school.

There are alternative pathways available for students in that position through complementary providers, especially the School of Languages, but it appears that many students are not aware of such pathways. This appears to be the result of a problem in disseminating information. The School of Languages provides information to schools, but this information is not passed on to students and parents, at least in some cases. Where information is passed on, this is often done only when the school makes a decision not to offer a class. This means that most students are not aware of alternative pathways for studying a language and that the possibility of alternative modes of study is not something that they can consider in deciding what to study at senior secondary level.

Thus the uncertainty about the future of a language program at a school is hardly conducive to students choosing in Year 8 to continue to study a language – they could potentially choose that path, but they cannot be sure whether language study will be available the following year, or the year after that. Only the highly dedicated and motivated students would make a choice for languages in the face of such uncertainty.

**Timetabling, semesterisation, and time allocation**

Another structural issue which was raised in discussions of participation in languages relates to when and for how long languages are taught at schools – timetabling against other subjects,
languages only being offered for part of the year, and other subjects ‘taking over’ from languages.

Because language classes tend to be small, at any year level languages are normally only offered on one line; hence students necessarily have to choose to do a language over another subject, and that other subject may be something they particularly wish to do. Equally, some teachers felt that languages were timetabled against ‘fun’ subjects, and so naturally students would choose to do the ‘fun’ subject rather than a language. It is worth noticing that this issue was not raised by all teachers at all schools; however the overall impression it gives to students and others is that languages are not particularly important educationally for students, they are just something you might do to pass the time.

A issue related to timetabling which arose in some schools, and is seemingly becoming more relevant, is the issue of ‘semesterisation’ of languages. In some cases, rather than students studying a language for a full year, they study a language (more intensively) for only part of the year. Several principals mentioned this as a future possibility to deal with issues of the Australian Curriculum (see below); some schools have already adopted this approach for their Year 8 language classes. This has a very stark effect on retention in languages – at one school, students had just selected whether to do a language at Year 9 or not; of the 20 students who were interested, 18 had studied the language in the second half of the year, with only 2 of the students who had a six-month break wishing to study in Year 9. It is clear that a lack of continuity leads students to cease language study.

A related issue with semesterisation is not about the semesterisation of languages, but other subjects. In many schools, most subjects which students elect to do are only a semester long, so that they can do two subjects in the line per year. However languages (and sometimes music) tend to be full-year subjects; hence if a student wants to do a particular non-language subject, they can do that subject in one semester and a different subject in the other semester, but cannot do that subject and a language.

School leaders were explicitly asked about the effect of the Australian Curriculum; teachers were not asked explicitly, and almost no teacher mentioned it. The responses around the Australian Curriculum were extremely diverse, but related to structural issues rather than issues of pedagogy. Some principals felt that the Curriculum would have no effect on languages, good or bad. One principal believed that it was impossible to tell at this stage because nothing had been released which would make any effect clear. Several indicated that what had been released would require substantial reworking at their school, because certain other subjects (if any were mentioned, this usually included history) would now need to have a more substantial time allocation in the curriculum, and this would probably have to come out of languages (and possibly other subjects); some principals indicated that they were being ‘pushed’ in this way by staff associated with other learning areas whose curriculum documents were further advanced. Finally, one principal believed that under the Australian Curriculum there was now a reduced requirement for students to study a language, as it will now only be required in Year 8, and for a shorter period of time. There is no consistency across the responses; but in general, most principals felt that the introduction of the Curriculum will lead to them further constraining the possibilities for students to study a language.
Issues of time and timetabling lead to languages not being offered in a consistent fashion; students being unable to take a language even if they might wish to; and a general perception that languages are not particularly important in education.

**Students choose other subjects as more relevant**

Students are operating within a framework where they must choose some subjects over other subjects – there is a limited time, and a limited set of options for each line. Within this, then, students are selecting courses which they believe to be necessary or relevant for them, or which they will enjoy.

There is a clear hierarchy of subjects, in terms of community attitudes, as discussed above. Numeracy (maths), literacy (English), and sciences are important for all, regardless of interest; although sciences seem to be relevant for all only at lower levels, but not at senior secondary. Interviewees tended to agree with this hierarchy.

As noted above, there was a belief among language teachers that careers advisors, or career counsellors, or home-room teachers, who assist students in deciding about subject selection, have no understanding of why a language would be useful for students, and consequently do not advise students to study a language when it is an optional choice.

Community beliefs about the relevance of languages were also starkly reflected in the beliefs of interviewees, regardless of their relationship to languages education. Interviewees at schools with a higher socioeconomic level discussed students deciding against languages as relating to them choosing subjects that they needed and which would get them the highest possible ATAR score; it was generally assumed that many students wished to study a language, but other subjects ‘won out’ over languages. At schools with lower socioeconomic status, various interviewees espoused a position that languages would only be relevant for those students who might go on to university; languages were not considered particularly relevant for those students who would go straight into employment after school. In these schools with a lower socioeconomic status, interviewees also assumed that students were deliberately not choosing a language because they did not want to study one, rather than that they could not fit it into their timetable.

Where it was relevant, teachers felt that the changes to SACE had a dramatic effect on student retention in languages. One principal was absolutely explicit: ‘the New SACE has killed languages’. The issue of the SACE was only relevant in those schools which had a tradition of students continuing languages into Years 11 and 12, which tended to be the schools with higher socioeconomic status.

At these schools, students were expected to want to go on to university, and teachers believe that students wish to leave open the broadest range of possible futures. Thus teachers believe that students at Stage 2 SACE will go on to study: English and maths; if they are not sure what they wish to do, then probably two sciences; if they have an idea, then perhaps one science and a specialist subject such as economics. Traditionally, in the belief of teachers, students then had a fifth subject at Stage 2 which was their more relaxed subject, ‘something they’d enjoy doing’; and for many students, this was a language. With the change to SACE having ‘only four subjects’ (which is how the change was generally discussed by interviewees), those students who did the language as their fifth subject can no longer do it.
While this broad interpretation was the most common, other teachers were more specific in their understanding of student choices in the SACE, but generally the issue was four subjects rather than five at Stage 2. Some said, for example, that students believed you had to do two sciences to get into engineering, or that you had to study English in order to enter a university on the east coast. And a few teachers considered that rather than the problem relating fundamentally to a change between five subjects and four subjects (although this was relevant), the primary issue was the change from requiring a language-rich subject to no such requirement – students could now do, potentially, double maths, physics and chemistry, whereas before they had necessarily done a non-science subject.

An associated issue connected to university study was the issue of requirements – that there is absolutely nothing that would require a student to have done a language at school, unlike many other subjects (in the belief of teachers). Even university study in areas where one might think a language would be useful or necessary (e.g. international business) did not require a language for entry. Language study at university does not require students to have studied a language at school (although it can allow you to enter at a higher level; but not usually to study less).

While some interviewees (primarily the language teachers) indicated that they were aware of the existence of various ATAR bonus schemes around languages, no-one expressed the view that student choices were particularly affected by these schemes.

There is thus an interesting hierarchy, reflecting community attitudes, about different subject choices, what sorts of subjects students need to study, and who should study a language. These clearly have a strong impact on the retention of students through to senior secondary.

Languages are not for all (especially at advanced levels)

One very interesting view that arose from the interviews was the clear belief among some of the participants, including some language teachers, that language study was not for all students. Obviously, one way this was expressed has been discussed above – that there are some students whose future path will mean that languages are not relevant (in the estimation of the teacher, community, or student). However leaving those students aside, there was a clear story from some interviewees that certain sets of students should not study a language.

Many school leaders and many language teachers believe that students who are ‘struggling with literacy and numeracy’ (where literacy is to be interpreted as English literacy) should not study a language, although there is research evidence that this is not the case and that learning a second language can actually support literacy development in the first language. Those who are ‘struggling with literacy’ include students who are in ESL programs, but also those who may be struggling for other reasons. The idea that these students should not study a language, which had support from many language teachers when they were explicitly asked, has been structurally instituted in several schools, with ESL or ‘remedial’ classes of various types being timetabled at the same time as ‘compulsory’ languages, so students no longer have an option to study a language even if they would wish to. At one school, a teacher estimated that around 10% of the students in Year 8 did not study a
language as a result; this figure was allowed to pass without comment by other language teachers present in the group.

In some interviews with language teachers, certain teachers indicated that they believe that ‘only the good students’ should go on to study languages beyond the compulsory years. While a language is compulsory, language classes are deliberately made ‘fun’ or ‘entertaining’, but once students choose to study a language, ‘that’s when it gets hard’ or ‘challenging’. One teacher suggested students should only be allowed to go on to study a language in Year 10 if they passed an exam; a few teachers indicated that students who the teacher believes will not do well are actively discouraged from choosing to study a language.

This seems to be particularly the case if there are very few students who would be studying at an advanced level, as it is easier for a teacher to control a combined class if the students who are present are all (in the opinion of the teacher) good language learners, with strong self-direction, and not ‘lazy’. This was echoed even more strongly by one of the principals, who indicated that, at a previous school, the language teachers actively discouraged students from going on to senior secondary, ‘because it’s too much hard work to teach at that level’; if the students really wanted to continue, they were encouraged to go to the School of Languages.

At the level of schools and even for some language teachers there is a clear belief that only some students should study a language at any level, or only some students should go on to study a language at a higher level. These beliefs clearly work against the retention of students in language programs.

**Lack of clarity around languages education**

An interesting issue which arose in the interviews and focus groups is the lack of clarity around language study, and what role it plays or could play in education.

Several of the school leaders indicated that their local communities are not interested in language study, and do not feel it is relevant to their students. As one principal put it, ‘in this community, education is purely functional, it’s about getting a job’; consequently, languages education is perceived as irrelevant where students do not see their future as requiring knowledge of a language.

More broadly, though, there was little indication that any of the interviewees had a concept of what was ‘required’ for students in terms of compulsory language education, or what study to any year level would involve, beyond the number of hours of study. That is, none of the participants expressed a view of what would be a reasonable outcome for a student at any particular level, or what a student would be able to do in or with a language after a certain amount of study. When language teachers were explicitly asked whether students have to study a language to be prepared for the modern world, they all responded yes; but when that was reframed as ‘Do you think that if a student doesn’t study a language at school then they won’t do very well in modern Australia or won’t get a job or something?’, the response was always that the student would get by fine without a language. When asked how long a student should study a language for at school, the only response was ‘as long as possible’. No teacher gave a response involving outcomes, or abilities, or areas that students should have studied, or curriculum goals.
An additional related issue here is that students are aware that there are other places to study a language. As some teachers noted, students know that in the future if they decide they want to study a language, it is possible to do that at university or in many other contexts. If students study a language from primary school through to senior secondary, it is still only the equivalent of doing a year at university, and teachers believe many students know this – so it is better to do ‘fun’ things at school while you have the chance. Equally, many students do not see a language in their future, but even if they do, they can study whichever language it happens to be easily enough at WEA or similar; or even better, in-country, since ‘everyone knows’ that it is much better to study a language in-country.

There is thus little clarity about what languages education at school is for, and what students are able to achieve by doing it. This is likely to discourage students from wanting to continue on in a language – there does not really seem to be any point.

Aspects of teaching
Interviewees commented on a couple of aspects relating to teaching which they felt were directly related to the participation and retention of students in non-compulsory languages. Some of these were related to pedagogies and teaching directly; however there was also discussion of trips, exchanges, and similar.

In discussions with the interviewees, it was often difficult to distinguish issues around ‘good’ teachers (see section above) from ‘good’ teaching. Many of the participants indicated that in their belief students would only continue to study if the classes were conducted in a fashion which would lead students to engage with the material – this was often expressed in terms of teacher personality traits, such as teachers being ‘active’ (or even ‘young’!) or ‘with-it’ and aware of what students might like, and what they would be interested in.

Teachers were explicitly asked in the interviews about the practices in language classes that lead to highest student retention. In responding to this question, no teacher discussed any language-specific teaching practices. One or two mentioned the importance of good, modern pedagogies; however in essence all responses were uniformly about ensuring a good relationship with students in the class, teaching in a manner which was sensitive to students’ needs and differences, being aware of what students are interested in – fundamentally, teachers all maintain that the most important factor in the classroom for retaining students is good teaching. (In addition to other important factors which are, from a teacher point of view, outside the classroom, such as structural factors and exchanges.)

Some teachers explicitly stated that at lower levels, where languages are compulsory, the classes have to be ‘fun’. You cannot have too much content, and the classes should not include grammar. But at higher levels, when languages are no longer compulsory, languages should be ‘hard’. Given that we know from the research literature that students leave at higher levels because they consider that languages are too hard, it would seem that teachers are creating a problem for themselves here – do nothing at lower levels, because ‘fun’ is interpreted as largely content-free, so students don’t really see a point to studying a language, since they don’t learn anything; and then have those students who might have continued on pull out at higher levels because suddenly the language classes are very much harder than they were anticipating, based on their earlier experience.
Language teachers were specifically asked about technology in the language classroom, how students respond, and what technology is used for in their classes. While many teachers said that students ‘enjoyed’ the use of technology, it was clear that most teachers were talking at the level of using laptops to write essays, designing powerpoint slides to accompany a talk, looking up a YouTube clip, or sometimes using Google Translate – and several teachers indicated that the students simply expected this level of technology in all their classes, and basically did not even notice its presence. None of the teachers appeared to be utilising more ‘complex’ technologies, such as video chat or social media; several teachers indicated that it might be a good idea, but they would need substantial additional time to develop their own capabilities with such technologies and work out how to integrate them into the classes.

While it depended to some extent on the school and the language, most interviewees mentioned the importance of exchanges, trips, sister-school arrangements, and the like. Some believed that the opportunity to participate in such events was a fundamental motivator for students to continue on in studying a language. This was particularly the case for those schools and languages with a Year 10 or Year 11 overseas trip – quite a few teachers indicated that several of their students were essentially only continuing the language for the chance to go on the trip; however when students returned, they were often even more motivated in their language study.

Retaining students in language programs requires good teaching, with good modern pedagogies; there is no special teaching practice which will lead students to continue. Content-free ‘fun’ classes at lower levels and then ‘hard’ grammar-driven classes at higher levels lose out twice, with students rejecting the language because they do not learn anything, then those who stay rejecting the language because it is suddenly too hard. Technologies in the class could potentially help retention, although there was little evidence of it, but only if they are fully integrated and well-thought-out, which takes a great deal of time and resources. Exchanges and trips, at least at relatively senior levels, do seem to encourage retention.

**What idea would you put in the mind of your principal / head of DECD to improve retention?**

One of the questions which teachers were explicitly asked in the interviews or focus groups was what single idea they would put in the mind of their school principal or the head of DECD which would improve retention. Responses to this revolved around a very small set of features:

- Remove the research project from SACE so it returns to five subjects, and students can choose a language as their fifth subject
- Languages should be obligatory to the end of Year 9, with an exchange in Year 10 (but note that some participants explicitly rejected the option of making languages compulsory for longer)
- The Year 12 exam in some languages is pitched at background speakers, so it discourages continuers; it needs to be focussed specifically at continuers
- Get someone in from outside to tell students that languages are important; this should not just come from the language teacher
- There’s a need for external ‘pull’ factors to encourage students to study a language
• There needs to be a clear promotion of the career pathways that a language can provide
• There needs to be good teaching by good teachers across the language program, and across schools
Promoting retention

The study has shown that there are a number of (perceived) barriers that influence the likelihood that students will continue language study once it is no longer compulsory, through to Year 10 or Year 12. Promoting retention therefore involves facilitating retention by overcoming these barriers. The following discusses the various barriers and enablers, organised in a loosely thematic way.

The influence of community attitudes
The attitudes of the general community, and more specifically the school community, school leadership, teachers, parents and students have been shown to be vital in shaping student choices around language study. Where the community believes that language study is important, students are more likely to continue; where the community is less decided on the importance of language study, fewer students continue language study to higher levels. Positive community attitudes towards language study are therefore a significant enabler for retention in language programs.

Changing community attitudes is complex, and the study has shown that it is important that messages about the relevance of learning languages come ‘from the top’, outside education systems. This could be from political leadership (Prime Minister, Premier, etc.) or other leading Australians. It is also the case that individual messages need to be developed and targeted to specific groups – school leaders, teachers, parents and students – along the lines of the messages presented in Fernandez & Gearon (2011b).

The influence of the SACE
There is a strong belief among many principals, teachers and senior students that languages are commonly conceived of as the ‘fifth subject choice’ for those Year 12 students who are interested in languages. That is, there is a perception that there is a set of students who would be studying a language in Stage 2 SACE if it was possible to do an additional subject, beyond the ‘current four subjects’ which can be taken (to use the phrasing of our participants).

Mandating of language study
In many European and Asian contexts, it is common for at least one language (in addition to the main language used as a medium of communication) to be compulsorily studied through to at least Year 10 – that is, every student must study a language, at least through middle school. In some countries, there is very strong streaming of students, with increased requirements for language study placed on some categories of students, so that Humanities students may have to study two languages, for example.

In the Australian context, different schools have different approaches to mandating language and this sends different messages to different groups of students about the value of language study. At senior secondary level languages are mandated only in situations where schools offer the International Baccalaureate, at the level of the Diploma (equivalent to Years 11-12).

This study found that there is some confusion over the status of languages in the general South Australian state educational system (and in understandings of the new
Australian Curriculum). Languages are often spoken of as being ‘compulsory in Year 8’ by participants, yet many participants are also aware of students who do not study a language in Year 8, either because the school which they attend does not offer a language, or because they are in a particular ‘category’ of student who are exempted from studying a language. In either case, the combination of the belief that language study is ‘compulsory’ in the system but that (some) students don’t have to study one currently sends a quite clear message to students that ‘languages aren’t that important, because you don’t really have to do one even when we say you do’. This anomalous situation works as a barrier to establishing a positive belief about the importance of the place of languages in the curriculum and in students’ lives.

**Direction for principals**

Relating to this last point is the interesting view of many of the school leaders interviewed that they currently do not receive clear messages about languages in the curriculum from DECD, and consequently do not feel able to support languages as well as they might like. Different school leaders expressed this in different ways, but it always came down to wanting to receive clear requirements with respect to whether languages are compulsory or not (and for whom), clear requirements with respect to program length and program quality, a clear curriculum, and with clear accountability for learning standards and retention rates. With a clear statement of these, many school leaders feel that they would be able to better support languages at their schools and in their school communities, thus improving retention among students.

**Expectations about what students will learn and be able to do**

At present, messages which reach students about language study are often very generic, framed in terms of it being important to study ‘a language’ because it allows them to participate as a global citizen, have an intercultural understanding of others, and that it has a positive cognitive effect. These are important messages; but by themselves, they lead students to the simple conclusion that studying a language is important for those reasons, but even a limited study of a language is enough to gain these benefits. There appear to be few clear messages given to students about what progression is in language study and what they can expect to attain as the result of continued study. Language teachers themselves do not seem to articulate a clear understanding of the long term benefit of language study: when language teachers were asked explicitly how long students should study a language, they simply came up with ‘for as long as possible’, which once again feeds into the idea that it does not really matter when you study a language if it is not compulsory, because there is no identified advantage that comes from continued study.

If students are to commit to long-term language study, they need to understand, clearly and unambiguously, what they will learn by studying a particular language up to a particular year level, what they will be able to do as a consequence and what the added value of additional study would be. This study has indicated that students need to feel that there is a clear pathway, and that they are progressing year by year. They need to know what more they will be studying if they continue their study of Language X until Year 10, and what they will be studying if they continue on with the same language until Year 12. Clearly, this must be
done separately for each language, as what students will study and achieve is distinct for different languages.

The implementation of the Australian Curriculum will greatly assist in allowing schools and teachers to state unambiguously what students will learn in studying Language X until Year 10. However while students should be presented with this information in curriculum form (e.g. that you will be introduced to the past tense, learn vocabulary for household objects, or improve your character recognition), students also need explanations of what they will be able to do in terms of capabilities that are concrete and meaningful for them: ‘having studied Spanish until the end of Year 12, you will be able to read graphic novels in Spanish with the help of a dictionary’, or ‘you will be able to participate in simple conversations with a native speaker about a range of topics’.

Without an idea of what the immediate short-term advantages of continuing to study a language at school might be, students are unlikely to opt to continue, especially where there is a belief that language learning requires effort. If messages reach them which give them a reason, in the short-term, to study a language, they are more likely to continue.

Messages about the advantages of language study may be more convincing if they come from peers, such as a former student. They could talk to assemblies or home-groups about what they were able to do because they studied a language to Year 10 or Year 12. Note that this should not necessarily be someone who continued on with a language through university or studied overseas – many students will not have that in mind for their futures. Students are interested in knowing what the advantages for them are, in terms of how they see their immediate future. With appropriate permissions, talks of this kind could be filmed and placed on a relevant website, but this has a lesser impact on students than someone physically present – especially when it will undoubtedly be the language teacher who shows the students the video clip.

**Languages and careers**

The literature on retention in languages suggests that messages about how a language can be useful in the future can be productive; but equally that tying language study and careers together closely is counter-productive, because students often do not see any connection between their intended future career (if they have one in mind) and the study of a language, even if others might.

Thus too close an association between specific languages and specific careers can have a negative effect on retention, as students may not be interested in those careers, or may change their minds about what they may wish to do, or think that the language they are currently studying is less useful than another language which they are not able to study. Language programs are more successful when students believe that language is for human development and for obtaining a global perspective, as well as for careers. Messages about languages in careers need to show what languages can add in terms of future options for any career rather than focusing on specific careers: e.g. the ability to communicate with people from other cultures in the future or the possibility of opening up new options or possibilities within a career.
Delivering messages to students – particularly through voices such as careers advisors, course advisors and other similar groups – about generic capabilities which are developed specifically through the study of languages to an advanced level (perhaps Year 10 and Year 12), and ideas about how these capabilities can then be applied in other contexts, would encourage students to continue. Language teachers also need access to this information, but their voice is much less relevant here, as it is considered that they will naturally encourage students to study a language, and so in a sense their input is much less influential.

**Clear pathway for students**

This study has shown that the lack of certainty about whether language classes will be offered by their school in future years is a barrier to students choosing to study a language. If students are uncertain about whether they will be able to continue with a language program, or if the program will not be of the type they expect, this discourages them from continuing. Conversely, if students have explicit information from Year 8 onwards about exactly what their possible pathway is through the study of their particular language to the level which they would like to achieve, they are less likely to discontinue earlier simply on the grounds that they might not be able to keep going. At present, they often receive messages such as that the language may or may not be offered at a particular year level, but that this will depend on enrolments, that the language may possibly be offered in a combined class or that they might be able to take classes with a complementary provider. If students and their parents receive clear and definite information about the possibilities of language study – ‘you will be able to study German at this school campus until Year 10; if you wish to continue through to Year 12, that will be possible, and the school / the principal / the home-group teacher will organise for you to study online via Open Access College / at a local area school where classes will be taught through the School of Languages’ – then they are able to make an informed choice. If students are unclear, or must research and organise for themselves, only a very small number of highly dedicated students will continue to study a language, particularly in contexts where there is a historical precedent that the language is not taught through to Year 12.

**Quality teaching**

This study has shown that the quality of teaching is a significant factor in students’ decisions to continue or discontinue language learning. In any learning area, unless students receive quality teaching, many students will discontinue. Like other teachers, language teachers need to take account of student differences, be aware of their students’ interests, know what students expect and explain to them explicitly if things will be different in this class from other classes and why. Issues of quality teaching are perhaps more relevant for languages than many other learning areas, as it is often the case that there will be only one or perhaps two teachers of that language in the school; students cannot just wait until next year in the hope that things will be different.

The study has also shown that students want language programs to be ‘fun’, but this does not mean that fun is seen as an alternative to meaningful content and the need to make an effort in learning. Students need to see that what they learn in a language program is worthwhile and that they have achieved something through their study and this constitutes
part of their enjoyment of the language. Fun is not trivial content so much as an engaging teaching approach and learning activities.

The relationship between students and teachers is the most important factor in continuing to study a language, and students are very clearly in favour of face-to-face teaching. Even students who are highly committed to studying a language are not sure whether they would continue without direct contact, face-to-face, with the teacher. ‘Learning by machine’ will discourage students from continuing. This is not to say that blended models involving videoconferencing and similar are not possible, provided they are strongly linked to having a teacher.

The place of ICT in quality teaching of languages is therefore complex. ICT is important, but is fundamentally a tool. Students are not excited by technology per se, as this is available in many homes and other learning areas. Once again, what is important in retaining students in languages is that they have the ability to do something which they would not be able to do if they were not studying the language. Well-implemented communication and information technologies in the language class can allow students to interact and communicate with others with whom they would not otherwise be able to communicate. However to be successful, programs involving such technologies need to be implemented well, with many resources, much support, and using a great deal of teacher time. Without such an input of resources, they are more likely to discourage rather than encourage students.

At an individual level, teachers may not be able to influence retention directly, but they can implement certain strategies within the classroom to heighten student motivation to study a language (Dörnyei, 2001), and indeed to motivate students to see themselves as using languages in their future (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

The language program and its place in the school
This study has shown that students continue on in a language program if the program has a clear pathway, is well taught, and is valued as an important part of the curriculum of the school.

Students are encouraged to continue with a language where it is clearly linked into the culture of a school. For example, this may occur where there are clear links between the language and one or more other areas of study in the school – say, German and History, or Chinese and Business Studies. This linking can be more or less formal, whether at the level where Chinese teachers and Business Studies teachers, for example, agree that they will focus for a period on business in China, thus allowing students doing both subjects to see the language as being useful beyond the language classroom; or at a much more formal level with a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) program within the school, showing the clear relevance of the language to a particular area. The school’s support for such informal or formal arrangements (for example, requiring at the least the support of sympathetic timetabling) establishes in the minds of students and teachers that the school is strongly supportive of languages.

The study has also shown that continuity of language learning is important for retention. High school students do not take up the study of a language again at a higher level if continuity is broken and they spend a period not studying a language – they sometimes take
up the language again at university, but in these circumstances they start from the beginning again. Principals and language teachers need to be aware that for retention to occur across years in a language program, continuity is vital. Where schools find ‘creative’ ways of offering a language program, and those ways include teaching the language for only part of the year, then continuity is disrupted and students simply do not continue. Continuing to study a language involves continuity of study.

Combined classes may also have a negative impact on retention. If students believe that they are not receiving sufficient attention from the teacher – for example, because the teacher is attempting to teach several different levels of students simultaneously – students are unlikely to continue. Students prefer to study under conditions where only one level is taught in one class, which is good pedagogy.

Students’ expectations about teaching and learning also play a role in retention. Good pedagogy in general is important, although it is equally important to ensure that students understand what the pedagogy is, and why it is being used; the literature suggests that students stop studying a language because there is a conflict between the way that the language is being taught, and the way that they expect a language (or perhaps any subject) to be taught.

As part of pedagogy, language teachers need to consider their program in light of the needs of students who may be struggling with literacy in English. Excluding those students from a ‘compulsory’ subject sends a clear message to all students that the language is not really important, and this discourages them from continuing.

The study found that activities such as exchanges and in-country study can be important in encouraging retention in languages. Most students are focused on short-term goals, and continue to study a language only if there is something they can do through studying the language which they could not otherwise do. The most obvious ‘incentives’ of this sort are exchanges or excursions in which students cannot participate unless they have been studying a language. Strongly promoted in-country study and exchange programs for those who have studied a language through to Year 10 appear to be particularly good for retaining some students in language study, even beyond Year 10.

The perception of languages as ‘elitist’

This study has shown that at present many members of the community, including many principals, parents, students and at least some language teachers, believe there is a connection between language study (and particularly language study at senior levels) and ‘elite’ education. At present, it is clear that this link is present for many members of the community. This view is encouraged by teachers who believe Year 8 languages should be fun and contain no grammar, whereas later years should be hard and grammar focussed, particularly at senior secondary in advanced language study. This sends a message that ‘real’ language learning is only for capable, academically minded students.

In the current circumstances, it seems that the perception of languages as being for ‘elite’ education is found most strongly in those school communities where such education is not seen as being ‘for this community’. (The expression ‘elite education’ is used here as it was used by several interviewees in this study; others talked more explicitly about ‘university
education’ in contrast to ‘getting a job’.) That is, those communities which think that the majority of the students will not be participating in ‘elite’ education believe that languages form a part of ‘elite’ education; and therefore language study at a high level is not relevant in that community. On the other hand, in those schools where the community has a perception that students are participating in or will participate in ‘elite’ education, students did perceive languages as being a part of that education, but also believed that there were many other subjects that were much more important for getting into their chosen university course … and that, therefore, they would not study a language.

This view of languages as elitist but less essential than other subjects means that students who are not interested in a university education are discouraged from studying a language, and this may also be the case for some students who are interested in a university education, but are seen as less academically inclined. Languages are seen as something that some few students will study because it fits them really well.

Students would be encouraged to continue language study into higher years if they felt either that languages were relevant for all secondary students (in which case they need to be shown how), or else if those students who are interested in future higher education saw languages as more strongly important in that process, perhaps through some strategy such as the introduction of more specialist languages schools.


Adelaide: Research Centre for Languages and Cultures Education, University of South Australia.


Speiller, J. (1988). Factors that influence high school students’ decision to continue or discontinue the study of French and Spanish after Levels II, III and IV. *Foreign Language Annals, 21*(6), 535-545.


Appendix 1: Questions for focus groups with Year 8-10 students

1. Tell me about your experience of the transition from learning a language in primary school and learning a language in secondary school.

2. Do you think it is important for students to study a language in school? Why/why not?

3. Do you think it is important for you to study a language? Why/why not?

4. What things do you consider when you choose whether to study a language or not?

5. Do you think learning a language will be important for your future? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

6. In your view, why do students continue to learn a language (from middle years when it is no longer compulsory to senior secondary)?

7. In your view, why don’t students continue to learn a language (from middle years when it is no longer compulsory to senior secondary)?

8. What would make you want to continue learning a language?

9. What do you think about the use of technology in learning a language?
Appendix 2: Questions for interviews or focus groups with language teachers

1. Think about some of the students you have had in your language class in the past.
   - Think of a previous student who was doing well in the language class, and who chose to continue to study a language in a later year. Why do you think they continued?
   - Think of a previous student who was doing well in the language class, but you know didn’t continue to study a language in a later year. Why do you think they stopped? What would have encouraged them to continue?
   - Think of a previous student who was doing badly in the language class in terms of their marks, but despite that continued to study a language in a later year when it was completely optional. Why do you think they continued?
   - Think of a previous student who was doing badly in the language class in terms of their marks, and who stopped studying a language when it was no longer compulsory. What do you think would have convinced them to continue studying?

2. What do you think is the general perception of students about languages and language education? Do you think that is the same in the general broader community?

3. If you could tell your fellow teachers about three really useful things you have done in your teaching that you think have led some students to get more interested in languages, what would you tell them?

4. What do you think are the practices in language classes that enable the best student learning?

5. What do you think are the practices in language classes that lead to the highest student retention?

6. If you could put one single idea into the mind of your school principal or the head of DECD to improve retention in language classes, what would it be?

7. From your point of view, can language students study ‘all the way through’ from primary to senior secondary in the same language? If they can, is there any advantage to them doing so that you can see? How do you cater to those groups?

8. How do you think students respond to the use of technology in the language classroom? What sorts of things do you do with technology in your classroom?
9. Do you think students have to study a language to be prepared for the modern world? How long do they have to study a language for?

10. What would you change about the way your language program operates if you had complete control?
Appendix 3: Questions for interviews or focus groups with school leaders and relevant staff at complementary language providers

1. What is your experience of managing language programs in the middle years? What do you see as the value of language learning in your school/community? What are the issues that have emerged in your context in the management of language programs?

2. What is your view of your students’ experience of language learning? What evidence do you have for your view? Has this matter been discussed/investigated in your school?

3. Has there been any change in the provision of languages in the middle years in your context? How has the influenced retention?

4. What effect do you think the Australian Curriculum will have on curriculum delivery and languages in your school? Do you think it will affect retention of students in languages?

5. There has been an overall decline in language learning in the middle years in this state. What do you see as the influencing factors? Which factors are the most significant? What do you see as the consequences? What action if any do you think needs to be taken to address the decline?

6. What has been the impact of the new SACE on the learning of languages in your context? Across the state there has been a decline. How do you respond to this impact? What are some of the disincentives? Can you imagine some incentives to support language learning?
Appendix 4: Questions for interviews with teachers’ associations, principals’ associations, and relevant members of DECD

1. What is your experience of and observations about language learning in the middle years in South Australia? What are some of the issues that have emerged regarding provision? Which do you see as the most important?

2. What is your view of your students’ experience of language learning? What evidence do you have for your view? Has this matter been discussed/investigated in your school?

3. What effect do you think the Australian Curriculum will have on retention?

4. There has been a decline in language learning in the middle years in this state. What do you see as the influencing factors? Which factors are the most significant? What do you see as the consequences? What action if any do you think needs to be taken to address the decline?

5. What has been the impact of the new SACE on the learning of languages in your context? How do you respond to this impact? What exactly are the disincentives? Can you imagine some incentives?
Appendix 5: Questions for interviews with members of SACE Board

1. What has been the impact of the new SACE on the learning of languages? How do you respond to this impact? What exactly are the disincentives? Can you suggest some incentives?

2. There has been a decline in the number of students taking languages? What are the reasons for the decline? What action do you think needs to be/can be taken to address the decline?

3. What is the impact of the selection purpose of the SACE (i.e. need to generate the ATAR score)?

4. What is the impact of the eligibility criteria for different courses within the languages learning area?

5. The percentage of students taking a language at Year 12 as a proportion of the whole cohort is higher for Victoria than it is for South Australia. What might be the reasons for this difference?