

OPINION

A language is a window to another world

Joseph Lo Bianco March 26, 2008

The study of other languages is important as English becomes more prevalent.

IN 2004 I took part in a joint conference of the US departments of education and defence. In the wake of 9/11, languages were a major concern: defence personnel wanted educators to fix the language problem, public institutions needed to offer the "right" languages, linguistic skills had to be tied to security and trade, and "heritage" speakers of strategic languages should help the nation catch evildoers. The participants were sent off to "fix the problem". We talked about teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment, tones, characters, texts and accents. Frustrated by absence of clear, simple solutions, a convener bellowed: "It's not rocket science, you know! It's just a subject!"

It probably isn't rocket science, but languages are far from being just a subject, and English-speaking countries have special problems teaching them. Languages are deeply intellectual and intensely practical. When you learn a language well, you engage in the deepest manifestations of a cultural system. Few other subjects require cumulative learning of taught material for progress and so languages contribute substance and continuity.

Since the Rudd Government's election, desperately overdue policy work is taking place to restore the flagging fortunes of languages. Our national effort is low by some OECD standards. One of the peculiar challenges we face is the immense international investment in English, whose dispersion and status worldwide is probably unassailable. In 2005 British Council research estimated that close to 2 billion people could be learning or know English by 2010; eventually as many as 3 billion, close to half the world's population.

We haven't even begun to think through the consequences of this. If English does serve as a global auxiliary language, then it is in Asia where it is strongest. Research from Hong Kong University colleagues documenting the status of English across Asia speaks of English learning as a national mission.

We need a rationale for languages that makes sense to Australians dealing with a multicultural English-knowing world. We should find the reasons for promoting languages where they have always been, in the universal experience of the intellectual gain that comes from bilingualism and in the unique cultural insight languages offer. This is why languages should be on all school timetables.

The only feasible long-term solution to our persisting language problems is for compulsory language study for 12 years. We have the strongest educational evidence for defending such a choice. We compel young people to be schooled, so what we offer them should be academically serious, occupationally rewarding and in the best interests of the nation. With serious language study we are on strong ground with all three. But we have tried many times to "fix" the language problem.

In 1968, when fewer students completed 12 years of schooling, 40% "matriculated" with a language. Today only about 13% do.

There are some lessons we can draw from our past efforts to do something about this. First, avoid substitution. An early temptation of language problem fixers is to get the languages changed. This is the last thing we need to do. In the past we have often mistaken substitution for progress. When 87% of final-year students do not study any language, it is clear the problem is not that some students study the wrong language. We want more students studying languages, not the same overall percentage studying different ones.

Second, talk to the students. Students have got good radar for tokenism, half-heartedness and low standards. We have just completed an intensive four-year study of Japanese and Italian in metropolitan Melbourne, listening to student views. The students identified many signs that some schools, some teachers and "the system" didn't really believe in languages despite teaching them.

The third broad lesson we can learn from the past is that what we do to encourage language success in schools is not the same as what our military or trade or espionage interests might be. It is poor policy to design what we deliver in schools, struggling as they are with declining resources and expanding expectations, on the basis of sectoral needs that require specialised delivery post-school. Language programs for schools should aim to secure success in learning for the greatest number of students, in languages we can staff, for which there is demand and which carry sufficient prestige. The "national interest" as it is perceived by policy makers isn't necessarily apparent to learners.

The research that federal Education Minister Julia Gillard is releasing shows that parental advice, career teacher guidance and assessment impediments send students the wrong signals about the effects on university entrance scores. Unsurprisingly, the 90% of students taking languages in primary school declines steadily from year 7. The minister is to be congratulated for her interest in language study. Fixing this problem might not be rocket science but it won't be quick and easy either.

Professor Joseph Lo Bianco is chair of language and literacy education at the University of Melbourne.