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Draft Australian Curriculum for Languages written submission

Submission on the draft Australian curriculum for Mandarin

General comment

The Association for Learning Mandarin in Australia Inc (ALMA) is pleased to see a draft curriculum that has moved away from a restrictive and irrelevant focus on targets for the number of Chinese characters mastered as a proxy for Chinese proficiency. ALMA strongly endorses the curriculum's focus on communication (both passive and active) at various levels and in various contexts and subject matters as the benchmark standard for measuring achievement throughout the draft curriculum.

ALMA congratulates ACARA for developing an ambitious curriculum for all streams and all levels of Chinese and consider that the achievement levels envisaged would, if attained by all students, result in a significant improvement in the level of Chinese proficiency in the Australian population.

Learner Pathways

With respect to the division of the curriculum into three pathways, for second language learners, background learners and first language learners, ALMA fully understands and supports the reasons for doing this. We would, however, like to emphasise the importance of assessing students according to their actual Chinese proficiency and not according to their ethnicity. At present, we have observed that many ethnically Chinese students are pushed into a background learner stream when in fact they are second-language learners with little or no background exposure to the language. For many of these students, being in a class with genuine background learners is difficult and sometimes demoralising, leading some to abandon their Chinese studies.

We would also note that the category "background learner" covers a wide range of proficiency, ranging from those who have only a very basic grasp of the language, perhaps limited to basic domestic vocabulary, to those who are essentially fluent speakers, albeit with a more limited vocabulary than first language learners. Background learners also range in literacy skills in Chinese from entirely unable to read or write, to having a good basic grasp of Chinese characters and stroke order.

ALMA notes also that, in delivering an ambitious curriculum, many Chinese teachers in Australian schools will find themselves with a full range of proficiencies in a single class (ie from those new to Chinese to those who are fluent and have good basic literacy). There are very few, if any, public schools in Australia with the resources to have separate classes for second-language and background learners, and teachers also need to cater for the wide range in proficiencies of background learners. While it is not the task of the curriculum designers to intervene in school management, ALMA sees value in a delivering a message to principals and school managers that good language outcomes can only be achieved if language teachers are given strong administrative and managerial support.

Curriculum delivery for Foundation to Year 2: second language and background learners

ALMA applauds the ambition of the draft curriculum for Foundation to Year 2 students. We make the observation that the curriculum appears to assume translation-based teaching methods, that is, the teachers are expected to use English and introduce Chinese language through its English meaning. While this method is common for language pedagogy and is effective for older children and adults, younger children (under the age of eight) do not acquire language in this way, and immersion-based teaching has been shown to be most effective for younger children.

We understand that the curriculum is designed for LOTE programs where children are taught for not more than one hour per week, but we still believe that teachers should aim to deliver as much of their teaching as possible through the medium of Chinese, using gestures and actions to deliver meaning, with English explanations as necessary, rather than as the starting point. We believe the ambitious content of the curriculum would be best achieved in this way. This is particularly the case for background learners, who can be expected to have at least a basic comprehension of spoken Chinese (and if not, they should be placed in a class with second-language learners).

We do not understand why the curriculum for background learners suggests an increase in the proportion of Chinese spoken by the teacher as the children progress through primary school. Our experience of actual background learners in Australia is that, firstly, their fluency and proficiency in Chinese tends to decrease with age, as the influence of English at school and in their general environment grows and, secondly, that their ability to respond to immersion-style teaching decreases as they move out of the period (around age eight) where they are able to pick up languages easily and naturally. Research (Bialystok, 2006) has shown that young children use different mental processes to acquire language than older children or adults, which is why an immersion approach is more effective than a translation-based approach for very young children.

ALMA fully supports the content and achievement standards outlined in the curriculum, we believe the assumption should be that teachers use Chinese most of the time for all background students, and for Foundation to Year 2 second-language learners.

Janaline Oh
President
11 April 2013

Reference

Bialystok E. 2006. 'Second-language acquisition and bilingualism at an early age and the impact on early cognitive development'. http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/BialystokANGxp_rev.pdf (accessed 8 April 2013).