

Language, the missing word in our schools

Matthew Absalom July 6, 2007

WALKING around Preston Market this weekend, I was overjoyed to hear not a word of English spoken around me. Despite the fact that Melbourne is a linguistic hotbed, Australia has an appalling record with languages.

Commentators such as the Australian Council of State School Organisations label this "an international embarrassment and national disgrace". Influential groups such as the Group of Eight Australian research-intensive universities call for "a new attitude towards languages and the learning of languages in Australia".

Talk about languages in our schools is a hot topic. But nobody is talking about the elephant in the room — how language programs in government schools undermine languages education.

To understand this better, we need to survey some of the programs offered. In primary schools, we find immersion/bilingual programs, language awareness programs and Languages Other Than English (LOTE) programs.

An immersion/bilingual program is one where everything is taught in the language being studied. So, as well as doing maths in English, you would do it in, say, Chinese. This would happen in all areas of the curriculum and it requires teachers with expert language skills.

Language awareness programs focus on culture and include varied exposure to the target language. LOTE programs concentrate more strongly on the target language as the object of study.

In Australia, Italian has long been the language spoken most after English. It is also one of the most taught languages in Victorian government schools — it accounts for 25 per cent of all language enrolments and its continuing strength in Victoria can be linked to patterns of community settlement in Melbourne.

Startlingly, despite this, in 2005 there was not a single bilingual/immersion program for Italian at primary level in any Victorian government school. Even more perplexing is the imbalance between full-blown LOTE programs (where Italian is taught as a language) and language awareness programs (where students do things such as study Venice's Carnevale, make masks and perhaps learn a little vocabulary).

In Italian primary programs in 2005, more students statewide (53 per cent) were in a language awareness classroom than those studying the language (47 per cent). Even at secondary schools, 4 per cent of students were only offered language awareness in Italian.

This is a grave state of affairs, given the place of Italian in Victoria's psyche.

At the recent "Languages in Crisis" summit in Canberra, a West Australian academic reported that student numbers in Chinese languages had risen by 90 per cent in the past 10 years. Chinese languages rank with English among the most spoken languages in the world, so it is hardly surprising that there should be strong growth in Chinese.

In Victorian government schools, Chinese enrolments rose 21 per cent between 1999 and 2005. Numerically, Italian is much stronger. But Chinese enrolments point to a

much higher emphasis on the language itself, with students in bilingual and LOTE programs outnumbering those in language awareness programs.

Language awareness programs are available across all languages and they raise serious questions. How valid is it to count these weak forms of language education as language programs? Would we accept courses in maths awareness in place of actual maths education, where tomorrow's adults get down and dirty with numbers, integers, angles and algebra?

Perhaps we have such low expectations of language education because about 30 years ago our schools abandoned the rigorous teaching of English as a language.

In my first-year university Italian classrooms, I routinely have to teach students basic language concepts. My students are among the highest achievers in VCE and have outstanding results in English and Italian — some having studied Italian for the full 13 years of school. But their knowledge of language is still precarious.

In maths classes, students are often encouraged to put down their working-out. This strategy helps to ingrain knowledge of maths as a system. We need a similar approach with languages, particularly if students begin to study the language in secondary school. They need to know how it works as a system. Making masks doesn't teach this.

I'm not advocating a return to bland grammar-based courses. But we have tipped the balance in favour of fun and fluff too far the other way, perhaps in an attempt to deal with the difficulties of teaching languages in schools.

People often cite the rise of the internet as furthering English's march to world domination. The attitude that "English is all you need" lulls us into dangerous complacency. Recent research, such as David Crystal's work on language and the internet, shows that it has given new life to a range of minority languages and points to a multilingual future.

Since speakers of English as a second language outnumber English native speakers, monolingual English speakers are the global minority. They are likely to have difficulty participating in a multilingual society.

Australia is a highly multicultural society, which acts as if it were monolingual. With most of the world's population being at least bilingual, we are falling behind. It is about time that we argued for language programs in schools to focus on what they're meant to: language.

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