

Gift of the gab
By Jon Ralph

Becoming a world-beater in another, um, language involves making, ah, mistakes, writes Jon Ralph

MANY students envy the classmate who goes on a foreign-exchange program and returns with, not only wild stories but, a firm grasp of a language.

Suddenly they breeze through their VCE language studies, while others around them flounder. So how do you polish your skills in the language you have chosen to study without travelling overseas for six months or more?

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority believes there are many ways to develop your oral skills as you approach your VCE exams.

Languages Other Than English (LOTE) manager Madeleine Jenkins says students need to realise they are going to make mistakes.

`` It's a question of using the language as much as you can in a range of different situations and getting used to being confident and not worrying about hesitating," she says.

Jenkins says students sometimes feel they need to be word perfect, despite the fact they seldom are when talking English.

`` People feel it has to be a totally flawless way of speaking, without any ums and ahs. Authentic conversation in any language involves pauses and those ums and ahs."

`` The strategies include gap fillers like, `just one moment', or `did I hear you right when you said X, Y and Z?'. You can ask for clarification."

Fluency in any language comes only after many years of intense study, not five or six years in secondary school.

Very few people become fluent in another language without a trace of accent or some lack of vocabulary.

Jenkins says VCE students should be able to hold basic conversations.

`` You could say that by Year 12 we expect students to engage in conversation, or give talks or do presentations, on a wide range of areas," she says.

`` Like being able to converse about themselves and about aspects of the LOTE-speaking community and the wider world."

Continued Page 32

From Page 31

Melbourne French Theatre founder Michael Bula often uses school students in his plays.

The international lawyer says students learn best when there is competition or necessity involved.

`` The best way is role-playing. You need a goal or a pressure or you won't learn to ride a bicycle, let alone learn a language," Bula says.

He says students need to enjoy, rather than fear, speaking another language.

`` Role-playing and being immersed in something French is good, because it stimulates the neurones," he says.

`` You have to swallow your shyness and make mistakes."

Jenkins suggests that students:

WATCH foreign language films. Look at the subtitles and try to match the written to the spoken words.

LOG on to the Internet. Listen to international news on-line. Even if you only pick up a few words, you are improving your ability to understand the language delivered at a faster pace.

GO TO areas where the language is. If you are learning Chinese, take up Tai Chi or go shopping in Chinatown and try out your Chinese on someone. Even on public transport you can hear people speaking different languages. Try to tune in or ask them a few questions.

CONVERSATION classes. Many schools and organisations have classes where people simply talk for an hour in a specific language.

Websites:

www.lotelinx.vic.edu.au (general)

www.netspace.net.au/~aftvinc (French)

www.users.bigpond.com/chineselinx (Chinese)

www.vilta.vic.edu.au (Indonesian)

www.goethe.de (German)

Caption: Children from various countries surrounding a globe of the world

Illus: Illustration

Section: LEARN

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