



## Languages and cultures in the regions: A tribute to Ruth Nicholls (1947-2024)

Susan Feez<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of New England, Armidale, Australia

Elizabeth Ellis<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>University of New England, Armidale, Australia

Isabel Tasker<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>University of New England, Armidale, Australia

Zuocheng Zhang<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>University of New England, Armidale, Australia

Helen Harper<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>University of New England, Armidale, Australia

### Abstract

Multilingual and multicultural Australia is typically represented in urban settings. This representation is challenged by half a century of languages and multicultural teaching and research originating in Armidale in the New England region of NSW. From the 1970s to the present, educational institutions in Armidale have been leaders in the multicultural, TESOL and languages education fields, a tradition recorded in a manuscript prepared by Ruth Nicholls (1947-2024), a lecturer in TESOL and Languages at the Armidale College of Advanced Education (ACAE) and at the University of New England (UNE) from the early 1970s until her retirement in 2013. This manuscript, which accompanies a carefully documented archive, records innovation in applied linguistics, TESOL, languages and cultures education over decades, as well as productive collaboration between Armidale-based specialists working in these fields. This paper draws on Ruth's manuscript (Nicholls, ca. 2014) to trace TESOL, languages and cultures education and research in the New England region, extending the account up to the present and into regions beyond the New England.

### Correspondence

Susan Feez  
[sfeeze@une.edu.au](mailto:sfeeze@une.edu.au)

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## **Introduction**

In 1973, at a time when the White Australia policy was only just coming to an end, and public awareness of Aboriginal history, culture and society beyond colonial era justification for dispossession was only just emerging, courses in Aboriginal and multicultural education, as well as courses in languages education, including TESOL, were established at the Armidale College of Advanced Education (ACAE). These courses were the origin of more than half a century of unbroken languages and multicultural education in Armidale.

Multiculturalism and multilingualism in the New England region of NSW, where Armidale is located, has a much longer history than half a century. As recorded by Clayton-Dixon (2019), a community of five languages, alongside languages from two other language families, has been used by First Nations Australians on the New England Tableland for millennia. Nevertheless, the formal teaching of languages and cultures education in Armidale at the ACAE and at the University of New England (UNE) over five decades is a heritage worth celebrating, especially when viewed alongside the ‘monolingual mindset’, that is, English monolingualism understood as the ‘unmarked case’, so apparently entrenched in settler Australian culture throughout most of this time (Clyne, 2008; Ellis, 2006, 2008).

This article is dedicated to the memory of Ruth Nicholls, a long-serving and devoted lecturer in TESOL and Languages education at both the ACAE and at UNE until her retirement in 2013. From 1973 to the present, educators in Armidale, Ruth’s friends and colleagues, have continued to implement programs in languages and cultures designed to overcome the ‘limitation of human potential’ represented by monolingualism (Ellis, 2008, p. 316). That the heritage of languages and cultures education in Armidale is recorded is largely thanks to Ruth, whose carefully curated archive, a post-retirement labour of love, is the source of much of the history recounted below. This history records how, over the decades in Armidale, teacher education in the fields of languages, TESOL, migrant education, and Aboriginal studies has drawn on the knowledge, skill and experience of both staff and students, and has resonated with evolving theory and practice in these fields. The account below begins with the Diploma in Migrant Teaching offered in 1973 at the ACAE and then tracks a series of innovations from this starting point to the array of related programs now offered at and supported by UNE. As recorded below, these innovations led to UNE academics extending the focus on languages education and use beyond the New England region to other regions of Australia. An unbroken thread that runs throughout this account is Ruth Nicholls’ unwavering commitment to languages and cultures education in the New England region and beyond.

## Leading the languages education field from the 1970s to 1990s

Languages have been academic disciplines at UNE since the founding of the New England University College in 1938. In fact, among the five academic staff in that first year of operation, two, i.e. 40%, were languages scholars. French and German were the first ‘modern’ languages offered, and Latin and Ancient Greek were offered for those who studied Classics. Subsequently, as UNE became an independent university in 1954, and continued to grow, Italian and Modern Greek were introduced, responding to the needs of families of second-generation migrants in NSW. Asian languages were taught within social science and Asian studies disciplines, as was standard practice in tertiary education at the time; these were located at the ACAE, where Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian were offered.

In 1973 Dr Alan Kerr established the two-year Diploma in Migrant Teaching at the ACAE. Notably, the preferred title, Diploma in *Multicultural* Education, was not considered ‘acceptable’ at the time. Moreover, even though this diploma was a graduate diploma, the word ‘graduate’ could not be used because it was offered at a college of advanced education rather than a university (Nicholls, ca. 2014). Nevertheless, the Diploma included modules in adult and child migrant education, society and culture, as well as language teaching and a related practicum. Significantly, the Diploma included an introduction to linguistics for language teachers taught by John Collerson (1994, 1997), who later authored grammar books widely used by Australian teachers. Each offering attracted at least 100 students, both internal and external, and included two very popular five-day residential schools.

Many senior staff in the Adult Migrant Education Service, the various state Departments of Education as well as other government departments also enrolled, creating a major force for new thinking related to immigration and settlement as well as the education of new arrivals (Nicholls, ca. 2014).

By 1976 the success of the diploma led to the ACAE opening the Centre for Multicultural Studies. In the same year Ruth Nicholls began teaching at the Centre, while also teaching TESOL and Modern Languages Teaching methods in the Graduate Diploma of Education offered at UNE.

In 1978, a Graduate Diploma in Multicultural Education was established within the Centre for Multicultural Studies at the ACAE. While the scope of the new diploma expanded to include studies in sociolinguistics and education for a multicultural society as well as English language teaching, and the opportunity to study European languages and modern language teaching, all students continued to be provided with an introduction to linguistics in a module entitled *Linguistics for Language Teachers*.

The program recognised that the whole of Australian society needed to change as the population diversified and encountered varied cultural practices, so it aimed to educate all educators (not just specialist ESL teachers) to meet this challenge (Nicholls, ca. 2014).

The 1978 ACAE Graduate Diploma strengthened the 1973 foundation, developing into an unbroken tradition in Armidale of teacher education in the fields of languages, TESOL, migrant education, and Aboriginal studies. Following the amalgamation of ACAE and UNE in the period 1988-89, this tradition has continued at UNE through partnerships between the School of Education (SoE), and departments of Linguistics and Languages and Cultures in the School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS).

In 1973, at the same time as Dr Alan Kerr was establishing the Diploma in Migrant Teaching, Mary ('Millie') Douglas established Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal Studies as compulsory subjects for all students at the ACAE. Later in the 1970s, the Centre for Multicultural Studies, established at the ACAE in 1976, was expanded to become the Centre for Aboriginal and Multicultural Studies. By the 1980s the Centre was led by Dr (later Professor) Anne-Katrin Eckermann, an expert in Aboriginal land rights. The Aboriginal Education programs offered by the Centre were delivered by Aboriginal Fellows, including the well-known activist Burnum Burnum (Harry Penrith). The Graduate Diploma in Aboriginal Education offered through the ACAE Centre trained half the Aboriginal teachers in NSW. The growing number of Aboriginal students, enrolled at both the ACAE and UNE, led to the opening in 1985 of the Oorala Aboriginal Centre established to support these students during their studies. The Oorala Centre continues to flourish and support First Nations students to this day (University of New England, 2025a).

## **Applying linguistics to language teacher education**

Studies in educational linguistics established by John Collerson at the ACAE in the early 1970s remain a feature of current UNE TESOL programs. The content covered is based on ongoing developments in the social and functional approach to linguistics that was such an innovative feature of John Collerson's original teaching. The inclusion of educational linguistics in TESOL and languages education offered in teacher education programs in Armidale from 1973 to the present represents a thread that ties together developments in language education theory and practice, and languages teaching in general, throughout these decades (Nicholls, ca. 2014).

During the 1960s, audiolingual and structural approaches were used to teach additional languages. These approaches featured activities based on teacher-led repetition and drills designed to build accurate control of the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of the target

language. Once British linguists such as J. R. Firth (1968) and M.A.K. Halliday (1973) had drawn language teachers' attention to how language is used in real contexts, structural approaches evolved into situational language teaching (Richards & Rogers, 2014). In the mid-1960s in Australia, for example, a series of resources, *Situational English for Newcomers to Australia* (Department of Education and Science, 1969-1972), became the mainstay of adult migrant education. These resources were designed to help students learn sentence and interaction patterns they could use in everyday situations, such as 'at the post office' or 'in the restaurant'.

By 1973, when Dr Alan Kerr launched the Diploma in Migrant Teaching at the ACAE<sup>1</sup>, approaches used to teach additional languages were becoming increasingly student-centred and communicative. Earlier 'quantitative, cognitive [and] positivist' teaching methods were being overtaken by the 'social turn' (Ortega, 2013) with a focus on authentic language use and building language learners' 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1972). This was especially true for migrant English programs designed for learners who needed to become fluent language users comparatively quickly in order to navigate successfully life in a new linguistic and cultural setting. The advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) heralded two decades during which additional languages education responded to linguists recasting in social terms phenomena such as cognition, grammar, interaction, learning and identity (Ortega, 2013).

Communicative language teaching, and related pedagogies, were characterised by a variety of group work, pair work, roleplay and problem-solving spoken language activities, designed to build motivation and with an emphasis on fluency over accuracy (Savignon, 2000; Richards & Rogers, 2014). During the 1980s and beyond, interactive communicative activities became a feature of the very popular and distinctive intensive schools attended by all students enrolled in additional language education programs at masters, graduate diploma, and graduate certificate levels initially at the ACAE and then at UNE. Student numbers were high because of the demand at the time for migrant English teachers in school and adult settings, as well as foreign language teachers in schools. Moreover, student teachers could enrol in these courses externally from anywhere in Australia and beyond; the number of overseas students on campus at UNE increased as well. During the 1990s, as other universities began to offer TESOL and Languages education programs, student numbers in those programs at UNE plateaued (Nicholls, ca. 2014).

By the 1990s, English language teachers in Australia were increasingly expected to integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills into migrant education programs designed to prepare learners to use both spoken and written language fluently *and* accurately to a standard that would underpin effective engagement in education, employment and the community.

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Alan Kerr Collection', comprising books and other documents related to the development of TESOL in Australia, is held in the UNE Heritage Centre.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s in Australia, language teaching programs were strongly influenced by educational linguists describing how language is used to make meaning and the related ways text structure, grammar and vocabulary vary from one social context to the next (e.g. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These descriptions have been successfully applied to language teaching and learning and have influenced the development of Australian curriculum documents to the present (e.g. Derewianka & Jones, 2022; Rose & Martin, 2012). Migrant English programs, in particular, were strongly influenced by emerging text-based pedagogies, which shifted the focus of language teaching from isolated sentences to whole texts and their use in context (Feez, 2001; de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2015; Mickan, 2022). Language teaching programs at UNE were well placed to prepare student teachers for these developments through the *Linguistics for Language Teachers* unit first established in the 1970s by John Collerson. Following a recent UNE course review, this unit is being revised for 2026, but it retains the emphasis on functional approaches to language and highlights the contribution linguistics can make to inform teaching, including English and languages teaching (University of New England, 2025b).

## **Languages and TESOL education at UNE**

At UNE during the early 2000s, text-based language descriptions within interactive classrooms that drew on the CLT heritage were a feature of TESOL and Languages education programs in the School of Education. This was also the approach used in the English Language Centre (an ELICOS centre for international students enrolling at UNE), and the Academic Skills Office, established to assist all UNE students with academic English (Nicholls, ca. 2014).

In 2001, the UNE School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics established the Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics (MAAL), later the Master of Applied Linguistics, the first fully online Masters course in Australia, promoted as UNE's 'flagship' degree from 2007. This degree attracted students from Australia and overseas, with students from over 27 nationalities studying the course online. The MAAL represented a broadening of the traditional linguistics courses on offer, which previously focused more on preparing descriptive linguists to analyse and document languages of the world. The MAAL featured units in Intercultural Communication, Applied Linguistics and Bilingualism among others, and increased its appeal to a wide range of languages, literacy and TESOL teachers as well as those in the publishing and diplomatic fields (Elizabeth Ellis, personal communication, March 24, 2025). When a TESOL specialisation was added in 2010, the Linguistics discipline collaborated with School of Education colleagues, Ruth Nicholls and Glenda Kupczyk-Romanczuk, to deliver the TESOL units that prepared both classroom and specialist teachers to work with learners of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) in primary school, secondary school and adult education settings (Nicholls, ca. 2014).

Following the merger of the ACAE with UNE in 1988-89, Asian and European language and culture disciplines eventually joined into one School. These moves facilitated subsequent collaboration between the School of Education and Languages and Cultures disciplines in the Faculty of Arts (later the School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences). By the early 2000s, Modern Greek had been discontinued, but Spanish was introduced in 2012 through an innovative cross-Tasman blended model arrangement with Massey University in New Zealand. In 1995 a four-year Bachelor of Languages had been introduced, enabling students to aim for advanced levels of language proficiency and cultural awareness by spending an academic year studying university courses in a target language country. For UNE's distance education students, who may have been studying in an environment with few opportunities for hearing and speaking the target language in authentic situations, this extended period of language immersion has been found to be especially profitable for developing oral and aural proficiency. Shorter periods of in-country language study have been included in the popular Diploma of Modern Languages (Nicholls, ca. 2014; University of New England, 2025c).

From the beginning, an integrated approach to distance education has been of crucial significance to UNE's identity. UNE was the first tertiary institution in Australia to offer TESOL and language courses by distance education. Innovative characteristics of the original ground-breaking "New England model" of distance education included the requirement that internal and external students be taught concurrently in the same courses, and the incorporation of residential and weekend schools to facilitate face-to-face contact among students and with staff (Eastcote & Small, 1984). In this way UNE's long history of offering languages in distance education mode as well as on-campus mode has extended opportunities for formal language study far beyond the regional centre of Armidale to reach students who for reasons of work, health, family or location are unable to attend traditional classes. As these students use and reflect on their developing language proficiency and learning experiences, they contribute to the development of multilingual and multicultural awareness in families, workplaces, and regional and local Australian communities (Tasker, 2012, 2018; Evans, 2024).

The Diploma in Modern Languages was eventually expanded through a notable collaboration between Languages in the School of Arts and Ruth Nicholls and Glenda Kupczyk-Romanczuk in the School of Education, initially to enable teachers of European languages to add an Asian language to their teaching repertoire. The approach grew out of the Asian Languages Accreditation Program, a UNE initiative begun in 2010 in response to the government's National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP). The aim was to increase the supply of Asian language teachers in Australian schools. Students, who were qualified teachers in other subjects, were enabled to retrain as teachers of Asian (and later other) languages, and so the Diploma combines language proficiency units with Languages Other Than English (LOTE) methodology for primary or secondary school settings, a teaching practicum, and a short intensive in-country immersion program (Evans, 2024). By 2014 the course had been instrumental in assisting 60 NSW teachers to become qualified to teach Asian

languages across the state (Georgina Doukas, NALSSP Languages Officer, DET NSW, personal communication, July 15, 2014; Reading et al., 2013).

In 2010, as initial teacher education courses were being restructured, alongside the streamlining of online delivery, a generalist unit in cross-cultural education was included in all UNE initial teacher education degrees so all teachers recognised:

... that they are **always** teachers of English in their classrooms in **every** learning area, through the medium of their specialist subjects (Nicholls, ca. 2014).

In 2013, Ruth Nicholls retired, handing over coordination of the TESOL units and Languages education units to colleagues. As the decade unfolded, the ‘multilingual turn’, a logical development beyond the social turn, was re-shaping language teaching (Ortega, 2013), including at UNE. This was a shift from thinking about language learning in terms of separate languages, a consequence of the ‘monolingual mindset’ so prevalent where English is the dominant language (Clyne, 2008; Ellis, 2006), towards a recognition that language teaching and learning necessarily takes place in plurilingual settings in which languages interact dynamically and interdependently. Enabling language teachers and learners to draw on all the languages they know and can use supports them learning to make meaning in an additional language (Ellis, 2016a, 2016b; Garcia, 2014; Li, 2022; Li & Garcia, 2022; Menken, 2013; Choi & Ollerhead, 2018).

During the decade from 2010 to 2020, UNE scholars were teaching and researching in the fields of Languages, TESOL and Languages Education both from the point of view of social approaches to language education (e.g. de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2015; Feez & Zhang, 2018; Parkin & Harper, 2018) as well as multilingual (later, plurilingual) approaches (e.g. Ellis, 2016a, 2016b; Morgan, 2020; Tasker, 2016), a contribution that has continued beyond 2020 (e.g. Harper & Feez, 2021).

In recent years, discipline knowledge and pedagogical content in the TESOL units have been consolidated and differentiated to strengthen the preparation of teachers striving to meet the needs of EAL/D school students in diverse teaching situations in Australia, as well as the needs of adults learning English in the Adult Migrant English Program, studying in Australian ELICOS centres, and studying English in institutions overseas. This includes addressing the development of literacy and the study of texts that underpins the Australian Curriculum: English and related syllabus documents, as well as more diverse pedagogies used in English education in post-school settings in Australia and overseas (Yilmaz et al., 2023). A new unit, *Perspectives on Language, Society and Culture*, has been designed to cover sociolinguistics, language ecology and the analysis of intercultural interactions. In recognition that teachers, in both Australian and international settings, are increasingly expected to contribute to knowledge



creation, unit consolidation has included a focus on on-going professional development and the role of teachers as researchers generating new understandings and effecting change on the basis of action research in their own classrooms (e.g. Yilmaz et al., 2023; Zhang, 2025).

## **A wealth of ‘languages in the regions’**

Over the last two decades, groups of researchers at UNE began to focus their attention on languages used ‘beyond the metropolis’ (Ellis et al., 2014). This development emerged from the awareness that while the New England region, and comparable regions of Australia, have always been culturally and linguistically diverse, much of the research into language practices and the education of plurilingual children and adults has been conducted in metropolitan areas. Projects that addressed this disparity included the following:

- Community workshops conducted by Elizabeth Ellis on ‘Bringing up Bilingual Kids’, which focused attention on passing on family languages to children in the regions when there is no readily-accessible speech community (Ellis & Bilbatua, 2013, Ellis, 2014).
- The plurilingual and translingual practices of migrants from African countries in Armidale, Coffs Harbour and Wagga Wagga (Ndhlovu, 2014; Ndhlovu & Willoughby, 2016).
- The complex learning journeys of isolated distance students of Chinese and how their encounters with the language and culture fostered international relationships and networks (Tasker, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2018).

These shared interests came together in a Symposium at the 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) in Brisbane in 2014: ‘*Beyond the metropolis: Language learning, teaching, use and maintenance in rural and regional contexts*’. This provided opportunities to foster links with researchers in other regional areas (Ellis et al, 2014).

The growing recognition of the wealth of language diversity in the regions led to a successful project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC): *Bilingualism in the Bush* (Ellis & Sims, 2014 – 2018) which followed nine families in three New England towns as they nurtured plurilingualism within their families (Ellis & Sims, 2018). Another successful outcome of this link between researchers in plurilingualism and early childhood was the ARC project: *Starting young: Early years’ languages learning in Australia* (Morgan, Hajek, Lo Bianco & Ellis, 2019-2025): *investigating best practice in language learning in pre-school and early primary school* (Morgan et al., 2024a). This project has informed the National Languages Education Plan (Morgan et al., 2024b). A further project led by Elizabeth Ellis, in collaboration with the

Bicultural Support Program, the International Student Office and the English Language Centre matched international students with young children in childcare settings to provide language and cultural support in their language.

A very different perspective on ‘languages in the regions’ is advanced in the groundbreaking work of UNE scholars, Nick Reid (Linguistics) and Patrick Nunn (Geography), which matched First Nation stories with scientifically-recorded sea-level variation since the last Ice Age. This innovative work showed that oral histories could be passed on accurately over a period of 7,000 years through traditional transgenerational communication practices (Nunn & Reid, 2016). Callum Clayton-Dixon continues his work on reviving the Anaiwan language (Clayton-Dixon 2025).

## **Innovation and inertia in research-driven course design**

The multilingual (later plurilingual) turn in languages education led to UNE researchers collaborating on new Masters programs that drew on the availability of seven language disciplines, as well as on the long history of collaboration between Linguistics, the Language and Literacies group in Education, and Languages and Cultures. These programs included a Master of TESOL, based on Ellis’s (2016) research on plurilingual teachers and designed for international teachers of English, for example, in Thailand or Japan, recognising their plurilingual capabilities and turning their attention to plurilingual approaches they could use in their own classrooms.

A further innovation was the Master of Languages Education, a wide-ranging degree with a core of cross-disciplinary Education and Linguistics units and eight specialist strands in Languages, Languages education, English language/TESOL education, English language testing (IELTS), Linguistics, Applied linguistics, Community and regional languages, and Translation studies. Sadly, due to a university-wide restructure, and in line with the current trend in Australian universities limiting research-driven innovative course development in the humanities, neither of these forward-thinking degrees became ongoing languages education offerings at UNE.

## **Armidale becomes a refugee sanctuary city**

Combined with UNE’s reputation for adopting multicultural approaches to education, advocacy by Armidale Sanctuary Humanitarian Settlement Inc. resulted in Armidale becoming, in 2018, a designated centre for receiving Ezidi people from a refugee background (Armidale

Sanctuary, 2018-2025). Ezidi people were mercilessly persecuted for decades in northern Iraq, culminating in a catastrophic genocide and siege in 2014. Finding asylum and permanent residency, they now number almost 1,000 residents of Armidale. A UNE-based survey of social attitudes within the Armidale community shows that Ezidi people have been welcomed by the locals and have become integrated into the community (Watt et al., 2023), including through sporting networks (O'Neill, 2023; O'Neill & Baker, 2023, 2025). Nevertheless, the arrival of the Ezidi people presented considerable challenges for local schools and the TAFE college (Feez, Ellis, Tasker, & Harper, 2018; Xavier & Baker, 2025). Most of the newcomers had little to no English, had been through extreme trauma with no schooling, or at best brief and interrupted schooling. There were only small numbers of EAL/D trained teachers in schools, and TAFE offerings were limited to on-arrival AMEP classes and Adult Literacy programs designed for native speakers. With the arrival of the Ezidi students in Armidale, several local TAFE teachers took the opportunity to upgrade their qualifications by enrolling in the UNE Graduate Certificate in Education Studies (TESOL).

In addition, UNE's educational linguists, led by Susan Feez, with Elizabeth Ellis, Isabel Tasker, the English Language Centre, and later Helen Harper and Robyn Cox, established, with funding from the Australian Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), a program which orients young Ezidi people to higher education, by, for example, providing access to academic and social English, an understanding of approaches to study and mentoring and role-modelling support. This program ran in various formats for eight years, and, with the knowledge gained, transitioned to a 'business as usual' model within UNE, whereby the Student Services unit takes responsibility for engaging with and supporting students of refugee background (Feez, Ellis, Tasker, & Harper, 2018). The arrival of Ezidi families in Armidale also led to the establishment in 2020 of the first Intensive English Centre (IEC) outside a capital city at the newly-opened Armidale Secondary College.

With the arrival of so many Ezidi refugees, providing adequate interpreting services became a further challenge for the Armidale community, with few trained interpreters in what was at first believed to be their preferred language: Kurdish Kurmanji. Soon, however, it became clear that the Ezidi language was distinct from Kurmanji and efforts have been made to have Ezidi recognised by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). A high-level round table was held in 2019 with the CEO of NAATI, the Languages Director of Multicultural NSW and other key Armidale stakeholders to investigate pathways for training more interpreters (Elizabeth Ellis, personal communication 2025). Efforts continue in order to develop increased interpreter provision (Ellis & Hogan, 2020). In the intervening years, numerous Ezidi young people have been supported to finish school and embark on university degrees or TAFE qualifications. A recent example is the 2025 Health Scholarship offered by the New England Division of General Practice 'in recognition of the Ezidi community who have become an integral part of the Armidale and New England Community' (Boshoff, 2025). The scholarship supports university students with an Ezidi background who are enrolled in a health-related degree.

## **Into the future – Threats and opportunities**

Languages education at UNE has a long and distinguished history, and its varied complement of language educators and linguists from diverse backgrounds positions it well to face the many challenges ahead. So, what do we do well?

We have an increased understanding of the impact of identity on learning outcomes, and an increased recognition of the meaning-making and cultural resources EAL/D students bring to the classroom. We know how these can be used to support students' learning of English (i.e. the 'multilingual turn' in language education). We have a rich heritage of Australian innovation and leadership in TESOL education based on a principled educational linguistics (Partridge & Harper, 2023). We have strong links with professional associations, including ACTA, AFMLTA, PETAA, ALEA, ALS, AILA, LCNAU and ALAA<sup>2</sup>.

There are, however, many threats to our continued good practice, now and into the future. Like most universities, UNE has lost staff, with their knowledge and expertise, to redundancies, and we hear of the closure of languages departments around the country (See for example, Cassidy, 2025; Zhang, L., 2023). We see the promotion of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to literacy education in Anglophone contexts aligned with high stakes testing, with English aural comprehension and pronunciation assumed, resulting in EAL/D learners being perceived as having learning difficulties and their existing language resources being ignored (Adoniou, 2018; Creagh et al., 2023; Nguyen & Rushton, 2022; Partridge & Harper, 2023; Schalley et al., 2015; Tilney, 2023).

Then there is the loss of targeted funding for EAL/D education and Professional Learning (PL), leading to further loss of professional expertise and knowledge (Australian Education Union & Australian Council of TESOL Associations, 2023; Creagh et al., 2023; Michell, 2025; Oliver et al., 2017; Steele et al., 2025). A fragmentation of the EAL/D research base is apparent, and although it is many years since we lost the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) (Tilney, 2023), today we see the defunding of the Australian Dictionary Centre as well (Manns & Burrige, 2025). What will be next?

Furthermore, we see the promotion of commercial resources designed around language fragments and inauthentic texts, often using British or American English (Creagh et al., 2023). The increasing use of AI in the development of learning and assessment materials risks

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Council of TESOL Associations, Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations, Primary English Teaching Association Australia, Australian Literacy Educators' Association, Australian Linguistic Society, Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities, and Applied Linguistics Association of Australia.

embedding a lack of recognition of the full spectrum of EAL/D learner diversity. Large language models are trained on a limited set of languages, estimated as around 100, while there are more than 7000 languages in the world (Fromkin et al., 2021), and often on restricted sets of speakers and contexts. While a focus on the use of digital technology and multimodal texts in classrooms is inevitable to prepare language learners for a digital future, learners' success with authentic language use and meaning-making depends on 'sustained ... guidance and supervision' (Macinska & Vinkler, 2024, p. 16) by the waning numbers of specialist language teachers (Guillén & Sawin, 2025; Neilsen & Weinmann, 2022). Lastly, we face the persistence of the monolingual mindset and the retreat from multicultural and global perspectives in the current international political landscape (Robinet, 2025).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the challenges, the resilience of Armidale's multicultural and multilingual traditions, as documented so meticulously by Ruth Nicholls, represents hope for the future. UNE continues to offer specialist degrees preparing teachers to teach English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) in primary, secondary, and adult education, as well as to teach Languages in primary and secondary schools, at a time when the number of universities offering these teaching specialisations appears to be shrinking across Australia (Crealy, 2025; Steele et al., 2025). UNE also continues to teach the same range of Asian, European and classical languages (University of New England, 2025d), again at a time when these disciplines are being discontinued by many Australian universities (Heffernan & Carroll, 2023).

We are proud of UNE's multicultural and multilingual heritage. The current article illustrates our belief that we should make much more of this heritage than we have in the past. Ruth Nicholls' archive has provided us with the raw material to honour our multicultural and multilingual legacy, while also honouring Ruth's role in promoting languages and cultures education in the New England region of NSW and beyond. It would seem fitting to finish this article with a personal view of Ruth Nicholls, composed by Jim Nicholls, Ruth's husband, scholar of French and former UNE academic.

## **Postscript: Ruth Nicholls - A personal view**

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| Ruth Nicholls (née Yelland) (1947-2024) showed an interest in languages from an early age: Latin, French and German at school, and French, German and Indonesian at the University of Sydney. As an undergraduate Ruth volunteered at the Sydney University Settlement in Redfern, helping clients with English. From 1968-69, as a post-graduate student in the French |
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Department at the University of Sydney, Ruth taught French and furthered her experience as a French teacher at the Australian International Independent School. In 1970, Ruth joined the French Department of the University of New England, and in her spare time volunteered in remedial English tutoring with individual and small-group members of the community. In 1972, Ruth returned to Sydney for our wedding and was welcomed back by the University of Sydney French Department.

In August 1972, we sailed for France. While an *assistante d'anglais* in Paris between 1972 and 1975, Ruth completed a *Diplôme supérieure de linguistique appliquée à l'enseignement des langues étrangères* at the Université de Paris 3 – Sorbonne-Nouvelle, and at night taught English at the Australian Embassy to displaced people intending to migrate to Australia. The Paris experience prepared Ruth for the next phase of her academic career.

Ruth's career from 1976 onwards has been documented above by her colleagues. Ruth was a devoted, thorough and thoughtful lecturer, unfailingly loyal to her subject and to her students, internal and external. She regarded the practicum as an essential part of a student's preparation for teaching in schools and made a point of visiting her students on their practicum placements to encourage them and to iron out any problems, but also to forge or maintain relations with language-teaching schools. Even when funding for these visits was withdrawn by the university, Ruth continued to visit her students on placement, at her own expense, and often interstate. In retirement Ruth worked voluntarily with overseas students and their families, and made many friends in the Iranian, Iraqi, and latterly Ezidi communities.

It was a source of great pride to Ruth, and is to me, that our son Peter teaches English to international students at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Pete is third generation TESOL. His paternal grandmother, a Secondary Latin, French and German teacher, worked with migrant education after the war and into the 1950s.

*Jim Nicholls*

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**Dr Susan Feez** is Adjunct Associate Professor in the Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Education at the University of New England (UNE). She has worked as a classroom teacher of English language, literacy, EAL/D and Montessori education, and more recently as an educational linguist, teacher educator and researcher specialising in these fields.

**Dr Elizabeth Ellis** is Adjunct Associate Professor in the Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Education at the University of New England (UNE). She has extensive experience in teaching applied linguistics and English as a Second and Foreign Language, and in educating language teachers. Dr Ellis' research interests are in bilingualism, especially bilingual teacher cognition and bilingual family language practices, and in sociolinguistic perspectives on monolingualism.

**Dr Isabel Tasker** is Adjunct Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Education at the University of New England (UNE). She has extensive experience teaching Mandarin Chinese in many contexts and has been involved in a wide range of curriculum development, assessment, evaluation and teacher-training initiatives at local and national level in Australia and UK. Her research is in Chinese pedagogy and long-term language learning.

**Dr Zuocheng Zhang** is Associate Professor in English, Literacies and Languages Education in the School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Education at the University of New England. His teaching areas include TESOL education, disciplinary literacies and teaching for cultural diversity. His current research focuses on interdisciplinarity in Business English Studies, construction of prestige on top-ranking universities' websites, and international students' agency in transitioning from university to the workplace.

**Dr Helen Harper** is Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of New England. Helen's working life has included roles as a language teacher, and as a researcher in linguistics and literacy education. Helen's current research centres on the design of pedagogic approaches that benefit marginalised students, including those with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, First Nations students and English language learners from refugee backgrounds.