Elliott FORSYTH
La Trobe University

Why languages? Motivation and objectives in Australian education

Abstract

The question ‘Why teach languages?’ is commonly answered in the Australian community by a sceptical comment based on a narrowly utilitarian approach to education, which easily filters through to students who can see no good reason for embarking on such a demanding discipline. In this situation motivation is weak because objectives are ill-defined and misunderstood. My own experience as a student, teacher and examiner in the field of French studies over many years has made me aware of how little attention has been given in the teaching process itself to guiding students to an understanding of the educational benefits that can be gained from an active and well-directed study of one or more languages other than their own, benefits that go far beyond the ability to read simple texts.
The prime motive for studying another language in secondary school was for a long time to meet entry requirements for a range of tertiary courses, but as these requirements became less common, enrolments in secondary language programs waned and in many schools disappeared. But there proved to be, in these secondary schools, quite a number of students who, on entering university, wanted to begin learning another language, and university language departments, whose enrolments in standard courses had fallen, felt compelled to provide, in addition to their standard program, courses in languages for beginners which were expected to have similar academic standing to the standard ones.

This changing pattern has resulted in a confused situation, where motivation and the perception of objectives have been anything but clear. Unless the educational objectives and benefits of language study in schools and universities are clearly understood by teachers and administrators and made clear to students and to the public at large, and unless teachers at all levels develop the skills to motivate their students through their own enthusiasm and their understanding of their objectives, little will change.

The underlying reason for the calling of this colloquium is the long-established and persistent apathy towards the study and use of languages other than English in Australian education and in Australian society in general, despite the huge range of languages actually spoken in our community. The purpose of this contribution is to look at two basic interrelated elements in our approach to language education, motivation and understanding of our objectives, to see if our strategy can be improved.

Clearly, the most powerful force in successful teaching is positive motivation, not only on the part of the student and the teacher, but also on the part of the community in which the teaching takes place. This applies of course to all areas of teaching, but especially to the study of languages, which requires progressive study and serious and sustained personal input. The intrinsic interest that we feel as teachers is not necessarily shared by our students, especially at the beginning of secondary school or at the beginning of university studies. The secondary students of my generation (around 1938) took French and Latin because that was the traditional classical course: they had no special motivation and little thought of objectives, other than the idea that they might learn to communicate with those of another culture, if the occasion ever arose. Things hadn’t changed ten years later: I recall that, as a young school teacher, I was challenged by one of my less gifted students with the question: “Sir, why do I have to learn French? I’m never going to France.” In 1948, when overseas travel for students was still a wild dream, it was hard to give a convincing answer to that country Tasmanian boy who would probably never look beyond the shores of Bass Strait. Many course materials in those days were dull and teachers were often semi-competent. School principals often failed to see that beginners’ classes, where the essential foundations are laid, and where a good teacher can stimulate interest and positive motivation, required the care of the most competent language teacher
available, a point I have often had to make in schools much more recently as an itinerant examiner. After all, it is at that level that habits of good pronunciation and basic patterns of speech should be established, and it is also the level where students can learn potentially useful dialogue structures and get a sense of power in doing so.

At higher secondary levels, motivation was for many years largely determined by university entrance requirements. Not many students saw further than this requirement, and many dropped the language subject(s) when they could. Some teachers at this level would probably have said that, while they aimed to enable their students to communicate and become acquainted with another culture, they were also training them in a better understanding of English and, more widely, of the nature and mechanism of language, though they might not have brought this to the attention of their students. Some of the more perceptive students would have been aware of this, however, and some, embarking on the study of an additional language, would have discovered that they had acquired the elements of a learning strategy that made the acquisition of the new language much more straightforward, a skill that could have great value in professional situations in later life. These are both valid objectives and students and school administrators need to be made aware of them. Now, of course, many secondary students have the opportunity to visit a country where the language they are learning is spoken, and this experience, where well organised, can greatly strengthen motivation.

My generation of university students, in the 1940s, were required, in Faculties of Arts, to complete a unit of a language at post-matriculation level. This was an obstacle for many and greatly resented. The objectives of the policy seem to have been poorly understood as were the inadequacies of ‘reading knowledge’ requirements for research students. In time, such requirements were gradually dropped as were the more general requirements for a language at matriculation. On the positive side, there was a certain proportion who had studied a language successfully at secondary level and who chose tertiary language courses because of their interest: many of these students achieved real proficiency in practical skills and some have gone on to make significant contributions to teaching and research in the field in Australia and elsewhere.

The removal of language requirements for entrance to university courses was soon reflected in secondary school programmes where language offerings were reduced or dropped altogether as the principal motive for their inclusion had disappeared. It was clearly felt by many that learning another language was of no practical use and no other benefits in learning one were perceived.

There were, however, some brave souls, often from migrant families, who came into tertiary education from the 1950s on, wanting to learn a new language for the first time, and in view of the falling numbers of students entering with a secondary background in a language, university language departments felt impelled to introduce beginners’ courses, which raised complex problems of standards and finance. Such programmes existed in the US, of course, as the Americans had virtually
eliminated foreign language studies between the two World Wars, and when I taught at the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s, they constituted the basic language programmes. The turning point had been the discovery, when the war hit them, that the armed forces lacked the skills to understand the enemy (or even their allies!). In Australia, motivation and objectives for such courses were not always clear, but it was difficult for these students to achieve more than very basic language proficiency.

On the organisational side, it has to be said too that some language departments were faced with hostility from colleagues in other Arts disciplines who looked on the language courses as useless and costly to run. I recall that, at La Trobe University, when the School of Humanities was considering a proposal to introduce an interdisciplinary area studies course in Renaissance studies, I suggested that such a programme would need to include study of a relevant language, if possible Latin or Italian. To this a senior member of the History department replied, “Oh, but you can’t ask students to learn languages.” And that was the end of Renaissance studies. I recall, too, that a senior La Trobe economist told me once that, as far as his subject was concerned, all truth came from English-speaking sources, and if by chance anything of interest had come from another source, it would have been translated anyway, so what was the point of teaching other languages? I have to say that I believe this attitude lay behind the whittling down and eventually the closure of the department of French at La Trobe, some ten years after my retirement, on the grounds that it was no longer viable. (Courses in French are now being offered again.)

Long term change in the Australian setting has resulted in a confused situation, where motivation and the perception of objectives have been anything but clear. Precisely how the situation stands today is not obvious to me, looking from the standpoint of many years of retirement, but I am not convinced that much has changed despite public statements made and claims that languages have been restored to school programmes. Report after report has declared that, when it comes to international commerce and diplomacy, Australia makes weak use of foreign language resources despite its huge immigrant population, but motivation for real change still seems lacking. An article published in the journal *Curriculum Leadership* by three leading scholars in 2007 pointed out that:

“half the children in compulsory education in Australia are not being taught a language other than English (LOTE) in a mainstream school and the majority of those taking a LOTE are in programs with inadequate time allocation, and taught by teachers who have not received sufficient training or are not sufficiently proficient in the language they are teaching. Language teacher status and morale are low. Most schools do not require students to take a second language throughout the compulsory years of education. Many schools make it impossible or inconvenient to take a LOTE in years 9 and 10 through the constraints of the timetable.

Thirty years of reports and reviews have kept identifying the same problems.”
(Clyne, Pauwels and Sussex 2007)
The arguments that are used to justify this confused situation leave out of account the wider educational benefits that can accrue from second language study, especially the conclusion that is now emerging from recent research that second language study not only contributes significantly to communication and literacy skills in the mother tongue but fosters “improved general cognitive skills and academic achievement in other curriculum areas including Maths, Science and Social Studies” and in general stimulates intellectual flexibility and creativity (Collins 2007). Does this explain why Finnish students, who have to learn both the official languages of their country, Finnish and Swedish, which are very different from each other, and at least one other language, regularly score so high in international comparative assessments where Australians perform so low (Clyne, Pauwels and Sussex 2007:2)?

While we, as educators and academics, have long been aware that language study brings important cultural benefits, the general public perception of the purpose of language study seems to be limited to a narrowly utilitarian view of the practical application of second language skills but with little conviction that they are really necessary in view of the international status of English. This approach seems to be shared by government and by many in academia and so undermines the position of languages in education. My own belief is that unless the educational objectives and benefits of language study in schools and universities are clearly understood by teachers and administrators and made clear in appropriate contexts both to students and to the public at large, and unless teachers at all levels develop the skills to motivate their students through their own enthusiasm and understanding of their objectives, little will change.

What then, to sum up, are the educational benefits that motivate our objectives and which we should seek to promote? As I see it, they can be summed up as follows:

- The effective development of second language skills will obviously be of practical use to the student in appropriate situations which may vary widely, and at an advanced level will be of economic and political benefit to the nation.
- As grasp of a second language grows, a student has a chance to develop a deepening understanding of another culture, which may be of interest for its own sake and of benefit in international relations.
- Progressive study of another language in a comparative context enables a student to gain a greater understanding of the nature and mechanism of language in general and particularly in his own language and thus to greatly improve communication skills.
- In learning a second language, a student gradually acquires a learning strategy that makes more straightforward the learning of any other language that may be needed in the future in a world where professional life requires more and more international communication.
- When well taught, the student of a second or additional language can develop more extensive cognitive skills in broader areas of intellectual activity and
creativity which can lead to a fuller cultural life. And this, after all, is the essential purpose of education.

All these objectives will only be achieved if the teaching and study are supported by positive motivation, clear understanding of their nature and effective and skilled language teaching.

References
