



May 28, 2008

21/2008

E-Language

ONLINE Opinion

Australian e-journal social and political debate

Multilingualism and multiculturalism

By Karen Woodman

[View Article](#)

From the perspective of a Canadian, the current discussion on language education in Australia is very interesting - primarily because many of the questions being raised about the viability of language education have arguably been answered by other international experiences.

For example, growing up in a country where bilingualism - and multiculturalism - has been official policy for more than 30 years, it is normal for Canadians to self-identify as “hyphenates” (for example, Greek-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, French-Canadian, and so on) without undermining their “Canadian identity”.

Thousands of children have graduated from language immersion programs without losing their first language(s) or suffering any other damage (in fact, quite the contrary). “Heritage language” programs promote and celebrate cultural diversity without undermining social order; and indigenous language programs have been prominent in the cultural revitalisation programs of the First Nations, which have been key to supporting development within those communities.

Government policies supporting language education have not driven the country bankrupt, nor have they negatively had an impact on national or international opinion. In fact, Canadians are generally known for their tolerance and openness to other cultures, arguably a product of the cultural “mosaic” approach (and “additive bilingualism”), rather than the “melting pot” (“subtractive bilingualism”) of, for example, the US.

This is not, of course, to imply Canada is an oasis of harmony and understanding (there are still linguistic and cultural tensions in different regions), but rather to underline the fact that official recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity clearly can have a real impact on how the population perceives such issues.

As a number of writers have noted, continental Europe has a long tradition of multilingualism, supported by government via language education and other policies. The expectation in Europe is that the majority of the population will study and learn at least one other language. In other parts of the world, the expectation is that most people will speak several languages.

Why is the issue of expectations important in a discussion of language education?

It's because research suggests that we rise to the level of our expectations. If a population believes that learning an additional language is normal, expected, useful, and attainable, then the goal is often attained. This perspective is also supported by research on the important role of motivation in language learning. Providing opportunities for language education is only part of the equation - creating the social, political, economic and psychological environments in which learning languages are valued is equally important.

There are psycholinguistic benefits of multilingualism, as well as economic benefits. Psycholinguistic benefits include both cognitive and neurolinguistic "flexibility". That is, people who speak more than one language often find it easier to deal with linguistic and other complexity, and multilingualism does have an impact on the type and amount of "wiring" in the brain.

Economically, as humourously illustrated by the HSBC ads in airports, understanding the languages and cultures of your business partners is crucial to success - and miscommunication literally costs money. Kevin Rudd's fluency in Mandarin has already proven beneficial to Australia's relationship with China, and his government's apology to the Stolen Generations, which demonstrated both cultural and linguistic sensitivity, has had a very positive impact on the International Community's view of Australia.

These examples demonstrate that the benefits of being able to speak to colleagues and clients literally in their own language are not only a demonstration of respect and interest, but pragmatically also minimise miscommunications which can cause political and/or economic damage.

So what does all of this mean to the question of language education in Australia? Well, as suggested by a number of the previous writers, it implies the need for both cultural and policy changes at the government and individual levels. Having a Prime Minister who is fluent in another language - and one that is considered quite difficult for many - is a good first start. It demonstrates that learning a language is possible, and possibly even helpful to one's career. Providing additional funding for LOTE at all levels of the school system (including training LOTE teachers) is also necessary. A long term commitment to such funding (both perceived and real) is critical, since the results of language education are not

Developing opportunities for language education - and education about the value of language education - for adults is also important, as their views influence both politicians and their own children. Using technology to support distance and flexible language learning offers significant potential in this area - as the success of my former colleagues in languages at UNE can demonstrate.

One advantage of online learning in the teaching of languages is that - if done well - learners are not restricted by geography in terms of accessibility AND they can be encouraged to develop their skills interacting directly with members of the target language community (for example, via email, forums, skype, gaming, Second Life, MOOs, and so on). An additional advantage of looking to online educational options to support language learning is the potential for teaching a greater diversity of languages across a widespread population of learners.

In terms of which languages to teach (and presumably to fund), priorities would normally be based on interest and/or relevance. However, these priorities are not necessarily easy to identify: Australia is close to Asia, but also retains strong ties to Europe. Officially supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism, as a basic principle on a federal and state level, would be a significant symbolic step in acknowledging the diverse cultural and linguistic contributions of the diverse populations who contributed to the development of Australia. Funding for research on current and future language priorities by state, nationally and internationally could also help to address this question.

Dr Karen Woodman is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL in the Faculty of Education at the Queensland University of Technology (Kelvin Grove). From 2000-2007, Dr Woodman was a Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of New England, where she co-ordinated development and implementation of the online Master of Arts (Applied Linguistics). She has also lectured in Canada, the US and Europe. Her research interests include online teaching and learning, teacher development and teacher cognition, language activation, and the role of genetics in second language acquisition.