The shortage of students studying languages for NCEA Level 3

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key points

• The New Zealand education system should set a goal to produce a significant number of school leavers proficient in an international language.

• Fewer than 10 percent of Year 13 students are studying an international language at the highest curriculum level, NCEA Level 3.

• Only about 20 percent of secondary schools have enough learners for a viable Year 13 class.

• Curriculum policy changes at national level may well enhance the status of language learning.

• Positive timetabling strategies in schools are needed to make languages more accessible to students, and increased co-operation between secondary, intermediate, and primary schools in the same communities is also desirable.
In recent years Learning Languages has become a learning area in its own right in the New Zealand curriculum, and there have been initiatives to facilitate more language learning in primary and intermediate schools. Less has been done to increase the number of students in senior secondary classes. This article outlines the findings of a study into the number of students studying international languages at National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 3, both nationally and in individual schools, and examines contributing policies and practices.

Introduction
Terms of reference
The advantages of being bi- or multilingual are many. Intellectual growth and connecting with the cultures of friends—or indeed one’s own heritage—are important reasons to learn a second language. Communication for travel, tourism, trade, diplomacy, and academic, cultural, and sporting encounters are further examples of the value of language competencies.

Language policy generally divides languages into three categories: official languages, community languages, and international or foreign languages:

- New Zealand’s official languages are English, Te Reo Māori, and New Zealand Sign Language.
- Community languages are other languages spoken in the homes and communities of minority ethnic or immigrant groups in New Zealand, such as Samoan, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, Tagalog, and Afrikaans.
- International languages are those used mainly to communicate with overseas or “foreign” countries or cultures.

While the three categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, this article is concerned mainly with the third category, international languages.

Bernard Spolsky (2004. p. 88) identifies 12 major international languages that he calls “super-central” languages. These are languages that are either the mother tongue of a large number of people, or used widely as a lingua franca. In alphabetical order they are: Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swahili. From this group, those with the most established tradition of being taught in New Zealand, are Mandarin Chinese, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish. In the study which underpins this article, I used National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) statistics for these five languages to gauge advanced international learning participation among secondary students.\(^{1}\)

The case for New Zealanders learning international languages
This much is certain … we have indeed become more interdependent, more closely linked to our fellow human beings than at any time in recorded history … Both in their scale, and their cultural significance, the proliferation of linkages among nations is without precedent. It is a phenomenon that is inexorable ... I cannot imagine a future in which people of all cultures and nations are not increasingly connected via ties of travel, commerce and migration. Language skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of this world order. (Cosgrove, as cited in Ingram, 2005, p. 163)

New Zealanders appear fortunate that their predominant language, English, is so widely used internationally. However, English is the first language of only about 7 percent of the world’s population (Prigent, 2012). We need to provide opportunities for New Zealanders to learn second languages, both for their intrinsic worth, and if we are to engage effectively with the other 93 percent.

There are major contexts in which international language competency is valuable in New Zealand. For example, in 2011, following the lethal Christchurch earthquake, search and rescue squads from China, Taiwan, and Japan came to our aid and would have required liaison with local authorities. Soon afterwards New Zealand reciprocated, with rescuers flying to Japan to assist after the March 2011 tsunami disaster.

On a happier note, a major sporting event provided scope for international language use when New Zealand hosted the Rugby World Cup in the same year. At the opening ceremony a foreign rugby
Researchers have indicated that, in the New Zealand context, to attain functional proficiency for purposes such as tourism and trade, at least 5 years of language tuition are desirable, along with exposure to the target language outside the classroom (Ellis, 2000; Peddie, 1991). Due to the affordable communications technology we now have, there is now ample access to that exposure.

Judith Liskin-Gasparro (cited in Waite, 1992) estimated that it takes an English speaker 480 hours to reach intermediate-level competence in French or Spanish; 720 hours for German, Indonesian, or Russian; and 1,320 hours for Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. Using a model of students having 3 hours a week of tuition in Years 9 and 10, and at least 4 hours in Years 11, 12, and 13, in a 39-week school year, students could have around 620 hours of language tuition plus homework time at secondary school. This could enable students to achieve an advanced level in French and Spanish, and a level approaching intermediate in German, but a lower level in Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, which require learning a different written script. In the latter languages a younger start would be useful, or subsequent tertiary study.

2. Should language learning begin prior to secondary school?

I have often heard it said that young children learn second languages with ease, and that secondary school is too late to begin effective second-language acquisition. However, research and my anecdotal observation in New Zealand have found the long-term effects of starting international languages prior to secondary school age are inconsistent (Burstable, Jamieson, & Cohen, 1974).

For example, Spanish students of English aged from 11 to 17 maintained better long-term language performance than a group who started learning English aged from 8 to 16 (Ortega, 2009, p. 17). Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam (2009) found that some immigrants to Sweden attained a level where they were perceived as native or very near native, having arrived between the ages of 12 and 17. Ioup, Boustagoui, Tigi, and Moselle (1994) document the case of native-like proficiency in a woman who began learning a second language (Arabic) at age 21.

Contextual factors affect outcomes significantly; for example, the total length of time exposed to the language. In other words, the younger you start, the more of your life you have to learn a language, particularly if you are living where the language is spoken. It is also relevant to examine our expectations of second-language proficiency. A speaker can be effective without being strictly native-like—for example, retaining some accent from their first language. Neurological researchers have also found that

dignitary greeted the crowd in at least three languages (in contrast to the monolingual address of a prominent local politician). Provincial towns hosted squads from linguistically diverse nations. Ex-All Black international coach John Kirwan spoke Italian at an international press conference, which became news for that reason alone. Most sports presenters struggled with even French and Spanish, let alone Georgian and Russian, names. It could be said that the event was a success in spite of linguistic limitations, but for many it could have been so much richer had they been equipped to communicate more directly with our visitors.

When our politicians and sports, defence, business, artistic, and scientific personnel represent us overseas or host counterparts here, they are rendered much less effective if they are dependent on interpreters. Even those professionals could be scarce. Spolsky (2004, p. 102) documents how both the Second World War and the 9/11 attacks exposed a significant shortage of linguists in the United States who were needed to facilitate operations. Although defence agencies set up intensive language training on both occasions, they failed to create the quantity of linguistically competent personnel required at the time. We cannot rule out a similar language crisis occurring in New Zealand.

Educating language-proficient school leavers

If the above justifications are correct, then we should be supporting the education of a critical mass of people who can do more than count to 10 and describe their pets in another language. To maximise language acquisition in the course of their schooling and thereby reach an advanced level of fluency and literacy in an international language, a sizeable number of students should be studying the language to an advanced level. This brings us to three salient questions:

1. How long does it take to learn a new language?
2. At what age should the learning begin?
3. How well are we doing?

1. How long does it take?

During informal conversations with adults about second language learning, I have heard frequent claims that although they studied a language at high school, they “can’t remember a thing”. While this is often self-effacement, it is a genuine perception not limited to those who studied a language decades ago when there was barely any oral work in class, but also applying to younger people who would have been taught with audio-lingual and communicative methodology.

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the adolescent brain is in an intense stage of development, which can continue through to the early 20s (Sowell, Thompson, Tessner, & Toga, 2001).

Therefore, if primary school second-language acquisition is not possible, there is evidence that the secondary school period is still a very fertile phase for second-language acquisition. I am not saying that international languages should not be taught prior to secondary school, but that with a limited pool of specialist language teachers available in the primary sector for language tuition or bilingual education, all is not lost if it is not begun prior to secondary level.

In my opinion, for optimal proficiency outcomes it is important that international language learning be continued, or indeed resumed, through to the highest senior secondary levels, i.e. Years 12 and 13. Students need to learn to use the language at a mature level in order to articulate adult ideas and opinions. A student who studies French all through primary school may be fluent at age 12, but may struggle to use the language at a higher developmental level later on.

3. How well are we doing?

Many secondary language teachers watch cohorts of language learners shrink with each passing year in secondary schools. It is common to have to teach combined senior language classes of Years 11/12, Years 12/13 or even Years 11/12/13. If the class is declared unviable they can be lost altogether, with only the keenest students continuing their learning with Te Kura (Correspondence School). A dedicated Year 13 language class seems a luxury that is normally limited to very large schools or to private and integrated schools who are prepared to staff a small class that is seen as an unjustified drain on resources in state schools.

The low numbers and attrition rate of international language students at senior level are already well documented (McLauchlan, 2007; Spence, 2004; Shearn, 2003; East, Chung, & Arkinstall, 2012). Around the turn of the millennium a figure of 6 percent was given as the rate of Year 13 student participation in New Zealand, which, incidentally, is half the rate found in the Australian state of Victoria (Shearn, 2003). In my study, I set out to update these earlier studies by ascertaining the rates of international language learning 10 years on in Year 13.

My research questions were:

1. What is the current rate of participation in international language study at the highest curricular level in New Zealand, both at national and individual school level?
2. Are there demographic features that characterise schools with high international-language participation rates?

3. To what extent does language education policy encourage high-proficiency outcomes for international languages?

Data were collected using:

- Ministry of Education figures on total cohort numbers in 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2014)
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority figures relating to how many candidates there were for NCEA Level 3 Mandarin Chinese, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish in 2009 and 2010 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2012, 2014)

The study was originally carried out in January and February 2012. At that time NCEA data was not available for 2011, so figures from 2009 and 2010 were used for NCEA Level 3 participation within schools.²

Results

Year 13 international language figures declining

Table 1 shows Ministry of Education figures for the number of Year 13 students nationally enrolled in the five international languages in question in the years 2000, and 2009–13.³ The percentage of the total Year 13 population enrolled in these five languages has declined. The 2000 figure is more than quoted above from Shearn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin Chinese</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>1255</td>
<td>1138</td>
<td>1095</td>
<td>1051</td>
<td>1087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>1188</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>2861</td>
<td>3213</td>
<td>3505</td>
<td>3154</td>
<td>2994</td>
<td>3153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Y13</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF YEAR 13 LEARNERS PER LANGUAGE IN 2000 AND 2009–13

Figure 1 shows trends within the five languages. French, German, and Japanese are trending downwards, while Mandarin Chinese and Spanish trending slightly upwards.

Table 2 shows the number of students enrolled in these five languages in 2010 by year level. We can see that just under half of all Year 9 students were engaged in international language study. International language students are largely lost in the progressions to Year 10 and Year 11.
Year 13 language class profiles at individual schools

From the 491 schools in New Zealand that potentially had Year 13 students, 353 schools were included in an analysis of class sizes based on NCEA Level 3 entries in either Mandarin Chinese, French, German, Japanese, or Spanish in the years 2009–10. Table 3 shows the distribution of the total number of students studying one of the five international languages at the schools. As can be seen, 76 percent of schools (33+29+14) had 10 students or fewer studying an international language, and they may not have been all the same international language.

I examined data from each school for the number of students doing each of Mandarin Chinese, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish at Level 3 in 2009 and 2010. Obviously most schools would not allocate a dedicated class for a very small number of students, so in that case there would be combined year-level classes, or students would study using a Te Kura (Correspondence School) course. I analysed the school figures to see how many schools had a viable class in any one language at Year 13. A viable class was defined in my study as eight or more students, a conservative figure allowing for some variety of pair and small-group work for the students, and reasonable justification for use of a staff member. According to Ministry of Education statistics, staff-to-pupil ratios in upper secondary school are officially one to 12 on average, so a class of eight requires generosity and a commitment to language learning from school management.

Using my definition above, the disturbing result of the survey was that only 85 of the 353 schools had a viable class in any one international language in either 2009 or 2010. In 2009, 18 percent had a viable class, and in 2010, 20 percent. This means that during this 2-year period, approximately 80 percent of schools did not have enough students to run a Year 13 international language class. As the overall rate of language study at NCEA Level 3 appears to have declined since 2010 (see Table 1), I assume that this state of affairs has not improved.
 Schools with high NCEA Level 3 participation

The characteristics of all schools \((n = 353)\) in terms of funding basis, year level range, and student gender were compared with the characteristics of the “Top 85” schools; those who had a viable Year 13 international language class in either 2009 or 2010. Comparisons can be made using Table 4. For example, single-sex girls’ schools make up 17 percent of the 353 schools surveyed, but occupy 33 percent of the places in the schools with high NCEA Level 3 participation. Private schools, Years 9–13 secondary schools (as opposed to Years 7–13), and girls’ schools were all over-represented in the Top 85 category. I would note, however, that a state boys’ school was one of the very top schools.7 Obviously larger schools, with economies of scale, and small-class-size private and integrated schools with lower teacher–pupil ratios would find it easier to run a Year 13 class.

**Table 4. Characteristics of Schools With Viable Year 13 Language Classes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of school</th>
<th>All 353 schools (%)</th>
<th>Top 85 schools (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Y 9–13</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Y 7–13</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite Y 1–13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State integrated</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ministry policy encouraging senior language study

Previously, there were seven “essential learning areas” in the New Zealand curriculum. Second-language study was bracketed with the official languages of instruction, English and Te Reo Māori, under the heading “Language and Languages”. In 2007, there was a major step forward for second-language learning when Learning Languages became the eighth learning area in its own right. In the last decade or two, there has been major resourcing of language courses in intermediate and primary schools. However, there is still no absolute compulsion for schools to provide second-language tuition, although some confusion surrounds this. The section of the curriculum outlining requirements for Boards of Trustees compels them to provide tuition for students in the other seven learning areas, and then goes on to state:

All schools with students in years 7–10 should be working towards offering students opportunities for learning a second or subsequent language. (Ministry of Education, 2007, September 21)

This marginalises and gives inferior status to Learning Languages, compared to the other seven learning areas, which must affect how languages are valued in the minds of principals. The Ministry of Education’s own Te Kete Ipurangi site contains different wording:

All schools with students in years 7–10 are now expected to offer all students the opportunity to learn an additional language. This means that increasing numbers of students will be entering secondary school with language learning experience and knowledge of additional languages. And it should mean that, in time, increasing numbers of students are learning languages in the senior school. (Ministry of Education, 2014b)

This is echoed in an Education Review Office report for a school, which states that it has “obligations to offer students opportunities for learning a second or subsequent language as required by The New Zealand Curriculum” (Education Review Office, 2011).

Certainly there is no requirement to offer languages beyond Year 10, and indeed very little official reference at all to international-language study at senior levels that I have been able to find apart from the excerpt above which mentions increased numbers in the senior school “in time”.

The Human Rights Commission and the Royal Society are investing resources into national language policy development (Human Rights Commission, 2009; Royal Society of New Zealand, 2013) and this builds on the work of others in the past (Peddie 1991, Waite 1992, Spence 2004). I believe we now need to address learning in senior secondary school.

The new Vocational Pathways system recognises very few international-language achievement standards as part of pathways, even in sectors that boast exports and international trade as a priority, for example Primary Industries. No international language standards are recognised as counting towards this pathway, yet curiously Te Reo standards are. This is another area where international language learning advocates need to be pro-active in order to remind employment sectors of the economic value of languages.

Discussion—What can be done?

We have seen that the rate of advanced achievement in international-language learning is low in New Zealand schools, with only 6 or 7 percent of Year 13 students enrolled in NCEA Level 3. Three questions arising are:

1. Does it matter?
2. Do we need to look at the way languages are taught and assessed?
3. What structural barriers discourage students from continuing international language study?

1. Does it matter?

My opinion is clearly yes. While New Zealand is geographically isolated and boasts English as its major language, we will increasingly have to complete at a global level in trade and other areas. Our education system should also exist for the wellbeing of the individual, and the intellectual and cultural benefits of multilingualism are considerable. It is important that being bilingual is not seen as being only for the academically elite. As a comparison, only about 14 percent of people in the Netherlands describe themselves as monolingual (Lambert, 2001).

2. Do we need to look at the way languages are taught and assessed?

How well are we teaching languages?

Obviously teaching quality varies, but most language teachers that I have met are very enthusiastic. Second-language pedagogy has changed significantly since the schooldays of some of those reading this article, when the target language was rarely heard spoken between students in the classroom. Broadly speaking, methodology has transitioned through from the “grammar-translation” approach to the audio-lingual, the communicative, and, most recently, the task-based learning method. Most teachers now use a mixture of methodologies, with the emphasis on effective communication. Print resources, audio, video, computer, Internet, and smart technology provide an almost overwhelming array of tools for the teacher who is bending over backwards to make the subject fun, because first, she or he is usually highly committed to language learning, and second, numbers in subsequent years’ classes depend on it.

Is assessment too demanding?

Assessment has gone through a radical change since the introduction of NCEA. At Levels 1, 2, and 3 there are five achievement standards assessing (1) listening comprehension, (2) reading comprehension, (3) a prepared speech, (4) oral interaction, and (5) writing over the course of the year. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority needs to ensure that assessments continue to be fair and valid, and equitable with other subjects in terms of credit value. On the whole, though, I believe the move to standards-based assessment has created more validity in assessing language proficiency.

Could secondary schools do more to differentiate levels of existing language expertise?

One problem is that, due to (perceived) timetabling constraints, secondary schools are often reluctant or unable to place students with prior learning in a level-appropriate class. For example, Year 9 and Year 10 option lines may not correspond. Therefore the Year 9 students with prior learning stagnate to the level of the beginners in their class. Another current consideration is that if you learn a language at primary school there is no guarantee that the local secondary school will offer it as an option. Perhaps schools in the same community need to review the languages taught and become co-ordinated. There are calls for more bilingual education (McCaffery, 2014) as practised, for example, in our kura kaupapa Māori, and in South Africa, Canada, the US, and Australia. However, it remains to be seen whether we have the means or the will to resource this, for international or even community languages.

3. What structural barriers discourage students from continuing international-language study?

If a school wants to get more students through to Year 13 in international languages, languages first need to be promoted and encouraged. Second, option pathways need to be examined in order to identify barriers contributing to language attrition.

The total number of options available to a cohort may be too large. At Year 10, the critical point at which attrition begins, languages are often pitted against very attractive, even recreational, options. Thought should be given to whether other learning areas are over-mandated in comparison with languages. In addition, students should not be limited to studying only one second language. For example, New Zealand children surely deserve the opportunity to study Te Reo Māori as well as a “foreign” language.

There seems to be disproportionate pressure on secondary students, especially the high-achieving, to take science and commerce options at the expense of the language they frequently adore, despite the cognitive and economic benefits of being multilingual. Career guidance teachers must be well informed of the benefits of language study. They must give accurate information to students about which subjects are actually essential for various careers, rather than perceived as such.

It would be also be helpful if universities and employers recognised more tangibly the value of multilingual workers and graduates. International-
language departments in universities are probably under financial pressure because they do not appear to offer the short-term commercial returns that are increasingly demanded of universities.

Conclusion

Very few young New Zealanders are leaving school with advanced fluency and literacy in international languages, as shown by the low numbers sitting NCEA Level 3 achievement standards in Mandarin Chinese, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish.

As we live in an age in which intercultural understanding is becoming increasingly important, when international trade is expanding, and where wars continue to be waged, surely international-language learning is fundamental global literacy that we should not leave to chance.

The time is ripe for strategic policies at national and school level to raise our achievement in this area. Carpe diem?

Notes

1 To some extent, these languages are also community languages in New Zealand, particularly Chinese. Many students of Mandarin, from what I have seen, are ethnically Chinese and it is their first language.
2 For full details of my methodology, a copy of the report can be requested by emailing me at crystellejones@hotmail.com.
3 My original study did not include the totals for 2012 and 2013.
4 138 schools were excluded because they had no NCEA results, or fewer than fifteen Year 13 students in total.
5 Students studying an international language assessed by International Baccalaureate (IB) or Cambridge international Examinations (CIE) and not NCEA do not appear in these figures, which is a limitation of the study.
6 The Correspondence School (Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu) has become the safety net for students who cannot study a language in a class in their attended school and as such has been a valuable resource for language learning in New Zealand.
7 To find your school’s place in the survey please email crystellejones@hotmail.com.

References


Crystelle Jones was born in Palmerston North and is a secondary teacher of Spanish. She has also taught mathematics, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), information technology, English, and French. The article is based on a research project she did towards her master’s in applied linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington, completed in 2012.

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