

OPINION – GUEST COLUMNISTS ADDRESS VALUES BASED ISSUES

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Obstinate Ignorance - the Glad Game and the Blame Game in Languages Education

ABSTRACT

The last decade has seen a retreat in Australia's commitment to the study of other languages. Australian university students routinely study international business, politics, law, art and music without studying a related language. In Europe this would be unthinkable. Post-Hansen and post-Howard, in the midst of complex security concerns and debates, different others are most often represented as a threat. The Howard government abandoned the "Asia literacy" push and cut NALSAS funding. Failing to provide a model of positive engagement produces a trickle down effect on the media and the whole society. Languages teachers maintain that persistent study of other codes and modes of thought and living brings joy, fulfillment, useful knowledge, skills, self-awareness and being "other-interested" instead of purely self-interested. Obstinate ignorance is dangerous, an act of disrespect and passive racism.

Most of us know in our hearts that spending more money on technological surveillance or on squads of gunmen is not really going to make us safer. Understanding our own peoples, as well as those of our region and our globe, is much more likely to do that. Professor Iain McCalman, Making Culture Bloom, National Press Club Telstra Address, 16 June 2004

In a profession typified by persistent failure to achieve its stated goals (Rae, 2003), Australian languages teachers can play two games. First, like the film character Pollyanna, they "play the glad game", that is, maintain heroic optimism. Another reaction is to "play the blame game", to name those responsible for the failure.

In this article we examine both options towards mainstream apathy about languages education and what this means for Australian education and society.

Language teachers believe that to learn another language is to reach out to others, to show respect and intellectual curiosity for the world views, cultures, belief systems and life practices of different others (e.g. Kramsch, 1993). It shows an other-interestedness to the extent of wanting to imitate and interact in their code-for-their-experience. Languages teachers believe culture shock and language shock are good for us, liberating us from parochialism. Going through the effort, the cognitive discomfort of foreign language learning (FLL), along with the joy, success and fulfilment, makes us more understanding, appreciative and critically aware, of ourselves and others. The optimistic outlook is that competence in a foreign language makes us better informed, and more empowered linguistically in any field we choose to apply our language skills, such as journalism, aid work, diplomacy, business, indeed any field of life or work, whether in our country of origin or elsewhere.

The foreign language teaching (FLT)- or Languages Other Than English (LOTE) as it is often referred to in Australia - profession asserts that overseas travel and mixing with people of different and diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, in no way diminishes our Australianness or identity (Mueller, 2003). Interest in languages makes one all the more eager to learn the basics and decipher signs wherever we go, to know about the other experience of different people.

The "glad" LOTE teacher is glad that Australia became so much more multicultural after WWII. She (the great majority are female) is glad to know of her own ethnic and cultural provenance just as she may be glad to know and appreciate the Australian bush or local urban history and traditions. Many Australian LOTE teachers are glad their parents came to Australia as migrants or refugees (like this writer's mother from Hitler's Germany) and to be brought up hearing other languages spoken in the home. Inter-marriage among older and newer migrant groups is healthy for the gene pool and beneficial and necessary for the cultural pool, our diet and cuisine, all our arts including the language arts, our pool of ideas and the diversity of ways of living. LOTE teachers are glad that the Special Broadcasting Service continues to offer films and programs in many languages and that Australia has a proud record in provision of English education for migrant adults and children. The optimistic view leads languages educators to believe widespread and diverse languages learning and use is all to the good for social, cultural, economic and political reasons.

BUT ... and here we turn to "the blame game", when it comes to language - the DNA of the human mind - Australia is a language graveyard. The last 200 years has seen us eradicate about 200 indigenous languages and all those remaining are endangered (Amery, 2001).

Far from committed engagement to other languages, there is strong social pressure in Australia for migrants not to pass their languages on to their children and rare are the grandchildren of migrants who really inherit that precious gift, a natural competence in another language, through the family (Clyne, 2005).

As for learning languages as instructed second languages by the Australian born - whether indigenous languages, European or Asian languages, heritage migrant languages or languages of strategic importance - our record is marred by what Michael Clyne calls a persistent "monolingual mindset" (Clyne, 2006a). Our efforts in primary and secondary school rarely produce students who can hold a sustained conversation in their second language or comfortably read an authentic text like a newspaper article. Dissatisfied, attracted by many other rewarding and possibly easier offerings in schools, few stay with languages long enough to give themselves a chance.

Australian university students nowadays are mostly starting languages from scratch and have caught up with those who did school languages in one semester or so. Then the vast majority desert FLL after one year. It's "too much like hard work" in the plug and play age (Mueller, 2005). Tertiary language courses struggle to attract double digit enrolments in third year courses. To become decently competent languages graduates, some undertake in-country courses which cost them extra, especially if in Europe. Fewer than 3 per cent of individual students at Australian universities now study an Asian language. This is far from the target of 10 per cent called for by the Asian Studies Council in 1998 (Asian Studies Association of Australia, Inc., 2002, 42).

This dismal state of affairs is despite some 20 major national reports on languages teaching and learning in Australia since 1971, all affirming the economic, cultural and political importance of languages for Australia's future.

If we play the blame game, it must be someone's fault that the nation continues to be so under-equipped. Who is accountable?

Is it languages teachers? Are they boring, out of date, burnt out, unable to devise rewarding and exciting activities that will attract today's students to languages instead of to drama, art and music for active, hands-on fun? Must it be only in Advanced Science, Maths and English Literature that bright students show their mettle? Can only some subjects like hospitality and outdoor education studies claim to be "vocational"? LOTE teachers who only see students for one or two 40 minute lessons per week in upper primary school, or perhaps three 40 minute sessions in grade 8, fail to raise them to any satisfying standard and fail to convince most Australian adolescents that the sustained effort of gaining a FL proficiency is worth the effort (Crawford, 2002). The Commonwealth of Australia ([DEST], 2002) reports of LOTE study that "What is needed is more tangible demonstration of these benefits in a form that will convince students and the community of this validity."

Personal contact with LOTE teachers reveals sincere, creative, committed, overworked individuals, forever reading, thinking and re-thinking, in search of improved teaching ideas, of "what works" pedagogically and often frustrated in an all but impossible job. Like all teachers, they are pushed and pulled by curriculum and educational fads, the exigencies of school life and the sheer resistance of unmotivated students (although it is politically incorrect to say so). Many do undertake continual advocacy work in the community and occasionally among educational and government circles through professional associations. Some undertake overseas study at personal cost to upgrade their proficiency or postgraduate studies to seek new insights, adding to their time poverty. Others

bottle their frustration and struggle on in difficult positions -itinerant primary school LOTE teachers routinely visit three or four schools a week and "teach" hundreds of children - or abandon the enterprise. Such a situation makes some prone to doubt and self-blame, little reassured by academics that there are no magic success formulae or short cuts in language learning with all its complexity and variability (Ellis, 2000).

Their interested colleagues at tertiary level are encouraged to publish research results in "in-house" academic language with all its strictures, often highly specialised and reductionist, not easily accessible to the wider public or having any striking impact. Confining themselves to scientific analysis of policy, pedagogy, curriculum or linguistic theory, they see on their own campuses that Australian university students routinely study international business, politics, law, art and music, even development studies, without studying a related language. The specific training of future LOTE teachers often consists of "language proficiencies considerably below that which the ALCC report considered to be the minimum" (Ingram, 2003, 14) and one, or at best two, units in some kind of LOTE curriculum studies along with limited in-school practicum. "Between 1997 and 2000, 90 university teaching positions in languages were lost across the country. Asian languages other than Chinese and Japanese, which remain steady, have been hit particularly hard" (Russell, 2003). Occasionally, the ludicrous contrast between stated policy goals and rhetoric about quality on the one hand, and real conditions and outcomes on the other hand, inspires an academic to launch a broadside in the popular press, ignored or forgotten in a few days.

To proceed with the blame game, is the failure of LOTE attributable to school principals and state education departments who allocate LOTE teacher timetables and funding and, above all, moral endorsement? Government bodies produce high-minded policies, never fulfilled, and detailed curriculum documents, never implemented in reality, expecting LOTE teachers to make the best of it, which they do. Crawford (2002,2) indicates that, despite being accorded the status of Key Learning area (KLA)

In Queensland, for example, proposed time allocations (QSCC, 1997) clearly give less time to LOTE than to any of the other KLAs. The proposed 420 hours are also well below the 800 to 1,000 hours often recommended as necessary for achieving useable levels of proficiency.

The outcomes are not good enough for our society, our culture and our national needs. Illusory policies are an excellent way for politicians and bureaucracies to appear to be acting. In fact, the volumes of policy disillusion the public and educators yet again by not being carried through. Who is accountable for the lack of implementation?

School principals are key models and actors in the fate of foreign language programs: their attitude and actions influence all teachers, parents, students and community. During 14 years as a teacher, this writer enjoyed the support of enlightened Principals but some are impressively insular and unaware of other cultures or the national need for languages skills. Lindsay Rae (2003) writes, controversially, that "Australians are such poor language learners" but also of the "reluctance on the part of principals and systems to commit large scale

resources." It is good to see such frank admissions of the adverse situation of LOTE teachers.

Invariably as overworked as their teachers, Principals cannot and should not micro-manage every department in their school but their active and public endorsement of the language program is an essential and hugely motivating contribution. Even just a regular "look in" on the classroom and approving comments, learning a little of the language, talking about the languages program at Parents meetings or in the school newsletter, affirmation of the LOTE teachers, genuinely praising students for languages achievement as much as for sport, these are all helpful and much needed signals from the school Principal.

Above, I dared to blame unmotivated Australian students. Are too many lazy, blithely uncaring about their own education? Young Australians are highly motivated as regards sport, pop music and television, computer games and shopping, and indeed education that is seen as having direct relevance to later employment. The knowledge many children have about television programs is a stunning demonstration of their ability to retain information. Can we blame kids for being kids? Australian kids are not unteachable nor are languages unlearnable (Crawford, 2002).

Ultimately though, teachers cannot do the learning for them. Learning happens in the minds of students. This writer asserts that many Australian students are passing day after day, term after term, year after year, not achieving the levels they could, not fulfilling their potential, shirking sustained mental challenge. Cognitive development is one of the many benefits of languages learning which should appeal to young learners with an eye to a globalised world, elaborated in Mueller's (2003) pessimistically titled article, Learning languages in Australia - too much like hard work? Unfortunately, some Australian children - emulating many prominent figures in the adult world - are precociously snide about any area that calls on them to reflect on themselves, their values, their history, language and culture, all those domains that comprise the Humanities.

Shall we blame, therefore, their parents and the community of voters and citizens at large? Iain McCalman labels Australia an "incredibly utilitarian society" (in Russell, 2003). Australians are interested in more money for consumer products, house and garden, endless evenings watching the television and sports, all of which can be enjoyed perfectly well through the English language. How can wearisome language and culture studies compete? Even at wealthy independent schools in Australia where languages might be expected to be highly regarded as a badge of a well educated world citizen and a very marketable skill in many careers, many LOTE teachers have very few students in senior grades (for a cheering exception, see Johnson, 2006). In a blaming mood, we could conclude, the rich just do ignorance and consumerism more lavishly than the poor.

One can find plenty of excuses for Australian parents, busy earning a living, chauffeuring children to sports events, seeking advice on how to manage their children from Super Nannies and keeping them from drugs and junk food. Parents who set the all-important model for school students can themselves become stressed from work, managing finances and relationships, and cannot necessarily be informed about or involved in all that their children study, or do

not study. Of course, parents too are the products of all their own experience, diverse backgrounds, and attitudes influenced by the media and the community. Foreign languages are, naturally perhaps, foreign to the list of priorities of many. Not all, it should be added. For example, Rupert Macgregor (2006) of the Australian Council of State School Organisations, in a review of Clyne's 2005 book, states:

... the issues around languages education affect how we should prepare and equip young people to take on an effective role in a changing world, in ways that bear directly upon their own opportunities and the economic well-being of this country.

Australians are said to be great readers, travellers, innovators and early adopters of new technologies. Despite all these advantages, most Australian parents are not interested in raising the consciousness and literacy of their own children through languages, or about their region of the world in particular on which their future welfare depends? Are they not aware of the urgent national need for languages and cultural skills, especially Asia-related skills, as skilfully argued by Lindsey and Kingsley (2006)? Or are Australian parents, Principals, politicians, obstinately and happily ignorant?

Raising cultural consciousness through learning other languages is not a high priority in contemporary, mainstream Australia. "Language and languages are no longer a front page issue in Australian social and political life," writes Michael Clyne (2006). The public is drenched in too many messages - often negative or fearful representations of different others (vide the September 2006 Howard attack on Australian Muslims) - to receive the feeble few about engagement with other cultures, peoples and languages.

Such neglect is a kind of passive racism? That which we neglect, we tacitly condemn. If a majority of Australians will commit to the rest of the world no more than a few minutes of commercial television news, before switching to "reality TV" or soap opera imported from the USA, is this not sustained, obstinate ignorance? It is no comfort that Australia is not the only persistently xenophobic, obstinately monolingual, backward-looking and inward-looking society (vide the decline in GCSE language enrolments in Britain, Smithers and Whitford, 2006). Most English-speaking nations are equally slothful and complacently believe that "English is enough".

Indeed they joyously make enormous profits selling "the global hyperlanguage", imposing "a huge burden of costs entailed by the worldwide hegemony of English in education, science, commerce, and communication" (Templer, 2002). Jo Lo Bianco has written that knowledge of English in this globalising world is a great advantage; knowledge of English alone is a massive disadvantage (Lo Bianco, 2004). Australians live in denial of this reality so evident to most of the world's population.

Whose responsibility is it to awaken the public, young and old, to the undeniable fact that there are worlds of wondrous experience, opportunity and peril out there in the non-English speaking world and that our present and future welfare relies on our understanding of it? The final round of the blame game should

naturally include pot-shots at those groups who have significant influence in the Australian society and polity. These people are attitude and opinion shapers, and decision makers with genuine power to make things happen. These authority figures shape Australian language attitudes.

They are politicians, especially those in elected office at federal and state levels, business leaders, religious leaders, some judges and military figures, academic commentators, sports and popular entertainment "celebrities", and the media people who report on all the rest. Some in their ranks do not shy from declaiming (if never carefully defining) the Australian values all citizens should subscribe to. They thereby assume moral responsibility for Australia's core or common social values.

"We don't have any clear statements of policy from the Federal Government level. Above all, there's no sort of clear statement that a national competency in languages other than English is of strategic advantage to the country. The same thing is true for humanities in general," says Colin Nettelbeck, head of the school of languages at Melbourne University (in Russell, 2003). Indeed thanks to the current Federal government, "Funding for studies of Asia in schools was cut by 80% in 2003 with the cessation of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) strategy" (Russell, 2003).

It is not just their decisions but the words, attitudes and behaviours modelled by public leaders that strongly influence Australian thinking and discourse. Since 1996, despite the economy surging on the back of profitable trade relations with China, the dangerous attitude that has been modelled for the Australian public is that:

outsiders are to be feared and suspected, as are different insiders. At best they are competitors, or migration queue jumpers, at worst, dangerous extremists or terrorists (the latest version of colonial era "heathens" and Cold War "commies"). This goes beyond security concerns to racism. The current federal political leadership plays a game where "the race card" is played for political advantage and multiculturalism is consequently downplayed.

languages education has had all the attention and budget it deserves (less than the cost of a coffee per Australian per year, according to Hill, 2005.) Crawford (2003) compares this to the European scene: "Unlike Australia where the debate continues about the place of a single language in the curriculum, in Europe, the focus is increasingly on how many and which languages learners should take in addition to English."

the power of money and force is what counts; the power of understanding is leftist, liberal fantasy. Universities are now run on a business model with disciplines not geared to the job market feeling most "the pressures of decreased funding and increased vocational emphasis" (Russell, 2003). The "life of the mind" has no dollar value; languages of low demand are vulnerable to cancellation.

the English speaking world is the part of the human race which matters, which has the best civilisation and the right to dictate to and dominate the rest to swim against the mainstream norm in society and education or to oppose "market forces" and consumerism is to be un-Australian, unpatriotic.

Caught in its own trap, this Commonwealth government has now been obliged to use funding threats to compel universities to sustain specialised and nationally significant courses, including "courses for a nationally strategic specialised language (including Arabic and Indonesian)" (Commonwealth of Australia, DEST, 2005).

This is not an atmosphere conducive of teaching and learning the languages and knowing the lives of foreign people or Australian migrant and indigenous languages. This is a model poisonous to the efforts of language teachers' who "dream of a world in which people are able to interact freely and equally, recognising each other's rights to be different, to live differently, to speak differently, to think differently, and to worship differently" (Ingram, 2003).

The blame game must attribute a heavy portion of blame to those elected politicians in particular who put themselves forward for power and responsibility, presume to define and decide "the national interest" and yet patently do not act in the best interests of the people as defined by their own agencies (eg see the recent MCEETYA National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008.) "Commonwealth responsibility therefore lies in," says its own DEST Report (2002), "providing strong leadership and commitment to LOTE. The Commonwealth should lead the debate about what capability in languages Australia will need in the next twenty years to fulfil its economic, strategic, social and cultural aims and responsibilities, and develop a coherent strategy to meet those needs."

It is those with highest authority over educational policies and influence over cultural trends who force David Ingram to write of an enlightened culture and "positive cross-cultural attitudes" as just a dream:

"We must retain our dream of a society and a world where cultural differences and the languages that reflect and support them are not only tolerated but are valued and genuinely enrich all people's lives (Ingram, 2003)"

Iain McCalman (2004, 3) points to the stunning economic benefits in Ireland and New Zealand of cultural industries, "the most powerful engines of economic growth in modern knowledge-based societies." If cultural creativity is now seen as a core competency which "helps to stimulate a culture of innovation essential to any aspiring knowledge economy" (McCalman, 2004, 4-5), how can Australian governments ignore languages and all those Humanities fields which should be "recognized not only for the commercial profit that they might bring but also for the public good" (McCalman, 2004, 6)?

In conclusion, languages educators may well blame the Howard government for a disastrous turning back the clock in our culture, for revival of an exclusivist, English-speaking White Australia. There is no chance that the current federal government will change its chosen course or outlook, antithetical to multicultural consciousness and critical enquiry. Educators who genuinely care about the minds of the young, not just child-minding or job training, who care about a diverse, skilled, critical and humane culture, other-interested not just self-interested, those who care about Australia's place in a peaceful, not obstinately ignorant world, will have to persist, resist and protest for some time to come.

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