

# Martin East: Value of Language Learning



Associate Professor Martin East from the Faculty of Education

**This article was written by Associate Professor Martin East from the Faculty of Education in response to an expression of opinion in the media that getting school students to learn an additional language is a waste of time, except for those who are included in a bilingual immersion teaching context. Without being surrounded by the language and compelled to use it for a considerable period each day, they would learn only the basics, which they would soon forget.**

I have some sympathy for the “use it or lose it” position. It could be argued that limiting students’ exposure to language learning to a few short lessons a week for a couple of years, while for the remainder of their time they are immersed in English, is effectively achieving very little. But I do not buy into the argument that this makes school programmes in additional languages a waste of time.

My own initial exposure to languages was as just one school subject among many. Nevertheless I learnt a lot. If you now put me in a context where I am required to speak French or German, I will rise to the occasion. This does not mean I will do so unflinchingly, but I will do so effectively. This is because I am able to tap into the language I acquired, starting in school and then through university. To counter “use it or lose it” I would argue that speaking another language is somewhat akin to riding a bicycle – it’s arguably a skill you never forget.

I am mindful of a conclusion reached by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry, a committee set up in 1998 to review the UK’s capability in languages other than English, and to project its future language needs. Under the heading “languages for the next generation”, the final report asserted “English alone is not enough.” It then went on to argue that “in a world where bilingualism and plurilingualism are commonplace, monolingualism implies inflexibility, insensitivity and arrogance.” This is just as relevant to any country in which English is the majority language, including New Zealand. To rely on those who have been fortunate enough to have been brought up in bilingual homes or to have benefited from bilingual immersion programmes is essentially to “pass the buck”.

Also, the purpose of learning another language is not just to learn the language. It has to do with being confronted with what it means to be “different” and “other”, and learning how to appreciate and relate to that “otherness”.

In the New Zealand context, this makes learning an additional language an important way of realising the vision, values and key competencies that form the foundation of our school curriculum, which encourages students to value diversity of cultures, languages and heritages, equity, fairness, social justice and community, and to relate to a diverse range of people in a variety of contexts. Languages open the door to achieving these laudable aims. This adds significant value to school languages programmes.

Of course, one means of meeting New Zealand’s language needs could be to rely on those who, by virtue of immersion, have reached, and can maintain, a high level of proficiency in the language in question. I believe our languages programmes in schools should be doing all they can to enable students to achieve high levels of proficiency in additional languages, and I certainly believe that, when measured against other nations, the skills in additional languages that many of our young people reach would have to be rated as “could do better”, indeed, “could do much better”. Nevertheless, I would not want to rob any of New Zealand’s young people of the opportunity to learn an additional language. This is not only because of the “value added” that learning a language can bring. It is also because even the most basic attempts to communicate with others in their own languages are appreciated by the hearers. Let us counter the assumptions of inflexibility, insensitivity and arrogance that only speaking English communicates, by encouraging our young people to learn an additional language.

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