

AUSTRALIAN HELLENIC COUNCIL

A RESPONSE TO THE VICTORIAN LANGUAGES STRATEGY DISCUSSION PAPER GREEK IN VICTORIA

1.0 The Hypothesis

For any non-dominant language to be maintained in a bilingual environment without diglossia at inter-generational level requires the following:

1. The existence of a populous base of speakers;
2. Adequate function of language use;
3. Acceptability within the broader society;
4. Stability of the language.

2.0 The Vitality of Greek in Victoria

The vitality of Greek in Victoria is determined by a variety of factors including the disposition of the Greek community members towards its learning and use and their desire for continued distinctiveness as a socio-cultural group. Socio-structural factors soundly contributing to the vitality of Greek in Victoria include:

- a. The existence of almost 180,000 people who know and use Greek as well as the subsistence of approximately 25,000 students attending Greek language education provisions offered by a variety of sectors, including government schools, of whom an estimate of 32% are of non-Greek language background;
- b. The existence of wide functional areas of Greek language use and reasonable community networks which could elaborate the function of language use, outside and beyond the Greek community controlled areas, eg. Church, nursing homes, socio-cultural activities;
- c. Conscientious attempts to promote Greek to the broader society;
- d. Ability to rally institutional support, primarily government agencies and networks;
- e. Accommodating favourable demographic characteristics by creating a language map depicting the socio-demographic mobility of the Greek Australian community members, eg. Residential concentration;
- f. The degree of international dynamics which could characterise the Greek community in Victoria and its ability to promote Greek to the broader Australian society.

3.0 Victorian Government Policies on LOTEs and Greek

In 1991, the Victorian ministerial statement entitled Victoria: Education for Excellence replaced the previous Language Action Plan retaining the principles of needs and demands based on economic relevance, social justice and pursuit of excellence, outlined in the 1987 National Policy on Language. The Victorian policy also strongly recommended for close collaboration between the Commonwealth and the State authorities as well as cooperation between day and after hours schools. For the next twenty

years the official policy remained that the “study of a LOTE is to be made available to all students in Victorian Government primary schools, while all secondary schools will be required to make LOTE a core study for all students to Year 10” whilst “emphasis will be on providing for continuous study of LOTE from Preps to Year 12”.

The aforementioned Victorian policy on LOTE teaching and its relevance with the teaching and learning of Greek have been moulded on the following principles:

Since 1991, the Victorian government selected Greek as a priority language for teaching and learning in its state school system, in agreement with the Commonwealth policies and practices.

The Australian Commonwealth Government in alignment with the National Policy on Languages (1987) and the Commonwealth Priority Languages Incentives Scheme (1991) also selected Greek as “Priority language” for learning and teaching purposes in Australia’s educational institutions.

Victoria is still the only Australian State with an inter-government agreement with Greece, signed in March 1987 between Greece and the Victorian government pertaining Greek language education in Victoria.

Victoria remains the ethno-linguistic centre for the 215,000 Australians of Greek ancestry [Greeks and Cypriots] and additional estimate of 50,000 who maintain cultural and social relations with Greek Australians by means of exogamy and other socio-economic manifestations.

Greek remains as one of the seven most commonly taught languages in Victorian government schools (46), together with Italian, Indonesian, Japanese, French, German, Chinese and Vietnamese.

Greek remains as one of the four most commonly taught languages in Victorian School of Language (47), together with Chinese, Vietnamese, and Turkish.

Greek remains the most popular language offered by the Ethnic School providers.

3.1 Victorian Government implementation of Language teaching and learning

At the outset it should be stated that Victoria is favourably disposed to Greek and possesses a systematic program of implementation. Victoria’s language policies give a commitment to upgrading the teaching of LOTE from primary to senior secondary school and designate Greek a priority language.

Previous studies (Tamis and Gauntlett, 1993; Tamis, 2001 and Tamis, 2008) have found the hallmark of provision for Greek is its diversity, diffusion and incoherence with competing systems, problems of continuity within and linkage between levels and several other serious impediments to commencement or continuance of formal learning and to its ef-



ficacy. A major disincentive at all levels is the erroneous perception in the broader society that serious learning of Greek is the preserve of the Greek Australian community; and even within the latter community, that successful study and certification is the preserve of the elite.

Greek teaching and learning in Victorian government schools is influenced by problems of under-resourcing, unfavourable timetabling, poor linkage between primary and post-primary schools and limited possibility for mounting low-enrolment classes at senior level. Victoria also has one of the highest rates of attrition of enrolments in Greek leading up to VCE level, stemming largely from the limited hours of teaching, the inflexibility of the senior secondary syllabus and the inadequacy of provision for ex-beginners and intermediates. This has entrenched the perception among students of all backgrounds that Greek is a “community language” in the narrowest sense of that term.

The Victorian School of Languages which has served as a back-stop for Greek in the government sector for many years is characterized by problems arising out of the format of its contact hours and of staff morale in view of the conditions of appointment and status offered to fully qualified teachers. Victoria’s monolithic VCE syllabus contrasts with the more flexible NSW unit system and the generous SA provisions for beginners advanced and accelerated Greek courses at senior secondary level.

The major “grey” areas of Greek language teaching and learning at government schools could be summarized as follows:

The provision of Greek language teaching and learning is primarily based on obsolete demographical patterns characterising the Greek community settlement in Victoria forty years ago. The socio-demographic mobility of the Greek community members into new suburbs since the 1980s was not met with relevant provision of Greek language courses in government school within the new suburbs of settlement.

Victoria is lacking a language map targeting potential students of Greek in certain suburbs of concentration and outlining provision of Greek language courses

as a matter of continuity of learning between primary and post-primary education.

Victoria is lacking Greek language pre-school centres and Greek-language kindergartens where bilingual immersion classes could be introduced; The Lalor North experimental bilingual school must be reinforced to accommodate a pre-school Greek language component.

Greek suffers from an image problem as a “community” language in the narrowest sense, despite the fact that most of its students are 3rd and 4th generations English speaking monolinguals.

Greek is under-resourced at every level of education.

There are serious problems of linkage between, and continuity within, levels of learning Greek.

Inflexible curricula and assessment mechanisms, and inability to cope with mixed ability groups using appropriate materials, methods, are inimical to the survival of Greek in Victoria.

The plurality and diversity of the current provision of Greek is not necessary a negative factor, providing effective learning could be assured.

Retention and attrition are not the sole measures of successful teaching; a greater range of certification of proficiency and entry/re-entry points to learning Greek is needed.

Victoria’s Greek language resources are underutilized as a competitive advantage in trade and cultural links.

4.0 The recommendation of the Australian Hellenic Council

The National Board of the Australian Hellenic Council wishes to make the following recommendations towards the Victorian Languages Strategy Discussion Paper regarding the teaching and learning concepts of Greek in Victoria, encouraging further discussions with those involved in designing, developing and deciding the Languages Strategy for Victoria. To materialize the Building of the Educational revolution that the Strategy requires, revolutionary changes are needed.

In our effort to improve the Greek language education and enhance a fruitful collaborative structure on all six areas defined by the Discussion Paper we propose the following seriatim:

1. Victoria should plan, develop and implement a language map incorporating socio-economic and demographical mobility trends and change of Victorians during the last 25 years prior to establishing the 40 new Language Centres in Victorian Schools. During this period very significant demographical changes took place in Victoria involving Greek Australian settlers and their children, when new concentration pockets of Greek population were established; new households were created in the outer suburban areas, intense mobility characterised inner suburban areas whereas certain old Greek settlement pocket areas became obsolete.

To be continued in Friday’s edition