



Improving Languages Education in South Australia

CONSULTATION PAPER

Introduction

Learning an additional language offers powerful benefits to individuals, enhancing cognitive abilities, academic achievement, and personal development. Language learning strengthens analytical and critical thinking and problem-solving skills, while also supporting improved literacy in English and mathematics. These skills not only boost educational outcomes but also equip learners with the flexibility and critical competencies needed in all aspects of life. These individual strengths contribute to the development of a skilled, adaptable workforce—one prepared to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive and interconnected global economy.

Language learning also plays a crucial role in fostering intercultural understanding, empathy, and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. By engaging with different worldviews and communication styles, learners gain a broader perspective, which strengthens social cohesion and helps build inclusive, respectful communities. This not only supports individual identity and well-being but also contributes to a more harmonious and tolerant society. In a multicultural region like South Australia, such understanding is essential to social progress and unity.

Beyond the classroom, the benefits of language education extend to economic and strategic domains. Multilingual proficiency opens doors to careers in global trade, international relations, tourism, and diplomacy—industries that are vital to South Australia’s growth and global engagement. As the world becomes more interconnected, the ability to communicate across languages becomes a valuable asset for both individuals and the broader economy.

This document synthesises current research, along with insights from students, educators, and communities, to identify actionable strategies for improving the profile and uptake of languages education across South Australia. The case for languages is not only educational, social, and cultural—it is a strategic investment in the state’s future prosperity and the success of its young people.

Discussion points

1. Reimagining Languages Education in South Australia

Languages education in South Australia operates within a complex and dynamic environment. A range of factors—including learner diversity, varied learning needs, different contexts, resource availability, community involvement, teacher professional development, and curriculum and teaching approaches—shapes the outcomes and quality of language education.

Given our rich and varied cultural and linguistic landscape, there is a need for a holistic, inclusive, and collaborative strategy to promote language growth, address language decline,



provide high-quality professional learning, and forge connections with other areas of shared interest. Through critical thinking and dialogue, stakeholders including academics, school and sector leaders, language associations and experienced language teachers can collaborate to overcome challenges and drive continuous improvement.

Central to such discussion is our learners' entitlement in terms of language learning as an educational imperative and the mechanisms to ensure equity for all learners.

With a collective focus on the needs of learners and the best interests of South Australia as a unifying force, and by valuing different perspectives, contexts, curriculum and pedagogies, we can collaboratively reimagine and grow languages education in South Australia.

2. Language teachers and educators

To build a robust and dynamic language-learning ecosystem, all teachers must have access to sustained, contemporary professional development that keeps pace with evolving pedagogical methods and global linguistic developments. Such professional development is essential not only for their growth as educators, but also for delivering engaging and meaningful language learning experiences for students. An investment in teachers is also critical in addressing the growing shortage of qualified language educators, particularly in rural and remote areas, and to meet the growing need in South Australia for teachers of Aboriginal languages and Auslan.

Furthermore, to reverse the downward trend at university level, incentivising and integrating language studies into education and other degrees will not only enhance student enrolments but also safeguard the future of language learning. This approach will prevent the further erosion of language course offerings, thereby building a multilingual, globally competent generation critical to the State's development.

Principals play a crucial role in shaping the educational environment of a school, and their leadership is fundamental in promoting and supporting language learning.

When principals have a deep understanding of the value of multilingualism and in fostering an inclusive school environment, they can take proactive steps to encourage language learning and create policies that support it.

3. Aboriginal languages

Aboriginal children and young people are entitled to a quality education, a strong sense of identity, connection to Country and well-being enriched by learning in their own languages.

To achieve this imperative, it is critical to take action that includes improving remuneration and working conditions to ensure the continued employment of qualified educators and language owners. Aboriginal educators play a vital role in strengthening school-community partnerships, facilitating knowledge transfer, and preserving and advancing their languages and cultures. We need to appropriately recognise and reward the rare and specialised skills of language owners educating South Australian children and young people.



There has been meaningful progress in developing curriculum, resources, and grant programs and in the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages, however the demand has not been fully realised and more action in these areas need to occur. Aboriginal languages represent one of the fastest-growing areas of study in schools, driven largely by the dedication of language owners. Their persistence—often unpaid—has been instrumental in reclaiming languages and advocating for their inclusion in school curricula on their Country.

Advancing Aboriginal language education in schools demands a thoughtful and strategic approach, developed in partnership with local communities. By addressing the needs of the educators, communities and young people, we can foster the learning, identity, and well-being of Aboriginal children and their communities. This, in turn contributes to healing the enduring impacts of colonisation.

4. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and language technologies

Further exploration and development of AI and language technologies can significantly enhance every student's language learning experience, broadening access to a wide range of languages. These advancements have the potential to foster critical and metacognitive thinking skills, preparing future generations to thrive in a global knowledge economy. By leveraging AI, students can engage in personalized, adaptive learning that supports diverse linguistic needs, empowering them to develop a deeper understanding of language structures and cultural nuances. This innovation can also equip learners with the cognitive tools necessary for problem-solving and independent thinking, skills that are essential in an increasingly interconnected world.

As long as access security and safety is not an issue, AI-powered language learning can significantly enhance both student language acquisition and professional development for teachers, promoting equity in educational opportunities for all

Chen (2019) and Powell (2004) highlight AI's central role in the global knowledge economy, linking language learning to economic and geopolitical challenges such as climate change, trade, and social justice. Heugh (2024)

'There is every reason why in South Australia, these technologies can be used to enhance access to and learning for language continuity when a language is not available in the school.... There is every reason why we need to be equipping our students to access and engage in the global knowledge economy beyond English, and which is currently shifting inexorably towards languages of Asia. Socio-economic justice depends on access to this knowledge'. Heugh (2024)

5. Structural improvements

An analysis of how structural barriers impact language enrolment and participation clears the pathway to develop strong, continuous language learning experiences from early childhood through to senior secondary education and university. By recognising and reducing these barriers and opening further pathways, more students can benefit from the cognitive, social,



and cultural advantages of multilingualism. The State will gain from better access to the knowledge economy and its citizens with enhanced life and employment skills.

We need to consider how time allocation in the primary years affect additional language learning. Is this a structural barrier that impedes meaningful engagement and student's confidence in being successful in language learning?

Perhaps incentivising preservice primary teachers to major in a language at university (Discussion point 2) will increase the number of language teachers and facilitate bilingual and transdisciplinary approaches to language learning. Language learning becomes not just a separate discipline but a holistic and integrated way for children and young people to learn. (Learning in and learning through languages)

Current research and the firsthand perspectives of those who work in fields related to early childhood, highlight the positive early learning experiences of bilingualism and languages learning in the first 5 years of childhood. Evidence suggests, early-start bilingualism (at ages 0–5), including learning home languages and additional languages, is beneficial for successful English outcomes and achieving a sense of community and belonging. (The Multicultural Education and Languages Committee (MELC), 2022)

Concern has been raised regarding the current senior secondary certification structures and eligibility criteria. While some schools have creatively offered Stage 1 language courses at the Year 10 level, this approach is not suitable for all schools and learners. Significantly, students report that they are not able to accommodate language learning in their senior secondary subject choices.

Analysing the structural barriers that affect language enrolment and participation offers valuable insights into creating a seamless, continuous language learning journey from early childhood through to senior secondary education and university. By addressing these obstacles, we can pave the way for more inclusive, accessible, and effective language education, ensuring students and the State benefit from a strong languages education.