

ALC, Assessment of Languages Competence

A Unique Set of Tests in Languages

Since 1990 we have seen significant changes in the teaching and learning of languages in Australian schools. It was roughly 25 years ago that we saw the launch of Australia's Language: The *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* and the publication of the *Australian Language Levels Guidelines*. Both of these titles powerfully influenced both the perception of Languages education in the community and the way languages were taught in schools.

Recent years have seen a move forward with the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum: Languages*. According to Angela Scarino (2014) in *From concepts to design in developing languages in the Australian Curriculum*, we have moved from an activity-based/communicative methodology to an 'interlingual and intercultural' approach. This approach sees students as more active and enabled participants in their language learning.

Over this period of change, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has promoted, celebrated and encouraged the learning of languages in primary and secondary schools through Assessment of Languages Competence (ALC) tests, originally known as the Australian Language Certificates.

Originally introduced by the Australian Bicentennial Multicultural Foundation, the ALC tests for Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Modern Greek were developed by ACER in consultation with the Language Testing Research Centre at the University of Melbourne.

Early listening tests comprised multiple questions for a single text divided into shorter segments. Topics in 1990 included a joke about homework in the Chinese test, an item about fox hunting in Greece and questions about winter fashion for German reading.

The ALC was well-received by teachers, with many commenting that they were delighted with the format and pleased to have a national certificate. They also wanted to see the tests offered every year and appreciated an opportunity which created interest and excitement among students and helped strengthen and promote language learning in schools.

One teacher has been with the ALC from the start. Maria Melchiorre, Head of Languages at St Mark's Anglican Community School in Perth's northern suburbs, enrolled students in the ALC program in its very first year and has continued to enrol students of French, Japanese, Indonesian and German every year since.

'It is important to recognise success in all areas, especially academic success, in Australian society where sporting success is most celebrated and respected,' Melchiorre observes. 'The ALC program enables us to recognise success in the study of languages.'

'Students enjoy the challenge of a national competition and the fact that their results are compared to students from all over Australia... it boosts their confidence when they do well. They look forward to the next level and improving their results each year.'

Melchiorre notes that analysis of the ALC results 'helps us to identify areas of the curriculum

we've addressed well, and areas we might wish to address more thoroughly. The ALC program enables us to analyse data for comparison with like schools'.

Over the 25 years, the ALC has expanded into schools throughout New Zealand and into the SE Asia Pacific region as well as all Australian states and territories. It has grown to include Indonesian and Spanish but has lost Modern Greek due to declining numbers.

Written by Bernadette Brouwers, former Director of ALC, ACER

References: Scarino, A. (2014). From concepts to design in developing languages in the Australian Curriculum. *Babel*, 48(2-3), 6.