

## OPINION

### Minding our language

*John Töns*

On Monday, February 25, the *Advertiser* ran a front-page item about the imminent release of a report on languages. The report recommends that all children should have access to learning a second language from kindergarten.

While the report has not exactly dominated the opinion pages, those letters that have been published about it have been predictably scathing: South Australians, at least those whose letters get published, fail to see the merit in students learning a second language.

The report is timely. The Government's commitment to an education revolution and to revisit the idea of a national curriculum means that a report like this will at least be part of the mix. However, I have my doubts that it will get very far.

Of course I hope I am mistaken. I hope that this is finally the breakthrough for Australian education and that we will at last shake off the dead hand of our past: a past heavily influenced by an Anglo-centric view of education. But I doubt it. In a previous life I wrote many a briefing paper for both state and federal ministers about language education. They were all very well received. Unfortunately that is where the matter ended - I had little evidence that the papers had been read or if read, had been understood.

This report will encounter much the same road blocks. The first tends to be in the form of a challenge: which language?

The answer to the first challenge is that it does not especially matter which language. The purpose of learning a second language is not merely transactional it is cognitive, social and cultural. Few people seem to appreciate that being bilingual (and preferably multilingual) is a cognitive asset.

As a society we value lateral thinking, or to coin a phrase, "thinking outside the square" or if one wanted to be really modern: "blue sky thinking". We admire individuals who can look at a problem and come up with radically different solutions. A second language assists in developing that skill.

The reason for this is simple: if you are thinking in another language you are already "outside the square". You are approaching the world from a different perspective.

Doubtful? Two examples may drive this point home. When I was teaching aspiring teachers learning theory I was stuck for a clear example about the relationship between teaching and learning. Approaching the same question from a number of other languages makes the problem much simpler - in some the same verb is used for both learning and teaching and in most one finds that there is virtually no distinction between the two - they are aspects of the one process. This is of course the concept that teachers need to appreciate (and sadly often don't).

The second example relates to Japanese. Australian business people often remark on the way in which the Japanese will ensure that business cards are distributed at the start of a meeting. Few appreciate the reason for this. Japanese is a very formal language, the mode of address you use depends very much on to whom you are speaking. It is unctuous to be too polite and formal with someone who is a subordinate and it is the height of rudeness not to be sufficiently polite to one's superiors. A business card that includes one's role is a useful guide to the sort of courtesy that one needs to extend.

For Australian business people this is quite often a salutary reminder of the fact that Australia's much vaunted egalitarianism is largely mythical; permission to use the boss's first name is merely pseudo egalitarian.

So from a linguist's point of view it does not really matter which language. But in Australia that is a major issue. For example, there are those children who come from non-English speaking backgrounds and very often their parents would like the child to learn the language(s) spoken within the extended family. There is merit in that approach. There are at least 70 languages used in Australia. Yet when it comes to those generations born in Australia they tend to only have some rudimentary passive understanding of these languages - they are a long way away from being genuinely fluent. This is a tremendous resource that Australia is simply allowing to wither.

Are we so naïve that we think the only brilliant ideas in the world are produced in English?

Just think of the competitive advantage we would have as a nation if we had people reading the academic literature in a range of languages. We currently rely on the really outstanding work coming to us in translated form, which essentially means that we miss out on some of the formative ideas, the initial discussions that produced that outstanding work.

Do we really believe that discussions about global issues can only receive their full expression in English? There is some brilliant work being done in South America - much of it only available in Spanish. Along with Israel, we are the most linguistically diverse nation on the planet. (I am ignoring countries like New Guinea with many more indigenous languages than either Israel or Australia.) We should be tapping into that expertise.

Were we to tap into that linguistic heritage we could fast track language teachers. To introduce a second language to all four-year-olds is daunting simply because we do not have the teachers - recruiting bilingual Australians and training them as teachers, as well as improving their own language skills, will increase the pool of available teachers. (Merely being bilingual does not mean that you have sufficient command of a language to teach it.)

The other obstacle faced is the myth of the overcrowded curriculum. How is it that in many countries around the world there is room to teach two, three or four languages without any adverse impact on the curriculum? And why is it that in Australia it is the languages area that causes the crowd? Perhaps, as a way of opening up our ideas to the possibility of including languages other than English as part of the core curriculum, we should encourage an exchange system with countries where teaching

two or more languages in the primary years of school is the norm. Their knowledge as to how everything fits in their domestic curriculum can be a major asset.

There is also of course the debate about some languages being more important than others. So how do you decide? Does anyone know who our significant trading partners will be 20 years from now?

If it is China, are we going to confine ourselves to Mandarin or should we also make sure that we have knowledge of Cantonese and Hokkien? (The Chinese Diaspora is one of the most significant trading networks in the world - if one does business in Asia more than likely one will be dealing with the Chinese Diaspora, many of whom do not understand Mandarin.)

Perhaps we should consider India - then which of the many Indian languages? Tamil? Urdu, Gujarati or perhaps Hindi?

Suppose we focus on the Middle East - that is of course much simpler isn't? True Arabic will help you get just about everywhere but it would be wise to be familiar with the intricacies of Gulf Arabic not to mention languages like Farsi and Kurdish.

What any language teacher will tell you is that once you have more than one language it becomes much easier to communicate with people regardless of whether or not you speak their language. I have been in the middle of conversations where we chased one another through Italian, French, German, Latin and Greek with the odd English word thrown in.

So what will happen to this latest report? Will it be incorporated in the fabric of a national curriculum? Or will it be taken seriously and then put on the shelf for someone else to revisit five years from now? Let's hope we will finally take languages seriously.

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