

## **The state of languages education in Australia: A national tragedy and an international embarrassment**

An Opinion Paper by Michael Clyne, Anne Pauwels & Roland Sussex

There has recently been much public discussion on the dangerously weakened status of mathematics and science in Australian education. But the issue of languages other than English has been neglected and marginalized in the too-hard basket. It is no exaggeration to state that this area is now a catastrophe in Australian education.

### **The Problems in Schools**

The MCEETYA National Plan on Languages Education (2005) opens with a true statement and a great understatement: *'Quality languages education is not yet part of the learning experience of all students, in all schools, in all parts of the country'*.

- In fact, half the children in compulsory education in Australia are not being taught a language other than English (LOTE) in a mainstream school
- The majority of those taking a LOTE are in programs with inadequate time allocation, many taught by teachers who have not received sufficient training or are not sufficiently proficient in the language they are teaching.
- Language teacher status and morale are low.
- Most schools do not require students to take a second language throughout the compulsory years of education.
- Many schools make it impossible or inconvenient to take a LOTE in Years 9 and 10 through the constraints of the time table.
- 30 years of reports and reviews have kept identifying the same problems.

Although Australian governments and agencies have been active in commissioning reviews and reports, to date the core recommendations of such reports have not been implemented, so the problems are mounting.

### **Australia's Monolingualism and Multiculturalism**

Australia is blessed with resources in a wide range of languages but their utilization is undermined by a dominant monolingual mindset.

Language skills acquired at home are often wasted because students are not being motivated to build on them or do not have opportunities to do so.

Children learning languages are not given the opportunity to benefit from the community resources to develop their competence.

Languages offered in schools or in universities rarely take into account current language demography.

Persistent reference to a 'crowded curriculum' as an obstacle is both dubious and misleading, since many countries of Europe and Asia do not consider their curriculum too crowded to include two languages other than the first.

This places Australia at odds with its peers in the OECD. From having had an acclaimed policy on languages in the 1980s, we are now near the bottom of the rankings.

In Finland, whose school students consistently perform better than Australians in international comparative assessments across the curriculum:

- all children take three languages throughout schooling,
- 44% a fourth language and
- 31% a fifth.

In the Netherlands,

- 99% of Year 12 students are learning a second language,
- 41% a third and
- 21% a fourth.

There is Australian evidence that bilinguals approach the task of learning another language differently from monolinguals because they have a better understanding of how language works.

### **Issues & State Differences**

Retention rate to Year 12 in LOTEs is about 13%, half of the goal set for 2001 in the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (1991).

Queensland's retention, at some 5%, is about 20% of the goal.

Queensland and ACT do not participate in the Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages (CCAFL), offering Year 12 assessment in 42 languages.

Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and ACT do not have a government School of Languages which enables students to take languages not offered in their school on Saturdays in a 'mainstream' environment. Thus those states provide a more limited range of language learning opportunities.

Indeed, the fact that they do not participate in CACEFL weakens the viability of many smaller languages in the national initiative.

### **The situation in Australian universities shows a similar decline.**

Only 28 languages are now taught in Australian universities, as compared to 66 in 1997. Of these, nine are offered at only one Australian university, and only seven are well represented at Australian universities.

Many languages with large communities of speakers around Australia are not (widely) available at university.

Many universities have difficulty maintaining small enrolment languages, or offering a full language program - beginners to PhD- even in some large languages. Staff reductions and casualization are substantial even in the major languages, some of which are taught by a staff of one in some universities.

(Many of these issues are being revealed in a project of the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities being coordinated by Professor Anne Pauwels<sup>1</sup>.)

University courses are interconnected with school programs in that they build on them but also equip teachers with the means of delivering school language programs.

### **Advantages of Bilingualism and Second Language Acquisition<sup>2</sup>**

International literature shows that bilingualism offers cognitive, social and cultural benefits.

Contrary to a dangerous myth, bilingualism and early second language acquisition, if imparted in an appropriate way, can enhance English literacy skills.

Language resources are of economic benefit to the nation. Yet a study published in 2000 showed Australian CEOs averaging proficiency in fewer languages than those of the 27 other countries surveyed, including the US, the UK and New Zealand.

A recent report to the British Council (*English Next* by David Graddol) based on a large number of data bases, predicts that monolingual English speakers are about to lose the advantage in the language because high English language skills are becoming a basic skill internationally.

Monolingual English native speakers will be disadvantaged by lack of skills in other languages which their counterparts in other countries have.

The report also predicts that, in 10-15 years' time, other languages, especially Chinese and Spanish, will become rivals for English.

### **Diversity in Programs**

Because Australia has English as its national language, it does not need to teach any particular language as its first 'foreign language' and can opt for a wider range of languages, Asian, European and other, in keeping with needs and resources. However, recent increases in the number of students taking certain Asian languages have been at the expense of other languages.

Above all, what Australia cannot afford is the cost of monolingualism.

### **Recommendations**

1. A language other than English (with adequate time on task) should be compulsory for all students in compulsory years of education. (Some states and territories may require a staged introduction of the implementation of this recommendation.)
2. Incentives (including scholarships and overseas study grants) should be provided for those wishing to train as LOTE teachers.
3. Political leaders should encourage bi- and multi-lingualism (BOTH English acquisition and the acquisition or the maintenance and development of at least one other language).

4. All states and territories should become part of the Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages.
5. All states and territories should establish a School of Languages open to all students wishing to take a language not offered in their school.
6. Incentives for University entry should be offered for those continuing a LOTE to Year 12 such as the Victorian bonus system.
7. Universities need to offer a larger range of languages, taking into account language demography, internationalisation needs and targets and the existence of a Year 12 study.
8. More carefully targeted government funding for language programs in universities as is the case in the United States.
9. Changes in regulations on collaboration across the sector should be effected to facilitate inter-university collaboration in the maintenance of small enrolment disciplines.
10. Funding should be assured of overseas exchanges which include study experience in a language other than English.

There might also be need to consider establishing frameworks (e.g. national advisory committee) for the implementation of changes.

But, above all, what Australia cannot afford is the cost of monolingualism.

- Michael Clyne is a Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne and founding director of the Research Unit on Multiculturalism and Cross Cultural Communication (RUMACCC)
- Anne Pauwels is Dean of Arts & Humanities at University of WA
- Roland Sussex is Professor of Applied Language Studies, University of Queensland

*Note: The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent a position endorsed by ACSSO or any other entity.*

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.dassh.edu.au](http://www.dassh.edu.au). Another project (ARC/Australian Academy of Humanities), coordinated by Professor Colin Nettelbeck, is focusing on beginners' courses in universities.

<sup>2</sup> See M. Clyne, *Australia's Language Potential*. University of New South Wales Press, 2005.