

AFMLTA Conference 2003

Babble, Babel and Beyond

Wendy Matthews, Conference Delegate sponsored by NZALT

I would like to thank NZALT for their generous travel grant to attend the Australian National Language Teachers' Conference in Brisbane. It was a truly uplifting experience. The Brisbane Hilton in the central mall of Brisbane's CBD was a superb venue and the conference organisation was impeccable. It felt great to be part of such a confident, competent professional body.

"Babble, Babel and Beyond" was the conference title. As soon as I walked in to complete registration, I became part of an expectant, excited babble, which continued at every break and over the delicious daily lunches. With at least seven international languages (Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese and Spanish) strongly represented through delegates, presenters and publishers, there was a potential for Babel, but we celebrated difference and diversity in our commitment to common themes and directions.

The highlight of the conference opening was a wise and humbling address given by Mrs Maroochy Barambah, representing Brisbane's Turrbal people. Of the 160 aboriginal languages only a few remain, and at last there is acceptance and a growing desire to promote these aboriginal languages.

Our morning sessions began with excellent keynote addresses. The first of these, given by Professor Colin Power, was entitled "Beyond Babel: Creating language policies for the 21st century". Babel symbolises the confusion and conflict, which arises when there are language and other cultural barriers. Participation in the multi-cultural knowledge society of the future will demand even higher levels of language competence and cultural sensitivity as the world shrinks. If Australia (and New Zealand) are to avoid becoming another Babel, they must recognise the importance of multi-cultural and multi-lingual policies and programmes. Language policy reform is vital and we must ensure that language studies help students to become better world and Australian/New Zealand citizens. Professor Power began his career teaching science and maths. He then assumed responsibility for research, curriculum and planning in the Department of Education in Queensland. Professor Power was UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education from 1989-1998, based in Paris, and Deputy Director-General of UNESCO from 1999-2000. He has made an

outstanding contribution to the development of education internationally, especially assisting nations undergoing major political, economic and social transformations.

The full text of Professor Powers address together with those of other keynote speakers and details of the conference can be found on: www.afmlta.asn.au/afmlta/conference/conf2003.htm

The rest of the daily working programme was divided into six 45 minute time-slots with six parallel sessions for each slot. This was the pattern for each of the three days. In fact so much choice posed a real problem because there were so many interesting topics on offer. Some of the sessions were practical and hands on; for example "Making Films in the Language Classroom". This session showed what an effective and motivating classroom tool a video camera can be. Another practical session entitled "Language Learning Games" was to be a workshop until 100 people arrived. The games were mainly for primary school learners but many could be used successfully up to Year 10.

Other sessions were more theoretical and philosophical. A language panel on "Intercultural Language teaching and its implications for classroom practice" was both challenging and thought provoking. Our approach to culture has been largely encyclopaedic and content-based. This approach presents a static knowledge of otherness, which suggests that tolerance is a sufficient goal. Interculturality compares and explores cultures. It questions facts and views culture as process rather than content. Culture is infinitely variable and fundamentally linked to identity. It is not facts but connecting experiences. Thus interculturality is about multiple identity and indeed goes beyond tolerance. We must engage with otherness so that our previous beliefs are challenged and we redefine our own identity.

The language sessions were very worthwhile, but so was the dialogue or babble, which continued during the breaks. Attractive and tempting displays occupied every piece of available wall space, so one was either discussing the language sessions or examining and discussing all the interesting literature.

I strongly recommend the newly published "Teaching Invisible Culture - Classroom Practice and Theory", edited by Jo Lo Bianco and Chantal Crozet and published by Language Australia Ltd.

Another interesting find was "Fra Amici" Levels 1 and 2, a course in Italian for adult learners from Aurora Publications in Perth (www.italiancourses.com.au)

I thoroughly enjoyed the Brisbane conference and am looking forward to 2005.

Wendy Matthews