Is English Enough? The Value and Future of Languages Other Than English in Australian Vocational Education and Training

Abstract

Lehmann (2006) discussed the intrinsic value that every language has, yet in today’s demanding, market driven vocational education and training (VET) sector, more than that is required to guarantee the viability of courses in languages other than English (LOTE). This paper investigates the spaces and possibilities for LOTE in Australian VET, including the unchallenged position that English enjoys in VET in the context of an increasingly globalising world. The paper discusses the enormous untapped linguistic resources in Australia, the reasons behind the need to challenge mindsets limiting the growth in plurilingualism at the VET level, and the possibilities for the future for LOTE in VET.

The effects of what Graddol (2006) and others term ‘the devaluation of English’ and the linguistic complexity that will result from globalisation are discussed with reference to how LOTE can provide a means of connection for VET graduates with their clients both domestically and internationally.

Introduction

In February this year I attended a conference in Mandalay in Myanmar about language policy in multicultural and multilingual settings. Although the conference had many international presenters, the focus of the conference was the situation in Myanmar, where Myanmar citizens from 135 language groups compete for a place in their nation’s identity. I say compete, because there is a real fear amongst the smaller groups such as the Wa, Naga and Lahu, that their languages will be overwhelmed by the larger and more powerful languages such as Myanmar (Burmese), and I say identity because language is unquestionably tied to identity (see for example Norton, 2013; Vygotsky, 2012).

I have come to understand over the course of my life, and it was reconfirmed for me again at the Mandalay conference, that who we are, what we do and how we do it cannot happen without language and importantly, it cannot happen as effectively without the language we feel most comfortable with, our mother tongue. For the nearly one-fifth of Australians who speak a language other than English in their homes and in their linguistic communities (Clyne, 2005), including indigenous Australians, addressing the inequity that is caused by failing to provide the language training they need to upskill them to a level of proficiency in their mother tongues so that they can operate multilingually in vocational settings, is long overdue.

In this paper, I will not address this issue directly, but rather the more obvious issue of monolingualism in the setting of a globalising world, and the belief that many monolingual and some multilingual Australians have, that learning another language for vocational purposes is simply unnecessary, because the rest of the world speaks English. Let me assure you at the outset: the rest of the world does not speak English, or at least, not the English that many Australians who have grown up with English as their mother tongue are familiar with. You need only step outside any international airport in the world, where English is not spoken as a first or second
language, to be corrected on that point. Clyne (2004; 2005) described people who held this attitude as having a ‘monolingual mindset’. Given this situation, in order to value languages other than English in any context, including in vocational education and training, this attitude must be challenged and defeated.

I also want to discuss the findings of a small research project I completed in 2014 into the value of languages other than English in VET (Buoro, 2014), in order to contextualise these issues in a vocational education and training setting. Finally, I want to use this discussion to outline possible future directions for scholarship in this field.

Is English Enough?

Any serious study into the value of languages other than English has to consider what they are being valued against. The idea that English is the only language one needs to know, in order to carry out international transactions was described by Dr Michael Wesley from the Lowey Institute as ‘the English speaking conceit’. Wesley said that the expectation ‘[to be able] to rely on English in any meaningful or serious negotiation with an Asian counterpart is like agreeing to play poker with someone who has a mirror on the ceiling and can see your cards’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012). On top of this, other commentators such as Crystal (1997) and Graddol (2006) point out that, as the use of English increases around the world, the value of the ability to speak English decreases, diminishing and devaluing the employment marketability of monolingual English speakers in an increasingly globalising world. Even more concerning is the belief amongst other commentators, such as Wooldridge (2015), that the process of globalisation has only just started, leading us to the logical conclusion that the devaluation of English can only continue.

The belief that the triumph of English is a triumph for English-only speakers belies the very serious social and economic positions in which English monolingualism places its speakers in the context of globalisation. In the future, globalisation will lead to linguistic exchanges that are increasingly complex, made up of language exchanges that are composites of several languages, and include forms of English that are owned and controlled not by the roughly 350 million native speakers of English, but by the more than 1.5 billion speakers of English who speak it as an additional language (Crystal, 2000, p. 3), where the cultural norms of native speakers will not necessarily be the accepted norms of the majority of English speakers speaking ‘global English’ (Pennycook, 2007; Sharifian, 2009; Clyne & Sherifian, 2008). The characterization, therefore, of learning languages other than English as useless and time consuming, must be viewed through the spectacles of globalisation and the need for global VET graduates of the future to acquire greater linguistic and inter-cultural dexterity.

Background

In TAFE, particularly in New South Wales, LOTE in VET had a venerable past. In 1891 when Sydney Technical College opened its doors, French, German, Latin and Italian were taught (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1884-1914). In those days, English was not the international language it is today; in those days French and German took a more equal place alongside English as international languages in commerce and business and cultural exchanges. The post World War II
shift to English can be partly attributed to the Cold War and the meteoric rise of the USA to superpower status. The growth in the use, importance and prestige of English as a lingua franca, occurred because of British and US colonisation and growth. Other English speaking populations in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada rode the wave of this dominance, but it also affected them in another way: it made them insular and ‘deprived [them] of the motivation needed to enquire into the social, political and economic lives of non-English speaking societies using their languages and attending cultures as a means of connection’ (Buoro, 2015). Even in countries such as Canada and New Zealand, which have a policy of bilingualism, the English mother tongue populations remain largely monolingual. In Canada for example, two largely unilingual regions exist side-by-side with only 9.7 percent of Canadians outside Quebec claiming the mantle of bilingualism, whereas in French speaking Quebec, roughly 40 percent of the population is bilingual in French and English (Lepage and Corbeil, 2013).

The dominance of English has also affected Australia and countries like it, in one more way: as more and more people learn English as a second, third or forth language, the value of English as a marketable competency decreases; the value of English to English-only speakers devalues as more and more speakers of other languages acquire English as an additional skill, competing in the job marketplace with greater linguistic and cultural dexterity, than a monolingual English speaker possesses. As Graddol explains, ‘this may be the stage, now rapidly developing, where English becomes indispensable, a key basic skill for everyone. At this point it no longer provides competitive advantage’ (2013, p.107).

From the point of view of training a workforce capable of dealing with the cultural and linguistic demands of a globalising world, this is a concern. In Singapore, for example, which has a language policy of English plus mother tongue, and where in a little over two generations, the nation has gone from a situation where only 1.8% of the population spoke English, to one where 32.3% speak it as their home language today (Cavallaro & Chin, 2015), the issue of competition in language ability could not be starker: with every other competency being equal, the choice of whether to employ a multilingual VET graduate in hospitality or business, for example, or a monolingual one, is easy.

Although English is undeniably a lingua franca, it is not the only international language: Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, French and Russian can also lay claim to enormous territorial spheres of influence, where they, not English, are the dominant languages of international communication. In many parts of Africa, Asia, South and Central America, English is not the preferred language for international communication. For example, in countries that once formed part of the Soviet Empire, Russian and even Chinese are preferred to English as a means of international negotiation. Of the developing countries, it is only in regions that were once part of the British Empire, that English is the preferred second language used for global communication. My recent experience in Myanmar tells me that even though Burma fits securely into this last group, reforms that followed the military coup in 1962 led to the devaluation and virtual abandonment of English in the official and commercial life of the country. There is now a very lively discussion taking place in Myanmar about what roles English will play in the nation’s future, and which roles it will not (Win Aung, 2015).
The value of languages other than English and their future in Australian VET must be linked to our appreciation of these very complex international issues, if VET graduates who want to work abroad are to compete successfully in the international job marketplace.

Yet it is not only on the international scene, that VET graduates will need LOTE. Domestically too, there are some very good reasons for valuing the role that LOTE can play in preparing VET students for the future.

**Method**

In a case study I completed in 2014 (Buoro, 2014; 2015b), I investigated the value attributed to LOTE by students and teachers in the fields of tourism and business in Australia. A series of four one-hour focus groups, one each for tourism teachers and students, one for business students, and another for language teachers, were held. The size of each group varied from between 8 and 20, and the average group size was 11. Because of organisational imperatives, a focus group originally planned for business teachers had to be reorganised into four 20 minute phone interviews with individual business teachers. Although a proportion of respondents identified themselves as bilingual or multilingual, this was not recorded.

Participants were asked to describe the value they assigned to languages other than English in their vocational fields, as well as to the barriers and enablers to including LOTE in VET. By including interviews with representatives of the two relevant industry skills councils, a TAFE Directors Australia representative and an institute director, I was able to draw a picture of how LOTE was valued in VET and to come to an appreciation of the barriers and enablers to including LOTE in mainstream vocational courses.

**Findings and Discussion**

The findings informed me that the respondents, over time, had formed clear opinions about the value of languages in VET outside their own personal experience and that they could identify vocational areas where they felt languages other than English would be useful to other VET graduates. The respondents informed me that in their opinions, there were five main ways they perceived LOTE to have value in VET. These were, that the value of the language depended on the field of study and the student destination, otherwise, as one student put it, having a foreign language in your resume, would simply be an interesting fact. The respondents readily acknowledged the relationship between language and culture and that if the right language was studied, this would help in gaining a job or promotion. Teachers especially, but students too, were conscious of the notion that including LOTE in mainstream courses such as international business, logistics and tour guiding, would increase the marketability of those courses. Finally, the respondents identified the intrinsic value of languages: language is essential for human communication and cognition and distinguishes us from other animals. To quote Lehmann ‘The answer to the question concerning the value of language for mankind and, consequently for every human being is thus simple: LANGUAGE IS CONSTITUTIVE OF HUMANITY; without it, we would be less human’ (2006, p. 216). The intrinsic value of every language, which
respondents in the study identified, lies in their unique human quality: languages are identifiers: they mark one human being from another and give them purpose and a means of expression.

Both Lehmann and the respondents identified language as the scaffold on which our human dignity rests. It is the structure around which our thoughts, feelings and actions are expressed, described and transmitted.

In an economic sense, ‘a language is worth what those who speak it are worth’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 652). That is, the social, political and economic power that we assign to the group that speaks a language, correlates exactly to the value we apportion to that language. As English speakers, for example, we may hold the view that English is more or less valuable than say, Bunjalung, an Australian language spoken on the far north coast of New South Wales. Our view will depend on our connection with the people who speak that language, and our consequent estimation of the social, political and economic value of those people in relation to our own linguistic community’s. The value or worthwhileness we assign to languages other than English in VET is likewise a value judgment, which is determined largely by our own perceptions of the world; we classify the value of other languages in relation to our own known language, which for most of us is English. When determining the value of a language other than English in VET we are therefore compelled to confront our own preconceptions of these languages and of the people who speak them.

In my 2014 study welfare was one area in which respondents felt LOTE would have value. When we consider aged care for example, issues relating to aging and loss of second language, as Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds enter nursing homes or require home-help to live independently with dignity in the community, come to the fore. As people age, they revert to their first language and loose dexterity in their second language (Jacobson, 1941; Goral, 2004; Hansen & Chen, 2001). For both the carer and the cared for, this creates issues of equity and access, which can only equitably be overcome through the use of the client’s mother tongue. Respondents in my study rightly identified welfare as a vocational field where learning a language would benefit the student-graduate and their clients. The languages they felt would be relevant to VET included Arabic, Greek and Italian. To this list I propose I could add another 200 or more Australian community languages, that could add value to a VET course in welfare.

Another vocational area that was mentioned was hospitality. In the twelve months to June 2015 the total number of international visitors to Australia topped 6.6 million (Tourism Research Australia, 2015). With increasing globalisation, the role of hospitality employees in Australia has changed from dealing almost exclusively with a English-only speaking clientele, to one that is much more linguistically dynamic and demanding.

The USA, New Zealand and the UK are all in the top ten list of short-term visitor countries to Australia, but so is China at number 1, Singapore (number 5), Malaysia (number 6), India (number 7), Japan (number 8), South Korea (number 9), and Hong Kong (number 10). Indonesia, Germany and France make up the next few countries on the list. The imperative for VET institutions to train their graduates to provide the
hospitality and other services, such as real estate brokerage (Folkstone, n.d.) to short-term non-English speaking visitors, could not be clearer.

Providing high levels of service to visitors involves speaking with them in a language they understand, feel comfortable using and which allows them to feel they are getting the most out of their visit. It is essential that if Australia is to maintain and increase its share of international tourism, VET graduates must be able communicate effectively with millions of visitors annually to this country, who do not speak English, or do not speak it as their first language. In the study that I carried out (Buoro, 2014; 2015b), respondents identified ten languages important to hospitality students, including Mandarin, French, Hindi, Japanese and Korean.

Service Skills Australia (SSA), the industry skills council responsible for hospitality and tourism training packages, understood the importance of LOTE in VET. By 2002 they had commissioned research (O’Neill and Hatoss, 2003) to identify the foreign language and intercultural skills workers needed, and develop the foreign language competencies for their industry training packages. The report identified the importance of utilising the linguistic competence of the Australian multilingual population and devised a scaffold for developing LOTE competencies in tourism and hospitality.

Unwittingly perhaps, the researchers identified the importance of the spiraling effect of language acquisition. They understood, and this became apparent in the structure of the SSA LOTE units, that any amount of language was useful in vocational contexts. Their findings showed that simple functions, such as greeting and farewelling, describing the location of restrooms, and providing information about food, time and weather, were all important language functions when dealing with short-term overseas visitors in hospitality and tourism. The belief that in order for language to be useful in vocational contexts, it needs to be at a level of proficiency near native-speaker level, does not take into consideration that language needs and ability change with time, context and use (see for example Cook, 1995).

Similarly, business students and teachers and the industry skills council, Innovation and Business Skills Australia, all acknowledged the importance of languages other than English for vocational business graduates in areas as diverse as local and international business and customs brokering and logistics. They realised that relevance for LOTE in business depended entirely on the industry and field of employment. However, business teachers were in no doubt that acquiring a second language would benefit their students. Employers also place great weight on foreign language skills (Davies, 2000), particularly those that are tailored to vocational needs (Gemmel, Gemmel and Bruce, 2003).

However, a 1994 US study into the economic value of languages other than English in American business found that languages other than English in domestic American business contexts were invariably considered to be of low value and useful mainly for lower level employees in order to manage non-English speaking workers (García and Otheguy, 1994). The same was true in international business contexts, where non-Americans, who might have been educated in the US, were employed for their linguistic and intercultural skills and knowledge in place of Americans who despite their high levels of education, were not competent in languages apart from English.
(García and Otheguy, 1994, p.113). The affirmation that international and domestic American business, cannot rely entirely on English, despite its enormous growth as a global language, nor on the investment in English language teaching that non-English speaking countries have provided in order to carry out business, is salutary.

Earlier in this paper I alluded to the language policies Myanmar was using to control and direct language use in that country. Cultural identity similarly places controls on language use in various contexts. In a study that examined the use of English for business purposes in Latin America, it was found that despite the fact that the Latin American elite spoke English, ‘they have developed a sense of cultural identity that does not favor the use of English in trade and other contacts’ (Beneke, 1981). In the generation since Beneke made this assertion, the socio-political scene has changed enormously, but the question of whether English has displaced Spanish in Latin America for business and other contacts is a dubious one. In Europe too, English must work hand-in-hand with French and German as the languages of business.

The participants in the project I was involved with also identified the connection between language and culture, which is well documented (see for example Zou, 2012; Bergman, Watrous-Rodriguez & Chalkley, 2008). Students and teachers saw and understood the connection between the two, but disturbingly, two industry representatives believed that cultural skills could be taught independently of language, with one representative completely questioning the connection between language and culture. The belief that language and culture are not connected is erroneous (see for example Kramsch, 2004), and the provision of training in cultural skills without recourse to language will result in a shallow understanding of the superficial elements of intercultural skills such as body language and gestures.

What remains unspoken and misunderstood without an understanding of the language, is the deep structure of beliefs, values, biases, prejudices, experiences, fears, dreams and feelings that people have. To quote one respondent: ‘There is a part [of culture] that you can see and a part of it that you can’t. You know, you cannot learn the most important part of it, which is the assumptions that people have, you can’t see that without the language’ (Buoro, 2014, p.15). Without recourse to LOTE, VET graduates in a globalising world will be left rudderless, unable to navigate the complex passages, for which language and intercultural skills and knowledge provide the means.

The research also showed that in the respondents’ opinions, the greatest barriers to including languages in vocational courses, were attitudinal. There were of course other barriers, related to poor student administration practices and institutional policies, as well as the high cost of these courses. High course costs came about because of early adoption of a commercial model for LOTE courses at the institute where the study took place. Perhaps this policy position reflects another attitudinal barrier, that is ‘unwillingness by institutes and skills councils to see general education, including LOTE, as part of vocational education and training’ (Buoro, 2014, p.18), thereby making the decision to commercialise LOTE courses, easier.
Conclusion and Future Directions

The effects of globalisation domestically and internationally must influence policy decisions about the future of LOTE in Australian VET. In no small part, the question of what shapes stakeholder views about LOTE in VET needs to be understood, because attitudinal barriers to including LOTE in VET risk controlling the policy agenda and disallowing discussion about what the future of VET without LOTE would look like in the context of a globalising world.

As stakeholders, we need to understand the extent to which, if any, attitudinal barriers limit the integration of LOTE in mainstream vocational courses and how this would effect VET graduates who want to work overseas in areas such as business, hospitality or tourism, or those who want to work with culturally and linguistically diverse clients in Australia. We also need to enquire into what has shaped these perceptions, how policy decisions are made, and how those responsible for policy see the future of LOTE for VET graduates. We need to do this because languages other than English offer the means for everyone, including to those of us in the VET sector, to ease our way through the narrow passages and tight corners that globalisation will subject us all to.

When writing first appeared five-and-a-half-thousand years ago, it was not used to discuss relationships, to record hopes or dreams, or even to debate politics. It was used commercially to list the items carried on the backs of camels from one part of the known world to another in order to make commerce a more secure prospect. As much as it is cultural, the power of language has always been an economic one. As VET educators, researchers and policy makers, our continued failure to recognise the fundamental issues concerning language and globalisation, will increasingly disadvantage the people who have entrusted their learning journey and their futures to us.

As the world settles in to globalisation, we as individuals will have little control over the enormous and inevitable social, political and economic disruptions that will impact on our societies. As VET researchers, practitioners and policy-makers, we have the capacity to question our assumptions and our motives about language in general and about LOTE in particular. We can enable a more inclusive, dynamic and rewarding global future for our students, or we can choose to follow the path devoid of languages into unchartered foreign waters. In either case, we must all begin our forward journey with a simple question: is English enough?
Reference list


New South Wales Department of Public Instruction (1884-1914). Calendar. Sydney.


