

A Czech proverb:

*Kolik jazyků znáš, tolikrát jsi člověkem.
You live a new life for every new language you speak.
If you know only one language, you live only once.¹*

A ‘peace’ about languages

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I am an educator in the field of languages. This paper discusses my observations as someone who has taught in the classroom, now works as a languages education consultant and as someone who has married a man of Chinese ethnicity and whose children are actively participating in two cultures.

I believe that we have had a ‘piecemeal’ approach to the teaching of languages in Australia and that we are paying socially, economically and politically for our inattention and apathy towards languages education. I am saddened at how undervalued languages are in Australia, including aboriginal languages. We simply don’t hear them.

This is a big problem to address but before we can move forward there needs to be a shared understanding of why the learning of languages is a vital component of an education that is relevant to the world our children live in.

¹ <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/proverbs.htm>

My observation is that languages learning is not clearly understood nor valued by our teaching community and the wider community and hence there is no shared understanding or priority attached to the role of languages in a child's schooling.

Why is languages learning important?

We need to address this question first.

Principals, in conversations with me over the past four years, often articulate their vision for the students at their school. One of the most important goals they have, they tell me, is that they want their students to be global citizens. Languages learning is the key to this citizenship.

Language exerts hidden power, like a moon on the tides.

Rita Rae Brown²

Language is power. You would agree that in Australia if you are unable to communicate effectively in English you are marginalized. You will be less likely to be as successful socially, economically, financially as someone who is proficient in English. Our 'decision makers' in Australia don't acknowledge at policy level, where emphasis is created, that English is not the first or only language of Australia. Power is taken away by focusing uniquely on English, when we could be empowering our young people. How much more powerful could our children be if we gave them the gift of two or more languages?

² [Starting from Scratch](#) 1988

Maori

Toku reo toku ohōho.

*My Language, my awakening.*³

Languages learning gives you a sense of belonging and a sense of self. Rita Rae Brown an American social activist explained, “language is the roadmap of a culture. It tells you where its people came from and where they are going.” Thinking of the Australian context and our Aboriginal people you can see this clearly. “The Aboriginal world view is inextricably linked to Language”⁴. “Language protects our history through story and song. It holds the key to kinship systems and to the intricacies of tribal law including spirituality, sacred objects and rites.”⁵ For our aboriginal children whose languages are being lost and are not being taught there are, as you can imagine, serious implications.

Bir dil bir insan, iki dil iki insan.

*One who speaks only one language is one person, but one who speaks two languages is two people Turkish*⁶

The connection between language and identity is also pertinent to our multicultural population. Multilingual

³ <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/proverbs.htm>

⁴ Kimberley Language Resources centre 2008

⁵ Kimberley language Resource centre 2008

⁶ <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/proverbs.htm>

children are highly represented in our schools. According to the last census Chinese is the second most commonly spoken language at home in Australia. The implications regarding identity can be illustrated by my husband's experience which I am sure he shares with many people living in Australia. My husband, Eddie, is ethnically Chinese. He was born in Singapore, lived there and in Christmas Island and then moved to Australia when he was eight. Eddie's experience is one of rapid identification with the host country where he met the societal expectation that he would and does identify with Australia as his place. At eight years old, after arriving in Australia, his knowledge of Chinese and his attachment to Chinese culture stopped. This was seen by society as a positive example of integration. The cost of this to Eddie is that he is unable to access his 'Chineseness', nor communicate with his parents on an adult level; he just doesn't have the words. It has had a savage impact on his identity and his relationship to his family and culture of origin. His Parents don't have any access to the adult version of Eddie. Had the view been at the time that maintaining home languages would allow children to move fluidly between two cultures and languages we could have had a much more positive impact on these children's identities and also enriched our community. The children who could potentially move easily between two languages and cultures need to be supported in our current environment.

Our Government refers to 'building strong foundations' in early childhood with what I believe is a limited focus on English literacy and numeracy. There is no mention in the

Early Childhood, \$2.4 billion going to schools that supporting children at school to maintain a home language or giving children the opportunity of learning another language would be part of the Government's agenda. This is in my opinion a lost opportunity.

La lengua es la piel del alma
Language is the skin of the soul.
- Fernando Lázaro Carreter^{7,8}

For our monolingual children there is also a connection between languages learning and identity formation. We can't really know ourselves if we don't confront and interrogate what it means to be someone else; 'the other'. We have nothing to buffer against. For example, Australian children, in classes I have taught, express the notion of being cultureless. Adults I talk with find it hard to articulate what it means to be Australian other than the stereotypical responses. They are unable to define what makes them who they are because they haven't had the experience of observing their own culture using someone else's words.

Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.
The limits of my language are the limits of my universe.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein⁹

⁷ <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/proverbs.htm>

⁸ <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/proverbs.htm>

⁹ <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/proverbs.htm>

In our global world where borders are melting, languages learning can offer a depth of perspective which will help our children operate in this new landscape. When you speak English you can only ever see the world through this vehicle. From the moment a child utters his or her first word, “duck,” “flower,” “please,” the world is labeled and thought about through this construct. Language is a construct, it forces you into a way of seeing, and most times if English is your first language you are limited to one lens. When you learn another language, you can change the aperture. I think of those visual allusion drawings that on first sight look like one image when there are actually two images. It takes a shift in perception to see them both; they have actually both been there though all the time. Languages learning offers children a tool to shift the way they perceive the world. You are able to see for the first time another perspective and reality. When you visit a country or a place without being able to communicate in the language you can only ever be an observer. You can be a culturally aware observer but you can never ever get a real insight into the world a Japanese speaking person sees or a Maori person sees unless you speak her language. Their reality doesn't exist for you.

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

- Nelson Mandela^{10, 11}

¹⁰ <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/proverbs.htm>

In the past we talked about IQ as being the most important thing that would determine a child's future. When I started teaching it was EQ, developing kids emotional intelligence, now we need to seriously address what hasn't been tackled and what often causes miscommunication and confrontation and that is kids' CQ, their cultural intelligence. Our children will be working alongside other people who speak different languages and come from other cultures; they will be working with other people in real time who will be sitting in different countries using the internet. They will need to have the skills and know how to be able to work globally even if they never leave Australia. Our awareness in Australia of the world's languages and cultures is from my experience, quite limited. The media encourages a monolingual, monocultural version of Australia and the world when it doesn't exist. When I visit schools and I show school children, for example, footage of Aboriginal teachers teaching children their Indigenous language, it is the first time the students have ever heard an Aboriginal language. They are surprised to learn how many Aboriginal languages are spoken in Australia and how different they are from one another. They delight in this knowledge. I have a wonderful poster on the wall of my office which shows the indigenous languages of Australia. Schools in Australia are funded federally on the provision that they have a poster of Simpson and his donkey on a wall in the school. Our languages need to have this level of emphasis and new posters put on the walls.

This intercultural ‘know how’ we want for our children is best realized through them learning another language and culture and seeing for themselves why other people behave and think the way they do. Why would we limit our children’s potential for gaining a greater experience of the world by limiting them to English?

Given the significance of the proposition discussed above it seems important now to dispel some myths about languages learning.

The ‘Swiss finishing school’ myth

I have concerns about the widely held view that Languages learning is elitist and is only relevant as part of a private school education or in the realms of Swiss finishing schools. Languages learning is important for all individuals across society.

The ‘only for clever kids’ myth

I am also concerned that it is still widely viewed as a subject suited solely to academic students. This was traditionally the case. Languages learning was, in the past, very much steeped in academia and based on grammar translation. Nowadays the focus is on communication and this notion of identity formation and intercultural understanding. I see, all the time, modern, effective language programs which make languages learning accessible to all students.

The ‘one day traveler’ myth

Languages learning is no longer about travel “one day” to that country. When you learn another language something happens inside you, something so powerful it can transform the way you see the world and interact with others. Our goals these days in languages classrooms are just as much about communication as they are about giving children a deeper understanding of who they are and why others are the way they are.

The ‘but my child is weak at English’ myth

Parents worry about their child’s English level deteriorating by exposing them to study of another language. Learning a language supports English literacy. Languages learning is in the business of literacy. There is no better way of interrogating and learning more about your own language than by having a comparison.

The ‘but my child won’t understand the teacher ‘ myth

The best environment for languages learning is if the teacher speaks the language most of the time. In languages classrooms we try to match naturalistic learning of the first language as much as possible and that requires a language rich environment. It is the teacher’s job to make sure the student understands the gist of what is being communicated. This is an important strategy when learning a language and mirrors what happens in a naturalistic setting. We encourage students to listen for meaning so that communication can happen.

The ‘I am going to learn Chinese this term’ myth.

Languages learning and intercultural understanding cannot occur in a year or two. Like any other learning area at school it requires adequate time and resource allocation over the whole of a child's schooling.

The 'my child is going to be fluent in French' myth

Native speaker like fluency is not the goal of most languages programmes in Western Australia. We aim for communicative competence which means that by the end of year 12 students would be able to communicate across all skills in a range of common day-to-day situations.

Sie verkaufen und ich kaufe, sprechen wir deutsch. Aber Sie kaufen und ich verkaufe, dann sprechen wir Ihre Sprache.

When you're selling and I'm buying, we speak German. But when you're buying and I'm selling, then we speak your language.

- attributed to Willi Brandt¹²

So where to from here?

I have just started Pilates and have been surprised at what my Pilates instructor is able to see when she looks at my body with her specialized knowledge. She is able to see what my body needs and assures me that by doing certain exercises my body will change and react to these changes. I can be realigned and she is right it is already happening.

What I can see as a languages educator is what we need to do to deliver quality language programs so that we can deliver the outcomes we want for our children.

¹² <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/proverbs.htm>

The essential 'pieces.'

1. A change in Government philosophy towards languages education and national policy to support it.
2. A national advertising campaign, targeting the wider community, which addresses why languages learning is important.
3. Financial incentives for the media to address the under representation of languages and cultures presented in the media.
4. A quality teacher of languages.
5. Teachers who speak the language most of the time in the classroom.
6. 3 lessons a week minimum. The length of lessons should reflect the age of the students and lessons do need to happen regularly across the week.
7. Communicate parameters of the languages course with clearly defined outcomes to parents, students and the community.
8. Resource programmes adequately. Access to native speakers and access to technology so children can communicate with other speakers is paramount.
9. A supportive environment which enables children to take risks with their languages learning.
10. Cross curricular links so children can make connections with other learning areas

- 11.Languages learning to be incorporated into the school's literacy plan.
- 12.Start children learning languages in early childhood programs.
- 13.A continuous languages programme in the school with learning from each year building on the year before.
- 14.Opportunity for students to continue the language learnt in Primary school into High school
- 15.Languages programs in High school not linked to year level but level of proficiency
- 16.School leaders and administrators educated about what makes a quality languages program
- 17.Languages program part of whole school strategic plan
- 18.Other teachers to engage in professional learning about languages and cultures and its significance to a child's development as a person in the 21st Century.
- 19.Language teachers valued and supported as much as every other teacher in the school

P.S You can't miss part of the exercise; you won't get the result you want.