

**The Negative L2 Climate:  
understanding attrition among  
second language students.**

Alastair McLauchlan



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To all New Zealanders who understand the limitations of being mono-lingual, who know the importance and pleasure of communicating with people from other cultures in their own languages, and to those who wish to preserve and promote second language learning in New Zealand.

\* \* \* \*

...A Swiss woman visiting New Zealand walked up to a bus stop in Christchurch where two locals were waiting. 'Entschuldigung, können Sie Deutsch sprechen?' she asked. The two Kiwis stared blankly, shrugged their shoulders but said nothing. 'Excusez-moi, parlez-vous français?' she tried, but the result was the same. 'Parlano italiano?' Still no response. 'Hablan ustedes español?' Still nothing. The Swiss tourist walked away, muttering and shaking her head. The first Kiwi turned to the second and said, 'Y'know, maybe we should learn a foreign language.' 'Why?' replied the other, 'that woman knew four and it didn't do her any good.'

# Acknowledgements

He taonga nga reo katoa...all languages are to be treasured  
(From Ministry of Education's Essence Statement on Language Learning)

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Merci beaucoup

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有り難うございました

Vobis gratias ago

AM



# Foreword

Dr McLauchlan is to be congratulated on providing a motivational study of foreign language learning in the secondary school instructional setting that is at once meticulous, unequivocal and goes beyond the usual focus on the complex construct of motivation itself.

His study limits itself to a complete annual cohort in the second most populous city in New Zealand, Christchurch, and traces the cohort's enrolment patterns in language study through the final three school years (Years 11-13). Motivation is thus operationalised simply in terms of persistence, which presumably is integrated with other traditionally studied aspects, such as why and how hard something is studied. In fact, the study could be characterised accurately as 'demotivational', in that its major interest lies in carefully pinpointing at each annual level the extent and causes of student attrition.

Going beyond the merely empirical, however, the author's ultimate concern in his final chapters' discussions is passionately cultural. His empirical diagnoses of the relative neglect of foreign language study at the micro- or school-level are reinforced by discussions of the reasons behind the wider society's linguistic abstinence.

At this stage of globalisation, it is clear by now that whereas the education systems of Asia and Western Europe, for example, simply assume that second language learning should be a compulsory part of the general curriculum, right through to senior secondary level, the English-speaking countries have relegated the curriculum to optional status. In fact, the Sciences tend to be the only area influencing choice by making certain studies compulsory for entry to tertiary courses—giving rise to the interesting conundrum that to study medicine you need to pass Year 13 Chemistry, despite it virtually being repeated in most Pre-Med, first-year programmes, but to be an expert on French philosophy or a theologian you do not need to study French or Hebrew and Greek to any level, even at university.

Associated with this, too, is the mistaken, faintly imperialist notion that other countries' emphasis on second languages is confined to English as the de facto international language. When one examines their school curricula, however, it is clear that many other major, international languages are taught and students are frequently required to study more than one foreign language. Indeed, many of the international students learning English in New Zealand are acquiring it as a third or even fourth language.

It is sincerely to be hoped that the present text might serve as the occasion for some thorough spring cleaning in the national educational household generally. Certainly the author has provided numerous starting points for linking the state of language study not only with school administration and teacher methodology, but much more widely with the attitudes and practices of universities and the business sector, with fundamental educational philosophy and political economy generally.

**R F Holt**

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Nov 2006

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# Chapter One

## Introduction to the Research

### 1.1 Aims and limitations

The third year of secondary school education in New Zealand (Yr 11, formerly Form 5) is the first opportunity students have to choose a second language (L2)<sup>1</sup> for formal assessment. However, not only are student numbers at many schools often barely sufficient to run viable L2 classes at Yr 11 but, during subsequent years, high attrition rates exacerbate the problem. The project described in this publication was undertaken to discover why so many Yr 11 students, after voluntarily choosing<sup>2</sup> to study an L2, subsequently discontinue that course of study after only one or two years.

The project was merely exploratory in its aim to identify some of the factors which influence a student's decision to abandon studying an L2. Therefore, the statistical analyses in the following chapters are limited to distributions (% for each variable), although in some instances it is useful to look at two variables simultaneously. In these cases, investigations into joint distributions such as 'the intention to study hard' with each L2 (see Section 3.10 in Chapter 3) will advance to examining the statistical relationship between the two variables using chi-sq. Readers need to bear in mind that the variables throughout this project are categorical and that the relationship between variables is based on the statistical row/column association indicated by the chi-sq ( $\chi^2$ ) and its associated p-value. The study was not concerned with investigating the effect of explanatory variables on the key student quality variables, but merely with exploring possible relationships between those key variables and other variables. Therefore, the relationships suggested in the subsequent explanations will generally not go beyond crosstabulations.

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, unless stated otherwise, L2 is used exclusively to define French, German, Japanese, Latin, Chinese and Spanish. No other L2 was offered for formal assessment at any school taking part in the project on which this report is based.

<sup>2</sup> In a survey, students were asked to indicate whether school or parents had coerced or advised them to study an L2 at Yr 11. While many indicated that parents had supported/advised L2 study for a number of reasons, not one student was coerced, either by school regulation, timetabling requirements or by parents. This scenario makes it logical to describe all respondents in the project as having "voluntarily chosen" to study an L2.

## 1.2 Design

Research into L2 study patterns tends to focus on L2 selection criteria rather than reasons for discontinuation (see, for example, Holt, Maeda et al., 2001; Jones and Jones, 2002; Powell and Batters, 1985; Coughlan, 2005; Cunningham, 2002; Lo Bianco, 2000). Moreover, most researchers rely on cross-sectional methods to obtain static, predictive data by asking students to indicate their own intentions regarding which subjects they do/not intend to study during subsequent years. As will be explained later, this ‘forecast and predict’ method can produce inaccurate data and it was for this reason that the ‘forecast and predict’ approach was discarded for the current project. This decision was vindicated by the large disparity between the Yr 11 students’ stated L2 intentions and their subsequent Yr 12 L2 decisions (See Chapter Four). The strategic value of the project, therefore, lies in three innovative procedures. Firstly, rather than follow the ‘forecast and predict’ approach, Yr 11 students who had already begun their L2 study were asked to provide their reasons for that choice. Secondly and more importantly, in subsequent years, every discontinuing student from the original survey population was personally contacted and asked why they had made the decision to discontinue. Thus the results pertaining to continuation and discontinuation are not predictive, but informed through being made on a *fait accompli* basis. Thirdly, rather than using a random sample, a sample population approach was used which sought the participation of every Yr 11 L2 student in greater Christchurch, New Zealand.

## 1.3 Comparing New Zealand’s L2 enrolment patterns with Great Britain and Australia

While millions of young citizens in Europe, South America and the so-called ‘Asian Tigers’ (Korea, Taiwan, Japan and China) have invested heavily in studying English as part of their route to employment and international understanding, declining numbers of L2 enrolments remain a feature of New Zealand’s educational statistics. In the United Kingdom also, school children appear to be walking away from L2 studies in ever-increasing numbers. Pre-emptively lamenting what may happen once L2 study beyond age 14 is removed from the British compulsory curriculum in 2008, the General Secretary of England’s National Association of Head Teachers recently described Britain’s L2 attrition rates as a ‘catastrophe’ (*The Independent*, 26 August, 2005). For example, even with the current L2 study requirements, numbers of students studying GSCE French in 2005 showed a 14.4% drop over the previous year, while those studying GSCE German decreased by 13.7%. Spanish has held its popularity far more convincingly, but numbers still fell to 62,456 in 2005, a

drop of almost 2000 from 2004. Reflecting the greater importance of funding-based strategies as a way of stimulating L2 learning and, probably hoping to silence some of the criticism for its decision to make all L2 subjects voluntary, the British government has responded with a range of measures. One is the so-called “Golden Hello”, a payment of £2,500 to newly appointed L2 teachers, while perhaps the most successful strategy to date is the ‘Pathfinders’ primary project. In 19 selected regions of the United Kingdom, ‘Pathfinders’ is reported to have created a “significant expansion” in L2 popularity (Language Teaching Pilot ‘Working’: BBC Education Report, July 13, 2005).

By contrast, the Australian situation is a curious mixture of what appears to be happening in the United Kingdom and New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> While the total number of Australian students across all subjects in Year 12 (final year of Australia’s secondary system) increased from 116,316 in 1985 to 193,672 in 2002, L2 numbers there fit three distinct phases. Firstly, from 1985 to 1996, L2 enrolments as a percentage of the total Yr 12 catchment increased from 13.7% to 14.5%. Secondly, however, between 1997 and 2003, the L2 percentage of the Yr 12 catchment showed a steady, albeit small, drop from 14.3% to 13.4%. Thirdly, in 2003, Japanese was the most heavily subscribed L2 by Australian students, followed (in descending order) by French, Chinese, German, Italian, Indonesian, Greek, Spanish, Arabic and Vietnamese. In strong contrast to New Zealand, Spanish numbers in Australia have never experienced the same popularity, the number in 2003 (741) remaining almost unchanged since 1993. In 1985, Indonesian was the fourth most popular L2 in Australia with 1254 enrolments, while in 1997, the number studying Indonesian increased to just under 2000. In 2002, Indonesian’s popularity had dropped to sixth, even though the number of students had increased to 2126. The Twin Towers and Bali incidents appear to have had only a marginal, if any, effect on the number of students taking Indonesian. In 2003, for example, Yr 12 enrolments totalled 1927 (drop of less than 1%), while in 2004, the 1845 students again represented a drop of less than 1%. Annual declines, even when less than 1%, will eventually mount up, but the predicted rejection of Indonesian has not occurred, suggesting that world affairs, even very negative ones, play a lesser role in influencing L2 enrolments than might have been expected. What must be good news for many of Australia’s L2 teachers is that Indonesia’s relegation to sixth most popular L2 was not the result of a drop in numbers studying that language, but rather, of a clear ‘popularity revival’ for the ‘traditional’ European L2s of French and German, plus Italian.

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<sup>3</sup> The Australian data for this paragraph is provided courtesy of the Australian Government Dept of Educational Statistics (DEST), based on data supplied by individual state/territory accreditation authorities. National data is not gathered for the years prior to Yr 12.

## 1.4 L2 Selection, attrition and retention

In general, choosing option subjects at secondary school has more to do with enjoyment (intrinsic), rather than for career or financial reasons (extrinsic) (Vaughan, 2003). This finding is backed up by Ashcroft (1992) who cited “personal enrichment” as the key reason for selecting L2 study beyond Yr 10. Holt *et al.* (2001) concluded that “only instrumental orientation was at all useful in *predicting* L2 persistence” (author’s italics). Their so-called ‘instrumental orientation’ is hybrid in its construct, however, meaning that it is a composite phenomenon involving extrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Holt *et al.* also concluded, albeit a predictive conclusion, that “the die is firmly cast by Yr 10”, meaning that by Yr 10 (second year of secondary school in New Zealand), students had already made their decision as to whether or not they would study an L2 in the following year.

Concerned at declining L2 numbers and the fact that language learning was being increasingly promoted with the extrinsic goals of employment and/or financial gain, McGill (1994) urged education planners to embrace L2 learning for its own cultural and academic value so that it becomes “as normal in the curriculum as English and Mathematics”. McGill has no shortage of supporters in his promotion of the intrinsic value of L2 studies. Carr (2002), for example, portrayed the L2 environment as one which allows students an almost unparalleled opportunity of “enriched cultural experience”, while Dabelstein (2002) wrote of the need for what amounts to nothing less than a paradigm shift, separating language study from all extrinsic rationales, and valuing the discipline for “its worth alone.” Some New Zealand employers may have also helped catalyse the widespread disillusionment experienced by many young New Zealanders moving into positions where L2 skills were advertised as “useful” or “an advantage”. Very few employers seem willing to pay any more for L2 skills in terms of salary and, while this issue will be re-visited in Chapter Six, Gibbs and Holt (2003, p. 14) summarised the issue as follows:

“...the long-term, consistent finding that despite the general educational and social credence given to the importance of languages for international business, organisations in both the public and private domains still tend to neither use effectively nor acknowledge the linguistic skills of the workforce at their disposal”.

Gender has little bearing on L2 success and continuation, but language study is less likely to be selected in the first place by boys who dislike *inter alia* the cumulative nature of L2 study, learning vocabulary lists and having to talk about

themselves and their feelings (Jones & Jones, 2002). Conversely, L2 study is more likely to prevail among girls (Powell & Batters, 1985)<sup>4</sup> and in upper and upper middle class schools (Coughlan, 2005). Furthermore, students studying two or more L2s may well enjoy greater satisfaction and progress than is normally found among those studying just one language (Powell & Batters, 1985), while Cunningham (2002) urges L2 instruction "...for a significant period of [primary] schooling" as a way of promoting ongoing L2 study. In an effort to retain greater L2 numbers at senior level, some schools (including one school in the current project), have reintroduced compulsory L2 study at Yr 9, in spite of the fact that this approach is unlikely to prove successful (Lo Bianco, 2000).

Although not dealing specifically with the L2 scenario, Zepke, Leach, and Prebble (2005) found that individual teachers and the school culture can both have a profound effect on student enjoyment and, therefore, on study persistence. Writers such as LaFleur (1991), while presumably well-intentioned, have blamed a lack of good teachers for the downturn in L2 enrolments, while Vaughan (2003) put a more positive spin on the same idea by suggesting that a popular teacher may well attract students into his/her L2 option subject. Cohen and Norst (1996) and Young (1986) identified affective reasons such as the "fear of performing for assessment" as key barriers to L2 persistence, while Holt *et al.* (2001) cited "level of difficulty" and "lack of intrinsic interest" as the most frequent reasons for discontinuation. However, not only are modern languages among the "most difficult subjects to teach" (Lodge, 2004), but the effort required for successful mastery is unquestionable. The cumulative nature of the study means it cannot be compartmentalised into discreet units of learning; highly convoluted and complicated patterns of syntax, plus all their exceptions, confuse even the most able students; extremely high levels of maintenance recall are constantly required; the affective domain of psychological stress is extraordinarily high, inherent in the 'stand and deliver' and 'one-on-one' styles of assessment required in L2 learning; the limitless range of regional accents, dialects, colloquialisms, metaphors, humour, nuance, vulgarities, jargon and the like is unpredictable and can result in serious loss of confidence; alphabets and writing systems often bear no resemblance to the learner's first language, and so on.

The inextricable relationship between an L2 and its culture means that a good knowledge of the latter is required in order to understand more fully the former. In looking at the relationship between a language and its culture, Liddicoat,

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<sup>4</sup> New Zealand's Yr 11 L2 gender ratio is around 60% girls: 40% boys.

Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler (2003, p. 45) describe any L2 learning which involves only the study of grammar and vocabulary as "...an inadequate conceptualisation on which to base an understanding of what is involved in language learning...language is never de-contextualized...[it] is social and communicative". The Ministry of Education appears well aware of the many social and other advantages of L2 study. In its *Guide for New Zealand Schools* (2002), the Ministry explains some of the key benefits of L2 study as "academic challenge...improvement of first language skills...self-esteem...tolerance for others...improved employability and inter-cultural communication." Self-esteem and tolerance are desirable qualities, but hopefully, the Ministry has rethought its attitude about the undeniable difficulty of L2 learning. Earlier statements by the Ministry such as the one made in 1995 that "[secondary school L2] learners are expected to become competent communicators in the language..." were hugely unrealistic.

In comparison, many non-L2 subjects *are* compartmentalised and, therefore, academically more manageable. Being able to separate a subject into smaller study topics, almost on a weekly basis, allows students to move from one unit of learning to the next, even where previous units have not been mastered. Moreover, some subjects are available for students to begin studying at Yr 12 or Yr 13, even for students with no prior knowledge, providing a ready escape route for disenchanted [including L2] students. Furthermore, Mathematics and chemistry, for example, allow calculators and essential formulae into the examination room, while History and Geography have removed much of the rote-learning requirements from their examinations. These sorts of assessment procedures widen the gap yet again between the robust demands of L2 and other subjects, thereby further reinforcing the [real and perceived] difficulty level of the former. Only L2 students are penalised for misspelling or for omitting an [often silent] accent above a word; only L2 students lose marks for hesitancy or poor pronunciation, for failing to remember an obscure vocabulary item, for being so nervous that they break down while presenting a prepared speech or while answering questions about its content; or for lengthening (or shortening) a Japanese vowel or consonant for a micro-second, thereby changing the meaning of a word completely, or for not knowing [or for having forgotten] something as complicated as the genitive plural form of a second declension Latin noun. No other subject compares with the cumulative nature, the intricacies and the demanded accuracy of L2 learning, and it is hardly surprising that L2 study remains the victim of its own reputation as the most difficult of all the disciplines.

## 1.5 The status quo of L2 learning in New Zealand

With New Zealand's early education system having been modelled on that of Great Britain, the inclusion of Latin and modern European languages throughout the syllabus, predominantly for above-average students in streamed classes, was assured. Schools often regarded offering a range of L2 options as good for their reputation, and such study often served as a clear dividing line between the once rigidly categorised "A, B and C streams". For above-average students who completed their five years at secondary school, French and German fitted neatly into any university degree in the arts, humanities or social sciences, while the most able and dedicated 'A' stream students could eventually study law and read original literature at university. One further L2 application was that until the 1980s, most New Zealand universities retained a rather vague form of L2 study known as French (or German) Reading Knowledge as a compulsory subject within their science degrees. Under sustained pressure from science students and lecturing staff, that requirement was abolished and no such course exists in any New Zealand university today.

Until America's post-war audio-lingual revolution reached New Zealand in the early 1970s, L2 teaching methods centred largely around a lockstep application of the Grammar-Translation approach. Text-book passages for study lacked practical relevance to the daily life of most teenagers and, rather than address everyday issues, set texts were far more likely to involve childish fairy stories, improbable adventures of children catching thieves or immature tales of space exploration and encountering wild animals. Five years of secondary school L2 study could easily pass with students never encountering such practical vocabulary items as 'passport, haircut, money exchange, airport transfer, hotel check-in, toilet-paper, zip, handcuffs or phone book'. The teachers themselves had rarely visited the countries whose languages they were teaching and, with few exceptions, were seldom experts in their field. A thorough knowledge of, and meticulous adherence to, the well-thumbed text-book provided security for the teacher and an unfortunate lack of inspiration for the students. Apart from the more academic students aiming for university study, few continued their Latin, French or German studies beyond the compulsory first or second year at secondary school.

In spite of today's far more communicative approach, L2 studies are still regarded by too many New Zealanders as quaint at best, difficult and irrelevant at worst. Our geographical/social isolation and long-held view of ourselves and of our nearest neighbour, Australia, as mono-lingual cultures have helped catalyse a widespread apathy, even negativity, towards, language learning. Holmes (1990, p. 19) described New Zealand as a "determinedly monolingual

country” and concluded that its people were averse to acknowledging any real value in a bilingual education for the majority of students. Given such an environment, it is perhaps little wonder that L2 classes have always battled for survival, a situation worsened considerably since academic streaming was viewed as élitist and largely dismantled in the 1970s. That move heralded the end of most compulsory L2 study, leaving schools struggling even further to maintain viable L2 numbers, especially at the senior level. Three clearly identifiable factors have further exacerbated the L2 status quo in New Zealand described above by Holmes. Firstly, the nation-wide decline in school rolls has produced a drop in numbers studying for formal qualifications. For example, between 1993 and 2002, numbers of students enrolling for formal assessment at Yr 11 dropped from 64506 to 61574 (New Zealand Ministry of Education)<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, as a percentage of that total potential catchment, L2 enrolments declined from 13.6 per cent to 11.1 per cent over the same period and thirdly, L2 attrition rates after Yr 11 were higher than for any other subject.

The results of dedicated L2 study are never immediate and, even after five years of committed effort in today’s more enlightened climate of exciting, relevant texts and practical-based, communicative teaching methods, most L2 students leave secondary school with limited ability to communicate with native speakers and disappointed with what they have achieved. In earlier times, L2 study by compulsion meant that, while many students were less than willing, greater numbers kept classes at viable levels, at least until the end of the third year of secondary school. Even in those days, however, numbers thereafter dropped dramatically but today, more than ever, low uptake *and* poor retention remain features of most schools. New Zealand’s annual retention rates for students who have completed three years of L2 study (Yr 11 through to Yr 13) are shown in Table 1.1.

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<sup>5</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all references to NZ statistics, plus all tables pertaining to NZ L2 enrolment/continuation rates, are taken or calculated directly from raw student numbers data in NZQA Secondary School Qualification Statistics booklets (1993-2003). Furthermore, unless stated otherwise, all statistics pertaining to student numbers refer to students officially enrolled for formal assessment/subject/year, rather than class size, as the latter includes those studying a subject but not sitting formal assessment.

**Table 1.1 All NZ Retention Rate (%) After 3 Consecutive Years of L2 Study (Yr 11 to Yr 13)<sup>6</sup>**

Yr 11-13 L2 Study	1993 -1995	1994 -1996	1995 -1997	1996 -1998	1997 -1999	1998 -2000	1994 -2001	1999 -2002	2000 -2003	2002 -2004
French	24.2	24.5	27.0	27.7	28.8	28.7	26.4	27.2	31.8	31.4
German	31.3	27.3	31.7	27.4	27.4	30.0	31.7	35.7	38.8	36.2
Japanese	36.5	33.0	35.3	33.8	31.8	33.2	33.5	34.4	43.2	41.8
Spanish	N/A	71.5	71.5	61.0	61.3	54.7	43.1	51.7	62.3	66.8
Latin	12.4	15.8	15.8	25.1	18.8	18.8	19.3	17.8	22.4	19.4
Russian	10.5	50.0	50.0	100	N/A*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Indonesian	197.3	215.3	316.0	170.0	148.0	117.3	107.1	77.2	86.6	63.0

\* Russian removed from curriculum because of low student numbers.

The Indonesian figures for the early 1990s in Table 1.1 are misleading because they include significant numbers of immigrant native-speakers joining Indonesian classes, especially at Yr 13 level. Overall, the three-year retention rates for L2 subjects are very low and, while promising increases of late are noted, only Spanish consistently generates a genuine three-year continuation rate above 50 per cent. The fact that less than one third of those studying an L2 at Yr 11 continue that option through to Yr 13 is a worrying pattern. On the other hand, and illustrating the perceived greater importance placed upon completing three consecutive years of many *non-L2* subjects, the three-year (Yr 11-Yr 13) continuation rates for a range of non-L2 subjects are presented in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2 All NZ Yr11-Yr13 completion rates (%) For non-L2 subjects**

All NZ: Completed Three Years L2 Study (Yr 11-Yr 13)	1998-2000 (%)	1999-2001 (%)	2000-2002 (%)	Average
Science	56.6	57.1	61.9	58.5
Maths*	54.8	50.2	55.8	53.6
Geography	45.0	45.6	44.4	45.0
History	57.2	56.4	55.9	56.5
Economics	70.4	69.6	70.4	70.1
Music	30.5	27.8	30.2	29.5
English	37.3	41.0	38.8	39.0

**Note:** English, Mathematics and Science data exclude the IA variants of those subjects. (IA variants = separate occurrences with reduced learning outcomes)

\* Includes Calculus and Statistics options.

The data in Table 1.2 clearly shows how the retention rates of many of the most popular non-L2 subjects are consistently higher than those for L2 subjects shown in Table 1.1. Economics is clearly the stand-out performer and retains

<sup>6</sup> Refer footnote 5.

more students across each three-year span than any other subject in the curriculum. Reliability of the data pertaining to science subjects in Table 1.2 is reduced because general science is offered as a separate option in Yr 11, but not in Yr 12 or Yr 13. In other words, when they enter Yr 12, students from the Yr 11 general science option (e.g. 29,666 students in Yr 11 Science in 2000, 29,410 in 2001) are required to choose from the specialist streams of Physics, Biology and Chemistry. Consequently, the three-year retention figures for Science in Table 1.2 are used generically to include all sciences, and are approximations only. This scenario would also apply to Art, for example, which ceases to exist as a generic subject after Yr 11 by splitting into Yr 12 specialist subjects of Practical Art, Design, Sculpture, and Graphics.

While not shown in Table 1.2, substantial increases in retention rates for Yr 13 Geography and Yr 13 History (for example, in 2002, Yr 13 History retention rate was 116.4%, while Yr 13 geography rate was 100.2%) may also seem anomalous, especially after the relatively high attrition rates after Yr 11 (48.5% and 44.3% respectively). However, Geography and History are among the very few options available to *first-time* students at the senior levels, including low-achievers and those with no previous knowledge of those subjects. This helps explain the large increases into Yr 13 for both subjects and, while there is no evidence available, we can assume that some of the students who discontinue their L2 studies after Yr 11 and Yr 12 are among those who boost the retention rates for Geography and History at the senior level. Senior L2 study, on the other hand, offers no such possibility for late starters. Being so irrefutably cumulative by nature, it is inconceivable that a student with no, or minimal, prior knowledge, could begin studying at Yr 11, even more so at Yr 12 and 13, with any hope of passing.

The three-year retention rates for non-L2 subjects (Table 1.2) reflect the importance New Zealanders attach to those subjects and the belief that most students, including low-achieving students, will benefit from following those areas of study. Although retention rates for History and Geography, as members of the non-science family, are lower than the Mathematics/Science group, they are still well above the L2s, except for the currently booming Spanish. Of equal note is that much of the drop-off in senior classes for Mathematics, English, Geography and History can be explained by the very substantial numbers of those students who actually leave school altogether, rather than who merely discontinue a particular subject but remain at school. This makes the retention levels of Mathematics and English in particular, all the more impressive. Moreover, the current project makes it clear that this is *not* the case with L2 students, the vast majority of whom, even after abandoning their L2 studies,

continued at secondary school through to the end of Yr 13.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the retention rates in Table 1.2 reflect this nation’s respect for Mathematics and the sciences, its reluctant engagement with humanities in general and its far more resolute avoidance of L2s in particular as worthy of serious study. While music also clearly has its own retention dilemma, its limited numbers and isolation from the Mathematics/Science cohort, even to the extent where it is frequently regarded as having a similar lack of importance as L2 study, was perhaps not counter-intuitive.

Table 1.1 shows an upward trend in three-year retention patterns, but what it does *not* show are the declining raw student numbers enrolling in each L2. In other words, while each L2 in Table 1.1 shows a higher retention rate in 2002 than for a decade earlier, those improved retention rates in most cases hide a gloomier picture of raw student numbers. What this means is that L2 retention rates as percentages of the previous year’s catchment are increasing, but intake numbers at Yr 11 for most L2 subjects are decreasing. An interesting and, no doubt, vigorous debate would be to decide the preferred desirability of a larger Yr 11 intake but with a lower retention rate or, a smaller intake at Yr 11 but with a higher retention rate thereafter. Of course, the preference would be for both the higher Yr 11 intake and the higher retention rate. Sadly, however, that is not the current state of affairs.

Table 1.3 also shows the less rosy picture of declining student numbers for all L2s combined between 1992 and 2002, especially after numbers at Yr 11 and Yr 12 appeared to be making some headway in the early-mid 1990s.

**Table 1.3 All NZ: Total number of candidates for all NZQA L2 exams**

Yr	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
11	7819	8716	8826	8696	8314	7833	7725	7507	7340	7070	0*
12	3531	3914	4084	3977	4029	3978	3585	3491	3178	3132	3040
13	2345	2485	2691	2708	2599	2887	2696	2449	2466	2269	2675

\* No Yr 11 data available because of the change from School Certificate to NCEA.

However, when the data from Table 1.3 is sub-divided and re-presented in Tables 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6, we see yet another less optimistic picture, this time of raw student numbers in each L2 and for each NCEA level. What this means is

<sup>7</sup> As will be explained in detail in Chapter 3, only 41 of the original 765 students in the survey had left school after Yr 11. Of the 41, 23 had transferred to other schools, meaning that only 2.3% of the original 765 had quit school at the end of Yr 11. After Yr 12, a further 67 had left school, of whom 36 were reported to have transferred to another school. Therefore, of the total n=765 L2 Yr 11 students, only 6.7% had discontinued their schooling prior to Yr 13. The project did not measure numbers who left school during Yr 13.

that the overall decrease in Table 1.3 is the result of two identifiable phenomena; firstly, that the ‘traditional’ L2s are continuing to lose numbers in a steady, downward curve and secondly, that the more recently introduced ‘new’ L2s are increasing or holding steady to help counteract that effect. While it is tempting to draw a more optimistic conclusion from increases in Yr 12 and Yr 13 during 2003 and 2004 (not shown in Table 1.3), they should not be compared with data from the previous decade because from 2003, the Ministry of Education’s method of counting student numbers changed.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, those whose passion, qualifications and skills have equipped them to teach in the areas which may, in a worst case scenario, eventually follow Russian’s removal from the curriculum, might well regard the future as less promising. Table 1.4 confirms the ‘balancing act’ of student numbers between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘new’ L2s.

**Table 1.4 All NZ: Total of Yr 11 candidates for each L2 1992-2002**

	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Chinese	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	99*	109	0#
French	3611	3535	3326	3062	2822	2534	2560	2607	2616	2584	0
German	1372	1488	1458	1401	1293	1233	1185	973	1029	944	0
Indonesian	39	38	26	25	20	25	23	14	22	15	0
Japanese	2431	3093	3451	3653	3651	3457	3303	2944	2658	2377	0
Latin	351	330	320	2711	251	276	303	295	258	289	0
Russian	15	19	4	10	5	0	0**	0	0	0	0
Samoan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	185##	188	194	0
Spanish	0	213	241	274	272	308	351	470	470	558	0

# No comparable data for 2002, the year School Certificate changed to NCEA.

\* Chinese first available for formal assessment.

\*\* Russian removed from formal assessment.

## Samoan first available for formal assessment.

In Table 1.4, only the ‘new’ L2s (Samoan, Chinese and Spanish) show significant increases in Yr 11. On the other hand, the traditional L2s have tracked a steady decline throughout the decade (and prior to that as well). Although French and Japanese have shown some small and sporadic increases of late (not shown in table), this scenario is also likely due to the different data collection methods of the Ministry of Education. However, while there is a glimmer of hope that this is part of a new and continuing trend, it is too early to draw any firm conclusions. Above all, what must be remembered is that Table 1.4 depicts the data for Yr 11, the first year of senior L2 intake. Any gains made at this level are the crucial first steps towards the survival of the traditional languages in our schools.

<sup>8</sup> Prior to 2003, subject data were collected as a “snapshot” and by year of schooling. Since 2003, data are collected on subjects taken for more than 20 hours per year, over the whole year, and were defined by Learning Zone (i.e. the academic level at which the subject is studied) rather than by year of schooling of the student.

**Table 1.5 All NZ total numbers of Yr 12 candidates for each L2 1992-2003**

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Chinese	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	99*	109	0#
French	3611	3535	3326	3062	2822	2534	2560	2607	2616	2584	0
German	1372	1488	1458	1401	1293	1233	1185	973	1029	944	0
Indonesian	39	38	26	25	20	25	23	14	22	15	0
Japanese	2431	3093	3451	3653	3651	3457	3303	2944	2658	2377	0
Latin	351	330	320	2711	251	276	303	295	258	289	0
Russian	15	19	4	10	5	0	0**	0	0	0	0
Samoan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	185##	188	194	0
Spanish	0	213	241	274	272	308	351	470	470	558	0

# No comparable data for 2002, the year School Certificate changed to NCEA.

\* Chinese first available for formal assessment.

\*\* Russian removed from formal assessment.

## Samoan first available for formal assessment.

Table 1.5 shows an improvement in Yr 12 French enrolments for 2002 over previous years, but again, this is due largely to the change in data collection methods. Whether this warrants greater optimism or not, remains to be seen. As with Yr 11, Spanish numbers are increasing steadily in Yr 12 and, although Latin also enjoyed an increase during the mid-1990s, its numbers overall are too small and its patterns too inconsistent to provide any conclusions. Samoan is now the third most widely spoken language in New Zealand (although as a first language rather than as an L2) and numbers of secondary school students wishing to study Samoan may well increase dramatically in the near future. Indonesian numbers in Yr 11 and Yr 12 have remained insignificant and, given the state of world affairs at the moment, it is unlikely that the study of Indonesian is going to experience a surge in popularity in New Zealand as Japanese once did, and as Spanish is currently enjoying. While numbers studying Indonesian in Australia have grown steadily, but not spectacularly, since the early 1980s, New Zealand does not share Australia's geographical proximity to Indonesia, and Indonesia's economy and level of consumer spending are unlikely to match those of Japan, a key factor in the 'Japanese boom' here during the 1980s.

**Table 1.6 All NZ total number of Yr 13 candidates for each L2 1992-2002**

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Chinese	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	462
French	1092	961	1014	858	817	827	784	731	736	690	713
German	453	447	452	467	398	445	410	339	356	309	368
Indonesian	50	57	68	75	56	79	34	37	27	15	17
Japanese	612	871	1021	1129	1139	1292	1234	1101	1098	987	916
Latin	65	62	44	41	42	43	63	52	57	57	46
Russian	13	14	15	2	2	5	5	0	0	0	0
Spanish	60	73	77	136	145	196	166	189	192	211	243

One notable feature of Table 1.6 is that many times more students are regularly enrolling in Yr 13 Indonesian and Chinese than feature in Yr 11 and Yr 12. Increased numbers of immigrant families have placed schools in a difficult position where they are not quite sure what to do with native speakers of NCEA L2 options whose English is often insufficient for mainstreaming. One solution is to place them in a senior class of their native language where they can assist the teacher and other students, and where, because of the way L2s are taught in New Zealand, most of what they hear will be to the betterment of their English skills anyway. Of late, numbers of 'genuine' beginner students of Indonesian have declined and are now on a steady downwards curve. Chinese, however, appears to be heading in the opposite direction and more will be said later about this issue.

At Yr 12 and Yr 13, Japanese still accounts for the largest number of L2 students, although at Yr 11, French is marginally ahead. What this means is that solving the long-term, overall downturn in numbers studying L2s lies partially in a dual approach. The first component is to encourage more Yr 10 students into the Yr 11 catchment level. Because L2 study is optional, almost all Yr 11 L2 students in New Zealand make their own decision to study. This is supported by that fact that in the current Christchurch study, while some enlisted the advice of parents and guardians, not one student in the project felt coerced into L2 study in any way. But the second component is to ensure that those who do make that crucial L2 choice at Yr 11 find success and derive sufficient enjoyment from their decision so that they are more likely to persist beyond Yr 11. A key indicator to the specific problem area for L2s is that the continuation rate for Yr 13 (see Table 1.8) is far greater than for Yr 12 (Table 1.7). So, while encouraging more students to opt for an L2 at Yr 11 is one immediate goal, of equal urgency is the task of retaining those students into Yr 12. Once in Yr 12, because students are far more likely to persist with their L2 study into Yr 13 than to discontinue, increased success during Yr 11 is crucial to strengthen numbers overall.

Moreover, in spite of its ability to consistently attract good student numbers at all levels, even Spanish retention rates, most notably at Yr 12, have dipped markedly (Table 1.7). If this pattern persists, Spanish will also be faced with its own internal 'balancing act' whereby increased numbers at Yr 11 will have to compensate for smaller retention percentages during successive years. This is a worrying trend which should not be ignored. Furthermore, Indonesian numbers overall are very small and, notwithstanding the healthier retention rates at Yr 12, numbers are falling, as shown earlier. Indonesian's Yr 12 data provide a clear example of how higher retention rates do not always reflect the very precarious state of a language overall.

The difficulty in maintaining numbers of L2 students at senior level is also evident within those secondary schools where L2 study is compulsory at the junior level. This in itself is a most complicated issue with strong opinions on both sides. However, in spite of curriculum requirements by which some schools amass veritable battalions of L2 students at Yr 9 (first year of secondary education), there is very little evidence that such a process reduces the attrition during subsequent years. In fact, those schools tend to have no more senior L2 students than schools without such a programme and, while some teachers may favour the compulsory L2 scenario by linking multiple classes at junior level to job security, those who have experienced the most extreme reactions of coerced and unwilling junior L2 students may feel less supportive of the concept. Compulsory L2 study in the early stages in order to maintain numbers at senior level, seldom works in practice.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1.7 All NZ Yr 12 retention rates (%)**

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
French	39.0	41.7	39.0	42.7	44.3	43.3	40.5	41.5	43.6
German	47.4	41.3	47.3	50.8	42.9	40.2	43.1	45.0	47.6
Indonesian	26.3	19.2	64.0	45.0	72.0	30.4	78.5	100	53.3
Japanese	55.1	51.4	50.6	49.1	46.8	48.9	45.5	45.4	44.8
Latin	17.2	10.9	12.9	21.1	18.4	18.4	18.3	16.2	14.1
Russian	15.7	100	70.0	60.0	0*	0	0	0	0
Spanish	89.6	94.1	94.8	93.7	79.2	63.2	59.5	67.4	62.0

\* Russian removed from secondary curriculum due to insufficient numbers.

Table 1.8 shows the NZ Yr 13 retention rates for all L2s, with Latin in particular scoring well throughout the whole decade. The apparent anomalies (retention rate greater than 100%) for Latin on several occasions are the likely result of students arriving from other countries and from others who, forced by a timetabling economy, studied Latin by correspondence prior to Yr 13. Offsetting those anomalous retention rates, however, actual student numbers are very low, the national total for Yr 13 Latin not having exceeded 65 since 1992.<sup>10</sup> When dealing with such small numbers, it takes only one or two more or fewer students in any year to skew the overall statistics. Yr 13 Spanish, unlike Yr 12,

<sup>9</sup> Lo Bianco (2000).

<sup>10</sup> In the project, 20 girls were studying Latin in Yr 11. While all 20 remained at school for Yr 13, only five were still studying Latin in Yr 13.

boasts retention rates which have climbed markedly over the decade, dipped during the mid-1990s but which now appear to be constant. Notwithstanding its lower retention rates at Yr 12, a more significant part of the overall optimistic Spanish equation is the fact that actual student numbers are still increasing steadily. Currently, Spanish appears to be the only language in NZ attracting increasing numbers and maintaining healthy retention rates.

**Table 1.8 All NZ Yr 13 retention rates (%)**

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Chinese	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	642*	57.6
French	64.1	60.8	61.0	69.0	65.0	64.0	66.2	65.0	65.6	72.9
German	64.1	60.8	61.0	67.1	62.3	64.1	74.6	73.5	79.3	81.3
Indonesian	340.0	750.0	714.2	493.7	377.7	98.6	385.4	136.3	113.3	162.5
Japanese	70.8	66.1	64.5	69.8	68.7	68.0	68.2	73.2	75.8	96.3
Latin	97.7	71.9	120.0	122.8	118.8	101.9	101.7	105.5	109.5	158.3
Russian	120.0	66.6	50.0	71.4	60.0	0	0	0	0	0
Samoan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	64**
Spanish	51.6	71.2	63.8	75.3	65.0	77.4	86.4	72.5	76.6	100.5

\* , Actual number of candidates at Yr 13 (not a retention rate), for first-year of NCEA Yr 13 Chinese.

\*\* Actual number of candidates at Yr 13 (not a retention rate), for first year of NCEA Yr 13 Samoan.

As is the case with Latin, data for several of the Indonesian and Russian retention rates show increases above 100%. The reasons for this have already been explained but even the unparalleled Indonesian retention rate of 714.2 per cent in 1996 still represented a total of only 56 Yr 13 students. With Yr 13 numbers studying Indonesian regularly only in the mid-teens during the last few years, Indonesian must now be in serious danger of being removed from the curriculum. Japanese retention rates are also steady but the true picture is somewhat bleaker than the retention rates themselves suggest, bearing in mind the steady decline in numbers at Yr 11. From about 1999 and continuing right up to 2003, German and French joined the other L2s in a welcome, but small, upwards trend for Yr 13 retention rates.

## 1.6 Conclusions

Declining L2 uptake into Yr 11 and high attrition rates after Yr 11 are disappointing, especially given the fact that most students who discontinue their L2 will remain at school until the end of Yr 13. This issue will be explored in subsequent chapters. Overall, L2 retention rates in New Zealand for Yr 13 are, predictably, far healthier than those for Yr 12. To L2 teachers weary of their colleagues'

comments about the impact small senior L2 classes have on staffing and the timetable, the Yr 13 L2 retention figures are at least one positive phenomenon. Accordingly, ways need to be found which will encourage more Yr 11 students to persevere into Yr 12, because that year is clearly a watershed for improving senior retention. Higher retention rates after Yr 12 than for after Yr 11 are not unexpected, however, firstly because most students who persist with their L2 studies to the end of Yr 12 are committed to seeing the senior programme through to its completion in Yr 13. Be that as it may, it does not mean that every Yr 13 L2 student is still the willing participant s/he was in Yr 11, and a second predictable explanation for the greater retention rate after Yr 12 is, in part at least, merely pragmatic. In other words, it is far more difficult to abandon one subject in favour of a new one in Yr 13. Accordingly, it can be assumed that Yr 13 L2 classes *do* contain students who may well wish they had opted out several years earlier. Furthermore, because of the almost uniquely cumulative nature of L2 study, any new students enrolling in an L2 at Yr 13 and boosting the numbers accordingly will be few and far between and restricted to those arriving with sufficient prior knowledge from other countries or private study. Unlike subjects such as English, History or Geography, L2s will almost never attract new students away from other subjects at senior level. L2 retention rates for Yr 13 are therefore almost totally internally generated and, by any measure, very high. Finally, it should not be overlooked that many senior L2 students who persist with their language studies to the end, do so because they derive high levels of satisfaction and enjoyment from their studies. For them, there is no need to justify or explain their continued interest and determination.



# Chapter Two

## Attrition: Theories and Opinions

### 2.1 Teachers' anecdotal reasons for L2 attrition

Some schools, either through advantageous location, decile rating or reputation, will regularly attract a Yr 9 intake where L2 study with uniformly prescribed levels of learning outcomes is suitable for most students. In these schools, greater numbers of students may persist with their L2 study to senior level. While not a new concept, Parkinson (2002) noted the connection between a school's decile ranking and the number of students studying an L2.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, very large schools are also less affected, simply because student numbers can offset attrition by providing the necessary critical mass for continued viability at senior levels. But for most schools, neither of the above scenarios is realistic, leaving the same cyclic conundrums of insufficient L2 students and not knowing what to do about it. Some schools respond proactively with attempts to encourage L2s through multiple options matrices, creative timetabling and pro-active careers information. However, senior L2 classes with large numbers are a rarity and it is most unusual in New Zealand schools today for any Yr 12 or Yr 13 L2 class to contain more than ten students.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, girls outnumber boys by almost two to one in any L2 and, in spite of resounding success in the early stages of L2 learning, most high-achieving students discontinue prematurely.

During survey visits to the schools, many L2 teachers expressed their own 'gut feeling' reasons for L2 attrition. Their suggestions, while anecdotal, fit roughly into three main categories. The first is that academically superior students have their sights set on high-income careers in science, medicine, law, engineering etc. and perceive no advantage from further L2 study, some even to the extent that L2 study would disadvantage them by excluding a more university/career-related option. Consequently, many students will willingly study an L2 (and very frequently achieve extremely well) as far as Year 11, but are the first to drop the subject thereafter, concentrating their final two years of secondary schooling on their tertiary and subsequent employment prerequisite subjects. Even

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<sup>1</sup> NCEA results for 2004, for all subjects and at all three levels showed significant differences according to the decile ratings for secondary schools.

<sup>2</sup> In 2004 Yr 11 L2 classes in the current project averaged 16.1 students, Yr 12 averaged 9.5 students in 2005 and Yr 13 classes averaged 6.3 students in 2006. Of the Yr 13 classes, one had retained 20 students and two had retained 11 students. But five classes had one student, three classes had two and six classes had four students

more serious is that the vast majority do not even take an L2 up to, or during, Yr 11. The second suggestion is that L2s are very often the first subjects to be discarded as too difficult or boring and in subsequent chapters, data analyses from the current project will provide strong support for that finding. Whether students become bored because of the difficulty level, or vice versa, or whether there is no connection between the two, is unknown. Both scenarios are very real, however, and will be explored in detail in Chapters Four and Five.

The third suggestion<sup>3</sup> is that interest in pursuing an L2 at senior level can be extinguished by principals, careers advisors and timetables<sup>4</sup>, the latter usually arranged by staff in the mathematics or science departments and, not uncommonly, in favour of subjects they deem to be more important, often in their own subject areas. While this claim is contentious and difficult to prove, several teachers at schools in the current project claimed that, to some extent at least, their schools actively encourage top students to study three sciences plus mathematics from Yr 11. Those same teachers also claimed that their schools would vehemently deny putting any pressure on their students to abandon their L2 study, but it is difficult to see how actively encouraging students to take an all-science programme does not directly catalyse some level of attrition in other subjects. After selecting a heavily Science and Mathematics-orientated programme, there is seldom space for more than one (if any) other option. It is in competition for this space that L2 options have to line up against accounting and economics, as well as other traditional members of the humanities family such as Geography, History and English. As is explained in Chapter Three, Ministry of Education statistics demonstrate unequivocally that most students will select Mathematics and English from the option column, followed by History and Geography.

To the further chagrin of many L2 teachers, the last decade or so has seen most secondary schools offering, as full senior subjects for NCEA assessment, many disciplines which were once firmly regarded as extra-curricular activities. The list is extensive but includes drama, dance, music, outdoor education, photography, printmaking, painting and sport. Academic rigour apart, such popular options have made further inroads into timetabling viability by thinning

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<sup>3</sup> Numerous other reasons are also frequently put forward, including the text-book, the teacher's personality, the teacher's approach, the student, the classroom, parents, peers, the school and so on. Apart from the current study, there appears to be no empirical research into why secondary school students abandon their L2 studies, and it is largely as a result of more than 30 years of discussions about the issue with L2 teachers that the current project was conceived.

<sup>4</sup> Timetable as a factor in high attrition rates was raised repeatedly by many FL teachers during my visits. While there is no doubt that the issue is problematic, for many students it is a diversionary tactic as will be explained in Chapter Four. Holt *et al* (2001) found that 9.6 per cent of their Yr 10 sample of Japanese students and 8.3 per cent of the French/German students cited timetable difficulties as a major barrier against continuation into Yr 11.

down further the number of students studying each subject. Three large secondary schools in the greater Christchurch area (average roll 1142) were unable to participate in the current project because they simply did not have a Yr 11 class in any L2. Ironically, the introduction of the 'new' L2s into the curriculum, firstly Spanish and Japanese, and most recently Samoan and Chinese, has also brought about a further reduction in class sizes as the already diminishing L2 catchment becomes spread even more thinly over a wider range of language options. Today, more than ever, L2s are consistently at the bottom of the popularity stakes, leaving dedicated, but despairing, staff to think up ever more creative solutions about retention. Camps, activity days, ethnic food fairs, videos, exchange programmes, games, rewards for good test results and trips to the L2 country are among the raft of measures aimed at reversing the trend.

Until the Te Reo Maori renaissance throughout our own education system and the boom in international travel during the 1970s, most New Zealanders accepted, and even promoted, a "one language...English" policy, blissfully unaware of just how linguistically and socially barren that stance left them. The "one language...English" attitude has contributed much towards the social climate and educational psyche which have helped catalyse high L2 attrition rates and the steady decline in L2 numbers nation-wide. The most extreme result of New Zealand's myopic approach to L2 study occurred in 1998 when the government removed Russian from the secondary school syllabus altogether because of its inability to maintain viable class sizes. Yet interest in studying Russian had flourished during the 1960s and 1970s, fuelled in part by the USSR's competitive reputation for developing sophisticated science and technology. This interest increased further with the Soviet Union's first flight into space, the resulting "space race" with America and intensifying cold war tensions. Such factors all created a new level of intrigue among young New Zealanders wanting to be better informed and, until the numbers fell away to below the viability threshold, for a time Russian competed with French as one of the most popular language options in New Zealand secondary schools. In 1999 Samoan, now New Zealand's third most widely spoken language, was introduced into the secondary school curriculum as an official subject,<sup>5</sup> and Mandarin Chinese was introduced soon after in 2000.

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<sup>5</sup> No school in the current project offers Samoan as an NCEA subject.

## 2.2 Compulsory or Optional? Customised Learning Outcomes

Most secondary schools formerly provided compulsory L2 study, at least at the junior level and for students of greater academic ability. Today, very few schools, mainly private schools, still do. For students whose own outlook regards L2 study as for the ‘betterment of their education’, compulsory studies work well, although history shows that continuation at senior levels is generally no greater than in schools without such compulsion. But perhaps the most destructive consequence of coerced L2 study could be termed “negative backlash”. This is the most extreme consequence of forcing large numbers of reluctant learners to study a subject in which they are condemned to make negligible or no progress, wherein they perceive minimal or no benefit and whence they derive little or no enjoyment. Sadly, many grow up to despise, not only the L2 they have personally studied, but everything associated with L2 studies in general. “Negative backlash” refers to the ingrained resentment which disillusioned L2 students can subsequently transmit, consciously and unconsciously, to siblings, friends and even their own children many years later. The latter, in turn, as they walk through the school gate on their first day, have already internalised the negative opinions of their elders and are resolute that they too are going to hate their L2 experience. There is widespread anecdotal evidence of students who felt negatively about L2 learning, even before their very first lesson, because an elder brother or sister (or parent) described how they “hated it” or regarded the process as “pointless”.

The most common solution to the compulsory vs. optional conundrum tends to be founded upon the age-old notion that L2 study is simply too difficult for average and below-average students, but appropriate and defensibly compulsory for more able students. However, while that solution may make perfect sense to many, it also revisits the frequently debated paradigm that L2 study is élitist and divisive. The Ministry of Education will not entertain such a notion and most L2 teachers would probably also prefer (apart from the viewpoint of teacher sanity and job-preservation) that it be avoided. L2 teachers may well delight in the cut and thrust of irregular verbs, non-conforming declensions, deciphering difficult kanji and musing over which French constructions take a subjunctive with the pleonastic ‘ne’, but even they must also concede that serious L2 study can be irrefutably difficult, time-consuming, often illogical and frustrating. While such a challenge may be what motivates many of us, a second and less contentious solution than the once widespread process of “the bright kids do French and Latin, the mediocre kids do French and the rest do nothing”, therefore, might be to address the issue of customising the learning outcomes.

In an age where the concentration span of many students is measured in sound-bytes of *The Simpsons*, considering alternative learning outcomes for groups of differing abilities is appropriate. This may mean that for some learners, elementary L2 study should amount to nothing more than being able to locate the major cities and neighbouring countries on a map, read fascinating stories about food, music, famous events and people from that country, count to a hundred and handle half a dozen of the simplest greetings and situations such as “where is X?” or “I like X”. Moreover, the requirements for “X” might involve nothing more than students constructing a short reference list of mutually agreed, or individually selected, vocabulary items, words which are relevant to a Yr 9 student but which need not even be memorised. If such a reduced range of outcomes is deemed acceptable for lower-achieving or potentially short-term L2 students, such a programme could well afford those same students a far better chance of enjoying their elementary L2 studies. They are more likely to derive success from it and far more likely to exit (as history tells us most of them will do) their elementary L2 experience without the feelings of total bewilderment and negativity about the process; in other words, without ‘negative backlash’.

It goes without saying that students who readily cope with the more complicated concepts of advanced L2 learning, however, would almost certainly be expected to attempt an expanded range of learning outcomes, such as what might currently be regarded as the “normal” syllabus. It is difficult to envisage any pedagogical or social arguments against a programme where those who complete the assessment for the “normal” syllabus will receive their appropriate and deserved NCEA achievement credits, while those who undertake a course of reduced learning outcomes receive unit standards. In fact, given the right set of learning outcomes, all students could have the benefit of a potentially stress-free, positive L2 learning experience, something L2 teachers would surely all want to encourage. In the void, what is not working and not to be encouraged, is the status quo of burdening every student with an expectation of the same learning outcomes in academia’s most demanding discipline. This is not advocating “dumbing down”, however, for that would mean offering the same reduced assessment credits to all students. Rather, it is advocating an acceptance of the fact that most secondary school students abandon their L2 studies prematurely and, for whatever reason, many either do not enjoy or do not value the experience. However, if they did enjoy the experience, logically, far more might continue. The findings of Simpson Norris International (2001, p. 9) would seem to support the notion of customising learning outcomes to suit various learner levels via the argument that even for children with learning

difficulties “the learning of a second language can, in fact, be advantageous”. But rather than arguing in favour of actual L2 acquisition, their case for teaching an L2 to children with learning difficulties was to help those children make progress in “listening skills, general communication skills, and importantly, self-esteem”.

A third solution, namely “language options” styled courses,<sup>6</sup> is already used in many schools. The aim of this type of programme, almost exclusively for Yr 9 students, is three-fold, namely: to ensure an L2 opportunity for all Yr 9 students, to boost L2 student numbers in subsequent years, and to keep existing L2 teachers gainfully employed. Indeed, this author well remembers the introduction of that very concept into the secondary school of his employ in the 1970s in a bid to alleviate the intense levels of “negative backlash” which resulted from every Year 9 pupil (including those with social, attention and academic learning difficulties) having to study French for a year. That scenario tormented teachers and students alike until senior staff finally realised that far too many new entrants, especially those with limited ability, were learning little in their L2 classes except how to misbehave and develop an intense loathing of L2 study in general. In that school, and in many others, however, the ‘language option’ was never going to achieve what it set out to do. One of the reasons for the failure of what could have been an exciting, stimulating innovation is that the learning outcomes and course content of such “taster” L2 courses are seldom modified for different learner abilities or interest. In other words, in most cases, Yr 9 students “tasting” an L2 in Semester One simply study the first half of the normal Yr 9 prescribed syllabus, namely the same complicated material the “language option” concept was designed to avoid. Sadly, because many students are already disheartened well before the mid-way point in a normal Yr 9 full-year L2 programme, the unmodified language option programme does nothing to alleviate their despair. Furthermore, during Semester Two, those same language option students are introduced to their second L2 language option and, although for some, the change may be exactly what is needed, for the many who struggled with every concept of L2 in the first semester, the negative attitude may already be in place.

Bearing in mind the much higher than predicted Yr 12 L2 attrition rates in the current project and the reasons behind them (see Chapter Four), it is especially important that Yr 11 L2 study is portrayed to students as valuable, worthwhile, not unreasonably difficult, rewarding, even honourable and superior. A second suggestion might be to replicate the structural model of science, art and social

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<sup>6</sup> Commonly structured so that Yr 9 students ‘sample’ one L2 in Semester 1, then a second L2 in Semester 2

studies, for example, by offering a specially designed Language Option for three years, from Yr 9 to Yr 11. Such a General Languages course could cover two (or three) L2s in much less depth than at present and, as with other broad-band courses, once in Yr 12, students who wished to persist would be required to specialise and take one or more individual L2s. Again, the purists may regard such suggestions as ‘dumbing down’ but, given the uneconomic size of most Yr 13 L2 classes and the reality that many Yr 13 students cannot converse freely with a native speaker after five intensive years of committed study, looking outside the square for answers should not be dismissed out of hand. Latin has already taken a small, but pioneering step in this direction by removing the effete vocative case from its complicated noun declensions. The vocative case which formerly required students (including this author) to memorise such oddities as ‘table, Oh Table!’ and ‘spear, Oh Spear!’ was tiresome and irrelevant long before New Zealand students in the 1950s and 60s ever looked at page one of their *Modern Approach to Latin, Parts I and II*. Furthermore, for a range of very sound reasons, German teaching has reversed the order in which students now study the genitive and dative cases. These are small steps but, regardless of how the goals of making L2 study more attractive and more achievable are perceived, once school managers and timetabling staff are faced with higher L2 student numbers and higher L2 retention rates, they will no longer be able to ignore the issue with their traditional defence that they “timetable according to demand”. The reality is that most timetables are now done by computers which rely heavily on the “numbers game”. This ‘catch-22’ situation is all the more relevant because anecdotally, it is the tangential mechanics of the timetable itself which are so often cited by high-achieving and high-interest L2 students as excluding them from continuing. In Chapter Four, the timetabling issue is explained more fully.

In discussing the L2 scenario, the Ministry of Education’s recognition that students have varying levels of ability starts and ends with the consideration of teaching methods, but fails to address the more important matters of course content and learning outcomes. In the end, the choice is frighteningly simple. We can maintain the status quo of diminishing returns and blame whomever we can think of, or we can have the courage to move away from the “one size fits all” approach to L2 syllabi and look towards offering a range of programmes, including, but not restricted to, one of varied learning outcomes.<sup>7</sup> While the latter might not meet with the full approval of all, it could well go a long way towards achieving one of our most cherished goals, namely that every student

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<sup>7</sup> I believe that what I am proposing supports Parkinson’s notion that one important aspect of any elementary programme must be to “prepare learners for future language learning.” (2002, p. 40).

could study an L2, enjoy it, succeed in it and either continue or exit with a greatly reduced risk of negative backlash. One of the undeniable benefits of NCEA is that a student could achieve credits at Level 1, even after five years of studying a program of reduced learning outcomes. Any claims of “dumbing down” are little more than mischievous because students who work at the lower level leave school with credits only for that level (Level 1), while their more highly achieving colleagues leave with credits at advanced Levels 2 and 3.

### 2.3 Looking to Asia

During the 1970s, traditional European languages suffered a further blow to their already diminishing numbers when Japanese was introduced into the New Zealand curriculum. In spite of strong feelings among many New Zealanders who had fought in the Pacific War, this country was turning towards Japan in an earnest search for trade and tourism opportunities. The new direction was part of the government’s strategy of targeting Japanese consumers whose spending power had skyrocketed at the zenith of their nation’s economic miracle. But the push to Japan was also a reaction to this country’s own geographic proximity to Asia, as well as reflecting a sense of urgency after traditional markets began to dry up through Great Britain’s formal alliance with the then EEC. As the ‘new fashion’ L2, Japanese enjoyed unparalleled popularity for over 20 years, unfortunately hastening at the same time the already steady decline in numbers studying French, German and Latin. Record numbers of students enrolled for Japanese at both secondary and tertiary levels and, as school principals struggled to protect the job security of tenured staff teaching the traditional “European” languages, they were just as desperately searching for suitably qualified staff to teach their burgeoning Japanese classes. As French and German numbers were further decimated by the surging popularity of Japanese, Latin all but disappeared from most secondary schools.<sup>8</sup>

As this nation’s ties with Asia became increasingly defined, for the first time many New Zealanders realised that L2 skills could be far more than an academic exercise. Within the context that “Language is most rewarding when it is used for real, meaningful communication...”<sup>9</sup>, communicative methods were deployed to help students towards their goal of practical Japanese skills which, for a time, many viewed as the new key to finding well-paid employment in such areas as trade, tourism and foreign affairs. As with secondary schools and universities,

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<sup>8</sup> Although 17 of the schools in the current project had once offered Latin as a formal subject at some stage in the past, today only two schools still offer the subject for NCEA assessment.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Education (2002, p. 11).

evening classes also struggled to find suitably qualified teachers and sufficient classrooms to accommodate the surge of adults who queued up to study Japanese in community education programmes around the country. Providing a rich out-of-class practice environment, increasing numbers of non-English speaking Japanese visitors were patient and encouraging as Kiwi students pursued them relentlessly on their shopping tours and in hotel lobbies. The more intrepid students (including this author) even travelled regularly to their local harbour to talk with Japanese sailors on cargo and fishing boats. Souvenir shops, restaurants, hotels and tour companies began to offer highly-prized, part-time employment to those who could boost profits by communicating with their Japanese customers. However, with Japanese language skills being keenly sought, it did not take long for local employers to work out that hiring young Japanese visitors, many without work-permits, was a far easier solution than encouraging and training young New Zealanders. Be that as it may, the booming tourist trade catalysed a proliferation in the number of businesses targeting Japanese tourists, and many students were still able to find work locally because of their burgeoning Japanese language skills. This opportunity was a tangible reward which years of committed endeavour in French, German and Latin had never offered.

However, since the late 1990s and partially in response to Japan's economic downturn, numbers of students studying Japanese in New Zealand have also declined. According to a very extensive international survey by the Japan Foundation (1998-2003), numbers studying Japanese in New Zealand have shown the greatest decline of any country in the world, at all levels (primary, secondary, university and night classes). Notwithstanding the steady decline, however, levels of interest in Japanese are still comparatively high in the New Zealand L2 setting. Nationwide in 2003, Yr 11 Japanese (2490 students = 32 per cent of all Yr 11 L2 students, marginally up from 2431 in 1992)<sup>10</sup> was second only to French (2714 students = 34 per cent of all Yr 11 L2 students, down from 3611 students in 1992). In Yr 12 in 2003, Japanese and French were equal with almost 32 per cent each (French = 1374 students, Japanese = 1397), while in Yr 13, Japanese (1028) accounted for 33 per cent of all Yr 13 L2 students, compared with French (823), a drop to 27 per cent of all Yr 13 L2 students. Several teachers from schools in the current project reported incidents of students who have felt deterred from studying Japanese because of the steady influx of native speakers of Chinese (who already know the

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<sup>10</sup> These figures do not show that in 1995, for example, 3653 students studied Japanese at Year 11.

Japanese characters) and Koreans (whose syntactical structures are similar to Japanese) in their schools. That is a very plausible situation although the issue was not raised by any student in the current project.

Chinese, on the other hand, while increasing steadily in some areas, has been much more erratic in its growth patterns. As China's booming economy and rates of economic growth replay Japan's own economic miracle of 30 years earlier, New Zealand students have responded predictably and are keen to experience China's language and culture. Although it is too early yet to draw conclusions from the few statistics available, between 2000 and 2003, student numbers in Yr 11 Chinese climbed from 99 to 159, although Yr 13 numbers over the same period dropped from 462 to 370. Moreover, one school in the current project has already abandoned Chinese because of lack of student interest in the subject. Like Japanese, Chinese has a complicated writing system and no linguistic similarities to English, its level of difficulty being further heightened by its range of pronunciation tones.

As explained in Chapter One, a particular phenomenon of senior L2 studies is that class sizes at Yr 12 and Yr 13 are almost uniquely dependent on the size of the Yr 11 catchment. One interesting and apparent aberration in this matrix involved the number of students studying Indonesian in Yr 13 in 1998. Although the national figure for Indonesian in Yr 12 was only nine students, in Yr 13 there were 34, an increase of 377 per cent! Clearly this unexpected figure must have resulted from an influx into New Zealand of native Indonesian speakers, an anomaly which again shows the ridiculous situation of native speakers being allowed to study their own language for formal assessment (in this case, for university entrance credits) at a level which can only be described as absurdly elementary to native speakers. However, while no university can take seriously an L2 'A' grade from a native speaker as a credential for university entrance, in its 2005 report to the Associate Minister, the Scholarship Reference Group was still concerned that native speakers were presenting themselves as scholarship candidates for examinations aimed at testing their ability in their own native language.<sup>11</sup>

*Apropos* of the impact native speakers may or may not have on L2 numbers, in the pre-NCEA days of School Certificate (formal qualification for Yr 11) and Sixth Form Certificate (formal qualification for Yr 12), the situation certainly deterred some students from persisting with their L2 studies. Under that old

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<sup>11</sup> Published by the Ministry of Education's Learning Policy Frameworks division Curriculum, Teaching and Learning group, March 2005.

system, grades for Sixth Form Certificate were generated from the grades achieved during the previous year's fifth form examinations. In Yr 12, schools were able to put all the previous year's Yr 11 grades into a "communal pool" and re-allocate them to Yr 12 students, across all subject areas. Because of the prevailing attitudes in some schools towards L2s, however, students entering Yr 12, regardless of how well they performed that year, could only ever achieve the grades which senior staff were willing to allocate from the school's "communal pool" of Yr 11 grades. But the ultimate absurdity of the old system involved students in an L2 class who were "native speakers" of that language. Ultimately, most schools prevented native speakers from presenting themselves for formal assessment in their own language, but some schools were very slow to notice the inequality. Their tardy approach produced inequities when native speakers (including because of nationality, bi-lingual upbringing etc.) or students with a clear advantage (long-term residency overseas because of parents' business reasons etc.) enrolled in the Yr 12 class. They brought no School Certificate grade with them from the previous year, and schools were supposed to generate a new grade through a given formula. Some schools did not, however, allocating instead one or more of the school's top School Certificate grades to the newly arrived native speakers. The inequity was so great that it might be compared to allowing a PhD graduate in biology (for example) to enrol in Yr 12 biology and immediately allocate him/her the top grade earned the previous year by a conscientious Yr 11 student. Grades at Yr 11 are no longer amassed and carried forward to Yr 12 and there is no longer any chance of a native speaker 'pinching' a grade which another student had earned in a previous year.

Yet here was one very tangible, and in many cases measurable, cause of student interest in L2 study declining after Yr 11. Prior to the regulations being tightened, students in some schools were palpably aware of the increasing numbers of native speakers (especially of Chinese and Japanese) entering their schools during Yr 12 and were bitter at the very real prospect of their hard-earned Yr 11 grades going to newcomers with an unfair advantage. Documented evidence exists of a number of students who walked away from L2 study for this very reason, into the welcoming arms of teachers of English, history, geography, environmental and media studies and the like.<sup>12</sup> This most unfortunate phenomenon of 'grade pinching' could easily be viewed as a variation of the 'negative backlash' phenomenon described earlier.

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<sup>12</sup> This scenario did not apply uniquely to Asian languages. Native French and German speakers, including those who, although born in NZ, were raised in bi/multi-lingual families, were also eligible in Yr 12 for the top grades earned by others with no such advantage during the previous year.

However frequent or infrequent, a number of such cases did occur and it is not unreasonable to assume that the disenchanted students would have at least made their friends very aware of the situation and their opinion of it. That is precisely how negative backlash operates.

## **2.4 A Brighter Note**

It is now the turn of Spanish to experience the same popularity and growth once enjoyed by Japanese, with numbers of candidates for Yr 11 Spanish increasing from 213 in 1993 to 893 in 2003. Nationwide, Spanish now accounts for 14 per cent of all Yr 11 L2 students, 11 per cent of all Yr 11 L2 students and 11 per cent of all Yr 13 L2 students. The wave of popularity can be partly explained by a number of factors. Devoid of the complicated writing systems which confuse and discourage so many European students of Japanese and Chinese, Spanish is a less 'mysterious' European language with a similar alphabet to English. Moreover, on the one hand, it is structurally and phonetically similar to its already widely studied romance sibling French, while on the other hand, it contains negligible hidden pitfalls in its rules of pronunciation, largely the result of several government-initiated spelling reforms. Apart from in Spain itself, Spanish is also the lingua franca of millions in Cuba, Central and South America. As the opportunities for travel and trade with those areas beckon, Spanish has New Zealand's highest retention rate (62.7 per cent) of any L2 from Yr 11 through to Yr 13. By 2001, the staggering earlier retention rates for Spanish, some years as high as 90+ per cent into Yr 12, had tapered off to a more modest 62 per cent. But Spanish remains the only L2 where student numbers have continued to increase at Yr 11 level, every year since its introduction into the secondary syllabus, and where Yr 12 and Yr 13 numbers also reflect a continuing surge in interest.

Also, as L2 teachers lament the loss of so many high-achieving and dedicated students from their senior classes, we should not lose sight of the success which many students have rightfully enjoyed. From among the ranks of those who have made L2 study their academic focus, courageously ignoring the more lucrative and socially approved 'call to sciences', many talented and dedicated students have derived enormous success and pleasure from their studies. Good numbers have completed post-graduate qualifications at universities here and overseas whence they have been able to launch outstanding careers in commerce, banking, tourism, sport, broadcasting, translating, teaching, writing, trade and foreign affairs.

## 2.5 Conclusions

There are several clear patterns within the status quo of L2 studies in New Zealand. With few exceptions, numbers of students choosing an L2 for Yr 11 are among the lowest for all subjects available. While the 'new' L2s (Spanish, Chinese and Samoan) have made good headway, the rates of increase for Spanish are already beginning to slow. The so-called 'traditional' L2s have continued their steady decline since the early 1970s and, while minor upturns of late are noted, it is soon to tell whether or not this is part of a trend.

Retention rates for L2 students who have completed Yr 11 and progressed into Yr 12 are poor and are again among the lowest retention rates of all subjects. Only Spanish has the relatively sound retention rate of 60 per cent, although this figure comes at the end of a drastic slide from over 90 per cent in earlier years. The rest are well below 50 per cent and, while Japanese is in second place, its own retention rate has slipped to a little over 40 per cent after a steady annual decline since the early 1990s.

If current retention rates into Yr 12 and Yr 13 operated on a Yr 11 intake of even 10 or 15 per cent more students than at present, the status quo would be immeasurably improved. But even in that case, L2 sustainability can still only be assured by understanding the reasons for Yr 12 and Yr 13 attrition and trying to address those factors which catalyse the phenomenon. Yr 13 retention rates for L2s are much healthier than Yr 12 rates, but by then it is too late as, nationwide, numbers of L2 students in Yr 12 are already well below half of those who embarked on the senior L2 journey three years earlier in Yr 11. Even the improved retention rates for the final year of secondary school merely retain a larger proportion of an already seriously depleted Yr 12 catchment. Subsequently, the three-year retention rates are again, among the worst for any subject available.

Most non-L2 subjects, especially English, Geography and Mathematics, are selected by a much broader academic representation of the secondary school population than are L2s. Their superior rates of retention continue in spite of the fact that very large numbers of their students will be low-achievers and many more will leave school altogether during Yr 11 or Yr 12 or Yr 13. As will be explained in Chapter Four, this is not the case for Yr 11 L2 students, most of whom will stay at school until the end of their five years of secondary education, regardless of whether they persist with their L2 studies or not. This makes L2 attrition rates, as well as the variables which influence them, all the more worthy of serious investigation. As has been explained, some subjects can offset poor Yr 11 and Yr 12 retention rates by being able to offer themselves to

senior students with no prior knowledge. Because L2s do not have this inherent luxury, they are never going to be able to pick up extra numbers at later stages. Consequently, the only option is to be pragmatic in the search for ways of retaining more of those students who select an L2.

By and large, too many New Zealanders are reluctant to acknowledge any inherent or potential value in studying a second language. Overall, twice as many girls as boys study L2s<sup>13</sup> and the discipline itself is much more likely to flourish in single-sex schools, especially all-girls' schools and schools with a higher decile rating. Many low socio-economic schools tend to reflect a much more 'Pacific' face of New Zealand, a social environment which is one further step removed from the traditional L2s which were part of the education system this country inherited from Mother England. Ironically, those schools may well turn out to be the new L2 centres of the country if second and third generation Pacific Island and Asian children decide to study their parents' mother tongues in large numbers.

The teachers whose students took part in the current project have expressed their opinions and, anecdotally at least, they all seem plausible:

1. L2s are academically more difficult than other subjects.
2. Students lose interest quickly.
3. L2 study is regarded as having little relevance to the career interests and ambitions of young New Zealanders.
4. Even before students enter Yr 11, most have mapped out courses of study which actively avoid any further contact with an L2.

In the following chapters, detailed findings of the current project are analysed including, for the first time, the reasons for discontinuation as provided by the discontinuing students themselves. Over the three years of the research, every discontinuing student who could be contacted was re-surveyed.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the following chapters do not attempt to predict on the basis of why students may or may not continue in the future, but rather analyse the reasons those students gave after having already abandoned their L2 study.

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<sup>13</sup> In the current project, out of N=765, 492 were girls and 273 were boys.

<sup>14</sup> The only exceptions were for illness and school activity (Yr 11), having left school (Yrs 12 and 13) and failure to respond to follow-up surveys (Yrs 12 and 13)

# Chapter Three

## Year 1 of the Christchurch project: n = 765

### 3.1 The Survey

In 2004 all secondary schools in the greater Christchurch area were invited to allow their Yr 11 L2 students to take part in the study. Year 11 was chosen as the starting point for the project because it is the first year of formal assessment (NCEA Level 1) in New Zealand's secondary school system. Two schools failed to respond to repeated invitations and did not take part, while three more schools replied that they had no L2 students at Yr 11 and were therefore unable to join the research. One further school initially agreed to participate but, in spite of repeated requests, failed to provide visiting times and was eventually excluded. One principal informally expressed his disappointment that his school had not taken part, but the school in question was one where a series of letters, faxes, emails and messages had failed to illicit any response at all from the teacher in charge of languages.

After the project and questionnaire<sup>1</sup> were approved by the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology Research Committee and Research Ethics Sub-committee, two groups of Yr 12 L2 students in Christchurch completed the survey as a pilot study. Based on their suggestions, the wording of one question was simplified, one question was removed and the answer options to two further questions were expanded. During April and May of 2004, all Yr 11 L2 classes of the participating schools<sup>2</sup> were visited at times arranged with the L2 teachers. The purpose and nature of the project, plus all ethical considerations were explained to the students who were then invited to sign the participation agreement form and complete the questionnaire. All participating students were given a chocolate treat and, without exception, all students completed the questionnaire with due seriousness. At no stage did any student decline to take part, although one very small class (five students) was unexpectedly excluded as the teacher was on sick-leave and the relieving teacher was reluctant to become involved. Moreover, while all students were fully aware of their right to subsequently withdraw at any stage, no student ever withdrew, formally or informally, from the project.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>2</sup> Total of 48 FL classes in 20 schools.

### 3.2 N=765. Target population replicates survey population

During the survey visits to the schools, some Yr 11 students were inevitably absent through sickness, schools trips, sport, drama productions etc. However, by calculating N=765 against the number of known absences and well-informed estimates of Yr 11 L2 classes at the schools which did not participate, it may be confidently assumed that n equates to at least 87.8% of every Yr 11 student studying an L2 in greater Christchurch during 2004, a very pleasing participation percentage for the project.<sup>3</sup> Table 3.1 shows the relationship between student numbers, L2s offered and school types for the current project.

Because state schools are by far the largest providers in the secondary education sector, it is not surprising that they educate almost seventy per cent of the L2 student population in greater Christchurch, as illustrated in Table 3.1. Worthy of mention, however, is the very small number of students who entered the project from private schools. Once the icons of 'traditional' education, private schools now have the smallest numbers of L2 students. No private school or Catholic integrated school offers Latin at any level, yet three decades ago, all would have timetabled classes, at least for their most able students, from Yr 9 right through to Yr 13. A further curriculum shift is from 'traditional' to Asian L2 options, with every school in the project but one offering Japanese.

**Table 3.1 School type/student numbers per L2/L2s offered**

School Type	Number of Schools	Student numbers and as % of n	L2s Offered
State co-ed	9	318/41.6%	Spanish, Japanese, French, German, Chinese
State girls	2	150/19.6%	Latin, French, Chinese, German, Japanese
State boys	1	58/7.6%	Chinese, Japanese, French
Private boys	1	53/6.9%	Japanese, French, German
Private girls	2	66/8.6%	French, Spanish, German, Japanese
Private co-ed	1	32/4.2%	Japanese, German, French
Integrated girls	2	72/9.4%	Japanese, German, French
Integrated boys	1	14/1.8%	Japanese
Integrated co-ed	1	2/0.26%	Japanese
Totals	20	765	

<sup>3</sup> Of N=765, only five students were studying two FLs, while no student was studying three FLs.

**Table 3.2 Yr 11 individual student numbers and % of n and L2 by gender**

	Girls	Girls as % of each L2	% of all Girls	Girls as % of n	Boys	Boys as % of each L2	% of all Boys	Boys as % of N
French (248)*	166	66.9	33.7	21.6	82	32.2	30.0	10.7
German (108)*	78	72.2	15.8	10.1	30	27.7	10.9	3.9
Japanese (271)*	131	48.3	26.6	17.1	140	51.6	51.2	18.3
Chinese (24)	14	58.3	2.8	0.01	10	41.6	3.6	1.30
Spanish (94)*	83	88.2	16.8	10.8	11	11.7	4.0	1.4
Latin (20)	20	100.0	4.0	2.6	0**	0	0	0
N =765*	492		100.0	64.3	273		100.0	35.6

\* Actual numbers in class during Yr 11 base-line data surveys. n totals exclude students absent through illness, drama, music, school camps etc.

\*\* No boys in the project were studying Latin.

The data in Table 3.2 shows the gender ratios for each L2 in the project. In keeping with the national gender matrix for L2 study, girls make up 64.3 per cent of the total, while equally noteworthy is the very clear dominance of girls studying the ‘traditional’ European L2s. No boy is studying Latin (not offered as a subject at any co-educational or all-boys’ school in Christchurch), whereas girls make up 70.2 per cent of the combination of Latin, French and German. Only in Japanese, are there more boys than girls and, while the difference is marginal, the slight male domination in Japanese may be due to a social perception in conservative Christchurch that, because Japanese is a ‘business’ language, it is considered to be of greater relevance to boys. Moreover, because L2 classes in all-boys’ schools have always struggled for numbers, even more than in all-girls’ schools, during the 1970s the former were especially keen to embrace Japanese as a replacement for the uneconomic ‘traditional’ L2s. Overall, L2 study in Christchurch remains very much a girls’ pursuit and, while this phenomenon reflects a number of social factors, students are also physically controlled by the range of L2 subjects on offer at their particular school. It is very possible that a student wanting to study Latin and/or German, for example, will find him/herself studying Spanish and/or Chinese by default, simply because of a school’s staffing resources, timetable, interests etc., all of which result in certain L2s being offered and others not.

Table 3.3 shows that the demographic make-up of N in the current project matches very closely that of the Yr 11 L2 data set for all of New Zealand. This lends added credibility to the project findings overall.

**Table 3.3 L2 matrix for N and for all New Zealand (2003)**

	Current project: L2s as % of N	New Zealand: L2s as % of L2 students in NZ (2003)
French	32.3	36.1
German	14.0	13.1
Japanese	35.4	33.2
Chinese	1.3	2.1
Spanish	12.2	11.9
Latin	2.6	3.2

### 3.3 Why study an L2?

Although the project did not set out to explain why students select an L2, that information is a valuable starting point for understanding why they discontinue. Therefore, as part of the project, all participants were asked to indicate their first and second most important reasons for studying the L2 of their choice at Yr 11, and for how long they intended to persist with that subject. No student indicated school rules or the need/desire to gain entry into a special class such as the so-called ‘top stream’ and, while six students did state that they had to ‘fill up’ their timetable, none expressed any resentment at having chosen an L2 for that reason. Furthermore, no student indicated pressure or coercion from parents/caregivers although 225 girls and 88 boys stated that parents/caregivers had supported L2 study at Yr 11 as a good idea or beneficial. All other reasons received only negligible support and included “my school is planning a trip there”, “I have family connections with the country/language” and “I have already visited the country”. In summary, every student in the current project was essentially a willing L2 student, a promising start to the next three years of L2 study. Table 3.4 illustrates the relationship between each L2 and the most important reasons for studying an L2.

**Table 3.4 The Four Most Frequently Cited Reasons for Studying an L2 in Yr 11**

Main Reason	% of all French	% of all German	% of all Japanese	% of all Chinese	% of all Spanish	% of all Latin	Average % of all L2s
L2 study is important	36.2	38.8	35.7	37.5	25.5	20.0	32.2
Interested in country	29.0	8.3	19.1	12.5	13.8	45.0	21.2
For a Job	7.6	12.9	17.7	29.1	18.0	25.0	18.3
For Travel	11.3	25.0	11.2	4.1	39.3	0.0	15.1

L2 teachers who have poured boundless energy into trying to convince their students that L2 studies will help them find a job in the future or be of use when they travel may well be disappointed by the data in Table 3.4. Only 18.3 per cent of N saw their future career as being enhanced by L2 study, while

an even smaller figure (15.1 per cent) linked their L2 study with future travel. Only Chinese (seven students) and Latin (five students) indicated that future employment was their most serious consideration in studying an L2. Even for Japanese, considerably less than one-fifth of students now regard that subject, once regarded as the bright light of the L2/career matrix, as a way of helping them obtain work. Equally surprising, especially given the enormous effort that tourism operators put into promoting the ‘mystique of the east’, is that both Japanese and Chinese ranked the lowest of all L2s with regard to future travel. In fact, the difference between east and west is quite marked, with Japanese more likely to be selected for career purposes, while the European languages are more likely to be chosen for future travel. Overall, however, the data for career and travel categories is counter-intuitive and will be disappointing for L2 teachers. While they may have believed that career and travel were the most ‘marketable’ advantages of serious L2 study, the greatest motivating factors in selecting to study an L2 at Yr 11 were much more altruistic for over one half of all students.

Because Latin students are essentially unable to select ‘travel’ as their main motivation, their responses are predictably re-distributed more densely elsewhere, notably ‘interested in the country’ (ancient Rome?). Latin also has the second highest response rate of all L2s for ‘career’, and in response to the question “what do you hope to do after you graduate?”, all five Latin students who selected ‘career’ as their main reason are hoping to become lawyers. Three of the (Latin) girls who chose ‘interested in the country’ signalled archeology as their intended career, while another cited anthropology. It is interesting, therefore, that out of all six L2s, the second highest response rate of ‘for future career’ was among Latin students, a language which will never be spoken as part of that career! Ironically, writing in the *Independent* and subsequently reported in the *NZ Education Review*, the British government’s L2 advisor Dr Lid King explained how he “hopes to convince children they can earn more [in the future] with language qualifications.”<sup>4</sup> Geographically, Great Britain’s location in multi-lingual Europe is very dissimilar from our own but, as was explained in Chapter One, their L2 attrition rate is even more parlous than ours.

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<sup>4</sup> Garner (2003).

Apart from small numbers of students who selected ‘career’ or ‘travel’, an equally surprising aspect of the data in Table 3.4 is that well in excess of 50 per cent of all students cited either ‘L2 study is important’ (32.2%) or ‘the country interests me’ (21.2%) as their key reasons for studying an L2. In other words, most L2 students begin their Yr 11 study for formal assessment under the intrinsic motivation of being interested or because it is educationally important to understand how another culture expresses itself. For every L2 except Latin, the importance of studying another L2 was by far the most frequent response. However, the non-selection of career and travel does not mean that teachers’ energy has been misplaced because it certainly has not. But what it might suggest is that the extra effort spent in organising trips, exchanges, ethnic food days, videos, having native speakers in the classroom and the like are far more likely to keep the student spark of interest alive than the ‘carrot’ of future employment or travel possibilities. It also means that the students’ own definitions of ‘important’ may be significant, although the current project does not go that far. On one hand, ‘important’ could mean something as elevated as ‘to further international understanding’, while a more cynical explanation could involve something less profound such as ‘it just means that later on I can claim a more-rounded education before I embark upon my science career in Yr 12.’ The truth is that it probably means neither but, as the first reason for a third of all students, and as the second reason for almost one-fifth, the value of discovering what is meant by ‘important’ cannot be overstated.

The gender matrix (Table 3.5) is also noteworthy. As already discussed, ‘L2 study is important’ is by far the most popular single reason for selection, but what is surprising is that 39.9% of all boys cited that reason, a rate well in excess of that for all girls (31.9% of all girls in N). On the other hand, girls outnumbered boys by almost two-to-one in citing ‘future career’ as their main reason. Given society’s historical gender roles and expectations, the absence of large numbers of boys selecting ‘career’ as their main reason, but especially the very high percentage of males choosing ‘L2 study is important’, might also be described as counter-intuitive.

**Table 3.5 Relationship between gender and the most important reasons for studying**

Main Reason for L2 Study	Important to Study L2	For Travel	For My Career	Interested in the country
Boys as % of all boys	39.9	16.1	9.8	17.9
Girls as % of all girls	31.9	24.5	17.8	13.2

**Note:** Other responses receiving minimal support not shown.

**Table 3.6 Second most important reasons for L2 study**

Second Main Reason for L2 Study	Important to Study L2	For Travel	For my Career	Interested in the country
Boys (% of all boys)	14.2	22.3	16.8	16.4
Girls (% of all girls)	18.9	23.3	13.6	16.8
% of all French	16.5	25.8	12.0	18.5
% of all German	21.2	25.0	13.8	17.5
% of all Japanese	15.4	19.5	18.8	16.6
% of all Chinese	29.1	16.6	8.3	20.8
% of all Spanish	14.8	27.6	9.4	12.7
% of all Latin	25.0	5.0	25.0	15.0

**Note:** Other responses receiving minimal support not shown.

As the second most important reason for studying an L2, as with the first reason, the same four major categories attracted the overwhelming number of responses, although they were much more evenly spread. Among girls and boys, the prospects of travel featured most highly although still below 25 per cent for both. Travel, but not career, is clearly regarded as an ‘added bonus’ for L2 study, but only after the principal reason for studying has first been satisfied. L2s for career purposes again rated lowly, illustrating that even as a second reason, most of the respondents do not regard L2 ability as an employment-enhancing skill. From the point of view of each L2, only among students of Latin did the percentage with an eye on future career options rise above 20 per cent. For those students, as a secondary reason, travel featured much more strongly than as a first reason, largely at the expense of the more selfless principal motivations of ‘importance’ and ‘interest’. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine what the one student who hopes to use Latin in her future travels has in mind!

### 3.4 Span of intended L2 study

In the original Yr 11 surveys, all students were asked to indicate how long they intended to study their chosen L2. Table 3.7 contains the data for the intended length of L2 study.

**Table 3.7 Span of intended study: % for each L2**

As % of each L2	Study until Yr 11		Study until Yr 12		Study until Yr 13		Study until university	
	% Girls	% Boys	% Girls	% Boys	% Girls	% Boys	% Girls	% Boys
French	23.4	14.6	10.2	17.0	30.7	39.0	22.8	20.7
German	23.0	33.0	7.6	13.3	32.0	36.6	21.7	26.6
Japanese	29.7	27.8	10.6	11.4	23.6	27.8	26.7	32.8
Chinese	7.1	10.0	7.1	0.0	21.4	10.0	50.0	60.0
Spanish	38.5	0.1	3.6	9.0	30.1	63.6	24.0	18.1
Latin	50.0	0.0*	25.0	0.0	15.0	0.0	5.0	0.0

**Note:** Rows do not all add up to 100% because of students who did not answer or who indicated that they were not sure.

\* No boys were studying Latin at Yr 11.

Table 3.7 shows that 24.7 per cent of N entered Yr 11 with the intention of quitting their L2 at the end of that year. In raw numbers, the percentages equate to slightly below three girls for each boy, an interesting ratio in that N contains marginally less than *two* girls to each boy. The pattern is marked in each L2, with the exception of Japanese where the percentages are roughly equal, and German where the number of boys is ten per cent higher than that for girls.

Students who indicated their intention to pursue their L2 for two years and to discontinue after Yr 12 present quite a different perspective. Firstly, overall, the numbers are much lower than those signalling their intention to quit after Yr 11. This is expected because to discontinue at the conclusion of Yr 12 would involve the risky process of beginning a new academic subject, possibly from scratch, at Yr 13 level. Secondly, unlike those discontinuing after Yr 11, the percentages of boys indicating their intention to stop after Yr 12 is considerably higher than that of girls with the same intention. This equation will be explored in Chapter Four but what the pattern shows immediately is that the vast majority of girls are choosing an L2 with the intention of either discontinuing after one year, or of persisting either through to Yr 13 and/or university level, an ‘all or nothing’ approach. Far more boys, on the other hand, view Yr 12 L2 study as a finite academic goal in itself. But what is arguably the most counter-intuitive result is that while 25.5 per cent of girls signalled their intention to study their L2 at university, the tertiary intention rate of boys was 31.6 per cent of all boys. Hypothetically assuming that all students who intended to go to university actually went on to study their L2 at the same local university,<sup>5</sup> the head count from the current project would be 198, 119 girls and 79 boys. While

<sup>5</sup> Of course this is hypothetical because not all school leavers go on to study at their local university. Moreover, although there are two universities in Christchurch, Lincoln does not offer any L2 courses at all.

local university L2 academics would be delighted to enrol almost 200 school leavers each year, they would be surely even more surprised to know that during Yr 11, greater percentages of boys than girls were intending to study L2s at their institution.

From Table 3.7 and the above explanation, it would not be unreasonable to expect that, in 2007, approximately 119 girls and 79 girls might enter university to study an L2 at some level.<sup>6</sup> However, this is now unlikely in the extreme because, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four, 306 students discontinued their L2 at the end of Yr 11, a total discontinuation rate which was almost 60 per cent higher than that which the students themselves had predicted in their Yr 11 surveys. This discrepancy is one of the most notable features of the project, for not only did it immediately decimate the catchment whence Yr 12 and Yr 13 will draw their numbers, but it makes it unlikely in the extreme that the number entering university in 2007 will be anything like the 198 Yr 11 students who originally signalled their intention to do so.

Furthermore, the higher than predicted Yr 11 drop-out rate (see Chapter Four) suggests the occurrence of one or several [unidentified] factors during Year 11 which make a full 15 per cent of the original Yr 11 L2 intake change their minds and cut their L2 studies short. Of equal significance, and perhaps of greatest interest to the universities, is the fact that 48.2 per cent of the Yr 11 girls who discontinued but had not intended to, as well as 38.7 per cent of the boys in the same category, indicated in their Yr 11 surveys an original intention to continue their L2 to the end of Yr 13. Moreover, of that unanticipated discontinuing group, 64.5 percent of the boys and 53.8 per cent of the girls had originally indicated their intention to study an L2 at university. Therefore, not only was the loss after Yr 11 far more substantial than anticipated, but many of those who dropped out had originally regarded themselves as serious contenders for L2 study at university. This makes the retention of Yr 11 students all the more important in any plans towards improving L2 numbers at senior levels, and questions research methods which predict future trends of subject choice based on students' stated intentions. In the end, we have to accept that many Yr 11 students always intended to study an L2 only for one year and that convincing those students to continue beyond Yr 11 will always be difficult. But what is clearly in need of further research is how to ensure that those who originally intended to continue, especially through to Yr 13 and university, do actually continue. The very small number of girls (9.1%) and boys (12.8%) who

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<sup>6</sup> One weakness of the original survey was that it did not ask those respondents who indicated their intention to study at university to specify whether they meant as a minor or major course of study.

intend to abandon their L2 study at the end of Yr 12 was predictable because Yr 12 bridges the gap between the ‘tasters’ (those seeking no more than one year of L2 study as part of their overall education in the senior school) and the ‘committed students’ (those aiming for university entrance). Furthermore, the inherent difficulties involved in beginning a new subject after Yr 12 have already been discussed and make the decision not to stop at that crucial stage also a matter of common sense.

### **3.5 How difficult is learning an L2?**

No other academic discipline demands the plethora of cognitive and applied skills which students of L2s are required to master. These include rote-learning of vocabulary (including specialist words and culturally-specific items outside the learner’s own experience and native vocabulary), the social context, accurate pronunciation sufficient to enable non-contextual comprehension, comprehension skills to accommodate non-standard pronunciation, speech defects and dialects, the wit to guess unknown material by context, a thorough understanding of complicated verbal (regular and irregular patterns) and other inflexions, idioms, vulgar style, humour, word order, Asian character sets, innuendo, slang, colloquialisms and so on. However, the L2 learner is not only required to achieve a thorough *passive* understanding of all of the above material, but is equally expected to actively present the same information accurately in both verbal and written form.

Asian languages in particular add further to the confusion of English Speaking Background (ESB) L2 students because of their complicated writing systems and, in the case of Chinese, a range of pronunciation tones. One tiny stroke missing from a complicated Japanese or Chinese character can change the entire meaning, as can a fractional variation in Chinese pronunciation, the unique response required when answering a negative question in Japanese, a letter omitted from a German noun inflection, or an accent, often not even voiced, from above a letter in French. The list is extensive and one might even feel inclined to ask why all 765 students in the current project would have willingly chosen to submit themselves to the strain of trying to master something as fiendishly different as a second language. In their Yr 11 surveys, respondents were asked to describe the level of difficulty of their L2 study. Table 3.8 shows how the students rated the difficulty of L2 study.

**Table 3.8 Level of difficulty of L2 study**

L2s are...	Very Difficult (% of N)	Difficult (% of N)	Not too Difficult (% of N)	Basically quite easy (% of N)
French	6.4	43.9	46.3	2.8
German	2.7	52.7	36.1	8.3
Japanese	9.0	53.1	33.5	4.0
Chinese	0.0	50.0	50.0	0.0
Spanish	5.3	47.5	44.6	4.2
Latin	0.0	45.0	55.0	0.0

The data in Table 3.8 is relatively evenly distributed, with approximately 50 per cent of students in each L2 rating the study as difficult or very difficult. On one hand, we might feel that if slightly over half of all L2 students think their area of study is difficult, then the standard is too rigorous and needs to be investigated. Unfortunately, no such level of difficulty data exists for non-L2 subjects to compare these findings against. On the other hand, however, around half of all students think L2 study is not too difficult or basically easy and we might conclude, therefore, that the syllabus is pitched at about the right level. It may be a fault in the instrument design, but a much more anticipated response to ranking L2 level of difficulty would have produced something more akin to (for example) 15% (Very Difficult), 25% (Difficult), 45% (Not too Difficult) and 15% (basically quite easy). However, the status quo where over half of all students think L2s are difficult is surely a serious consideration when considering high rates of attrition. Given the historical assumption – and the continuing practice – that academically able students are more suited than lesser achieving students to L2 study, the significant percentages who find the study difficult or very difficult is of even greater concern. Furthermore, if enjoyment and predictable academic success in L2 learning are to be among the reasons why students might select that course of study, the very small numbers who find L2s ‘basically quite easy’ warrant further investigation. Japanese presents yet another serious scenario, with 62 per cent of Japanese students (the highest of all L2s) rating their study as difficult or very difficult. In section 3.6 a more detailed analysis of the ‘difficulty’ concept will be introduced, but first, Table 3.9 presents the level of difficulty data from a gender perspective.

**Table 3.9 Perceived level of L2 difficulty by gender**

L2s are...	Very Difficult	Difficult	Not too Difficult	Basically quite easy
	(% of all girls)	(% of all girls)	(% of all girls)	(% of all girls)
Girls	6.3	47.1	42.6	3.6
	(% of all boys)	(% of all boys)	(% of all boys)	(% of all boys)
Boys	6.5	52.0	36.6	4.7

The distribution of ‘L2 difficulty’ by gender closely matches the levels of difficulty per L2 (Table 3.8) and, once again, the numbers at the extremes (very difficult and basically quite easy) are very small. The most worrying aspect is again the disproportionately large number who find the study ‘difficult’ (approximately five per cent more boys than girls) and the disproportionately small number who find the subject ‘basically quite easy’. Able students who are essentially interested in L2s and curious about foreign countries may well be able to put the discipline’s reputation of being too difficult to one side. However, those who are not thus fascinated and who are looking for interesting or manageable credits until Yr 13 and university are far more unlikely to risk a course of study which could so easily deny them those credits. As explained in Chapters One and Two, there is an ever-expanding range of non-L2 subjects at all senior levels for those students to pursue in order to collect the required number of credits with far less stress.

### 3.6 My biggest problem

It is apparent from the previous section that too many students think L2 study is too difficult, and we can assume that a similar perception is held by many of their non-L2 peers, including those who would have ruled out L2 study because of its reputation for being so difficult. Table 3.10 shows the selected responses to a question in the Yr 11 survey asking students to identify the most difficult aspect of their L2 studies.

**Table 3.10 My biggest L2 problem**

% of each L2	Grammar	Vocab	Time	Grammar & Vocab	Kanji	Kanji & Vocab	Speaking	Other
French	19.3	27.5	11.2	4.8	0	0	12.1	18.3
German	24.0	32.2	10.1	5.5	0	0	4.6	16.0
Japanese	11.0	26.9	13.6	2.5	6.2	1.4	5.5	22.4
Chinese	12.5	15.1	12.4	4.0	16.6	0	25.0	12.6
Spanish	19.1	35.6	6.3	9.5	0	0	4.2	17.6
Latin	35.0	30.0	10.0	5.0	0	0	0	15.0
L2 ave % per answer	20.1	27.8	10.6	5.2	11.4*	1.4*	8.5	16.9

**Note:** Totals do not add up to 100 because of students who did not provide an answer

\* Average for Chinese and Japanese only.

Vocabulary clearly poses the biggest difficulty, followed by grammar and ‘other’. However, although grammar is cited as a serious problem by 20.1 per cent of the students, grammar is the fuel of a language, the substance which gives words their motion, speed and direction. The best way to teach

and learn grammar is not up for debate here but, *without accurate grammar*, confused listeners are left with little more than a pile of unconnected words. Other than the actual *amount* of grammar taught in any one year, and syllabus advisors need to make sure they do not overload the curriculum, incorrect and unlearned grammar is very unforgiving. For the serious L2 student, there is little else to do with grammar except to learn it in whatever way best suits one's learning style.

Vocabulary, on the other hand, as with kanji characters in Chinese and Japanese, offer curriculum advisors a more pragmatic approach. Because most students indicated that vocabulary is their biggest problem, this is where L2 syllabus experts need to exercise the greatest caution and no small amount of humility. Along with classroom teachers, they must not forget the hard work behind the vocabulary lists they themselves have gained by university study, years of reading and speaking the L2, living in the country of that language and having a long-term partner who is a native speaker etc. Pity then, the Yr 11 student for whom the L2 workload comprises but one fifth or even one sixth of his/her total study allocation. Every new item of vocabulary that the L2 teacher describes as 'useful', 'essential', a 'great word which you also find in this little expression' is nothing less than another entire learning exercise. In many cases, it may even be one more deciding factor towards discontinuing as that student's initial L2 enthusiasm is buried under the burden of memorising new vocabulary which contributes so quickly to L2 being 'too difficult'.

But there is something inherently wrong here. Languages are not just about rote-learning. No professional teacher/translator/interpreter ever sets out to translate or interpret anything without the best dictionaries they possess at their finger-tips. What would be the point? Naturally, the more words they know, the faster they can complete the task and the more money they can earn. Although having to look up large numbers of words is a laborious process, that facility is available, even to the world's most proficient and celebrated linguists. When professional translators come across unfamiliar words, as they very frequently do, rather than penalising themselves by leaving gaps or guessing, they refer to dictionaries, electronic gadgets and internet sites. For a native English speaker, learning just one vocabulary item requires far more than memorising a simple equivalence of meaning. Table 3.11 suggests one formula for quantifying the task for an ESB student to memorise just one new vocabulary item.

**Table 3.11 Suggested score allocation for learning one L2 vocabulary item**

Scale -0-5	Gender	Inflection	Alphabet	Cognates	Pronunciation	Plural	Totals
French	1	0	1	1	1	1	5
German	2	2	1	1	1	2	9
Japanese	0	0	5*	5	3	0	13
Chinese	0	0	3	5	5*	0	13
Spanish	1	0	1	1	1	1	5
Latin	2	3	0	1	1	2	9

\* 5 allocated to Japanese alphabet because of the multiple readings per character plus two kana sets, and to Chinese because of its system of tones.

Academics will argue forever over the allocation of the scores in Table 3.11 and, depending on their points of view, they can all be right. Table 3.11 is only one suggestion, but what must be remembered is (a) that words with non-romanised alphabets (Japanese and Chinese) present serious difficulties to English-speaking background students, and (b) that mastering even the simplest word in any L2 involves a measure of difficulty score of at least 5. From that point on, every vocabulary item for acquisition has an accumulated level of difficulty, meaning that mastering just one word can no longer be regarded simply as ‘learning a new word’. Even German, in the same language family and the closest relative of our own mother tongue, has a high difficulty quotient because of its three genders, pronunciation issues and its complicated inflections for denoting case and plural. Syllabus designers and L2 teachers must rethink the inappropriateness of expecting students to learn vocabulary lists, describing that task as merely “memorising words”. L2 students certainly view vocabulary learning from a very different perspective. In Chapter Five, comments from participating principals are introduced, but at this stage it is worth noting that three principals made unsolicited comments to the effect that vocabulary learning was regarded by their L2 students as a burden which took up too much of their academic energy. The issue of dictionaries is explored in detail in Chapter Seven.

In identifying ‘other’ as their biggest L2 difficulty (Table 3.10), 16.9 per cent of N attempted to specify more explicit aspects of their L2 studies. While 16.9% may initially appear to be a significant statistic, the answers fit quite evenly into five categories and are now given with examples of the most common types of response:

- a) *Lack of Personal Satisfaction*: boring, don't enjoy it (9 mentions), lost interest (14 mentions), I just hate it now, the others laugh, I get embarrassed etc.
- b) *Teachers*: boring, she's too strict, we've had 4 different teachers this year already, the teacher comments on my health problem, he doesn't encourage us, she talks only in [L2] and nobody understands her.
- c) *Physical*: room too cold, room too hot, room too cramped, other pupils cause trouble all the time, too noisy, "I could concentrate better if my friends didn't sit beside me".
- d) *Books*: text-book too heavy, we need dictionaries, the text book is childish, I haven't even got my own text book.
- e) *Studying*: too many words to memorise (31 mentions), I don't understand any of it, I always compare [L2] with English, English is not my first language so it's harder for me.

Twenty-seven students identified affective issues such as lack of personal satisfaction, embarrassment and negative comments by teachers. These students are likely to be seriously disadvantaged as research regularly demonstrates that students who display low levels of anxiety about L2 learning, feel comfortable among their peers and who are encouraged by their teachers, will do better at L2 learning (see, for example, Artzer, Siebenhar, & Plageman, 1997). Furthermore, many of the students who ticked 'other' identified the following specific grammatical issues: German adjectival and noun endings, French and German noun genders, Japanese particles, Japanese verb endings, French, German and Spanish irregular verbs, Latin word order, French accents on words, Japanese negative questions, Chinese tones, Japanese long and short sounds. These were all entered in the data as grammar or vocabulary, while answers such as "making myself study for tests...I never get round to it" were recorded as self-discipline.

### **3.7 Present or future enjoyment derived from learning an L2**

The students were asked to identify what they enjoy about L2 learning. Table 3.12 presents the data for their responses to that question. The most notable result is the low number who selected the prospect of future travel. On one hand, most L2 teachers have taken every opportunity to emphasise the L2/travel connection and, anecdotally, many of us have long thought that travel would naturally feature as a key enticement and catalyst of satisfaction. However, as seen in Table 3.4, travel is a low priority, a factor which is again demonstrated in Table 3.12. Travel scored the lowest of all options of enjoyment

(total of 26 supporters) per L2, as it did when those options are plotted against gender (boys = 4.0 per cent, girls = 3.0 per cent). The thought of future travel opportunities barely rates as a factor in selecting an L2 or in the pleasure gained from that study. Is it possible that so many young people have already experienced international travel today, that the very idea of 'going overseas' no longer engenders the feelings of excitement and adventure it once did?

**Table 3.12 What students enjoy about studying an L2**

% of each L2	Communicating with visitors	Great for when I travel there	Culture	I enjoy learning it	Other
French	37.5	4.8	28.3	17.3	8.4
German	33.3	7.4	36.1	15.7	5.5
Japanese	35.4	1.4	23.9	11.8	16.6
Chinese	50.0	0	29.1	8.3	12.5
Spanish	53.1	2.1	27.6	5.3	6.3
Latin	10.0	0	70.0	15.0	5.0

As explained earlier, very significant numbers of students feel that it is important to 'study another language'. This intrinsic motivation is again reflected in Table 3.12 by the large numbers who get pleasure from 'communicating with visitors' and from 'studying the culture'. With the huge numbers of foreign visitors arriving in New Zealand and the plethora of cultural materials now available, here is a very clear opportunity for teachers and their associations to continue promoting L2s for reasons which the students have indicated matter to them. On the other hand, and of no small measure of concern, are the very small percentages who stated that they actually enjoy the very activity of L2 study. Spanish and Chinese scored especially poorly, but even French, which attracted the highest number of supporters, managed only 17 per cent. The average for all L2s was only 13.3 per cent. Out of all subjects on offer in our secondary schools, L2s are arguably the most passionate discipline, providing the only true outlet for original cognitive creativity. No other area of study permits or demands such courageous displays of personality, fervour and intensity. Unlike the more predictable journey through numbers, formulae and theories, L2s are the very foundation of social interaction, debate, opinions, romance, travel, the key to understanding culture, literature, history, world wars and even science. Our challenge is to light the fuses of enjoyment and subsequent achievement so that after three months into the first year of the subject they have voluntarily chosen, more than 102 out of 765 students might regard pleasure and enjoyment as the "best thing about studying" their L2. Students who answered 'other' (13.3 per cent, the third highest score, girls within a percentage point of boys) as their most pleasurable aspect of L2 learning, offer another useful insight into how

we might encourage more students to choose and continue studying an L2. Of those 82 students, 47 (57.3 per cent) said that they enjoy, and benefit from, L2 videos and privately recorded newsclips etc. One French student wrote in such detail that her comment is worth quoting verbatim.

When this guy [on the video] said “Ecoute, je t’ai déjà dis [sic] qui [sic] le patron ne m’at [sic] jamais demande [sic]” and I saw the words “Look, I’ve already told you that the boss never asked me” in English at the bottom, it made sense. I got a real buzz and I memorised it...

Similarly, we frequently marvel at the ability of Scandinavians to speak such sophisticated English. Most will quickly explain anecdotally that their access to sub-titled British television programmes is their greatest learning technique. Voila!

### 3.8 What would help

As well as commenting on what they liked and disliked, the students were also asked to provide information about their own effort and input into their L2 studies. Table 3.13 offers some interesting insights.

**Table 3.13 What would help my L2 studies/gender**

What would help	Time %	Self-Discipline %	Dictionaries %	Other %
Girls	10.1	23.5	14.0	44.4
Boys	10.9	22.7	14.6	42.5

**Note:** Some students did not answer

Firstly, in each category, boys and girls scored almost identically. Secondly, self-discipline is clearly the most frequently identified factor in what would help the students. Such refreshing honesty suggests, nevertheless, an unfortunate state of affairs. In other words, either almost one quarter of L2 students are incapable of making themselves do the work they know is necessary to succeed, or the programme is so uninspiring and difficult, or their opinion of L2 relevance is so low, that it has sapped them of their motivation. Furthermore, almost ten per cent had no suggestion and if we interpret ‘time’ as a variant of self-discipline, the figure rises to over one-third. Dictionaries drew the third highest response of approximately 14 per cent, a figure which lends further support to earlier comments about the difficulty of learning lists of new vocabulary. Cross-tabulating the students who discontinued after Yr 11 with those who selected ‘other’ produced a chi-sq (6.408) and p- value (0.171). In other words, there is

no significant relationship between those who discontinued and the 40+ per cent who cited 'other'. But once the 'other' answers (44.2 per cent of all girls and 42.5 per cent of all boys) are categorised, there is more disheartening news. Details of most of the 'other' responses fit into four groupings, all categorically negative in their outlook, as follows:

- a) Nothing. (14.0 percent of 'other')
- b) Not feeling bored/tired (12.4 per cent of 'other')
- c) A better text book/syllabus/course (18.6 per cent of 'other')
- d) Less work/less homework/less stuff to learn/pressure/(37.1 per cent of 'other')

The significance of the above categories, in particular (d), is that approximately one fifth of the total survey participants feel that either their L2 study requires a disproportionately large amount of their available study time or, the course itself is uninspiring and/or overly difficult. Students were able to select only one answer, so this figure does not include any of the approximately one quarter who admitted insufficient self-discipline in order to cover the work. Only the remaining 17.9 per cent of 'other' responses focused on the positive, including the desire to have someone at home to ask, tapes, videos, trips to that country, making food, having native speakers visit, having homestays, free periods for study and competitions. These answers clearly support figures introduced earlier regarding the cultural and communicative reasons behind a student's decision to study an L2. Table 3.14 presents the data for 'what would help my L2' for each of the six L2s in the project.

**Table 3.14. What would help/L2**

% of each L2	Time	Self Discipline	Dictionaries	Other
French	8.8	17.3	14.6	54.7
German	10.9	17.3	12.4	41.4
Japanese	17.0	26.9	13.4	38.9
Chinese	16.6	16.7	0	54.1
Spanish	9.5	26.6	0	54.2
Latin	20.0	25.0	10.0	30.0

**Note:** Some students did not answer

Once again, the high levels of 'other' and the negativity which that response embraces are apparent, with the answer 'nothing [can help me]' sounding particularly despairing. While generally spread across all L2s, French has the

highest score of 'other' with 54.7 per cent, while Latin has the lowest at 30.0 per cent. Having regard to the numbers who cited 'dictionaries' as their preferred solution, there is no apparent reason why no Chinese or Spanish students made such a selection. Spanish, with its comparatively low difficulty score for vocabulary learning might be understandable, but the non-selection of that answer by students of Chinese, with the second highest negative quotient of all L2s, is surprising. Although across all L2s, self-discipline is evenly divided between boys and girls, Japanese students have rated themselves as the least self-disciplined, possibly a reflection of the number of boys studying the subject. It should be remembered that Latin percentages are difficult to draw conclusions from because of the small number of students (20 students = <1% of N) in the project. Accordingly, while 30 per cent of Latin students ticked 'other' in the 'What Would Help?' question, 25 per cent recommended more self-discipline and 20 per cent wanted more time. However, while the percentages sound significant, they represented only three, five and four girls respectively. Care should be taken in observing the disproportionate influence such small numbers can have on averaged percentile data.

### 3.9 Satisfaction levels and commitment to succeed

Tables 3.15 and 3.16 summarise the responses to questions on satisfaction, concern and commitment.

**Table 3.15 Responses to questions on satisfaction, concern and commitment by % of gender and L2**

	I am pleased with my L2 progress			I'm worried about what lies ahead			I'm pleased I'm studying an L2			I intend to study hard		
	% of each L2	% of Boys/ L2	% of Girls/ L2	% of each L2	% of Boys/ L2	% of Girls/ L2	% of each L2	% of Boys/ L2	% of Girls/ L2	% of each L2	% of Boys/ L2	% of Girls/ L2
French	71.3	71.9	71.0	53.3	43.9	57.8	77.8	74.3	79.5	72.5	65.8	75.9
German	74.0	53.3	82.0	56.4	66.6	52.5	76.8	66.6	80.7	73.1	60.0	78.2
Japanese	60.5	55.7	65.6	55.3	52.8	58.0	65.3	59.2	71.7	65.6	60.7	70.9
Chinese	62.5	60.0	64.2	50.0	50.0	42.8	79.1	80.0	78.5	62.5	54.5	64.2
Spanish	69.1	81.8	67.4	60.6	72.7	59.0	73.4	63.6	74.6	68.0	63.6	68.6
Latin	65.0	N/A	65.0	60.0	N/A	60.0	80.0	N/A	80.0	85.0	N/A	85.0

Very few scores in Tables 3.15 and 3.16 indicate a satisfaction response rate of over 75 per cent. In fact, the average percentage for all the answers in Table 3.15 to the positive questions (pleased with progress, pleased to study an L2 and intend to study hard) is only marginally above 66 per cent, suggesting that fully one-third of all students are less than satisfied with the option subject they had been working at for only three months (plus two junior years previously).

Overall, girls are significantly more satisfied with their progress than boys, more pleased to be studying an L2 than boys and more girls than boys intend to study hard. This might not have been unexpected, given the historic and extant greater proportion of girls studying L2s and the overwhelming success girls have achieved nationwide in Latin and modern language competitions such as are run by regional language teachers' associations, the Goethe Society, the Alliance Française, the Japan Foundation, the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund and so on.

**Table 3.16. Responses to questions on satisfaction, concern and commitment by % of student totals**

	I am pleased with my L2 progress	I'm worried about what lies ahead	I'm pleased I'm studying an L2	I intend to study hard
% of N (765)	67.1	55.4	72.8	69.6
% of all Boys (273)	61.5	52.7	65.5	62.2
% of all Girls (492)	69.2	56.9	76.8	73.7

Of significance is that girls who intend to study hard in their chosen L2 out-point their male counterparts by over 10 per cent. On the other hand, only three months into Yr 11, almost 55 per cent of all students in the project were already worried about their L2 academic progress over the rest of the year. This suggests that many of the remaining almost one-half of the participants were to some extent more confident about their Yr 11 L2 journey.

### **3.10 The perfect L2 student intends to study hard, is pleased to be studying an L2 and originally intends to study for three years and/or at university**

It is interesting to consider some of the factors which make up what we might call our 'ideal L2 student'. All L2 teachers in the county would like their students to be hard-working, to be pleased that they chose to study an L2 and that they intend to persist with that option, at least until the end of their secondary school education. Those three key student qualities and how they may be related to a range of other variables are now presented in Tables 3.17, 3.18 and 3.19.

It must be remembered that the scope of the current project is exploratory in its aims to identify some of the factors which influence a student's decision to continue or abandon studying an L2. This stage of the exploration is carried out and presented descriptively in a series of crosstabulations between three key student qualities and other factors. The main reason for the crosstabulations is that the variables are categorical and the relationship between variables in a crosstabulation is based on the statistical row/column dependence

indicated by the chi-sq ( $\chi^2$ ) and its associated p-value. A high chi-sq value with an associated p-value of less than 0.05 is considered to indicate that the relationship between two variables is statistically significant. However, it is emphasised that caution must be exercised in interpreting such survey data as they often include subjective as well as unobserved variables which, if unaccounted for, will lead to erroneous results and misleading conclusions (see, for example, Shahtahmasebi, 2003). However, this stage of the study is not concerned with investigating the effect of explanatory variables on the key student quality variables, but merely with exploring possible relationships between those key variables and other explanatory variables. Therefore, the relationships suggested in the subsequent explanations will not go beyond crosstabulations.

In Table 3.17, the relationship between the variables “I intend to study hard” and “I intend to continue for X years” (chi-sq=48.600, p<0.001) appears highly significant and, as reflected by the row frequencies, a higher proportion of those who intend to continue also intend to work hard. Both variables are subjective, however, and may themselves be dependent on a number of individual/personal factors. For example, they could be proxy for other social and individual factors in the same table, such as (a) gender, (b) I’m pleased I chose an L2, (c) I enjoy my L2 studies, (d) I’m pleased with my progress and (e) my biggest problem, all of which are statistically significant.

**Table 3.17. Chi-Sq, DF & p-values for “I intend to study hard” (N=765)**

I intend to study hard ...		Chi-square	DF	P-value
1	L2s are difficult	7.535	4	0.001
2	Intend to study to Yr 13/ university	48.600	5	0.000
3	I’m worried about the future	1.594	1	0.207
4	I’m pleased with my L2 progress	59.071	1	0.000
5	I enjoy studying L2s	25.659	2	0.000
6	I’m glad I’m studying an L2	152.777	1	0.000
7	L2	6.572	5	0.254
8	Gender	11.007	1	0.001

In almost any field of academia, there is a strong connection between studying hard and achieving success. Therefore, a report in *The Christchurch Press* (Friday, May 13, 2005) that “girls have out-performed boys in every [NCEA] subject... [and that] males’ low achievement is cause for concern” suggests that the relationship between gender and “I intend to study hard” was intuitive. Be that as it may, the relationship is still significant because of its scale, namely that the percentage of girls in the current project who intend to study hard is

67.9, more than double that of boys at 32.0 per cent. Students of French and Japanese each account for approximately 33 per cent of those who indicated such an intention, with the remaining L2s generating small and/or insignificant percentages.

While school and parental threats about the dire ramifications of failing NCEA credits may frighten students in some subjects and spur them on to study harder, such browbeating tactics appear unlikely to affect L2 students. The relationship between studying hard [as a possible result of] and being worried about, L2 success, is not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=1.594$ ,  $p>0.207$ ). On one hand, almost 70 per cent of all students (526 students) intend to study hard, of whom slightly less than half are not worried about their results. In other words, very large numbers of students intend to study hard whether they are worried or not. On the other hand, the remaining approximately one-third students (231) indicated that they have no intention of studying hard, of whom 136 (58.8%) are already worried about their progress and possible failure. Table 3.18 presents the data for the relationship between “I’m pleased I’m studying an L2” and a similar range of variables.

**Table 3.18 Chi-Sq, DF& p-values for “I’m pleased I’m studying an L2” (n=765)**

	I'm pleased I'm studying an L2	Chi-square	DF	P-value
1	Intend to study L2 to university	66.141	5	0.000
2	I'm worried about the future	0.369	1	0.543
3	I'm pleased with my L2 progress	89.798	1	0.000
4	I enjoy studying L2s	33.3491	5	0.000
5	L2	12.760	5	0.026
6	Gender	11.248	1	0.001
7	School type	20.909	6	0.001

Given the most recent trends in academic performance in New Zealand, perhaps equally intuitive is that more girls than boys claimed ‘I’m pleased I’m studying an L2’. Less predictable, however, is the proportion of the gender difference, with the percentage of girls who are ‘pleased’ (out of all girls) being more than double the percentage of boys (out of all boys). It is possible that unobserved variables such as peer attitudes, gender stereotyping etc may be factors, although in the original survey, only five students (two girls, three boys) responded negatively to the question “My schoolmates think that L2 study is [positive or negative].” The relationship between the variables “I’m pleased I’m studying” and each L2 is statistically insignificant ( $\chi^2=12.76$ ,  $p=0.026$ ), but of interest is that all but Japanese were ranked very similarly (French: 77.8%, German: 76.8%, Japanese: 65.3%, Chinese: 79.1%, Spanish: 73.4%, Latin: 72.8%). Japanese

was proportionally lower and that statistic may also be proxy for the dynamics of the learning environment, the slight male dominance of boys over girls studying this subject and other personal/individual characteristics. All students in the project willingly chose their L2, so the uniform response to being pleased with that decision was not unexpected. But we should not ignore the fact that almost one quarter were apparently not subsequently pleased with their own voluntary decision to study an L2.

Type of school ( $\chi^2=28.909$ ,  $p>0.001$ ) also appears significant in its relationship with students who are pleased to be studying an L2. Of the total students at each school type, private girls' schools (86.3%), state girls' schools (84.9%) and integrated catholic girls' schools (83.0) generated the highest numbers who were pleased to be studying their chosen L2. State coeducational schools, in spite of providing the greatest number of students for the project, generated the lowest numbers of students who were "pleased they were studying". Once again, while external variables will feature in this matrix, the educational climate provided by the all-girls' schools (facilities, class size, teaching staff, timetable etc), not merely the educational attitudes and aspirations of the girls themselves, may be significant. When asked for their opinions regarding their schools' attitudes towards L2 study (positive/negative/in between), over 94 per cent of pupils at all-girls' schools (state, private and catholic) ranked their schools as 'positive'. The next highest score was 84.3 per cent (private boys), down to 66.7 per cent (state coeducational) and 62.5 per cent (private coeducational). School encouragement of L2 study, or at least student perceptions of that phenomenon, do not go unnoticed, and may have real spin-offs in terms of student satisfaction.<sup>7</sup> This issue is explored further in Chapter Six.

Finally, Table 3.19 presents the relationship between the variable "I intend to Study my L2 to University" and variables of interest. In the Yr 11 survey, 228 students indicated their intention to study their L2 through to Yr 13, with 198 further students claiming that they would continue thereafter at university level (refer Table 3.7). Firstly, the L2 variable appears significant ( $\chi^2=53.253$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Students of Asian languages (Japanese: 30.1%, Chinese: 54.1%) appear more likely to study their L2 at university than students of European languages (Latin: 10.0%, French 22.8%, German 23.1%).

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<sup>7</sup> A cross-tabulation of each school and "I'm pleased I am studying a FL" shows that of the 20 schools in the project, 17 received a 'tick of approval' with over 80% of their FL students being "pleased". One more school was close with 76.4% but, of the two remaining schools (unidentified for reasons of confidentiality), only 52.8% of students at one, and 42.6% at the other, responded that they were "pleased".

**Table 3.19 Chi-Sq, DF& P-values for “I intend to study an L2 to university” (N=765)**

I intend to study to University		Chi-square	DF	P-value
1	I'm pleased with my L2 progress	35.963	5	0.000
2	I enjoy studying L2s	25.934	25	0.000
3	I'm glad I'm studying an L2	66.141	5	0.000
4	L2	53.253	25	0.000
5	School type	68.961	30	0.001
6	Future job opportunities	18.104	10	0.053
7	Gender	14.558	5	0.012

On the other hand, among those who signalled their intention to study only until Yr 13, the pattern is almost reversed (French: 33.4%, German: 33.3%, Latin: 15.0%, Japanese 25.8% and Chinese: 16.6%). One possible reason could be that the perceived potential commercial benefits of studying an Asian language encourage students to aim for university study. However, as is seen earlier in Table 3.4 the relationship between “I intend to study to university” and “future job opportunity” is not significant (chi-sq=18.1, p=0.053) suggesting that any relationship between future employment ambitions and university or Yr 13 L2 study may well be due to chance.

We know that gender is an historic and extant major factor in deciding whether or not to study an L2. This factor reappears in the scenario that, while only one quarter of N intended to study an L2 at university level, that same one quarter itself is made up of 60.1% of girls and 39.9% of boys. The chi-sq (14.558) and  $p < (0.012)$  for the gender/university relationship suggest that there may be a link between gender and *intended* university study.

### 3.11 Conclusions

Year 11 begins on a positive note. All L2 students volunteered for their language study and have clear reasons for making that decision. A promising number (73.0%) indicated their intention to persist beyond their first senior year, with good numbers also indicating their aspiration to study their chosen L2 at university level. Among girls and boys, numbers intending to study an L2 at Yr 13 are only about 4 percentage points below those intending to continue to university. Therefore, ensuring that Yr 11 students achieve success, remain interested and pleased with their decision is paramount in encouraging them to continue their studies through to tertiary level. This is an area where our universities are in the perfect position to play a major role. They might begin by identifying with local Yr 11 L2 classes and following them through to Yr 13

when they could offer a small number of first-year university credits for extra work (for example, via the STAR programme), offering time, expertise, cultural seminars, promotional visits and so on. If universities are genuinely concerned about student numbers, the time is right for them to take the lead and play a much more active role in helping reverse the attrition trends during the three years of senior secondary education. As with all strategies, there is the risk that such activities will achieve nothing. But on the other hand, the potential damage from doing nothing is too great not to make the effort. This is all the more important because, even if all those who intended to study L2s at university actually did attend, for many of them it would be for only one, or possibly two papers. Universities need every L2 student they can get and one senses here a real opportunity for them to encourage students while they are still at school as one tangible way of maintaining L2 interest and hopefully increasing their own student intake. Chapter Six includes a detailed analysis of the responses from the universities regarding their activities aimed at promoting L2 study in local secondary schools.



# Chapter Four

## Yr 2 of the Christchurch Project

### 4.1 Procedure

Early in 2005, participating schools in the project were again asked to provide suitable times for their Yr 12 L2 classes to be re-surveyed. All schools were willing to continue their participation in the project. The Yr 11 questionnaires from 2004 were handed back to all students who had continued their L2 study into Yr 12 and the students were invited to make any changes they wished to their Yr 11 responses. The main purpose of this exercise, rather than measuring response variation, was to extrapolate a separate list of all those students who had discontinued their L2 study since Yr 11. The questionnaires were collected and all students were again given a chocolate treat for their 'continued participation'.

### 4.2 Continuation and discontinuation

By the end of the 2005 academic year (Yr 11), forty-one students had left school altogether and, although a number of them had transferred to other schools and were possibly able to be contacted, others had shifted away and several had left the country. Because tracking some, but not all, seemed inconsistent, students who were no longer at the school of their Yr 11 survey were categorised as having "left school" and entered into the data accordingly. Two schools had failed to retain a single L2 student from Yr 11 into Yr 12<sup>1</sup>. Both schools had the lowest decile ratings in the project and in 2004 had very small Yr 11 L2 classes (two students and eight students respectively), but it was unfortunate that not one student had continued into Yr 12.<sup>2</sup> In summary, of the N=765 students surveyed in 2004, 418 had continued their L2 into Yr 12, a further 306 students were in Yr 12 but no longer studying an L2, and 41 were no longer attending school. All students still attending school in Yr 12 but no longer studying an L2 were individually contacted, with each student receiving a follow-up survey asking why they had discontinued,<sup>3</sup> a chocolate treat and a stamped envelope with the researcher's return address.<sup>4</sup> Of the 306 discontinuing students, 264 returned their surveys by post. They are hereafter referred to as N2.

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<sup>1</sup> Two students were repeating Yr 11 Japanese but are recorded as not continuing at Yr 12.

<sup>2</sup> Follow-up survey replies show that timetabling difficulties were not a factor in either instance.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2

<sup>4</sup> This was a) to encourage easy return of replies and b) to avoid any possible contamination which may have occurred if students felt that their replies were to be collected and/or sighted by a school staff member.

NB. In this chapter, percentages referring to Yr 12 attrition are percentages of the 264 students who returned their Yr 12 follow-up surveys. Occasionally, percentages of the total attrition (306) are also used, in which case the percentage is indicated by a + sign.

### 4.3 Who discontinued?

Although postal surveys seldom generate rates of return above 50%,<sup>5</sup> of the 306 discontinuing (after Yr 11) students, 264 returned their follow-up surveys, a very pleasing response rate of 86.2 per cent. The girl/boy ratio for discontinuing students (almost 2:1) closely matches the gender ratio of N in the project and for all New Zealand. In other words, gender was not a significant factor in the decision to discontinue. Table 4.1 shows the data for the students who discontinued their L2s and the types of schools attended.

Most school types lost students after Yr 11 at roughly the same rate that they had contributed students to N in Yr 11. Furthermore, a low chi-sq value (4.780) and high p-value (0.189) suggest no statistically significant relationship between the discontinuing students and the various types of schools they attended. Private girls' schools and state boys' schools were the only two types of school which lost a smaller proportion of students than their original contribution to N. In both those situations, however, an anomaly was evident which the statistics do not disclose. Firstly, there was only one state boys' school in the survey and, while one of the three L2s at that school suffered significant attrition after Yr 11, the second suffered only marginally while the third did not lose a single student. Similarly, in the private girls' schools, a parallel scenario included one class with the highest attrition rate of any in the project, offset by high retention rates in the other L2 classes at that school. Incidentally, fewer than half of the students from the class with the highest attrition rate of the entire project returned their follow-up surveys, all indicating "too difficult" as their main reason for discontinuing.

**Table 4.1 Discontinuation statistics and school type**

	State Co-ed	State Boys	State Girls	Catholic integ. Boys	Catholic integ. Girls	Catholic integ. Co-ed	Pvte Co-ed	Pvte Boys	Pvte Girls
Student contribution (%) to N in Yr 11	41.5	7.5	19.6	1.6	10.5	<0.1	4.1	6.9	8.6
Discontinuation as % of all discontinuing +	38.5+	4.2+	22.5+	1.1+	11.4+	<0.1+	4.9+	8.5+	7.2+

<sup>5</sup> Moser, C.A, and Kalton, G. (1986), 260-266.

State girls' schools, private boys' schools and private co-ed schools all lost slightly higher proportions of their students than they had originally contributed to N. This may be due to the fact that all three types of schools are more likely to emphasize the value of an L2 and, while no actual coercion is involved, a number of students may undertake such study as a result. Less than highly motivated from the outset, that group may well contain some of the first students to drop out. On the other hand, as explained in the previous paragraph, private girls' schools are more likely to have a similar attitude towards L2s, yet they displayed a lower attrition rate.

However, the data in Table 4.2 shows a different picture. While no individual school can be identified for reasons of confidentiality, Table 4.2 presents the N contribution/attrition rates for each of the 20 participating schools. Although girls have a greater representation than boys in L2 study, School J (all girls' school) suffered the highest attrition, while School B (an all boys' school) had the lowest attrition in comparison to its Yr 11 contribution. Moreover, and again not shown by the data, of the 48 Yr 11 L2 classes in the project, those with fewer than 15 students at Yr 11 suffered, on average, 18.9% *less* attrition than classes with greater student numbers.<sup>6</sup> This scenario may be a reflection of the better L2 learning and teaching environment possible with smaller numbers of students. It may also reflect a climate where predominantly motivated students are present and/or, a more intimate teacher/student relationship with increased opportunity for the teacher to put his/her case for the students to continue into Yr 12. Whatever the explanation, the smaller L2 classes sustained almost 20% less attrition than the larger classes.

**Table 4.2 N % and attrition % by individual school (20 schools)**

Each of the 20 Schools in the Project is Represented by a Letter A-T										
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
No of students in Yr 11 survey	66	58	84	61	39	8	64	10	32	53
Students as % of N	8.6	7.5	10.9	7.9	5.1	1.0	8.3	1.1	4.1	6.9
Attrition rate as % of total attrition +	10.4+	4.2+	12.9+	6.8+	4.2+	0.1+	8.1+	0.1+	4.9+	9.1+
	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
No of students in Yr 11 survey	98	15	51	25	35	7	6	37	14	2
Students as % of N	12.8	1.9	6.6	3.2	4.5	0.9	0.7	4.8	1.8	0.2
Attrition rate as % of total attrition +	10.7+	0.9+	6.2+	3.6+	3.9+	1.3+	0.1+	5.2+	1.6+	0.1+

<sup>6</sup> Excluding the two Latin classes, plus the two Japanese classes which failed to retain one student into Yr 12.

Table 4.3 shows the attrition distribution for each L2.

**Table 4.3 Contribution to N and attrition by L2.**

Numbers of each L2 in Yr 11	Each L2 as (%) of N (Yr 11)	Attrition of each L2 as % of Total Attrition (306)+	Attrition as % of each L2+
French (248)	32.4	36.6+	45.1+
German (108)	14.1	11.4+	32.4+
Japanese (271)	35.4	35.0+	39.4+
Chinese (24)	3.1	<0.1+	8.3+
Spanish (94)	12.2	13.7+	44.6+
Latin (20)	2.6	2.9+	45.0+
Totals 765	99.8	99.7+	-

As is evident in the right-hand column of Table 4.3, most L2s suffered heavy, but relatively similar, levels of attrition after Yr 11, although the attrition rate for German was significantly less than for the other languages. Chinese had the lowest attrition rate of 8.3 per cent although both Chinese classes in the project were small and, as previously explained, were therefore less likely to suffer high attrition. Latin, on the other hand, endured the equal highest drop-out rate with French, in spite of both Latin classes being small and the enduring reputation for the higher academic ability and commitment of students of Latin. Furthermore, the very small numbers studying Latin and Chinese tend to disrupt the analytical picture of those subjects, as is the case with statistics aimed at providing averages across all six L2s.

Table 4.3 also shows that, regardless of the attrition rate of any L2, as percentages of the total attrition, those levels match quite closely the contributions of those L2s to N in Yr 11, with only French students abandoning their language at a significantly greater rate than their original contribution to N. So while attrition rates are uniformly high overall and, while French and Spanish (marginally) suffered a greater loss than their original N contribution, only German enjoyed a markedly lower attrition rate. In all other cases the differences are no more than a couple of per cent and overall, no L2 experienced significantly more or less attrition than any other.

#### **4.4 Intended and Actual Attrition**

Table 4.4 compares the intended (as indicated by the students themselves in their Yr 11 surveys) and actual (post discontinuation) attrition rates for each L2 with the national L2 attrition rates for 2000, 2001 and 2002 and shows several significant and unexpected patterns.

**Table 4.4 Yr 12 Intended and actual attrition rates for each L2. +Total attrition rate**

	Intended attrition (each L2) after Yr 11 (%)	Actual attrition (%) and % increase over intended attrition after Yr 11+	All-NZ Attrition Rates after Yr 11 (%) 2002-2002		
			2000	2001	2002
French	20.5	45.1+ (=25.5% increase)	59.5	58.5	55.4
German	23.1	32.4+ (=9.3% increase)	56.9	55.0	51.4
Japanese	25.0	39.4+ (=14.4% increase)	54.5	44.6	55.2
Chinese	8.3	8.3+ (= no change)	**	**	**
Spanish	35.1	44.6+ (= 9.5% increase)	40.5	21.6	38.0
Latin	50.0	45.0+ (=5.0% decrease)	81.7	82.8	84.9
Total	189 Students = 24.7% of N	306 students = 40.0% of N+	58.6	52.5	56.9

\*\* No data available.

The overall attrition rate is almost 11 per cent below the national figure, with German and Latin in particular, significantly less. French and Japanese rates are also lower, although less so than German and Latin, with only Spanish having a higher attrition rate. Clearly, the attrition rate in Christchurch is at odds with the rest of the country, so much so in fact that, for the national rates to be as they are, there are likely schools/regions elsewhere in New Zealand with L2 attrition rates of 70 per cent or more. From responses in the Yr 11 surveys (Chapter Three), future job prospects are not the reason for studying L2s so, in spite of Christchurch's reputation as a tourist destination, it is unlikely that the South Island's booming tourist numbers from overseas are a serious factor in explaining Christchurch's markedly lower Yr 12 attrition rates. However, too much should not be read into the lower attrition rates because the N group is a comprehensive cohort study, not a random sample. It is possible, therefore, that higher decile schools and all-girls' schools, for example, were over-represented in the project compared with the whole of New Zealand.

Secondly, and of some concern in the broader context of advanced L2 studies, the number of students who discontinued after Yr 11 (306) represents a significant increase on the numbers predicted by the students themselves (189) in their Yr 11 surveys. In particular, French students discontinued at more than double the rate they themselves had indicated in their Yr 11 surveys. This appears to be a French phenomenon, rather than attributable to the school, teacher, etc., because the originally anticipated French attrition of 20.5 per cent and the actual French attrition rate of 45.1 per cent were both spread relatively evenly across individual schools, school types and gender. Only Latin reversed the trend with a (marginally) lower actual than intended attrition rate. That statistic is not significant, however, because the drop from 50 per cent to 45 per cent represents only one student, the same situation applying to Chinese.

Averaging the attrition rates over six L2s serves little purpose because of the disproportionate influence the small numbers studying Latin and Chinese have on such calculations.

Thirdly, 83 students of N2 (31.4% of N2) had started Yr 11 with the intention of pursuing their L2 studies until Yr 13 (32 students) or university (51 students). That these students had originally intended to complete, at the very least, the three-year L2 journey but subsequently discontinued after only *one* year, is of major concern. The analyses in subsequent sections of this chapter will show in more detail what sorts of variables may have influenced those students to change their minds and abandon their L2 studies prematurely.

#### 4.5 Are you pleased you studied an L2 during Yr 11?

In Chapter Three, approximately three quarters of all students were pleased they had chosen to study an L2 during their Yr 11 year and overall, girls were more pleased than boys. Having discontinued, N2 students were again asked to indicate whether they were still pleased that they had selected an L2 for Yr 11. 79.1% were pleased, 11.7% were not pleased and 9.1% were not sure. Table 4.5 presents the data comparison of students who were pleased they were studying an L2 during the early stages of Yr 11, with those who subsequently discontinued.

**Table 4.5: Data comparing “pleased” during study with after discontinuing**

Pleased I'm Studying an L2 in Yr 11 (N)				Pleased I Studied an L2 Last Year (N2)		
	% of L2	Boys as % of L2	Girls as % of L2	% of L2	Boys as % of L2	Girls as % of L2
French	77.8	74.3	79.5	82.6	72.9	88.52
German	76.8	66.6	80.7	76.6	63.6	84.2
Japanese	65.3	59.2	71.7	72.9	65.8	78.1
Chinese	79.1	80.0	78.5	100.0**	*	100.0**
Spanish	73.4	63.6	74.6	74.29	75.00	74.1
Latin	80.0	N/A	80.0	87.5	N/A	87.5

\* No boys discontinued Chinese after Yr 11.

\*\* This very high percentage represents the 2 girls who discontinued after Yr 11.

It might not have been entirely counter-intuitive if a substantial proportion of N2 had signalled that their L2 experience in Yr 11 had been less than enjoyable. After all, they are the ones who discontinued after only one year. But they did not and, in fact, the opposite appears to be the case. Percentages of ‘pleased’ students for all L2s (except German which dropped by only 2 decimal points)

were higher among those who had discontinued than for the year they were still studying. There may be a psychological element of relief here, something akin to hating every second of a roller-coaster ride or bungee-jump but, when one's feet are safely back on terra firma, feeling glad that the process is over and pleased at having 'survived'. The significant difference is seen in the gender variable. In each L2, N2 girls are far more pleased that they studied an L2 during Yr 11 than are N2 boys. This phenomenon applies especially to French, German and Japanese, while in Spanish, the girl/boy numbers are almost identical.

#### 4.6 Why did you discontinue your L2 studies?

Section 4.6 now address the key focus of the current project and begins with Table 4.6 which sets out the answers selected as the main reasons for discontinuing.

**Table 4.6 The main reasons for discontinuing L2 study after Yr 11**

Main Reason for Discontinuing	Too Hard	I Lost Interest	Timetable	Lack of Effort	Didn't Enjoy	No use to my Future	Unranked Responses
Student Numbers*	75	46	71	18	19	14	19
As % of N2	27.7	17.1	26.3	6.6	7.0	5.2	7.0
Boys as % of N2Boys	23.6	18.2	30.1	10.7	7.5	2.1	6.4
Girls as % of N2Girls	29.5	16.4	24.4	4.5	6.8	6.8	7.3

\* Two students did not answer this most important question!!

Over one-quarter of the N2 group cited 'too difficult' as their main reason for discontinuing after Yr 11. Although referring specifically to Yr 10 Japanese, Holt et al (2002) concluded that level of difficulty is the most commonly cited reason for discontinuing with L2 study and predicted that almost 20 per cent of students will discontinue because of the risk of getting low marks. More will be said about the 'too difficult' conundrum later. In the meantime, of no less import and possibly even greater intrigue is that around one-quarter of N2 students indicated that the timetable was the principal cause for dropping their L2. However, timetable clash as a single motivator is highly questionable because, as will be explained later, the timetabling process at all schools in the project meant that any student who so wished, could have continued with his/her preferred L2 into Yr 12. In other words, no student in the project was physically prevented from continuing an L2 into Yr 12 because of the timetable. What the apparently significant timetable data actually seem to suggest is that when a student wishes to discontinue, either through loss of interest or because s/he finds L2 study 'too difficult' or has discovered the 'need' for

more specific career-oriented subjects or for any other reason, 'timetable conflict' becomes a convenient proxy reason. What this means is that, for many students, a timetabling clash can be selected as a diversionary tactic, especially in situations where, for example, continuing with the L2 into Yr 12 would mean being timetabled away from one's peers in other Yr 12 subjects,<sup>7</sup> or to outwardly 'reinforce' the decision to drop the less important and/or more difficult L2, without actually saying as much. This summation seems all the more likely given that such a high percentage of N originally based their decision to study an L2 upon intrinsic reasons (see Table 3.4 in Chapter 3). Consequently, when required to choose between two subjects competing for the same Yr 12 timetable slot, the value of their original selection rationale (intrinsic) for L2 study fades, and the timetable becomes a substitute excuse. By blaming the timetable, one can avoid: (a) hurting the feelings of a popular but disappointed L2 teacher, (b) being placed in timetable slots for other subjects away from their peers in non-L2 options and (c) another year of the stress resulting from difficult study. Moreover, one need not admit to oneself or to others, one's paradigm shift to more extrinsic factors such as future employment, prestige and eventual financial rewards. In the end, any committed students who did find themselves *genuinely* excluded by a timetable impasse, could have easily enrolled at the Correspondence School for any level of NCEA L2. This report firmly suggests that the start of the final two years of secondary school marks a change in educational values for many L2 students, namely from intrinsic to extrinsic, from educational roundedness to self-specific benefits.

After 'too difficult' and 'timetable', the third significant reason for discontinuing was 'I lost interest'. In itself, this is a very plausible and understandable reason for seeking change, but it is not possible to know whether the loss in interest was the result of finding L2 study too hard, for example. However, had those same students been enjoying greater success in their L2 studies, the subsequent timetable conundrum or loss of interest may not have become an issue at all. In such cases, continuing their L2 study rather than abandoning it, may well have been the obvious and preferred response to the timetable impasse. Percentages of girls and boys across the most frequently cited reasons for discontinuing are very similar, except in relation to future employment. Here, girls discarded their L2 at three times the boys' rate, although the overall numbers are low and not statistically significant. One positive feature is that only 19 students (7.1% of N2) cited 'I didn't enjoy it' as their main reason for

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<sup>7</sup> On one hand, the schools claimed that all students could choose any subject combination (including L2) they wished, while on the other, that assurance did mean that, in some instances, high-achieving students would be moved to a different 'band' in the timetable. This *could* involve being in the same class as less highly motivated students and away from their peers.

discontinuing. While this is a positive indicator, it does suggest that the more technical detractors of excessive difficulty and [perceived] timetable clashes are likely to overrule the enjoyment factor.

Only six students ticked 'other' as their main reason for abandoning their L2 studies and, while the number is so low as to be insignificant, the explanations they offered are interesting enough to be included (edited) as follows: (a) my parents couldn't afford for me to go on the class trip to country X so there was no point in continuing; (b) my best friend gave up so I did; (c) I didn't like the teacher and s/he didn't like me; (d) the class environment last year was unpleasant; (e) my parents convinced me that it (L2) was not relevant;<sup>8</sup> (f) I did two L2s for Yr 11 but only wanted to do one in Yr 12. While there are no conclusions to be drawn from the 'other' answers, because they are so few and diverse, it is interesting nonetheless that four students (all from different schools) dropped their L2 option because of non-academic or social/interactive issues within the classroom. Table 4.7 presents the data for those students who offered a second reason for not persisting with their L2 study.

**Table 4.7 The second main reason for discontinuing L2 study after Yr 11**

Second Reason for Discontinuing	Too Hard	I Lost Interest	Time- table	Lack of Effort	I Didn't Enjoy it	No use to My Future
Student Numbers	26	96	7	23	28	22
As % of 202 replies*	12.8	47.5	3.4	11.3	13.8	10.8

\* Student numbers in Tables 4.7, 4.8 and 4.9 do not add up to 264 or 100% because many students did not indicate a second option

The most significant feature of Table 4.7 is that over one-third of N2 cited 'loss of interest' as their second main reason for dropping L2s. When added to those who chose that response as their first reason, 'loss of interest' features, to some extent, in the decision to discontinue for almost one half of N2. While we cannot read too much into the high occurrence of 'loss of interest' as the second reason, its high response rate (47.5%) does suggest that the first reason for discontinuance (too difficult and timetable clash) might not have carried such weight if interest in L2 had been maintained. In fact, of the 96 students who cited 'loss of interest' as their second reason, 53 had indicated 'too hard' or 'timetable' as their first reason. Being faced with having to choose between an L2 and an alternative subject at Yr 12, high difficulty and loss of interest in the L2, rather than any special desire to study an alternative subject, would likely very quickly tip the scales in favour of the alternative subject. Table 4.8 contains the discontinuation rationale for each L2.

<sup>8</sup> This was one of the very few instances where students acknowledged their parents' opinions as key factors in the decision to study or discontinue an L2.

**Table 4.8 Reasons for discontinuing by each L2**

N2 Main reason for discontinuing % of each L2	Too Hard	I Lost Interest	Timetable	Lack of Effort	Didn't Enjoy	No use in Future	Un-ranked Responses
French	28.4	13.2	28.7	4.0	11.2	5.1	6.1
German	30.0	13.3	23.3	10.0	6.6	6.6	6.6
Japanese	29.1	17.1	23.9	7.2	3.1	4.1	10.4
Chinese	50.0*	0.0	50.0*	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Spanish	31.4	28.5	8.5	11.4	1.1	8.7	4.8
Latin	62.5	25.0	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

\* These high percentages each represent 1 female student. ie. 2 Chinese students discontinued, 1 (=50%) citing 'too difficult', the other (=50%) citing 'timetable'.

Well over one quarter of French, German, Japanese and Spanish students identified their L2 studies as being 'too difficult' and as their main reason for giving up. The 'too difficult → I gave up' equation for Latin was much higher (62.5 per cent), but again this differentiation represents only three students. Overall, 'too difficult' was the only major academic response and accounted for most students' discontinuation. This finding supports the claim in an earlier chapter, namely that L2s are among the most academically demanding subjects to study.

The high response rate of 'too difficult' is also significant for another reason. As explained in Chapter Three, it is reasonable to conclude that the mean academic ability of L2 students is still likely to be significantly above that of students in many other subjects. It is, therefore, a worrying statistic that almost one third of N2 discontinued because the subject was 'too difficult'. The response rate to 'not enough effort' was only 11.4 per cent which still leaves too many students studying well (presumably) but finding their L2 studies 'too difficult'. This scenario raises two questions. The first is how many of those students who gave up because of excessive difficulty might have continued if, for example, the burden of vocabulary learning (highlighted in Chapter Three, and again in the current chapter) had been less. The second question is whether Yr 10 L2 teachers, keen to promote their own subject in order to retain viable class sizes into Yr 11, are painting an unrealistic picture of L2 study at senior level in order to attract more students, including those who might lack the commitment and/or ability and may be destined to fail. Readers are reminded of Chapter Two's suggestions of an L2 course of modified outcomes, not to 'dumb down' the splendid achievements of successful L2 study, but to allow *all* students to complete either a Yr 11 L2 option (like social studies or general science), or to complete some Yr 11 credits in Yr 12 and/or Yr 12 credits in Yr 13. NCEA is the ideal vehicle for such flexibility.

One further statistic of significance is the possible effect of parental advice on discontinuation. In Chapter Three it was pointed out that 40.9 per cent of all students had received parental support (but *not* pressure) to study an L2 at Yr 11, and that some researchers (see, for example Holt et al 2002:13) have identified parental support as one of the “predictors of persistence”. The current project appears to support that finding in that, of all students who continued their L2 study into Yr 12, 60.6 per cent had indicated parental encouragement, compared with only 39.9 per cent of those who discontinued. However, while the finding is of interest, the chi-sq value of less than 1 and a p- value of greater than 5, strongly suggest that the relationship between parental advice and continuation was not immediately significant.

A flaw in the design of the Yr 12 follow-up survey is that discontinuing students were not asked to indicate their NCEA Level 1 (Yr 11) final grades, especially in their L2 subjects. Be that as it may, and while it would have been useful to compare the relative academic results, respondents were invited to add further comments in all sections of the follow-up survey, including the main reason for dropping their L2. No student offered any comment regarding low grades or fear of low grades, although one girl stated that German was her ‘worst subject’, a statement which presumably refers to academic performance. Moreover, as illustrated in Tables 4.6 and 4.8, whether controlled by the variables of gender or by L2, the response ‘too difficult’ was ticked by the majority of students as their main reason for discontinuing. The following section provides a breakdown of the various L2 components cited as the ‘most difficult’.

#### 4.7 The most difficult aspect of L2 studies

Discontinuing students were asked to identify the single ‘most difficult’ aspect of their L2 studies. Table 4.9 shows the three most frequently selected areas of difficulty and compares them with responses to the same question in the Yr 11 original survey one year earlier.

**Table 4.9 Most frequently cited difficulties in L2 learning**

Most Difficult Aspect of L2	As % of N2 (=264)	During Yr 11 (% of N=765)
Vocabulary	42.9	20.1
Grammar	38.1	27.8
Kanji	11.5	11.4

It should be noted that, while percentages of students most troubled by grammar and vocabulary virtually doubled between Yr 11 and Yr 12, the ratio between the two sets of data varied only marginally. Moreover, those who had already

identified vocabulary as a problem in Yr 11 made up 74.4 per cent of those who discontinued after Yr 11, while for grammar, the percentage was 75.9. Vocabulary was the most significant *L2-specific factor* in post-Yr 11 attrition.

Interestingly, all students who identified kanji characters (N and N2 students) as the most difficult aspect, were studying Japanese rather than Chinese. Only two students of Chinese discontinued after Yr 11, but the total absence of Chinese students (during Yr 11 *and* after discontinuing) identifying kanji as a problem is significant because many of the characters are the same for both languages. Moreover, the number of Chinese students is small and conclusions must be drawn with care but, as was explained in Chapter Three, the Japanese syllabus embraces three separate character sets compared with only one in Chinese. It may be this phenomenon which causes problems for students of Japanese but not for those studying Chinese. Or, it may be because in Chinese, each kanji character has a very limited number of possible readings, while in Japanese most characters have at least two readings, some having as many as six or seven possibilities. Added to that is the fact that Japanese students are also required to master the two kana writing systems. However, the fact that no student of Chinese signalled kanji as a problem warrants further investigation and begs such questions as, for example, whether teachers of Chinese use different methods from those used by teachers of Japanese, and whether the mastery requirements and/or actual numbers of characters to be learned make Japanese study inherently more difficult than Chinese.

One possible explanation is that the ethnic composition of the Japanese/Chinese classes may be a factor in the 'kanji is difficult/not difficult' split between Chinese and Japanese. In other words, does the split exist because more ethnic Chinese students study Chinese than ethnic Japanese students study Japanese? If this were the case, it could be argued that the ethnic Chinese studying Chinese will have an advantage in kanji and be less likely to experience difficulty in that area. However, at least in the current project, the theory is found wanting for three key reasons. Firstly, the Chinese and Japanese classes in the project contained similar percentages of Asian students. Secondly, very few of the ethnic Chinese students studying Chinese admitted to having any prior knowledge of the Chinese alphabet. Consequently, they had no kanji advantage over students in the Japanese classes. Thirdly, any advantage in kanji inherent in being Chinese and studying Chinese, would surely have featured among ethnic Chinese studying Japanese as well, given the high number of ethnic Chinese students studying Japanese and the similarities in the character sets shared by both languages. In the end, the disparity in 'kanji difficulty' between students of Chinese and Japanese may be nothing more than statistical, linked

as much to the fact that there were 271 students taking Japanese in the current project, while only 24 were studying Chinese. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Yr 11 questionnaire did not provide the opportunity for students of Japanese to distinguish between the three Japanese character sets (kanji and the two kana systems). It is possible, therefore, that of the students of Japanese who indicated problems with kanji, some were, in fact, thinking in terms of the triple writing systems of Japanese, rather than of kanji exclusively. Identifying kanji as problematic may have simply been the easiest way of expressing the difficulty they experience in memorizing the three separate writing systems of Japanese.

One other issue which emerges from the same debate, however, is that there are far more ethnic Koreans studying Japanese than ethnic Koreans studying Chinese. This *is* one area where an advantage will likely accrue, given the syntactical similarities between Korean and Japanese. The advantage here is less to do with the written character set (although many Koreans do read some kanji), but at the much more fundamental level of structure and word order. So, just as European students will normally have an advantage over native Asian speakers when learning Romance or Germanic languages, any ethnic Asian advantage in learning Japanese or Chinese is most definitely not just restricted to the writing system.

Overall, just as with the Yr 11 data, vocabulary once again featured as the N2 group's most difficult aspect of studying an L2, followed by grammar. Those who selected either response in Yr 11 were overwhelmingly the same (74.8%) who, after abandoning their L2 studies, clearly remembered that vocabulary and grammar had been the most difficult aspects of their L2 studies during the previous year. Apart from kanji, grammar and vocabulary, no response rate for the other available 'most difficult' responses (culture, pronunciation, reading, speaking, understanding, all, other) was greater than 8 per cent. The despairing 'everything is difficult' response (not shown in Table 4.9) which almost reflects an attitude of imminent discontinuation, was selected by only 4.4 per cent. Moreover, students who are already swamped by structures and unlearned vocabulary, or who are starting to feel that way, even well before the beginning of Yr 11, are seldom going to be able to turn things around sufficiently.

**Table 4.10 Most difficult aspect for N2 students: as % of each L2**

	Grammar	Vocabulary	Kanji	Reading	Speaking
French	31.6	42.8	N/A	10.2	6.2
German	43.3	41.3	N/A	6.7	0.0
Japanese	22.1	37.8	28.4	0.0	0.0
Chinese	50.0	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Spanish	39.8	45.2	N/A	0.0	0.0
Latin	60.0	40.0	N/A	0.0	0.0

**Note:** Not all rows add up to 100% because of response rates to several other (minimally supported) options not shown in table.

Only in German and Latin, the two most inflected languages in the project, did more (marginally) students rate grammar ahead of vocabulary as the most difficult aspect of their former L2 experience. Although Latin teaching methodology has removed the vocative case from its noun declensions, its heavily inflected – but comparatively regular – structures remain complicated, making the students’ identification of grammar as Latin’s most problematic aspect not surprising. In German, the selection of grammar over vocabulary was marginal while in Latin, as always, a seemingly significant differential (60.0%: 40.0%) represented only two students! Furthermore, because German and Latin nouns are so heavily inflected, declining a word correctly may well seem like an issue of grammar rather than one of vocabulary. It is highly plausible, therefore, that many Latin and German students regard vocabulary as ‘part and parcel’ of grammar and responded accordingly. Apart from ‘other’ as a response, only French students identified two further variables (reading and speaking), and only a small number of German students regarded reading as a serious difficulty.

Apart from the Latin statistics skewing averages, and bearing in mind that German statistics are almost equal for grammar/vocabulary, vocabulary is again clearly the most difficult factor of each L2. At some stage, foreign language and educational specialists must address the question of whether the ability to memorise lists of vocabulary should play such a major role in defining whether a student is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ at second language study (McLauchlan 2007). Many professional translators, including this author, would see serious difficulties in using vocabulary memorization as the deciding measure. Interpreting is a very different process with different skill sets from those required for translating, both in practical and cognitive requirements, and there is a good case for requiring mastery of greater levels of vocabulary for interpreting. Even in this case, however, the ability to actually use the L2 itself for defining and explaining new words and concepts is a far more practical tool, especially when

interpreters are required to work in areas outside of their expertise, as often happens. Because L2 study at secondary school level is generic, one of the many problems it faces is that it is required to be all things to all students. While it would be uneconomic to split L2 study at secondary school into separate translating and interpreting streams, the status quo is yet another factor which only serves to maintain the reputation of L2 study as disproportionately difficult. This is not exclusively because of the inherently complicated processes that L2 study involves, but equally because rote-learning of single-occurrence, low-occurrence and sometimes very obscure words is too often regarded as a sign of L2 competence. In Chapter Six, comments from participating principals about L2 learning in their schools will be introduced. Interestingly, and without solicitation, the only specific learning issue raised by any principal was vocabulary, namely that they viewed it as too ‘time consuming’.

#### 4.8 Chi-sq and P-values: Statistically significant relationships between discontinuing students and known variables

**Table 4.11 Statistically significant relationships per discontinuing students**

Discontinuing Students (N2)	Chi-sq	p-value
I'm worried about L2 studies this year	21.6	0.000
Gender	0.174	0.676
I don't intend to study hard	15.206	0.001
L2s are difficult or very difficult	11.545	0.002
Foreign language	12.191	0.132
What I really enjoy about L2= no answer	18.605	0.002
I intend to continue for Yr 11 only	132.391	0.000
My biggest problem is learning vocabulary	32.530	0.001
I'm not pleased I'm studying an L2 in Yr 11	14.211	0.000
Type of school	15.400	0.012

High chi-sq values and low p-values will generally suggest that the relationship between two variables is statistically significant. The two-way relationship between L2 discontinuation and other variables were examined in a number of 2 by 2 contingency tables. The results are shown in Table 4.11. For this study the confidence level was set at 5% (ie p-values less than or equal to 0.05 are indicative of a statistically significant relationship). The results in Table 4.11 suggest that 8 out of the 10 variables appear significant, but it is interesting that gender and L2 which are commonly reported in the literature as correlates of persistence and/or discontinuation do not appear significant even at a 10% significance level.

It appears that worrying about one's future L2 study may have influenced the decision to discontinue. Of all those who claimed to worry about their future L2 progress, 42% gave up after Yr 11, compared with 26% who claimed not to be worried. Further research is needed to explore more precisely the underlying causes and more detailed meaning of 'worrying about the future'. In other words, the students who indicated that they were worried about the future may be projecting variables other than such purely academic issues as 'work load', 'too difficult', 'potential loss of interest' and so on. For example, uncontrolled variables may include social attitudes towards L2, negative backlash, seeing their friends going on science field-trips, using computers, discussing job opportunities and any financial rewards which they hope/assume will flow from their own non-L2 courses. Such research may provide an insight into possible 'worry' factors, help develop L2 promotion programmes and provide knowledge about such factors so that students might make informed decisions about choosing an L2 and whether to persist with it or not. Furthermore, from Table 4.11 it is clear that only two of the ten variables investigated show no statistically significant association. All other variables indicate that discontinuation is affected by them beyond the level of mere chance.

#### **4.9 Conclusions**

A number of observations emerge from Chapter Four. Firstly, attrition rates in Christchurch are substantially below the national figure, although it is difficult to know whether this phenomenon reflects anything other than the survey population of the current project being non-random. On the other hand, Christchurch may indeed differ from New Zealand's general population in one or more ways, and/or other studies referred to in this project may not have been truly random themselves. Secondly, it is clear that researchers need to be very careful when attempting to predict future patterns based on the students' own stated ambitions. Such predictions, while made with the best intentions, are those of mercurial teenagers and are subject to change within a very short period of time, as demonstrated by the actual discontinuation rate being almost twice that predicted by the students themselves. What the study was never designed to show, however, is which external variables influenced those students who had originally intended to continue beyond Yr 11, to change their minds and discontinue. Knowing is important, however, because a significant percentage of those who did opt out without having intended to were initially planning on continuing with their L2 through to Yr 13 and university. Their loss is unsustainable yet, to some extent it should be able to be controlled because of their initial stated intention to continue.

Thirdly, no particular L2 suffered a significantly higher attrition/continuation rate than any other. The German attrition rate was slightly lower than the others and, as is also the case at the national level, German is making slightly better headway with uptake. Having said that, however, the attrition rate for all L2s in the project remains a serious problem, especially when compared with non-L2 subjects. Moreover, because no individual L2 appears to generate higher or lower levels of attrition than any other, attrition can be described as 'L2 non-specific' and as reflecting, in part at least, the perception many New Zealanders have towards L2 study, especially its usefulness and level of difficulty. One factor which exacerbates L2 attrition is the ease with which a student can discontinue an L2 and take up a completely new subject in Yr 12 and even in Yr 13. Unfortunately, the opposite process of attracting senior students into L2 study is simply not possible because of the uniquely cumulative nature of L2 learning.

Fourthly, most students select L2 studies for intrinsic reasons. In other words, they are initially driven by reasons other than the subsequent application of the skill to one's own enhancement (work, travel etc) and it is not unreasonable to conclude that this intrinsic motivational factor may be one of the weak links. Most who gave up prematurely cited 'loss of interest' or 'too difficult' as the key causes and, while we do not understand the relationship between those variables, they both seem to be very powerful motivational factors in the decision to discontinue. This is especially so when a student, on an academic journey of increasing difficulty and/or diminishing interest, becomes aware of a less rigorous option or one which his/her friends are confident will enhance their opportunities in later life. Suddenly, the intrinsic factors of 'interest', 'meeting people' and the quite noble claims related to the 'importance of studying a language' can seem rather trite and irrelevant. At Yr 12 and even Yr 13, the switch to a new [humanities] subject appears to be relatively straight forward. Merely because so many students claim that L2s are 'too difficult' does not mean *ipso facto* that the standard has to drop. But what it does mean is that we either accept the status quo or we display the courage to investigate steps towards addressing the 'too difficult' issue, possibly via an amended L2 option with a format similar to that offered in general science. Any such option will, by definition, offer fewer credits and at a lower level, but its overall effect on the L2 climate may be one useful step towards reversing L2 study's 'too difficult' reputation. Furthermore, even in the absence of empirical research, it can be assumed that many students also find Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics etc. difficult. But there is little comfort in this assumption, for it does not reduce the current L2 conundrum but, rather, reinforces it. In other words, university

pre-requisite studies for science-based courses, plus the greater importance traditionally, socially, and economically attached to the non-humanities means that far fewer students will take similar evasive action away from difficult sciences, Mathematics and so on.

Fifthly, among boys and girls, at all schools, and across all L2s, vocabulary was again identified as the most problematic aspect of L2 learning. It would be naïve to suggest removing the need to learn a fundamental set of essential vocabulary, and equally naïve to suggest that to do so would immediately solve the attrition problem. L2 students *do* have to learn vocabulary, but within that requirement, a more pragmatic approach may pay handsome dividends. The use of specified dictionaries is worthy of investigation as, not only will that relieve a tiresome burden in a subject which forms only one fifth or one sixth of a student's work-load, but it will also mean that examinations and exercises can be made far more interesting by not being restricted to words in the prescriptive syllabus. What this really means is that if students are required to memorise fewer words by rote, they can instead be required to work with more words. Grammar, on the other hand, is the substance which holds any language in place. It does not matter how many vocabulary items an L2 student can memorize, for without the grammatical substance to bind them into a meaningful sentence, there is nothing. In fact, the problems of grammatical difficulty and vocabulary difficulty logically co-exist in a form of synergy; ease the obvious burden of one, and the load of the other may also be lessened as a result. Encouraging the use of a wider range of vocabulary while reducing the amount of rote-learning could well be the right place to begin.

Finally, although the school timetable was frequently blamed as a major cause of L2 attrition, there must be serious doubt over the number of students who cited timetable clash as their main reason for discontinuation. In many instances, a less than ideal Yr 12 timetable matrix in the minds of students simply serves to reinforce a *fait accompli* decision to discontinue. A propos of the timetable, a very unpredicted response pattern emerged from one of the schools which had made a substantial student contribution to N. That school offered a dual occurrence at Yr 12 for its two most heavily subscribed Yr 11 L2 subjects, meaning that both occurrences operated below the minimum teacher-to-student ratio. This significant gesture was specifically designed to ensure that Yr 12 L2 students would not be disadvantaged in two key areas: firstly, it meant that students who so wished, could choose two L2s (the most popular and one other), and secondly, L2 students would not automatically be timetabled away from their peer groups for non L2 subjects. Yet it was this very school which generated eight of the responses citing timetable clash as their

main reason for discontinuing! Timetabling is a complicated process and even those principals who make a significant effort to encourage L2 study (as many do), such as running classes which are not viable and/or accommodating six subjects in Yr 11, 12 and 13, cannot satisfy everybody.

Ultimately, the problem is not with the timetable at all, but with the New Zealand perception of L2 learning in general. Today, every student selecting an L2 at Yr 11 does so as a voluntary customer; if the product is not what they want, or if their perception of the product is not what they want, they shop elsewhere. In the first instance, there are three issues to address. Firstly, L2 study needs to be presented as more important, relevant and desirable to Yr 10 students, including those who are already mapping out a future where they regard L2 study as an impediment. Secondly, parents, principals, careers-advisors and the students themselves need a clearer message about the inherent value of L2 learning and its present and future application, not exclusively using L2 skills to translate and interpret, to the widest possible range of interests and careers (see Chapter Six). An entire paradigm shift is needed so that the number of students who select an L2 for intrinsic reasons becomes matched by similar numbers who are convinced that L2 study will help them grow as adults and complement their chosen career rather than detract from it. Finally, the perception of excessive difficulty needs to be addressed with the aim of creating a climate of greater success for L2 students, especially at Yr 10 and Yr 11, by ensuring that L2 learning outcomes, level of difficulty, study requirements and access to L2 'tools of the trade' (McLauchlan 2007) compare much more favourably with other options on offer.

In Chapter Five, the analysis of the data from the students who discontinued their L2 study after Yr 12 will be presented.



# Chapter 5

## Year Three of the Christchurch Project

### 5.1 Procedure

In 2006, all schools were invited to participate in the final year of the project, with the exception of the two schools which had not retained any L2 students after Yr 11. For the Yr 13 data collection, the time-consuming process of handing back the original Yr 11 surveys to those continuing students and inviting them to make any further changes to their Yr 11 or Yr 12 responses was abandoned. Instead, HODs were provided with Yr 12 L2 class lists from the previous year and asked to indicate which students had persisted with their L2 into Yr 13 and which students had left school altogether. This provided exactly the information needed to carry out the final year's data collection. The Yr 13 Deans again assisted by distributing the follow-up surveys to the discontinuing students. One hundred and twenty-eight students had discontinued after Yr 12, of whom 91 returned their follow-up surveys. A further 62 students had left school altogether. The response rate of follow-up surveys was 72.2% which, although down on the 86% response rate of the previous year, was still significantly above what is commonly regarded as acceptable for postal surveys. Instead of issuing chocolate treats as in the previous two years, a lucky draw for CD vouchers and an MP3 player was organised for all students who returned their surveys by the end of March. It is unlikely that the lower survey response rate reflected a preference for chocolate over music on the part of discontinuing L2 students, and the variation was most likely due to the fact that individual schools with low response rates were not pursued as had been done in 2005. In the end, the final return rate was regarded as highly satisfactory. Students who discontinued after Yr 12 and who returned their follow-up surveys will henceforth be referred to as N3. Instances where that data also includes school leavers and those who did not send back their follow-up surveys will be highlighted in the text.

**Note:** Later in this chapter, comparisons will be made between numbers who discontinued and their own stated intended study duration. When the Yr 12 continuing students were asked to re-visit their Yr 11 surveys and to make any changes they wished to their replies, the area which most students altered was the 'intended length of study'. Not only is this further confirmation of the capricious nature of young minds, but it also lends weight to earlier expressed

concerns about the reliability of research based upon the predictions and intentions as expressed by the students themselves. Therefore, in this chapter, references to ‘intended length of study’ of students who discontinued after Yr 12 are not based on data from their original Yr 11 stated intentions, but on the replies in the Yr 13 discontinuation follow-up surveys. In other words, other than for those students who maintained the same ‘intended length of study’ intention each time they were surveyed, there is no other link between ‘intended length of study’ data in this chapter and ‘intended length of study’ data in previous chapters.

## 5.2 Continuation and discontinuation

Out of the 765 Yr 11 students in the first year of the study, 279 (36.4%) students persisted and eventually enrolled in Yr 13 L2 classes. Furthermore, a total of 101 students from N had left school and, as was explained in Chapter Four, no doubt some of them will have maintained their L2 programmes at their new schools. This left 365 students from N still at school in Yr 13 but no longer studying an L2. Table 5.1 shows the attrition rates after Yr 12, compares those rates with Yr 11 and shows total attrition and continuation rates for the three-year duration of the project.

**Table 5.1 Attrition after Yr 12**

	Attrition (%) each L2 after Yr 11*	Attrition (%) each L2 of N2**	Total Attrition % Yr 11-Yr 13***	Total Yr11-Yr13 Retention rate %
French	45.1	43.5	67.1	33.9
German	32.4	50.9	56.4	43.6
Japan	39.4	43.7	63.4	36.6
Chinese	8.3	16.6	16.6	81.4
Spanish	44.6	43.6	67.0	33.0
Latin	45.0	63.6	60.0	40.0

\* Includes non-returned follow-up surveys.

\*\* Includes non-returned follow-up surveys and school leavers.

As illustrated in Table 4.4 (Chapter Four), recent all-New Zealand average L2 attrition rates over the three years from Yr 11 to Yr 13 are 58.6%, 52.5% and 56.9%, less than, but still comparable with, the three-year rates from the present study (Table 5.1). Chinese retained the greatest percentages of its original N contribution, partially because of the small classes and the supportive atmosphere that can be generated therein. The high retention percentage for Chinese is in stark contrast to the rest of the L2 rates. The Chinese rate makes the overall L2 picture appear brighter than it is and obviates any benefit from calculating an average percentage. On the other hand, the very small Latin

classes were in contrast to this pattern, suggesting possible uncontrolled variables such as gender (all Latin students were girls, most Chinese students were boys), and the greater importance attached to a current language over an unspoken one. Most counter-intuitive was the overall attrition of Spanish, in stark contrast to nationwide patterns. The socio-economic factor was a possible catalyst in the Spanish scenario as one school of very low decile rating lost almost all its Spanish students, while another school of middle decile ranking lost around 50%. Having said that, however, one private school lost almost 40% of its Spanish students after retaining almost 100% the previous year. Although French retained a higher percentage of students after Yr 12 than after Yr 11, it had the highest three-year attrition rate overall. Once again, German has produced the lowest attrition rate (with the obvious exception of Chinese). German classes are generally small, and German is the nearest relative of English. In spite of those two factors, however, German is a complicated language and later in this chapter, student opinions about the difficulty level of German and the other L2s will be examined. Table 5.2 contains the attrition rates for each school.

**Table 5.2. Contribution to N (raw student numbers) and total attrition rate (%) by individual school**

Each of the 20 Schools in the Project is Represented by a letter A-T										
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
No of students in Yr 11 survey (N=765)	66	58	84	61	39	8	64	10	32	53
Total attrition rate after Yr12 (%)*	56.0	32.7	46.4	49.1	46.1	37.5	46.8	100.0	60.2	56.6
	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
No of students in Yr 11 survey	98	15	51	25	35	7	6	37	14	2
Total attrition rate After Yr 12*	57.1	26.6	52.9	48.0	45.7	71.4	66.6	56.7	50.0	100.0

\* excludes students who discontinue L2 or leave school altogether during second half of Yr13

Schools H and T failed to retain any L2 students, although in both cases the total attrition occurred in *toto* at the end of the first year of the project (Yr 11). The flow-on from this is that neither school was able to offer a Yr 12 or Yr 13 L2 subject in the subsequent two academic years. As was previously noted, both schools had very low decile rankings, as did the schools with the third and fourth highest attrition rates (Schools P and Q). The highest average attrition rate was for co-educational state schools (average rate 58.6%), while private single-sex schools had an average attrition rate of 45.3%. State all-girls' schools averaged 51.2% and, given the female predominance in L2 uptake, this

result may appear counter-intuitive. However, there is no causal link between uptake and completion and, because both state all-girls' schools contributed the greatest combined numbers to the project at Yr 11, their attrition rates were perhaps not totally unexpected. Private single-sex schools averaged 43.5%, while integrated catholic girls' schools produced an even more encouraging average rate of 42.1%. The lowest total attrition rate was 26.6% (private girls' school), although its contribution to N was small, as were its class sizes. The second lowest rate (32.7%) was for the only state all-boys' school in the project. This school had a very low attrition rate after Yr 11 and has managed to maintain that pattern. As was explained in Chapter Four, however, one L2 subject at that school was decimated after Yr 11 and again after Yr 12, while the other two L2s retained almost their total Yr 11 catchment through to Yr 13. The only private co-educational school in the project had the fifth highest attrition rate of 60.2%. Table 5.3 shows a further break-down by comparing gender with post-Yr 12 and total attrition (three years) of each L2.

**Table 5.3 Attrition after Yr 12 and total attrition (as % of each L2) by gender**

Attrition After Yr	French		German		Japanese		Spanish		Chinese		Latin	
	12	Total	12	Total	12	Total	12	Total	12	Total	12	Total
Male %	48.7	58.5	40.0	56.5	32.8	60.7	45.4	54.5	00.0	9.0	*	*
Female %	40.3	50.0	26.9	43.5	45.8	54.1	40.9	51.8	00.0	21.4	40.0	60.0

**Note:** Excludes all school leavers and non-returned follow-up surveys.

\* No boys in the project studied Latin.

Boys discontinued overall at clearly higher rates than girls, with the exception of Chinese which, because its low numbers make its results appear much more significant than the reality of the situation. Clearly, however, the lowest three-year gender/L2 attrition rate was for boys studying Chinese, followed by girls studying Chinese. In Chapter Three, Table 3.4 showed that more students of Chinese than of any other L2 cited 'future career' as their first and second main reason for choosing that language. This factor may explain the high continuation rates of Chinese through to Yr 13. Girls studying German persisted into Yr 13 at a significantly higher rate than for any other L2 (exception of Chinese). With girls in particular, what Table 5.3 suggests is that the lower the attrition rate after Yr 11, the lower the rate is likely to be after Yr 12. Boys studying German and Japanese, on the other hand, persisted comparatively strongly after Yr 11 but their retention in both languages fell away markedly after Yr 12.

Intended study duration, as expressed by the students, provides one of the most dramatic insights into the ramifications of the L2 status quo. Table 5.4 shows the intended L2 study duration of N3 (discontinued after Yr 12).

**Table 5.4 Intended persistence (raw student numbers) for N3**

N3 (total 91)	Yr 11	Yr 12	Yr 13	University
Intended study duration	4	10	38	39

Firstly, Table 5.4 again shows that student intention as expressed by themselves bears very little resemblance to the reality of the final outcome. But of far greater concern is that of the 91 post-Yr 12 follow-up surveys returned, a very significant 77 (=84.6%) had intended to study at Yr 13 and/or university. Only ten students of N3 (10.9%) discontinued at the stage they had indicated, while only four students had studied beyond their stated intention. Table 4.4 (Chapter 4) shows that those who discontinued after Yr 11 were almost twice the number who had actually intended to discontinue after only one year of senior L2 study. But the reality after Yr 12 is that almost all discontinuing students had intended to complete at least one further year. Mercurial decision-making, while an uncontrolled and therefore unmeasured variable in this project, is one factor, but urgent research is required to find out exactly what happens in the L2 classroom to influence so many willing L2 students so that they change their minds and discontinue prematurely. Until then, schools and universities are missing out on substantial numbers of potential L2 enrolments. The possible role of our tertiary institutions in helping address a problem which affects them directly is discussed in detail in Chapter Six. Table 5.5 analyses further the issue of intended/actual attrition by separating the data into each L2.

**Table 5.5 Raw numbers data of intended and actual post-Yr 12 discontinuation**

Intended study span (N3 only)	French	German	Japanese	Chinese	Spanish	Latin
To Yr 11	2	2	0	0	0	0
To Yr 12	2	1	2	0	2	3
To Yr 13	9	8	16	0	4	1
To University	9	7	16	3	4	0
Discontinuing after Yr 12 (raw numbers)	22	18	34	3	10	4

In Chapter Four it was explained that 31.4% of N2 (post-Yr 11 discontinuing cohort) had started Yr 11 with the intention of pursuing their L2 studies until Yr 13 (32 students) or university (51 students). If we combine the 38 students from Table 5.5 who initially aimed for Yr 13, and the 40 who aimed for university, the discontinuation rate becomes more significant than merely its numerical value. Of the total number of discontinuing students after Yr 11 and Yr 12, 151 had originally intended to persist until NCEA Level 3 and/or university. If this number, or even half of it, had progressed into Yr 13, the senior timetable in

many of the participating schools would have no choice but to accommodate their L2 students very differently. First year university L2 numbers would also be likely to be greatly enhanced.

We have no base-line data on each student’s academic ability, but it is probable that a reasonable percentage of the best achievers were among those who indicated in Yr 11 their intention to aim for Yr 13 L2 study and/or university L2 study. Therefore, without 151 of that high-achieving group, it is equally probable that the mean academic ability of the Yr 13 L2 cohort overall is depleted and less than what it would have otherwise been. Furthermore, because the number of school-leavers was very small (13.2% of N after three years), it is also reasonable to assume that many of the N3 group are still likely to go on to university. Unfortunately, by their premature L2 discontinuation at school, they have clearly signalled that language study is unlikely to be part of their tertiary programme.

### 5.3 Why did you discontinue after Yr 12?

**Table 5.6 Comparison of main reasons for discontinuation: post-Yr 11 and post-Yr 12**

	Too Difficult	Lost Interest	Timetable	No effort	Didn't enjoy	Won't help my career	Other
After Yr 11 (%)	28.4	18.1	25.1	7.4	7.0	4.5	1.2
After Yr 12 (%)	16.4	36.2	28.5	2.2	3.3	13.1	0.0

Several significant factors are evident from Table 5.6. The first is the large drop in numbers citing ‘level of difficulty’ as their main reason for discontinuing, when compared with those who stopped after Yr 11. This suggests that: (a) many of those who persisted to the end of Yr 12 were above average achievers and making reasonable progress, or (b) having ‘lost interest’ or having decided that their L2 will ‘not help their career’, difficulty was of little relevance in their decision to stop, or (c) those who were struggling were significantly culled out after Yr 11. The (b) cohort (above) would have probably discontinued whether they had found it difficult or not. On the other hand, it may be that the Yr 11 syllabus is overly demanding, thereby decimating the number of continuing students, or that Yr 12 is too easy. If there is an imbalance in level of difficulty between Yr 11 and Yr 12, it needs to be addressed as quickly as possible.

Secondly, over one-third of N3 discontinued because of lack of interest and it is this group that we need to know more about. In other words, we must identify what it is that causes the initial interest to fade. All students had the opportunity to select reasons such as ‘it won’t help my career’ and ‘I didn’t enjoy it’, but they

chose 'lack of interest'. The problem may refer to teaching style, although this is unlikely given the broad spectrum of students, schools and L2s who ticked that response. Or, it may reflect an aspect of the syllabus, course content, lack of hands-on activities and field-trips as are prevalent in so many other subjects. It may also be the down-stream effect of earlier factors such as difficulty or career consideration and subsequently developed from there in the minds of the students. Very significant is the fact that the number of Yr 12 students citing 'lack of interest' was double the percentage of the Yr 11 cohort.

Thirdly, timetable clashes featured at the same rate as in the previous year. What was apparent this time, however, was that after Yr 12, some students who were experiencing timetable problems, sought out alternative programmes. After Yr 11, only two students were identified as persisting with their L2 via the Correspondence School, whereas after Yr 12, 17 students had taken this option. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, those who were really determined to persist with their L2 could and did so, and secondly, it confirms that the large numbers who discontinued (Yr 11 and Yr 12) citing timetable problems had in all probability already decided to discontinue anyway. While possibly keen to continue, they were not prepared to consider alternative possibilities.

Finally, as expected, the number of students citing 'it won't help my career' increased as they found themselves approaching the final year of their secondary schooling and were thinking more carefully about jobs and/or university study. However, at 13.1%, the number was still only marginally significant. Table 5.7 now shows the intended and actual discontinuation data of N3 by gender.

**Table 5.7 Intended and actual discontinuation of N3 by gender**

	Yr 11	Yr 12	Yr 13	University	Actual Discontinuation Post Yr 12 (N3)*
Boys' intended discontinuation (%)	0.0	4.3	19.7	15.3	39.5
Girls' intended Discontinuation (%)	4.3	6.5	21.9	27.4	60.4

\* Excludes school leavers and non-returned surveys.

The data in Table 5.7 are largely counter-intuitive, given the historic scenario of greater L2 persistence by girls. More girls discontinued after Yr 12 (60.4% of N3) than boys (39.5%), although that still left 247 girls studying at Yr 13 compared with 134 boys, a ratio much more in keeping with the expected ratio of slightly less than two girls to each boy. But what is notable is that of the 91 students in N3, the anticipated attrition pattern was reversed so that while a greater percentage of N3 girls intended to persist through to Yr 13 and university, in fact a greater percentage of boys than girls actually enrolled

for Yr 13 L2 study. No prediction can be made as to how many will eventually complete Yr 13 and proceed to university, but some indication may be given by the fact that the discontinuation ratio after Yr 12 is very similar to that after Yr 11, where 64.8% of N2 were girls and 35.1% were boys. Table 5.8 shows the full range of discontinuation rates per individual L2.

**Table 5.8 Discontinuation rates by individual L2**

	French	German	Japanese	Chinese	Spanish	Latin
Contribution to N as % of N	32.4	14.1	35.4	3.1	12.2	2.6
Discontinuation as % of N2*	34.9	10.7	34.6	0.0	12.7	2.6
Discontinuation as % of N3*	24.1	19.7	37.3	3.2	10.9	4.3
Total discontinuation each L2 as % of its original contribution to N*	52.0	47.2	51.6	15.0	52.1	60.0

\* Excludes school leavers and non-returned follow-up surveys.

It goes without saying that, in order for attrition to occur, each L2 must lose more than it contributed to N or, some L2s must lose more to compensate for others which may lose fewer. Latin suffered the highest overall attrition although, like Chinese, which had the lowest overall attrition, Latin involved very small numbers of students. Predictably, the French attrition rate dropped from Yr 11 to Yr 12, but had been severe enough after Yr 11 that the lower Yr 12 rate could not prevent it from having the highest attrition rate overall (with the exception of Latin). Japanese suffered a similar total attrition rate although it lost a slightly higher percentage of students after Yr 12 than after Yr 11, as did Spanish. Only German lost a significantly higher percentage of students after Yr 12 than after Yr 11. In order to explain the various attrition rates, Table 5.9 expands the data from Table 5.6 and identifies the main reasons for discontinuation per L2.

**Table 5.9 Main reasons for discontinuing by L2**

Number in N3	Difficult (%)	Lost Interest (%)	Timetable (%)	No effort (%)	Didn't Enjoy (%)	Won't help my career (%)
French (22)	4.5	36.6	50.0	0.0	4.5	4.5
German (18)	16.6	50.0	16.6	6.2	6.2	6.2
Japanese (34)	20.5	32.3	20.4	2.9	2.9	20.4
Chinese (3)	0.0	33.3	66.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Spanish (10)	30.0	30.0	30.0	0.0	0.0	10.0
Latin (4)	25.0	25.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
N3 =91						

Because most of the cells in Table 5.9 represent very small raw numbers, it must be remembered that even high percentages such as 50.0% of Latin

students discontinuing because it 'won't help my career' represent only two students. Unlike the high percentages of Yr 11 students who discontinued because of 'difficulty', the main reasons for post-Yr 12 discontinuation were 'loss of interest' and 'timetable clash'. The timetable phenomenon has already been dealt with in Chapter Four and is further explored in Chapter Six. However, it should be noted that for the final year of the project no attempt was made to contact the schools to enquire about subject availability within the school timetable. The reason for not contacting the schools is that, regardless of a school's Yr 13 timetable, the Correspondence School option does offer every student who really wishes to persist, the opportunity to do so. It is not unreasonable to again conclude, therefore, that the majority of all students who cited 'timetable' were, in fact, either already considering discontinuing or were already committed to that decision. The timetable matrix may well have been a latent factor in that decision, but it is highly unlikely that it was a principle catalyst. If the Correspondence School option was not regarded as satisfactory, that does not reflect badly on that option, nor on the student in any way. But it does strongly suggest that the L2 was regarded as less important than the other subjects which were selected from the school timetable, and not of sufficient importance to warrant continuing via an alternative programme such as a correspondence course.

This change from 'too difficult' (Yr 11) as the main reason to 'lost interest' (Yr 12) was extreme but not unexpected, possibly due to the fact that many of the least able L2 students will have chosen to discontinue at the earlier opportunity after Yr 11. This is certainly one explanation for the counter-intuitive and very low percentage (4.5%) of discontinuing French students who cited 'too difficult'. As with Yr 11, the Yr 12 data does not tell us as why so many students lost interest. The problem may have started with difficulty, lack of enjoyment or lack of effort, but in the end, 'lost interest' was identified as the prime de-motivator. On the other hand, anecdotal comments from several Yr 13 teachers described their despair at having to witness so many high-achieving and successful students among those who had chosen to discontinue. This very scenario is the L2 teacher's worst nightmare; a class of enthusiastic, high-achievers in Yr 11 is inexplicably reduced to a fraction of its size in the new school year, having been decimated during the Christmas holidays. The teachers' comments have no small amount of substance, however, and are supported by the very low numbers of students who ticked 'no effort' and 'not enjoying'. Taken at face value, the very large majority of students who discontinued after Yr 12 believed they were putting in sufficient effort and were not finding the work overly difficult. This combination suggests that other unmeasured variables such as parents,

the L2 climate, peer pressure, holiday work, future study and career prospects take on increased significance as the L2 student moves into the final phase of secondary schooling. Many expressed their discontinuation as honestly as they could by ticking 'lost interest', while the other most substantial group used a timetable glitch simply to confirm the decision they were already committed to making. Not shown in Table 5.9 are the six students who cited 'other' as their reason for giving up. Only three expanded on their responses, all blaming their teacher as either 'boring', 'stupid' [sic] or 'a prick' [sic]. All were boys, two from the same class and one from a different school. This was the first time in the project that personality clashes appeared. It is entirely possible that other students may have also wished to express similar frustrations but did not through fear of being identified. Table 5.10 shows the stages of discontinuation by gender.

**Table 5.10. Continuation by gender**

	Yr 11 (N=765)	Continued into Yr 12*	Continued into Yr 13*
Girls	492	302	246
Boys	273	170	134
Totals	765	472	380

\* Excludes school leavers and non-returned surveys.

In keeping with national statistics, the ratio of boys to girls remained almost identical throughout the entire study. In the first year (N), the ratio of boys to girl was 35.6%: 64.4%. During the second year (N2) the ratio was 36.0%: 64.0%, and after the final survey in Yr 13 (N3) the ratio was 35.2%: 64.8%. These figures support the current discourse that gender is not a factor in discontinuation.

#### 5.4 Which aspects of your L2 were the most difficult?

All discontinuing respondents were again asked to identify the most difficult aspect of their L2 study. Table 5.11 presents the overall findings for that question and compares them with the data from the two previous years.

**Table 5.11 The three most difficult aspects of L2 study**

	Grammar	Vocabulary	Kanji
% of N (Yr 11)	27.8	38.1	11.4
% of N2 (Yr 12)	38.1	27.8	11.5
% of N3 (Yr 13)	40.6	34.0	8.7

Other responses such as reading, pronunciation, culture etc. are not shown in Table 5.11 because each contributed only one or two per cent to the total data for that survey question. Kanji remained constant throughout the three years, leaving grammar and vocabulary as the two most difficult aspects. This may have been predictable, but it is interesting to note that at Yr 11, vocabulary was the most difficult aspect and, although the problem lessened in the Yr 12 survey, it became a major issue again for those who dropped out in the final year. Percentages who regarded grammar as the main problem, on the other hand, increased steadily over the three years and Table 5.12 shows the breakdown of the difficulty factors for each L2. Students were permitted to select one response only and, while there were no doubt many who would have wished to select several, the final choice represents their most memorable feature of difficulty.

**Table 5.12 N3: Most difficult aspects by L2**

N3 as % of each L2	French	German	Japanese	Chinese	Spanish	Latin
Grammar	44.4	72.2	15.5	0.0	40.0	50.0
Vocabulary	41.9	27.7	46.1	0.0	40.0	0.0
Kanji	N/A	N/A	23.5	N/A	N/A	N/A

**Note:** Other factors such as speaking etc. are excluded because their response rates were less than 5%

The pattern in Table 5.12 paints a similar picture to the data after Yr 11, albeit with a slightly different hue. Percentages identifying grammar as the biggest problem increased over the previous year and, although grammar was more strongly identified than vocabulary for French, Latin and German, the difference in French was marginal. Spanish students were evenly divided between the two. In spite of the slight majority of French students selecting grammar over vocabulary, over 40 per cent of discontinuing French students still selected vocabulary, a clear signal that it was barely less of a problem than it had been in previous years. Furthermore, as pointed out in Chapter Four, the highly inflected nature of Latin and German again suggests that many students of those languages may view grammar and vocabulary as one and the same thing. Vocabulary as an individual problem still featured significantly (27.7%) among German students and it is likely that many of those who selected grammar were referring as much to what nouns 'do' as to what the individual words mean. In inflected languages, the latter do not exist in isolation without the former.

The Japanese response was largely predictable. Kanji is an issue for all students of Japanese, as indeed it is for native speakers. Offering kanji as a response in the survey has likely drawn the attention of some Japanese students away from other issues associated with learning that language. However, compared with all the European languages in the survey, Japanese grammar at NCEA level is a relatively simple and highly regular process. There are no genders, no cases, almost no plurals, no expansive declensions or conjugations, while tenses are also very limited. It was not surprising, therefore, that grammar was not selected as a major Japanese problem. Furthermore, in Japanese, at least until the end of the secondary school syllabus, learning a new word is largely a single procedure. This excludes the kanji factor, whose numbers are restricted at school level, plus the fact that most Japanese words at school are written in the simpler kana anyway. Japanese vocabulary items do not involve difficult pronunciation (as in French), and have no plural forms or gender as in French, German, Spanish and Latin. In selecting vocabulary as the most difficult issue, it is unlikely, therefore, that the Japanese students could have regarded any aspect of grammar and vocabulary as one and the same thing. Accordingly, the students of Japanese who cited vocabulary may have provided the clearest signal of the struggle L2 students face with vocabulary learning, namely memorising new words. Chinese students do not feature in Table 5.12 because their responses (three) covered 'pronunciation' and 'other'. Notwithstanding the very small number of Chinese students, they were apparently untroubled by grammar, kanji or vocabulary. Across all L2s, twice as many girls as boys selected grammar as the most difficult issue (25 girls, 12 boys), while those who chose vocabulary were evenly divided (17 girls, 15 boys), as were those who chose kanji (4 boys, 5 girls).

### 5.5 Are you pleased you studied an L2?

As shown in table 5.13, and perhaps not altogether unexpected, the longitudinal progression of the project displays a steady decline in the numbers who were pleased they had studied an L2.

**Table 5.13 Longitudinal change of being pleased at having studied an L2**

	Pleased	Not pleased	Not sure
% of N (Yr 11)	92.3	7.6	0.0
% of N2 (Yr12)	79.1	16.3	11.9
% of N3 (Yr 13)	58.2	24.1	17.5

As the percentages of students who were pleased decreased, the numbers who were not pleased or not sure increased. At 58.2%, slightly more than half

of those who discontinued at the end of Yr 12 still felt positive about their L2 experience. It is not difficult to put an even more positive spin on this result and to be pleased that over half of those who pulled out after Yr 12 were still pleased at having persevered for so long. The other part of this equation is nothing less than worrying, however, as the more students who were 'not pleased', the greater the likelihood of 'negative backlash' (see Chapter Three). The high percentage of 'not pleased' students suggests a more sinister scenario. It is unlikely that most of those students would have been 'not pleased' simply because of difficulty, grammar and the like, suggesting that their dissatisfaction stemmed from a more personal issue, again much more likely to lead to an overall picture of L2 negativity which may remain with them for many years. The three boys mentioned earlier who identified their teacher as the major reason for discontinuing, are one very clear example of the sorts of reasons which may lie behind being 'not pleased' after four years of L2 study. Even the increase in 'not sure' responses should be interpreted as a negative rather than a positive or neutral phenomenon.

Gender was also a significant factor in being pleased or not pleased, with 63.4% of all the girls in N3 being 'pleased', but only 50.5% of all boys selecting that response. However, for the response which required a more decisively negative attitude, 20.0% of girls were 'not pleased', whereas 30.5% of all boys in N3 expressed that sentiment. Those who had not really made up their minds ('not sure') accounted for 16.3% of the girls and 19.4% of the boys. The results for 'pleased/not pleased' by each L2 were also significant, as shown in table 5.14.

**Table 5.14 Pleased to have studied by each L2**

	Pleased as % of L2 in N3	Not pleased as % of L2 in N3	Not sure as % of L2 in N3
French (22)	50.0	36.3	13.6
German (18)	55.5	16.6	27.7
Japanese (34)	50.0	29.4	20.5
Chinese (3)	100.0	0.0	0.0
Spanish (100)	80.0	10.0	10.0
Latin (4)	100.0	0.0	0.0

French and Japanese had the lowest percentages of respondents who were 'pleased' they had studied those languages, but the satisfaction level of German discontinuers was only 5% higher. Of greater importance is that while German students returned a very low level of 'not pleased' and a proportionally higher level of 'not sure', French and Japanese, but especially French, had

much higher percentages of students who were definitively negative about their L2 experience by rating themselves as 'not pleased'. Three students from Chinese and four from Latin meant their rate for 'pleased' has less significance than the 100% data suggests.

Comparing the data of 'pleased', 'not pleased' and 'not sure' with that of the previous year's discontinuing cohort, we find that the French level of being 'pleased' has dropped by over 30%, the German level dropped by over 20%, and that the Japanese was down by over 20%. Of the remaining three L2s, Chinese remained exactly the same, while Spanish increased by 6% and Latin by 13%. It is difficult to account for why some L2s lost and others gained in the above process, but the three which lost were those which contributed the largest numbers of students throughout the project. Earlier comments about smaller class sizes possibly producing a more intimate learning atmosphere which could have resulted in lower levels of discontinuation may also feature in generating greater levels of being 'pleased', including among those who had discontinued. Equally likely is the scenario that some of those who continued into Yr 12 were already wondering if they had made the right decision, even at the very beginning of that year. Starting Yr 12 with some level of negativity or doubt was unlikely to improve and, as Yr 12 wore on, those feelings intensified until some of the earliest signs of 'negative backlash' may have already begun to appear.

## **5.6 Conclusions**

Chapter Five brings the data collection and analysis phases of the project to a close. Bearing in mind that the aim of the project was to find out why students discontinue their L2 studies, there are perhaps four features of Chapter Five which could be considered the most significant. The first of these is that, as with the earlier years of the project, far more students discontinued their L2 than had indicated any such intention. Relying exclusively on the students' own future predictions, therefore, is clearly not conducive to robust research. Secondly, this project does not identify the uncontrolled variables which have caused so many students to change their minds and quit prematurely. From the data collected, however, many students obviously discontinued, to some extent at least, because they found the work too difficult. That reason, however clear-cut it may seem, cannot be completely accepted at face value, a complicated issue which will be explored in Chapters Six and Seven. Also, while those who cited 'loss of interest' were probably being as frank as they could, this is a crucial issue and we need to find out why their interest flagged and why the syllabus, classroom, teaching style etc. was unable to maintain their enthusiasm.

However, as with previous years, it can also be assumed that those who cited 'timetable clash' as their main reason for discontinuing were using that excuse to camouflage their real reasons in order to justify the discontinuing process and make it seem more academically 'acceptable'. Yet the schools in the project did not cut their students adrift through restrictive timetabling. Rather, those students for whom difficulty, diminishing interest or motivation, peer pressure, future career aspirations or whatever other reasons were already catalysing the desire for a change of course, knew that their interest was insufficient to accommodate correspondence lessons or school classes without their best friends sitting beside them. Given the reasons for selecting an L2 in the first place, this obvious drop in value accorded to the discipline also needs to be investigated further. Finally, for those students who claimed to have stopped because their L2 programme was too difficult, the message is no less clear than it was after Yr 11. While grammar overtook vocabulary as the biggest academic burden of the secondary school L2 learner, the overall difference between the two was not great. In fact, breaking that data down into individual L2s shows that the result only came about because of the higher percentage of German students who cited grammar as their main difficulty.

Chapter Six moves away from the current focus on statistical data and introduces more challenging findings about how society's attitudes, and not the academic components of L2 study at all, may well be the greatest demotivational factors in the L2 uptake/attrition discussion.



# Chapter Six

## New Zealand's negative L2 climate: What the data does not show

### 6.1 Introduction

Chapters Three, Four and Five have analysed the reasons provided by the respondents for studying and discontinuing their L2 programmes. Throughout the project, all students approached the surveys with maturity and no informal or flippant responses were received. While it is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the answers were intended to reflect how the students genuinely feel, Moser and Kalton (1986, p. 246) warn that “[research] informants will not always give honest responses... [but may] deliberately avoid giving certain information [and may give] the answer [they] think is expected”. This note of caution is especially relevant to the number of students who cited timetable clash as their main reason for discontinuation. One step back from the aggregated data and statistics lies a much less visible phenomenon which appears to catalyse many of the answers offered by the students. The reality is that, apart from secondary school teachers, few New Zealanders in the strongest positions to contribute to the promotion and value of L2 skills display a proactive attitude in promoting language learning. While employers, school principals, universities, colleges of education, the government and even the L2 students themselves voice their support for L2 study, they are often found wanting when the time comes for the committed application of their idealism. This chapter identifies New Zealand's ‘negative L2 climate’ as a key catalyst in premature L2 discontinuation, and hails the dedication of secondary school L2 classroom teachers.

### 6.2 Employers

Many local employers have contributed to the negative L2 climate by the way they have advertised their need for L2-skilled staff. During the 1970s and 1980s, increasing numbers of shops and hotels began advertising for “fluent” speakers, sometimes of not just one, but of several L2s. Simultaneously, they stipulated several years' residence in the L2 country and an in-depth knowledge of its culture and business protocols. The then Department of Labour handled a number of complaints about tactics such as hiring native-speaker visitors without work permits, employing working holiday visa holders for longer than the permitted duration and/or then swapping them directly with other employers, paying non-taxed wages under the counter, offering back-

handlers to tour guides and tour bus drivers and so on. Thus were employers able to capitalise on New Zealand's burgeoning tourist boom.

Today, the situation has become much more sophisticated, but no less exclusionist. Of 23 L2-related (3 German, 5 Korean, 9 Japanese, 5 Chinese, 1 French) positions advertised in Christchurch between August 2004 and March 2005<sup>1</sup>, where an L2 skill was described as "useful" or "an advantage", I was able to obtain email or written responses from only 16. That in itself is a statement of no little significance, but those who did respond to the question ("What is the pay rate?") were offering remuneration at an average of \$11-60 per hour. Employers who describe L2 skills as "useful" are playing a wily game. While fully aware of the advantages of on-site L2 skills in enhancing their profit margins, describing those skills as merely "useful" or "an advantage" precludes any expectation from potential applicants of increased remuneration.<sup>2</sup> Equally inappropriate is that some advertisements state that applicants "must have a current work permit", while others cull out local applicants by advertising only in the target language.<sup>3</sup> Japanese vacancies often state the impractical requirement that applicants must be able to "write Japanese to native speaker level", even for positions where such skills are unlikely to be necessary. These practices are bordering on racism and are unacceptable. The work permit requirement is an unambiguous declaration that a visiting national will be preferred, while the requirement to write Japanese at "native-speaker level" is also designed to discourage non-native Japanese from applying. However, the latter situation is doubly dishonest as it is difficult to imagine many situations where sushi rollers, retail employees, restaurant and bar staff, hotel porters, mini-bus transfer drivers etc. would ever be required to speak, let alone, write [Japanese] with such a high degree of skill. If there were such situations, remuneration of \$11-60 per hour is all the more offensive.<sup>4</sup>

Thus are many young New Zealanders who have studied hard, still being denied the opportunity to use and benefit from their L2 skills by the unfair and

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<sup>1</sup> These were by no means all such vacancies advertised, merely those noticed and pursued. Most were for souvenir retailing, waiting/bar staff, sushi making, reception, hotel work, punting, vehicle hire etc. Vacancies in L2 teaching, chef-related or professional areas such as marketing and management were not followed up.

<sup>2</sup> These examples are typical of the conundrum. (a) "Requirements are...the ability to speak and understand Arabic and English, with secondary languages of Amharic, French and Coptic...[plus] knowledge of other languages is a bonus...\$38,000 pa" (*The Christchurch Press*, May 10 2006). (b) "Candidate [for PA position] must be proficient in MS Office, fast and accurate. The ability to speak other languages such as Chinese, German and Japanese would be an advantage" (*The Christchurch Press*, Oct 26, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Typical of this very frequent approach was the staff vacancy notice displayed in a Christchurch sushi outlet in March 2006. Written in Japanese, the requirement "*nihonjin boshuu*" [Japanese national wanted] was unequivocal so I asked the manager in Japanese if non-Japanese applicants were welcome. She looked uncomfortable and hesitated before replying "*nihonjin no ho ga...*" [= actually, we'd prefer a Japanese national].

<sup>4</sup> This figure excludes one French vacancy which, although requiring 'native speaker' ability and pronunciation for audio-tape recording, was still offering only \$16-00 per hour.

uninformed business strategies of local employers. Many of those who do obtain entry-level L2 skill employment after five years of L2 study at secondary school, three years at university plus two or three further years living in the L2 country are rewarded by the paltry sum of \$11-60 per hour. This is the equivalent to the pay for unskilled, casual staff in a fast-food chain or supermarket. It is not surprising that 'future employment prospects' barely registered in the study as a first or second reason for L2 uptake at Yr 11. Nor is it difficult to imagine the reaction if advertisements were to appear in our newspapers calling for lawyers, doctors, accountants, engineers and so forth, their hard-won skills described merely as "useful" and where the pay rate averaged \$11-60 per hour! Clumsy articles by education writers such as Bald (2004) that "...while a language makes a good additional skill, it can often be *picked up on the job...*" [my italics] are ill-informed, unwelcome and simply demean the substantial effort required to learn a second language.

### **6.3 School Principals**

During the second year of the project, the principals of the participating schools were all invited to complete a very short questionnaire about the status of L2 study in their schools. Covering letters were addressed to each principal individually and each was invited to delegate the survey to another staff member if they wished. The principals were asked to return the survey within three weeks but, of the 20 surveys sent out, only 12 responses (60%) were received, of which only four were returned within the time requested. It is no coincidence that of those timely replies, two were from principals who were themselves specialist L2 teachers, the remaining two being from schools which had contributed substantial numbers of L2 students in the project.

While acknowledging that a school must address the local learning needs of its catchment, the principal's leadership role is also to generate within the school an educational climate which embraces, to a greater or lesser extent, the personal educational ideology of the principal. That almost half the principals failed to return their surveys at all is a statement about the low priority of L2 study in those schools and one might well wonder how different the response rate would have been, had the survey enquired about rugby, science or computing, for example. Of those who did respond, three had made courageous, even unpopular, decisions in order to retain as many senior L2 students as possible. For example, one stated that L2s are located in the senior timetable before any other subjects to ensure viability, while another said the main reason behind all Yr L2 students having to do 6 subjects was to ensure they could continue with their L2 option. Most offered generally supportive comments about Yr 9

L2 learning, but seemed to lack commitment thereafter. Typical comments included “we try to encourage all students...”, “there is little interest...”, “most seem to prefer other subjects”, “we give them all a chance in Yr 9 but most don’t seem interested in continuing”, “there is little we can do” and so on. This is in contrast to the very positive responses of the participating students when they were asked to gauge their schools’ attitudes towards L2 study. Most students believed their schools had a positive attitude and their replies are summarised in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1 Schools’ attitudes towards L2 (raw numbers of N)**

Positive	Negative	In between	No answer	Total
689	30	24	22	765

It might be interesting to ponder how the students (continuing and non-continuing) would have ranked their schools’ L2 attitudes if they had been aware of the luke-warm responses from their principals. Anecdotally, a number of L2 teachers at participating schools complained that their principals were determined (one used the expression ‘hell bent’) to introduce too many option subjects at Yr 9. The teachers claimed that their principals were seeking to accommodate ever more disparate interest groups in the hope of enhancing their schools’ reputation as ‘total providers’. In the minds of L2 teachers, however, the move only serves to further decimate the potential L2 catchment during the very first year of secondary school. One very supportive principal explained that too many students believe they have to do certain subjects for their chosen university study when in fact “such is not always the case”. This statement demands further investigation.

Writing in the *Christchurch Press* in April 2006, the HOD (Languages) at one school in the Christchurch project described the lack of Asian studies in New Zealand schools as due to the “racist attitudes within the schools.”<sup>5</sup> That claim may or may not be true, but without robust evidence it is probably best put to one side. However, the same HOD’s subsequent comment was much closer to the mark, namely that “...schools saw Languages as secondary to subjects such as Maths and Science...”. This is where the principal’s own educational vision can be a decisive factor in whether L2s are valued or allowed to drift into obscurity. NZJNET, the email list-serve for teachers of Japanese in New Zealand has recently received a flood of complaints from teachers that many principals are worsening the L2 problem by reducing the number of teaching

<sup>5</sup> *The Christchurch Press*, April 8, 2006. Page A15.

hours available for L2 classes. While the principals can claim that the move is in response to “budget restraints” or “decreasing demand”, such moves are not only disheartening for teachers, but will surely make L2 study even more difficult as students struggle to cover the prescribed syllabus in less and less class time, and with reduced teacher availability. Instead of taking a backward step, principals who understand the real value of L2 study in their schools must take a stand and ensure continued L2 viability, even if that stand means rationalising the actual number of L2s on offer in any one year. One Christchurch school (not in the current study) timetables its Yr 9 L2 options (on a two semesters per year basis) against a cooking option (also offered for both semesters) for which the course promotion states “...make your own Japanese sushi, Italian pizza and Kiwi hamburgers”. It is difficult to imagine why, in a social and academic climate which already undervalues L2 skills, any but the most dedicated Yr 9 student would feel inclined to choose the rigours of L2 study over the entertaining (but hardly academic) course of learning to make what are three of the most popular foods in New Zealand today.

### **6.3 Tertiary Providers**

Emailed questions about L2 study promotion were sent to identifiable (via their university websites) senior L2 lecturers, heads of individual L2 sections and heads of overall L2 departments at each New Zealand university. Lincoln University was excluded because, in spite of its many courses in international tourism, research, commerce, science, sport and trade, Lincoln’s attitude towards L2 study is demonstrated by the fact that the institution offers no L2 course or L2-related course at any level. The project findings to date were summarised and L2 staff of New Zealand’s other universities were asked to indicate the extent to which they actively promoted their L2 programmes to Yr 13 students, especially in their own catchment. They were also asked whether they offered incentives, prizes, L2 career information, scholarships etc. to attract Yr 13 students into their departments. Seventeen<sup>6</sup> replies out of 22 (77%) were received, some of which were quite dismissive. One began unpromisingly with “I haven’t really got much to say about your two questions”, while another explained that he was just as likely to rely on his own “gut feelings” as on research findings. Three more suggested contacting other staff members in

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<sup>6</sup> Staff structures and hierarchies differ from university to university. Some have specific management roles for each L2, while others have a single head of an overall L2 department, or a mixture of both. Therefore, the analysis of the university responses is based on the comments from a variety of managerial levels. Many replies overlapped and several staff offered more than one reply, so the number of replies exceeds 17.

their faculty/department but did not provide email addresses, and nor did they offer to forward the request on to those colleagues. Two further replies were very brief, to the point of being unhelpful. The responses are summarised as follows:

**Q1.** Do your L2 staff visit senior L2 classes of local schools to promote your subject?

**Table 6.2 University L2 staff responses to Q1**

Yes	No: no Budget	No: no time	I would if schools asked	Rely on university generic marketing	We used to	In future we might	Offered but no response	Not our job
5	1	6	3	12 <sup>7</sup>	6	3	2	2

Only one university L2 department, one small L2 section within its parent L2 department, and two further individual lecturers confirmed any involvement in L2 promotion. Responses in Table 6.2 such as “no time”, “no money” and “not our job” are particularly disappointing, while “we would if we were asked” and “we might” rank as only marginally less so. Most replies indicated a reliance on generic marketing, namely the ‘travelling road show’ approach whereby university marketing teams set up promotional displays in school halls and the like. This strategy does not specifically promote L2 subjects (or any other subject) other than to list them among the scores of options available, and declining L2 enrolments simply confirm their ineffectiveness, at least as far as L2 uptake is concerned. Over half of the students who discontinued their L2 at the end of Yr 11 had previously indicated their intention to persist through to Yr 13 and/or university. Targeted intervention by university L2 staff may well have encouraged some of those students to continue. It would require no money and very little time for each staff member to ‘adopt’ a local Yr 12/13 L2 class to visit and promote university L2 study. Post-graduate students may have even greater impact, given their age, enthusiasm and commitment to L2 persistence. The practical value of such a scheme is evident from the L2 job losses at universities, a flow-on effect of L2 attrition in our secondary schools. For example, the 1970 Canterbury University calendar identified a full professorship, nine full-time lecturers plus tutorial staff in what was then the autonomous and prestigious French department. At the same time, the German department also had its own professor and was autonomous, as was the Russian department. Today, substantially because of decreasing enrolments, the former French, German and Russian Departments are combined into one

<sup>7</sup> There were many multiple responses here.

very small, single cohort with no chair and with the French section claiming only three full-time lecturing staff.

Similarly, until the late 1970s, the former Christchurch Teachers' College (now Christchurch College of Education) employed two full-time specialist lecturers to mentor its annual intake of around 20 trainees with an L2 as their first major teaching subject (known as 'Group L'), plus a slightly smaller number for whom an L2 was their second major teaching speciality. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, L2 trainee enrolments declined dramatically and in the last decade the total number seldom exceeded double figures. Consequently, specialist L2 staffing also shrank to one small, part-time position. In 2006 L2 applicants were advised that the Christchurch College of Education was unable to offer a full-time programme for specialist L2 trainees because of insufficient enrolments<sup>8</sup>.

**Q2.** Do you provide materials or other assistance to secondary schools L2 teachers/students?

**Table 6.3 University L2 staff responses to Q2**

I have marked speech contests	I speak at conferences	Used to	No budget	No	Yes: via outside organisations	Yes but never heard back	I've never been asked
3	2	6	5	6	14 <sup>9</sup>	1	4

The scenario for Q2 (Table 6.3) is only minimally more positive than for Q1. 'Speaking at conferences' cannot seriously be regarded as assisting secondary school L2 teachers and students, especially as such activities are often the least demanding and most attractive research publication requirement of university staff anyway. Judging the speech competition for the local L2 association each year is a pleasant morning off-campus and positive interaction, but it is seldom pro-active on the university's part<sup>10</sup> and is preaching to the converted anyway. As in Q1, "we used to" reflects a disappointing change in attitude, one HOD adding that, in the days when university staff set and marked bursary/scholarship exams, their relationship with schools was much closer. Another explained that the secondary teachers themselves are more involved in writing their own materials these days and know better than university staff what is

<sup>8</sup> Information pertaining to the 2006 scenario provided by Christchurch College of Education, May 2006. The lack of interest shown in the current project by the Christchurch College of Education has been disappointing, especially given the almost total demise of L2 programmes at the College.

<sup>9</sup> There were many multiple responses here, with many Japanese staff acknowledging the generosity of the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund and several German staff acknowledging the Goethe Society.

<sup>10</sup> One very positive exception here is that the German staff at Victoria University are almost exclusively responsible for running the local Goethe Society, including organising and judging its secondary schools' German competitions.

needed in the school classroom. That is probably true, but is also disappointing in its failure to address the key issue. School L2 departments are intensely impoverished in their resources, money and time. Just one new dictionary, CD player or set of videos will often account for a school's entire L2 budget allocation for the year. On the other hand, universities cannot afford to donate large amounts of money either, and nor should they. However, putting aside a hundred dollars per year out of a department's budget should be attainable as part of the bigger picture. Book prizes for Yr 12 and Yr 13 students are a positive way of enhancing the university's L2 presence and the value of L2 study. For example, at one secondary school senior prize-giving in Christchurch in 2005, two universities offered three prizes for excellence in Science and Mathematics, and one offered a prize in English. None offered a prize for any aspect of L2 study.

Publications such as the now defunct *Nihongo Newsletter* are another way of spreading the L2 message. For over a decade, this professionally produced, glossy two-fold was compiled annually by Japanese teaching staff at Christchurch Polytechnic and posted free of charge to every Japanese teacher and Yr 12/13 student of Japanese in the country. The popular newsletter contained Japanese news, exercises, puzzles, competitions, jokes, new words, graduate student success, jobs, scholarships and topical items. Its demise appears to reflect a declining interest among staff in promoting L2 courses to schools. Moreover, no university L2 staff member mentioned involvement with any such activity, unfortunate because newsletters are an excellent way of raising the L2 profile and that of its university provider.

All universities detailed very extensive inventories of awards, scholarships, overseas trips, exchanges, fees assistance and the like offered to students already studying within their own L2 programmes. This is a very positive state of affairs and, while it will help reinforce the advantages of tertiary L2 study, it fails to address the most serious problem of L2 attrition in the *schools*. However, with only one exception, all the 'in-house' awards are financed through the generosity of outside agencies such as the Alliance Française, the NZ-Asia Foundation, the Goethe Society, the Dao Ming Chinese Scholarship, the NZ-China Friendship Society, China Bridge, the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund and the embassies/consulates of France, Japan, Switzerland, Germany and Spain.

Based on the responses from university L2 staff, it appears that most of them are not aware and/or not concerned that over many years they may have actually been contributing to what could well be the death throes of some L2 subjects, firstly in schools and subsequently within their own institutions. Certainly, most

appear unwilling to be personally proactive in encouraging L2 study at senior school level, which is unfortunate for several reasons. Firstly, their own job security depends, to some extent at least, on reversing the current trends. Secondly, well over half of those students who discontinued prematurely had earlier intended to study their L2 at university level and thirdly, the flexible employment conditions of university staff see them ideally positioned to take the lead in addressing what may otherwise become a terminal condition. It could be argued that university L2 departments have an obligation to do all they can in the current dilemma, yet of the 22 communications sent to university staff, only five replies expressed a commitment to spending time encouraging L2 study at local secondary schools. Many universities have introduced beginner L2 courses to help sustain their L2 programmes. While on one hand this is a proactive move, on the other hand it does nothing to address the more substantive problem of L2 numbers in our secondary schools.

The administrative sectors in our universities appear equally uninterested in either L2 study or in research about L2 study. Firstly, for example, there appears to be not one degree programme at any New Zealand university which requires even the most basic level of L2 learning, other than where the L2 is the major area of study. This is disappointing, especially given the vast array of courses now offered in areas of imminent international application of the L2 and its associated cultural understanding such as commerce, trade, export, sociology, anthropology, research, history, geography, political science, culture, religious studies, philosophy, law, education and linguistics. Secondly, again with the exception of Lincoln University, university staff identified via their websites as holding senior positions in enrolments and/or academic records were also contacted and asked for aggregated data covering L2 enrolment trends over the last decade. Only two replies were received, one of which sought further information and promised to forward the data, but never did. The other was from Otago University whose registry dispatched a neatly tabulated matrix of L2 enrolments since 1992, exactly as had been requested. If the other emails had gone to the wrong people, or if universities regard such data as confidential, a brief reply to that effect or an offer to forward the request to a more appropriate staff member would have been helpful. In fact, each email specifically and politely requested that, in the event of the email going to the wrong addressee, it be forwarded to the appropriate staff member. For that very reason, it was decided that an email approach would likely be the most productive. That did not happen, however, and the registry responses seem to confirm the lack of interest in L2 study, not merely because they failed to provide the information, but equally because they failed to acknowledge the original request.

## 6.4 The Students

The key foci of this publication are the declining rates of L2 uptake and the increasing levels of L2 discontinuation. Both circumstances are indisputable, and it is now opportune to introduce the students themselves into the L2 climate matrix. If the student body in general regarded L2 study as genuinely important, more would take up the study and more would persist with that study. Therefore, apart from the irrefutable data pertaining to uptake and discontinuation, we also have to question the value attached to L2 study by the L2 students themselves. Firstly, most students claimed to have discontinued because they found their L2 study “too difficult”. L2 study is undeniably difficult, but in defiance of the “tough get going when the going gets tough” paradigm, discontinuation because of difficulty also reflects the reduced importance of L2 study in the minds of those students. Other subjects are also difficult, but their value is clearly seen as more important. Committed students hoping for a career in medicine or science do not abandon chemistry or biology simply because they become difficult. They get stuck in and do their best to obtain a pass mark because their university study and future career depend on it. Strugglers in Mathematics may seek extra tuition and/or study even longer hours, but they will not discontinue if engineering, architecture, psychology, computing or science are their chosen paths. As L2 teachers, we know the value of L2 in any field and we never miss an opportunity to inform others about it. Yet for our students, including those who excel at, and who genuinely enjoy, their L2 studies, when the career choice for commerce, economics, science, IT, engineering, medicine, geography, law, dentistry, design and so on has to be made, sentiment, success and enjoyment of the L2 play a negligible role.

Furthermore, the low regard for L2 study among L2 students themselves is also evident, not just from ‘loss of interest’ and ‘I didn’t enjoy it’, but much more from the very high number who cited ‘timetable clash’ as their main reason for discontinuing. All schools where students had identified timetabling as having prevented them from continuing were contacted, and all reported that in every case, no student would have been physically prevented from L2 continuation because of the timetable. The reality is that most L2 students are accustomed to studying in high-achieving, non-disruptive peer groups. Having discovered that, in order to continue their L2 into and beyond Yr 12, their other subject groupings would likely be away from their peer groups, many preferred to abandon the L2. Citing ‘timetable clash’ as the reason for discontinuing is partially true, but in almost every case it more accurately reflects the low value attached to L2 studies by L2 students themselves. In other words, while many may have genuinely wished to persist, the price was greater than the perceived

social sacrifice of doing so. If the Yr 12/Yr 13 option matrix had been as rigid as offering (for example) either Biology or French (but not both), Physics or Japanese (but not both), Latin or Chemistry (but not both), for example, de-selecting the L2 would still reflect the lesser value of L2 study. But the options were never so rigid and in each case provided much more accommodating formats. For example, typical of most schools is the following [hypothetical] scenario where L2 and science subjects are competing for the same slot on the Yr 11, 12 and 13 timetable:

Option (a): Choose a science + enjoy peer groupings for other subjects, or

Option (b): Choose an L2 + lose peer grouping for other subjects, or

Option (c): Choose a science PLUS L2 + *potentially* disruptive, and/or low-achieving, and/or non-peer groupings for other subjects.

For most of the students who cited timetable as forcing their L2 discontinuation, the reality is that the L2 on its own was simply not regarded as sufficiently more important than the subject opposite it in the timetable, while the combination of the L2 and its competing subject involved the detraction of non-preferred class groupings. Accordingly, in making subject choices, the science subject (for example) was regarded as the most important, socially desirable peer groupings for other subjects was the next most important, leaving the L2 itself as the least important consideration. One Yr 13 Dean said she had suggested the Correspondence School as a solution to a small group wishing to continue their L2 and who were unhappy with the timetable matrix. The idea was not “well received” and none enrolled for that course! Only with a change to the perceived value of L2 studies and in the intrinsic reasons for initial uptake are we likely to see more students willing to take Option (c). Thereafter, L2 numbers in Yr 12 and Yr 13 may eventually be enough to force the hands of principals and timetablers into relocating L2s into a ‘stronger’ band within the senior timetable matrix.

The third and fourth most frequently cited reasons for discontinuation, especially after Yr 12, were “I lost interest” and “it won’t help with my career” are self-explanatory, but they also provide further evidence that L2 studies are the first to be discarded, especially when interest fades, the work becomes difficult, or when placed in competition with other options regarded as relevant to a future career. Through their reluctance to take up L2 study and their early discontinuation, students become part of the cyclic problem as they reduce even further the value and viability of L2 study in our schools. Yet they are not to be blamed; they are the unwitting victims of the local climate which pays little more than lip-service to L2 learning.

## 6.5 The Government

Promoting L2 uptake is one issue where successive governments have seldom shown the commitment sought of them by L2 groups. Over many years, endless numbers of politicians have paid lip-service to L2 study, encouraged it when pushed to do so with bland acknowledgements of its importance within a greater cultural awareness that would be to the benefit of all citizens. In spite of the rhetoric, however, lacking are definitive statements, committed actions and adequate resources which acknowledge and promote the enhanced value of a secondary or tertiary education enriched by language study and its associated intercultural awareness. For example, in promoting Asian studies in our schools, MP Pansy Wong recently described L2 teachers in New Zealand as “overloaded and...[they] lacked resources”,<sup>11</sup> while the government recently ignored its own commission’s advice that the special nature of, and the difficulties inherent in, L2 teaching/learning at universities, required government funding be increased to more realistic levels.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, very few people will have failed to notice the prolific increase in advertisements for Te Reo Maori teachers at all levels. Equally evident is the fact that all government job vacancies stipulate an understanding of Treaty of Waitangi issues, while many others are worded bi-lingually and/or stipulate Te Reo Maori ability. This demonstrates the progress that can be made when the government promotes a sector of language study and provides appropriate finances and employment rewards to back that promotion. In spearheading the current interest in, and demand for, Te Reo Maori, the government has poured substantial sums of money into ensuring that every student has the best reason, opportunity and facilities to learn that language. This is a positive step and we should all celebrate the long overdue renaissance of New Zealand’s first language. The government’s willingness to finance Te Reo Maori courses and immersion schools and pre-schools demonstrates precisely how attitudes regarding L2 skills can easily change and increase student numbers ready to take up the challenge.

It seems anomalous, therefore, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) continues to hire university graduate recruits with no L2 skills, or worse, to send those with skills in one L2 to a country of a completely different L2. Like

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<sup>11</sup> The Christchurch Press, April 8 2006 (pA15).

<sup>12</sup> In 2005, a group of experts on tertiary education assembled to advise the NZ government on subsidy levels, an exercise known as the Funding Category Review (FCR). One of the FRC’s recommendations was to raise the subsidy level for tertiary L2 courses, although specific numerical targets were not identified. (In Australia, tertiary L2 courses receive 1.6 times the subsidy level of other humanities courses). However, not only did the Ministry of Education and Cabinet choose to ignore this recommendation, but they actually increased the subsidy level for some courses which the FCR had not recommended for increased subsidy, such as agricultural sciences where government and industry-based grants already far outstrip funding available to L2 programmes.

so many other employers, MFAT seldom pays more than lip-service to L2 skills, frequently referring to them merely as 'desirable' or 'advantageous'. Too many MFAT staff are recruited without any L2 skills at all and are subsequently put through expensive, high-pressure L2 courses for up to two years, in readiness for overseas postings.<sup>13</sup> If, as we are led to believe, this situation stems from the lack of suitable applicants seeking MFAT positions, then the paucity of applicants is arguably attributable to a lack of L2 skill recognition and remuneration, which itself illustrates a lack of foresight by MFAT and government policy in general. If school students were in no doubt that their chosen career in MFAT (for example) was contingent upon solid, if not spectacular, skills in at least one L2, they would not give up the subject simply because they lost interest or found it too hard, or because it clashed in the timetable. Rather, they would be more likely to regard *that* requirement as the important one, no less than engineering students regard maths, or medical students regard chemistry. Sadly, there appears to be no political point-scoring value in elevating the image of L2 study by financing the programmes to the necessary level and by promoting the study by stipulating the need for L2 skills and employing appropriate staff.

## 6.6 Secondary School L2 Teachers

Secondary school L2 teachers, increasingly isolated by the plethora of new science, hi-tech, sporting and drama subjects, are left to carry the L2 torch. Given the inherent difficulty of L2 studies, the constant questioning of their relevance by staffroom colleagues, careers advisors, timetablers and principals, many of whom would be happy for their schools to be to rid of the discipline altogether, timetable matrices which force students to make difficult choices and the ill-informed preference by employers for native-speaking staff rather than L2-proficient Kiwis, their dedication is all the more meritorious. The lack of a clearly defined L2 career path also means that very few students choose L2 study for future job prospects. This, in turn, means that senior students lack the necessary extrinsic motivation to persist when their L2 study becomes difficult and, for a range of reasons, they give up. Thus is the cycle of diminishing returns perpetuated. Two Yr 11 L2 classes in the Christchurch study which began with 30 students and 26 students respectively, finished with 3 and 5 students in Yr 13. Moreover, three schools did not join the project because they had no L2 programmes and two schools failed to retain a single L2 student after Yr 11. Out of 765 Yr 11 L2 students, 418 continued into Yr 12, of whom 240 continued

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<sup>13</sup> Over a period of 12 years, I was personally involved in designing and delivering intensive Japanese language courses to seven MFAT employees in preparation for their postings to Tokyo. Five had been employed by MFAT with no L2 skills of any sort, while one had minimal Japanese skills and one had superlative French skills!

into Yr 13, a total discontinuation rate in two years of almost 70%. However, in abandoning their L2 studies, discontinuing students had not rejected education by leaving school altogether. In fact, the total number of school-leavers in the Christchurch project between Yr 11 and Yr 13 was only 101, just over 13% of N. Significantly, this is far less than one-third of the nation's average total school leaving rate for the same three-year duration.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, L2 learners do not change their attitudes towards the value of education in the broader picture, simply because they no longer see any value in continuing their L2 studies.

Secondary L2 teachers continue to donate their spare time and often their own money organising L2 immersion days, festivals, trips, plays, food fairs, camps and the like, for which they receive no time allocation or reimbursement. Through their dedication, they persevere with even the least motivated and least able students, the socially delinquent, the incorrigibly disruptive and the disinterested. Moreover, NCEA has placed an almost impossible assessment burden on their shoulders. The teachers endure unsupportive principals, timetablers who ensure that their own subjects take precedence for the 'best' slots, as well as the bantering of fellow teachers over class size and subject relevance. Sadly, their reward all too often is to watch their best students leave in favour of other courses regarded as 'less difficult', more 'exciting' or with better career prospects. Their commitment deserves far better from their principals, employers, government, their university L2 colleagues and social attitudes in general.

## **6.7 Conclusions**

Understanding the academic factors which impact so negatively upon secondary school L2 students that they walk away from a course of studies they had earlier chosen of their own accord and for such commendably selfless reasons is, however, only part of the puzzle. The challenge of reversing L2 discontinuation is all the more difficult because the reasons the students provided for discontinuing are a by-product of New Zealand's historical and current climate of esteem for the sciences and general disregard for L2 study and skills. Employers looking for the fastest way to increase profits, school principals reluctant to make a committed stand in favour of a positive L2 policy in their schools, governments unwilling to finance L2 programmes appropriately, and university L2 staff who seem reluctant to promote their subjects and forge

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<sup>14</sup> New Zealand Qualifications Authority: Secondary School Qualifications Statistics (set of annual booklets, 1992-2002).

supportive and proactive relationships with local schools, have all contributed to that climate. The time is overdue for university L2 staff to make their course directors understand the academic, social, cultural and communicative value of graduates with L2 skills, especially those hoping for a career within the many areas identified in this chapter. In the meantime, if L2 academics can each spend an hour or two per year promoting their subjects to local schools, that time will not be wasted.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of secondary school students never take up an L2 option in the first place and that of those who do, most discontinue at the earliest opportunity. Although some who persist to the end will eventually carve out wonderful careers, their L2 skills will largely have been regarded as quaint, academic adjuncts, 'desirable' and 'advantageous' but seldom remunerated as an important asset. The tragedy of this is that, unlike the more predictable journey through numbers, formulae and theories, L2s are the very foundation of social interaction, debate, opinions, romance, negotiating, travel, culture, literature, philosophy, history, politics, world wars... even science.



# Chapter Seven

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### 7.1 Preamble

Historical and geographical phenomena have created a long-held belief among many New Zealanders that their native English equates to some form of linguistic self-sufficiency. Furthermore, until her entry into the then EEC, Britain was by far the major market for our exports, a scenario which further reinforced those beliefs. 'Psychological lag' has seen this short-sighted ideology manifest itself in our education system where L2 study is not regarded as important and where L2 students are all too often viewed as academic oddities. Thus were the foundations laid down long ago for the extant psyche which still regards L2 study as of little practical value. Accordingly, it would be naive to suggest that L2 study in New Zealand has suddenly reached a watershed. The problems of attrition and early discontinuation, although alleviated intermittently by support for the novelty of each new L2 introduced into the curriculum, have been evident for several decades.

The steady reduction in L2 uptake and persistence paints a despairing picture and, what is apparent is that there exists a synergy of two very distinct phenomena fuelling the decline of language study in New Zealand-Aotearoa. The first phenomenon is the overbearing L2 climate, shaped by many New Zealanders' misinformation about appropriate communication, their own lack of L2 skills, their shallow perspective on ethnic and cultural understanding, their obsession for things mathematical and scientific, their lack of respect for other people's L2 skills and their reluctance to utilise and enhance the L2 product. It is highly questionable whether our educational institutions are justified in emphasising the sciences so forcefully during the formative years of what is supposed to be a broad-based education. The second phenomenon, which is largely the end-result of the first, describes the specific academic reasons for L2 discontinuation as expressed by the students who took part in the three-year project.

### 7.2 The Negative L2 Climate

Before dreaming up yet another quick fix, and before engaging in yet another bout of [L2] teacher bashing, education policy makers should stand back and view with a little detachment the situation of language

teachers in the UK today, considering in particular just how adverse is the general intellectual climate in which teachers are now asked to operate. Real improvements in foreign-language teaching require not a quick fix, but some pretty radical shifts in attitude.

(Anthony Lodge, Professor of French Language and Linguistics, University of St Andrews, Fife, Scotland. First published on the Scottish CILT Web Journal and re-printed here with Professor Lodge's permission).

The New Zealand government has recently made some promising moves to support L2 study at primary school level, including a small budget for teacher-training and producing customised teaching resources. While such moves have met strong support in many quarters, there has also been criticism of some shortcomings over how the concept has been put into practice (see, e.g., Gibbs & Holt, 2003). Furthermore, there is also the feeling in some sectors that such moves are not necessarily in the best interests of the bigger L2 picture. For example, two secondary principals in the current project suggested in their surveys that L2 learning at primary school is “superficial”, that non-specialist teachers pass on “serious amounts of wrong information” and “pick the eyes” out of the syllabus by teaching one or two easily separable topics such as counting, the time, where is X? etc. According to those same principals, as the children begin their L2 study at secondary school, rather than having had their L2 passion *ignited* at primary school, many are resentful at having to deal with material already covered, sometimes twice, in the previous two years. Others, it seems, have to re-learn aspects incorrectly taught at primary school. The concept of introducing students to L2 at an early age conforms to the well-documented theory of ‘early beginning, early mastery’. However, it is not easy for Yr 9 teachers to introduce the fundamentals of their specialist L2 if some students in the class have already mastered them, some have been taught them incorrectly, some have failed to understand them and may already feel negatively about L2 study, and others have never come into contact with the L2 at all. If primary school intervention is not ‘igniting the L2 passion’, or worse, if it is actually turning some students away, then the initiative needs to be carefully re-evaluated within the much broader picture of its impact on long term study at secondary and tertiary institutions. Significantly, the principals who made the negative comments about primary school intervention were among the same group who returned their surveys on time. Naturally, they are very protective of their own L2 programmes and do not welcome any primary school measures which may interfere, especially if the outcome is fewer students.

What diminishing L2 programmes need much more urgently from the government is a visible commitment to the notion that secondary school L2

courses are of equal importance to every other subject, followed by a level of L2 funding which can sustain and enhance L2 programmes at secondary and tertiary levels, even when numbers have dwindled at Yr 12 and 13. Such commitment is unlikely, however, and in the void even the best intentioned school principals are reduced to such stop-gap measures as combining Yr 12 and Yr 13 students into one class, even combining two separate L2s into one class, reducing the number of L2 classroom hours per week and allocating L2 teachers reduced timetabled hours per week. None of these options is in the interests of good education, and none would be deemed acceptable for subjects other than L2s.

While Holt *et al* (2001, p. 36) concluded that, among Yr 10 students of Japanese, the “school administrative environment component was only weakly involved in the construct and could well be regarded as insignificant”, the poor response rate from the principals in the Christchurch project, and indeed, the content of some of those responses, suggest that they may well be a significant part of the problem. Quite clearly, some principals, especially those with marginally viable L2 programmes, appear to regard it as no great loss if L2 study were to gradually fade out of their schools altogether as is currently happening in several of the schools which were unable to participate in the study. The brief and unsupportive comments from several made this clear, although their comments were expressed more obliquely. From their perspective, they may feel justified, especially if they are unable to find suitable teachers and/or if their school catchment provides too many uninterested, unmotivated, low socio-economic and low-achieving Yr 9 students. One principal, for example, complained that offering an L2 in Yr 9 created the same flow-on difficulty every year, namely that insufficient numbers of continuing students regularly made the Yr 10 occurrence uneconomic. From that point, “the problem is with us for the next three years...not enough students to make it viable, but the few who do want to continue always demand the right to do so...” While that principal has a point and deserves some sympathy, doing nothing, possibly in the hope that the problem will solve itself, is not an option. Further research into whether principal disinterest in L2 generates reduced uptake, or whether the declining L2 numbers catalyse the principals’ attitudes, would be valuable.

So, is it fair to say that schools owe their students the opportunity to study an L2? The answer must always be yes, although successful implementation may require some difficult decisions. For example, one school in the project which offers two L2s with barely marginal support even at Yr 9, might well consider offering just one L2 (and maybe the other in alternate years) and concentrating the school’s resources in that direction. Two Yr 9 occurrences of the same L2 may well generate more viable numbers for the following years, at least into

Yr 10 and Yr 11, than two separate L2s. Principals (and BOTs) who feel that the easiest way to solve the L2 issue is by allowing them to fade out of the curriculum altogether are failing their schools and their catchment. Claims that schools must offer what their intake demands also deserve some sympathy, but responding by allowing the L2 subject to wind down and disappear altogether is shortsighted and simply adds to the already negative L2 climate.

In the same way that L2 study was once the reserve of the academically more able students in our secondary schools, a similar attitude existed within many university L2 departments to reinforce the élitist process. In more prosperous times when numbers were steady, most university departments did little to actively promote their subjects, assuming instead that each year's influx of new and enthusiastic students would enrol as of right and study diligently the limited programmes based around the lecturers' own (mainly literary) areas of interest. Because of this laissez-faire approach, many students who had excelled in their secondary school L2 studies were quickly disillusioned by the very small amount of time and marks allocated to actual language study at university. The composition of the available L2 courses seldom, if ever, considered student interest<sup>1</sup> and in many cases, departments operated their own culling processes by enforcing a range of otherwise unsustainable and highly esoteric post-graduate prerequisites. They knew that the best students would simply accept such requirements and enrol anyway, all the while aware that the less able students, whom they did not want at the advanced level, would opt out. This strategy of linguistic eugenics meant that a unilateral, non-moderated standard at post-graduate level was strictly policed. However, it was also unnecessarily élitist by excluding many capable and enthusiastic students who had simply not mustered the necessary collection of superior grades at undergraduate level, but who could have still completed a good post-graduate qualification because of their interest and study habits. In today's decimated L2 catchment, those same L2 departments would no doubt be very pleased to welcome many of the students they once rejected. Furthermore, university L2 programmes were not, and many are still not, intended to produce proficient L2 communicators anyway, their major focus often being the literature (often in translation), as well as the history and sociology of the L2 countries, again often in translation. For decades, many university L2 departments operated at a level which could only be described as exclusionist. Their responses detailed in Chapter Six suggest that, in spite of the parlous nature of the current situation, many still do not fully

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<sup>1</sup> In 1995 I wrote formally to the French language specialist at a local university, asking him to consider offering an Honours paper in business French and that I knew eight French-teaching colleagues who were committed to attending such a class. His reply, sent only after a further reminder, stated "...in case you think we can be pressured into offering courses on the basis of enrolment numbers, we simply do not work like that".

comprehend the contribution they have made to the negative L2 climate, nor the responsibility they have towards helping reverse the status quo.

The fact that few graduates emerged as work-ready L2 speakers may have also prompted some employers to make their own contribution to the negative environment. Many employers did, and still do, seek out native-speakers rather than enthusiastic young New Zealanders whom they could encourage and train further. The employers themselves seldom have L2 skills, which perhaps confirms in their minds the impossibility that anyone else could acquire a usable level of L2 ability anyway. In today's 'user pays' education system, a student debt has become almost as inevitable as taxes and death and one way to maximise one's future repayment potential is to choose an area of study where a career is as assured as it can be and where the accompanying salary is as high as it can be. Accordingly, it is difficult to criticise students who abandon their L2 options before the first of their three senior years at secondary school, and for those who, having chosen an L2 for Yr 11, quickly become aware of a range of economic reasons for discontinuing and subsequently drop that course of study.

In their first year at secondary school, aspiring engineers, doctors, accountants, dentists, veterinarians and scientists are well aware that at no stage will they require an L2. Unfortunately, and ironically, those students who have their sights set on careers in journalism, business, writing, trade, tourism, teaching, foreign affairs, retail, archaeology, law, research etc. are compelled by the current climate to the same conclusion. It is not the fault of the students, however, but of the L2 climate. While almost all science, health, technology and engineering degrees and their subsequent careers have a raft of pre- and co-requisites both at secondary school and at university, humanities courses have very few and, as far as can be ascertained, none has an L2 requirement.<sup>2</sup>

### **7.3 Capitulating to New Zealand's Negative L2 Climate: the L2 students' voice**

Woven into New Zealand's educational psyche which is loathe to value, encourage or reward L2 skills, are the very measurable down-stream effects which have manifested themselves in the lack of value our L2 students themselves accord language studies. Although the current project did not focus on why the non-L2 students did not choose a language option in the first instance, the fact that only 765 Yr 11 students in greater Christchurch did enrol for an L2 suggests that almost 90% of the city's Yr 11 cohort in 2004 saw no

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<sup>2</sup> With the obvious exception of degrees with an L2 major.

value, advantage, prestige or enjoyment in pursuing such a course.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, a large percentage of those who did not choose an L2 were already victims of the negative L2 climate. The process can begin in something as casual as a throw-away line by a peer or parent, off-hand comments from teachers of non-L2 subjects, careers advisors and others, or from negative backlash. Even the fact that a school no longer offers an L2 programme and regards that situation as 'unfortunate but beyond our control' is nothing less than a powerful anti-L2 message. Another is hearing about the study/career relevance and/or lesser (academic) difficulty of other subjects. While possibly unaware of the influence of the L2 climate, the respondents in the study explained their reasons for L2 discontinuation, sometimes directly, other times more obliquely. From the data and analyses presented in the preceding chapters, a number of conclusions can be drawn as to how the climate manifests itself in L2 attrition.

Most students in the study, boys and girls, in all types of schools and across all L2s, based their decision to study an L2 on altruistic or intrinsic reasons. In other words, most made their decision because they believed that studying an L2 was important or because they were interested in the country of the L2. Such noble theses may have seemed powerful motivators at the time, but those same intrinsic reasons quickly proved to be one of the most definitive barriers to L2 persistence. When the wider L2 climate and newly discovered extrinsic reasons begin to impinge on such ideological undertaking, the strength of the original justification fades very quickly. In fact, it could be said that reasons such as 'L2s are important' or 'I am interested' are so frail, that they were doomed from the outset to give way to the plethora of far more powerful academic, economic and social L2 demotivators which every student faces during the senior years of secondary school.

The first demotivator is the level of difficulty of L2 study. Language study is unquestioningly difficult, an issue which has been dealt with at length already in this report. While this linguist/researcher believes uncompromisingly that serious L2 study is the most difficult of all the disciplines, the question that remains is this: does L2 study at *school level* become so difficult that it forces 28% of N2 and 17% of N3 to discontinue? As suggested previously, aspiring medical students do not abandon chemistry and our future engineers do not drop mathematics when those subjects become difficult, and nor do hopeful accountants, psychologists and economists discontinue statistics in the same situation. The answer lies only partially in the measurable difficulty of L2 learning *per se*, but more importantly, it lies in the climate in which L2 students operate.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course many were excluded because they had not studied the L2 during Yr 9 and Yr 10. However, for many of them as well, the decision not to, or lack of opportunity to, study an L2 was influenced by the L2 climate.

It is impossible not to be acutely aware of friends scoring higher grades and enduring less pressure in other subjects and, from there, it is an easy step at the end of Yr 11 to change, not necessarily to a science option, but at least to what many would regard as less stressful and more ‘friendly-user’ options, especially within the humanities family. Difficulty is a relative measure, and it is very likely that if academic, employment and social opinions were less focused on the importance of sciences and mathematics, L2 difficulty *per se* might well play a lesser role in discontinuation. In a different social environment, the main justification for L2 uptake for many students might be ‘future career’ or ‘I need an L2 as part of my university programme’, rather than ‘L2 study is important’. How different might the discontinuation rates then be, regardless of the level of difficulty.

The second de-motivator, and closely connected to the first, involves defining just what it is that L2 students find so difficult. The main problem is clearly vocabulary, and curriculum advisors need to show sufficient courage to conduct some carefully monitored experiments by which students are allowed access to a standardised dictionary. The potential benefit of this move is that it would neutralise the power of the L2 climate by enabling some students, at least, to continue, their biggest ‘difficulty factor’ having been effectively removed. Dictionaries are the “tools of the L2 trade” (McLauchlan 2007) and it is purely academic élitism and arrant nonsense to insist that students in the 21st century should still be studying without the best tools available. It is simply inconsistent to expect that the same student who can take a calculator into his/her mathematics exam, cannot have access to the L2 equivalent. Australia has seen the sense of such an approach and all states now permit L2 dictionaries in written assessment.

Thirdly, grammar is the second most difficult factor. Only in German, was grammar actually rated as more of a problem than vocabulary, and the most likely reason for this has already been explained. Overall, the role grammar plays in L2 learning differs from vocabulary in that the former is a highly complicated, meta-cognitive process which must be mastered in order for the L2 to operate quickly and effectively. Whatever one’s beliefs about L2 acquisition, behavioural or cognitive, eventually there is no substitute for a thorough knowledge and accurate application of the patterns of a language. Vocabulary, on the other hand, is as much a measure of memory as it is a cognitive L2 skill and can sensibly be augmented by informed use of a dictionary. This in no way obviates the need for essential (primary) words to be memorised, nor the overwhelming benefits of accruing as much additional (secondary) vocabulary as possible. Rather, the principal consideration is that although vocabulary is the biggest

classroom barrier to persistence (all languages, all schools, boys and girls), its influence on attrition can be reduced.

After level of difficulty, large numbers of students cited 'timetable clash' as their principal reason for discontinuing. The lack of credibility surrounding this response has also been thoroughly discussed but, of all discontinuing students who blamed the timetable as their first reason, 73% cited level of difficulty or loss of interest as their second main reason. Because the timetable did not physically preclude L2 continuation, the combination suggests two scenarios. The first is that blaming the timetable was simply a proxy, but more credible and/or socially acceptable, justification for discontinuing a subject the student no longer enjoyed or was struggling with. The second is that some students, who would have otherwise persisted, were dismayed to discover that the timetable excluded their preferred peer-group requirements, not their L2 subject. They 'blamed' the timetable for their discontinuation, again as a substitute reason for their own unwillingness to join classes outside of their own social prerequisites. Ironically, greater numbers of students persisting would create multiple senior L2 occurrences in the timetable, thereby allowing all students to persist with their L2 and study in their peer groupings for their other subjects.

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the only influence of the timetable in L2 discontinuation was: (a) 'timetable clash' was a scapegoat reason or 'final straw' factor for those students who had already decided to stop anyway and/or (b) that the level of importance students attributed to L2 studies was no longer sufficient in the face of difficulty, boredom, future career, lack of interest etc.. Clearly, many students undergo a very distinct paradigm shift between Yr 10 and Yr 11, regarding their study priorities. Their original, almost virtuous, reasons for selecting L2 study appear to have been little more than an immature interlude, a fleeting rationale prior to the realisation that extrinsic factors such as university and/or career and/or income and/or prestige are, in fact, of superior importance after all. As difficulty, lack of enjoyment, the risk of non-peer groupings and loss of interest worked their way to the fore, the altruistic selection criteria of a year ago simply ceased to matter. By the end of Yr 11, New Zealand's negative L2 climate had overruled many students' earlier beliefs in the value of L2 study for its own importance and for their personal betterment.

One of the most obvious, but also most sensitive, variables in considering academic enjoyment or dissatisfaction is the classroom teacher. For obvious reasons, none of the questions in the follow-up surveys offered 'teacher' as a prompt for explaining discontinuation, which means that all statistics may have

involved a measure of the 'teacher-fondness' or 'teacher-dislike' variables. After Yr 11, only one student who ticked 'other' [reason for discontinuing] elaborated by citing 'the teacher didn't like me...and I didn't like her'. After Yr 12, three students were far more unequivocal in the way they identified their teachers as the main factor in their decision to discontinue. While there is no reason to regard those who blamed their teachers as merely flippant, the question which lingers is this: if those same students had irrevocably needed their L2 subject for their chosen university course or future career, would they have dropped the subject simply because they did not like their teacher? The answer is yes and no; yes if the L2 option is not regarded as important, *no* if it forms an integral part of the committed student's intended future.

Teachers do feature in how students select their option courses, even to the extent that "liking the teacher could be a big factor" (Vaughan, 2003). Although every school is required to have very clear procedures to ensure that teachers are qualified, teaching well and not initiating or exacerbating conflict, teacher influence is also likely to be a variable in discontinuation. Except in cases of extreme and intolerable student-teacher divergence, a more subtle conflict between the actual level of 'teacher dislike' and a student's respect for the [L2] subject is also likely to pre-exist. In other words, a student whose future university study and/or chosen career demand persistence in a given subject is more likely to continue, even within a framework of personality conflict. However, for the student who has already 'lost interest', is finding the work 'too hard' or 'not enjoyable', for example, 'teacher dislike' may well feature more readily as a justification for discontinuation. This is not to excuse any teacher for incompetence or inappropriate attitudes but, because there are no university courses with L2 prerequisites, even the most superficial levels of 'teacher dislike' could easily become a factor in discontinuation. The principal reason for offering 'other' as a response in the follow-up surveys was to allow students to suggest their own individual responses, including about their teachers. While the number who identified their teacher as their reason for discontinuing was statistically insignificant, subsequent research which addresses 'teacher' as a measured variable in discontinuation may be useful.

The very significant difference between intended and actual period of L2 study is a phenomenon which spans two difficult paradigms. On one hand, it is a clear example of how the power of the L2 climate overrides the intrinsic motivation among L2 students, while on the other hand, it also illustrates the capricious nature of young minds. Because both variables were unmeasured in the project, it is not possible to judge what percentage of either phenomenon was involved. In other words, did those students who discontinued prematurely

change their minds because of the L2 climate around them or, was the changed mindset predictable simply because of their age? Knowing is important, however, because very large numbers of L2 students, all volunteers and many of whom are extremely talented achievers, are dropping out prematurely. In the meantime, while those who discontinued have identified what they want us to believe are their principal reasons, it is extremely unlikely that any of those reasons would have catalysed the same levels of attrition in a more positive environment where L2 study and the resultant skills were more highly regarded and valued.

## **7.4 Recommendations**

Apart from increased international awareness for any person who undertakes some level of L2 study, the three quantifiable beneficiaries of improved L2 uptake and persistence are school L2 departments, tertiary L2 departments and the New Zealand Association of Language Teachers. Their *raison d'être* is to provide language and culture education and, like any venture involving providers and purchasers, they can only continue to exist if there is sufficient demand for their product. The following recommendations, therefore, are directed towards those three groups, not only because they have the most to win from improved uptake and persistence, but also because they are in the best position to take practical steps to that end, while also having the most powerful voices for carrying the message to the authorities identified in previous chapters.

### **7.4.1 Tertiary Institutions**

Universities and Colleges of Education have a very powerful voice in the education system and are in a position to take the lead, not only by 'cultivating their own garden', but also by helping the secondary schools cultivate theirs. Firstly, university L2 staff need to maintain their current campaign for stratified government funding for L2 programmes. Secondly, there is a case to be made that L2 study, even at an elementary level, should be 'strongly recommended' for inclusion in all relevant degree programmes. Thereafter, presenting that case with unrelenting commitment to their academic managers and administrative boards as 'strengths' and 'points of advantageous difference' in their degrees may pay handsome dividends. Thirdly, an even more specific strategy would be to plead the case that a beginner-level paper in any L2 should become a co-requisite for a range of degrees in certain fields of study such as political science, tourism, linguistics, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology and

marketing. This case is easily argued using the Ministry's own definition that a bachelor's degree should be broad-based.<sup>4</sup>

Fourthly, and one step back from the L2 prerequisite scenario, is the provision of L2 adjunct qualifications which fit inside, and enhance, undergraduate degrees in marketing, politics, tourism, business, linguistics, trade, law, teaching and so on. The value of a conjoint qualification, i.e. a degree with an L2 certificate or diploma supporting the speciality of the degree, is not to be underestimated. While most universities have taken backward steps in L2 course prescriptions over a long period of time, Lincoln University provides the most glaring contribution to L2 negativity. It is simply not acceptable that a New Zealand university can offer so many programmes aimed at preparing graduates for international research, problem-solving, business, sport, trade and scientific understanding, yet ascribe no importance to the cultures and languages of the rest of the world.

Fifthly, there is considerable potential for universities to become more involved in supporting their secondary school colleagues, especially those in their own catchment. In this regard, of greatest importance is the contribution L2 staff and enthusiastic post-graduate students could make by setting up a programme of short visits each year to (or from) their local L2 classes. Year 10 might also be regarded as particularly important because it is the breeding ground for the senior L2 intake and, as was explained in Chapter Three, augmenting Yr 11 numbers from the Yr 10 catchment is the first step toward L2 recovery. School L2 teachers who struggle with impossibly small budgets, exhausting teaching loads and indifferent principals and timetablers would feel greatly empowered knowing their efforts were being supplemented by supportive intervention from the most respected L2 providers in the country. Perhaps even more importantly, university L2 staff themselves will reap the long-term benefits of any improvement in L2 enrolments.

L2 university staff clearly relish being able to reward their own students with prizes, travel, books, funding and the like. This very positive process is clearly aimed at encouraging L2 study and making one's own L2 programmes more appealing than those of another university. What it does not do, however, is address the substantive problem of pre-university attrition. Universities might, therefore, look at the plethora of attractive awards they currently distribute through the generosity of so many outside organisations and ask themselves if some very small portion could be directed towards encouraging L2 continuation at school.

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<sup>4</sup> A further possibility in this vein is to require a pass in a Yr 13 L2. While that may not enhance university L2 enrolments, it would likely boost senior numbers at secondary school which could well generate enrolment spin-offs for the universities themselves.

There are currently no on-line L2 translation courses available at any university in this country. This void offers unlimited opportunity for an L2 department in a New Zealand university to set up first year, on-line translation courses for students on its own campus, as well as those studying on other campuses in New Zealand and around the world. Thereafter, by seeking access to STAR funding, carefully selected components of those courses could be offered to Yr 13 students. The advantages of such a secondary school connection are threefold. Firstly, the success for the Yr 13 students themselves should not be underestimated as encouragement to persist and secondly, the host university will be able to 'lock in' some of those students because they will have already accumulated their first few university credits while still at school. Thirdly, by raising the status of L2 study within the school, the strategy thereby addresses the underlying focus of the current project, while simultaneously generating more EFTs for the university's own L2 department.

Furthermore, the appeal of university credits for non-timetabled study should be immediately attractive to many first year university students, including those who did and those who did not do a STAR course. Students who have already decided to pursue their L2 studies at tertiary level will also enrol because that is one of their motivations for attending university. But more importantly, those students who persisted with an L2 to Yr 12 or Yr 13, but who are locked into a university course which excludes an L2 option, will also be attracted by the flexibility of credits for studying in their own time. Even if they persist with an on-line L2 translation paper for one semester only, that is one paper which they would have otherwise not have done. The challenge and the opportunity are both there, while the status quo is untenable. The risk of more schools and universities following Lincoln University into L2 obscurity is even more unpalatable. Whatever university staff decide to do, simply dismissing the now critical issue of promoting L2 study in schools as 'not our job', 'we used to', 'no time', 'no budget' and 'we would if we were asked' is only contributing to the negative L2 climate.

#### **7.4.2 Dictionaries**

The number of students at all levels and in all L2s who identified 'vocabulary' as their biggest problem warrants the most urgent investigation. During an examination, L2 students who have memorised most of the prescribed vocabulary have an appropriate advantage, not only in the ease and confidence with which they will understand, compose, answer questions, translate etc, but also in the amount of time they will have available to complete those tasks. Students with good vocabulary acquisition *and* access to a dictionary will likely produce the best work and the best marks. Those who are less vocabulary

rich, however industrious and enthusiastic, however, will need to refer more frequently to dictionaries and will have less chance of completing any test. Yet the current system penalises those students and forces them into the ‘too difficult’ category by denying them access to dictionaries, the very tools of the L2 trade. In any case, dictionaries do not give away all the information a student might require. In other words, a Latin dictionary which identifies only the gender and nominative/genitive forms of a particular noun is of no use to a student who has not already learned to equate that information with the word’s declension characteristics. Nor can students look up a Japanese or Chinese character in a dictionary unless they know the correct step-by-step process, including how to recognise the radical, count the strokes and use the numbering system to find various compounds. A German noun listed in a dictionary, for example, will indicate the word’s gender and plural, but students who have not learned to construct the dative case of a neuter noun in the plural are no better off with a dictionary than without one. Clearly, dictionaries will not render language study an easy touch for students who have failed to master an L2’s own unique and complex structures. Yet inside the examination room, mathematics candidates have access to calculators, while chemistry and physics students are provided with the required formulae for answering questions. L2s on the other hand, reward those who have the ability to rote-learn vast tracts of words. Foreign languages are much, much more than that and it seems unreasonable to expect that L2 students should be willing to compete on an uneven playing field against other subjects where the ‘tools of the trade’ are acknowledged as of equal importance to the trade itself (McLauchlan 2007). L2 uptake and attrition make it clear that they are not prepared to compete.

In Great Britain, 1998 saw the introduction of dictionaries for students sitting L2 examinations, and a number of researchers looked specifically at the new environment. Chambers (1999), who described the change as “an opportunity for a rethink of [L2] teaching methodology”, based his research around asking L2 students themselves what they thought. Over 94% of his sample approved of the idea and felt that examination access to dictionaries would enhance their ‘final product’. However, only 38% had been given any formal instruction by their teachers on the use of a dictionary and there seemed to be widespread inconsistency among teachers over the issue. The majority of teachers in Asher’s 1999 study were “pleased” their students had dictionary access, especially in the belief that the process would offer “added security” for less able students. The teachers who opposed the idea did so because of their concern that students would become “over-reliant” on dictionaries and that, even without dictionaries, getting students to learn vocabulary was already a “major problem”. While supportive of the use of dictionaries, Asher

found that the process had not been as productive as hoped because of a raft of contributing problems. These included the cost of purchasing sets of dictionaries, less than adequate existing knowledge of the target language to enable best use, poor instruction by teachers on how to use a dictionary, over-reliance and wasting time by looking up words the students already knew just to 'make sure'. Tall and Hurman (2000) also canvassed the views of students about the value or otherwise of three selected dictionaries for use in French examinations. The students were overwhelmingly in support of dictionaries but Tall and Hurman's results focused on which of the three dictionaries was preferred, rather than the more generic debate of permitting dictionaries or not. East (2006) concluded that dictionaries did not really improve or harm a student's L2 performance outright but, when used with adequate training, are a positive process which would create a feeling of security. From there, performance is more likely to improve.

Given the spelling irregularities we all struggle with in our own languages, it is inappropriate to penalize students for omitting French accents (which many native speakers omit), or not knowing obscure genders such as in French where *sein* and *vagin* are masculine, while *pine* and *bourse* are feminine, or in German where *Mädchen* is neuter! Genders are indeed an important component of many languages and must be learned as building blocks for subsequent case, verbal, particle and adjectival agreements. The issue, therefore, is as simple as deciding whether it is reasonable for a student under examination pressure, dealing with a complicated string of sequential agreements which will only be correct if the substantive noun is correct, to check its gender and/or spelling in a dictionary. The answer cannot be anything other than yes if we want to reduce stress and allow students to create more accurate work.

In keeping with Lodge's comments at the beginning of this chapter, L2 attrition is so entrenched that it is accepted as 'normal', even by many L2 teachers and students themselves. It would be simplistic in the extreme, therefore, to suggest a single solution. Few problems with such deep, diverse and historical causes ever have single solutions. Be that as it may, after three years of investigation, the two most plausible and practicable starting points may well be: (a) to understand that the negativity of the L2 environment dominates our students' thinking and catalyses many of the reasons cited by them for discontinuation, and (b) to accept that the easiest and quickest way of putting L2s on a more level playing field with other competing subjects is to ensure that the discipline is not regarded as disproportionately difficult in relation to other subjects. The use of a standardised dictionary in formal L2 assessment situations should be immediately investigated.

### 7.4.3 Secondary Schools and the New Zealand Association of Language Teachers (NZALT)

Bald's attack on L2 learning in Great Britain (*Education Guardian*, 21 Sept 2004) concludes:

(L2) Students have deserted languages because the teaching profession has not been able to give them an experience from which they can learn effectively and derive personal satisfaction. We have wasted their time, and they do not wish us to waste any more...language teaching has reached the critical point at which existing theory and practice are not capable of doing the job, but are still supported by most members of the establishment, who have built their careers on these theories.

Bald's comments were aimed as much at L2 teacher intransigence, incompetence and poor classroom practice as they were at the more impersonal factors of syllabus, L2 acquisition theory, government funding and so on. Predictably and rightly, his comments about the teachers themselves drew no small amount of equally acrimonious flak in their defence. Moreover, although the 'teacher-dislike' factor in the Christchurch project may have featured in more than the four measured responses, we have no evidence to confirm this. Accordingly, in contrast to Bald's comments, the analyses in this report make it unquestionably reasonable to conclude that our own L2 teachers are doing a thoroughly excellent and professional job in the most precarious, difficult and often unenviable circumstances. Leaving teacher personality and style outside the equation, therefore, a range of suggestions for consideration and discussion to help stem L2 attrition and to help increase uptake might include the following:

- i. There is value in considering the concept of an L2 'general' course for Yrs 9, 10 and 11, such as the general science programme which teaches the fundamentals of biology, chemistry and physics in preparation for Yr 12 specialisation. A similarly designed L2 course might involve a reduced syllabus of two, or even three L2s (depending on staff expertise), of which one or more may be offered individually at Yr 11 or 12 depending on numbers.
- ii. There is also merit in discussing the use of NCEA levels as a way of offering (again, depending on uptake) beginner L2 programmes at Yr 11 with the aim of those students achieving NCEA Level 1 (possibly level 2 in some cases) in Yr 13. This programme from scratch would accommodate beginner students and those who may have achieved well

at Yr 9 and/or Yr 10 but who did not persist into Yr 11. Simply offering the possibility is immediately a statement of L2 relevance to the school, staff and community. The course could also attract students who have lost interest in other subjects. If there are no takers, the course cannot run, in which case nothing is lost.

- iii. Encourage and support any university moves to have L2 subjects included in a range of university degrees, including as a compulsory component within certain degrees.
- iv. Produce a short brochure explaining the benefits of L2 study in building self-confidence, international respect, cultural understanding, sporting careers and other employment options, specifically for principals and careers advisors. Such a brochure would debunk the myth that L2 skills are only applicable to an L2-specific career.
- v. Emphasise the Correspondence School as a valid option for any students who may be genuinely stymied by a timetable impasse.
- vi. Some schools may have to 'bite the bullet' and consider reducing the actual number of L2s they offer. We cannot accept the case where a principal refuses to timetable *one* [even under-subscribed] L2 at senior level, but there must be some sympathy in cases where there are two, even three, senior L2s on offer, all of which are struggling for viable mass. In such cases, reducing the number of options lower down may be the key to increasing viability further on. This will never be an easy decision and, understandably, every L2 teacher will vehemently defend to the end the retention of his/her own L2. Ironically, such passion and resolve are among the essential qualities of every good L2 teacher.
- vii. Painting an overly simple or 'fun' picture of L2 study to entice uninterested or clearly low-achieving students into Yr 11 is not necessarily good practice. In the very short term, it may mean the difference between a class occurrence going ahead and being cancelled, but the influence of almost total attrition and 'negative backlash' at the end of the year, is no less destructive.
- viii. If the New Zealand Association of Language Teachers can become better informed of the issues surrounding attrition, it will be in a far stronger position to take measures to rectify it. The NZALT is commendably dedicated to supporting L2 teachers in the current difficult L2 climate, but one area where the organisation might consider becoming more proactive is in collecting data pertinent to its *raison d'être*. Only through

robust research such as the current project can the reality of the L2 climate be fully understood. For example, while L2 teachers' anecdotal stories are convincing and must be heard, unless they are professionally gathered, collated and qualitatively analysed into a coherent body of information, the evidence remains fragmented and lacking in credibility. Furthermore, the NZALT might consider undertaking its own in-depth investigation into the attitudes of school Boards of Trustees, principals and careers advisors about the value of L2s in their schools. The already parlous L2 status quo is gradually, but steadily, being further eroded and, as explained in Chapter Six, uninterested school managers may well be contributing to this equation. Equally important, but as yet unexplored, is an investigation into why so many students decide not to take an L2 when making their Yr 11 subject options. Continued failure to grasp the research nettle and to deny funds to robust research such as this unique project leaves the NZALT exposed. The status quo is already precarious and the NZALT may well become effete if school and university L2 enrolments continue to decline, the most obvious outcomes of which are reflected in the current situation at the Christchurch College of Education and the demise of Russian. Of particular interest is the secondary school principal who commented that many students are excluded from L2 study because they choose other subjects "in the *belief* [my italics] that they are university prerequisites when, in fact, *this is not the case*" [my emphasis]. The questions NZALT must ask are (a) are such subjects university prerequisites or not? (b) if not, then who is telling the students that they are prerequisites? and (c) what is that principal (and other principals) doing to correct the misinformation? This is crucial, especially given the fact that so many respondents claim to have discontinued because the timetable forced them to choose between prerequisites for university and their L2 subjects.

- ix. NZALT is urged to consider supporting the case for dictionaries in formal L2 assessment. The pros and cons have already been discussed in this report and, from the United Kingdom experience, careful selection of a prescribed dictionary plus sound instruction as to how and when to use a dictionary are clearly essential. This is a key recommendation because it addresses directly this study's single major academic catalyst of L2 attrition and the least attributable to our negative L2 climate. Defending the current L2 level of difficulty as 'appropriate to the L2 discipline' is no longer tenable and students have dismissed the notion for decades by rejecting L2 study altogether. Refusing to consider the dictionary option

in the belief that it would demean those L2 students who already persist to the end of Yr13 is élitist and destructive. Linking dictionaries to a drop in L2 standards is ignoring the realities of competing subjects, the value of L2 study for all students, the practicalities of professional translating and interpreting, declining L2 uptake and burgeoning attrition.

Finally, studying another language involves far more than simply the tangible ability to converse with people from different countries. Even a basic level of L2 study introduces the learner into a new world of understanding. The intercultural awareness thus gained, however minimal the attendant practical L2 skills, is such a powerful tool that no nurse, doctor, politician, minister, scientist, researcher, sportsman/woman, analyst, military personnel, engineer, social worker, teacher, lawyer, linguist, or traveller should consider their education and work-skills complete without an understanding of how other people think and communicate. It could even be argued that the communicative part of L2 learning is, for the majority of us, the least important component of the L2 scenario. Although most people are not going to need highly developed (so-called 'fluent') L2 skills in their daily lives, in the global village, it is increasingly rare for New Zealanders not to come into contact with a plethora of different nationalities and cultures. Even if those people speak English, and increasing numbers do, their thinking often stays rooted within their own culture's mores and folkways. A balanced programme of second language communication and cultural differences is more important than ever for New Zealanders.

# Appendix One

## The 2004 Base-line Data Questionnaire for Yr 11

Name \_\_\_\_\_

School \_\_\_\_\_

Number \_\_\_\_\_

### 1 Personal:

a) Age \_\_\_\_\_

b) Gender \_\_\_\_\_

c) First language \_\_\_\_\_

d) Which LOTEM(s) are you studying this year? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

e) Which other LOTEM(s) have you previously studied? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### 2 Your reasons for studying LOTEM(s) at Year 11.

a) The school requires me to. Yes / No

b) In order to fit in with the timetable. Yes / No

c) My parents insisted. Yes / No

d) My own decision but my parents advised it. Yes / No

e) It was my own decision as follows. *If you tick more than one, please also rank them as 1 (main choice) 2 (second choice etc).*

My school is planning a trip there soon.

I think it is important to study another language.

I am interested in the country.

It will be useful for me when I travel.

I have already visited the country.

I think it will help me get a job.

When I graduate I hope to work as a \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**3 Attitudes towards foreign language study**

a) I think everybody should study a foreign language at some stage Yes / No

b) I think foreign language study is:

*(Please circle)*

very difficult      difficult      not too difficult      basically quite easy

c) At this stage, I intend to continue studying this LOTEM:

*(Please circle)*

For Year 11 only

Year 12 only

Year 13 only

Onto tertiary study

d) I think my schoolmates generally feel that foreign language study is (use as many adjectives as you like eg difficult/easy, valuable/pointless etc

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e) I think my parents feel that foreign language study is (use as many adjectives as you like eg difficult/easy, valuable/pointless etc

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f) I think the government feels that foreign language study is (use as many adjectives as you like eg difficult/easy, valuable/pointless etc

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g) I think my school feels that foreign language study is (use as many adjectives as you like eg difficult/easy, valuable/pointless etc

---

h) The biggest problem for me studying my chosen LOTEM is

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i) The best thing about studying my chosen LOTEM is

---

**4 Individual satisfaction with progress in my chosen language.**

*(Please tick)*

- a)  I am pleased with the progress I have made so far.
- b)  I am a little worried about what lies ahead.
- c)  I am pleased that I am studying a LOTEM this year.
- d)  I intend to work really hard at my LOTEM this year.
- e)  What I really enjoy about my LOTEM study is: *(please explain briefly)*

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- f) What would really help my LOTEM studies is: *(please explain briefly)*

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- g) I think the most difficult aspect of my chosen LOTEM is: *(please explain briefly)*

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Thank you for taking part.

Good luck with your studies and I hope to meet you again in 2005.

# Appendix Two

## Follow-up Questionnaire for Discontinuing Students

Name \_\_\_\_\_

School \_\_\_\_\_ Number \_\_\_\_\_

Last year you kindly took part in our survey about studying languages. I understand that you are not continuing with your language study in 2006 so I wonder if you would take a minute to answer the 5 questions on this page and post it to me in the stamped, addressed envelope. All replies received go into the draw for an MP3 player and CD vouchers.

- 1 Are you pleased you continued your LOTEM in Yr 12?

*(Circle ONE answer)*

Yes      No      Not sure

- 2 How long did you originally plan to continue your LOTEM for?

*(Circle ONE answer)*

Yr11      Yr12      Yr13      University

- 3 Overall, which **ONE** aspect of your LOTEM did you find the **most difficult** (eg grammar OR vocabulary OR kanji OR culture OR pronunciation OR reading etc etc etc?)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 4 Can you identify the **MAIN** reason why you have decided not to study your LOTEM in Yr 13. Please try to choose only **ONE** reason, but if you do tick more than one, please indicate the **MAIN** reason by writing 1 beside that tick.

- It was too difficult,
- I just lost interest.
- It clashed with other Yr 12 subjects.
- I did not put enough effort into it.
- I did not enjoy it.
- My friends teased me about it.
- It will not help me in the future.

Other reason (big or small) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking part. Good luck for the future and please feel free to email me if you have any questions about the study.

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