

Diverse language skills will open the world to Australians

Michael Clyne January 2, 2008

IN 2008, the International Year of Languages and the European Year of Inter-cultural Dialogue, many countries will be reflecting on their achievements in these areas and what can be done better.

On such occasions, Australia is often cited as a nation that has achieved a unique identity based on cultural diversity, successful integration, harmony, and inclusiveness.

Now that we can again feel "relaxed and comfortable" to talk about our cultural diversity, we too should take stock. We will have an opportunity to consider how we, as individuals and as a nation, make the most of our language resources and how we communicate with and about those of other cultural backgrounds.

About 400 languages (indigenous, community and sign languages) are spoken in Australian homes, and Australians have daily grassroots experience that makes them more aware of others' cultural values and communicative behaviour. It is these resources that could make us an important link between Asia and Europe.

Despite this, we are not encouraging enough younger Australians to maintain and develop their bilingualism or to acquire a second language. Half the children in compulsory education in Australia are not being taught a language other than English in a mainstream school. The majority of those taking another language are in programs with inadequate time allocation, often taught by teachers with insufficient training or language proficiency. Many schools discourage students from proceeding with a language beyond year 8, and the retention rate to year 12 is only about 13% nationally, but 22% in Victoria, largely thanks to a high retention rate in independent schools.

In the past decade, the number of languages offered in Australian universities has fallen from 66 to 29, and the situation of some of these is precarious.

The marginalisation of language teaching is often justified by the need to concentrate on English literacy. International and local evidence shows that bilingualism and appropriate early second language study actually enhance English literacy skills.

If allowed to develop in a balanced way, bilingualism brings many cognitive benefits and assists in the learning of additional languages. The impoverished "core curriculum" favoured by the previous government — comprising English literacy, mathematics, science and perhaps Australian history — would not equip future generations for their place in the world.

We are out of step with most other countries. In most of Europe and much of Asia, two languages in addition to one's first are an essential goal of the curriculum. For instance, Finland, which consistently outperforms Australia in comparative measures of educational attainment, including literacy tests, does not have problems with a "crowded curriculum" although students take three languages throughout their schooling and about half study a fourth language.

In a report commissioned by the British Council, based on language need projections over the next decades, English linguist David Graddol predicts a bleak future for monolingual English speakers.

State and federal governments should collaborate in a program to raise the availability and quality of learning in languages other than English at school and university and promote motivations for it. The welcome expansion of Asian language programs (in Mandarin, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean) needs to take place without further weakening the study of other languages, including European languages still of value to the nation.

The new Government also intends to charge a National Curriculum Board with deciding if languages should be compulsory. "Compulsoriness", which has a negative connotation in Australia, seems mainly an issue with languages; it is taken for granted for mathematics, science and other core learning areas. Unless languages are compulsory from prep to year 10, like other core areas, they will not be taken seriously.

If we have a national curriculum, it is essential that languages be strengthened in all states including ones, such as Victoria, where they are relatively better off.

With Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister the emphasis may change. During the election campaign he demonstrated his understanding that language is both a means of communication and a symbol of shared identity by speaking to the Chinese Premier and TV viewers in Mandarin.

The International Year of Languages is an opportunity for the new Government to act on a number of issues. It needs to review the citizenship test introduced by the previous government and to fund the teaching of English as a second language for adults, for a language test is no substitute for the best possible opportunities to acquire the national language.

It also has to overcome the political correctness that developed during the Howard era by reinstating the term "multicultural" to facilitate renewed public discourse on our national demographics and culturally inclusive national identity.

Federal and state governments need to consider ways to harness Australia's intercultural communication experience and multilingual resources for Australia's economic benefit as well as for the good of individuals, families and communities. This will involve collaboration with education institutions, ethnic communities, families, and business.

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