

OPINION

Learning a language is not just words

Matthew Davies

THE 2020 Summit missed half of the problem: Australia's weakness in foreign languages comes from widespread problems of attitude. Overcoming bad attitudes is crucial to mastering languages. How could Australians miss the publicity for Prime Minister Rudd's command of Mandarin? And what does it say of Australian identity and our place in the world when such pride and curiosity greet a public figure who has mastered another tongue very different from his first language of English?

The paradox is extreme. Rudd's language ability contrasts starkly with debate about Australia's foreign language education, where leading professionals have long reported a worsening crisis.

Since the 1960s, Australia has plummeted in foreign language learning. Strange then that the 2020 Summit really only restated much that has been urged at different times in past decades: more foreign language skill, covering Asia in general and Indonesia in particular.

As a domestic social issue, the state of our foreign language learning suggests many of us have tunnel vision, if not stunted minds. Globally it amounts to a major and long-term strategic weakness, comparing poorly with most other countries.

Overcoming the "language gap" is not just a matter of sectoral policy and budgeting. The challenges of learning a language are fundamental: even before the process starts, a learner's own cultural background and personality help determine performance in the new language.

Obvious signs of such weaknesses appeared in negative responses to Kevin Rudd's Mandarin fluency, before he became prime minister. During last year's federal election campaign, then foreign minister Alexander Downer suggested that Rudd's public use of Mandarin revealed egotism and traits of the "show off". Downer seemed under pressure by opinion polls and unflattering comparisons, but he spoke volumes for many Australians: speaking foreign languages in public must be asserting yourself as "different" and better than "us".

The previous government also tried some 11th-hour trickle of pre-election sleaze depicting Rudd's Mandarin proficiency as evidence of un-Australian activities, a hidden badge of disloyalty, or contamination by alien powers. By that simplistic language, "Sinophone" must equal "Sinophile".

Those awkward election campaign tactics indicated immature attitudes among many Australians: a lack of confidence, overcompensated for by mocking of identifiable difference, with strains of xenophobia.

The irony is that, in positive responses to Rudd, much commentary shows how Australia's cultural weaknesses could undermine efforts to make us more literate in

languages other than English. Focus on the Prime Minister's linguistic skill could allow passivity among language advocates awaiting direction from above, but without effective leadership ability of their own. That conclusion would hold some truth if we reflect on Australia's ever-dwindling pool of Asia-literate academics, a problem long acknowledged in those circles.

Positive spin over Rudd's Mandarin also bears policy risks. Some have commented that Rudd's language ability will give him more influence with the Chinese Government. That view would depict foreign language skill as a special diplomatic tool for small Australia to "punch above its weight".

That is just as superficial and simplistic as the Chinese-speaking-traitor paranoia. The lesson of that dark pre-election spin is that we should not assume people lose their identities or loyalties after learning foreign languages. And we should not demand that such people make extra effort proving their allegiance.

This carries another warning: not to count on citizens' loyalty if they are made to feel like outcasts or even traitors simply because they use a language other than English. Carried zealously to extremes, such xenophobia against one's own citizens becomes at best a squandering of useful, rare assets; at worst a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rudd's example normalises foreign language skill for many Australians, but others must now inspire the rest beyond English-only comfort zones and half-hearted language education.

Learning a language is not like buying a commodity as one would a set of tools. It is not like using a simple filter device as some hopefuls use "language calculators" and software to swap words between languages in a detached scramble for meaning. Languages demand involvement by the whole personality, both for passive comprehension and active expression. And they need humility too, as the innocent child opens its eyes to its own ignorance. Language skill is another of our internal learning processes, essential for strengthening our minds along the path to maturity, looking beyond the surface gloss of tourist brochures.

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