

AFMLTA Conference 2003

Babble, Babel and Beyond

Jude Edwards, Conference Delegate sponsored by NZALT

It was an honour and a privilege to attend this conference and to meet with language experts from our own country and those outside New Zealand. It is always a positive experience to be surrounded by people with a passion for teaching and learning languages.

The conference opened to the beat of taiko drums and a blessing by Maroochy Barambah, a representative of the Turrbal people. With the variety of presentations by keynote speakers and language experts from far and wide, the whole experience was an enlightening one right through until the closing ceremony on Saturday afternoon.

The sessions I opted to attend were not only inspirational but affirmed that what we are doing here in NZ is positive in terms of languages education. It was interesting to gain some understanding of the Australian language teachers plight through chatting with other delegates. Federal Government has recently withdrawn its support for language teaching programmes and in some states this has resulted in many teachers losing their jobs. Often one state will have little in common with another in terms of language teaching policies. Language teachers often tend to work on an itinerant basis and this comes with its own perils also. On the whole, these teachers are not valued by their colleagues or by their pupils and often have no set working space, carrying their teaching kit from school to school.

From the primary school perspective, it was not too difficult to see why our MOE is so keen to train and up skill classroom teachers to take responsibility for language teaching within their own schools as greater continuity and value must be gained by all stakeholders in this way.

The addresses given by the keynote speakers were informative and provocative, referring to different pedagogical beliefs, reminding delegates that language education is the door to the future.

Professor Colin Power spoke about language policies for the 21st century. He pointed out that as nations become more linguistically and culturally diverse, the survival of the globe will in future rely upon the extent of our understanding of other languages and cultures. Therefore, the development of intercultural and multi-lingual policies are matters of

national importance. Our children need to be citizens of the world by understanding the languages and cultures of others. With these skills they will be better equipped to forge global alliances and see themselves as citizens of the world. In essence, languages must be seen as our passport to the world of tomorrow.

Uschi Felix discussed pedagogic principles in relation to on line learning in her address. She felt that the constructivist approach could be used in on line learning as long as certain requirements were observed. Students required personalised, meaningful feedback, they needed to have a sense of community and belonging and the programme needed to cater for spoken communication. The challenges in such an approach would be to consider the social dilemma of learner vs instructor control, authentic assessment tasks and time management for both students and teachers.

Professor David Ingram in his address traced the development of language teaching in Australia during the time of his involvement in language education. This has been a time of great change with the quality and status of language teaching varying considerably from one decade to the next. He addressed the following future issues for Australian language teaching :

- the need to maintain strong professional relationships through professional associations like MLTAs, AFMLTA and FIPLV;
- the need for a national language education policy together with a supportive infrastructure;
- language teaching must respond to the needs of Australian industry;
* the need to improve inter-cultural attitudes through effective language education;
- the need for a high quality curriculum document and sound teaching methodology;
- the development of sound assessment techniques;
- the availability of technology in LOTE teaching programmes.

The future of language education, he said, is in our hands. Teachers must recognise the value of joining together to assert the importance of language education to the education of all children, to society and to the security of the world.

Dr. William Littlewood spoke about the processes involved in interactive learning (cognitive, social, motivational and developmental). He explained that the success of task based learning was dependent upon the degree and nature of the students involvement in the classroom interaction. His research shows that most students have a positive attitude towards

cooperating in groups in order to achieve common goals and would like to see themselves as active participants in the classroom learning process. He maintained that by providing a supportive classroom climate and interesting and challenging tasks, both autonomous interdependence and communicative competence will develop.

When it came to individual choice, I tended to base my session selections on what was relevant to me in my current teaching position with Year 7/8 students so these sessions often had a more practical base.

Adele Lilly's session on ways to improve classroom language teaching practice was an ideal and practical lead in to many of the other sessions which I attended. These included a songs session where we were encouraged to utilise a wider range of our student's learning styles by inventing little tunes to teach and practice new vocabulary.

Harald Ohlendorf stressed the need to make the most of the talk time available to us in our classrooms. He explained that in an atmosphere of mutual trust where increasing independence and self-management, students will perform at optimum levels. Students must be encouraged to listen first and after this as much talk as possible needs to be in the target language.

Ursula Goetz in her session, introduced many novel games and activities for the language classroom which participants were able to play and then discuss their usefulness in their target language.

Other sessions included ways to celebrate languages in the wider community along the lines of our International Languages Week celebrations and the use of multimedia in LOTE classrooms. My Kochen in Klassenzimmer session was one which confirmed my belief that total immersion is actually a great way to learn a language! I found myself quickly recalling my memories of high school German classes as the entire session was conducted in German! It's amazing how much you can understand with the application of some memory skills and logic when the context is known!

Looking into the Queensland Year 1 - 3 LOTE guidelines was an interesting session as many of the suggestions contained in their curriculum document were directly applicable to teaching languages in NZ at Year 7/8. In addition to all this, there was the opportunity to peruse and / or purchase language teaching resources not currently available in New Zealand. On a personal note, I know that our cluster of North Canterbury

schools will benefit from this enormously.

The book reps, publishers and language groups represented on these stands were also extremely generous in the freebies which were on offer and again, I think that the many stickers and badges which I collected will make wonderful prizes and incentives in our language programmes and also during our French fete which we will be holding during Languages Week.

I want to conclude by sincerely thanking NZALT for assisting me with sponsorship to attend this conference. It was a truly wonderful experience and one which I am motivated to repeat again in the future.

Jude Edwards