

MAKING LANGUAGE LEARNING A CORE REQUIREMENT IN THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM

**Recommendations from a National Forum
Co-hosted by University of Auckland, the
New Zealand Chinese Language Week Trust and
the New Zealand Association of Language Teachers:
*Language Learning for New Zealand's Future***

August 2025

This report shares the findings and recommendations from the Language Learning for New Zealand's Future Forum, held in July 2025 in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. The event gathered over 100 participants and 22 speakers – including education leaders, language experts, teachers, business representatives, government officials and rangatahi – to tackle the decline in second language learning in New Zealand.

Delivered by the New Zealand Chinese Language Week Charitable Trust in partnership with the University of Auckland and the New Zealand Association of Language Teachers (NZALT), the forum underscored the national importance of language learning as a driver of educational performance and global competitiveness along with six key recommendations to get us back on track.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New Zealand is now one of the very few OECD countries without compulsory language learning in the curriculum. Enrolments are at their lowest point in a century, putting us out of step with global best practice and contributing to our wider decline in educational performance.

Languages are not a “nice to have” – they are foundational to learning, boosting outcomes across literacy, maths, and science, and building the global skills our young people need. With the curriculum review underway, we have a rare opportunity to fix this gap.

Our key recommendation – to make second language learning a core requirement in the curriculum from Years 7–10, with 3–4 hours of weekly instruction – could be enacted now. The workforce is available – there is a great pool of teachers, with excellent access to PLD provided by the Ministry of Education through Tui Tuia | Learning Circle.

Key Recommendations

1. Make second language learning a core requirement in the curriculum from Years 7–10, with 3–4 hours of weekly instruction.
2. Develop different pathways for heritage speakers, native speakers, and second- language learners.
3. Increase teacher supply and professional development through pre-service language requirements and expanded support networks.
4. Establish a comprehensive national languages policy to provide strategic direction.
5. Enhance support for distance and online learning to address equity issues.
6. Use AI and digital tools to support language learning while maintaining human connection.

Language Learning in New Zealand is in Crisis

Fewer students are learning languages now than at any time in the past 80 years. In 1933, nearly one in three secondary students studied a second language. At its peak in the 1960s, almost 40 per cent did. Today, that figure has fallen to just one in five¹. Enrolments have been declining due to the absence of a formal mandate in the curriculum, and because foreign languages at Years 12–13 do not count towards the literacy credits required for University Entrance, making them an easier subject to drop.

The irony is that the workforce exists: we have a strong pool of trained language teachers, but without a clear place in the curriculum many are being under-utilised, diverted to other subjects, or lost to the profession entirely. Unless urgent steps are taken, we risk losing this capability just when we need it most.

¹ Source: Tan, L. (2015, April 25). Fewer pupils learning languages. New Zealand Herald. This statistic is grounded in Ministry of Education data, as reported in Tan (2015). It reflects that in 2014, only 20.3% of secondary students in New Zealand studied a second language – the lowest rate since 1933, when 32.2% studied two or more languages. While the data is now over ten years old, there's no evidence to suggest that language learning rates have increased since that time.

We Are Out of Step with the World

Unlike nearly every other OECD country, New Zealand does not make language learning compulsory in the curriculum. Not only that, [but language learning is the only one of eight learning areas in our curriculum that is not a core requirement](#). Currently the curriculum includes only an [expectation](#) that schools with students in Years 7-10 should be [working towards](#) offering opportunities for learning a second or subsequent language – effectively a let-out clause.

Australia has compulsory language learning in some states and partial mandates in others, supported by strong national policy. Other English-dominant peers like the UK, USA, Singapore, South Africa, and Canada all require second language study or proficiency for top universities and careers. Qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate require languages. In Europe, multilingualism is the norm, with students routinely mastering at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue.

New Zealand's decline in international education benchmarks is a stark warning. Once a top performer, we now sit closer to the bottom of global rankings. A key weakness is our language policy gap. Embedding language education as a core part of the curriculum would help reverse the downward trend and strengthen both language learning and our international performance.

Why It Matters

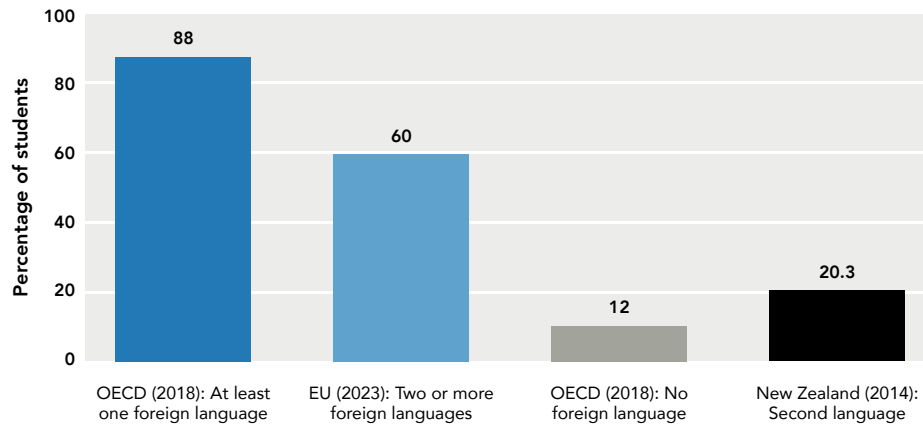
New Zealanders are missing out on the cognitive, cultural and economic advantages that come with learning a second language that cannot simply be replaced by AI and auto-translation.

[Neuroscience research confirms that language learning makes you smarter](#). Language acquisition strengthens cognitive functions – including memory, problem-solving, and literacy – which are vital for success across the curriculum. Countries that prioritise language learning often see wider educational gains, not just in communication, but in maths, reading, and science outcomes. Our declining investment in language learning is likely to be both a symptom of and a contributor to broader academic stagnation.

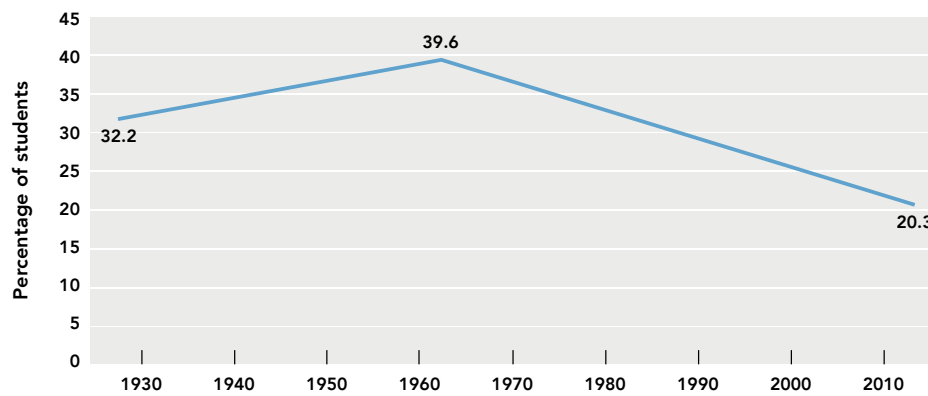
[Language learning builds intercultural competence, supports identity and belonging for diverse learners](#). It is recognised as a principal vehicle for cultural inclusivity and community building in New Zealand, with te reo Māori leading the way in demonstrating its importance in building community identity. Conversely, the absence of languages in the core curriculum may be negatively affecting student engagement, equity, and future readiness. While AI and machine learning can indeed duplicate the mechanical aspects of language learning, it is cultural insight, interpersonal relations and deeper inter-group understanding that are the foundational aims of language study and these are not replicable by machines.

[Language learning fosters globally relevant skills and makes a compelling economic case](#) for New Zealand given our geographic remoteness and heavy reliance on international trade. Language skills connect local communities to global opportunities such as tourism and international education, strengthen diplomatic ties, and enhance international business outcomes. Trade happens between people, and when those people share a language, negotiations are smoother, trust is built faster, and outcomes improve. To stay globally competitive and relevant, New Zealand must lift language capability across the board.

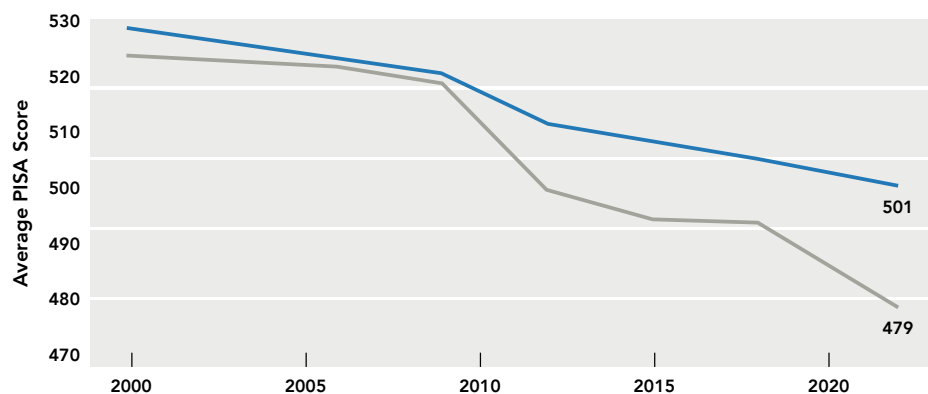
Foreign Language Learning in Schools: OECD, EU and New Zealand



Decline in Second Language Learning in New Zealand Schools (1933-2014)



New Zealand PISA Performance (15-year-olds): Reading and Mathematics (2000-2022)



Next Steps

A national call to action as concluded at the National Languages Forum: “Language learning matters. It matters at an individual level, it matters at a community level, and it matters at an international level. It matters for New Zealand at all of those levels.”

A Curriculum Window of Opportunity: These recommendations are intended to contribute to the wider curriculum refresh consultation, which offers a rare opportunity to embed second language learning more meaningfully into New Zealand’s education system.

Why NCEA Reform Makes this Urgent: At the same time, the recent announcement to overhaul NCEA makes these recommendations even more urgent. Many of the drivers behind NCEA reform – declining educational performance, lack of curriculum consistency, and reduced global competitiveness – mirror the challenges facing language education.

Curriculum Must Lead, Not Assessment: It is important to underline that assessment systems, whether NCEA or a future NZCE, can only succeed if they are guided by a strong, coherent curriculum. Allowing assessment to dictate teaching content, as has too often been the case, risks perpetuating the very issues these reforms are intended to fix. Embedding language learning as a core requirement in the refreshed curriculum would strengthen both our education system and whatever assessment framework follows.

Aligning with International Standards: If the goal of a new NZCE is to align New Zealand’s school-leaver qualification with international standards, then language education is essential – particularly given the expectations of our English-dominant peer countries.

LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR NEW ZEALAND'S FUTURE

The forum on Language Learning for New Zealand's Future recently brought together education leaders, language experts, teachers, and business representatives to address the concerning decline in second language learning in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Language learning is crucial at individual, community, and international levels for New Zealand. Despite current challenges, there is significant unrealised potential in language education.

The strongest recommendation emerging from the forum is to make second language learning a core requirement in the New Zealand curriculum. This call is backed by compelling evidence across three key dimensions: cognitive development, community-building and cultural understanding, and economic opportunity.

How Did We Get Here? A Long and Winding Road...

1992 – Aotearoa: Speaking for Ourselves Commissioned by the Ministry of Education (lead author Jeffrey Waite), this foundational report highlighted the importance of multilingualism for New Zealand's future and called for stronger support for second language learning.

1993 – Curriculum Framework The New Zealand Curriculum Framework grouped English and other languages together under a broad "Language and Languages" area. This allowed schools to meet curriculum obligations by focusing solely on English, effectively sidelining second languages.

1994 – NZ China Council Conference Report Written by Martin East (later expanded), this report emphasised the importance of teaching languages in schools in the context of New Zealand's growing engagement with Asia, particularly China.

[Teaching Languages in Schools – NZ China Council](#)

2007 – Revised New Zealand Curriculum Introduced Learning Languages as a standalone learning area. Schools were expected to offer language programmes in Years 7–10, but participation was not compulsory – a compromise that resulted in patchy and inconsistent uptake.

2013 – Royal Society Paper: Languages in Aotearoa New Zealand This influential paper highlighted the social, cultural, and economic importance of languages, and the risks New Zealand faced if language capability continued to decline.

[Royal Society Report](#)

2010s – Academic and Professional Contributions Professor Martin East produced extensive scholarship on language learning and teaching in New Zealand, shaping much of the academic discourse. The New Zealand Association of Language Teachers (NZALT) and other professional bodies continued to publish recommendations, highlighting workforce capacity and the urgent need for policy change.

2018 – Auckland Central MP and former Education Minister Nikki Kaye's Private Member's Bill The late Hon Nikki Kaye introduced a bill proposing that all students should have access to one priority language from a national list. Although it did not pass, it marked a key milestone in raising political attention to the issue and foreshadowed current debates.

Over three decades, New Zealand has seen repeated recognition of the value of languages (in reports, academic work, and professional advocacy), but policy follow-through has lagged. Each step has added weight to the case, but without a compulsory mandate, enrolments have continued to decline.

The 2025 Curriculum Refresh presents a rare opportunity to address longstanding policy gaps by embedding second language learning as a core requirement.

Cognitive Benefits: Learning Languages Makes You Smarter

Researchers in New Zealand and overseas have shown that language learning changes brain structure and function in ways that improve overall learning ability. [Learners of languages develop distinctive patterns of thinking that transfer readily to mathematics, sciences, and other school subjects](#). The high PISA rankings of students from Scandinavian countries, where second-language learning is the norm, are public proof of these benefits.

“When you learn a language, you become smarter”
– Professor Barbara Oakley, Forum Keynote

Professor Barbara Oakley, Professor of Engineering at Oakland University (and keynote at the recent forum), makes a powerful case for the cognitive advantages of language study. [“Language learning is much like learning chess,”](#) she explains, noting that these cognitive patterns transfer across domains. Drawing on her own experience of learning Russian before becoming an engineering professor, she reflects: “I would not be here if it wasn’t for my language learning.”

The neuroscience behind this phenomenon is based on the brain forming neural connections through two key pathways: the conscious pathway via the hippocampus, and the unconscious automatic pathway via the basal ganglia. [Language learning uniquely activates both systems, building robust neural networks that enhance cognitive function](#). Young children learning languages heavily use the basal ganglia system, which contains a “deep neural net” similar to large language models, enhancing cognitive flexibility and problem solving. The dual-pathway engagement helps explain why language learners perform better across other subjects, and why “when you learn a language, you become smarter”.

Professor Martin East of the University of Auckland, a specialist in language teaching and learning, has found similar results in New Zealand classrooms.

“Bilingual young people in business settings are more inquisitive and take new information on more readily”
– Dale Stephens, NZ Māori Tourism

These benefits extend beyond the classroom. In a discussion on education and employment, Dale Stephens, Chair of NZ Māori Tourism, [observes that bilingual young people in business settings are “maturing faster because they’re more inquisitive and take new information on more readily”](#).

Community Benefits: Identity and Social Cohesion

Language learning is recognised as a principal vehicle for cultural inclusivity and community building in New Zealand, with te reo Māori leading the way in demonstrating its importance in building community identity. Dale Stephens notes that “if we lose the language, we lose the culture,” highlighting the intrinsic connection between language and cultural identity, and its ability to connect local communities to national and global opportunities.

“The whole point about learning other languages is that you’re actually learning to understand another way of looking at the world.” – John McKinnon, former Ambassador to China

Language competency also contributes to a different level of engagement and understanding of social issues. John McKinnon, former Ambassador to China and Chair of the New Zealand China Council, reminds us that “the whole point about learning other languages is that you’re actually learning to understand another way of looking at the world”. In this way, language provides a window into another culture, its history, its values and its aspirations. Making the effort to acknowledge and learn from other cultures through language study will greatly enhance social cohesion in New Zealand.

Economic Opportunities: International Relevance, Competitiveness

The international dimension of language learning is crucial for New Zealand’s future. As Eric Lithander, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Strategic Engagement, University of Auckland comments: “language is a way to connect local communities to global opportunities”. Language facility enables deeper engagement with other cultures and societies, providing deeper and different levels of understanding that go beyond what is possible through translation alone.

The economic argument for compulsory language learning is particularly compelling. New Zealand depends on its global connections. Language competency is particularly valuable in diplomatic and international business contexts. The forum underscored the importance to New Zealand of not just Chinese and Spanish, but all languages including Pacific languages, to remain globally relevant and competitive.

Today’s trade and transnational economic relations increasingly emphasise person-to-person connections in areas such as product design, trend spotting, and marketing strategies. These rely on the cultural insights that language proficiency provides, directly linking culture and trade to New Zealand’s national advantage. As Ivan Kinsella, Vice President of Corporate Affairs for Zespri China, highlights: “Trade is not done between countries. It’s done between people”.

“Trade is not done between countries. It’s done between people.” – Ivan Kinsella, Zespri.

Government Leadership and Commitment

Strong government leadership and commitment to language teaching in New Zealand is an essential basis for change. The current curriculum refresh presents an opportunity to address this gap, but without significant pressure, it may become another unrealised opportunity.

New Zealand’s approach contrasts with that of Australia. Despite not having complete national consistency, Australia enjoys at the top level a national commitment to language education, with compulsory language training in schools across different states. New Zealand’s education system needs to step up and recognise language learning as a priority area for development.

Local Leadership in Schools

Despite funding issues and curriculum challenges, local leadership in schools can produce significant results in language education. School principals' effective leadership can change the direction and achievements in language learning at a school, as experience across New Zealand has shown.

Good leadership at the school level can create environments where languages thrive. Acting Principal Anna Wilson from Wellington East Girls College highlighted their connected courses that blend language with other subjects, such as "making music in French" or their "Asian Culture and Language" course that combines cultural learning with elements of both Chinese and Japanese. Success stories like this highlight that individual commitment and vision can overcome systemic barriers, providing models for what can be achieved when language learning is prioritised within educational institutions.

Why Making It Core in the Curriculum is Critical

Making language learning a core requirement would address what Stephanie Mortimore, Programme Manager for Languages at Tui Tuia | Learning Circle, identifies as a critical barrier to successful language learning: that [the current curriculum doesn't provide enough time for long sustained learning in languages](#). Students are forced to decide whether to continue with language studies right when they're struggling most. As Mortimore puts it, "We don't give them the time to come down and up the other side and go, 'actually I can do this, this is really good'".

"We need to normalise multilingualism, so that all of our students come out competent in at least two languages."
– Forum speaker.

Making language learning a core requirement from Years 7-10 would ensure all students have sufficient time to develop meaningful skills and experience the cognitive, cultural, and employment benefits that language learning provides.

Every young New Zealander deserves the opportunity to grow, connect and succeed – and that starts with language.

"New Zealand has a unique opportunity to craft a language policy that celebrates multiculturalism, strengthens national cohesion, and prepares young people to be global citizens. To achieve this, policy must be practical, well designed, and effective."

Professor Joe Lo Bianco
Emeritus Professor
University of Melbourne

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Core Curriculum – Make second language learning a core requirement (Years 7-10)

The forum strongly recommends making second language learning a core requirement, especially from Years 7–10. The current absence of this policy represents a significant gap in our education system compared to international standards. The current curriculum wording that schools must be “working towards providing the entitlement” for language learning, provides a “let out clause” that undermines implementation.

The forum recommended at least four years of language learning, with ideally 3 hours weekly in Years 7 and 8, and 4 hours in Years 9 and 10 to ensure sufficient exposure. This recommendation is supported by evidence from multiple teachers and researchers, who note that sustained language learning over time is essential for proficiency development.

In the New Zealand context, any move to make language learning a core requirement should also reflect the special status of te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) as official languages. This is not about positioning languages in competition, but about creating a system that values and supports all languages. Te reo Māori is currently the fastest-growing language in schools, but expansion is constrained by a shortage of qualified teachers, an issue expected to improve as training pathways expand. One option could be to retain te reo Māori as a core requirement for Years 1–7, with the flexibility for students to either continue with te reo or choose another language from Year 8 onwards.

Making language learning a core requirement would align New Zealand with international norms and a system presently hardwired against language learning.

2. Pathways – Differentiated for heritage, native, and second-language learners

The forum called for differentiated pathways to reflect New Zealand’s diverse learner base: heritage speakers, native speakers, and true second language learners.

Educators have extensive experience showing that differentiation of pathways, especially at assessment points, recognises the skill and greater proficiency that ‘background’ students have and can reach, without discouraging new learners. Without separating out our heritage speakers and native speakers from true second-language learners, we create inequities in mixed classrooms. Teachers have experience of designing and delivering learning to these different groups efficiently.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) provides a model along these lines. By offering pathways like language A for native speakers and language B for second language learners the IB encourages students with different backgrounds to do languages.

This recommendation acknowledges the diverse language backgrounds in New Zealand classrooms and would ensure that all students receive appropriate instruction and assessment, rather than being placed in mixed-level classes that serve neither heritage nor second language learners effectively.

3. Teachers – Increase teacher supply and professional development

Addressing the shortage of qualified language teachers for certain languages is an essential step. For other languages the workforce to address this challenge is already in place and the barrier is policy, not capability. The forum suggests several approaches to address this issue:

- Leveraging the pool of trained language teachers, supported by professional learning opportunities through Tui Tuia | Learning Circle.
- Requiring pre-service teachers to learn a language as part of their training.

- Provide opportunities for experienced native-language teachers to gain recognised qualifications through expanding existing special teacher development programmes.
- Expanding the national language advisor programme to include all languages with NCEA pathways.
- Restoring funding for professional learning networks and communities of practice.
- Supporting teachers to develop cultural competence alongside language skills.

Tui Tuia | Learning Circle and the Confucius Institutes have been providing essential resources and professional development for the successful expansion of Chinese learning in schools. If learning languages was made a core requirement, programmes like this could be expanded to provide the teaching staff required.

4. National Policy – Establish a comprehensive languages policy

The forum strongly recommends developing a comprehensive national languages policy to provide strategic direction and coordination for language education. Despite efforts dating back to the early 1990s, including the Waite report (Aotearo Speaking for Ourselves), New Zealand still lacks a cohesive policy framework for languages.

A national policy would address unrealized opportunities to achieve a great deal more in the area of language teaching and language learning. It would provide the government leadership and government commitment to language teaching that has been lacking to date.

The policy should encompass:

- Clear goals for language proficiency at different educational levels
- Strategies for supporting heritage and community languages
- Coordination between primary, secondary, and tertiary language education
- Recognition of the role of languages in cultural inclusivity and national identity

As one speaker noted, “We need to normalise multilingualism, so that all of our students come out competent in at least two languages.” There are communities across New Zealand where multilingualism is already the daily reality. We need to bring multilingualism to the forefront as a strength both in our schools and in our society as a whole.

5. Distance Learning – Expand online and hybrid models for equity

To address equity issues and expand language options, the forum recommends strengthening distance and online language learning opportunities. This would enable schools without specialist language teachers to offer a wider range of languages and support continued learning in less commonly taught languages.

Technology allows a hybrid mode where if the language is not available in a school, students can study online with credits acknowledged through the qualification system. This approach would build on existing platforms like Te Kura (Correspondence School) and the Virtual Learning Network. Hybrid models can combine intensive in-person sessions with distance learning.

The recommendation includes looking to successful models in Australia, which have highly developed distance language education spanning 15-20 languages in certain states through hybrid models combining face-to-face and online learning. This would be particularly valuable for supporting heritage languages and addressing the needs of New Zealand’s increasingly diverse population.

6. AI & Tools – Use AI to enhance learning while keeping human connection

Finally, the forum recommends embracing AI and digital tools to enhance language teaching and learning while maintaining the essential human element. In the age of AI, we can no longer focus on just getting students to sit there and remember the vocab and grammar. Language teaching is undergoing massive change with the advent of AI. The New Zealand education system needs to be ready to embrace the new opportunities.

AI can support more creative and engaging approaches to language learning, including:

- Video projects that showcase student learning in authentic contexts
- Digital books created with AI support
- Experiential learning that reverses traditional approaches to start with meaningful use

Language brings people together and ultimately education is about people. The goal is to use technology to enhance human connection and communication, not replace it.

APPENDICES

Forum: Key Points from Each Session

Opening Session

Erik Lithander highlighted languages as a strategic asset for New Zealand's future prosperity. Languages build cognitive flexibility, cultural empathy and boost global employability. We need to restart national conversations about language policy and push for dedicated curriculum space. Language pathways must begin well before university level. The University of Auckland embraces its role in educating future leaders, advancing research in language and culture, and promoting global citizenship.

Keynote: Dr. Barbara Oakley

Learning languages physically changes brain structure and enhances cognitive abilities. Our brains have two main learning pathways: declarative (conscious) and procedural (automatic). Retrieval practice works best for learning, not rereading or highlighting. Direct instruction that combines lecture with active learning proves most effective. Language learning builds pattern recognition skills that transfer to other subjects. Dr. Oakley shared how her language learning experience helped her succeed in mathematics and engineering. Constructivist teaching approaches have contributed to declining educational outcomes. Both rote learning and practice remain essential for effective language acquisition.

Panel 1: Why Second Language Learning Matters

John McKinnon noted that while English benefits New Zealand, it can become an obstacle when we assume everyone speaks it. Dale Stevens pointed out how Te Reo Māori revitalisation shows what's possible when society unites around language learning. Language connects people and strengthens cultural identity. Ivan Kinsella emphasised that language capability must reach a level where it's useful for business and daily life. Language learning builds intercultural competency and strategic insight. Multilingual skills are essential for rangatahi in today's global economy. Businesses can support second language learning through traineeships and internships.

Panel 2: School Leadership Perspectives

James Bentley from St. Peter's College requires all boys to learn Te Reo Māori, Chinese and Spanish for their first three years. Anna Wilson from Wellington East Girls College makes languages compulsory for Year 9-10 students with multiple options. Andrew King from Oropi School teaches Mandarin across all levels from new entrants to Year 8. All three schools have Confucius Classrooms and host Mandarin Language Assistants. School leaders stressed the importance of senior leadership support for language programmes. Challenges include teacher supply, funding constraints and competing curriculum priorities. They recommended creating school networks, dedicated language funding and access to talented teachers.

Panel 3: Curriculum and Teaching

Martin East provided historical context on language policy development in New Zealand since 1993. The 2007 New Zealand Curriculum introduced "Learning Languages" as a separate learning area but without making it a core requirement. Stephanie Mortimore presented data showing declining enrolment in most international languages. Challenges include the curriculum's "endeavour to provide" wording, timetabling constraints and multi-level classes. Danping Wang discussed AI applications in language teaching and the need to prioritise creativity in programme design. The panel recommended making languages a core requirement from Years 7-10 and providing specific pathways for different learner types.

Curriculum Refresh Presentation

Juliet Kennedy noted the curriculum refresh represents a once-in-15-20 years opportunity for meaningful change. Recommendations included making language learning core for at least four years with 3-4 hours weekly. The goal should be for all students to become competent in at least two languages. New Zealand stands alone as the only country without compulsory language learning. Resources should focus on teacher development and creating well-sequenced learning materials.

Case Study: Teaching Chinese in New Zealand

Laura Deng shared her experience teaching Chinese since 2008 and the growth of Chinese departments. Dr. Jiwei Fu emphasised that Chinese isn't as difficult to learn as many believe and advocated balancing language with cultural learning. Yachan Wong described her entrepreneurial approach with Pistachio Mandarin, focusing on making language learning enjoyable. Successful approaches included cultural activities, study trips and personalised learning. Challenges included the time needed to decode Chinese characters and maintaining student interest.

Youth Panel: Why We Learn Languages

The youth panel provided some of the most powerful testimony. Luka Yelash spoke of representing New Zealand at the Chinese Bridge competition and meeting Premier Li Qiang. Telesia Tanoa'i spoke movingly about how Pacific language skills empower her to advocate on climate issues across the region. Kate Storr, a non-native Chinese teacher, has increased Chinese enrolment at Waitakere College by 150%. The panel highlighted personal development benefits of language learning. Key success factors included encouragement, resilience and connecting language to personal goals. These examples reflect the transformative potential of language learning for Aotearoa's future leaders.

Closing Remarks

Tony Browne identified four key themes: language learning matters at individual, community and international levels; government leadership is essential; local leadership produces results; and ongoing advocacy is needed. We must build stronger arguments for why New Zealand should commit more to language learning. The curriculum refresh presents an opportunity to address language learning gaps. Language serves as a principal vehicle for cultural inclusivity and community development. New Zealand can learn from Australia's experience in developing language policies.

LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR NEW ZEALAND'S FUTURE

17 JULY 2025 LANGUAGE FORUM

THE PROGRAMME – Venue: Regatta Conference Rooms A & D, Lower Ground Floor, Pullman Hotel

- 8:00 Registration
- 8:30 **Mihi Whakatau** – Dale Stephens, **Welcome** – Jo Coughlan, and **Opening Remarks** – Erik Lithander, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Strategic Engagement, University of Auckland
- 8:45 **Keynote: Language Learning in the 21st Century**
This panel highlights international policy frameworks, strategy, and what NZ can learn from other systems, with a focus on key themes around equity, multilingualism, and national identity.
Joseph Lo Bianco
- 9:30 **Keynote 2: What Language Learners Know About Learning (That Neuroscience Just Figured Out)**
We discuss the cognitive science behind language learning, broader educational benefits, and links to workforce readiness.
Barbara Oakley
- 10:30 **Morning Tea**
- 10:45 **Panel 1: Why Second Language Learning Matters**
The lens is widened to consider the full value proposition of second-language learning in Aotearoa: not only cognitive, but also economic, social, and cultural. We ask what's at stake – nationally and globally – if New Zealand continues on its current trajectory of declining second-language enrolments.
John McKinnon, Ivan Kinsella, Dale Stephens and Suzannah Jessep (moderator)
- 11:30 **Panel 2: The Case for Teaching Languages at New Zealand Schools**
Featuring school leaders from primary and secondary sectors championing second-language learning in diverse school contexts across Aotearoa. Highlighting why they continue to invest in language education, what structural and policy barriers they face, and what kinds of support or partnerships are needed to help language learning flourish more widely.
James Bentley, Anna Wilson, Andrew King and Juliet Kennedy (moderator)
- 12:15 **Lunch & Networking**
- 1:15 **Panel 3: Curriculum and Teaching**
Hear how curriculum design, teacher capability, and innovative, future-oriented strategies can be leveraged to strengthen language education. At a time when language learning faces both challenges and opportunities, we explore how to reimagine our approach – from system-level curriculum reform to on-the-ground professional support and the emerging role of AI in multilingual education.
Martin East, Stephanie Mortimore, Danping Wang and Juliet Kennedy (moderator)
- 2:00 **Curriculum Review: Making a Case for Language Learning**
This short, forward-looking session will offer reflections on how the forthcoming curriculum review can help lay a stronger foundation for the future of second-language learning in New Zealand.
Juliet Kennedy and Constanza Tolosa
- 2:30 **Afternoon Tea**
- 2:45 **Case Study: Teaching Chinese in New Zealand Schools and Universities**
With enrolments in decline, Chinese still remains one of the most taught second languages in New Zealand. This session provides an inside look at the lived realities of Chinese language teaching – what's working, what's not, what we can learn from local success stories, and where support is needed.
Laura Deng, Yatchun Wong, Fu Jiwei and Professor Paul Clark (moderator)
- 3:30 **Panel 4: Youth Voices – Why We Learn Languages**
Personal stories from students and young professionals on the value of language learning in life, work and identity. These voices showcase the importance of maintaining support for languages from early learning through to tertiary education and beyond.
Telesia Tanoa'i, Kate Storer and Luka Yelash (moderator)
- 4:15 **Closing Remarks** - Tony Browne
- 4:30 **Networking Reception**

LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR NEW ZEALAND'S FUTURE

17 JULY 2025 LANGUAGE FORUM

THE SPEAKERS

Jo Coughlan: Chair of NZ Chinese Language Week, Jo is a seasoned director and communications strategist with leadership experience across business, government, and international relations. She is also a former Wellington City Councillor and Managing Director of Silvereye Communications.

Joseph Lo Bianco: Emeritus Professor at the University of Melbourne, Joseph is a global expert on language policy, multilingual education, and language rights, advising governments and international bodies worldwide.

Barbara Oakley: Barbara is a globally recognised education expert, New York Times best selling author and creator of the "Learning How to Learn" course, combining neuroscience and engineering to transform how we understand learning.

John McKinnon: Chair of the NZ China Council and former Ambassador to China, John McKinnon has held senior leadership roles in the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and continues to contribute to strategic policy and international relations.

Suzannah Jessep: CEO of the Asia New Zealand Foundation, Suzannah is a former diplomat and leading voice on New Zealand's engagement with Asia across trade, education, and policy.

Dale Stephens: Chair of NZ Māori Tourism, Dale is a senior executive and board director with deep expertise in public policy, Māori development, and Asia-Pacific engagement.

James Bentley: Headmaster of St Peter's College, James is a leader in international education and school sport, and has championed Chinese language learning through the Confucius Classroom initiative.

Anna Wilson: Acting Principal at Wellington East Girls' College, Anna is a school leader and co-Chair of the national association for secondary school deputies.

Andrew King: Principal of Ōropi School, Andrew advocates for global citizenship through language education and leads New Zealand's Rural Schools Leadership Association.

Paul Clark: Emeritus Professor of Chinese at the University of Auckland, Paul is a pioneer in NZ-China cultural exchange and an expert in Chinese cinema and urban history.

Ivan Kinsella: Ivan is Vice President of Corporate Affairs at Zespri China, leading government and regulatory engagement. He has a background in China business consulting and previously served as NZTE's Investment Counsellor in Beijing.

Martin East: Professor of Language Education at the University of Auckland, Martin is a leading researcher in language teaching, learning, and assessment.

Danping Wang: Associate Professor and Director of Chinese Language Education and Advanced Research at the University of Auckland, Danping researches AI in multilingual education and advises on national language policy.

Stephanie Mortimore: Programme Manager for Languages at Tui Tuia, Stephanie supports language pathways in schools and is a former Head of Languages and Deaf education leader.

Constanza Tolosa: Senior Lecturer at the University of Auckland, Constanza researches language teaching innovation and intercultural competence in schools.

Juliet Kennedy: President of NZ Association of Language Teachers, Juliet is a secondary teacher and curriculum developer advocating for inclusive and diverse language education.

Laura Deng: President of NZCLTA, Laura is a Chinese language teacher at St Kentigern College and a contributor to NCEA curriculum development.

Yatchun Wong: Founder of Pistachio Mandarin, Yatchun is an accountant-turned-educator creating interactive, student-centred Chinese learning environments.

Fu Jiwei: Fu is New Zealand's National Chinese Language Advisor, with over 30 years of experience leading Confucius Institutes and curriculum work globally.

Luka Yelash: University of Auckland student Luka placed 5th globally in the 2024 Chinese Bridge Speech Competition and is passionate about language as cultural connection.

Telesia Tanoa'i: A filmmaker and Youth Ambassador, Telesia uses Mandarin to advocate for Pacific issues, with her film Telesia 2 the World screening internationally.

Kate Storer: Head of Chinese at Waitākere College, Kate has built a thriving school programme and led multiple student trips to China to foster cross-cultural learning.

Tony Browne: Tony is Executive Chair of the NZ Contemporary China Research Centre and a former Ambassador to China who played a key role in the NZ-China FTA.



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