

## CATERING FOR LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

With 27% of its population using a language other than English at home, Melbourne offers an environment that lends itself to language sharing. **Language sharing occurs between people who speak the language well (i.e. those with more background in the language), and those who have less experience with (or background in) the language.** It provides opportunities for those with less background to hear the language being used in a natural way, makes those with more background feel good about their language, and gives both groups opportunities to communicate with each other in the language. Among the languages used regularly in this state are all those frequently taught in schools and those considered of vital economic and strategic importance to Australia, such as Arabic, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Korean, Mandarin, and Spanish. Language sharing means that speakers of these languages in our community can provide a valuable community resource for learners. Their presence provides many opportunities for children to develop their language potential to the fullest:

- in a language in which they have some background;
- in a language they have acquired as a second language;
- by acquiring a third or additional language.

It is a widely held but misinformed belief that there are two clear-cut groups of students in our

language programs: ‘native’ and ‘non-native’, or ‘first language’ and ‘second language’ learners. It is important to recognize that this distinction is simplistic and in fact misleading. Our research has demonstrated just how much more complex the situation in language programs is. **Rather than simply ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speakers, the students in our language classrooms may have widely varying degrees of experience with the language,** as the following table shows.

### Students’ Backgrounds

<b>Students in our language classrooms may have....</b>	
a)	a home background + overseas experience of formal education in the LOTE
b)	an active home background (the student can comprehend and speak the language quite well) + some formal instruction in the LOTE
c)	an active home background + no formal instruction in the LOTE
d)	an active home background in a ‘dialect’ of the language + with/without formal instruction in the LOTE
e)	a weak active home background + no formal instruction in the LOTE
f)	a passive home background—the student can comprehend the LOTE but speaking skills are not developed
g)	no home background but formal instruction in the LOTE
h)	the student may be an L3 learner
i)	a passive home background in a ‘dialect’ of the language + no formal instruction in the LOTE
j)	no home background + no formal instruction in the LOTE

This table reflects some but not all of the types of backgrounds represented in language classes. The categories are not clear-cut but form part of a continuum.

### Different Backgrounds, Different Needs

It is possible for students from any of these backgrounds to achieve success in a language. However, **students with different backgrounds have different needs.** For example:

- Some who speak a community language at home may ‘mix’ their languages, making the speech difficult to understand for monolingual native speakers; such students need assistance to develop their vocabulary and grammar;
- Some may need help to use their ‘dialect’ as a resource to learn the standard language of the classroom (e.g. Sicilian to Standard Italian);
- Most will experience an unusually large time lag between learning the spoken and written modes of the community language and will need help with orthography;
- Those who have grown up in Australia will tend to have problems with the rules of formal address.

All of these groups will have an advantage in oral comprehension and production over those without an active family background in the language.

The challenge is to develop programs which cater for all these categories. **The fact that languages are alive and widely used in Australia should give all students with or without a home background the motivation to pursue their**

**language studies, as well as providing them with opportunities to use and develop their language skills with speakers who use the language on a daily basis.**

Our multilingual environment provides opportunities to utilise community resources, for example:

- within the school (other students);
- through institutions which can support home bilingualism and school language learning, such as radio, television, press, after hours classes, drama and music groups, festivals, shops, guest houses and cafés;
- through interaction with people (especially elderly people and tourists) who will also benefit from this interaction.

### **Utilising Community Resources**

There are many activities which have been shown to help **maximize language potential** in mixed background classes and help students access community resources. These include:

- visits to day care centres for the elderly where students engage in conversations with elderly people of the appropriate language background;
- an electronic newsletter (perhaps one each semester) in which small teams of students (preferably a combination of students with and without a home background in the language) across all year levels take on different tasks, such as designing the newsletter, writing up short articles, and editing. The articles may be

on varying topics related to community resources, such as music, singers and clubs; films and videos; festivals; shopping, restaurants and food; jokes and a report of the school's languages concert.

- pre-planned shopping expeditions to businesses conducted in the community language.

Specific examples of activities for a number of Community Languages may be found on our website: **[www.rumaccc.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.rumaccc.unimelb.edu.au)**

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