LANGUAGES TEACHING AND LEARNING: 
CHANGE IN CONTEXT

RESEARCH REPORT
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by the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures 
University of South Australia

RESEARCH TEAM
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context of the project

The Languages Teaching and Learning: Change in Context project was commissioned by the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA) as part of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP), which was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The project was a collaboration that involved three independent schools, Prince Alfred College, St John's Grammar School and St Martins Lutheran College, the AISSA and the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures (RCLC) at the University of South Australia.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of the project was to examine teaching and learning practices in ways that are sensitive to the specific needs and nature of the school and program context and to develop ways to enhance (1) experiences and (2) the quality of the program and students’ learning. There were different aims for different participants in the project. From the perspective of each school, the aims were to improve the teaching and learning of the target language and to strengthen the language program as a whole. The AISSA’s aims were to support schools in teaching and learning languages with a view to improving program quality and in doing so take action to support the NALSSP aim:

"... by 2020, at least 12 per cent of students will exit Year 12 with a fluency in one of the target Asian languages ... sufficient for engaging in trade and commerce in Asia and/or university study."  

(DEEWR, 2008)

The Research Team aims were to provide a research perspective on the experience, to facilitate a sustained and theoretically informed process of investigating language teaching and learning in context-sensitive ways that would illuminate both the specific case and the principles and practices that could be transferred across contexts and programs.

1.3 The concept of ‘context’

‘Context’ is a concept that comes from communication theory. It refers to all the elements or features of a communicative situation, including the participants and their social roles and relationships; their knowledge, attitudes and values; their norms of interpretations, the physical setting, the situation. Duranti and Goodwin (1992) describe context using five categories: setting, behavioural environment, language in context, institutional order and extra-institutional context. The setting refers to the physical and social space and situation as well as to the particulars of the people involved in the space, their roles and relationships. The behavioural environment refers to the interactions of the participants in the particular setting. Language and culture are central to creating understanding within the behavioural environment. The institutional context refers to what it is that people bring into the situation that shapes what goes on. The extra-institutional context refers to all other knowledge, understandings, considerations that participants bring to the situation. It is the interaction of these elements that provides an understanding of ‘what it is that is going on’ in a particular setting. It might also be described holistically as the culture of a particular setting. In this project, ’context’ in this sense is a central concept. Making ‘context’ central acknowledges that the circumstances in which the change takes place, the participants, and their roles, relationships and interactions shape the very nature and extent of change that takes place.

Contexts are not fixed and given; they are created by the participants in the course of their interactions and as such they are always dynamic. Whatever people say or do constantly creates the context for what happens next — both in time and over time. This characteristic of context must be considered if change is to be achieved. It is also this characteristic that makes it complex.

1.4 Change in context — why it matters

The context of the school matters. It is constructed in diverse ways by the participants. In order to begin to understand the practices in any school, it is necessary to understand the context and the diverse understandings and assumptions that participants bring. It is this understanding of the context that provides the basis for examining current practices constructively with a view towards making sustained improvements. The elements of context differ in each school and for this reason they need to be understood in their own right in the particular setting. It is also for this reason that the notion of ‘best practice’ is challenged. What might be considered ‘best practice’ in one context may not necessarily be transportable to another context
and remain ‘best practice’. In this project, therefore, attention was focused on the context of each of the three schools. The research was ‘emic’ in the sense of being participatory, with the researchers visiting the schools and working directly and collaboratively with the key teacher(s) in order to come to an appreciation of the context. It was also ‘etic’, in the sense that the researchers also needed to step back from the participatory processes and consider what it was that was ‘going on’ in each of the three language programs.

The following table provides a brief overview of the participating schools, teachers and the project focus in each case:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>School Context 1</th>
<th>School Context 2</th>
<th>School Context 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St John’s Grammar School</td>
<td>Prince Alfred College</td>
<td>St Martin’s Lutheran School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Years 8-9</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Retention</td>
<td>Inquiry based teaching &amp; learning</td>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Participants</td>
<td>Sallie Letcher</td>
<td>LiHwa Chu</td>
<td>Ming Wei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leah Wardle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.5 Processes

In designing a project that would bring about change in school language programs, the Research Team considered that it was necessary to work from a number of guiding principles:

> Change is context-dependent.
> Participants in the research bring valuable perspectives and actively contribute to shaping the research focus, process and findings.
> Change occurs over time.

This research is based on the fundamental principle that change is dependent on context and that this requires sensitivity to understanding the multiple dimensions of circumstances in which the language program is situated. Further, participatory classroom-based research requires ongoing dialogue and investigation of the research focus, using evidence in an iterative and developmental way to inform the focus and trajectory of the study. Participants in this project were primarily the language teachers and the RCLC Research Team, and on occasions students, school leaders and the AISSA Management Team. The third principle is that change can take time and although it can begin in small ways, it is necessary in a research study and in working with teachers’ knowledge and practices, to view change from a long-term perspective. Because change involves shifting practices and perspectives that are embedded in the context of each school, a longitudinal approach was taken. The underlying principles led to a number of research processes that were applicable to each project context and the particular aims.

A project of this kind includes multiple layers in the ways of working in order to understand and bring about change in the specific context. At an overarching level, a partnership between the AISSA Management Team and the RCLC Research Team provided the common directions and conditions for supporting the implementation of each project. The school leaders and teaching staff proposed the initial focus and identified particular issues to be addressed, for example retention, engagement, and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). An ongoing dialogue between the school leadership team, teachers and the RCLC Research Team developed throughout the project. Regular planning and debriefing meetings were held by the RCLC Research Team and each school team to plan research approaches, including the use of lesson study (see below), interviews, statistical data collection and analysis, and document analysis. Support was also provided through additional examples, observation visits, resources and readings related to each project focus. As part of the ongoing monitoring and evaluation, the RCLC and AISSA teams met to discuss progress and actions across the project as a whole. This kind of school–tertiary partnership, drawing on diverse perspectives with a view to all participants learning in the process, proved invaluable in understanding the nature and issues in each context and developing ways of bringing about change (Tsui and Law, 2007).

The RCLC Research Team worked closely with each school team to develop a staged plan of action that included three main phases: investigation, experimentation and change. In each case, specific research and development processes were tailored to the particular context and focus. In some cases, this involved collecting quantitative data such as student enrolment figures. In two schools, a similar process was used to investigate curriculum and pedagogical practice, which included document analysis of programs and teaching materials and the use of lesson study to elicit teaching practices related to the language-specific program.
Lesson study proved to be a valuable process in examining pedagogical practice and its relationship to curriculum (Tsui and Law, 2007, Fernandez et al., 2011, Fernandez, 2005, Tsui and Wong, 2006). Lesson study is a process whereby the ‘lesson’ is the window through which the teaching of particular aspects of the curriculum can be viewed (Fernandez, 2005, Fernandez et al., 2003, Chokshi and Fernandez, 2005, Fernandez et al., 2011). The process begins with collaborative planning of the curriculum objectives prior to the teaching episode. The lesson is then implemented by the teacher and video-recorded. Following the recording, the project team (teachers and researchers) analyses aspects of the lesson to ascertain areas for intervention and improvement. The team then plan a further episode designed to enable innovation and change in teaching of the planned lesson. The experience is intended to inform curriculum planning and teachers’ professional knowledge, both in the immediate and longer term. Lesson study in the present project was a ‘crucial site’ (Candlin, 2002) at which the perception, preconceptions, ideas, dispositions and practices of the teachers and students emerged. It was also the site at which the schools’ priorities emerged. The process posed considerable risks to the participants, who were essentially revealing their established practices. It also raised ethical issues for participants in relation to their role in the interactions.

Fundamentally, the lesson study process provided a means to observe, discuss and analyse practices collaboratively. The model and its focus on discussion invite participants not only to act, but also to come to understand why they act in the way they do. As such, the process of lesson study challenges assumptions and practices and assists in identifying alternative ways of working. It also establishes a culture of experimentation.

In each of the schools, students participated in processes designed to elicit their understandings and experiences of learning within the particular program and school context. Processes included surveying students at various year levels to discover students’ background language-learning experiences and their perspectives on their current and future experiences. In addition, small-scale focus group discussions were held with selected students to explore these perspectives in greater depth. In one case, a small-scale semi-structured interview was conducted with students immediately following particular lessons, to elicit their immediate reactions to the lesson and the state of their learning.

These research processes yielded various forms of data that were subsequently analysed. For example, student survey data were recorded and thematically analysed to show trends in students’ perceptions towards language learning and the particular language program. Classroom interaction data obtained as part of the lesson study were analysed each time by the teachers and the RCLC Research Team to obtain immediate impressions of teaching. The recording became a bank of data that also provided a longer term perspective on change in teaching practice and program implementation. Documents such as teaching programs, materials and curriculum frameworks were analysed in order to discover teachers’ understandings of curriculum, the teaching of their particular language, and the influences on their planning processes.

Towards the conclusion of the project, teachers in each school were interviewed and invited to reflect upon the experience overall. The semi-structured interview was focused primarily on teachers’ own learning and any changes in their understandings, as well as changes within the program and broader school context. Each school provided a written report (Section 2.0) outlining their perspectives on the issues and the experience.
2.0 THE THREE CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

In the following section, each case study is described in detail, beginning with an orienting statement by the research team, followed by a detailed description of the experience and insights by the participating teachers, and concluding with a summary comment from a research perspective highlighting the significance of each project.

2.1 St John's Grammar School Year 8–9

Indonesian: Why do students choose to continue or discontinue studying a language?

"... we have learnt that the two most significant factors that contribute to retention rates from Year 8 to Year 9, Indonesian are timetable restraints and the perception that languages are hard work and as a result 'boring'. ... We learnt that students do actually understand and appreciate our pedagogical style but that they also want more freedom to study areas of personal interest and the opportunity to be more creative in their language use."

(Selly Letcher 2011)

Orientation

The following account illustrates how a large secondary school explored the issue of retention in language learning in the junior secondary years. With a well-established language program, the school leadership and languages team aimed to examine underlying causes and factors impacting on retention rates, particularly at the transition point from Year 8 to Year 9.

The focus was placed on one language in order to consider in depth how the particular language and culture itself operates within the school context. The teachers' accounts show how the language program itself, both structurally and conceptually, contributes to students' experiences and perceptions of language learning, and of the particular language and culture. Furthermore, this account reveals how the concepts of language, culture and learning are played out in the program designed by the teachers of Indonesian and how their understanding of students impacts on their program design choices. In relation to students, this account provides evidence of decision-making at a critical point in their language learning experience, and the factors and perceptions at work in how they arrive at their decisions. These contextual influences include their language learning experiences, school structures and family perspectives.

The context

St John's Grammar is a co-educational independent day school affiliated with the Anglican Church. It is located in the Adelaide Hills and was established in 1958 with just 41 junior primary and primary students. It now caters for approximately 1000 students across years R–12.

The school aims to provide a safe, nurturing, and positive environment for students. There is a strong culture of encouraging students' individual skills and strengths in various spheres, including academic, sporting, debating, music and performing arts. According to the school, its long-term goal is to 'produce citizens who are articulate and confident young men and women with a social conscience who can contribute to society, and leaders who want to journey through life with tolerance and compassion for others.' (2012).

The languages program at St John's

The school offers two languages, Indonesian and Japanese. Previously, Japanese was offered to students in Years 5 and 6; however, in 2011, Indonesian was introduced from Reception to Year 6 for 150 minutes each week. Both languages have been offered at the secondary level since the secondary school opened in 1998. In Year 7, all students study both languages, each for one semester. At the end of Year 7, students may choose to study either language for a full year in Year 8.

On completion of Year 8, language study becomes optional. For Year 9, students may choose to continue to study the same language within the allocated elective subjects (4 semester units) in addition to their compulsory subjects.

The most recent enrolment figures show the numbers of students studying each language:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>2010 Year 8</th>
<th>2010 Year 9</th>
<th>2010 Year 10</th>
<th>2010 Year 11</th>
<th>2010 Year 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are two teaching staff in the Indonesian language program, one of whom is the school’s Languages Coordinator. The Coordinator is a highly experienced teacher of Indonesian who has worked at the school for many years and has an in-depth understanding of the school context. Halfway through the project there was a change in teaching staff and a new staff member joined the project. As an early career teacher, she was keen to be involved and brought with her knowledge of recent pedagogical developments, such as intercultural language teaching and learning.

The primary concern of teaching staff in the Indonesian language program was student retention, particularly at the key decision-making point at the end of Year 8. This concern became the project focus and underpinned the desire for change in this particular language program and school context.

Report of the School Team

Aim of the project

This project aimed to improve the teaching and learning of Indonesian as a second language at St John’s Grammar School. It was hoped that through the research we would be able to strengthen the program as a whole by investigating the question, ‘What motivates students to continue or abandon their language studies in the post-compulsory language study years?’ In the St John’s context, this occurs at the end of their Year 8 studies.

As part of this research project we examined both external and internal factors that may affect student motivation and engagement as language learners. External factors included curriculum choice, parental attitudes and expectations, and the importance families place on language learning. Internal factors were, however, the main focus and these included different pedagogical styles that may impact on student learning and motivation, as well as student perceptions of language learning.

Process

The following table provides a summary of the development of the project overall. Each stage, its focus and its related activities are outlined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Phase 1, Semester 1, 2010   | The current state of participation & retention | > School Visits  
                               |                                            | > Initial Focus Group  |
| Phase 2, Semester 2, 2010   | Investigating students’ experiences & perceptions | > Collation & analysis of participation data  
                               |                                            | > Survey of Year 8-10 students  |
|                              |                                            | > Analysis of survey responses  
                               |                                            | > Focus group discussions & analysis  |
| Phase 3, Semester 1, 2011   | Addressing the findings                    | > Program review & redevelopment  |
| Phase 4, Semester 2, 2011   | Experimentation in the language program     | > Designing & implementing the independent learning unit  
                               |                                            | > Evaluation of innovation  |
| Phase 5, Semester 2, 2011   | Reflection on the experience & own learning | > Collation of documentation  
                               |                                            | > Debriefing interview  |

Phase 1. The current state of participation and retention

To establish the existence of any patterns or trends, we decided initially to collect data of the language learning cohort of St John’s Grammar over the past five years. This data included a breakdown of numbers of students studying Japanese and Indonesian as a second language in Years 9–12. Numbers of male and female learners were also noted, to investigate whether or not there has been an increase or decrease in the number of males choosing to study a language. It was hoped that, apart from the information these surveys provided for this project, the data would also prove useful for tracking the implications of the new SACE for the retention of language learners at a senior level.

Although we are satisfied with retention rates in the Senior School, the analysis of the data confirmed our existing concerns about the large amounts of students in Years 8 and 9 who elect to discontinue their language studies. As a result, it was decided to focus on the highest dropout rate, that being Year 8 students going into Year 9.
Phase 2. Investigating students’ experiences and perceptions

All language students in Year 8 in 2010 were surveyed to gain an insight into their perceptions of language learning and the reasons behind their decisions to continue or discontinue their study in 2011.

A two-fold approach to analysing the data was adopted:

- Structural — obtain feedback on curriculum structure
- Pedagogical — obtain feedback on student experience.

Once obtained, the data were divided into Japanese and Indonesian learners, to more accurately determine the pedagogical implications of the responses. The data were then divided into whether or not students currently studying Indonesian had decided to continue with a language the following year.

It is important to qualify that this data represents one particular cohort of students at one particular time of the year (July 2010); however, the analysis revealed that:

- 57% of the cohort chose Indonesian over Japanese in Year 8, based on the perception that it was easier
- Of the students who indicated that they had chosen not to continue studying Indonesian in Year 9, 48% cited ‘boring’ or ‘too difficult’ as the reason
- 35% stated their decision was based on curriculum constraints.

The majority (i.e. fifty-seven per cent) of students surveyed brought with them negative ideas of language learning from primary school. Responses to the question ‘What describes your language learning experience in primary school?’ were predominantly ‘boring’ or ‘not learning enough’. Within this cohort there were students in Years 7 and 8 who perceived that they were not learning enough and were not adequately challenged, while others stated that the course was too difficult. Also of interest was that some students viewed ‘challenging’ as a positive, whereas others used it with negative connotations, writing off language learning as ‘too hard’. Among those who elected to continue their language learning in 2011, a picture emerged from the data about why they chose to continue. Their reasoning can be summarised as follows:

- Active use — they enjoyed speaking and using the language
- Feelings of success in the subject
- Relevance — key to which is ownership, which has implications of needing to include more negotiation in lessons

From the responses it also became apparent that the two major reasons for discontinuing a language after Year 8 were:

- Structural concerns, e.g. not being able to fit it in with other elective subjects they wished to pursue
- Engagement level — perceived difficulty, and how interesting the subject was to them.

Phase 3. Addressing the findings

Phase 3 of our project investigated how the findings from the surveys might best be addressed. In order to do this we decided to form two focus groups of three students in Year 8 who had chosen to continue and three who had not. To tease out exactly what ‘boring’ and ‘difficult’ meant and to discuss their reasoning, one member of the research team met with the students. The conversations were based on the following questions:

- What do you find easy about learning Indonesian?
- What do you find difficult?
- What makes learning a language other than English enjoyable?
- What makes it boring?
- How could it be more enjoyable for you?
- Do you think that your idea of ‘fun and boring’ is related to how successful you feel you are in the subject or topic?
- What do you find most interesting or relevant in the course?
- What would make it more relevant for you?
- What does it look like to do well in a language?
- What does it look like to do badly in a language?

From the conversations, the following points emerged:

- Sibling influence is quite strong in making a choice to continue language learning in post-compulsory year levels
- ‘Boring’ often means ‘hard work’
- More capable students want opportunities to be more creative in their language use
- There is a desire for more interactive work
- Some students struggle to see the relevance of a language outside of travel
- Students would like to see more cultural activities in the Year 8 program.
Phase 4. Experimentation in the language program

One of the barriers to continuing the study of a language beyond Year 8, which was mentioned repeatedly in the 2010 survey, was timetable constraints. The curriculum at St John’s opens up significantly at Year 9 as the school prides itself on offering a wide variety of curriculum opportunities and experiences. As structural changes to the school curriculum and timetable were not within our immediate power to change, we decided instead to focus on addressing the perception that languages were ‘boring’ and the feedback that students wanted to be more creative with their language use. We addressed this in a review and redesign of the language program, as described below.

1. Overhaul of the Year 8 program

The data generated concerns that students may not be seeing the bigger message that we as teachers are trying to convey through our existing program and we were unsure as to whether or not the current program experiences and talk were all working together.

To address this we decided to overhaul the existing Year 8 Indonesian curriculum to incorporate greater use of intercultural understandings and to link cultural practices with language more effectively. We hoped that this would enable students to better internalise what they had learnt by helping them to understand how it affects them as an individual as opposed to just knowing or learning something. We hoped that the greater emphasis on intercultural understandings within each unit we teach would shake up students’ cultural world view and interest in language learning.

Over the course of 2011, we actively tried to provide Year 8 students with more opportunities to learn about aspects of Indonesian culture, to use their language skills in meaningful situations and to develop greater intercultural understanding of Indonesia and their own language and culture. We did this by creating experiences where students would meet Indonesian native speakers, observe and participate in experiences that required them to both interact in Indonesian and reflect on their communication and understanding of the process.

These experiences included:

> interacting with a twenty-five-year old Indonesian tutor on exchange from Bogor over the four-week period of his visit
> participating in a traditional dance workshop

> swapping their role as learner to that of teacher when they visited the Junior School to support the cultural and language activities of the younger students as part of an inaugural ‘Indonesian Day’.

2. Introduction of a new unit

In a further attempt to provide students with opportunities to be creative and independent language learners, a new four-week unit of work was developed, which aimed to:

> allow students to follow their own interest and learn Indonesian language that is relevant and of interest to them
> allow students to work collaboratively and creatively with their friends to produce a multimedia presentation in which they ‘taught’ an audience of adults and peers about their topic and the language that accompanied this
> encourage students to examine how they best learn language by asking them to think about how best to teach their own new knowledge to others
> promote the language and the project by involving parents as ‘assessors’ of the students’ work.

This unit of work differed significantly from the usual teaching methods in Year 8, as its content was determined entirely by the interests of small groups of students.

Reflection: the teacher perspective

Upon completion of this unit, feedback was obtained by two means. The first was a student reflection task and the second was informal, debriefing conversations between the RCLC researcher and two groups of randomly selected students about their experience and how this may have influenced their perceptions of the nature and value of learning Indonesian.

The feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive, with the following emerging as common themes. Students:

> learnt that people have different ways of learning languages and respond differently to different pedagogical approaches
> enjoyed and appreciated the creative and interactive nature of the assignment
> enjoyed being able to follow their own interests.

It was interesting to note that although students felt that it was a worthwhile and motivating assignment, they could also recognise the need for the ‘normal’ teaching process and were more aware of the teachers’ pedagogical practices that they find effective. As a result of the positive feedback, it has been
decided to include this task in the future Year 8 curriculum; however, there are several things that will be done differently from a teacher's perspective.

One of the major hurdles students faced in completing this task was downloading their presentations onto the computer and in a form that was recognisable on a PC and not just on a Mac. I under-estimated their computer literacy in this regard and when several groups became stuck, my level of knowledge in this area was insufficient to assist them. In preparation for this task to be undertaken again in 2012, I would either need to attend professional development activities on making iMovies or at least ensure that I have better access to the school’s IT staff to assist in overcoming some of the problems students commonly faced.

Despite working closely with students on their scripts, I found the level of Indonesian used was very limited and, for several groups, it was little more than a fun project with a smattering of cultural information and a few words in Indonesian flashed up on the screen at the end. A better balance needs to be found between directing students more closely to achieve greater language outcomes and allowing them self-direction and creativity. This could be better managed by asking them to run through their script with me, rather than by just marking it and offering suggestions. This would have also alleviated some pronunciation and intonation issues.

**Conclusion**

From this project we have learnt that the two most significant factors that contribute to retention rates from Year 8 to Year 9 Indonesian are timetable constraints and the perception that languages are hard work and therefore “boring”.

Timetable constraints are the most difficult and frustrating to address. St John’s prides itself in offering curriculum choice so that students have the opportunity to explore a wide range of subjects to find their skills and interests. This means that in Year 9 the curriculum choices open up significantly and students often drop languages for subjects that they perceive to have less work and are more ‘fun’, such as Cooking or Drama.

Although it is not within our power to change the timetable, in 2011 we started being more proactive in promoting our subject to Year 8s. Pamphlets promoting the benefits of second language learning were given to students and class time was devoted to emphasising the fact that most electives can be taken up at a variety of stages throughout a student’s schooling, but once a language is discontinued, it cannot be taken up again. The new accelerated program that we have introduced to try to counteract the effects of the new SACE on student retention in the senior years was also promoted as an incentive.

The introduction of Indonesian throughout the Junior School in 2011 will bring further challenges in future years, as courses will need to change and develop constantly to reflect the prior knowledge Junior School students will bring with them in Year 7. In 2012 there will be Beginner’s and Advanced streams of Indonesian in Year 7; however, the resulting flow-on effect, with significant timetabling and structural challenges, is still being debated.

The second factor that was determined to contribute to the discontinuation of a language at the transition between Year 8 and Year 9, that studying a language, was perceived to be too difficult and boring, was something we had greater scope to address. An emphasis was placed on pedagogy with the hope this would influence student learning and motivation. Initially, the Year 8 program was restructured to incorporate greater intercultural understandings with the expectation that this would enable students to see closer connections and relevance to their language studies.
From the movie unit introduced this year and the student reflections and interviews on this unit, we gained a greater insight into the ways in which students view what happens in the classroom. We learnt that students actually do understand and appreciate our pedagogical style, but they also want more freedom to study areas of personal interest and the opportunity to be more creative in their language use. We also learnt that they want to have the opportunity to participate in more authentic situations in the target language so that they can see the application of the language outside its purely academic form.

Overall, the insights gained from students in this project will guide us over the next few years in adapting and delivering our programs in what is, hopefully, a more effective manner.

The significance of the experience at St John’s: the researcher perspective

The issue of retention in language learning in the Australian context is a challenge that has been well documented in recent reports on languages education (Liddicoat et al., 2006 [2007]). The issue is a pressing concern for Indonesian in particular, with its well-known decline in participation rates and retention, particularly at the junior to middle secondary levels (Kohler and Mahnken, 2010, Slaughter, 2009). There has, however, been little investigation into the underlying reasons for such difficulties in some languages, Indonesian being one of them. The St John’s project has provided an opportunity to examine in some detail the issue of retention at the critical point of junior secondary schooling, and has yielded insights into the issue and ways to address it.

The experience of investigating retention at St John’s revealed the importance of the place of language learning in the school community and the language program in the school culture. The data gathered about student enrolments and retention rates acted as a powerful evidence base for decision-making within the faculty and within broader school decision-making processes. The data showed high retention (69%-88%) in the senior years in the transition from Year 10 to Year 11 and the lowest retention (32%-47%) in the transition from Year 8 to Year 9. The method of data-gathering enables overall enrolment and retention data to be captured and analysed routinely.

The data gathered from students in the semi-structured interviews reflected a range of considerations and perceptions that influence their decision-making. It revealed a dilemma: on the one hand, students have a high expectation of enjoyment and ‘fun’ with language learning; while on the other hand, language learning is difficult and is not achievable by all students. The students reported that learning about the culture of the target language community was desirable and engaging and they appreciated opportunities for learning more about the culture and how it compares to their own.

The St John’s experience also reveals how curriculum structures and processes within the school can both facilitate and restrict student perceptions of the value of an area of learning, and its status relative to other areas of learning. The Indonesian language’s optional status was reflected in its positioning amongst a range of semester units from which students could choose to complete the four ‘choice’ units for Year 9, including units such as IT Graphics and ‘Baked Goodies’. Students expected that optional subjects, that is, the four choice semester units, should be fun and therefore they preferred not to use their choice units for ‘serious’ or demanding subjects such as languages.

From a curriculum perspective, within the particular language, Indonesian, the account shows how teachers’ understandings of language and culture impact on their design decisions, from the overall program to tasks and experiences, assessment processes and the selection of materials. A review of the existing curriculum revealed a strong emphasis on vocabulary and language structures, with culture providing contextual information for appropriate language use and factual knowledge of practices in the target language community. The program was revisited from an intercultural language learning perspective in discussions between the teachers and the RCLO Research Team. The redesign provided more opportunities for students to make connections across languages and cultures, and to reflect on their own language and culture (Papademetre and Scarrino, 2009). The change was made largely by reconceptualising the program’s topic design and learning experiences. A descriptive orientation to topics (e.g. School), shifted to a more conceptual orientation (e.g. Education), enabling students to focus on concepts and how these are manifest in language(s) and culture(s). In addition, a reflective dimension was included in at least one of the major tasks in each unit; for example, inviting students to consider ‘How does this (learning) matter to me and who I am?’ An intercultural orientation facilitated greater personal engagement with the ideas in the program. Informed by the focus group responses calling for greater autonomy, the Indonesian team decided to design part of the program as a self-directed project of exploring aspects of both language and culture.
The students' written evaluations of the 'independent learning' experience and the subsequent debriefing interviews reveal how students appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with their peers in pursuing an area of their own interest. The students explained that different learning areas held different associations for them. They did not tend to associate language learning with collaboration, problem-solving and student-directed learning. Students reported that the 'independent learning' experience opened up their perceptions of the kinds of experiences possible within language learning, increasing their interest and motivating them to learn.

The St John's study revealed how a facilitated research and reflection experience increased understanding of the issue of retention by drawing on a combination of (a) collaborative planning between the teachers and the RCLC Research Team and (b) teacher expertise and knowledge in the specific school context. The study highlights factors that impact on retention both within the languages learning area (e.g. program design and learning experiences) and within the broader school context (e.g. curriculum structures and community perceptions of the value of language learning). This understanding provided the basis for change in the St John's context. The school intends to inform future development, implementation and improvement by continuing to gather and analyse retention data, and to continue to evaluate students' experiences of the Indonesian program.

2.2 Prince Alfred College: ‘Changing the way I interact with students’

“The Innovative Language Learning Project provided a valuable opportunity for me to reflect and improve the teaching of Chinese. I was able to spend time focusing on my own classroom practices, observing lessons taught by experienced teachers, developing resources, attending various professional developments and sharing ideas and concerns. All these activities were designed with a focus on improving my own understanding of learners and their needs in the Chinese classroom context, how best to plan to engage learners with learning and using the language in meaningful ways, designing resources that might be most suitable to enhance their learning experiences, and how to enhance my classroom practice by changing the way I interact with students and draw upon their understandings and insights in order to engage more deeply with Chinese language and culture.” (Linhwa Chu, 2011)

Orientation

The following account illustrates how the teacher learns to understand and address the challenges of introducing Chinese to young second language learners. It explores the process of opening up, of allowing the researchers into her classroom to document her practices, of participating in a process of reflection and review, and then taking responsibility for change in her own context. In this particular context, the Chinese program is being required to integrate more directly with content and processes in the mainstream classrooms through the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program (PYP). In addition, the teacher and the school administration recognise the need to ‘enhance learning experiences and motivations to learn Chinese’. Although the initial focus sought answers from outside, the project helped the teacher and the school to recognise that the most important change comes from within, by looking closely at the nature of the current teaching-learning experience as a basis for improvement.

The changes that take place, ultimately in program planning to connect Chinese with the mainstream IB PYP, are preceded by:

> an intensive lesson study
> reflection on the teacher's values and practices
> the opportunity to observe and appreciate possible alternatives that she may explore and apply as she best sees for in her own context.
These experiences are exemplified in her reflection above, and in her summary reflections, which conclude this report.

It is evident that the teacher faces a number of challenges that are deeply connected to her knowledge and experiences as a native speaker of Chinese, and as a non-native English speaker in the Australian classroom. One challenge is to try to distance herself from her first language perspective of Chinese so that she can discover ways to represent Chinese that are meaningful to Australian learners; these ways are still unfamiliar to her. A second challenge is to develop processes (this includes planning and resourcing), for learners to actively construct their own meanings by thinking things through in active exchange in the classroom. These things require classroom interaction and management, processes with which she is still unfamiliar.

Overall, however, the report highlights the key moments of 'bridging' between the teacher and her learners. These moments drew on understandings gained primarily through the opportunities provided to consider different approaches:

> engaging in discussions with the ROLC Research Team as part of the reflective stance taken with lesson study
> exemplifications of classroom discourse (visits to other classrooms and the researchers' 'modelled' lesson
> collaborative program and resource development.

None of this is easy, but the benefits are clearly established, as the teacher reports.

School context

Prince Alfred College is a single-sex school affiliated with the Uniting Church of Australia. It was established in 1869 in metropolitan Adelaide. The college comprises an early learning centre, a preparatory school, a middle school and a senior school. There are more than one thousand boys, including boarding and international students; 391 students are in the preparatory school. Prince Alfred College is an International Baccalaureate school and offers the Primary Years Program, Middle Years Program, and the International Baccalaureate Diploma.

The language program at Prince Alfred College (Preparatory School)

The school offers Chinese to all students in the Preparatory School (Reception-Year 8). The Chinese Program in the Preparatory School aims to provide the boys with the opportunity to develop their own abilities to use Chinese to communicate with others. It also develops their understandings of the culture linked with the language and positive attitudes to our culturally and linguistically diverse society. The program currently offers two lessons each week: one 30-minute lesson and one 90-minute lesson.

One teacher is responsible for most of the classes at this level. This teacher, the primary participant in the project, has taught at the school for several years. She is a native speaker of Chinese who has been teaching in Australia for approximately ten years.

Report of the school team

The aim of the project

The primary concern of the school leadership team and the teacher of Chinese was to increase language learning outcomes and foster retention of students of this subject through to secondary school. The focus for change was on developing an inquiry-based curriculum in keeping with the orientation of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program.

The aim of the project was therefore to explore ways to enhance the quality of the program and the boys' learning experiences. The challenge was to explore different aspects of the current program and identify changes that might enhance learner's experiences and motivations for learning Chinese. The project also provided an opportunity for the Chinese teacher to work with the ROLC Research Team to explore her own beliefs and practices from a detailed study of her teaching in context.

The aims of the project focused on the following three key questions and issues:

1. How can we teach languages better in the primary school? — *Improving motivation and retention and performance*
2. What is the best approach to teaching Chinese in the 21st century? — *Contemporary pedagogy, resources, technology*
3. What should our goals be and how should we measure outcomes? — *What can be expected from (60 hours) a year of language learning?*
These issues also relate to the school’s plans to integrate Chinese learning into the overall International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program with an inquiry-based teaching and learning approach, and with a contemporary languages education focus on conceptual and experiential learning.

The first question highlights issues of continuity and progression with attention to improved mapping of the learning sequence and finding better ways of building on learners’ prior knowledge and experiences in learning Chinese. It also requires a better understanding of the nature of Chinese language learning in a second language context and consideration of ways to better engage young learners with the language’s complexity and with learning the language in the classroom.

The second question highlights issues of understanding of contemporary pedagogy in languages education, the nature of resources, and the application of technology in language learning and use. From a Chinese language perspective, it also draws attention to the need to find a balance between oral and written language development in classroom learning, and to ensuring that the resources available provide adequate and appropriate support for oral language development and learning to read and write, based on learners’ prior knowledge and experience in both first and second language learning.

The third question of appropriate goals and learning outcomes for one year of Chinese language learning depends on revisions undertaken to curriculum structures and priorities in teaching and learning, and how achievements can be assessed in the short- and long-term.

**The classroom**

The Year 5 Chinese classes were chosen as the focus for the study as they represent a significant year level within the primary years program in the Preparatory School. They have usually studied the language for a number of years already (although there are always new entrants into the school) and are willing and active learners who can be difficult to engage effectively with Chinese language learning. Initially, two teachers were involved at Year 5, but in the second year of the project only one teacher was teaching the Year 5 classes.

**Process: Phases of the project**

The following table provides a summary of the development of the project overall. Each stage, its focus and related activities are outlined in further detail.

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Project collaboration

Phase 1: Understanding the context

In the initial phase of the project the research team met with school leaders and Chinese language teachers to gather current planning materials and teaching resources and to discuss the aims of the project and identify key areas for attention. This review of current planning, the types of resources currently being used in Year 5 and the discussion of teachers concerns and aspirations, helped us to clarify the actual nature of this project, how best we could participate in identifying areas for change and our role in implementing new ideas. As a result of this first phase of review and planning, I began to see issues in my planning that were likely to impact on my classroom practice.

Phase 2: Investigating teaching

The RLC Research Team introduced the lesson study method to examine the teaching and learning practices that were currently employed in Year 5. The lesson study also provided me as the participating teacher with the opportunity to reflect on my practices, to identify aspects of learners' experiences that were not as effective as I might hope, and to recognise how my teaching practice might be improved. The research team recorded a few lessons, including discussions with students after the recorded lessons. A copy of the recorded lessons and reflective questions was provided to me to help me to reflect on my own classroom practices. This allowed me to pay attention to every detail of my teaching practices and the students' learning experiences during the lessons. Although I discussed with the research team the recorded lessons and the identified issues, they did not provide detailed and specific criticism of my practice, which might also have been useful to me.

A valuable part of this phase was having one of the members of the research team come into my class to teach lessons on content similar to that which I taught in the recorded lesson study. By watching these lessons, I felt that I immediately gained knowledge that I could use to improve my own teaching. It was useful to see how another teacher could ask questions to draw on the students' knowledge of English in a way that could help them to appreciate and understand some of the concepts of the structure of the Chinese language. I was interested in the way in which the researcher interacted with the students, questioning them frequently to ensure their engagement and understanding. At the end of the lesson, the researcher allowed the students time to reflect on and summarise what they had learnt in the lesson, in their own words.

As a result of the lesson study experience, I began to plan my lessons with a focus on how to elicit and use the students' prior knowledge (of English, of the topic, of Chinese) to help them to understand the concepts related to the Chinese language that I was trying to teach. This required me to reflect on how to change my approach to giving instructions and my ways of questioning students in the context of my teaching. I also realised that, based on this understanding, the quality of worksheets and class handouts could be improved. I have also begun to provide more time at the end of the lesson for the students to reflect on and summarise what they have learnt.

Phase 3: Planning and developing resources

As a result of the lesson study, an action plan was proposed to improve aspects of planning, resourcing and classroom practice. One of the areas identified for improvement was the organisation of students' learning and the development of resources to assist in improving learner engagement with learning Chinese. The RLC Research Team suggested creating a booklet to be used for a term, as a way to focus on both the content to be learnt and the ways to represent this to learners and engage them with it. This required careful planning of the types of activities and tasks for them to engage with, and thinking about how to connect the new content with their prior knowledge and learning by asking questions to stimulate their thinking and participation. We had a chance to look at some good examples of teacher-developed materials shared by one Chinese teacher we invite to show us her practices. I felt that the idea of the learning booklet was useful. It covered most instructions, concepts, languages and activities that I aimed to teach throughout the term. I developed the booklet 'Sports and me' on my own with feedback and suggestions from the team. It was not easy to develop the learning booklet on my own. I felt this might have been more successful if done with the team to allow for conversations about ideas that occurred to me in the process of developing the booklet. It was also very time-consuming to develop and print the booklet.

Phase 4: Observing alternative approaches

In this phase the lesson study process was repeated. I planned and conducted lessons based on the resource developed in the Phase 3, the learning booklet 'Sports and me'. I used the booklet throughout the term. From a teacher's point of view, all of the preparations were done and it was easier to refer to previous learning experiences when reviewing with students. Some students found it easier to manage their learning records. The team members and I had an opportunity to observe Chinese lessons at two other schools nearby. At one school the
teacher used her learning booklet to focus on in-class character learning. We held discussions and reflections after observing the lessons. It is always valuable to see what other teachers do in their classes.

**Phase 5: Program planning**

After the reviewing the lesson study with the new resources, the final phase involved drawing on prior experiences to begin to incorporate the International Baccalaureate PYP into the planning for future units of work in Chinese. We held two planning meetings to develop a unit of work that would engage students using concepts that are covered in other learning areas, with a focus on the enquiry-based learning approach that is expected in the PYP. We chose the topic ‘advertising’ from the year plans for Year 5 in mainstream classes. To stimulate students' interest in the topic and engage them with new language learning experiences in Chinese, we attempted to find ways to connect with learners’ everyday experiences with advertising. After we chose one of the Year 5 PYP topics, we developed a term outline, taking it from a PYP generic topic to a Chinese language-specific unit of work. We also developed an assessment task that allowed the learners to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of language and culture. Previously, this has not been an easy area for me, but after the meetings, I felt I had gained some useful guidelines, strategies and directions for planning a PYP unit within my Chinese program in the future.

As a result, I had an opportunity to plan an additional PYP unit with the Year 2 teachers. The topic was ‘Food, Fun and Fitness’. I applied the knowledge, ideas, strategies and guidelines gained from the planning sessions with the research team. The meeting with the Year 2 teachers gave me a better understanding of what the classroom teachers wanted to do and I was able to share my ideas with them and get feedback. I was involved in the Year 2 excursions to the market and having lunch in a Chinese restaurant with the boys, applying Chinese table manners and experiencing using chopsticks in a real-life situation. I also worked with a small group of the boys for their Health, which allowed them to show their knowledge and understanding of the unit to the school community. This also promoted Chinese language teaching and learning within the PAC community. I enjoyed working with the boys and the teachers.

**Reflections: The teacher perspective**

The project provided a valuable opportunity for me to reflect on and improve my teaching of Chinese. I was able to spend time focusing on my own classroom practices, observing lessons taught by experienced teachers, developing resources, attending various professional development activities and sharing ideas and concerns related specifically to the teaching and learning of Chinese. All these activities were designed with a focus on improving my own understanding of learners and their needs in the Chinese classroom context. I learnt how to plan to engage learners with learning, with Chinese language and culture, and with using the language in meaningful ways by:

- designing resources that enhance their learning experiences
- changing the way I interact with learners, to enhance my classroom practice
- drawing upon the learners’ understandings and insights.

Overall, I see myself as a more effective language teacher as evidenced by the following changes:

- **Planning a PYP unit within the Chinese program**
  I have gained guidelines, directions, ideas and strategies and feel more confident in planning a PYP unit within the Chinese program in the future. The school is very supportive in providing planning time for me to work with classroom teachers.

- **My teaching practices**
  The project allowed me to reflect on my own teaching practices. I have learnt various strategies and ideas for engaging learners more effectively, such as frequent questioning, using the learners’ prior knowledge (English) when introducing new concepts, allowing time for the learners to reflect and report their learning at the end of the lessons, and applying new games and learning activities I learned from various PD sessions.

- **Resources**
  I have improved the quality of my class resources with the aim of improving learners’ engagement by ensuring that the instructions are clearly explained step by step, and that the tasks are relevant and interesting.

In conclusion, I appreciate the opportunity of being involved in this project and the support and advice from the RCLC Research Team.
The significance of the experience at Prince Alfred College: The researcher perspective

This case is significant in that it provides insights into understanding ways in which Chinese could be taught in primary classrooms. In order to assist the teacher in better understanding her own stance and her own context, it was necessary to understand the teaching and learning issues for young second language learners. In particular, it was important to step back from the unit-topi orientation and ask, “What is it that learners need to learn about Chinese, in order to learn to mean in Chinese?” From a researcher’s perspective it is possible to review the literature and identify the issues learners are likely to face in learning to understand and use Chinese language. However, the implications for a particular age group are seldom so easily identified, and the opportunity to explore these issues with a teacher in context provided a sound basis for linking the research perspective to teaching practice.

At the same time it was necessary to engage with the challenges of bridging between the teacher as native speaker and the researcher as non-native speaker; values and perspectives based on experiences in and with the language meant that mutual understanding could not be achieved simply or quickly. One effort to create shared understandings was a ‘model’ lesson conducted by the researcher in the teacher’s classroom, in taking the theory and putting it into practice with the teacher’s own students. Although just a single instantiation, the model lesson evidently had a positive impact on the teacher concerned. Consequently, the process of recommending and supporting change in planning, resourcing and classroom practice was more targeted and structured, based on a shared view of what could be learned, how it could be organised and presented, and how the teacher might better engage with young learners.

The case is further significant in terms of the process of change itself. The lesson study method provided the teacher with multiple perspectives and diverse lenses on her repertoire of practice that she could call upon in building bridges for her students. Each lens and perspective was an additional scaffold to assist the teacher to understand her own context, to find ways of connecting to her learners, and ways of connecting the learners to the language and to learning. At each stage of the lesson study the focus remained objective; the focus was not on the teacher herself, but on her understanding of how students might best learn Chinese in the classroom context. The stages included a review of approaches to planning:

- units of work, for greater coherence
- resourcing, for better understanding
- teaching, for better engagement
- the subject matter of each unit, for relevance to students as learners and potential users of the language.

The review of current practices highlighted issues for attention and areas where change could impact significantly on learners and their engagement and progress. The review of planning highlighted the emphasis on language features, vocabulary and sentence patterns. There were few opportunities for learners to engage meaningfully and experientially with Chinese language and culture. In terms of resources developed for teaching and learning, attractive displays were prepared but content remained at vocabulary and sentence level, presented ‘as is’, for presentation, practice and production; there were few scaffolds to assist understanding of the nature or complexity of the language, or to make connections with prior knowledge or belongings of English. Language was often presented in characters with or without Pinyin glossing, making the relationship between the purposes of reading and speaking unclear, and access to language input challenging for many students. The teaching practices focused primarily on teacher-centred delivery and learner receptivity, on pattern drills with an emphasis on memorisation. There were few opportunities for the learners to actively construct their own ideas in the language.

Throughout the initial stages of the lesson study it was noticeable that the teacher was attempting to focus on learners’ needs and their learning process, but without the lesson study itself it would have been difficult for the teacher to access, identify and reflect on these features identified here.

Once these challenges had been identified, the teacher was able, through ongoing discussion with the RCLC Research Team, to begin a process of change that affected her teaching practices. There were challenges throughout. As the teacher
identifies in her report, changing practices is not a simple process. The challenges remain:

> How to achieve active learner participation in classroom learning — Planning does not necessarily translate into successful teaching, no matter how well-intentioned.
> How to maintain an inquiry focus — It takes time and experience to develop skills in asking questions and scaffolding, by building further on learners’ responses. This is an aspect of teaching that cannot be easily anticipated or planned for;
> How to manage planning processes — Developing unit plans with outside help is worthwhile, but maintaining the practice and coming up with ideas and ways to engage learners is time-consuming and difficult.
> How to develop resources that focus on learners’ learning and social interests
> How to teach in a manner that maintains the attention of young learners and that scaffolds and differentiates according to prior knowledge
> Dealing with a natural return to ‘old habits’ — Participating in a project such as this may have immediate and long-term benefits, but innovation presents a constant challenge in teaching.

There is no easy solution to the challenges teachers face in changing their practices; however, a project such as this, which involves intensive, supported and ongoing involvement by teacher and researchers, provides a great impetus for improvement that is more likely to be sustained in the longer term.

2.3 St Martins Lutheran College:
'I used to teach a lot, now they learn a lot'

Two and half years ago, when I started the project, I did not know what my students would be able to achieve by participating in the project. None of the students knew the logical way to make sentences and create texts in Chinese. They could neither recognise four tones nor use a Chinese dictionary. They tried to memorise drills in the textbook. When they forgot some of the memorised words they were unable to say a correct sentence in Chinese. In other words, they did not know how to make meaning by creating their own texts in a logical way.

Meanwhile, as a native speaker, a teacher-centred teaching approach was the main way I taught. I was the one to decide what to learn and what to say in the class. I had never thought about [the fact] that there might be something that students would be more interested to learn in Chinese. Everything in Chinese was defined as ‘boring’, ‘too hard’, ‘I can’t do it’ ...
Chinese L2 students vs L1 traditional teachers

(Ming Wei, 2011)

Orientation

The following account illustrates how a native-speaker teacher of Chinese learns to understand and address the challenges of introducing Chinese to young second language learners, particularly those in a rural setting. It explores the experience of an individual language teacher bringing about change through dialogue with other language educators, in conjunction with learning how to reflect on and improve her own practice.

The school aims to increase the engagement and retention of learners in the Chinese language program from junior primary to Year 12. The school is located in a large regional town that is renowned as an agricultural and tourism centre. The school leadership team values the Chinese language program and face the challenge of conveying its value to learners and the broader community, which is primarily concerned with vocationally oriented education. The Chinese language teacher is the sole language teacher on staff and therefore must resource herself by attending conferences and gathering materials available online. There are few opportunities for professional dialogue specifically about Chinese language teaching and learning in the teacher’s immediate context.
The project therefore provided a major opportunity for the teacher to enter into a long-term dialogue with others in the languages field and in particular with other native-speaker teachers of Chinese. The experience of noticing and comparing the understandings and practices of other teachers of Chinese was invaluable for this teacher, who is otherwise working in isolation. While ultimately each teacher adapts his or her knowledge to the particular teaching context, the opportunity to gain new insights into similar issues was a reference point for reflecting on her own theories and practices. Through structured reflection and sustained support, the teacher developed a critical perspective on her own practice and experimented with new ideas and ways of engaging her students.

The case of St Martins shows the importance of understanding teacher professional learning and change in teaching practices as both an individual and a collaborative endeavour. The teacher, in conjunction with others, developed self-awareness and recognised the power of dialogue that is based on genuine meaning, both in her own professional learning, and in the learning of her students.

The school context

St Martin Lutheran College is a co-educational Reception to Year 12 School in the regional city of Mt Gambier. Established in 1982 with just 33 students, the College now has approximately 512 students across R–12. Families at St Martins come from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

The Chinese language program at St Martin Lutheran College (Years 1–6)

The Chinese language program was introduced to St Martin in 2005. In 2010 and 2011 Chinese was taught from Reception through to Year 12. There were 370 students learning Chinese language as a second language at the school. In Reception–Year 6, students attend one 45-minute lesson a week; in Year 7, students attend one semester of Chinese and one semester of German for two lessons a week; in Years 8–12, students attend four lessons a week. Numbers in the secondary classes are growing each year. During the project, the Year 5 class was offered two 45-minute lessons a week.

There is one teacher of Chinese at the school, a native speaker of Chinese who has worked in Australia for a number of years. She had taught at the school for two years prior to the project.

Report of the school team

Introduction

This project aimed to explore innovative approaches to Chinese language learning relevant to a regional school like St Martins Lutheran College (SMLC). One main concern of the leadership team and the teacher of Chinese was to develop ways of integrating ICTs into the Chinese program as a means of increasing student engagement and in the long term, retention of students into the senior years. The school had recently purchased a SMART Board for the Chinese language classroom to enhance student learning. Overall, the school recognised the need for change and new initiatives in the Chinese curriculum and teaching practice in order to enhance interest and commitment to the study of Chinese.

The project created an opportunity to examine aspects of teaching to improve the teacher’s classroom practices and to develop students’ intercultural understanding, and Chinese oracy and writing skills. It also created an opportunity to promote the profile of Chinese beyond the classroom to the whole school. Chinese L2 teaching needs to focus on teaching students how to make meaning through sentences and texts, and how to connect their own culture with the Chinese culture. This perspective motivated me to explore ways to develop suitable resources that would help students to develop their knowledge and intercultural understanding, and that would make Chinese teaching at SMLC more effective and practical.

Aims

The aims of the project were to:

> strengthen Chinese L2 learning and intercultural understanding at SMLC
> incorporate intercultural language learning approaches and ICTs in Chinese classes
> motivate students to learn Chinese (the four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing) by developing learning booklets to cultivate and sustain students’ interests
> improve the teacher’s talk and interaction, and students’ engagement and retention
> develop expectations of the Chinese program across the school and the parent community.
Key questions included:

> How can the Chinese program as a whole be strengthened at SMLC?
> What is the nature of Chinese as a language?
> What are Chinese L2 students’ needs? How do I stimulate learners to participate more actively in learning?
> What is the way that Chinese language is best taught in the classroom?
> What are intercultural approaches?
> What resources help students learn Chinese? How do students use them in lessons and at home?
> How do I help students to develop their Chinese for both school study and social purposes?
> How will the students, the school and the teacher keep the “Project” advantage further than two years?
> How can the teacher construct herself? What is the teacher going to gain/change/improve by participating in the project?

Description of the learner group

In 2010, the project focused on a cohort of specially designated students: 38 students in two Year 5 Chinese classes, 24 girls and 14 boys. The intake of students spanned a wide range of ability. For example, 35 students in the target classes were from families in which English was the first language; one student was from an Aboriginal family; one student was from an African family and one student had an Asian background. Apart from that, seven students in the target classes had not studied the Chinese language before, and six students were studying music using Chinese lessons’ time. All students studied Chinese as a second language.

The target group in 2011 were 43 students in two Year 5 Chinese classes, including 22 boys and 21 girls. The intake of students spanned a wider range of ability than the target group in 2010. Seven students had no prior knowledge of Chinese; 5 students attended Chinese class irregularly as they were with support learning staff most of the time; 1 student was a non-native English speaker; and 1 student had a music lesson during Chinese lessons.

Current resources

There were a lot of resources on the market, but it was hard to find one that was suitable for each individual student in the class as the student intake spans a wide range of ability. Between 2005 and 2009, the following textbooks were used at SMLC: HanYu (Chinese), Happy Chinese (KuaiLe HanYu), Chinese Made Easy (QingSong Xue HanYu), NiHao, The Great Wall

Chinese (ChangCheng HanYu) and Chinese Paradise (HanYu LeYuen). There were both advantages and disadvantages in these textbooks and resources. Students at SMLC were not able to complete any of them in the time available, as the level of the textbooks did not suit the students’ learning ability and curriculum framework at SMLC.

Project collaboration

The following table provides a summary of the overall development of the project. Each phase, its focus and related activities is outlined in further detail.

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Phase 1: Understanding the context

During Phase 1, the RCLC Research Team observed and demonstrated Chinese lessons in both primary and secondary levels at SMLC. Discussions focused on analysing students’ participation and learning, teacher talk and the interaction in the class and the current curriculum:

> The curriculum focused on isolated language elements (vocabulary items, grammar and separate cultural activities) rather than on integrated learning.
> The topics were not relevant to students’ needs and interests; therefore, students were not motivated.
> Students’ management of their learning resources was limited, they were unable to access required information in order to participate effectively
> Timely feedback was not always provided to students in the class.
> Teacher talk and the interaction in the class were not effective; teacher-centered teaching practices were not supporting learner engagement.
Overall, students were very positive and keen to learn more about Chinese language and culture. Some students, however, showed limited interest in the Chinese lessons.

The RCLC Research Team identified the following challenges for the teacher:

- To discover students’ needs and motivation in Chinese learning
- To design a theme/topic based on a unit of work suitable for the target group
- To develop a year-long program for the target group
- To provide positive feedback in and after the class
- To improve teacher talk and interaction with the students
- To transform from teacher-centred to student-centred.

Phase 2: Understanding learners’ needs

A Year 5 Curriculum was drafted for the following year. The project team provided feedback on the curriculum document and recommended changes to better meet the needs of learners. They noted the curriculum:

- focused heavily on carrying out exercises in Chinese without necessarily exploring students’ developing understanding of concepts
- did not sufficiently recognise the challenges of character reading and recognition and the role Pinyin might play in encouraging oral language use
- did not focus on how students were making sense of their learning and how they understood Chinese as a new, and different language
- showed limited connections between ‘What do students learn... about China, about Chinese language, about language’, i.e. ‘What is their overall conceptual development in relation to Chinese language and culture?’
- was largely reliant on students’ memorising words in order to speak and write
- gave little opportunity for students to ‘have a go and get it right’.

The RCLC Research Team suggested that a learning booklet with an intercultural orientation be developed for Year 5 in 2011 to:

- provide access to core language/vocabulary as a reference
- reflect students’ needs (predominantly boys), interests and engagement
- connect better with students’ prior language knowledge
- provide tasks focusing on meaning-making rather than memorising words
- focus mainly on oracy through Pinyin (with some focus in the program on reading and writing characters).

The learning booklet was drafted and reviewed, and a number of changes suggested:

- A more intercultural focus, linking with learners’ own language and culture as they engage with Chinese language and culture
- A coherent framework for planning teaching and learning, drawing upon a clear understanding of Chinese language teaching.
- More open-ended interaction and questions, including encouraging students to ask questions.

Following the discussion, the second Year 5 Booklet, ‘I Play Sports’, was drafted. Although there were improvements, it still focused on linguistic knowledge rather than its interconnection with culture, and it contained too much information. It took Year 5 students two terms to work through the 40-page learning booklet. As can be seen from their feedback, some of the students enjoyed learning through the learning booklet, but others were unable to cope with the language learning and needed special learning support.

I started to consider the balance between linguistic and cultural tasks. If the students enjoyed using the learning booklet and their special needs in Chinese learning were met, it might prevent more students from falling behind.

Phase 3: Investigating teaching practice, and program development and innovation

At the end of Semester 2, the RCLC Research Team observed the Year 4 and Year 5 lessons and made a diagnostic assessment of what students had actually learnt and retained in 2010 in Year 4 and 5 groups. A series of observation visits to other contexts was also arranged at this stage. It was a great opportunity for me to observe other teachers’ lessons and performance in Chinese classes. By observing and studying other teachers’ classes, teaching methods, resources preparation and students’ performance, I learnt how to develop suitable teaching and learning resources. As a result, I have been developing more booklets for different levels.

As a result of the opportunities provided to observe and reflect on videos of my own teaching, on lessons provided by the RCLC Research Team and observing other teachers’ practices, I identified some beneficial features of classroom practice:
> Clearly define expected student learning through curriculum, assessments, teaching methodologies and practices. One of the project questions was about Chinese L2 students’ needs and how to stimulate them. To answer this question, I had to have clear ideas of what the target groups were expected to learn and be able to do by participating in the project. The curriculum, assessments, teaching methodologies and practices would define students’ achievement, knowledge, understandings, skills, attitudes and values. As a result I endeavoured to offer students clear goals in their learning, to inspire them to approach their learning more positively.

> Encourage self-directed learning through resources relevant to learners’ needs and small group work. A primary aim of the project was to develop resources that were relevant to learners’ needs. Resource-based learning using booklets, posters, flashcards, CD-ROMs, and computers encouraged self-directed learning in Year 5 students. When using the resources in small group classroom activities, students became confident and positive, and their attitude toward reading and understanding the learning booklet for information improved. Meanwhile, I was given time to help or support individual students. The students and I both appreciated the value of the new learning resource.

> Document students’ learning by asking them to write in the booklets. The project focused on developing booklets. The best way to evaluate the booklets was to get students to use them as a guide and write on them. This writing strategy helped students understand, remember, explore and extend their learning. By writing in the booklet and creating short texts, the students demonstrated their understanding and learning of Chinese language in a logical way. Their writing also reflected on the extent to which the booklets and topics were suitable for them, which helped me to fine-tune the booklets later. Students provided feedback on learning topics and progress at the end of each unit in the booklet, which helped me to improve both the lesson and the booklet. From the students’ notes, I was able to plan a class discussion focusing on learning outcomes and the subject. For example, some students wrote, ‘it’s too hard, I don’t understand’. I opened a short class discussion rather than explain to the student as a teacher. Each student expressed their understanding about how they completed the task successfully. One or two students with good explanation and communication skills, helped to explain the task in their own language to the students who had difficulty with it.

> Use interactive whole-class teaching and direct instruction to draw students’ attention. One of the project aims was to improve my teaching, with a focus on teacher talk and student interaction in the classroom. Interactive whole-class teaching and direct instruction required me to organise encouraging, interesting and targeted questions so that I could draw all students’ attention. Year 5 students’ ability to understand their learning tasks was still developing, and I needed to think as a student in order to respond and provide effective feedback to their contributions. These strategies gave students opportunities to answer questions together as a whole class or individually, which ensured that each student had a go. My organisational skills and communication style improved gradually.

> Utilise reflection, discussion and evaluation. Reflection and discussion were the main methods used with both the research team and my Chinese classes. My self-reflection helped the research team to understand how things actually stood in the classroom. The key to keeping the project going smoothly was the face-to-face discussions with the team about my teaching concerns and the feedback they provided on the issues and solutions, how to improve, and setting the next goal of the project. Regular discussion and reflection helped me to realise what enduring changes I might make immediately, and what I might keep going for a while to see how it works out.

> Assessment. One of the goals of the project was to develop understanding of expectations of the Chinese program across the school and parent community. In the primary area, I usually used product assessment, such as evaluation portfolio and exhibitions. The evaluation portfolio included specified and marked work, indicating outcomes achieved in Chinese class and demonstrating students’ work and learning. Exhibitions were the best way to present and display students’ work. Parents visited the school quite often; exhibitions presented students’ understandings and values directly to the parents and other learners.

> ICT-assisted learning. An initial objective of the project was to apply ICT skills in intercultural language learning. Although the target groups’ ICT skills didn’t improve as much as I expected, ICT-assisted learning helped greatly in my teaching at all levels. It was one of the most motivating and challenging methods of teaching and learning. With well-designed programs and practices, students moved towards independent learning. Most students enjoyed practising with ICT skills more than using textbooks. Two and a half years later, I can say the advantage of ICT-assisted learning will be life-long.
Student knowledge and Impressions in Chinese class

In Term 1 2010, the teacher conducted a survey of the target group. The data indicated that students’ knowledge of Chinese (language, people, culture, country) was very limited:

> None of the students had ever been to China or Chinatown in other cities.
> 91% of students knew only a little about Chinese food and a few significant traditional festivals.
> 2.6% were able to say more in Chinese than ‘hello’ (one student’s grandparents are Malaysian Chinese and his parents speak Mandarin and Malay).
> 21% were able to write full sentences to express ideas, likes, dislikes, hobbies or to introduce themselves, etc. in Chinese Pinyin.
> 4% students were able to write Chinese characters from 4 to 10.
> 87.2% learnt Chinese because ‘it’s a compulsory course at school’.
> 23.6% enjoyed Chinese language and culture study at school.
> No students were able to distinguish four tones properly in Chinese.

A similar survey was conducted in both Year 4 and Year 5 classes in 2011. The data indicated that, compared with the previous Year 5 data, students’ knowledge and interest in Chinese were improving. Based entirely on student perceptions:

> 48.19% were able to speak simple sentences or words in Chinese.
> 44.54% were able to write some Chinese characters other than numbers from 1 to 10.
> 32.14% learnt Chinese because they ‘like Chinese culture and language’.
> 20.24% learnt Chinese because they wanted to ‘go to China for further study’.
> 41.67% learnt Chinese because it was a ‘compulsory course at school’.
> 72.73% of girls and 52.94% of boys were ‘happy with Chinese study and lesson’.
> 48.48% of girls and 35.29% of boys would like to continue Chinese in the future.

The learning booklets inspired most students in my classes to learn Chinese. A short survey was conducted at the end of 2011 in Year 4 groups (17 girls, 21 boys). When students gave negative answers, it was usually because they would like to have some ‘fun’ activities such as playing games, working on craft or colouring pictures, and so on. But most students (12 girls and 11 boys) provided positive feedback, saying they would like to have a Chinese booklet:

> ‘So I can study Chinese better’
> ‘Because I need to learn more’
> ‘Because I really want to learn different languages’
> ‘Because you can learn different words and languages’
> ‘Because they are very good and they are easily [sic] to do and read’
> ‘Yes, because they are easier and quicker’

When asked ‘Do you think a Chinese Booklet is good for your Chinese study?’, 17 girls and 16 boys said ‘Yes’:

> ‘Because it will help you and you can look back at all your work’.
> ‘Because it would help memorising things’.
> ‘Because you will learn more’.
> ‘Because you can learn and learn more words’.
> ‘Because you need to think and they are fun’.
> ‘Because it gives you practice’.
> ‘So I can learn about China’.
> ‘Because it will help you learn Chinese faster and easily’.
> ‘It will teach you more about Chinese’.
> ‘Because you can pratice [sic] your chinese [sic] characters’
> ‘They are very good to learn with’.
> ‘Because then we learn about it at home’.
> ‘Because it will help us in tests’.
> ‘Because if you ever go to Chinese you can speake [sic] it’.

Reflections: the teacher perspective

One of the best aspects of the project was the learning booklets idea. The RCLC Research Team focused on developing curriculum and learning booklets for the students with the aim of developing intercultural understanding. Inspired by the RCLC Research Team and students’ desire to learn Chinese, a series of printed learning booklets have now been developed for students across other year levels.

It was a big challenge for me as a native speaker to learn to understand and teach Chinese in an L2 classroom. When I developed these learning booklets, I had to draw from the needs of the target groups and my experiences.

In developing the relevant teaching materials, I reflected on my teaching practices and understanding of students’ needs in the Chinese class. The learning booklets not only helped students’ learning but also improved my teaching, professional thinking and intercultural understanding. For example, before, I simply
taught the language elements in the classroom directly; now, I encourage students to find out the differences in grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary and culture between the two languages. I used to tell students that there were different definitions of family members or different rules of driving a car in the two countries; but now, students are encouraged to discover the differences in cultural aspects by themselves, to identify similarities and differences, and to comment and reflect on their new understandings.

Included in the learning booklets are detailed and systematic explanations that help students to understand Chinese as a language and ensure that they understand their tasks/activities, so that they can work independently or as a team. This gives me opportunities to walk away from the whiteboard and to help students individually and invite or provide timely feedback. The feedback pages in each unit also allow students to evaluate the learning booklet and the experience and to give feedback on the teacher’s knowledge and teaching. This feedback was valuable in helping me to improve my Chinese teaching methods and content.

These learning booklets also helped me to:

> always prepare enough well-organised resources to be used in the lesson
> think as a student about all of the questions set and the lesson, to help me to consider what would be suitable for my teaching
> always teach and learn linguistic knowledge in a logical way so that students can draw inferences about other cases from an instance
> assign the task and set the goals clearly; make sure that students understand what they are going to achieve from their participation
> organise my classes and lesson plans and make sure the teaching and learning go smoothly.

Apart from developing the learning booklets, the project focused on my talk and interaction in the classroom. From working with the RCLC Research Team, I realised that teacher-talk plays a vitally important role in language learning, especially in the L2 Chinese classroom. I tried to reduce the amount of teacher-talk in class and increase students’ communicating time, providing more open-ended questions in the classes so that every student might have a go. In this way I transformed teacher-centred talk into student-centered, interaction-based talk.

The collaboration

When I reflect on the experience, I believe that collaboration was the most important aspect and that it had a very substantial and positive impact on the project at SMLC over the past two years. Working with the RCLC Research Team at the University of South Australia and a team of my colleagues helped me become a good and effective team player; this surely proved to be useful in listening to the research team and colleagues’ ideas, views, suggestions and concepts. Teamwork encouraged me to discuss the ideas and strategies suggested by the team and also to share my own knowledge and understanding with the team members and the network.

When I developed the first curriculum document and learning booklet, I was limited to my own teaching methods and traditional understanding about teaching and learning. I was given helpful advice by the research team. They not only provided open and valuable suggestions, but also organised all those professional meetings and a series of school observation visits to meet other Chinese teachers. In addition, the demonstration of innovative teaching by a member of the research team and the observation of my teaching practice in the lesson study gave me a good deal of enlightenment about students’ learning and their needs. They also offered professional suggestions by studying my first curriculum document and learning booklet. Those suggestions were of great value to me.

There is one more thing worth mentioning: inside school support and teamwork. From the very beginning, my school fully supported me with the project. At the beginning of 2010, the school installed an Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) in the Chinese classroom. Since then, the IWB has engaged students and encouraged an interactive environment in Chinese classes. In 2011, the school offered iPads to the Chinese class, which was a real technological innovation in Chinese learning. This advanced ICT equipment inspired and motivated students in many ways. Throughout the last two years, my school provided opportunities for me to go to workshops and conferences to develop my professional skills. Between 2010 and 2011, the school leaders also decided to increase Year 5 Chinese lesson time from one single 45-minute lesson a week to two lessons a week, to fulfill the project requirements of twelve to fifteen lessons a term. This was significant for implementing the project smoothly. Meanwhile, the cooperation between colleagues was another positive factor. Relevant teachers and learning support staff helped with lesson arrangements and behaviour problems in the class. My colleagues also communicated the project to the parents and school community.
by sending newsletters, consent forms and printing an article on the project in the local paper. All of this was most helpful to the Chinese students and to me inside the school.

Recommendations

From my point of view, the NALSSP Innovation Project successfully achieved what it planned to do. I do, however, think there were some areas for improvement in the process of implementing the project and I would like to make a few suggestions that may be beneficial to future implementation of similar Chinese language learning projects.

ICT focus

The project’s initial objective was to contribute to the quality of technology-enhanced intercultural learning in Chinese language. The ICT approaches in the target groups, however, did not improve much over the two years for the following reasons:

Research team focus
The focus of the project changed slightly from the focus on both ICT and intercultural understanding to developing intercultural learning booklet resources.

Students’ ICT skills
I underestimated the target groups’ computer and ICT skills. The target groups were not familiar with basic ICT skills except for very basic typing skills in Microsoft Word and reading websites.

School ICT equipment and resources:
In 2010 and 2011 the target groups had few opportunities to go to computer rooms because of inadequate ICT equipment and resources at the school.

At the beginning of 2012, the school offered iPads to the Chinese classroom. Students were suddenly more motivated in Chinese learning. Once the students understood the activities and instructions, they were able to quickly work out how to use the right apps to achieve their goals. Two years ago, students complained, ‘Chinese characters are too hard’. That was one of the reasons that we took Chinese characters out of the learning booklet and developed oracy and written skills separately.

Now, students often come to ask if they can practise some Chinese characters on the iPads; they are very confident that they can learn some Chinese characters in this way. It took me years to think about how to motivate students to learn Chinese characters; iPads offered a solution to the motivation in one term. I suddenly realized that if a suitable technology-enhanced program and lesson plan were set up, kids might achieve that goal much easier and sooner; and maybe my teaching could be replaced by these elements.

In addition, during the past two years, I have used many audio, CD-ROM and online programs in the Chinese class. It worked well in all levels, especially in middle and secondary years. For example, there are 15 boys and 6 girls in the 2012 Year 8 classes; this is the most difficult group I’ve ever met, as more than half of them had no choice about joining the Chinese class. For the first half term they were unwilling to do anything in Chinese at all, complaining, ‘I didn’t know Chinese before’, ‘It’s too hard’, ‘It’s too boring’. Fortunately, once I discovered that almost all of the students in this class were really keen to learn through technologies, the Chinese groups have been able to use computer rooms weekly and use iPads every lesson.

I trialled a few online study programs and re-set ICT-based tasks. The whole class improved suddenly; the behaviour problems were much reduced. Now when I watch them learning online by themselves quietly, being a teacher seems to be such a peaceful and beautiful thing. In addition, a webcast link-up with Chinese pen pals also encouraged my students to improve their Chinese learning. Therefore, we should consider improving our skills in ICTs and technology so that we can more effectively assist and motivate students.

Time allocation

Time allocation at school, especially in primary school is a big issue that prevents students from achieving their goals in language learning. One lesson (45 minutes) a week and about thirty lessons (22.5 hours) a year (some of the allocated language class time is used for extra activities) is far from enough. One of the aims of the project was to ‘improve student retention’. The school allocated an additional lesson to Chinese in Year 5 for the duration of this project in 2010 and 2011. This was a key reason for the project’s success and we have seen a significant improvement in Chinese language skills in the target groups. However, we were not able to increase the Year 6 timetable in 2011. When the first Year 5 target group went through to Year 6, there was huge drop in students’ performance, enthusiasm and effort as they too often missed Chinese lessons for other extra-curricular activities. This exerted a tremendous influence on me and the Chinese groups’ work across the school and the parent community.

Changes to the timetable are necessary to accommodate the extra time needed for the program. Increasing the time spent on the language certainly allows students to become more proficient and to increase their awareness of Chinese culture. To fine-tune the time allocation for language is imperative; nothing further can be done properly without reconsidering the Chinese class time allocation.
Teacher’s preparation time

Insufficient preparation time was one of the main issues I had. It has been an issue for all language teachers nationwide.

An online forum says, ‘Many teachers view release time as an unexpected ‘gift’. Why do we need preparation and release time? The generation of the ‘paper and pencil only’ class has gone; more and more advanced technologies have flooded into our classrooms, and they update rapidly every minute. Most teachers, however, have limited previous knowledge and skills in this area; extra effort is needed in order to cope with the effective teaching program and be able to help with students. This virtually reduces teachers’ preparation time. Good preparation can ensure the quality of teaching and learning. Research and reflection time are also needed to develop valuable resources, such as the online program and the learning booklets. Without enough time to research, the resources and learning booklets I created would not have been effective at all. All of these resources need to be presented in a logical and well-organised way by research, design and repeated fine-tuning.

Language teachers’ cooperation within and between schools

From two years of observation, I realised that the student achievement can be limited without positive and effective cooperation between teachers in schools and between schools, especially schools in the same region. Most R-7 schools in Mount Gambier offer one language other than English, such as Italian or Japanese; local high schools offer two languages, which are simply defined as European Language and Asian Language and which work separately in a narrow sense.

My school is one of the two schools that offer Mandarin Chinese as a second foreign language in our region. All of our Chinese teachers work hard and do their best to improve the teaching and learning quality at the school. It is a pity that there is no network for all of the Chinese teachers in the region to focus on professional and educational matters. Even if we are able to achieve in our professional careers individually, we are unable to share the success. The sharing of the school-based initiatives with other schools is also limited because of the absence of a network to connect us with each other.

Summary

This project was the best professional development I have ever had; I believe the benefit will be lifelong. For my students, they gained not only the linguistic knowledge; they also learnt to make meaning and connections through independent learning. For me, it was not just about developing learning booklets, improving technology skills and professional knowledge; it was more about how I changed inside, and this will influence my future career. I would not say that the project has already ended as there are some issues that need to be considered so that we can keep the ‘Project’ advantage beyond the two years.

The learning booklets were developed in a short time, and I have not been able to do enough research and study on the content and the best way to present the intercultural ideas. As well, the connection between the booklets and ICTs and advanced technology still needs further improvement.

We would like to perfect and continue to develop suitable intercultural Learning booklets and design ICT-based curricula (iPad apps, IWB, online program, Web 2.0, wikis, link-up with sister schools) and develop innovative immersion programs based on the new trend of the national curriculum. Meanwhile, we would like to enhance communication between Chinese groups and parents and school communities locally by promoting Chinese language and culture events and opportunities for participating in Chinese culture.
The significance of the experience at St Martins Lutheran College: the researcher perspective

This case is significant in that it provides significant insights into the process of change and the developing realisation of the nature of young learners of Chinese and their particular needs in the second language classroom. From a research perspective, we came to the project with a particular approach to supporting the teacher to undertake a process of change as appropriate to her own context. It was also necessary to engage with working with the teacher as a native speaker of Chinese in addressing ways of understanding the teaching learning experience from the second language learners’ perspective.

These challenges, identified in her teaching practice, derived from long held and deeply embedded views of the nature of the language and how it might be best represented to young learners. The experience revealed to the teacher that despite her best efforts, these assumptions were not resulting in a quality learning experience for young learners. It was necessary to identify the issues from the ‘inside’. It would have been possible for the RCLC Research Team to diagnose and address the issues from the ‘outside’; however, because the issues derived from the personal experiences and perspective of the teacher in her particular context, the only lasting and substantial change was likely to occur if it came from the teacher’s own realisations of what motivated her practices and where the problems were from a learner’s perspective, and understanding the possible alternatives that were open to her.

Consequently, lesson study was adopted to assist the teacher to identify issues through her own process of reflection and discussion. The identified issues can be summarised as follows:

> Teacher positioning
The teacher’s understanding of her practice, and her positioning as a native speaker teacher in the second language context, were reflected in the ways in which she understood the nature of her mother tongue, and in her overall teaching practice. In particular, they were reflected in the challenges she faced in converting her deep knowledge and experience of Chinese as her first language into pedagogical knowledge capable of being presented to and be understood readily by young second language learners in regional South Australia.

> Overall framing
The teacher’s ability to represent the language in appropriate ways to second language learners and, consequently, her ability to organise and represent a meaningful learning experience to young learners, was reflected in the challenges she faced in building a holistic picture of the language for learners and developing a working understanding of its core components through planning a scope and sequence for learning that was relevant to their immediate needs. Planning tended to focus on a composite of vocabulary, linguistic items, sentence structures and key phrases within the context of a particular theme or topic, such as transport or travel. Understanding how to connect the intended content to learners’ prior knowledge and experiences or to their aspirations for using the language for their own meaningful communication, was a challenge in the planning process. The framing focused predominately on what the language learners were learning, with little attention paid to how learners might be engaged with new knowledge or how they might engage in tasks that focus on meaningful learning of or using the language for personal meaning-making. It was similarly evident in the manner in which the teacher resourced her lessons and the representation of the language to her learners. In particular, there was limited or inconsistent scaffolding provided to assist learners to access meanings in texts presented in characters, and in their understanding of Pinyin romanisation and how to use it to speak effectively in Chinese (with attention to pronunciation and tone). Students were left to manage their understanding of resources and their ways of responding as best they could.

> The learning process
The teacher’s conduct of her lessons and her understanding of the teaching-learning process was evident in the reliance on recitation drills and group responses to activities that involved reading aloud or reading after the teacher as the dominant form of student input into their own learning. An area that needed improvement was scaffolding learner engagement with new knowledge, planning for and employing questioning techniques to elicit learner thinking or interpretations of new language, and relating that to their prior learning or experience. Dialogue between teacher and learner that focused on building a collaborative picture of the language and the process of learning was infrequent, resulting in limited learner engagement.
The lesson study process offered an opportunity to draw the teacher’s attention to features of her practice and helped her to identify these areas and reflect on the implications. This fostered her understanding of how her own background and experience were impacting her practice and how change might occur from within. As the teacher reflected at the time:

"I have reflected on the degree to which my teaching is teacher-focused. I recognise the need to ‘get students to ask the questions’ rather than relying on the teacher generating the questions. More open-ended interaction remains a challenge. I have recognised the need to translate ideas from practice to theory and back again. Planning the teaching and learning sequence remains challenging for me despite reading theoretical pieces and gathering materials from various sources."

Consequently, the latter half of the project provided the opportunity for the teacher to question her assumptions and experiment with new approaches to planning, resourcing and teaching, with more attention to the learner’s needs and interests in the Chinese classroom. In terms of planning, the teacher explored means of scoping and sequencing learning with greater recognition of the importance of planning for interaction.

In terms of resourcing learning, the teacher explored ways of representing Chinese language and culture in more engaging ways, designing tasks that focused on learner exploration of new ideas, making connections with their prior learning, and opportunities for personal meaning-making and reflection on their learning experiences. This included representing the language in a more consistent fashion, predominantly in Pinyin romanisation. This gave the learners more opportunity to participate in oral activities and reduced the memory load of character learning and use in everyday classroom learning and language use.

Finally, in terms of teaching practice, the teacher managed the learning experience with a greater focus on learners’ understanding and engagement, testing out strategies for promoting extended discussion with learners, rather than presentation to learners, and encouraging learners to express freely their insights about Chinese, about learning, and about language and culture in general.

In her final reflection on the experience, the teacher said:

"My teaching skills have improved, but it’s still hard to encourage L2 learners. My language and culture (teaching) points must be of interest to them, otherwise they’ll tell me ‘this is not my life’.

What I have learned is to be well-resourced, adaptable, willing to make changes mid-stream. I need to understand their needs and introduce things that are interesting to them, even if it is not necessarily ‘useful language’. Previously I was teacher-centred, with little attention to learners’ needs. Now I understand my students better, I am able to change, and it’s good for my lessons.

There’s much better behaviour management and interest, I understand their needs. What would the students say? They say ‘we learn more now’, I used to teach a lot, but now they learn a lot, they don’t say it’s boring now, they have gained the ability to learn by themselves and we have reflection time as well.

The issue was myself. I set high expectations, I used to think Chinese was too hard for Aussie kids. I couldn’t understand why they are so LAZY! Now I see it was more my issue. So I continue to work closely with my kids and observe how others work with their students ..."

(Ming, November 2011)

Ming’s experience and her reflections highlight the value of a teacher-centred lesson study approach to professional learning and bringing about change in teaching practice. Ming’s experience highlights the changes in her stance or orientation. She displays a clearer view of the relationship between learners’ knowledge and life worlds and the Chinese classroom, between the roles of Chinese and English in the learning of Chinese in a second language context. She understands better the challenges for native speakers in the second language classroom, and how to mediate knowledge of the nature of Chinese as a second language to young learners. Finally, her management of learning, her control over content and process in the stages of planning, resourcing and teaching, have provided greater certainty that outcomes can be achieved and learners’ effort rewarded in appropriate ways.
3.0 DISCUSSION

3.1 Context

This project was designed with a view to recognising the powerful relationship that exists between the language program and the school and community context. That is, an understanding of language teaching and learning as part of an ecological system.

The project was designed using a participatory action research methodology. This enabled multiple perspectives of participants; teachers, students, school leaders, and researchers to be brought to bear in an ongoing collaborative process of investigation and classroom-based research. The participatory nature of the research enabled both insider and outsider perspectives on the issue at hand and enriched the possibilities for how best to bring about change according to the specific nature of the context.

Another design feature was the longitudinal nature of the study. This meant that not only did it enable sustained and in-depth investigation of the research focus, it enabled a relationship of mutual respect and cooperative endeavour to evolve among the key participants. This relationship proved crucial in fostering a supportive environment for risk-taking by the teachers, such as opening up their own classroom and practices to critical review through lesson study, inviting students' views on their experiences, increasing student-directed learning, reframing teacher dialogue and questioning, and encouraging and managing for diverse views in interaction.

3.2 The crucial role of research

Bringing about change in school language programs is dependent on the context and critically dependent on the language teacher(s). The teacher's knowledge, understandings and practices represent a critical dimension of the context within which language teaching and learning takes place. Framing teacher professional learning as research was important in establishing an expectation of mutual investigation based on understanding and shared problem-solving. Working within a participatory classroom-based research orientation involves commitment among the research collective towards shared dialogue, joint problematisation, and joint investigation and problem-solving. It necessarily draws on the distinctive expertise and perspectives of each participating member of the team to the research focus. Such an orientation is becoming increasingly common in the Australian education context. For those whose foundational teacher preparation and experience has not been in this context, shared responsibility and collaborative dialogue and actions can be challenging. In such work, context includes the very identity and linguistic and cultural frameworks of the research participants themselves, making participatory classroom-based research a fundamentally intercultural experience. The intercultural dimension of working with teachers and researchers in this project proved to be critical to the research process and focus in each case.

Within participatory classroom-based research a relationship of collegiality, shared ownership and affirmation of the value of diverse perspectives is critical to success. It was important from the start to recognise that all perspectives were necessary and that the role of the researchers in the process was to facilitate how best to enable diverse voices to be heard. There was a need to shift from, in some cases, a view that the researchers would evaluate teachers' practices and provide 'solutions' to problems. Over time, the relationship became one in which teachers developed ownership by sharing their insights into their decision-making and understanding of the context, knowledge that the research team did not hold in the same way. The shift from a sense of evaluation to cooperation meant that teachers and researchers developed greater trust and a sense of common understanding of issues in context, which enabled innovation within a secure space. The opportunity for teachers to genuinely innovate within a supported environment and with access to advice from external others is not a common occurrence and was greatly appreciated by the teachers.
A crucial intervention point within the projects proved to be the opportunity for students’ voices to be captured and heard by teachers and school leaders. At times when teachers were unsure of the nature of the issue, it was the voices of their students that became a driver for change. All of the teachers valued the opportunity to listen to students’ comments, responses, questions, and views, and to consider how these might be addressed in the change process. The teachers felt it was advantageous to have someone regarded as an ‘outsider’, that is, a researcher, to elicit students’ views so that it was as ‘objective’ as possible and students would give their views freely and honestly.

The project has highlighted the value of understanding change as an experience which is fundamentally context-dependent, intercultural and involving reciprocal processes of understanding, and joint investigation and problem-solving in situ. The process of change within schools requires perspectives beyond the immediate context, and the research perspective and expertise in this project was critical to facilitating approaches to the research focus, alternative views and suggestions for improvement based on knowledge of current understandings, theories and practices in the languages education field.

3.3 How context matters

The three case studies highlight the importance of context in shaping language teaching and learning in school settings. Context shapes practices and in turn is shaped by practices. Factors such as the school culture, the nature of teachers’ work, teaching and learning experiences and expectations, students’ perceptions and decision-making processes, and engaging in a research study itself, have proven critical in shaping the research study and the overall findings. The study itself, in turn, shapes the context for subsequent work in languages education.

In relation to the language program itself, context shaped various aspects of the teachers’ work, including their understanding of the language teacher’s role and status in the school. Teachers had varying degrees of understanding and views about the value of languages within their school, the degree of support they could expect and access, and the power of external forces such as curriculum frameworks, educational trends and school initiatives to impact on their work. In relation to the research itself, the participating teachers varied also in their sense of their own expectations of the research experience, and in their power to bring about change within the school. The teachers were interested in making changes within their own programs and teaching practice. There was little sense that a research study in a learning area such as languages might impact more widely on the school culture and practices such as time allocations or timetabling of subjects.

Within the parameters of the research study, context influenced a number of aspects of the experience of bringing about change in each school. First, decisions in developing and shaping the project aims for each school were influenced by factors such as school leadership views on student engagement and quality teaching. There was a perception that student engagement could be best addressed through the increased use of ICTs. Hence, two of the project schools described initial aims as the increased use of ICTs in language teaching and learning. Furthermore, within one school the curriculum framework that was being adopted across the school curriculum was a focus for a desire to reform the languages curriculum and align it with the curriculum as a whole.

Context includes such dimensions as the status of the language subject offering and the ways in which schools organise the curriculum. This dimension shapes the languages program in important ways. A significant factor in all of the projects was the scheduling of the languages program on the timetable. In the case of the primary programs, this related to the weekly time allocation and its impact on programming and nature of teaching. In one primary program this meant limiting interactive experiences to the more extended lesson, while in the other primary program, the school increased the lesson time from one to two lessons a week to allow greater duration of study, which leads to increased student achievement in primary (Scarino et al., 2011).

A further dimension of context in all of the schools was the relationship between the language program in the research study and the language program within the school as a whole and or with the feeder primary school program. The need to cater for continuity, retention and increased engagement of students in language learning was a high priority for the language teachers and the school leadership team in each of the schools.
A major dimension of context that featured strongly in each case study was the nature of the student cohort for whom the language program was intended. School leaders and teachers hold beliefs that are derived in part from experience and from educational discourses about how the learners are, their learning needs and the way they best learn. For example, in one case, beliefs about young male learners learning best through activity and inquiry-based learning had resulted in an emphasis in the language program on oral communication such as role-play and rehearsed oral presentations. Such beliefs are often deeply held and are part of a broader educational context that also impacts on language programs.

Finally, and arguably most significantly, teachers themselves are a major part of the context and how it influences language teaching and learning. The background, including linguistic and cultural biographies, expectations and experiences that teachers bring to their particular language program context, shape its nature and the nature of change that may be possible. Language teachers bring multiple facets of themselves to bear on the language teaching and learning experience as follows:

"Teachers' work involves integrating theoretical knowledge from a range of dynamic and ever-evolving disciplines (both in education and linguistics), their own practice, knowledge and pedagogic designs. Their decisions and judgments are based on their own educational experiences; their personalities; their philosophy of language and how languages and cultures are learned; their particular context, including social and power structures of school communities, as places that create and sustain meanings; their understanding of students, with collective and individual needs — as persons, as learners, as developing language learners and users; and the social, cultural and political contexts which constitute their professional landscape."

(Scarno, 2001)

Each case study shows how the teachers' own linguistic and cultural identity, in particular, influence their professional stance and practices. Whether the teachers originate from a target language—speaking country or are Australian-born, impacts on their own enculturation and relationship to the target language and culture, including their positioning as an "insider" or "outsider" to the specific language. In addition, their socialisation through the education system as a learner and through teacher training contributes to their expectations and experiential understanding of schooling, the roles of teachers and learners, and the nature of language teaching and learning. The teachers' views on the role of native and non-native speakers in language teaching and learning are also influential in shaping the curriculum goals and how these are realised in practice. Furthermore, how teachers view themselves is critical to how they feel they understand and can relate to their students. Understanding students as a means to improving the quality of teaching and learning became a common theme across the three case studies. This theme highlights the importance of creating a dialogic culture in the languages classroom, one which is based on and continually informed by a deep knowledge of students' own biographies and learning needs. In order to effect change, it is necessary to recognise the fundamentally intercultural nature of the teaching and learning process and of working with teachers and learners in their particular context.

3.4 Methods

The project recognised the necessity to investigate the language program and teaching practices in context using a range of methods, including quantitative and qualitative processes.

Lesson study in classrooms

Lesson study was a major part of the process in all three case studies. It had a central role in the Chinese classrooms, where it was the primary investigative process. The classroom and the individual lesson can be viewed as a microcosm of the teaching-learning experience and provides a lens into the macro-picture or orientation the teacher brings to her practice in the classroom. Lesson study focuses on observation of and reflection on classroom practice, including teaching and researcher observation and feedback, and reflection on videos of lessons and of post-lesson student interviews. It provides an insight into the teachers' stance (Scarno & Lidiccoat 2006) or framing of the language and learning experiences, into how they understand and represent their beliefs in relation to language, culture and learning in the particular language and how this plays out the specific context of their own classroom. It provides an opportunity for teachers to develop a critical/evaluative perspective for themselves, learning how to evaluate practice, not necessarily a view of 'best practice'.

When given the opportunity to observe and reflect on their lesson retrospectively, the teacher gains a fresh perspective on the nature of learner engagement in their classroom, on the levels of participation, of progress, and of sense of purpose and overall sense of connection with the task of learning and using the language that their own students use.
The process also included observation of the practice of other teachers teaching in other contexts at the same year level, and the practices of researchers teaching ‘model lessons’ in the teachers’ own classrooms, recognising that each teacher brings diverse experience and background and will respond to learners’ needs in distinctive ways. Lesson study, including the collaborative discussions between teachers and researchers, after the reflections, aims to draw attention to the bridge-building that is necessary for effective learning: the bridging between the two languages and cultures, between the teacher and the learners, and particularly between the native-speaker teacher and second language learners in these contexts. It focuses on the teaching-learning processes of the individual and opportunities for change from within as a result of a better understanding of self as teacher and of learners, and the teaching and learning process in context.

In summary, lesson study is not restricted to an observation of the lesson itself. It includes joint planning and processes of professional dialogue about understanding the experiences of planning the teaching, learning and resourcing, as well as understanding what motivates teacher’s practices in these areas and how these are received or understood from the learners’ perspective. It involves teachers reflecting on their own and others’ teaching, planning and resourcing, and it involves, most importantly, experiencing change and –incorporating new ideas in their own context, so that change can have a lasting impact on the teachers’ beliefs and practices and on learners’ learning experiences in the longer term. The aim of lesson study in this project was to assist teachers to make a shift in

> orientation, from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning, by understanding what motivates their practice and to see their task of Chinese teaching more from the perspective of the learner
> planning, from a focus on content delivery to a focus on concept-based and experiential learning opportunities
> resourcing, from activities to a deeper connection and engagement with new learning
> teaching, from delivery of subject matter to interaction with learners and providing the opportunity for their own meaning-making in and about the target language and culture.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods

In the case of Indonesian, the research approach also included a quantitative dimension, in order to investigate the issue of retention beyond Year 8 to the upper levels of secondary school.

In the early stages, informal discussions were held with school leadership and teaching staff to share understandings of the nature of the school and program context. A process of capturing the participation of students in the language program (both Indonesian and Japanese) was conducted to act as a baseline of participation and retention across Years 8–12 for the previous five-year period. The participation data were analysed to determine the retention rates from one year to the next, providing the trends over time and indicating which points were the most vulnerable.

Student questionnaires were used to gather data on student profiles as language learners, and their perceptions of their experiences and the nature of the language learning area, together with the reasons behind their decisions about continuing or discontinuing the study of a language. Following the analysis of the questionnaires, a number of themes emerged and a key theme related to perceptions of languages as ‘fun’ or ‘boring’ provided a basis for redeveloping the Indonesian program for Year 8 to adopt a more intercultural orientation with self-directed learning opportunities.

Closer to the subject selection process, focus groups were held with small numbers of Year 8 students, in order to investigate their reasons for continuing or discontinuing their study of the language. This data was analysed revealing common themes about students’ perceptions and decision-making processes that impact on retention. Taken together, the research methods in this case study illuminated various dimensions of the program context that were impacting on the language program and the issue of retention.

Overall, each method contributed valuable insights that enabled improved understanding and action on behalf of the project participants. The value of the research dimension of this work was that the methods used throughout the process ensured that data were gathered in a systematic way that was sensitive to the context of the language program. In addition, it ensured that, through teacher participation, they learned the processes and would be able to utilise them again in an ongoing way in their subsequent work beyond the project.
3.5 Conceptions of language and culture and how languages are learned

The project revealed teachers’ understandings of the concepts of language, culture and learning which are fundamental to languages teaching and learning in school programs. The program analysis process in each of the schools revealed the challenges for language teachers in developing an integrated view of language and culture as fundamentally important for effective language learning (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009).

A view of language primarily as code typically leads to an emphasis on vocabulary acquisition and accurate application of grammatical rules. A view of culture as comprising behaviours, practices and artefacts from the target language-speaking community, leads to an emphasis on the acquisition of facts and information about various aspects of the target language culture that provide understanding of sociocultural appropriateness of language use and or general knowledge about cultural practices such as celebrations (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999, Liddicoat, 2002). As such, in practice, language and culture are somewhat disconnected with language, vocabulary and grammar seen as core and with culture, facts and information seen as somewhat optional or of lesser importance. When considered in the context of language teaching and learning, language and culture are seen as requiring pedagogically different approaches. Language learning is considered to be dependent on rote learning, practice and memorisation, particularly vocabulary acquisition. Language development is associated with processes of knowledge storage and recall. Culture, on the other hand, is considered to be dependent on the use of English for instruction and interaction, and is associated with gathering of facts and information and developing understandings about the target language culture.

The project has highlighted the ongoing challenge of enabling teachers of languages to understand language and culture as social practices of interpretation and meaning-making. From a sociocultural perspective, language is ‘not a thing to be studied but a way of seeing, understanding and communicating about the world’ (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009). As such, language needs to be understood as having a cultural context which, together with language, creates meaning. This integrated perspective means that students are learning to understand and use language according to its cultural context; they understand language as culturally situated. Furthermore, by understanding the contextual nature of language, students are constantly making comparisons with their own language(s) and culture(s), and thereby are engaged in an intercultural and intra-cultural experience.

From this perspective, language learning can be viewed as a participatory process of constructing knowledge through making sense of experiences and of the world. Learning a language within a school program involves being a participant in the social practices established within the classroom (Kramsch, 1994). By understanding a language classroom as a site in which social practices are constructed and played out, teachers can design experiences and students’ participation in them so that students are learning through participating in language and culture.

Through researchers working closely with teachers in particular school contexts, these understandings can be developed in highly specific and relevant ways that enable teachers to innovate and reflect on their practice with ongoing support.

3.6 The shift from pedagogy to learning (from the learner’s point of view)

The initial investigations undertaken as part of the project identified the fact that in many instances teaching appeared to be based on a generalised view of teaching languages that did not give sufficient attention to the characteristics and challenges of learning the particular language, be it Chinese or Indonesian. In a sense teachers seemed to lack a framework for learning the specific language, teachers seemed to be challenged in representing knowledge about the language in ways that would be meaningful to their learner group and in ways that would be generative for future learning and use of the language.

This issue of understanding the language and ways of learning from the learners’ perspective was evident in the representations of the language in planning documents, in resources developed or used in the classroom, and in teacher talk during the lesson.

It is well recognised that teachers need to have good understanding of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and how they transform their own knowledge of the subject area (e.g. Chinese language and culture, Indonesian language and culture) into ‘learnable content’ for students. This process requires teachers to understand learning from the learner’s point of view, and consequently to find ways to bridge between their understandings (whether second language or native-speaker) and represent that knowledge in a form or manner that more directly meets the needs of their learners. This transformation extends beyond ‘content’ to process, recognising that teachers’ own experience as a native-speaker learner, or as an adult second language learner, may not transfer effectively into their classroom. It further extends to resources developed or employed in the classroom that focus primarily on activities, largely at the word or sentence level, without defined communicative purpose, and without the learners’ own communicative interests in mind. There is often an emphasis on
using ICT as a means of increasing learner engagement with language learning. This approach frequently reflects a view of teaching and learning as a set of activities that seldom appear connected or purposeful in terms of building a better understanding of the nature of the language or its communicative potential. ICTs can also be seen as a way of enabling students to be more active in determining their learning and as more constructivist than teacher instruction/talk. While exposure to content may increase, it is the nature of that exposure and the processing of it — through social interaction — that is critical to the transformation of content into knowledge for the individual and the group of students.

Teachers need to be aware of teaching-learning as a process of transformation, recognising the power of classroom interaction and discourse in shaping learning experiences and perceptions of learning the language and culture. Teacher talk is a major factor in constructing and representing the language and culture to students. There is a need to understand learning as a dialogic process — of offering and exchanging ideas and simultaneously developing a discourse and culture of language learning among the students as a class community.

3.7 Specific issues of Chinese second language teaching and learning

Considerations related to the language and the context of learning

The situation for teaching and learning Chinese as a second language in schools is particularly complex. The specific issues essential for improving teaching practice and increasing learner participation and success rates in school programs are in some senses well understood, but often remain the key challenges for teachers in the Chinese language classroom in Australia. These considerations include:

> The nature of spoken Chinese, as a tonal language with a distinctive syllabic and form of romanisation (Pinyin) that challenges English assumptions of sound-symbol correspondence

> The nature of written Chinese, a writing system using characters, a form of writing that does not follow English ‘rules’ of writing and word formation, and which conveys sounds and meanings in most unreliable ways

> The nature of the learner group, characterised by diversity in linguistic and cultural background, and the increasing participation by Chinese ‘home users’ in school language learning programs

> The low intensity and low frequency of learning, where on average students are exposed to between 30 and 60 hours a year in most primary school programs (one or two lessons of approximately 40 minutes duration a week), in an environment characterised by limited appreciation of the value or benefits of second language learning, and a sense of compulsion in the study of Chinese.

In many school programs the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are treated as being of equal importance, or as necessarily integrated in teaching and learning, and being interrelated in terms of determining the nature and pace of progress in learning Chinese. These assumptions are often evident in teacher practice and in the resources used to support the learning and use of Chinese. For example, students are asked to engage in reading aloud dialogues presented in characters as a means of developing their oral skills, and at the same time their character recognition skills. The issues are particularly significant for learning to read and write in Chinese, where assumptions about the language and resources for learning are based on long held assumptions of commitment and memorisation that are less appropriate in the school-based second language program context.

The issue of developing oral skills in Chinese

Learning to read and write is recognised as a slow process requiring the development of a new set of skills and conceptual understandings. Developing oral communication skills, acquiring vocabulary and building sentences may well be more effective if the complexities of learning to read and write are removed from the process of developing oral communication skills, and dealt with separately.

Engaging in purposeful, meaningful oral interaction represents the most immediate and relevant communicative capability learners wish to develop in order to gain a real sense of progress and achievement in learning Chinese. A focus on oral language development draws attention to the important mediational role of Pinyin in learning and communicating in Chinese. The role of Pinyin as a means to access the sounds of the language and acquire a working knowledge of a wide vocabulary and explore representations of the structures and features of the language in phrases and sentences cannot be underestimated. Pinyin thus represents a vital tool in the early stages of second language learning, not only in order to process and produce the sound system of Modern Standard Chinese and develop a working knowledge of its vocabulary, but to explore its syntax and engage in everyday social interaction.
The use of Pinyin has been an important aspect of this project, and both teachers and students have benefited from a curriculum that has removed the learning of characters — an impediment to progress and engagement — from the everyday teaching-learning experience. Characters cannot be ignored, however, so a more conceptual and strategic orientation towards introducing and exploring the character system from an early stage is also an important foundation for future reading and writing skills.

The issue of literacy development in Chinese

It is important to have a set of principles to guide teaching and learning practice and resource development in learning to read and write in Chinese, to promote an inquiry-based, exploratory approach to character learning and to provide learners with an understanding of the structures and features of the character system. A more appropriate basis for a positive and productive engagement with the task of reading and writing in Chinese can be found in the provision of opportunities to explore the character system beyond limited, prescribed lists and the promotion of the development of metalinguistic awareness, an understanding of how to access and process graphemic, semantic and phonetic information. Key concepts that need to be introduced, and which form the basis of the metalinguistic knowledge by which characters are best explored and understood, include understanding:

> how characters differ from alphabets
> the construction of characters; the set of strokes,
> the origin and nature of basic forms; components,
> the structure of compound characters and the relationship of the sides to the sound and meaning of a whole character.
> how characters are used to make words.

How these concepts are represented in resources and explored in classroom contexts has a marked influence on the future success of Chinese language learning in classroom contexts. In the context of this project, character learning was not given priority, and the teachers' focus remained on developing oral language skills in the context of exploring better ways of enhancing learners understanding and engagement with Chinese language.

The issue of learner diversity

The participation rate of students who speak Chinese at home in school-based second language programs has become a significant feature of Chinese programs in Australian schools. This was not the case in the two schools participating in this project. For these two Chinese programs, diversity is represented by the fact that new enrolments at each year level, each year, creates a complex challenge of providing meaningful learning experiences for children with diverse prior knowledge of the language in a learning area that is strongly cumulative. Teachers attempt to offer appropriate programs to meet diverse learner needs. They employ a number of strategies to respond to the particular mix of learners in their classrooms, including forms of differentiated learning such as varying tasks, texts or assessment expectations for different groups of learners. However, the time required in planning for, resourcing and teaching differentiated programs restricts teachers' capability to achieve their teaching goals effectively in this context.

Low frequency, intensity, and setting appropriate goals

While Chinese language learning is understandably popular at a national level, the realities of the classroom are such that the dynamic and developing relationship between Australia and China does not filter down as a motivating force for young learners, despite teachers' best efforts. The motivations for young learners are naturally localised and immediate, with little sense of the longer term educational, social or vocational value of Chinese language learning. In the context where time on task is limited, setting outcomes that prioritise communicative capabilities that are often not achievable, results in a sense of dissatisfaction for teachers, learners and parents alike. Such outcomes often prioritise performance rather than understanding and engagement as the key measures of success, and teaching practices that focus on content memorisation often mitigate against the goals teachers set for themselves.

A principled response to the distinctiveness of Chinese in schools

Chinese learning in school needs to address specifically:

> the distinctive features of the spoken and written Chinese language (in contrast to English)
> the classroom context of teaching and learning (with limited time on task)
> learners and their distinctive learning needs, interests and motivations.
The challenge in addressing these issues does not imply doing less at a slower pace and in more a mechanical fashion, but finding innovative, ways of engaging learners in thinking about and talking about the challenges they face as they develop the skills to communicate their own messages for their own purposes, in Chinese. This is the fundamental challenge at present in the Chinese classroom. Given the limited time on task, and the challenges of learning to learn both to read and write and communicate orally in Chinese, a fundamental principle in curriculum design is that clear differentiation is necessary between the knowledge, skills and practices in learning to engage in oral interaction, and in learning to understand and use the writing system. This has implications for all aspects of Chinese teaching and learning: curriculum design, teaching practice and resources for learning.

Considerations relating to resourcing Chinese learning in schools

A focus on innovative curriculum design and teaching practices appropriate to the second language classroom also brings into focus the nature of resources to support such an orientation. Textbooks are often a critical component of classroom practice in that they provide structured and sequenced language input and learning opportunities. In Chinese teaching and learning, active intervention to enhance teaching practice and learning opportunities is necessary in the form of resources that:

> reflect contemporary theories about second language teaching and learning
> reflect the particular characteristics of Chinese and relate this to learners’ own linguistic background
> provide a content, context and purpose that are related to learners own life-worlds while providing access to the world of the target language community.

How teachers represent Chinese language and culture in resources to promote learning and communication is likely to have significant impact on learners and their learning. As part of this project, current resources were reviewed to examine the extent to which the resources that are used:

> reflect the particular features of learning Chinese as a second language, in particular addressing the development of both oral language capability and reading-writing skills in a manner which is both conceptually and procedurally valid
> explore learners’ developing understanding of the Chinese language and culture and their own language and culture by comparison, and promote learners’ interpretations and engagement with the concepts being addressed
> create opportunities for learners to use the target language for meaningful communication, i.e. to communicate about their own world with other users of the language
> provide opportunities for learners to reflect on learning and therefore promote awareness of the task at hand, the best means to achieve their goals, and, ultimately, building more autonomous approaches to their task.

The assumptions that underpin these resources (in terms of the integrated macro skill representation of the language, the limited relationship to learners’ prior knowledge and experience, and the limited engagement with learners) suggest that the teacher’s task in promoting a meaningful learning experience and significant communication outcomes is challenged from the outset. The task of bridging between learners’ own linguistic and cultural background and the distinctive nature of Chinese is not reflected in current resources. There is a need to shift from using resources as a teaching tool to using resources as a learning tool that promotes learning by providing questions or processes for enquiry which are:

> intellectually engaging and challenging, in moving learners forward in their learning and use of the Chinese language
> relevant and useful, in developing knowledge and skills learners see as relevant to their immediate and future needs
> scaffolded, so that learners have access to assistance required to learn and communicate at a higher level.

Teachers involved in the project perceived the need for resources to be learner-friendly in:

> relating learning Chinese to the learners’ own first language and in building language knowledge in a comparative and conceptual way
> recognising the important role of the English language in mediating learning and developing the understanding of language as a system
> being purposeful, focusing on the communicative interests and needs of learners in their own context.

This examination of specific issues of Chinese second language teaching and learning highlights the distinctive Chinese-specific needs and approaches to effective teaching and learning in school-based contexts. The particular needs of teachers are rendered more complex by the diversity of teachers’ backgrounds and their own rich and complex histories of Chinese language learning and Chinese second language teaching.
4.0 PRINCIPLES AND IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Understanding language teaching and learning begins with how the teacher understands language, culture and learning

This project has foregrounded the significant extent to which language programs, teaching, learning and assessment are dependent on the language teacher’s understanding of the concepts of language, culture and learning. These concepts and the relationship between them are the basis upon which all aspects of teaching practice are developed and enacted. There is an increasing critique of the limitations of communicative language teaching in practice and what has been characterised as ‘pseudo-communication’, in which students are encouraged to use oral language but with meanings that are provided to them by the teacher rather than generated according to their own meanings (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009, Eisenchlas, 2010, Legutke and Thomas, 1991).

An intercultural perspective on language teaching and learning provides an alternative understanding of language teaching and learning. It views language and culture as social practices through which people of a given community make sense of and express the world around them (Byram, 1991, Kramsch, 1993, Liddicoat et al., 2003). An intercultural perspective presupposes student participation as a condition for learning. Language teaching and learning are viewed as sociocultural acts in which participants are constructing meaning through social exchange and communication. Language learning, therefore, can be considered to involve both acquisition and participation processes (Sfler, 1996, Swain, 1985, Lantolf, 2000). For this reason, it is necessary to provide students with opportunities to create their own meanings in the target language and their own language learning experiences. Participation, in this sense, is more than activity; it is the opportunity for students to generate meaning that has significance for themselves, and to contribute to the creation of a community of learners and language users. It involves being a member of the target language-speaking community. Students recognise themselves as emerging bilinguals and develop self-awareness of their own membership of a language-learning community in the Australian context and of the target language-speaking community, in a global context.

An intercultural perspective on language teaching and learning also has implications for the role of the language teacher. The language teacher is understood as a mediator of language and culture, someone who bridges the target language and culture and facilitates students’ participation in it and how it is represented to students (Buttjes and Byram, 1991, Kramsch, 2007, Kohler, 2010, Scarino, 2001, Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009). Language teaching and learning therefore becomes a process of active construction of knowledge on behalf of both teachers and students, who are engaged in a dialogic relationship towards understanding language, culture and learning and their relationship, and understanding themselves (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009).

4.2 An investigative stance towards teacher professional learning

This project has revealed the value of adopting a research orientation towards understanding ‘crucial sites’ for language teaching and learning. Teacher professional learning is fundamental to the process of change in school language programs and an investigative stance enables teachers to engage in their own learning and the processes of active construction, making connections, interacting with others, reflecting and taking responsibility for actions — the very principles proposed for students (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009).

An investigative stance relies on evidence and this project highlights the value of operating from an evidence base in relation to language programs and teacher professional learning. The experience shows how different processes of investigation can build a rich picture of the context and related issues. Evidence that is based on systematic processes is invaluable in not only building understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny but also in providing a basis for long-term investigation and change.

Change in context requires shared ownership of the language program and commitment to bringing about change and improvement. Understanding the context involves understanding who the stakeholders are and how they are impacted by and impact on the issue at hand. There are multiple stakeholders with varying degrees of involvement and in various relationships with each other. Ultimately, change in a school language program involves language teachers, and being self-aware and critical is necessary for effecting change in practice. The capability for critically examining one’s practices and context and developing self-awareness are essential for teacher professional agency — the capability to act and to act differently (Scarino et al., 2012). This project has provided an opportunity for teachers to engage in, and develop their own capability for practising, theorising, and researching (investigating), which is a basis for continuing to bring about change in their own contexts (van Lier, 1996).
5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is appropriate to reflect on some of the dimensions of the project that we consider to have been beneficial to all. The experience of participating in this project has focused on learning and understanding on the part of all participants. It is entirely appropriate that any work undertaken to improve languages education focus necessarily on learning: the learning on the part of students as the ultimate goal, the process of interest and measure of success and the learning of all others involved — teachers, the school community, educational agencies and researchers. The act of learning, for students as well as teachers and all interested parties, requires a coming to understand that can only be achieved through dialogue; that is, the exchange of meanings between people. It involves exploring assumptions; exploring prior conceptions that come from diverse trajectories of experience; seeking to understand what participants mean, and doing so with respect and empathy, recognising that meanings are not ready-made but are accomplished in the act of participating in dialogue; offering explanations; interpreting; connecting and reflecting in an ongoing way.

Learning, like communication, which is the focus of the languages learning area, is centred on the interpretation, exchange and creation of meaning. It is a process in which there is always an element of uncertainty that can represent a challenge. Gallagher (1992) explains the interpretation of meanings in context in the experience of learning in the following way:

"Interpretation is the attempt to get to the meaning of something. In some sense, learning also involves meaning. Whatever is learned is meaningful. Even if one sets out to memorize nonsense syllables, meaningless series of letters, the learning takes place within some context that bestows meaning on their meaninglessness" (p.20)

Learning involves interpreting the subject matter as well as oneself and others' meanings. It is this interpretive work itself that generates learning. The focus on meaning reminds us that in the languages learning area, the task in learning is not just a matter of understanding concepts and ideas in an abstract way. Rather, it involves learning to mean. Because meaning can only be interpreted, exchanged and created by people, the learning is always embodied — it is peopled.

The experience of participating in this project has involved learning as understood in this way. It has involved people with different roles and experiences meeting together in what the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a ‘fusion of horizons’ or a bridging of different linguistic, social, cultural, experiential and intellectual worlds. It is in this sense, and appropriately in the field of languages education, that the process is an intercultural and interpersonal one. It is also an intrapersonal one, because for all participants, it also involves a process of reflection. In the many dialogues that have taken place in this project, the process has been reciprocal, one of mutual learning and coming to understand between the teachers and learners, between the teachers and school leaders, and between the teachers and the researchers. This reciprocal process allows new questions to emerge from the context which, in turn, lead to further reflective activity, and so on, so that questioning, inquiry and problematising becomes a natural part of the culture of learning for all in their diverse roles.

The project has taken place in context, recognising that context shapes and is shaped by the participants and their actions and interactions. If change is to be firmly established, context must be the starting point. The change itself needs to be meaningful in relation to the local circumstances and the life-worlds of the participants.

It is acknowledged that the process of change is always challenging and at times confronting. The teachers in this project were constantly challenged to examine their own assumptions and often tacit understandings, to articulate views and perspectives while still in formation, to open their own expectations, experiences and practices to the view of others. At times, they were challenged to unlearn long-held perspectives and practices and to re-examine their thinking and actions from diverse perspectives. Their willingness to accept this challenge is laudable.
It is also worth noting that the project included a research dimension. The research orientation ensures that the processes of investigation, experimentation and reflection are systematic. When processes are systematic, the data yielded is dependable and can be used to inform further development and improvement. The processes designed can, in fact, be used continuously so that investigation becomes a normal part of the way participants work. Gathering data systematically, and analysing them mindfully yields the kind of evidence that becomes available to inform further planning and development.

The work in this project has involved two specific languages: Chinese and Indonesian. The work in these languages was different but included some elements in common. This project makes clear that the context of particular languages in the Australian school setting is different and that issues that pertain to each specific language and its teaching in that setting are also different. The dialogue about development and improvement is all the more meaningful when it takes into account issues that are particular to specific languages.

The process of change has certainly begun in the three participating schools, in the sense of change that is founded on processes of exploring in a fundamental way, and participants’ conceptions of language, culture and learning in languages education in their particular language and particular context. The teachers all attested to new learning and changes that they are implementing, based on the important principle that might be expressed as: listen and listen again to the learners. They also confirm that this process cannot stop with the end of the project. The challenge now is to continue to work along the learning, research and development pathway that they have come to understand. Specifically, the work needs to continue towards developing learning trajectories — ‘paths by which learning might proceed’ (Simon, 1995) — for both their learners and the teachers. To do so the teachers will need to continue to develop not only their subject matter knowledge but also that amalgam of knowledge called pedagogical content knowledge that combines knowledge of content and curriculum, knowledge of content and teaching, and knowledge of content and students (Ball et. al., 2008).
6.0 REFERENCES


