

Minding our language

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ONE October night two years ago, when the Howard government was at its peak and Alexander Downer was in his prime, the then-foreign minister stood in a dining room at the Windsor Hotel and spoke about opportunities created for Australia by the rise of China.

Australia, he said, had the skills - including an increasingly multilingual workforce - that China needed as it moved into a more advanced phase. His words struck a discordant note among some of his listeners, members of the Australia China Business Council, and one of them challenged Downer about Australia's poor record in teaching foreign languages, especially Chinese.

His reply, in essence, was this: learning foreign languages is a good thing, but English is the language of the world. Foreign political and business leaders increasingly speak our language and we're privileged because of that.

The implication drawn by some in the audience was this: Downer's view was that languages were useful but not necessary, and we could get by without them.

It's a widely held view that has created a crisis in Australian schools and universities, where foreign language study and teaching are in steep decline.

Three decades ago, 40% of year 12 students studied a foreign language. Now it's about 13%, of whom less than 6% are studying Asian languages. Fewer than half of primary and secondary students study a foreign language.

What's happening in schools flows into universities.

Ten years ago, Australian universities taught 66 languages. Now it's 29. Only about 3% of university students study an Asian language. Fewer than 500 university students are studying Indonesian, the language of our nearest big neighbour. More than 90% of undergraduates do no language study at all. In the babble of the global marketplace, "Australian" has become a synonym for monolingual.

Now along comes Kevin Rudd, confidently speaking to Chinese leaders in their own language - a first for any Australian prime minister - who talks about making us literate in the ways of the world, or at least the Asian parts of it.

Suddenly there's a hint - no more than that - of optimism among advocates of foreign language teaching, who wonder if, maybe, this time we'll get it right.

The optimism is guarded for three reasons: the extent of the problem; the complexities that have to be overcome in resolving it; and the fact that, when it comes to politicians promising to do something about it, we've heard it all before.

The problem, say experts, is not that we've lacked foreign language policies. For more than 20 years, governments, bureaucrats and educators have drafted a

succession of policies, plans, reports, discussion papers and strategies aimed at making Australians multi-lingual.

"It's not that we haven't had good or even inspirational policy," says Melbourne University's Joseph Lo Bianco, who drafted our first National Policy on Languages in 1987. "It's just that it's become a political football, so that each time there's a change of government, and sometimes even just a change of minister, there's a new emphasis placed on this issue."

So in 1991 there was the Australian Language and Literacy Policy, followed in 1994 by the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy, based on a report drafted by an obscure Queensland bureaucrat named Kevin Rudd.

The strategy, projected to run for 12 years, was bearing fruit but was axed in 2002 by the Liberal government, which then introduced its own national languages program.

Now Rudd the bureaucrat is prime minister, and he's got a new plan - the \$62.4 million National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools program, a three-year scheme due to start next January.

So we've had plenty of plans. The problem is, they haven't been consistently implemented, while numbers studying languages are in decline.

As a recent report to the Federal Government pointed out, there's a yawning gulf between policy and what happens in the classroom. A fundamental flaw has been that while national policy says languages should be a key part of the curriculum, they are not mandatory.

"There is a fundamental mismatch between the aims, objectives, content and achievement levels expected for languages at the policy level, and what is actually being represented to students in language programs in schools," says the report, titled *An Investigation of the State and Nature of Languages in Australian Schools*.

"Language education policy in Australia is failing in its goals, and its recommendations have little impact on practice," it says.

"The fragility of languages education ... derives from the fact that languages education has not become a central part of the curriculum for school education, in spite of languages having been a key learning area since 1989."

The report highlights some obstacles facing any attempt to introduce a new national approach. Most students don't continue with languages after primary school. Languages curriculum varies from state to state. What's studied one semester might not be available the next. What children study at primary level might not be available in their secondary school. In secondary school, numbers decline because languages become optional. Year 11 and 12 students, focused on tertiary entry scores, fear languages are too hard so they drop them.

There are serious issues with the quality and availability of teachers, who feel under-valued, under-paid and under-resourced.

"Teacher supply and retention are ongoing problems which have been recognised for almost two decades, but for which there have been no consistent attempts at solutions," the report says. "A lack of qualified teachers is often cited as the reason for cutting language programs in schools."

And then there is a national complacency about languages: "School leavers have a perception that languages are not relevant for their future lives and this perception is reinforced by parents and by career advice given by schools."

Two decades after our first national languages policy was implemented, the report calls on state and federal education ministers to "develop as a long-term strategy a coherent, systematic, nationally agreed languages education policy". The report touches on a contentious issue that divides proponents of language education: which languages should be taught, and why.

On one side are those, like Lo Bianco, who argue languages are valuable in their own right. "Fundamentally, we should teach languages because they're intellectually enriching," he says.

He disputes the view that we must focus solely on Asian languages because of national imperatives in trade, diplomacy and strategic policy.

"We need a comprehensive, balanced policy that includes European and Asian languages," Lo Bianco says. "Students do languages for many reasons - their background, personal interests, their families, their professional direction. The vast majority are never going to have anything to do with trade, for instance."

David Hill, professor of South-East Asian studies at Perth's Murdoch University and an Indonesia specialist, sees compelling reasons why Australians should study Asian languages. But at the same time, he says there are benefits in the promotion of all languages. "My experience in the university sector is that there is a recognition that everybody gains from the promotion of languages in general," he says.

Kathe Kirby, executive director of the Asia Education Foundation, a federally funded body at the University of Melbourne, says Australia is so far behind and the international competition is so tough that we have to narrow our focus.

"I think for a country of 20 million people, attempting to teach, say, six languages across the board is going to be so challenging that I don't think it's going to be effective for us." She advocates focusing on three languages: Indonesian, one European, and one other Asian language.

In the meantime, does Kevin Rudd have a workable plan? His new Asian languages program is "definitely a sign of absolute progress", says Kirby.

Government support will be pivotal in any successful plan, she says. But while she applauds what Rudd has done, she says it will require more than the \$62.4 million allocated.

"What we're going to need in languages is a revolution, rather than an evolution, if we're going to meet the needs of equipping our kids for the 21st century," she says.

Australia's commitment just doesn't match those of Asian or European nations or, increasingly, the US, where there has been an explosion in the teaching of Chinese.

She points out that in the Netherlands, all children study at least one foreign language; in Finland it is compulsory for students to study three languages; and Asian nations have similar requirements.

"Is the logic that those kids are smarter than Australians? I don't think so," she says. "The logic is that those countries and governments are committed to teaching languages. So we have to be serious about it. We can't just say it's too hard."

She challenges the view, implicit in Alexander Downer's comments, that we can get by with English. "The data already shows us that Chinese is now the most spoken language in the world, and it's predicted in the next decade that both Hindi and Spanish will overtake English as the second-most spoken language. So we're really moving into new times."

Lo Bianco summarises the issues this way: "We have a problem that we share with other English-speaking countries, and this is English. English is a problem because unquestionably it is the global lingua franca.

"Lots of English-language speakers reach the conclusion they don't have to learn other languages. I think that's extremely flawed because those people learning English aren't abandoning their other language, they're becoming bilingual. That means they can include a monolingual English speaker in the conversation - or they can also exclude them, and that puts the monolingual person at a disadvantage."

When it comes to foreign languages, he says, there are two types of disadvantage: One is not knowing English. The other is knowing only English.

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