

28 April 2014

Joy McDowall  
Department of Internal Affairs  
PO Box 805  
Wellington 6140

Dear Joy,

The purpose of this letter is to follow up on the phone conversation I had with you in early April, regarding feedback on your “Language and Integration in New Zealand” publication.

This letter is co-written with Associate Professor Sharon Harvey, AUT and Professor Miriam Meyerhoff, Victoria University. Our feedback comes from the collective expertise of the Auckland Languages Strategy group, a diverse group of linguists, educators, community organisations and others working to develop an Auckland Languages Strategy. COMET Auckland is coordinating the group as part of our commitment to education and skills in Auckland. As requested, I have summarised our feedback below, and would like to arrange for some of our group members to meet with you and your team to discuss this further.

1. We are pleased to see the Office of Ethnic Affairs and the Department of Internal Affairs’ recognition that language is significant in migrant integration.
2. We agree with the report’s emphasis on the need to help migrants integrate more effectively, and on the role of increased fluency in English in supporting integration. Indeed we would like to see greater emphasis in the report on the importance of English language programmes for all migrants whose first language is not English.
3. We support the report’s conclusions that “heritage language maintenance has the potential to contribute to positive integration outcomes”. This conclusion aligns very well with the evidence on the value of a strong first language to support additional language learning. Being fully fluent in more than one language has benefits for intercultural communication, and has also been shown to support further language learning and more flexible thinking<sup>1</sup>. Note that for clarity, we suggest that the phrase “heritage language” be used only when it relates to subsequent generations. In the case of migrants themselves it should be referred to as their first language.
4. We support the statement that “positive attitudes of employers – and New Zealanders more generally – towards ethnic and linguistic diversity can encourage migrants to acquire proficiency in English”. However we are concerned that some of the statements in the report may inadvertently encourage less favourable attitudes towards migrants’ first languages.
5. In particular, we are very concerned by the statement that migrants need to choose between maintaining their first language and becoming fluent in English. This implies that proficiency in one language negatively affects proficiency in another, as though learning languages were a zero-sum game. In fact, becoming fluent in more than one language strengthens metalinguistic knowledge<sup>2</sup> (knowledge of how languages work) and so makes further language learning easier. Full bilingualism (and/or multilingualism/plurilingualism) is therefore completely attainable and should be encouraged, not discouraged.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas, W. and Collier, V. (1997). Two languages are better than one. *Educational Leadership*, 55 (4), 23-26.

<sup>2</sup> Cummins, J. (1991) Language Development and Academic Learning Cummins, J in Malave, L. and Duquette, G. *Language, Culture and Cognition* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

6. We are also extremely concerned at the advice that migrants should speak English at home. This advice is counter to the international literature and contradicts current government recommendations (eg MOE website advice that parents “use the language that works best for you and your child”). Families are best advised to speak their strongest language (usually their first language) at home because this supports language maintenance and provides the best possible environment for children’s language development. Many families erroneously see their heritage language as an impediment to their children’s English-medium education, whereas the evidence shows that fluency in a heritage language enhances educational success<sup>3</sup>. It is therefore essential that families receive sound, consistent advice from government agencies.
7. The report seems to quote one particular reference (Esser 2006) for the claim that migrants should speak English at home. This is unfortunate as there is a wealth of other, more robust literature available. Several of our members, who are university-based linguists, have looked into Esser’s paper, and it appears to be a qualitative summary of literature on bilingual populations in Germany, Turkey and the US, not a controlled meta-analysis as described in the report. We understand that the paper was criticized by German linguists at the time. It is also questionable whether any findings would be transferrable to New Zealand’s much more pluralistic society. We would therefore like to see the reports’ reliance on the Esser paper reviewed.
8. We would like to see greater emphasis on the role of government to support language acquisition and maintenance<sup>4</sup>. As stated in the report, migrant integration is important to both the individual and society as a whole; integration is improved when migrants gain fluency in English and maintain their first language; and *without support*, migrants generally lose their first language within three generations. It follows that government has a role, alongside the individual and communities, to support language acquisition and maintenance in order to ensure the best possible productivity benefits from the skills and language strengths that migrants bring to our nation.
9. We are unsure about the conclusions reached from the statistical data quoted on migrants’ employment outcomes by language level. The data shown gives percentages but not numbers for most graphs, and no analyses of statistical significance are shown, so it is impossible to judge whether the graphs reflect real differences. For example the data appears to indicate a benefit of low English levels for business migrants (though curiously this is never referred to in the text). The report’s interpretation of the graphs also takes no account of possible confounding factors, such as age or qualification levels at the time of migration, or discrimination against some migrant groups.

We would be keen to discuss this feedback with you and your team. As it happens two of our group will be in Wellington on May 29<sup>th</sup> and could meet with you in the afternoon, after 3pm. Would this be possible for you? If not, please can you email me with some other possible dates and times.

I look forward to hearing from you, and hope to meet with you soon.

Yours sincerely,



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Professor Miriam Meyerhoff  
Professor of Linguistics  
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<sup>3</sup> May, S., Hill, R., & Tiakiwai, S. (2004). *Bilingual/immersion education: indicators of good practice*. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

<sup>4</sup> The Royal Society of New Zealand (2013). *Languages in Aotearoa New Zealand*. The Royal Society of New Zealand: Wellington.