

○ CINDERELLA'S COACH OR JUST ANOTHER PUMPKIN? INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE CONTINUING MARGINALISATION OF LANGUAGES IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

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The rhetoric around global connectedness and advances in information communication technologies (ICTs) suggests that: Professional life for the marginalised and isolated language teacher should be easier; the experience of language learners in Australian schools should be more meaningful and bring them closer to the languages and communities that they are studying; and collectively this should be empowering for students and teachers and, in turn, empower the languages learning area with respect to its status and place within the curriculum. This paper examines these assumptions through a qualitative multiple case study investigation of the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) in secondary school language classes. The study explores the perceptions and experiences of early adolescent language learners and those of their teachers. It also identifies and examines a range of contextual factors that both complicate and nuance the technology and languages learning nexus. The findings of the study question the assumption of 'automaticity' associated with ICTs and an enhanced/improved language learning experience for all those involved. This study finds that experience with technologies can impact negatively on both learners and teachers. This, in turn, can have an adverse influence on perceptions about languages and their status in schools. At a time when schools are investing heavily in information communication technologies, and when they are having to manage the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum: Languages*, the findings of this study serve to highlight the place of the 'critical' in terms of languages in Australian schools.

KEY WORDS: languages education, technologies, inter-global connectedness, critical pedagogy, educational technology

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly acknowledged that we are living in an increasingly globalised world. The term 'globalisation' pervades contemporary political rhetoric and is a keyword associated with both academic and popular discourses that range across a diversity of areas including economics, sociology, technology, culture and education. Waters (1995, p. 3) describes globalisation as a social process where the constraints of geography recede. Block and

Cameron (2002, p. 1) talk of this process allowing unfettered worldwide social relations. Advances in information communication technologies (ICTs) add a further dimension to the discussion of global social connectedness. Bringing this mix into the domain of Australian education establishes the conditions that spawned the Australian political rhetoric of 'The Digital Education Revolution' (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). This 'revolution' has positioned students studying in Australian schools as 'learning in an online world' where ICTs are 'enabling the transformation of the curriculum and changing the way learners and educators operate, learn and interact' (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA] & Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education [MCVTE], 2008).

Language is unsurprisingly identified as an issue of practical importance within global connectedness. It is described as the 'primary medium of human social interaction' (Block & Cameron, 2002, p. 1). The importance of language is also recognised within the rhetoric of contemporary Australian educational policy where increased 'global integration' (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA], 2011, p. 10) is touted as providing new and exciting opportunities for young Australians who have language and intercultural capabilities. According to the MCEECDYA (2011), this will enable them to engage as 'global citizens' (p. 10). Global connectedness, information communication technologies and language learning are thus portrayed as interconnected, and as promising much for the future of young Australians.

Kramsch and Thorne (2002) discuss the potential of such a combination in creating global opportunities for foreign language use. They highlight the potential for native speakers and non-native speakers to have access to one another both synchronously and asynchronously. They identify the capacity to see and hear the cultures of different language communities and to access, engage with and use authentic texts. They also comment on the potential for the development of discourse communities. Many other researchers and practitioners, particularly in studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) agree: Collectively such global opportunities with ICTs suggest enhanced conditions for language teaching and learning, particularly in the development of communicative and intercultural competence (Blake, 2013; Fischer, 2013; O'Dowd, 2013; Schenker, 2012; Stanley, 2013; Thomas, Reinders, & Warschauer, 2013).

This paper seeks to examine if, and how, such conditions have changed language learning and teaching within the Australian context. It asks if global connectedness and advances in ICT have been transformative for languages and if the promises of the political and educational rhetoric have been fulfilled from the perspective of the middle-school teachers and learners who were the participants in this study.

Languages, as a learning area, is the ‘Cinderella’ of Australian curriculum. Although recognised as a key area in Australian school education in 1989 through the Hobart Declaration on Schooling, and in spite of having its significance reaffirmed in subsequent declarations (Adelaide in 1999 and Melbourne in 2008), languages continue to struggle to achieve recognition. Just as the fairy-tale Cinderella languished in relative obscurity, so it is with languages in Australian schools and educational jurisdictions. Clyne (2005) commented on the continuing fragility of languages in Australia notwithstanding a series of policy initiatives designed to increase participation in the area. And even with two national attempts to embed the study of Asian languages in the Australian education system, (National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools [NALSAS] Task Force 1995-2002 and National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) 2008-2012), there has been only limited success with respect to languages achieving recognition within curriculum. In fact, rather than there being a strengthening of languages, Liddicoat and Scarino (2010) report a weakening of the position of languages in schools. Language teachers are often marginalised and isolated (Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Australian Parents Council [ACSSO], 2007; Liddicoat et al., 2007; Norris, 2010). As Cinderellas within their schools, they struggle for recognition and support, and their conditions make it difficult for students of languages to achieve meaningful outcomes.

With respect to outcomes, whilst it would be convenient to be able to make a direct connection between the use of ICTs and enhanced learning outcomes, Newhouse (2002, p. 16) argues that most educational researchers agree that there will never be a direct link. This, he states, is because learning is mediated through the environment and ICT is only one element of that environment. This position is echoed by Dale, Robertson, and Shortis (2004) who comment that,

...neither ‘ICT’ nor ‘teaching and learning’ have self-evident, universally accepted or context-independent meanings and...the learning context of the classroom and teacher-student interaction using ICT are neither ‘neutral’ spaces, nor limitless in their possibilities. Rather, they are spaces that have been constructed, framed and shaped in particular ways that privilege some learning, pedagogic and curricular activities, practices and possibilities over others. (p. 456)

Increasingly researchers in the area have shifted focus. Studies on ICT and education have often been directed towards the ‘potential’ offered by ICTs (Arnold & Ducate, 2011; Boulton, Chateau, Pereiro, & Azzam-Hannachi, 2008; Livingstone, 2012; Mitchell, 2009; Smeets, 2005) rather than the practice. This is in the face of acknowledgement that modern technology has not lived up to all the promotional hype (Burston, 2006) and that Cuban’s (2003) assessment of technology being oversold and underutilised was accurate. It is acknowledged that the impact of ICTs on teaching practices has been limited (Kozma, 2003; Law, Pelgrum, & Plomp, 2008; Livingstone, 2012; Newhouse, 2008; Selwyn, 2011), and that

within the Australian school context, the take-up and use of digital resources continues to be patchy (Dandolopartners, 2013; Lee, 2013; Lee & Finger, 2010; Muspratt & Freebody, 2007). There has, however, been a significant move towards focusing on the student rather than on ‘gadgets and bells and whistles’ (Felix, 2003) and this has resulted in a change from examining what the technology can do for the student to what the student can do with technology (Livingstone, 2012; Luckin et al., 2012; Fisher, 2013; Reinders, Thomas, & Warschauer, 2013).

In studies specifically concerned with ICTs and language learning these same shifts in focus are evident. Burston (2006) states that,

...anyone looking for incontrovertible evidence that instructional technology improves or accelerates learning outcomes will be hard pressed to find it – certainly as far as foreign language acquisition is concerned. (p. 254)

Zhao (2005, p. 8) argues that technology should not be viewed as the sole player. Instead, he advocates the need for the adoption of perspectives that take both technology and teaching into consideration. Zhao also claims that there are significant deficiencies with respect to research into ICT and language learning and teaching. He identifies that there has been a focus on adult learners and not on learning in school contexts, and that this is contrary to studies of technology applications in other subject areas that have mainly taken place in K-12 classrooms (Zhao, 2005, p. 33). Similarly, in his review of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) literature, Evans (2009) found that many of the influential studies were small scale, experimental and set in the context of adult and higher education. Like Zhao, he demonstrates that these studies focus on learners of English as a foreign language who often had working proficiency in the language (Evans, 2009, p. 18).

In recent years, however, teachers and researchers have shown a greater desire to explore ICT and languages more holistically (Blake, 2013; Chiu, 2013; Davies, Otto, & Ruschoff, 2013; Grgurovic, Chapelle, & Shelley, 2013; Meskill & Quah, 2013; Stockwell, 2012). CALL researchers have extended their forms of inquiry beyond the traditions of second language acquisition and applied linguistics in order to be more inclusive of methods traditionally associated with disciplines such as sociology, education, media literacy studies and communications (Meskill & Quah, 2013, p. 87). In spite of this there is still a lack of peer-reviewed literature reporting studies in K-12 foreign language learning contexts: such accounts are predominately confined within the realm of blogs, opinion articles, and unpublished action-research reports.

Even in the face of continuing debate and mixed research findings, State and Commonwealth government media releases and Australian jurisdictional websites continue to spruik the automaticity associated with communication technologies and enhanced or improved learning outcomes. Such sources assert that ‘the computer rollout is transforming the way

students learn' (Ministers' Media Centre, 2012). The classroom is described as having become the 'global schoolroom' and the school student is depicted as being armed with 'a shiny new laptop to take home every night' (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2012). ICT is described as offering students 'a world of opportunity' (Department of Education Western Australia, 2013). In the face of this, and given the need for further studies in this area – particularly in school contexts – this study asks if global connectedness and ICT have been the 'fairy godmother' for a number of secondary language programs operating in schools with access to specialised ICT support. It examines whether professional life for marginalised and isolated language teachers is made easier; if the experiences for language learners are more meaningful bringing them closer to target language speakers and their communities; and if collectively this empowers languages, language learners and language teachers. Findings from this study highlight the complexity of the technology and languages learning nexus. The findings also show that technologies and expectations around their use can have a negative impact on language programs and that this, in turn, may further marginalise them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The epistemological stance adopted for this study is social constructivism. Unlike constructivism that tends to focus on the individual and how individuals construct and make sense of their world (Burr, 2003), social constructivism has a broader social focus by considering how groups of individuals communicate and negotiate their views and perspectives (Kelder, Marshall, & Perry, 2005). This idea of knowledge and reality being constructed through dynamic interaction with others, within a particular cultural and historical time and place, is fundamental to the theoretical positioning and framework of this research.

Also fundamental is the use of phenomenology as a theoretical perspective. Phenomenological research addresses people's lived experiences and aims at gaining deep understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday experiences (van Manen, 1997). In keeping with social constructivism, this phenomenological study examined not only what language learners and teachers did, used and felt with respect to ICTs and language learning, but also how language learning and teaching practices were shaped by broader institutional and social factors within the shared experiences of participants.

An additional consideration is that this is a qualitative study in an area that continues to be dominated by quantitative investigations (Blake, 2013; Tamim, Bernard, Borokhovski, Abrami, & Schmid, 2011; Stockwell, 2007; Zhao, 2003). Research in language teaching and learning using technology has traditionally focused on showing how computers can improve discrete aspects of language acquisition (Chiu, 2013; Fischer, 2013; Grgurovic et al., 2013; Meskill & Quah, 2013; Motteram, 1999; Wang & Vasquez, 2012). Qualitative practitioner-

based classroom research that explores and exposes how language learning with ICTs is perceived and experienced in lower secondary school contexts, is still far too uncommon.

METHOD

This study utilised a qualitative multiple case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of language teachers and their adolescent learners (Merriam, 1998). The study aimed to develop thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Patton, 2002) in which ‘the voices, feelings, actions and meanings of interacting individuals are heard’ (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Such descriptions enabled ‘thick interpretation’ (Denzin, 1989, p. 83) of the complex relationships between learners, teachers, language course content, and technology as played out in the particular social and cultural contexts of each of the case study sites. The study also sought to examine these against the broader perspectives and issues associated with managing and enacting languages as a learning area within curriculum in Australia.

Data were collected using multiple methods that enabled detailed recording of the thoughts, feelings and experiences of all participants. Giving voice to language learners, as well as teachers, provided complimentary perspectives from which to view the intersections of languages, curriculum and technology within lower secondary school contexts. Data were collected to accentuate the experiential dimension of language learning and teaching rather than to identify learning outcomes.

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

The research carried out for this study was conducted at four case study sites. All sites were government public schools in a single Australian educational jurisdiction – three in metropolitan areas and one in a rural community. All schools were ‘technology enhanced’ by virtue of the fact that they had been involved in a Departmental initiative that provided extra ICT support to schools. This support included increased ratio of computers to students together with the provision of ICT coordinators whose role it was to provide professional learning experiences for school staff as well as technical support for the utilisation of technology. Significantly, as a result of a re-focus of the Department’s priorities for schools, this support was reduced during the course of this study.

Seven language teachers participated in this study. Three of the teachers involved had no formal languages curriculum or methodology training although all had been appointed specifically to teach languages, and all had been doing so for in excess of 12 months. In addition, two of these three were what might be described as ‘pseudo speakers’ of the languages they were teaching – a Malaysian woman teaching Indonesian and a woman whose parents had been Italian migrants. Two of the metropolitan sites had multiple teachers.

The remaining sites had only a single language teacher. No site had a language teacher in a designated senior position to provide leadership for the languages learning area and its staff, or representation at administrative level within the school.

Language learner participants totalled 32 in number and were drawn from all the case study sites. Learner participants were in their early adolescent years – 13 to 15 years of age – and chosen from Year 8, 9 and 10 classes. Participants for focus group interviews at each site were teacher selected to be representative of the full range of language achievement as determined by teacher assessment and school reporting procedures. Variety in learner motivation was also a selection criterion. It was considered important for focus groups to be constructed in this way in order to provide a broad range of perspectives and experiences with respect to language learning and technology.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected using a variety of methods to allow for triangulation and the establishment of the trustworthiness of the study's findings (Dornyei, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the language teachers at the beginning and end of the study. Questions were a mix of demographic, behaviour, opinion, feeling, knowledge, and sensory questions designed to encourage thoughtful and thorough responses from interviewees as they recounted and reflected on, their experiences of ICTs and language teaching. Interviews were conducted as 'professional conversations' (Dornyei, 2007, p. 134) between researcher and teacher. Members of the research team also conducted focus group interviews with student participants. The focus groups provided a forum for open discussion with language learners. Information was shared about tasks students liked and disliked as well as technologies they used, and would like to be able to use, every day and also for language learning. The guarantee of confidentiality facilitated frank disclosure of learner opinions in respect of their attitudes towards, and experiences of technology and the learning of languages.

Data were also gathered through classroom observation. Classes were observed on multiple occasions over a ten month period facilitating the development of a detailed understanding of language learning and ICT use at the case study sites. Watching the learning and teaching of languages also enabled corroboration between what was observed and what was reported by case study participants.

Additional data were collected through student work samples and also document analysis. School policy documents (or lack thereof), pertaining to languages and to the use of ICT, were of particular importance in contextualising and examining interview and observation data.

ANALYSIS

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe analysis as a process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. These stages framed data analysis within this study. The process, however, was not linear. In keeping with the phenomenological intent to ‘grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or a group of people’ (Patton, 2002, p. 482), participants were invited to be co-analysts, particularly at the data reduction and verification stages of the study. Enabling participants to exercise this role was not only in keeping with social constructivism, the guiding epistemology of the study, but also served as a mechanism for participant empowerment within a study that was very much about being disempowered and marginalised.

FINDINGS

This study sought to determine if global connectedness and advances in ICTs had impacted positively on the experiences of language teachers and language learners in technology enhanced lower secondary school contexts. Data were collected to ascertain if professional life was easier for teachers, if language learning had become more meaningful for students bringing them closer to target language cultures and communities, and if languages and their learners and teachers had become more empowered within curriculum through the use of ICTs. This study finds that, rather than enhancing language learning and teaching, technologies can impact negatively on the experience for both learners and teachers and on the status of languages learning in schools. In the following sections, the data are explored with respect to each of the three identified areas and the overall findings.

HOW DID LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN THE STUDY USE TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND MAKE THEIR PROFESSIONAL LIVES EASIER?

The data show that none of the teacher participants in this study felt that ICTs made their professional lives easier. In fact, overwhelmingly, teachers reported that incorporating technology in their programs made life more difficult. Whilst similar findings have been reported elsewhere (Bauer & Kenton, 2005; Hutchison, 2012; Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon, & Byers, 2002) what is significant here is that the case study sites were technology enhanced schools. Additional resources had been expended within these schools to provide hardware, training, maintenance and support and yet the language teacher participants of this study cited all these ‘enhanced’ areas as presenting difficulties for them in their professional lives.

Hardware emerged as a significant issue for teachers. Despite each of the case study sites having an increased ratio of computers, teachers reported numerous and ongoing problems. One teacher commented that ‘*the contracts only allow us to buy crap computers,*’ and there were regular issues with networking and with the reliability of the computers that were available in classrooms and computer pods. Data show that, whilst computers in computer

labs were acknowledged as being more reliable, accessing these was particularly difficult for all the language teachers interviewed in this study. The languages learning area was classified as a 'non core' area of the curriculum. 'Core' areas of the curriculum had priority in booking the computer laboratories. Interestingly, even when it came to 'non core' areas, languages still missed out. Other 'non core' areas such as computing and digital media had their needs prioritised. In effect, school practices and procedures around computer access contributed to the marginalisation of languages. In the technology enhanced environment of the case study schools, in order of importance within curriculum there were core areas, non-core areas and then there were languages.

In terms of maintenance, teachers reported that time and time again, they experienced interruptions to planned lessons. Issues identified included: the network being down; computers had been vandalised and were inoperable; sound cards did not work; and updates needed to be downloaded before students could log on. The consensus from teachers was that access to poorly maintained and unreliable computers was actually more detrimental to learning than having no access at all.

Issues around access and maintenance were exacerbated because of school arrangements for technical support and support in languages leadership. At all of the case study sites technical support had become ad hoc. This was the result of the change in Departmental policy and the cessation of the technology initiative. Previously formalised school processes for the provision of technical support had become untenable because of staffing and funding cuts. Given this situation, language teachers were forced to take the initiative and build their own relationships with technology support staff. One of the teacher participants in the study reported that in the face of the breakdown of formalised school policies around ICT support she had resorted to gifting (chocolate cake and bourbon) in order to secure the technical support she needed for her languages program.

Even more critical was the lack of support available to language teachers because of the absence of languages leadership positions within the case study schools. Languages were not regarded as equal with other disciplines. In the words of one participant '*we are not a real learning area.*' Lack of leadership exacerbated the fragility of languages in general and weakened the capacity for language teachers to be able to manage the effective use of ICTs in their teaching. They reported feeling isolated. There was no provision for mentoring and no perceived access to professional development to support their use of ICTs. The resultant holes in professional knowledge became a significant impediment to the teachers being able to use technology to enhance language learning and make their professional lives easier.

The management of learners and learning, when using ICTs, was also identified by participant teachers as making their professional lives more difficult. Monitoring students as

they used what were considered to be valuable assets was an issue. Trusting students with same was an issue. Teacher comments included:

It's a lot more stressful because I, um, there's so many kids in that class ... to watch every single student and make sure they are not fiddling with the mouse, taking this, removing this ...

You have to be an octopus.

Teachers also commented on the work required to plan for and sustain teaching with ICTs:

There's so much prep beforehand...it discourages me from even um, tackling anything using technology.

Interview and observation data suggest, however, that some of these management issues can also be attributed to poor pedagogical knowledge and a lack of technical skill. Five of the seven teachers that took part in this study had no familiarity with web-based tools such as blogs and wikis. The same five also lacked understanding of contemporary approaches to languages pedagogy.

HOW DID STUDENTS USE ICTs TO MAKE LANGUAGE LEARNING MORE MEANINGFUL AND BRING THEM CLOSER TO THE LANGUAGES AND COMMUNITIES THEY WERE STUDYING?

The short answer is that they didn't – much. Only one of the case study sites allowed students to email target language speakers. In the remaining schools there was no real communication in online spaces. And, with respect to engaging with the culture of target language speaking communities, overwhelmingly this comprised project work in English. There was very little evidence at any of the case study sites of learners having opportunities to use online authentic target language text or communicate in other culturally meaningful ways.

Data from participant learners reveal that language learning with ICTs comprised essentially two types of activities, neither of which learners found particularly meaningful. Quizzes, drills, practice games and using online learning objects were common uses of ICTs. '*Boring games, easy stuff*' is how learners reported these activities. On the other hand there were the activities that learners associated with *more work* and these always involved writing (often in English). Participant learners were very vocal about these types of activities ('*They're boring. They're all about writing*') and writing digitally implied either constructing extended texts or completing mechanical tasks ('*type our text – good copies*').

Learners attributed these restricted activities to two factors. They commented on limitations with respect to what could be accessed at school sites (often no audio, no video, no chat facilities, restricted internet). There were also some quite scathing comments with respect to teacher competence:

I just, um, I don't think it really depends on the technology that you use, it's just, the teacher...

Interestingly, when learner participants spoke of online communication they used verbs: '*chatting, presenting, writing, surfing.*' Their construction of ICTs was active. This was in stark contrast to all teachers (bar one) who used nouns, '*PowerPoint, Word, Google, Learning Objects,*' thus interpreting ICTs as passive tools. Prensky (2001) highlights this unconscious language use as a distinction between 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants' and although the metaphor is problematic for many researchers, (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Jones, 2011; Thomas, 2011), there was a clear divide between the teachers and students in these case studies both in how they used technologies and in how they talked about them.

WERE LANGUAGES, LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND LANGUAGE TEACHERS EMPOWERED BY OPPORTUNITIES FOR GLOBAL CONNECTEDNESS AND THE USE OF ICTs?

In the metropolitan case study schools, the limited curriculum leadership and support in ICT, combined with the lack of leadership in languages, worked to further disempower language teachers. These teachers were expected to manage their programs and departments without the resources associated with having a head of learning area or teacher in charge. They strongly felt their lack of representation at school management level and they considered themselves powerless to enact change. They said that addressing issues associated with ICT use in languages was beyond them. As a result, little was done with either global connectedness or ICTs within their language programs and, consequently, the languages learning area was further marginalised.

The scenario at the rural case study site was quite different. Here the Japanese teacher was able to influence school policy and practice, and languages were strengthened within the curriculum. This, however, had little to do with technology. The enhanced status of languages and increased enrolments in Japanese were a reflection of the efforts, confidence and competence of the teacher and his capacity to engage directly with school leadership and the broader school community. A master's degree in educational leadership provided this participant with a skill set that set him apart from other teachers involved in the study.

With respect to the empowerment of language learners, data show that, in general, students were not provided with learning activities that challenged their ICT competence. Condescending, not empowering, described these experiences. At one site learners did have some opportunity to develop their own metalinguistic awareness and this could, perhaps, be considered to have been empowering.

Issues around the hardware at the case study sites also served to undermine opportunities for ICT use to be empowering for learners. There were instances where learners were

empowered when asked by teachers to troubleshoot the technology, but in general because *'stuff is always broken; they're not like up to date; they're not set up'* meant that ICT use in language learning was rudimentary. Student interview data suggest that this resulted in many learners feeling disaffected or disengaged rather than globally connected. Interview data give little sense of learners perceiving the experience of language learning to be either meaningful or personally empowering.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that rather than enhancing language learning and teaching, the use of technologies at the case study sites impacted negatively on the experience of both learners and teachers, and on the status of languages learning in schools. The findings also amplify the complexity of the technology/languages nexus at the case study sites. What this research study reveals is a *wicked problem*. The term *wicked* is used here, not in the sense of evil as in the wicked stepsisters in the Cinderella tale, but rather as a problem that identifies issues that are highly resistant to resolution. Wicked problems are tough to describe and have no clear-cut answers because of the social complexity of the problem or issues involved (Conklin, 2008; Mishra & Koehler, 2007). Within the context of this study social complexity encompassed many different dimensions. There were learners who were more 'tech comfy' (Pegrum, 2009) than teachers and who found the experience of language learning to be less than meaningful. There were teachers who had mixed competencies across their languages, their teaching practices and their technical knowledge. These same teachers lacked representation at leadership levels in schools and struggled with accessing IT support when using technology in their language programs. There were the school sites themselves that reflected an ongoing failure to understand or support sound practices in language teaching and learning and whose operations have been compromised by jurisdictional policy changes that have led to adhocery in processes and procedures. However, the social complexity of this study included more than this. It also involved government and ongoing rhetoric associated with global connectedness, technology and languages. This helped shape policy, perceptions and practices at the case study sites but also contributed to participant frustration and disempowerment as well as the continuing marginalisation of languages within secondary school curriculum.

Issues around the fragility and marginalisation of language programs in Australian schools are well documented (ACSSO, 2007; Liddicoat et al., 2007; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010). Also documented in the international literature is the need to consider more than the technology when looking at ICTs in teaching and learning (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Pegrum 2009; Selwyn, 2011; Shneiderman, 2002; Thomas et al., 2013; Zhao, 2005). The wicked problem that is this case study brings all these factors together. Tackling wicked problems successfully requires a broad recognition that there are no quick fixes, and no straightforward

solutions (Conklin, 2006; Mishra & Koehler, 2007; Rittel & Webber, 1973). There are certainly no simple answers (and no magic wand) for the problems and issues exposed through this study but, by returning to the goal of phenomenology to ‘grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience’ (Patton, 2002, p. 482) within the particular cultural and historical context of this study, we can at least begin to build an ideational framework that can help challenge the ‘wickedness’ of this research.

Critical theory can inform such a framework. According to Steinberg and Cannella (2012, p. ix) critical theory is ‘a philosophy which situates itself smack dab in the middle of power and politics.’ This study is also situated in the middle of power and politics. This is demonstrated through contextual factors documented in the study together with the issues, concerns and experiences voiced by study participants. Because of this, there is a need for the adoption of an ideational framework that incorporates a critical theory of technology, critically reflective practice, and critical approaches to language education. A detailed description and discussion of such a framework is beyond the scope of this paper but it is possible here to identify elements within such a framework that can leverage some of the issues embedded within the social complexity of this study.

Schmid (2006, p. 51) states that a critical theory of technology demands the examination of underlying power relations that shape how technology is designed and used. Viewed from this perspective, technology is not neutral. Each piece of technology is constructed by the interaction between its design and how it is appropriated by its users. Appreciating technology critically in this way was certainly not the experience of the majority of participant teachers in this study. Consequently, their capacity to influence their circumstances was compromised. There is, however, a need for a note of caution here. Viewing technology critically could not have solved all the ICT related issues that emerged through this study. If able to view technology critically, however, teachers would have been better positioned to appreciate, negotiate and possibly ameliorate issues associated with technology in language learning within the politically influenced social and organisational contexts of their schools.

Taking this idea further into language education, Pennycook (2004, p. 799) advocates ‘always turning a sceptical eye towards assumptions, ideas that have become ‘naturalised,’ notions that are no longer questioned.’ Within this study the marginalisation of languages and the disempowerment of this curriculum area, and its teachers and students had, in most instances, become naturalised. Enacting their work as critical work is described by Pennycook as having the potential to provide a capacity for language teachers to contest and change situations. This did occur within the rural site included in this research study, but was not the case with the majority of participants who found themselves unable to combat this naturalised state of isolation and marginalisation. The social complexity associated with this challenge must also not be oversimplified. As stated by Morrell (2012, p. 377), we ‘need to

find ways to help teachers develop empowered identities where they see themselves as intellectuals and change agents.’

Critically reflective practice is one such way. Within languages teacher education and professional learning this requires a shift from focusing on the status quo or the ‘what is’ in languages in schools, to preparation for ‘what needs to be’ or ‘could be’ (Norris, 2010, p. 80). Again, this is complex, and the wholesale adoption of critically reflective practice by language teachers is subject to significant constraints (Norris, 2010).

So whilst there is not the scope within this paper to elaborate further on the ‘critical,’ what is clear is its importance. Language teachers cannot afford to be passive; they must be proactive, particularly at this time with the implementation of *The Australian Curriculum: Languages*. They must seek support to be empowered and not oppressed. The use of an ideational framework drawn from critical theory has the potential to help in this regard.

CONCLUSION

Within the context of this study the use of ICTs was not transformative as suggested in policy rhetoric. In effect experiences with, and perceptions of, ICTs served to exemplify the marginalising conditions associated with language teaching and learning at the case study sites.

This study focused on a number of secondary public schools, their language teachers and adolescent learners. In three of these schools the interplay of factors around access, support, and leadership within the context of ICTs, languages pedagogy, curriculum hierarchies, and broader policy and rhetoric, resulted in further impoverishment and neglect for languages. Languages were identified as a wicked problem and languages remained the ‘Cinderella’ area within curriculum. The case argued here, however, is that the use of a critical ideational framework encompassing technology, but also critically reflective practice and critical approaches to language education has the potential to help combat issues that are endemic in languages teaching and learning in Australian schools.

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