

By accident or design – the origins of the Victorian School of Languages

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Abstract

In 1935, the then Minister of Public Instruction established the delivery of two “foreign” languages under the title of a “special experiment” and taught at MacRobertson High School in Melbourne. This was the first step into what is known today as the Victorian School of Languages (VSL). It was at the time a small, seemingly unobtrusive development of the teaching of two new languages (Japanese and Italian) in Victoria which over time would be seen as a giant step in the area of the expansion of delivery of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) for the State of Victoria. The emergence of this “special experiment” was a pioneering development in a period and a scenario in which languages other than English was neither welcomed nor expected. The country had only just emerged from the deepest depression of its history and its massive post war migration program was still to come. Despite the jingoist tendencies and monolingual pressures that were ever present in the inter-war period in Australia, none of these were strong enough to curb the language delivery of Japanese and Italian. This paper seeks to examine and explore the uncertain origins of the Victorian School of Languages and the oft repeated assertion that the VSL was an accidental development and not one that was either planned or projected.

Introduction

In 1987, the then Minister for Education, Ian Cathie, as part of the attempt clearly assign the proper role of the Saturday School of Modern Languages (SSML) in the Department’s LOTE policy entitled *The Place of Languages Other Than English in Victorian Schools*, accepted the recommendations of the working party which included the status of the school, establishing a position of Principal, the establishment of a School Council and most importantly a change of name from the Saturday School of Modern Languages to the Victorian School of Languages (VSL) (Panousieris 1993, p. 22). This new accorded status of the VSL was in marked contrast to its fragile beginnings.

The Victorian School of Languages was founded in 1935 as a “special experiment” of Saturday morning language classes offered at the MacRobertson Girls High School located in the Melbourne suburb of South Melbourne. Its Principal at the time was Mary Hutton, and the School had been one of the oldest schools in Melbourne stretching back to 1854 (Blainey 1984). As well as serving as a primary

school it was, according to one report, the most established education institution where it had also served as a primary teacher's training college and for a short period of time as the Education Department (Merlino 1988, p. 9). The new school premises in South Melbourne had only been opened the year before, in 1934, as a result of a donation by the wealthy benefactor Sir MacPherson Robertson to the State Government of Victoria of a new building converted into a school (Merlino 1988, p. 9). What would be offered at MacRobertson Girls High School was initially conceived as a small, partial isolated case of meeting an educational need. To all intents and purposes it was exactly that. The LOTE languages normally offered within Victorian education system, until the arrival of Japanese and Italian at MacRobertson Girls High in 1935, consisted mainly of French and German with Latin and Ancient Greek in a smaller number of non-government schools. In audacious fashion and ironically, the school's initial first two languages were Japanese and Italian. That these were the first languages offered by this "special experiment" speaks volumes on the integrity and political firmness by brave individuals to not succumb to jingoistic anti-Axis campaigns against powers that would in a few years time become arch enemies of Australia: Japan and Italy. This new language offering was established in the immediate post-depression period, before the mass migration program of the late 1940s and as will be demonstrated, an anomaly and a fortuitous combination of events both in terms of its benefactor origins and its location of two new languages which would be offered.

As will be made clearer in this paper, developments such as that of the "special experiment" occurred more as initiatives of individuals and individual Australian institutions than as a policy or strategy. Moreover they occurred in "hostile" conditions neither aided by an expansionist and progressive view of languages, a migration program or a plurality of ethnic communities providing leverage on government and its policy direction. Policy on languages would set in much later and always in response to historic changes in society including in education. The aim of this paper is to explore the factors and the conditions which produced the "special experiment" which subsequently resulted in what became known in 1987 as the Victorian School of Languages. Moreover this paper seeks to ascertain what policies and policy directives were in place emanating from the Victorian education authorities on (LOTE). It is also the aim of this paper to investigate the drivers which allowed for the creation of the genesis of the Victorian School of Languages and whether the assertion by one scholar (Forster 1992) that this "special experiment" was designed to head off LOTE through mainstream schools. It is also the intention of this paper to critically examine the oft explanation that the VSL was a product more of "accident than design" and as such why this "special experiment" would exist at all.

Background

Australia's standing in terms of its openness towards LOTE languages in the late part of the 19th century into the 20th century offers a scenario surprisingly positive for embracing global languages and cultures. Despite not having mass migration programs at the time, Australia demonstrated a welcoming approach towards a "...plurality of languages and cultures" (Smolicz and Secombe 2003). Australia in the second half of the 19th century was according to the literature "a period of considerable cultural and linguistic diversity, with a huge influx of population during the gold rushes of the 1850s from Europe, Asia and the Americas" (Ozolins 1993, p. 3). Clyne (1991) has noted the extraordinary scenario of the acceptability and popularity of LOTEs in Australia during this period of cohesion of Australia in the late 1800s. He notes that German and other European communities established themselves in rural areas and were well regarded by their hosts while in the cities many of the colonial elite sent their children to French and German bilingual schools. But the reason why these languages were part of the offerings were probably more to do with the reasons why the UK introduced these languages into the curriculum, than any "Australian" reason.

This however changed abruptly as Australian federation was achieved in 1901 and more importantly the experience of World War One in the early part of the 20th century with British Empire pro-jingoism coming to the fore. As Ozolins summarized:

... Curiously, through the first four decades of the 20th century, Australia became less diverse and an increasingly pro-British society (Ozolins 1993, p. 3).

The Commonwealth of Australia came into being in 1901 against a background of aggressive nationalism throughout the world. With the worsening conflict between Britain and Germany, the Anglo-Australian establishment strengthened identification with the British Empire which was accompanied by xenophobia, and as a consequence, intolerance to languages other than English (Clyne 1991). During World War One an "English only" language policy was developed and with the end of the war and the returning soldiers even stronger monolingualism dominated Australian society. German language usage was curtailed, many German named suburbs and street names were renamed and it became common practice that the use of German and by extension any language was considered disloyal. Bilingual German Lutheran schools which had been functioning uninterruptedly in the later part of the 1800s became the victims of xenophobic legislation passed in the Victorian Parliament in 1916 preventing the registration of schools in which English was not the medium of instruction (Forster

1992, p. 18). In categorical fashion one could surmise that by 1919 Australia’s identity was identified with monolingual English (Clyne 1991).

The Victorian population before 1935 was a slowly growing one dominated by British origin settlers. As can be evidenced from Table 1, the non-British population was limited to a handful of other nations with small numbers. The significant and highlighting change is the rapid growth of Italians that settled in Victoria between 1901 and 1933.

Table 1 – Major birthplaces of the Victorian population 1901 and 1933

Birthplace	1901	1933
Australia	941,097	1,610,207
England	113,432	112,534
Wales	3,676	2,622
Scotland	35,751	29,949
Ireland	61,512	17,793
New Zealand	9,020	12,408
Germany	7,594	2,848
China	6,230	1,875
Italy	1,525	5,841
Other	21,504	24,184

Source: Broome, 1984, p. 149

Immigration to Victoria in the 1920s made a significant contribution to the population growth with over one quarter of the growth coming from overseas settlers. Over 216,000 people arrived from overseas between 1920 and 1930 and Britain continued to provide a bulk of these newly arrived. Poor economic conditions in Britain accounted mostly for this trend. More than half the newcomers from continental Europe came from Italy from 1,525 in 1901 reaching a population of 8,000 in 1940 (Broome 1984, p. 156). The Victorian demographic profile was slowly altering and starting to see the beginnings of larger numbers from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The Saturday School of Languages “special experiment”

The establishment of the “special experiment” in the 1930s was an event which was both remarkable and visionary though it was not planned policy or in line with government strategy. It was also a development which occurred in poor external conditions. The “special experiment” as it was labelled before becoming the Saturday School of Modern Languages, to distinguish from the classical languages like Latin and Ancient Greek, was succinctly documented in the annual report of the Minister of Public

Instruction for the year 1935-1936, John Seitz, the Chief Inspector of Secondary Schools which reported:

A special experiment in providing morning classes at MacRobertson Girls School for pupils who desire to learn modern languages was commenced in 1935. At the beginning of the year, two classes of pupils took up the study of Japanese. In the second term, in response for Italian, three classes of pupils and two classes of teachers were started successfully... (Merlino 1988, p. 12).

In 1934 Victoria celebrated its centenary. Sir MacPherson Robertson made a centenary gift of 100,000 pounds, 40,000 pounds of which was to be spent to provide a girls' high school. The present building was officially opened as The MacRobertson Girls High School on 7 November 1934.

In the early 1930s the perception of the two languages Japanese and Italian would be different from that of a decade later. According to Merlino (1988) "Japan and things Japanese were seen in a favorable light" (1988, p. 10). There were personal champions of the language such as Instructor Inagaki from the University of Melbourne. It was announced that the provision of Saturday morning classes "for pupils who desire to learn modern languages" had begun at the MacRobertson Girls School. These classes which were described as "a special experiment" included:

"... two classes of pupils took up the study of Japanese. In the second term, in response to a demand for Italian, three classes of pupils and two classes of teachers were started successfully, with the help of the Dante Alighieri Society, which has provided instructors for the pupils classes and is giving assistance in the provision of suitable textbooks for pupils" (Forster p. 17).

In May 1935 Vaccari, the then President of the Dante Alighieri Society contacted the Victorian Department of Public Instruction to request consideration for Italian to be officially included among the modern "foreign" languages offered and taught in Victoria (Merlino 1988, p. 10). The support for starting up Italian classes is corroborated by the activities of the Dante Alighieri in Melbourne documented by the study conducted by Mayne (1997) in which he indicates that:

Vaccari [President of the Dante Alighieri in Melbourne]...during the 1930s threw his weight behind the Society's efforts to introduce Italian language study in Victorian schools, donating a prize to the Society for the promotion of Italian language study (Mayne 1997, p. 64).

Relations between Australia and the two countries of these languages (Japan and Italy) were already strained when both Japan and Italy joined the Axis Alliance in 1936 and so it was serendipitous that these languages would be the first given the geopolitical events of the time. These were the early fortuitous days of what would become the VSL but the development and growth of this school would

need to wait some years before it was able to really expand. Terrible developments were occurring in Europe in 1939 resulting in the decline of student enrollments in both languages. Fortunately the languages were allowed to continue to operate even though Italian and Japanese entry into the world war on the Axis side did little to help.

The Chief Inspector of Secondary Schools, John Seitz, came under pressure to abandon the language delivery of the Axis powers (Japanese and Italian). Just as there had been considerable pressure put on the teaching of German during and after World War One, as similar pressure was exerted on the teaching of Japanese during World War Two. A recommendation was made by the Inspector in charge of languages that the teaching of Japanese be discontinued. Seitz disregarded this view and the teaching of Japanese continued throughout the war period. With the requisitioning of MacRobertson Girls High School by General MacArthur in 1942 for use by the U.S. Army Headquarters and later by the Australian Airforce to plan what was known as the “Brisbane Line” operations, the language classes had to be moved out of MacRobertson Girls High School building. According to one vivid account:

In March 1942, at Spencer Street station, General Douglas MacArthur stepped from the Adelaide express, his long journey of retreat from the Philippines through Darwin and Alice Springs now over, and rode two blocks to Menzies Hotel where he lived while presiding as Supreme Commander of the war zone in the South East Pacific (Blainey 1984, p. 184-185).

Despite these wartime activities involving MacRobertson Girls High School, the language classes were shifted to University High School without a break in instruction (Forster 1992, p. 19). All students at MacRobertson’s were forced to leave the premises: some students were located at Brighton Road State School, others at Camberwell East Girls’ School and some at University High School. The language classes remained at University High ever since 1942.

The war years and languages in Australia

The war did have an effect on enrolment as table 2 demonstrates. Japanese enrolments which began quite healthily in 1936 had dropped dramatically by the close of the war. The original teacher, Inagaki, who was also the instructor at Melbourne University, was interned in 1942 leaving his wife and daughter in charge of instruction. Contrary to efforts to restrict German teaching in World War One, enrolments in this language grew over the war years. Italian enrolments also remained quite healthy. However none of this development was commented on in *Reports of the Minister of Education*. By 1937 the Saturday

classes were an obvious success, and it was reported that students of these classes were now taking examinations at Leaving Pass stage at:

“...Intermediate and Leaving Pass examinations with marked success” (Forster 1992, p. 18).

It was not until the Report of 1945/46 that the Saturday morning classes were again mentioned, when it was stated that the classes “continue successfully” (Forster 1992, p. 30) yet it had been deemed unworthy of mention previously in the Reports. When they re-appeared in 1945/46, yet another language, Dutch, had been added during the war, with Russian being added to the list of available languages in 1947.

Table 2 - Language enrolments 1936-1955 (Leaving enrolments only)

	1936	1940	1944	1950	1955
English	2108	2833	3392	2982	4021
French	1555	1846	1918	1045	1358
Latin	471	622	534	379	450
German	63	204	221	81	97
[Ancient] Greek	19	14	17	7	13
Italian	12	47	49	23	40
Japanese	14	0	6	4	1
Dutch	0	0	0	10	23

Source: B. Forster, 1992, p. 20, Taken from Handbooks of Public Examinations.

Debate around the purpose of the Saturday Morning School of Modern Languages

Forster, in her doctoral study on languages curriculum (LOTE) in Victoria between 1950-1987 made the startling observation that the establishment of the “special experiment” which later became the Saturday School of Modern Languages was in actual fact established to head off the momentum for languages in mainstream schools. She makes this declaration in her study:

Apart from ethnic schools, the other major forum for learning community languages was the Saturday School of Modern Languages. The changing role of this “school” and its success as a language provider has been traced showing that the Victorian Education Department/Ministry was prepared to use it as an official ethnic school and as an excuse not to develop this curriculum area in day schools (Forster 1992, p. xv).

Whilst there are some grounds for acknowledging that it may have appeared in this manner, Forster’s view seems somewhat retrospective. At the time the Department of Education had little or no intention to introduce LOTE languages at all and remain wedded to the traditional offering of languages such as

German and French. The period was pronounced by wariness towards foreigners and all of its manifestations – such as education. This argument only confirms the view that the precursors of the VSL were in fact a fortuitous product of history providing a pilot arrangement which would then be transferred across all mainstream primary and secondary schools.

Post war migration and the changing pattern of Australian society and foreign languages within it

By August 1945 the Second World War had ended and though MacRobertson High School was demobilized, the Saturday language classes remained at University High School and never returned there again. Over the next two years, extra languages were added to the list of offerings including Russian and Chinese. Between 1948 and 1958 with growing numbers of interested students in languages, the school continued with its Saturday classes offering Japanese, Italian, Dutch, Russian and Chinese, with Italian becoming the largest language group during that time.

French and German, as well as the classical languages of Latin and (Ancient) Greek, were studied by secondary students because they were accredited subjects for Matriculation and counted towards university entrance. When the Japanese and Italian classes started there was no expectation held by students that either of these would contribute to their formal studies or count towards one of the three formal secondary examinations. Instead students attended both the Japanese and Italian classes because they were fun or interesting – Japanese was an exotic language and Italian gave better insight into the significant culture of another European country. However, once both of these languages became accepted as subjects for the Intermediate, Leaving and Matriculation examinations then this provided additional incentives for the students to continue to study them. The same came to be true for the subsequent introduction of Dutch, Russian, Chinese and other languages.

As Ozilin observed, “Australia at the end of World War II seemed a most unlikely place for innovations in language policy” (1993, p. 2). Mass migration of non-English speaking children marked a challenge for Education in Victoria. Previously the Schools Board had dealt individually with requests for varying kinds of special consideration from non-English speaking candidates for public examinations. In 1929, two requests were received in regard to special consideration from non-English speaking candidates in the English examination. On both occasions this was refused. This position had modified by 1939 when a similar request was made, but on this occasion it was for blanket special consideration, not merely for the English examination. The Schools Board resolved:

That examiners in Intermediate and Leaving Certificate subjects other than English be instructed to make allowance for candidates whose papers give external evidence that English is not their native language by overlooking deficiencies in expression in those sentences or passages where the meaning intended by the candidate is clear. It was further resolved that an announcement to this effect be made in the metropolitan press (Forster 1992, p. 23).

Despite the reaction during the war, the degree to which languages had become established in the curriculum by 1950 was mostly due to the requirement from the University to have French or German for university entrance. This can be seen from the table below which shows the total number of candidates enrolled for the Intermediate and Leaving Examination in the various languages from 1944 to 1955. However, if these figures are compared with those for the Matriculation Examination, Table 3, apart from Hebrew over this 10 year span, all other languages increased in their enrollment.

Table 3 – Victorian matriculation examinations in the principal Languages

Language	1944	1950	1955
Dutch	7	9	49
French	401	686	806
German	103	116	150
[Ancient] Greek	9	11	15
Italian	10	15	15
Latin	137	236	277

Source: Forster 1992, p. 21

By 1950, although there had been a gradual diversification of the language curriculum area, instruction in this area was aimed at English-speaking students. Although some of the languages of the immigrant groups were available for study, the enrolment remained small indicating that in fact these languages were not being used. The languages offered continued to grow and in 1961 Indonesian was offered for the first time. At the same time as demand for other Asian languages grew, concern emerged from the Department of Education about the “right” kind of languages which should be taught in Australian schools. A report from the Minister of Education in 1961 indicated:

“The study of European languages in our schools maintains its place in the curriculum because our culture is of European origin and because the pupil strengthens his command of English through his study of related languages” (Merlino 1988, p.13).

1966: The emergence of the Saturday School of Modern Languages (SSML)

Throughout the 1960s Australian society was adjusting to the arrival of thousands of immigrants from lands where English was not the mother tongue. Indirectly this would have a bearing on the approach by the Victorian government towards LOTE languages and their acceptance. Calwell's term of "new Australians" was unceremoniously dropped in 1961 because of the negative connotations and in 1965 when Jupp undertook his milestone study of immigrants he commented "For all the apparent influence of Australia's 2,000,000 migrants they might just as well not exist" (Cited from Broome 1984, p. 211).

For the Saturday language classes it was time to raise its profile and so in 1966 the then Principal, Bernie Rymer suggested (Merlino 1988, p. 14) that the Saturday language classes which were running at University High School should be renamed to the Saturday School of Modern Languages (SSML). The languages classes were spreading across the city of Melbourne and by 1967 had extended to five different campuses all teaching on the Saturday. The real leap in importance occurred in the 1970s with enrolments increasing in languages and the Saturday School of Modern Languages became the main vehicle for language learning especially for migrants in Victoria.

Coinciding with the victory of the Labor government in 1972, the official discourse of assimilation slowly changed. Assimilation gave way to integration as the guiding principle for migrant settlement with an emphasis on multiculturalism. There were a number of factors motivating the change to multiculturalism: at this period in the mid 1970s there was a quest for a new national identity which differentiated Australia from Britain, following the latter's membership of the European Community and retreat from the South-East Asian region, and Australia was also redefining itself in relation to its region. Internally, there was also a need for this search for identity to reflect the change in Australia's demography. This period also saw the rise of a new section of the Australian elite (in the judiciary, academia, and the medical profession) which was not of British ancestry (Ozolins & 2001). More broadly, there was a new political situation with openly cosmopolitan elements starting to replace "old guards" in both the major parties; importantly, shifts in thinking on immigration and multiculturalism were generally bipartisan and not politically divisive. And more broadly still, the international climate favoured ethnic rights movements among a number of other social reform movements (Clyne 1991).

The management of the "Saturday School" became full time and enrolments between 1975 and 1981 increased from 2,200 to 6,200 students. The number of large centres increased from four to twelve and the number of instructors from 110 to 260. Most importantly the number of languages taught in the "Saturday School" went from 17 to 26 (Merlino 1988). When the Board of Studies (now the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority) gave accreditation to new languages at the Year 12 Certificate

level this gave added status to the languages and made them more attractive for student enrolments as the language examination results contributed to the students score for tertiary entrance. In this period many languages were still unavailable within the normal curriculum of normal schools. By the end of the 1970s this started to change and some languages began to find their place within the standard curriculum of some of the schools often dependent on its demographic location within the main suburbs of Melbourne and Geelong. Making the task of supporting the development of the “Saturday School” more difficult was its unusual status. It was not a “normal” school within the Departmental structure. In the early 1980s the Saturday School of Modern languages made greater steps in “normalising” the nature of the school. Full time staff and management were eventually added to the school’s establishment, the full time principal began to receive administrative support and in 1984 a “School Advisory Committee” was established, as a precursor to full School Council status. Recognition of the unique model of the Saturday School was acknowledged by the South Australian government in 1984 when it proposed that a similar model to SSML be established in Adelaide (Merlino 1988). Subsequently New South Wales and the Northern Territory established similar schools though using slightly different models.

Table 4 - Headmasters/Instructors/Principals of the predecessors of the VSL

Period	Name	Position	Location
1935-1941	Mary Hutton	Principal	MacRobertson Girls high School
1941-1964	Virgil Cain	Instructor in Charge	University High School
1965-1974	Bernie Rymer	First administrator of the SSML	Princess Hill High School
1975-1981	Stefan Kasarik	Headmaster of the SSML	Princes Hill High School
1982-1991	Joe Abiuso	Principal of the SSML/VSL	Initially Princess Hill High School

Source: Authors

By 1985 important milestones were being reached including the fiftieth anniversary of the school. More strategically however was the proposition that the SSML become a mainstream school of the Department of Education with the necessary language support and structure. New developments on the LOTE front emerged including the formulation of the National Languages Policy (Lo Bianco report) which encapsulated Australia’s position in terms of languages other than English was itself a major turning point for developing and acknowledging a diverse Australia. It was as Smolicz and Secombe acknowledged:

Australia's belated discovery of the ethnic, linguistic and cultural complexities within its own shores – some of them already of second, third or even fourth generation vintage. In practical terms, this marked the eventual acceptance of a curriculum focus upon Australia's own plurality of languages and cultures (Smoliscz & Secombe 2002, p. 10-11).

In accord with the new enlightenment on understanding the LOTE sector, in 1987 at the Annual General Meeting of the staff involved in the SSML, addressed by the Minister of Education at the time Ian Cathie, accepted the recommendations of a review undertaken by the Department under the banner of the LOTE Implementation Groups Recommendation that the school be properly recognised was a major milestone. In addition the Minister indicated that the new school would be called "Victorian School of Languages" (Panousieris 1993), its name to this day.

Conclusion

1987 was an important landmark in Languages Other Than English developments for Australia with the release of the first languages policy approach known as the Lo Bianco report. It was also the year in which the Victorian School of Languages (VSL) was founded under its new name after precursors known as the "special experiment" and the Saturday School of Modern Languages paved the way for greater expansion of LOTE languages delivery in Victoria. What is significantly different in these two events is the context. The National Languages Policy was amongst other things, a product of a new demographic panorama which reflected a new Australia while the emergence of the predecessor of the VSL, the "special experiment", occurred in a different kind of Australia which had little or no major emigrant community and the Victorian education authorities responded to entirely different circumstances. The introduction as this "special experiment" of new languages such as Japanese and Italian, especially in the inter-war period, provided austere beginnings for what is today the VSL.

The introduction of languages other than English into secondary curriculum in Victorian government schools shows the complexities involved in this one curriculum area. Originally, the languages of French, German, Latin and Ancient Greek were seen as academic subjects for the selected few. Moreover until the early 1990s languages would have been dominated by male students and only after the 1990s did female enrollments start to dominate. The diversification of this area away from classical languages was for reasons of utility, and happened outside day-school hours. During both wars there were implications that languages other than English did not match Australia's national fervor, and

growing national identity. There were according to Forster (1992) political and curriculum restraints which already existed in this area of the curriculum by 1950.

The model of the Victorian School of Languages was unique in its origins and accidental in its role. It was initially the product of individual determination to provide foreign languages rather than a systematic response by then Department of Public Instruction to provide foreign languages. In a period when no LOTE policy existed it is a remarkable testimony to a future necessity of having a diverse array of languages fundamental to the building a modern society. Nonetheless after the difficult initial period of the beginnings just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and growing from the modest “special experiment” with two “controversial languages” Japanese and Italian, to the Saturday School of Modern Languages, the precursor of the VSL went from an institution which could have easily disappeared to one that became an essential service by 1987 when the SSML was renamed Victorian School of Languages assuming most of the characteristics of a mainstream public school. While today the VSL is an established institution recognised for its important LOTE delivery in Victoria, its fragile and unexplored beginnings give testimony to the much accidental and unplanned origins of this organisation which is today taken for granted.

March 2012.

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