A Snapshot of Language Program Standards in Australian Schools

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Abstract

Language programs have been a part of the educational landscape in Australia for at least fifty years, but like in other predominantly English-speaking countries, the widespread success of the discipline remains elusive despite significant policy attention. Quality language programs are vital to support effective language teaching and learning, as acknowledged in pedagogical research informed by second language acquisition (SLA) theories, and in the Australian “Professional Standards for Accomplished Teaching of Languages and Cultures” (AFMLTA, 2005). However, little is known about the standards of language programs in Australian schools. To help address this, a mixed-methods study of 180 language teachers in the state of Queensland was conducted in order to gain insights into the standards of language programs in primary and secondary schools, using both objective measures and the subjective voices of teachers who are at the chalk-front. Results show wide variety in program standards from school to school, some of which are not optimal to support effective SLA. The study provides valuable insights for researchers and policymakers about the realities of language programs at the implementation level.

1 Introduction

Language education has been an important part of the educational landscape in Australia for at least fifty years, although first coming to mainstream community prominence in the late 1980s through the “National Policy for Languages”, which advocated for “a language other than English for all” (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 4). Working toward this goal has remained a national priority since that time, having been the focus of numerous policies and programs in all states of the country (Liddicoat et al., 2007; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). Today, ‘Languages’ is one of the eight key learning areas included in Australia’s first national curriculum, a discipline area that contributes to the personal, social, and cultural development of individual students, as well as contributing to the nation’s social, economic and international development capabilities, by providing students with opportunities to “engage with the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world and its peoples” (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013).

Despite generally partisan support for language education in schools, particularly in the middle years, the nature of language programs in many Australian schools is for the most part fragile (Clyne, Pauwels, & Sussex, 2007; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). At the senior secondary level, language enrolments are the “lowest by far” of all the major eight learning areas (Asia Education Foundation, 2014, p. 66). The percentage of students graduating from high school with a language has hovered at around 15% in recent history (Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood, 1989–
2008), and in some states, the rates are much lower, including in Queensland where uptake is at less than seven per cent (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2014).

In recent years, second language acquisition (SLA) research has become more concerned with classroom-based research and practice, as Lightbown (2000) noted in her updated review of SLA research: “the number of studies designed to ask pedagogical questions has increased dramatically” (p. 432). While early theories of SLA focused heavily on acquisition purely as a psycholinguistic process that mirrors first language acquisition (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982), there was skepticism about these theories in their ability to explain differences in acquisition rates and levels of attainment of students in similar learning contexts (Collentine & Freed, 2004), and research into the context of younger students learning in classroom settings outside of the target country was limited (Lightbown, 1985). School language classrooms requires specific attention, because unlike immersion models and in-country learning which continue to be a major focus in SLA research, language learning generally takes place exclusively with the confines of the walls of the classroom (notwithstanding current technology-based pedagogies). The emerging research aims among other things to better understand the factors which promote or inhibit language learning in the classroom setting.

As the paradigms of SLA and pedagogy have become more closely intertwined, there has been a growing acknowledgement of the important role that the context of learning and the instructional environment can play in language acquisition (Collentine & Freed, 2004). It is within these environmental parameters that language teachers “must devise cohesive curricula that facilitate language acquisition” (Collentine & Freed, 2004, p. 154). In Australia, the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations, the peak professional body representing language teachers in the country, notes that “effective languages and cultures teaching is influenced by the context in which the teaching happens, including the conditions in which the program operates” (AFMLTA, 2005, p. 6). As a result, the AFMLTA (2005) has supplemented its “Professional Standards for Accomplished Teaching of Languages and Cultures” (hereafter: “The Standards”), with program standards necessary to facilitate effective language teaching and learning. “The Standards” include statements which raise issues of curriculum time, class size, physical teaching space, and access to resources. Many of these issues have been investigated, to different degrees, in the research on language learning and teaching.

One of the major debates surrounding language education in schools is when students should begin learning a language. SLA researchers have theorised the existence of a critical learning period, meaning that language learning is best facilitated when it begins as early as possible (Johnson & Newport, 1989; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höle, 1978). This understanding has informed many efforts to introduce early language teaching and learning in primary schools. However, much of the informing research is from the context of acquiring a language in the target language environment, and “there is still serious disagreement regarding the problem of when to start or the best way to learn in foreign contexts, because results from second language environments have been directly generalized to a completely different situation” (Muñoz et al., 2003, cited in Luque Agullo, 2006, p. 1). It appears that adults and older children differ in the speed at which they acquire different aspects of language (Long, 1990), and the aptitudes that can predict success (DeKeyser, 2003). That is not to say that the ‘earlier the better’ position advocated by educational experts is false, but it has been found to be less important than issues of frequency, intensity, and continuation of instruction over time (Lightbown, 2000).

Another question regularly raised is the amount of time that should be dedicated to language learning. One factor in determining the time necessary to acquire a language is the linguistic distance from the learner’s mother tongue to the target language, meaning that some languages will take longer to learn than others. The United States Foreign Service Institute developed a “Language Difficulty Ranking” (2016), based on the level of linguistic difference from English, providing a guide as to how long proficiency could take to achieve. While the guide relates to motivated adult learners in well-resourced language courses – a completely different context to school classrooms – it does give some insight into the varied and considerable amount of time it can potentially take to master a language (600 hours for French and more than 2200 hours for Japanese). While there are many espoused benefits to language learning, proficiency in the language continues to be a major goal of school language
learning. Lightbown (2000) argues that “the most important reason for incomplete acquisition in foreign language classroom settings is probably the lack of time available for contact with the language” (p. 449), and suggests that SLA research could be used to set more “realistic expectations for what language teachers and learners could accomplish in a second/foreign language classroom” (p. 431).

Perhaps equally as important as the amount of time, and certainly more widely represented in the literature, is the way in which learning time is ideally distributed. Studies have shown that the same amount of time dedicated to language learning is best delivered in shorter and more frequent blocks, than in longer but less frequent blocks, often called block scheduling (Duibhir & Cummins, 2011; Swender & Duncan, 1998). Block scheduling is often criticized because it does not allow for continuity of learning (Gascoigne Lally, 2001). Criticism has been focused in recent years on the so-called “drip-feed” approach, where the time allocated for language learning is both short and infrequent. The argument being that language instruction of a few hours a week of language learning, even over a period of years, does not facilitate high levels of proficiency (Collins & White, 2011; Scarino et al., 2011; Scarino, Liddicoat, & Kohler, 2016). In Australia, a three-year investigation of different learning distribution modes was undertaken in the primary and junior secondary sectors. The study revealed that increases in learning time and continuity “lead to improvements in learning for students and higher expectations on the part of their teachers” and had a positive influence on curriculum design and development, and assessment processes and outcomes (Scarino, Liddicoat, & Kohler, 2016, p. x).

There are multiple studies of the impact of class sizes on student learning, a factor subject to legislative action which is popular within the wider community (Whitehurst & Chingos, 2011). Within the literature, there are studies which both support and refute the impact of class size (Dobbeltsteen, Levin, & Oosterbeek, 2002; Hoxby, 2000; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005), and with limited research focus on language learning in schools, the role of class size is even more unclear. Nevertheless, several studies have shown that for modern approaches to language teaching and learning that focus on communication, students may benefit from smaller class sizes. For example, García-Bayonas and Gottschall (2008) noted that university Spanish courses saw higher grades in smaller classes, but also improvement in other factors which may also impact acquisition, including increased class participation, and increased self-reported motivation, which was also seen in studies of language learners in Hong Kong (Harfitt, 2012) and Norway (Yi, 2008).

While teaching space may appear to be incidental to teaching pedagogy, it is an element of program conditions that can have influence on student learning. Definitions of teaching space general include physical characteristics such as seating, windows, decorations, etc. but these are important only in as far as they enable or inhibit a deeper ‘classroom climate’ (Gabryś-Barker, 2016). Communicative approaches to language learning value pair and group interaction, and classrooms need to be designed to facilitate these approaches (Naughton, 2006). Researchers have also emphasized the role of a positive classroom climate in motivating students in language classrooms (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998).

Numerous concerns have been raised about the standards of language education in Australian schools, particularly in terms of the minimal and often fragmented time in which students in Australia spend learning a language (Liddicoat, et al., 2007; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). The low status of language teachers in Australia means that they may have limited agency in their workplaces (Mason, 2010, 2015), and thus decisions about language programs are often not within their control. Language education policy is largely driven by quantitative targets to increase the number of students studying a language, particularly in the senior secondary years, and less attention is paid to issues of quality (Liddicoat, 2010). Data regarding language programs are thus limited, and due to the complexity and variety of programs “it is impossible to describe with any confidence a typical primary school experience of language study” (Liddicoat, et al., 2007, p. 83).

In light of this gap in knowledge, and the challenges facing language education in Australia, this study aims to provide insights into the conditions of language programs in a sample of Australian primary and secondary schools. The study focuses on the state of Queensland, which has among the
lowest uptake of language study in the country despite mandatory language learning in the middle years for most of the past 30 years (Poyatos Matas, & Mason, 2015). The study is informed by three research questions that allow the collection of objective data as well as the subjective voices of teachers at the chalk-front:

1. What is the intensity, frequency, and duration of language learning programs?
2. For language teachers, for how many students, year levels, and schools are they responsible?
3. How satisfied are teachers with the standards of language programs in which they teach?

The answers to these questions are at present unclear in the state of Queensland. Policy regarding language programs in Queensland is generally presented as a series of recommendations rather than requirements, and lacks a clear implementation and evaluation plan (Poyatos Matas, & Mason, 2015).

As a result, there are limited data available to reveal what is actually happening in classrooms at the grassroots level, as opposed to what is proposed through policy rhetoric. It is difficult to develop language capacity in the state of Queensland without a better understanding of the realities of language programs in schools. While this study presents only a snapshot of those programs, and is not necessarily representative of the wider educational landscape, it does present important data that can assist researchers, policymakers, and language advocates to better understand the typical features of language programs, to identify areas in need of addressing, and inform subsequent efforts to improve language education in the state, particularly when noting that Queensland has among the lowest records of success in language learning in the country.

2 The study

This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design as the best approach to investigate the standards of language programs in Queensland schools, with quantitative and qualitative data collected from currently practicing language teachers using an online questionnaire and interviews. The complex and social nature of language education—and indeed educational research more broadly—requires an understanding of the issue using multiple measures. Mixed-methods research allows the researcher “to gain an overview of social regularities from a larger sample while understanding the other through detailed study of a smaller sample” (Bazeley, 2004, p. 146). In this study, quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire from a larger sample of participants in order to highlight trends, and the following qualitative interviews were aimed at identifying possible explanations for these trends by understanding the human realities of the issue (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006; Kaplowitz, 2000).

The quantitative phase of the study was conducted in 2012, with data collected using a standardised, self-administered, online questionnaire. Invitations to language teachers were sent via principals at all government, Catholic, and independent schools in the state (n=1694), with 180 current language teachers completing the questionnaire. The data collection instrument (Appendix A) first asked demographic and employment details from each participant. Then, details about the intensity (minutes per lesson), frequency (lessons per week), and duration (years of language study) of language programs were requested. Participants were also asked the number of students, year levels, and schools they are personally responsible for teaching language. Finally, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with various standards of their programs, which were taken from “The Standards” (Fig. 1).

The analysis of the quantitative data involved calculating, where appropriate, totals, ranges, means and standard deviations for each variable. Chi-square tests were conducted to identify any differences in responses by participants in different teaching circumstances.

In the following qualitative phase of the study in 2014, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small number of the original participants (n=10), who were not chosen to be representative of the wider population, but to elicit personal stories and experiences from teachers from a range of different teaching circumstances (in terms of teaching sector, school system, years of teaching, loca-
tion, native/non-native speaker status etc.). The interviews were conducted in the context of prompting teachers to tell stories about the issues that support or challenge them in their careers using a series of “grand tour questions” (Leech, 2002). Participants were invited to tell a number of stories (describe a typical day, a recent success, a recent challenge) with the understanding that it “is far from unusual in everyday conversation and it is apparently no more unusual for interviewees to respond to questions with narratives if they are given some room to speak” (Michler, 1986, p. 69).

Recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher and reviewed by each participant before analysis. Data were analysed manually to identify and classify specific mentions of issues related to program standards, and “to discover patterns across individual narrative interview texts or to explore what may create differences between people in their narrated experiences” (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 227). The ‘mixing’ of the qualitative and quantitative methods in this study occurs in the reporting of the findings. The quantitative data reveals patterns, and the qualitative data provides possible explanations for those patterns.

While every effort was made to contact all language teachers in the state, it is impossible to know how many invitations were passed on to language teachers, or how many language teachers there are in the state. The sample of 180 participants presents a limited sample, the representativeness of which cannot be determined due to a lack of baseline data on language teachers (Liddicoat, et al., 2007). Therefore, the results of the study should be viewed as offering a snapshot of a sample of program standards, and not an indication of the state of all programs across Queensland or Australia as a whole.

3 Results

The 180 questionnaire participants included both male (12%) and female (88%) teachers, native speakers (22%) and non-native speakers of the language taught (78%), teaching in state (63%), Catholic (17%) and independent schools (18%). Just over half (55%) of the participants taught in primary schools, which at the time of this study included a preparatory year, followed by seven further years of schooling. Around 60% of participants taught in secondary schools (61%), which at the time of the study began in the eighth year of schooling and continued until the end of the twelfth year. A number of teachers taught across both sectors, accounting for the higher than 100% total. Teachers taught one or more of the following languages: Japanese (44%), French (19%), German (14%), Italian (11%), Indonesian (6%), Chinese (<1%), and Spanish (<1%). Teachers came from urban (72%), regional (25%) and remote (3%) areas of the state.

In response to Research Question 1, there was considerable variety regarding the structure of language programs across the 286 schools at which the participants were involved in teaching a language. Thus, programs varied not only from school to school, but also within year levels in each school. For example, a school may have a language program for Year Six and Year Seven, but the number and length of lessons may differ between the two. Therefore, the data are presented for each Year level program. In all, the participants provided details about 833 different year level programs; a summary of which is shown in Table 1. The highest number of year level programs was found in Year Six (n=116) and Year Seven (n=127), making up almost one third of all reported programs. Fewer programs are reported for the senior years, with the least number of programs seen in the earliest years of schooling. In terms of frequency, language classes for the most part are delivered once or twice a week until the upper years of secondary schooling. In terms of intensity, in Year Six and Seven where the majority of language programs are delivered, students typically have access to two lessons a week for an average of a total of 80 to 88 minutes of language instruction per week. The minutes of language study per week increases from Year Eight, to an average of two lessons a week for a total of about 140 minutes of language instruction per week. Younger students generally receive a total of 30 minutes of instruction per week until the fourth grade.
Table 1. Details of 833 year level programs taught by 180 Queensland language teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Number of language lessons per week</th>
<th>Total number of minutes of language learning per week</th>
<th>Part year*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>min</td>
<td>max</td>
<td>mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>127</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>99</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of programs that ran for one semester (half an academic year, i.e. 20 weeks) or less

In response to Research Question 2, the teachers in the sample taught up to 650 students, with an average of 193 students. In terms of the number of year levels, the majority of participants teach from two to five different year levels, although three participants taught across 13 year levels, which is a complete program beginning in the preparatory year until the end of secondary education (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of year levels each participant delivers a language program (n=180)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of year levels</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In regard to the number of schools at which teachers taught language programs (Table 3), the majority (69%) were based at one school. This means that around one third of the participants were itinerant, that is, travelling in order to teach at multiple schools. In one-tenth of cases in this sample, participants travelled between four or more schools.

Table 3. Number of schools at which participants deliver a language program (n=180)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of schools</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In response to Research Question 3, the results of the six Likert-scale items are shown in Fig. 1. The mean scores for all six items ranged between 3.3 and 3.9 on the 5-point scale, meaning that the majority of teachers were satisfied with these elements of their language programs. The highest level of satisfaction was shown in the input teachers are given into decisions about their language programs, and the least satisfaction was expressed with timetables. The highest levels of dissatisfaction were seen with budget allocations. Additionally, the qualitative data gave some further insights into the program characteristics of interest to the language teachers interviewed. Five different issues were raised with respect to program standards: timetables (raised by seven of the ten participants, n=7), curriculum time and frequency (n=5), physical teaching space (n=5), total number of students (n=4),...
and resources and budget (n=2). In order to retain the personalised and contextualised nature of the interview data, selected quotes from the participants are presented verbatim throughout the discussion.

![Fig. 1. Level of satisfaction with program standards, n=180](image)

The Chi square tests found no significant differences in satisfaction level for teachers teaching in different geographic locations. However, primary school teachers and itinerant teachers were both significantly more likely to be dissatisfied with their access to technology, their budget and resources.

4 Discussion

The aim of this study was to highlight the realities of language programs at the classroom level, in light of a lack of data and insights in this area. In doing so, the author hopes to highlight the areas that could be developed in improving what may be impeding wider success of language education in Australian schools. The results show considerable variety in the structure of language programs in schools, and while this study presents a limited sample of programs, this variety from school to school is likely the case across the state and the country.

In terms of the duration of the language programs, in this sample, the majority of language programs begin in Year Six, which is to be expected because, at the time of this study, language learning in Queensland state schools was compulsory in the three years from Year Six (Queensland Studies Authority, 2011). It is interesting to note that there is a sudden drop in program numbers seen in Year Eight, which is still during the compulsory language education period. The discrepancy in numbers may be a product of the limitations of this study, but it may also indicate that some schools may not be meeting mandatory language program requirements. This is an area in need of further investigation, particularly as there have been cases in the past where Queensland schools have been found to be not meeting their obligations concerning language education (Chillcott, 2011; Day, 2011).

Regardless of any mandatory years of instruction, the data show that fewer schools offer programs in the younger years, which means potentially missed opportunities in terms of developing students’ language proficiency and motivation. The concentration of programs in the middle years shows that for many students, continuity of learning extends only two or three years, which the literature tells us is not enough to foster the development of language knowledge and skills of any real consequence.
At the time of the study, the Queensland Studies Authority (2011) provided advice to schools regarding time allocations for all areas of the curriculum. The recommendation for language study was 46-50 minutes per week from P-6, 74-80 minutes per week from Years 7-9, and 70-76 minutes per week in Year 10. On average, the programs in this sample meet these obligations. However, the time given to language study in Queensland is minimal compared to international standards (Bense, 2015). In the younger years, weekly 30-minute lessons are common, and with most schools working with a 40-week academic calendar, this amounts to only 20 hours of language instruction per year. One interview participant made particular mention of lessons of 30-minute duration, calling them, “waste of time lessons”. Three others spoke about the influence of the lack of contact time on their ability to build motivation and develop strong relationships with students. From one participant:

It’s hard to get kids on side, because you don’t have much time to devote to individual kids – you’ve got to keep the whole class moving and the whole class engaged, and sometimes I don’t know what the story is with some students, I don’t know what their situation is.

In addition, time allocations in some programs may also be much less than they first appear. Teachers reported that one quarter of their programs ran for half an academic year (about 20 weeks) or less, and in one case for only 13 weeks of the school year. This practice is commonly seen in Year Eight, although it is also seen in some other year levels, albeit to a lesser extent. The result of part-year programs for students is less contact hours, as well as potentially large gaps in students’ language learning experiences, and this does little to promote sustained learning throughout schooling. One interview participant provided an insight into the impact of these part-year programs:

We have one term [10 weeks, of language learning] in Year Eight, one semester [20 weeks] in Year Nine as an elective and then full-year courses from Year Ten, so they’re going into Year Ten with a gap of perhaps six months of not learning anything … and our Year Eight program which is now only one term, is really relegated to, make it fun and entertaining so they pick it in Year Nine, because before they get to Year Nine, they might be having a three-term break or even longer depending on the timetable.

Participants in this study expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction with their timetables than with any other program standard. It is likely that the described lack of adequate and sustained curriculum time that timetables afford language learning is a potential contributor to this dissatisfaction. The interviews also presented several other possible explanations. For one secondary school teacher, concerns were expressed about the unwillingness of administrators to allow smaller senior classes to run, and of timetable clashes, where languages were placed alongside “fun” subjects, making it less appealing for students to continue with language study. Other concerns raised include timetables which do not take into consideration the need to move between classrooms, meaning teachers were at times “literally running from classroom to classroom”, often carrying a load of resources.

A frustration that was expressed by the primary school teachers who were interviewed was the perception that the language timetable is often seen as secondary to the provision of Non-Contact Time (NCT) for classroom teachers. NCT is time that is set aside for planning and preparation, and classroom teachers are generally allocated their weekly NCT when their students are taking language, music and/or physical education lessons. For language teachers, NCT may not necessarily be spread throughout the week, but placed in a single block at the end of the school week:

We [the language, music, and physical education teachers] all had our Non-Contact Time on a Friday afternoon, so by one o’clock on Friday you’re done for the week but you’re so tired, so exhausted that you don’t want to use that time for your own planning, I mean you can’t, these innovative ideas don’t come to you after running around and standing up and being ‘on’ [participant emphasis] for students for four and a half days straight.

How languages are timetabled is fundamental to the success of language education. Australian studies have also shown that timetabling can have an influence over students’ decisions to continue language study (Crawford, 1999; Ham, 2008; Liddicoat, et al., 2007). Timetables also impact on
teachers, particularly those who are itinerant, who are susceptible to physical and emotional exhaustion as they move around to multiple teaching spaces without regular breaks (Crawford, 1999; Mason, 2010).

In regard to student numbers, the literature review showed that the research focus was clearly on the number of students in each class. Because maximum class sizes are imposed in Queensland schools, the number of students per class did not appear to be a concern to teachers, as it was not raised by any participants in the questionnaires or in the interviews. However, a related issue came to light: the total number of students across all classes for whom a teacher is responsible. One third of the participants teach a total of more than 250 students each week, across an average of five different year levels. This presents particular challenges which have not been addressed in the literature. As one interview participant stated, “I had over 400 students in my first year and I had trouble remembering all their names”. With many students and limited contact time, it may be difficult for language teachers to develop relationships and foster a positive classroom environment which have been shown in the literature review to facilitate effective language teaching and learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). As shared by an interviewee: “I only had very short amounts of contact with the students each week, so that I had hundreds of students, five, six, seven hundred, and no time to build relationships”.

The highest levels of dissatisfaction in this study were seen in regard to teachers’ budget allocations for their language programs. Teachers in primary schools, and itinerant teachers (who largely work in primary schools), were statistically more likely to be dissatisfied in this area, as well as with resources and technology, which all require an adequate budget. While the interviews did not shed any light on the possible reasons for this, it may be related to the different ways in which funding is generally disursed in the two sectors. Heads of Departments represent the interests of the various subject areas in high schools, and are often involved in discussions with administrators about how funding should be allocated across disciplines. In primary schools, decisions about funding are generally made by the school administrative team, and this may or may not involve the input of the language teacher. With no middle manager to represent them, many primary school teachers are at the mercy of school administrators, who may or may not be supportive of the language program. The allocation of budgets and resources to language programs would be worthy of further investigation.

While the majority of participants in this study expressed satisfaction with their teaching space, it is important not to overlook the one fifth of participants who did not, particularly because “The Standards” state that “effective languages and cultures programs are characterised by the allocation of dedicated space which is suitable for languages and cultures teaching and learning” (AFMLTA, 2005, p. 8). The difference between having a teaching space made “a huge difference” to one interview participant, supporting classroom management and the development of supportive learning environments. This difference is described by an interviewee who had been in both positions, and described that when she did not have a dedicated teaching space, she would move from room to room, where “each teacher has a different way that they’ve set up the room, that they manage their students, their expectations, their behaviour management strategies, so you’re constantly having to adapt for each class”.

On top of not having a dedicated classroom for language teaching and learning, two teachers reported that they did not have any physical space within the school at all, with one teacher provided with “a desk in the sick room”, while another “had two shelves in the back room at the library”. A space within a school is important not only for practical reasons: a place for planning and reflecting, for storing and creating resources, and to meet students; space also represents a sense of belonging. Without a physical space in the school, a teacher may also feel emotionally isolated from the school community, and this can communicate to students a lack of importance of the subject.

5 Limitations and future research

Because of the methodological limitations of the study described earlier, the author encourages further research (and government funding of such) to investigate further the realities of language
education provision in Queensland, to determine if the findings of this study have adequately captured the wider reality of language programs in the state. Some recommendations have been made throughout the discussion. In addition, qualitative case studies of successful provision of language education in Queensland, as seen in recent reports of language programs in other states (Fielding, 2015; Scarino, Liddicoat, & Kohler, 2016), would be a welcome addition to the research body.

It is also important to note that the data in the first phase of this study was collected in 2012. Since the time this study was conducted, two major changes have occurred which have impacted language education in Queensland. Year Seven students, who were originally part of the primary school sector, have now moved into secondary schools (Department of Education and Training, 2016). This resulted in a reconsideration of the current model of language learning in the state, the outcome being an expansion of the compulsory language program from three years in duration to four years. This means that students in Queensland must study a language for the final two years of primary school, and initial two years of secondary school. These changes are not reflected in the data presented in this paper.

6 Conclusion

For successful language education, more policy attention needs to be given to the quality of programs, and not solely on quantity. The lack of focus on program standards has led to some poor quality language programs which arguably do more harm than good for the promotion of language education in the state. This study has shown that language program standards in Queensland vary greatly from one school to the next. In some cases, programs standards would not meet “The Standards” proposed by the AFMLTA (2005), those necessary to facilitate accomplished language teaching and learning. While there are other factors at play in successful second language acquisition, for many students in Australian schools, their only access to language learning is in school classrooms, and below standard programs may impede the potential for students to acquire a second language. If Queensland is serious about providing quality language education to its students, policy must incorporate serious measures to address program standards, and include accountability measures to ensure the implementation of quality programs at the school level. Without the support of explicit government policy which is supported in its grass-roots level implementation, developing effective language programs presents a significant challenge for teachers, who may be working in difficult conditions with limited and intermittent contact hours, large total number of students, inadequate teaching spaces, and inequitable timetables. These challenging conditions may also impede student motivation, as well as the development of strong student-teacher relationships, which are both factors that could help to improve the low uptake of language learning by Queensland students.

Notes
1 Schools in the Catholic Education diocese of Cairns were not contacted via schools as permission was not granted.
2 The number of schools does not represent the number of language teachers. Some teachers teach across multiple schools, while some schools may have more than one language teacher. The total number of language teachers teaching in Queensland is not available.
3 State schools represent the majority of schools in the state, and educate the majority of students. While Catholic and independent schools are not obliged to follow state policy, many schools in the private sector mimic state school policy in terms of how and when language education is delivered.

References

Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations. (2005). *Professional standards for accomplished teaching of languages and cultures.* Belconnen: AFMLTA.


Ham, S. R. (2008). *An analysis of factors shaping students’ decisions to study or not to study languages other than English (LOTE) in Queensland state secondary schools* (Unpublished Doctoral thesis). Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.


Appendix

Quantitative data collection questionnaire

What is your gender?  
Female  Male

What is your age?  

Are you a native speaker of English?  
Yes  No

Are you a native speaker of any language you teach?  
Yes  No

How long have you been teaching languages in Queensland?  

What language(s) do you currently teach?  

Is your employment permanent?  
Yes  No

Who is your current employer(s)?  
Education Queensland  Catholic Education  Independent School  Urban/Suburban  Rural  Remote

Which describes your current teaching location?

What year levels are you responsible for teaching languages?  
Prep  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12

At how many schools do you teach?  
1  2  3  4 or more

How many students are you responsible for teaching languages?  

Please describe how your language program is organised.
Consider year level, number of lessons per week, duration of each lesson, how long classes run  
(e.g. one year, one semester)

Please select the appropriate response for each item

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have access to resources that allow me to run the language program well</th>
<th>I am given a budget that allows me to run the language program well</th>
<th>I am happy with the language timetable</th>
<th>I am happy with my teaching space</th>
<th>I have access to sufficient technology for integration into my classes</th>
<th>I am allowed input into decisions about the language program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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