

## Language Learning: Beyond Politics — Practice as Policy

L Thornquist, September 2007

In the lead up to 2008, designated by the United Nations as the Year of Languages, 2007 has seen a flurry of activity in the debate on language education at a national level with reporting on papers such as the *National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008*, a national survey and report on *Attitudes Towards the Study of Languages* and a *National Languages Summit — Languages in Crisis*, to mention a few.

Language learning has long been a key learning area in the national curriculum framework but over recent decades it has slipped on and off the political and public radar screen with many policies relegated to an educational wasteland where resources, both human and other, have been unable to flourish. The *National Languages Summit* held in Canberra last June made the salient point that a skills shortage in languages represents a national deficit with repercussions in Australia's role as a world player in areas such as political and cultural diplomacy, security, business and trade and tourism.

It is the irony of our nation that while we are a multi-linguistic society (over 200 languages are spoken within our communities, migrant and indigenous) we appear to accept our monolingual English status and the image it conveys to the world. Many people may ignore or take for granted the rich linguistic heritage of Australia yet we as Australians actively engage in one way or another on a daily basis with the diverse cultural manifestations in our everyday lives whether they be in the realm of sport, food, the arts, or other intellectual and leisure pursuits.

While the English speaking nations including Australia wait for the world to speak English (and herein lies another essay), other countries still prize a citizenry that has linguistic skills in more than one other language, understanding the intellectual and cultural edge that this gives them. Senior secondary school students in Europe rarely graduate with fewer than two foreign languages regardless of their future career aspirations.

If we plead that our geographical isolation provides no cultural context for the application of second language learning in the Australian experience, then we are the poorer for not having the building blocks of that context when we travel and do business on an international platform. Language and culture are so inextricably mixed and it could be argued that a complete experience in another country either for leisure or on business is one that may inevitably be compromised without language skills.

Is our monolithic English state a metaphor for our notion of impenetrability and invulnerability as an island state, a notion we may suspect is itself unsustainable and even unsafe? Is this collective attitude underlying and undermining our will and willingness to become second language learners and users? Here is another irony. The national survey on attitudes to language learning revealed that a majority of Australian parents want their children to learn a second language and students also agreed with this. However, liking the idea and living the idea are not necessarily one and the same.

What can we make of these debates, policies, surveys and summits on second language learning raised earlier? What transforms a policy from a document to a working reality? Where do surveys go? How can the outcomes of a summit take on a process of action? When can all these debates, discussions and decisions translate into operation that has momentum, support and some perpetuity?

Engagement with national and state policies and debate concerning the teaching and learning of languages is part of our responsibility as educators at Brisbane Girls Grammar School but the fact is that this School has had its own language learning policy and infrastructure since its beginnings in 1875. Language learning is and always has been an integral part of our curriculum and culture and considered a critical element in an academic, intellectual and personal framework for our students' learning and their journey towards adulthood.

However, there is room neither for complacency nor for imagining that how other states and systems interpret policies is not relevant to us. While the percentage of students in our School who graduate with a senior level language is at almost 30 per cent, national statistics show that only 15 per cent of Year 12 students in this country study a second language, with the figure in Queensland dropping to around 6 per cent. There can be no pride in such ignorance and neglect.

Developing language skills is an essential part of our personal and national character and identity. At Brisbane Girls Grammar School, encouraging language skill acquisition reflects unequivocally the School's intent to engender in our students an acknowledgement and awareness of an international perspective and of our image and role as a nation in a global community. The National Summit on Languages in its communiqué crystallised the essential:

*Language education can have a substantial transformative effect on students who develop a confidence in negotiating life in a diverse global community.*

Nurturing our second language learning programmes in this School is not thought of randomly or idly, nor lightly undertaken. As a leader in language education in the Australian domain, Brisbane Girls Grammar School is unafraid of continuing to value this asset as a vital means of preparing our young women to meet the challenges of our present and future and forming them as credible and compassionate players on a world stage.

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[http://www.bggs.qld.edu.au/news\\_insight.php?action=itemDisplay&ItemID=4190](http://www.bggs.qld.edu.au/news_insight.php?action=itemDisplay&ItemID=4190)

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