MLTAV Submission to the Victorian Parliament’s Education and Training Committee’s Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

The Modern Language Teachers’ Association of Victoria (MLTAV) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission as part of the inquiry into this area which, whilst not ‘core business’ of Languages educators, is of high interest and importance to us.

Languages education for Gifted and Talented Students
Written by Rita Felder for MLTAV

The benefits of learning languages other than English, henceforth referred to as Languages, are numerous and well documented in research findings, in particular linking the learning of Languages to the enhancement of cognitive development and literacy of students (Baker 2006; Bialystok 2001; Geake 2009; Howden 1992; Liddicoat 2001; Scarino and Liddicoat 2009; Yelland, Pollard and Mercuri 1993).

Furthermore, Languages are an indispensable and interlinked part of the social and cultural fabric of multicultural Victoria and an increasingly globalised world. Second or third language proficiency, together with intercultural understanding and cross-cultural competencies, are vital in equipping students to be full and active participants in an ever more interconnected and interdependent world (Coyle, Hood and Marsh 2010; Fernandez 2007; MCEETYA 2005; MCEETYA 2008).

Whilst all students can benefit from the important educational experience of learning Languages, it is Gifted and Talented students in particular who should be provided with quality Languages programs (Bartz 1982; Robinson, Shore and Enersen 2007). By providing “additional support for foreign language learning to those students who have special qualities and academic abilities”, we help develop and enhance the potential of those “who will undoubtedly be the future leaders of an increasingly interdependent world” (Bartz 1982).

What do Gifted and Talented students bring to the Languages classroom?

In order to best cater for Gifted and Talented students in the Languages classroom, it is important to consider the special qualities and academic abilities which they possess, from Deveau 2006:

Gifted and talented second language students can display the following characteristics:

- An interest in and capacity to acquire, recall and manipulate advanced vocabulary and grammatical concepts
- A capacity to extrapolate, infer and transfer meaning creatively
- A capacity to perceive patterns and relationships within and between Languages
- An appreciation of the important intercultural role language plays in an interconnected world
- An ability to code switch
- An ability to creatively synthesize all elements of language learnt
- An ability to understand a language as a holistic system and identify cause and effect relationships
- An ability to rapidly and easily recall facts
- An advanced set of communication skills.

Whilst Gifted and Talented students are by no means a homogenous group, it is important for educators to understand, and continuously reflect on, the varying skills and needs of their most able students, in order to “build a solid, defensible thinking skills curriculum and the climate needed in which to teach it” (Robinson, Shore and Enersen 2007). In so doing, we can better ensure that Gifted and Talented students are able to fully benefit from the unique educational experience that learning Languages can provide.

What are the limitations of current Languages programs?

Even though the benefits of learning Languages for Gifted and Talented students are well documented in the research, it is concerning that there are still a number of reasons preventing these students reaching their full potential in most current language programs:

- Not enough time allocated to Languages
- Limited teacher training opportunities in this area of expertise (i.e. Gifted and Talented language learning)
- In Primary education programs, Languages are often inadequately staffed and timetabled to provide for the needs of all students, but particularly Gifted and Talented students
- In Secondary education programs, Languages are predominantly blocked as elective subjects, rather than core subjects, beyond the compulsory years of secondary education. This constrains choice and narrows the option for pursuing language learning (when it is often only compulsory in Years 7 and 8 in schools)
- Course design and resources of many language programs do not always fully cater for the specific needs of Gifted and Talented language learners.

(Fernandez 2007; Gallagher, Harradine and Coleman 1997; Jung, Boman and Williams 2007; VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh 2005)

What should a quality Languages program catering for Gifted and Talented students provide?

1. Time, resources and highly proficient language teachers that understand the needs and requirements of Gifted and Talented learners
2. A complex and abstract interdisciplinary content focus - Language units should not be limited to thematic topics with a situational language focus, e.g. going to the cinema, going shopping etc. Instead, a language program for Gifted and Talented students must allow learners to build on other forms of learning and ways of understanding the world. It should also enhance and support their cognitive development and allow for interdisciplinary connections to be made (Clark 2002)
3. Promotion of linguistic competence as well as stimulation of cognitive flexibility
4. A content focus that provides the opportunity to use language holistically as a system, e.g. shifting away from the idea of teaching language on a linear trajectory based on the idea of grammatical level of difficulty. Instead, the accent of language teaching shifts “toward functional and notional levels of difficulty demanded by the content” (Coyle, Hood & Marsh 2010)
5. Open-ended activities, e.g. Gifted and Talented students must not be limited by the confines of language requirements of a particular chapter or lesson (Bartz 1982)
6. Accommodation of self paced learning modes allowing for flexibility, e.g. through graded text-based language learning stations or curriculum compacting
7. Allowing students to have input in deciding how to demonstrate what they have learnt
8. Providing opportunities for students to work in varied and fluid grouping arrangements.

Considering the important benefits that Languages education can provide for Gifted and Talented students, the MLTAV believes that it is a matter of considerable urgency that the issues outlined and raised in this paper are addressed.

The MLTAV would welcome the opportunity to be involved in further Victorian Government initiatives to enhance learning opportunities for Gifted and Talented Students.

References


Howden, B. J. (1992). Why Languages other than English should be part of the Primary School Curriculum. *Independence*, 17 (2), 36-38.


