

# Learning Languages & Literacy



**New Zealand Association of  
Language Teachers**

# What is Learning Languages about?

*In learning languages, students learn to communicate in an additional language, develop their capacity to learn further languages, and explore different world views in relation to their own.*

*The New Zealand Curriculum, page 8*

Languages link people locally and globally. They are spoken in the community, used internationally and play a role in shaping the world. Oral, written and visual forms of language link us to the past and give us access to new and different streams of thought and to beliefs and cultural practices. By learning an additional language and its related culture(s), students come to appreciate that languages and cultures are systems that are organised and used in particular ways to achieve meaning.

'Learning Languages' is one of the eight learning areas of The New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in Years 1 - 13 (2007) and embraces the Vision, Principles, Values, and Key Competencies of the curriculum. All students from Years 7 – 10 ought to be offered the opportunity to learn a second or subsequent language. Learning one or more additional languages benefits students and their communities at three levels: at a personal level, at the level of family and community, and at a national level.

*Ko tōu reo, ko tōku reo,  
te tuakiri tangata.  
Tihei uriuri, tihei nakonako.*

*The New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in years 1 – 13, 2007*

Learning a new language provides a means of communicating with people from another culture and exploring one's own personal world. Languages and cultures play a key role in developing our personal, group, and national identities. This learning area provides the framework for the teaching and learning of languages that are additional to the language of instruction.

*What role can we play as language teachers in developing citizens of tomorrow who are aware of the effects of globalisation, who realise its dangers but who can also accept that there may be new opportunities? In other words, how can we encourage young New Zealanders to become globally literate?*

*Watts, 1998, page 44*



# What is the Language and Literacy Partnership?

*Given the 'global cross-cultural information flow' (C. Luke 2000:73) that characterises the world of our learners, there is a requirement for more than 'mere literacy' (New London Group 2000:5) but a literacy that is better defined as multi-modes of representation that differ according to culture and context, and which have specific cognitive, cultural and social effects which is inclusive of English and also of languages other than English. It would acknowledge the potential for languages to be mutually supportive and informative in the language learning process either for first or second language learning.*

Simpson Norris International and the Centre for Learning Change and Development,  
Murdoch University, 2001

- Learning any language means learning about language and about what it means to be literate.
- Language learning experiences in a second language not only improve our knowledge of how languages work, but also enhance our thinking skills.
- Critical thinking is a transferable skill associated with literacy development. It is increasingly becoming a focus in first language to second language pedagogy.
- Co-operative second language learning experiences that are considered to be enhancing literacy involve students learning to solve problems, helping each other, soliciting opinions, presenting rationales, defending, synthesising, listening to others and asking relevant questions that allow students to refine their own thinking.
- Studies in metacognition and metalinguistics suggest that learning more than one language helps develop sensitivity to language as a system and argues strongly that the formal acquisition of a second language develops a conscious awareness of language as a system that is advantageous for learners.
- Exposure to languages other than the language of instruction provides the opportunity to appreciate that literacy is about culture and about different ways of thinking and being.
- Even when two languages use different writing systems, students are able to apply visual, linguistic and cognitive strategies they use in their first language to the second language. Cummins' (2000) hypothesises that cross-lingual proficiencies promote the development of cognitive academic skills. Known as the Common Underlying Proficiency Theory, it refers to the interdependence of concepts, skills and linguistic knowledge found in a central processing system.



# What is Literacy in the 21st Century?

*'Literacy is the ability to understand, respond to, and use those forms of language that are required by society and valued by individuals and communities.'*

Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8, 2006, page 18

- Being able to read, view or hear messages and make meaning from them.
- Knowing why messages were created and being able to interpret their intent.
- Knowing that messages can carry values.
- Knowing that languages create and communicate the thoughts of a multitude of different people with different experiences and lifestyles.
- Learning how to exchange information in an intercultural way.
- Accessing ideas, different ways of communicating and ways of being through multiliteracies.
- New literacies include computer literacy, media literacy, cultural literacy, visual literacy and critical literacy. The technological revolution has dramatically changed how, and what we read and write.
- Effective communication that is more than just language and involves 'acting-interpreting-thinking-valuing-talking (sometimes writing-reading) 'in the 'appropriate way' with the 'appropriate props' at the 'appropriate times' in the 'appropriate places'.
- Literacy development and second language learning is viewed as a partnership which is inclusive of cultural and linguistic diversity. It embraces and is expressed through new technologies and transcends national boundaries and interest.

*I would suggest that the globally literate person possesses characteristics such as the following:*

- *knowledge of international issues*
- *critical appreciation of the effects (positive and negative) of globalisation on economies, cultures, traditions and patterns of living*
- *ability to access and evaluate information from a wide variety of sources*
- *understanding of other peoples and sensitivity to cultural differences.*
- *open-mindedness*
- *broad-vision*
- *flexibility in adapting to changing environments*
- *ability to interact directly with people from different backgrounds.*

Watts, 1998, page 44



# What is a Literacy Approach to Language Learning?

A literacy approach:

- Assumes the primary importance of developing some level of communicability in a new language. Within this, there is an emphasis on the development of learners' abilities to analyse, interpret and transform discourse.
- Emphasises communication, through all modes and media that is informed by a metacommunicative awareness of how discourse is derived from relations between language use, contexts of interaction, and larger sociocultural contexts (Kern 2000).
- Provides learners with an opportunity to work collaboratively, to interpret, to understand conventions, to be involved in problem solving, to use language and reflect on language use, and to develop cultural awareness through language use.

Learners should be provided with:

- Multimodal and multitextual learning.
- Opportunities to engage with authentic texts.
- The knowledge of how to 'read' text and of how to apply the roles of code-breaker, text participant, text-user and text analyst.
- Opportunities to construct text and discourse appropriate to different contexts and purposes.
- Explicit training to enhance ability to use language learning skills and strategies to increase metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness.
- An environment that enables learners to be socialised into new ways of thinking about meaning and communication.

*It is ... very important to teach students about the world beyond their own countries. What are the similarities we share and differences with our friends around the world? We must understand what motivates those whose cultures and traditions are not our own. To achieve these goals, we must teach our children international education skills, which include the learning of other languages, cultures, and traditions.*

Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education, 2005



# References and Recommended Reading

## Professional Development

- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power and Pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Garcia, G. (1999). *Bilingual Children's Reading: An Overview of Recent Research*. ERIC/CLL News Bulletin, Fall/Winter, 1 - 4.
- Kern, R. (2000) *Literacy and Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press, 303 - 320.
- Luke, C. (2000). *Cyber-Schooling and Technological Change: Multi-literacies for New Times*. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the Design of Social Futures*. South Yarra, VIC: MacMillan.
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- Watts, N. (1998). *Language Learning and Global Literacy*. *The New Zealand Language Teacher*, 24, 44-47.

## Strategies for Teaching and Assessment

- Dyer, W., Hadfield, J. and Marsden, N. (2008). *Top Tools for Language Teachers*. Auckland: Pearson Education.
- Whitehead, D. (2001). *Top Tools for Literacy and Learning*. Auckland: Pearson Education.
- Whitehead, D. (2009). *Top Tools for Literacy and Thinking*. Auckland: Pearson Education.

## Websites

- Learning Languages on TKI website at <http://www.tki.org.nz/e/community/language/>
- New Zealand Association of Language Teachers website at <http://www.nzalt.org.nz/>
- The New Zealand Curriculum Online website at <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/>