

An investment that speaks for itself

Joseph Lo Bianco | *July 08, 2009*

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MONEY talks, we all know, and the money metaphor makes us talk about the currency of codes. In Language of Money Edna Carew defines the insurance term surrender value as: "What the life office will pay you if you choose to cash in your policy before its expiry date."

Unfortunately this is very relevant for language teaching in Australia today; the vast majority of learners cash in their language chips before either maturity or proficiency.

Unlike the life office, however, schools and universities neither pay nor recognise any accumulated investment. These students are 88 per cent of the total. Many take up languages again at university and so perhaps they are shirking language exams, rather than languages. They often choose a different language from the one school offered them, but alas a large majority raise the white flag at the end of first year. Discussion about language teaching in Australia could usefully spend some time debating this tale of attrition.

This will be more productive than berating those among the 12 per cent who persist for choosing "wrong" or "bad" languages.

But we shouldn't berate the 88 per cent either. It is important to understand what is going on and, as I propose here, we should also explore how to account for what the attrition cohort has learned; what they do achieve linguistically, and, if we can agree on how to describe it, what they gain culturally.

These are two practical tasks that would improve all language learning: increasing student persistence and devising a surrender value scheme for those who don't persist. Over the years of schooling before they baulk students gain skills and information about another society, culture and language; they also learn much about themselves and their own society, language and culture.

In a series of interviews and focus groups with close to 100 students of Italian and Japanese in Melbourne high schools, many related important stories about their experiences of language learning. It was hardly ever about "the language" and mostly about "the people" and the students' interesting theory about how languages mark who is "inside" and "outside" a cultural system.

They reflected, in a way that would be inconceivable if they had not been contrasting Italian and Japanese, on "What's Asia and what's Europe", as one put it; that English was culturally shaped, and they were its "insiders", making them "outsiders" to the communities using the languages they were studying. They knew a lot about kanji, hiragana and katakana, and thought it was important to say that the latter form was reserved for "foreign" words. One insisted that "we do the same" by using italics in English to mark that which doesn't belong. The students spoke about how politeness "works" in Japan, and that in an Italian kiosk coins are dropped on to a plate rather than in the palm of your hand, "for the same reason".

They knew which social groups were referred to with what forms of address, and that Italy and Japan nominated different social groups for this treatment. They knew that different cultures "pay attention" to different aspects of shared experience.

Learning languages makes you accept another culture's self-definition, at least to some extent, and to perform it in practical communication. These, recall, are insights elicited and freely offered, from learners of languages well on the way to stopping.

These incipient drop-outs were developing a good dose of what the Victorian Essential Learnings Standards describes as "intercultural knowledge and language awareness". A certificate of achievement, a surrender value certification, would allow such students to tell employers, teachers, parents and themselves what they have acquired; it would be a record of achievement rather than a feeling of failure.

Even the most utilitarian advocacy for languages eventually gets around to making a claim that cultural insight is a key reason for teaching them.

But what is the relation between culture teaching and languages, compared with say telling students about the dimensions of the Borobodur, the significance of the Temple of Heaven, or the styles of the castles of the Loire, in English, or, more critically, about decolonisation in Latin America, using Spanish to fight Spain?

"Intercultural knowledge and language awareness" remain the most enduring reason to squeeze languages into timetables. The old foreign language teaching dictum was that culture equals civilisation, and that it should be taught in a separate curriculum from language teaching. This prescription sees culture as facts and phenomena about a foreign place. Under this rubric, culture is assumed to belong to a single bounded nation state, separate from the learners' one, and linked to canonical literature, visual treasures and refined performance arts. Language teaching focuses on grammatical correctness (accuracy) and cultural information is delayed until linguistic competence is achieved. During the 1960s and 70s a new role emerged for culture knowledge. Studies of actual communication revealed how even mundane talk is infused with cultural assumptions and culture was tied to communicating in socially appropriate ways. Cultural information was introduced into language teaching but restricted to non-linguistic knowledge to facilitate communication.

Since the late 1980s migration, travel, multiculturalism, and in the European Union the right to labour mobility, have transformed both culture and language teaching, aiming for quickly produced and practical skills.

A major critique of the civilisation approach was launched, berating it for associating cultures with what is foreign and distant and with authorised versions favoured by elite institutions. The implicit aim of teaching admiration was criticised as ideological.

In multi-ethnic societies such as Australia, with 350 languages spoken, the culture notion became complicated. Any "foreign" language taught in schools or universities will have a local speaker population, with identities bound up in the language, often with complicated relationships with source countries, a history of teaching the language locally, with institutions, media, clubs and societies and with cultural investment. These diaspora realities create complex connections with homelands. Sometimes the only students of a language are those for whom it is a heritage, identity and home language, rather than foreign.

Growing international dependency supports a transcultural approach to language learning.

A good example is the recent move by Taiwan, creating language and culture institutes in San Francisco and Los Angeles, rivalling the Confucius Institutes, aiming to teach traditional (full-form) rather than simplified characters. With its large Chinese diaspora populations, California's need to reconcile and negotiate cultural nuances and meanings is a dynamic well-known in Australia with our long tradition of Chinese community schools. Rapid globalisation will only intensify this departure from the modernist assumption about uniform cultures in single national states.

Perhaps the life and work of Lang Shining, a court painter in the 18th century, has something to teach us about cultural forms and language teaching, and about what to record on surrender value certificates. He was skilled at human figures, flowers and birds, but famous for images of massed horses.

His detailed realism was appreciated at the court of Qianlong, who reigned for 59 years as fifth emperor of the Manchu Qing dynasty, but he regularly endured criticism for the light and shade, for undue Western influence, precision of form and realism, the same qualities which were admired.

During the British embassy of Lord Macartney during 1792-3 to extract trade concessions the water-colourist William Alexander considered Lang Shining's work demeaning to Western taste and excessively Chinese.

So too perhaps might Lang Shining's Milanese mother, who knew him as Giuseppe Castiglione. Like many European Jesuits who served the Ming and Qing courts between 1500 and 1800, he created a cultural "third place", a zone of compromise and hybridity, involving an original and personal fusion from two cultures. Learners, and cultural visitors, create a third place from the moment they encounter systematic cultural differences, but are vulnerable to alienation from the original, the target, and sometimes both cultures.

By the mid-19th century the conversation between "the West" and China had passed to British and Americans, and trade was its main business. The surrender value of the exchange between China and the West involved mutual exploration around Confucianism, Christianity, art, science, philosophy and literature.

Enlightenment intellectuals in Europe drew on Chinese natural philosophy introduced by Jesuits, in purely European battles, to contest the church influence in European life. Some Chinese modernisers relied on Jesuit skill in western science and technology to strengthen their place at court; some traditionalisers repudiated this influence. Among the tension and strife was also mutual influence, interaction and learning.

Rescuing Australian education from its recurring failure to "do languages" requires action in teacher training, program design, and having a clear and educationally sound rationale for languages. Among these complex tasks we also need to devote energy to describing what learners learn, especially those who devote 10 years to Chinese, French, Indonesian, Japanese or Spanish only to discontinue when languages become elective.

As yet our education offices are incapable of documenting what learners have learned. Up to 10 years of accumulated investment constitutes considerable knowledge, a platform for

resuming studies later, and an incentive for us to reduce the number who quit before maturity and proficiency.

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