

# Lingua, frankly, is underrated

Bernard Lane | *June 24, 2009*

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**"WHY write about the universities? They do nothing." I'd never seen my Spanish teacher angry before. He agreed there was a story to be told about the rise of Spanish but for him, our universities would be a minor, often clueless character. There was institutional politics in his anger and some exaggeration, too, but not ignorance. He knew our system.**

Consider the latest, bleak report from the language departments.

On average, nine out of 10 first-year students take no modern languages at all, according to a 10-university study for the Australian Academy of the Humanities. About a third of the students who do begin a language last just one semester.

In our "aggressively monolingual culture", as the report puts it, students learn that languages are an easily discarded "add-on" rather than a central part of an education. The report blames indifference or even hostility to languages on the part of leaders, from government through university management down to faculty deans.

Hence our campuses with their ever narrower offering of languages by global standards, high attrition rates, a dramatic skewing of programs towards beginners, a curriculum built on the assumption of a three-year program, the threat of abolition if enrolments fall too low and de facto financial penalties if numbers rise.

One tactic of the academy under pressure is to cut contact hours. You'd imagine the more time that teachers and students spend together the better, but it costs money. Italian at one university went from eight hours a week in 1964 to four in 2007 and three in 2008.

I was thinking about this last Thursday night at the Sydney Spanish meet-up, which is part of a global network of web-based groups that bring together people with common interests, ours being conversation. Three hours flew by.

The crowd at Club Swans in Kings Cross included an Irishman with an Argentinian accent and his old flatmate from Buenos Aires, two Colombian students, a Japanese girl, a schoolteacher returned from Mexico, and an irrepressible lawyer ticked off for asking questions in English.

The cocktails were half-price, the mood relaxed and noisy, but this was real, live language practice.

The social web, phone calls courtesy of Skype, and a global hunger for English have opened up new opportunities for language exchange, while language tourism has taken off thanks to cheap air fares. For those who prefer solitary study, there is first-rate software. Universities no longer cast such a long shadow in the marketplace of culture.

Tomorrow, Australia's first Cervantes Institute has its official opening. A global agency to promote Spanish language and culture, the institute has vast resources. Its Sydney centre in Chippendale looks up towards the turrets of the University of Sydney. Collaboration is the official motto and no doubt there will be plenty of that. There may be a stiff dose of competition for the universities, as well, and there are academics who think this long overdue.

But Anne Pauwels, a scholar who has kept up her interest in language policy following a move to Britain from the University of Western Australia, thinks the bad news in the academy's report has little to do with competition. She says there is a growing number of students who go no further than a beginners course.

"Sometimes, universities see this as a massive problem but if you ask these students, they never had an intention to do more than one or two semesters," she says.

"(As) for language majors, the greater use of the internet as a learning tool has proved beneficial, especially because the students can access chatrooms in which the language is being used."

The Group of Eight universities say they are looking at more online learning for "high-cost subjects" such as languages but not, they insist, at the expense of contact time.

In last week's HES, a former French student Michael Phillis criticised the teaching style at his alma mater, the Australian National University, saying it was discouragingly technical while teachers imposed their "pet interests" as comprehension exercises. Other alumni sprang to the defence of ANU. For Colin Nettelbeck, chief investigator for the academy's study and former head of languages at the University of Melbourne, the quality of teaching was one of the good news items in an otherwise bleak report.

"Despite the difficulties in funding, despite the fact that they're unacceptably overworked, the language teachers that we interviewed and worked with were absolutely impressive in terms of their devotion, their creativity, their commitment, which is what gives me a little bit of optimism," he says.

Phillis spent a week in Paris and a month in Geneva as part of his law program and said he learned more French than in two years at ANU. The obvious rejoinder is to ask how much he would have profited from those freewheeling opportunities abroad without his formal preparation in Canberra.

Why shouldn't languages prosper at university, where there is such a concentration of smart and curious youth?

"My suspicion that given opportunities, students might take up languages in greater numbers has been vindicated by what happened last year at the University of Melbourne," says Nettelbeck. In the name of broader education, the Melbourne model asked students to venture beyond their specialty. "All languages enjoyed a huge increase in enrolments. In some cases, they more than doubled," Nettelbeck says.

Better still if the incentives go to work on school education. From 2012, UWA is to give bonus points to would-be students who make a fist of senior school language study.

"Where we've seen the introduction of bonus points, especially in Victoria, it has certainly shown that the number of students successfully completing languages in year 12 has gone up," says Pauwels.

The Melbourne model has a lot to do with a rethinking of how best to educate for the professions. Here, Pauwels sees an opportunity to put languages at the centre, not the periphery. Take the globetrotting field of engineering, where serious study of Chinese or Indonesian could be very useful. Trouble is, the crowded curriculum leaves little room.

"Students who want to do engineering and a language are required to do a double degree. That is quite demanding and expensive," she says.

Timetables may suggest a pecking order in which languages rank below other disciplines. As well, there's a perception that the handful of permanent research staff has higher standing than the small army of casuals who drill the beginners although, paradoxically, timetables are sometimes made awkward by the need to fit in with casuals who make their real living elsewhere.

Nettelbeck deplores the casualisation. "There's a lot of research that lies behind even the teaching of beginners languages, in some cases, I'd say, especially of beginners languages," he says.

"It's not ever, at the university level, simply a question of the acquisition of a kind of travellers' vocabulary. It's actually (about) being able to operate in a creative way within a different cultural framework and language."

But in courses for beginners, on average, about a quarter have no wish to do more than a year's study. Another 25 per cent of students are unsure how far they'll go. Workload is one reason for students giving up. Presumably they're expected to do more private study as contact hours shrink.

Students are calculating. It's clear some still value an expert introduction to language. But the power of a university to keep and cultivate students is weakening just as off-campus opportunities multiply for those interested in languages.