

COMMUNICATION ERROR: in its steadfast commitment to English, and English alone, some say New Zealand has slipped into a cultural abyss.

**No matter how much we bang on about being a bilingual society, the statistics, and the word on the street, say otherwise, with fluency in a second language largely the preserve of immigrants. AMANDA MORRALL reports.**

There's a tired old saying about Christchurch being more English than the English. The locals may joust over the cultural comparison, but you'll get no quarrel from new immigrants.

The Maori-stamped signage and bilingual government brochures might suggest otherwise, but the writing on the wall, the voices in the mall, the buskers in the street scream English loud and clear. And the statistics bear it out, too.

At last count, 95.5 per cent of the population was English speaking. But Josh Liu doesn't need maths to know he's a minority. In the four years since the 25-year-old Chinese national has been on Kiwi soil, he has encountered just one New Zealander with whom he could converse in his mother tongue.

"He worked in a travel agency, I was so surprised," says Liu, who moved here from China to study business.

Officially a trilingual nation (English, Maori and New Zealand Sign Language), New Zealand – unofficially – is regarded by some as a bastion of unapologetic monolinguals for whom the utterance of *kia ora* is a linguistic feat.

In fact, outside Maori-run organisations, you'd be hard pressed to find a government department, a national business or an educational institution where fluency in a second language is a requirement, let alone a preferred asset on the job application.

And why should it be any other way? New Zealand's closest ally and neighbour is English speaking, it's a card-carrying member of the Commonwealth, and it trades in the same verbal currency that powers the global economy. But in its steadfast commitment to tradition and practicalities, some say New Zealand has slipped into a cultural abyss – a place where immigrants find it hard to fit in and Kiwis abroad are left fumbling for words and scrambling for the nearest bookstore.

Alastair McLauchlan, a translator, teacher and interpreter from Christchurch, says New Zealand, in its dogged attachment to English, has isolated itself from the rest of the world even more than its geography dictates.

"We've always had this Colonel Blimp attitude that if you want to talk to us, you talk to us in English – New Zealanders have a bad attitude towards second languages and tend to think of it as a waste of time or a pointless pursuit."

If McLauchlan sounds jaded, he comes by it honestly. The former Christchurch polytechnic language teacher – fluent in Japanese, French, English – recently completed a book on drop-out rates of students studying second languages.

In his three-year study, McLauchlan found that more than 90% of secondary students in Christchurch did not take up a second language in Year 11. And of the small minority that did, most ended up dropping out.

Reinforcing his sense of a malaise, his research interest (of poor second-language uptake among students) rated so poorly with Wellington, McLauchlan says he was turned down for a government grant to help with the costs of the book. Instead, funding went to research on "What it means to be a bogan".

McLauchlan still bristles over the decision. But more than a personal affront, he sees it as a sad reflection of the value Government placed on second languages. He also believes New Zealand's single-language climate is an invisible force fuelling racial tensions between Kiwis and visible minorities.

"The biggest advantage in learning another language is learning about another culture, being able to step outside the Kiwi cocoon ... It's a bridge to other worlds."

His sentiments are shared by Wellington entrepreneur Getrude Matshe, who moved here from Zimbabwe in 2001.

"It's crucial, you can't connect otherwise," says Matshe, who runs a recruitment agency for medical professionals.

Fluent in English and three African languages other than her native tongue, Matshe considers herself luckier than most immigrants.

She says proficiency in English has helped her break down social barriers that are a daily grind for immigrants like Liu, who relates some humorous moments of miscommunication, but says he's also grown accustomed to getting stuck with the dirty jobs at his part-time work, and to cheap attempts by shady employers trying to take advantage.

"They think I don't understand my rights, because my English not so good," he says. New Zealand can hardly be singled out as a hotbed of discrimination; newcomers to any foreign country are bound to encounter some degree of exclusion, even if they speak the native language. But McLauchlan maintains the cultural divide is far more pronounced in nations that cling to a single language.

On that basis, New Zealand should be shifting towards a more tolerant society. In the last decade, multi-language speakers have increased by 43.3%, with more than 670,000 people falling into the bilingual bracket. But credit lies mostly with immigrants. While

almost half of all overseas-born people report to have two or more languages, only 10% of native New Zealanders can communicate in a language other than English.

The head of Business New Zealand, Phil O'Reilly, says the nation still has a long way to go. He sees second languages as both culturally and economically enriching, and feels New Zealand is missing opportunities on several fronts. He says he's trying to leverage the issue but without much success. Business, he says, is still slow on the uptake.

"What we're saved by, and what we get by on in New Zealand – rather than solving the problem – is the fact that the international language of business is still English and is likely to be for quite some time. The reality is that increasingly we won't be able to rely on that."

John Bongard, the managing director of Fisher & Paykel Appliances, which has one production plant in Italy and another coming on stream in Thailand, says the reality is that businesses can get by without expertise in second languages. In Fisher & Paykel's case, Bongard says the company's specific language needs are met by hiring locals where necessary.

"As we expand around the world, we tend to employ very good locals, so the whole concept of training our own staff to have a second language is not one we would really use.

"The universal business language is English, it's as simple as that."

But Aaron Gilmore, mergers and acquisitions manager for New Zealand's General Cable – a company that recently set up shop in China and India – says it pays to be multilingual in today's international marketplace.

Having staff who are skilled in business but who can also understand the nuances of a particular culture and can communicate effectively with state and corporate officials is a distinct advantage, he says.

"We've been lucky in that in India and China we've had in-house people that we managed to promote within who were Chinese or Indian nationals, and it's been very useful for us, without which we would not have been able to do some of the things we've done the last 12 months.

"We now see multilingualism as a requirement for our executives in those countries." Finding Kiwis to fit the bill is the challenge. "If you go out seeking a specific person with specific language skills, you won't find them in New Zealand. I don't think government policy works very well for it."

The problem hasn't escaped Wellington's attention or that of its education officials. In New Zealand's new education curriculum, which comes into effect in the next school year,

language learning will form part of the new syllabus. All schools with students in years 7 to 10 will be required to offer more opportunities in foreign language and culture.

And still under consideration for inclusion in the new curriculum are educational policies and tools to heighten cultural awareness and sensitivities towards Asian cultures specifically. This stems from a government committee report last year, which slammed the education sector's exclusion of cultural teachings given the increasing importance of New Zealand's relationships with Japan, China and other Asian nations.

What form that takes remains to be seen, but greater exchange opportunities for students and teachers is one of the key features mentioned in draft documents.

Still, McLauchlan thinks it is going to take a heck of a lot more than foreign exchanges and Japanese take-out at school to effect any real change.

He believes government, the tertiary sector and businesses combined need to do a better job at encouraging and promoting second-language use through hiring, policy and operating practices.

And based on their record so far – neither Air New Zealand nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (two of the country's most prominent flag bearers) have any second-language requirement – McLauchlan despairs.

That business, government and education are struggling to bring about a metamorphosis in language comes as little surprise to Eruera Tarena, Ngai Tahu's project leader for culture identity. Based on the Maori experience, institutionalised change is just half the battle. He says culture and language need to be embedded deep within a community, not just classrooms and brochures, to have any lasting and meaningful effect.

"The problem that Maoridom and Maori language is facing is that it's become very much institutionalised. It's alive and kicking in general on our marae and formal ceremony and within our tertiary institutions and education system, but we know that for a language to survive and be healthy, it must be the language of intergenerational transfer – the language spoken within the home."

From that end, Tarena figures New Zealand has a long way to go before it becomes a multilingual mecca. Despite the recent revival and interest in Maori language and culture, Tarena says many Pakeha and Maori are reluctant to embrace the two cultures and tongues.

"There's still a huge prevalence of misconceptions and misinformation about bilingualism. It's basically just a whole heap of bad ideas that are a hangover from a colonial, monolingual presence in the country.

"But if our kids can speak English and Maori, they're going to be more open minded and have a greater ability to learn a third or another language.

"At the end of the day, it lies with family."

