

○ PREFACE

In the Australian context of language education over the past three decades there has been an ongoing critical discussion about the development and use of frameworks that describe student achievements in language learning. This is part of the wider educational context of standards-referenced assessment for the purposes of accountability (Brindley, 1998; Moore 2001). This discussion has generally focussed on English language learning (ESL/EFL) and to a limited extent on the learning of additional languages. This is no doubt because of the crucial role of English and the reality that educational systems gather state and national data on students' achievements in English but do not do so in languages other than English.

This critique, in line with a similar critique in general education (Luke, 2011), has been valuable in identifying the dangers of generalisation and standardisation and the often negative impact on particular groups of learners K-12, such as students of English as a Second Language. Applied to languages other than English this generalisation and standardisation process is even more marked in the Australian context because: (1) students learn specific languages, not a generic language, as is depicted in the frameworks of learner achievements or standards; (2) students do not necessarily learn the same language continuously across the K-12 continuum, thus there are likely to be differences in the amount of time-on-task in learning a particular language, and (3) given the migration history of Australia, there is often a range of diverse learner groups learning particular languages, for example, some who are learning the particular language as an additional language, some who are learning their first language and some who have varying degrees of home background in the particular language being learnt. The learning trajectories and achievements of students in this context are markedly diverse. The national and state frameworks made available to teachers of languages mask this contextual diversity to such an extent as to render their use meaningless. As such, they leave unanswered the question of teachers and other interested parties about legitimate achievements of students learning particular languages.

In Australia, with the government's prioritisation of the learning of Asian languages (Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean) (see LoBianco, this issue) there is a growing interest on the part of policy makers in knowing about the achievements of students learning Asian languages. Equally, teachers and students themselves need a frame of reference for understanding the achievements of learners of languages in the context of the diversity of languages, conditions of learning, specifically time available and the diversity of students.

With the unprecedented global movement of people there is an increasing diversity of languages and diversity of students in K-12 education. In fact, for many students in Australia, as indeed globally, multilingualism is the norm. This builds on the long history in languages

education in Australia of seeking to provide for the diverse languages that are used routinely in the Australian community. This context intensifies the challenge of seeking to describe the nature, scope and levels of achievement of diverse students studying diverse languages. This was the aim of the Student Achievements in Asian Languages Education (SAALE) project (Scarino et al., 2011), which provides the research base for this special theme issue on the diversity of learner achievements. Specifically, the study addressed the question of student achievements in Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean at three points along the K-12 continuum: at the end of the primary cycle, at the end of Year 10 and at the end of Year 12. In so doing, it examined specifically the impact of two major structural variables that influence language learning: time-on-task and learner background. The starting point for the study was the recognition of the diversity of the conditions of learning (time-on-task) and of groups of students learning the diverse languages. In this sense it was acknowledged from the outset that student achievements, rather than being generic and generalised, need to be examined in a way that is sensitive to diversity in context.

There are further dimensions of this diversity in context that need to be highlighted: the interrelationships of the two major structural variables and the different way in which the relative influence of these variables is manifested in different languages.

Time-on-task and language background might appear to be separate variables but they interact with one another in intricate ways. While the notion that hours of classroom instruction equates to level of achievement is intuitively appealing, leading one to expect, for example, that those who start their learning early (e.g. from primary school) or study more intensively (e.g. via immersion) will achieve better outcomes, it should never be assumed that language learning takes place only within the confines of the classroom. Those who speak the target language at home or have been exposed to it, say, during a sojourn in a country where the language is spoken, may experience far richer and more intensive input in the target language than what can be offered by the classroom teacher, and this is likely not only to speed up the rate of learning but also to yield a richer understanding of the ultimate goal of language instruction. Likewise learners who have acquired or studied other languages, whether in the home or in a formal learning context, are likely to be better able to process the classroom input that they receive than monolinguals with no prior language learning experience, and this will be all the more true if the languages already known share some common features with the new language they are studying. Part of the task of all new learning, after all, is discovering and building on what is already known and language learners with different language backgrounds and language learning experiences will come to the task with varying degrees of such knowledge.

In addition, it is important to note that the relative influence of time-on-task and language background variables is manifested differently in different languages. This is at least in part because of the history of the particular language in the Australian context which, in turn, is

related to Australian migration history and the resulting presence of users of the particular language in the Australian community.

For example, there are relatively few first language speakers of Indonesian in the Australian community (with the exception perhaps of Darwin). Students of Indonesian in Australian schools are therefore generally second language learners. As such, in considering student achievements, it is the time-on-task variable that is more influential, although we acknowledge that, given the diversity of L1 backgrounds in any Australian classroom noted above, not all learners of Indonesian will come to class with the same level of language awareness. With Chinese, in contrast, where the vast majority of students have a home background or are first language learners of Chinese, it is the learner background variable that is the most salient, even though the amounts of prior instruction undertaken in or through the target language will vary widely among learners of both Chinese and non Chinese speaking backgrounds. Thus, the configuration of variables that influences student achievements and the way these interact with one another is different for different languages.

The papers in this special issue have in common their focus on time on task and/or language background variables as they pertain to the study of Asian languages in Australian schools and their use of data from the SAALE study (referred to above). They however differ from one another in important ways.

The first paper by Scarino offers a rationale for acknowledging the diversity of learner achievements in school education in Australia with particular reference to the curriculum and assessment frameworks that have been used to describe learner achievements since the 1990s in the context of a movement towards standardization for accountability purposes. She highlights the value of context-sensitive descriptions to guide learning contrasting the generalized 'proficiency' approach taken for the Common European Framework of Reference with the 'achievement' orientation of the SAALE descriptions. She also points to the importance of ongoing research into the way such descriptions are conceptualised, to the processes by which they are developed and to the ways that they are used by teachers and others.

The second paper by Elder, Kim and Knoch focuses particularly on the process followed for the SAALE project which generated the data for the subsequent language-specific studies in this special issue. It begins with a broad overview of the literature on time-on-task and language background which informed the study's design and outlines the assumptions about the impact of these variables that the project set out to test. It then describes the 'common measures', i.e. the language tests and background questionnaires used to collect data from learners of Asian languages at three levels of schooling as well as the procedures for recruiting and collecting data from the learner sample. The paper goes on to outline the analyses undertaken firstly, to determine for each language the links between time-on-task

and language background variables and learning achievement and secondly, to develop language-specific descriptions which were sensitive to these links.

Four language specific papers follow – each with its own take on the issues foreshadowed in the two introductory papers. The first, by Kohler, deals specifically with the time-on-task factor (operationalized here as years of instruction in the Australian school context) as it pertains to the study of Indonesian in primary and junior secondary schools. While the quantitative results suggest some benefits for early starters at Year 8 compared to those who have studied for one year only in secondary school, such benefits are not evident at Year 10, at which stage the author suggests factors such as intensity of instruction and exposure to or experience of learning languages other than Indonesian may come into play. The quantitative trends reported in this study are also illustrated qualitatively, via an analysis of particular examples of student writing at each year level.

The second paper, by Iwashita, investigates one aspect of the language background question: that of cross-linguistic influence and how similarities between languages can influence learning achievements. Since the study of Japanese is increasingly attractive to learners from a range of L1 backgrounds including speakers of Korean, which shares structural features with Japanese, and Chinese which, like Japanese, is a character-based language, it provides a good context for gathering evidence of cross-linguistic influence. The study compares the scores of Year 10 Japanese learners from different L1 backgrounds derived from performance on common writing and speaking measures. In addition, qualitative analysis of a sample of student performances offers some instances of the L1 transfer phenomenon. However the author speculates that other non-linguistic factors, such as familiarity with their target culture, may also contribute to the variety of forms and richness of content evident in particular samples of performance.

The next two papers also consider the effect of language background, but from a somewhat different perspective, comparing the performance of heritage or background learners with a home and/or community exposure to the target language and “foreign” or second language learners with no such exposure. Scrimgeour, focusing on Chinese in Year 10 (middle secondary school) contrasts the writing performance of the two groups on common tasks, noting both quantitative and qualitative differences in many areas but especially in relation to linguistic forms and structures. While the background learners attain high levels of achievement on average he points to specific areas of weakness derived in part from the difficulties in rendering oral forms in characters.

Kim, focusing on Korean writing performance at the same year level, offers a fine-grained analysis of learner performance across two different writing tasks, paying particular attention to both morphosyntactic and discourse features, which she argues are particularly crucial for Korean language acquisition. She finds that heritage and non-heritage learners

perform differently in response to different task demands due to different levels of familiarity but also to what she argues are fundamentally different processes of learning. She questions the assumption that a home background in the target language guarantees an advantage for language learning, pointing as does Scrimgeour, to the variability of performance within this group and to the significant difficulties which some background learners face even after many years of formal instruction.

All four language-specific papers consider the pedagogical implications of their findings and offer proposals for further research.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

The SAALE project outcomes, and the insights on these outcomes presented here, constitute only a first iteration in seeking to gather empirically baseline data on student achievements in Asian languages.

It has drawn attention to the *centrality of context* of the specific language, in the specific educational context, in the context of history of the specific language – and the students whose language learning we seek to characterise, in its intricate diversity.

It has begun to describe scope and level of achievement. It has respected the current state-of play in language learning – not the conceptual challenge of the more contemporary constructs of multilingual and multicultural competence and the distinctive capabilities that these foreshadow (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; Stroud & Heugh, 2011). These will we hope be the subject of ongoing research with the ultimate aim of improving achievements in learning languages in general and Asian languages in particular.

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