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The dynamic of need

Andrew Godwin | July 15, 2009

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Language learning is driven by fascination.

BEFORE penning this comment, I had been racking my brain to think of how I could make a meaningful contribution to the Asian languages debate. After all, buying into the debate should be relatively easy for somebody with my background: a former student who studied Chinese at school and at university, a lawyer who practised in China for 10 years, and now an academic who uses his Chinese extensively for research purposes. In every sense, I am a beneficiary of an enlightened language policy, at least as it existed in the 1970s and 80s.

However, there are at least two reasons why I have found it difficult to take a position in this debate. For a start, I am not a language teacher and am therefore not qualified to comment on the pedagogical challenges that face language teachers, especially at the primary and secondary level. Second, and perhaps more frustrating, I find myself torn between the lofty goals of those who want to increase Asian literacy in Australia, and the practical difficulties of teaching a language such as Chinese en masse.

My appetite for buying into the debate was whetted when I read the thought-provoking and insightful comments by Pierre Ryckmans in the HES last week. Ryckmans highlighted the distinction between education and training, noting that mass instruction was effective in the area of technical training, but completely ineffective in the area of education, where the focus was on the individual and the individual's desire "to become more fully human".

His comments resonated with my own experiences as I pursued my Chinese language studies at university. It was here that I experienced the joy of being able to read and dissect Tang poetry and, at the same time, the frustration of being unable to communicate fluently in Chinese on a practical level. It was only later, after I developed a practical fluency in Chinese, that I was able to appreciate how my humanities education had laid a profound foundation for my future immersion in Chinese legal studies and research.

I have always subscribed to the theory that the majority of people learn as much of a second language as they need to, whether it be for the purpose of passing exams at school or communicating on a social or business level.

Take, for example, a multi-lingual country such as Belgium, where the official languages are French, Dutch and German. In Belgium, school students need a command of at least three languages for the purpose of passing their exams; namely, Dutch, French and English. Those who are seeking an additional linguistic challenge could also study German, the third official language. However, since German is only spoken by about 1 per cent of the population, the need is not quite as great.

Of course, the burden for Belgian students is lessened somewhat by the fact that neither of the two "foreign" languages involves the unique challenges that learning a tonal, non-phonetic language such as Chinese presents. However, it is still a heavy burden, since the expectation is that Belgians will achieve near-native fluency in each of these languages. Not surprisingly perhaps, it is usually English -- the non-official language -- that trumps the other languages in business because of its status as the global lingua franca. Interestingly, my Belgian colleagues tell me that English is often the preferred medium of communication between native Dutch-speakers and native-French speakers in a social context as well, simply because it is the one language in which neither side has the natural advantage.

Another example where need has driven people to learn a second language (or, more accurately perhaps, a second dialect) is Hong Kong, where fluency in Mandarin Chinese has increased over the past decade or so ever since the handover (or, as China would term it, the "hand-back") of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty.

There's still no guarantee, however, that the taxi driver will understand where you want to go if you provide the instructions in Mandarin and not in Cantonese or English.

As I think about how Asian language policy in Australia might be formulated at the primary and secondary level, a somewhat inconvenient truth springs to mind. This is as follows: despite our location in the Asia-Pacific region, where Asian languages predominate, school students in Australia are not driven by any immediate need to learn an Asian language (or any other language for that matter). To begin with, it would be rare to find oneself in a local Asian restaurant where the waiters cannot speak English. In addition, although learning an Asian language might turn out to be a good investment in one's future job prospects, secondary school students are likely to be more preoccupied by the subjects that will give them the results they need in order to be admitted to the degree course of their choice.

Of course, learning an Asian language could be made compulsory for all students from the early years to year 12. This would create an immediate need and a level playing field, assuming that students were appropriately streamed according to whether they were native or non-native speakers. It would also provide an incentive for students to do well in the language, since nobody could drop it in favour of pursuing better marks in another subject.

Such a bold step, however, is likely to be opposed on a number of fronts. For a start, it would require a huge number of competent Asian language teachers and a correspondingly huge investment in teacher training. Even if this could be achieved, it is unlikely to be supported by the broader Australian community, which has grown up with the reasonable expectation that multiculturalism involves free choices about cultures and languages, rather than choices that are imposed by government decree. As Ryckmans noted, Asian language literacy does not yield itself to any central policy planning.

More importantly still, such a policy would ignore the reality that unlike Belgians, whose job prospects are significantly diminished by an inability to speak English and at least two other languages, Australians can still survive -- and are likely to continue to be able to survive in the future -- by being monolingual. As a result, unless we end up being colonised by one of our Asian neighbours, or Chinese unexpectedly replaces English as the global lingua franca, school students are not going to be driven to study an Asian language by any immediate need.

If it is correct to say that language learning for the majority is driven by need, then those who need to learn an Asian language for social or business purposes will always find a way of learning the language to a standard that meets their need. In my decade in China, I met many Australians who had not studied Chinese in Australia, yet had been able to develop an impressive fluency in the language through language tuition in China and through immersion in a Chinese-speaking environment. Would they have benefited from more opportunities to learn Chinese in Australia? One would like to assume so. However, the point that I am making is that necessity is the mother of invention: with or without such opportunities, they were able to learn the language to a standard that met their need.

It seems to me that, apart from need, the only other motivation for learning a second language is an intellectual fascination with the language and the culture it represents. This was what sparked my enthusiasm about Chinese when I first started learning the language at secondary school. It certainly wasn't sparked by any externally imposed need or, for that matter, any clever foresight about the relevance of Chinese to my future job prospects.

If I were to trace the evolution of my Chinese language ability, I would say that it germinated at secondary school where my enthusiasm for Chinese culture and language was sparked by competent and inspiring teachers. It was later developed and consolidated at university where I started to think about how it might be relevant to my career. Happily for me, it has proved its enduring relevance ever since.

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