

RESEARCH

Is there a future for languages?

We talk to Dr Alastair McLauchlan

“Dr. McLauchlan, your book “The Negative L2 Climate” contains some very significant, original research into L2 retention and attrition. It has huge implications for language teachers and impinges on the continuation of L2 teaching in our schools. Perhaps we can explore some of the ideas of your book further.”

Polyglot: Do you believe that the present types of L2 courses are conducive to encouraging students to continue with L2?

Alastair: I would prefer to see us take a step back and consider a more general L2 course, such as we currently offer in science, social studies and maths. I think the current hell-for-leather race to get to NCEA Level 1 is a serious detractor. Think about it; we actually try to teach most of the very complicated structures of an entire language, in a very unrealistic environment, in 3 periods per week (at best), 40 weeks per year over three years. What a huge and unrealistic expectation. I would love to see a Yr 9 comparative linguistics year where we look at language families, similarities/differences, famous people and places, basic structures and patterns of several languages. This would lead into Yr 10 and Yr 11 where 1 or 2 (or even 3) languages are studied in greater depth, and from there into Yrs 12 and 13 for concentrated study of a chosen L2. L2 ability at the end of Yr 11 may well be at a lower level than we currently achieve, but students would have a much greater understanding of the broader picture of languages and cultures overall and would, I believe, be better prepared to launch into specialist Yr 11/12/13 L2 programmes.

Polyglot: Which year of study is most crucial to retention of L2 students?

Alastair: My study suggests that getting students from Yr 10 into Yr 11 provides the most fallow catchment for senior study. This is more likely to happen if students at the end of Yr 10 have not already been swamped by the duplicitous array of tenses, agreements, declensions, conjugations, cases, vocab etc.

Polyglot: Do you believe there should be a different type of course offered to Year eleven in order to ensure students feel successful in their L2 studies?

Alastair: Yes. I believe we should pursue the concept of a three year general L2 programme. At some stage, the purists (I used to be one) need to be a little less exclusionist, a trade-off for retaining more students and enhancing the L2 message. The more general 3 year programme which I suggested earlier will likely promote L2 study, effect better timetabling and reduce what I call the “negative backlash”. As a result, I would hope

that more L2 students from Yr 11 will continue to Yr 12 and 13. It stands to reason, therefore, that a broader foundation L2 programme during the first years at secondary school, with as little stress and frustration as possible, is paramount.

Polyglot: If learning vocabulary has been identified in your research as a major burden, do you think we should restructure courses to require less vocabulary learning and more cultural studies?

Alastair: Not necessarily less vocabulary and more culture at all, but less memorised vocabulary. Using a dictionary (and this means being taught how to use a dictionary correctly) actually means being able to use MORE vocabulary. Then, a course can be less ‘vocab’ prescribed, and more interest or topic-directed. Of course vocabulary is undeniably important, but it is also a problem. To tell our students to ‘harden up and learn it’ is not working except for the very bright ones who can take anything in their stride and who will achieve in spite, or because, of the L2 course and their teacher. My focus is the other students, the much greater numbers we are losing every year for all the reasons identified in my book.

Polyglot: The debate over dictionaries has raged over the Listserve. What do you see as the place for dictionaries in the classroom and also in assessment events?

Alastair: To me it is quite simple. Provide standardized dictionaries for written assessments at senior level. Of course, the more vocabulary a student has memorised, the better. But I remember a comprehension passage in School Cert French many years ago, based entirely on knowing the French words for mattress (matelas) and sailor (matelot). If students did not know both words, the passage was meaningless. Only 2 in my class knew both words; the others, many of whom were achieving well in French, could make nothing of the story (which was, I must say, amusing and not very difficult). But it all hinged on knowing two key words. What do you and I do when we don’t know a key word? I grab my trusty dictionary.

Polyglot: Do you believe students should have access to online dictionaries and correction programmes?

Alastair: I am happy with that too. These are “tools of the L2 trade” and I cannot understand why we can't bring L2 learning into the 21st century and let our students use the best tools for the job. Maths students use calculators during assessment, chemistry and physics students are provided with formulae, woodwork students uses saws and clamps, and the list goes on. There is a terrific amount of L2 learning, satisfaction and fun to be had with on-line programmes. Why deny our students when the positive impact of those L2 aids is so great? It does not make sense.

Polyglot : What factors did you identify as impacting negatively on L2 continuation in years 12 and 13?

Alastair: This was perhaps the most interesting part of my research. Many students who dropped out identified 'timetable' and 'difficulty' as the reasons for doing so, yet both reasons are often proxy for the real reason, namely the negative L2 climate. I know this because I contacted all the schools where students had cited "timetable" as the reason for dropping out. In every case I was informed that those students could have continued if they had so wished. In other words, what 'timetable clash' really means is that other subjects were regarded or promoted as more important, more interesting, less difficult, essential for intended university study and career paths. The same applies to 'difficulty': of course L2 study is difficult but this would deter students less if they were required by university or career aspirations to maintain their L2 programme. The fact is that they are not required to, so they drop out. We often say "when the going gets tough, the tough get going", but in New Zealand there is almost no incentive or requirement to "get going". Dropping out avoids the issue without jeopardising university/career options.

Polyglot: Many teachers as well as students believe that timetablers hostile to L2 study are a major factor in L2 attrition at senior level. Do you agree?

Alastair: Yes I do. But I also acknowledge that their hands are tied to a certain extent by student numbers. This is precisely why we must have a long, hard look at generating larger numbers, even if it means upsetting the purists and enduring their lamentable wailing about "lowering standards". Once we can increase numbers at the senior level by 10-15%, we will have some serious ammunition to throw at the timetablers. The choice is stark, but remarkably simple: maintain the status quo which encourages high-achieving students while those around them drop out, or think about an alternative L2 rubric. In the end, high achievers will still achieve at the same level; but think of the benefits of greater numbers continuing and achieving at the middle level.

Polyglot: What are the main factors you found in your research causing students to give up their L2 studies?

Alastair: This is a biggie and there are 3 problems. One is that most New Zealanders simply do not value L2 study or skills; we have a culture of dismissive ridicule

for those involved in the discipline. Second is that most students take an L2 for very intrinsic reasons. This is fine at the outset but, as extrinsic factors such as university requirements and career options take over, those intrinsic motivators quickly lose their attraction. Third, if employers and universities required even a small amount of L2 study, I really believe things could be very different. What I would really like to see is the universities looking at ways to make even 6 L2 credits part of almost every undergraduate degree, at least in the humanities, liberal arts and commerce areas. This would have enormous spin-offs for schools, university L2 staff and for New Zealand as an educated society. Look at the huge numbers of Kiwis studying Te Reo Māori, mainly because the government has made it a priority, society values it and employers have supported it.

Polyglot: What changes do you recommend in the current L2 courses to encourage more students to continue studying their L2.

Alastair: It is about course structure and difficulty, as I have already explained. But is also very much to do with social expectations and rewards. University L2 staff need to convince their colleagues, managers (and students) that all degrees with a potential inter-personal or international application (trade, linguistics, teaching, psychology, politics, religion, sport, business, law, research etc etc etc) should involve, at the very least, one 6-point L2 paper. In responding to declining student numbers, however, most universities have simply expanded the number of beginners L2 courses, a strategy which has further eroded the value of pre-university L2 study and robbed secondary schools of some of their potential senior L2 students.

Polyglot: Are there any practical steps L2 teachers and Principals can take to turn round the attrition rate for L2 studies?

Alastair: I would like to see NZALT take the lead here. As I have suggested in my book, NZALT must coordinate the renaissance by talking to university staff about what sort of L2 inclusion would be reasonable in an undergraduate degree, and how much more should be required for a post-graduate degree. From there, NZALT and university staff need to formulate a plan of action whereby they put their case forcefully to the government and university management. School teachers are seldom in a position to do much at all. They slog away in the classroom doing a terrific job for 20 hrs per week, but they have had the rug pulled from under them as employers, the govt, universities and colleges of education have turned their backs on L2 study at secondary level. There is a very myopic, laissez-faire acceptance among some school principals, careers advisors, tertiary providers and employers which needs to be addressed.

Polyglot : Do you believe there is sufficient liaison between the primary schools, secondary schools and Universities to encourage L2 participation?

Dr. McLauchlan: No there is not. With very few exceptions, there is none. I do not know what has happened here although one university professor said it was much better when universities were marking bursary and scholarship exams. Whatever the cause, schools and universities are suffering from the sinking lid effect as their numbers continue to drop. For too long, those in a position to take the lead, devise strategies and fight the good fight, have sat on their hands and done very little. Some are happy ensuring that their own specialist courses survive until they retire; thereafter, they don't give a stuff.

Polyglot: How can we as teachers utilize the present qualifications system to enhance the L2 learning experience for students ?

Alastair: In spite of the criticism of NCEA (much of which I share), the multi-level structure of the qualification does provide opportunities for schools to offer (for example) Level 1 French (for example) to yr

13 students if enough were interested. Schools could even use Yr 9 for a general comparative linguistic/cultural programme and start the full L2 course at Yr 10 (or Yr 11) when students have had a good look at (and hopefully enjoyed) a far more broad-based, less demanding L2 programme. I honestly think this would help encourage greater numbers further along the line. It would mean that NCEA Level 3 would only be achievable by the top students, but isn't this exactly the case now? The advantage would likely be that as well as those top achievers still passing Level 3, we could well have significantly larger numbers in Yr 12 and 13 studying NCEA L2 at Levels 1 and 2, satisfied, positive, unstressed and achieving. History and statistics tell us that, not only were they never going to do NCEA Level 3/university L2 anyway, but that they would not even continue into Yr 11 or 12. With some creative re-arranging, we could have greater numbers doing NCEA Levels 1 and 2, where they would not have done so before; is that not the perfect outcome?

Polyglot: Thank you Dr McLauchlan - a most thought provoking interview.



Dr Alastair McLauchlan was a teacher of French, Japanese and German for almost 30 years. He now works as an education consultant/researcher and as Academic Advisor at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. He has a BA in French and German, a BA (Hons) in Japanese, an M.Ed (with Distinction), a Ph.D (Otago) and a Diploma in Teaching. The book on which this interview is based is McLauchlan, A. (2007) *The Negative L2 Climate: understanding attrition among secondary students*. Palmerston North: Sasakawa.

Alastair welcomes any comments on his work regarding the L2 conundrum to mclauchlana@hotmail.com

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