

## The Quiet Revolution

### Language Teaching in Schools and the Responsibility of the Universities

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The announcement of a National Language Policy recommending the compulsory teaching of languages other than English in all primary schools will bring public policy up to date with private practices that began fourteen years ago. It also raises a number of questions which will cast shadows for several years to come over what otherwise may be a brave new linguistic world. These questions are of crucial concern to Faculties of Arts in all our universities. It is to them, and their graduates, that this article is addressed.

In 1973 members of the German Department of the University of Sydney began pilot classes in German in a number of Sydney primary schools. These spread rapidly and spawned a host of similar projects of varying respectability throughout New South Wales. Other pilot programmes began in other states at about the same time. The haphazard nature of this development understandably caused serious concern among professional language teachers, who saw the lack of professionalism of some of the schemes as subverting the ends they were intended to promote and, indeed, as possibly accelerating the latter-day decline in the prestige of languages as academic disciplines.

Many of these misgivings must still hold and they are lent new urgency by the prospect of changes affecting the whole primary system, with implications for the general promotion of literacy which ultimately must flow through to university level. The purpose of this article is to examine the key problems in the light of two quite different projects: the German teaching project at Paddington Public School, which has been running since 1973 and may be seen as what may be done practically in any State School; and the multi-lingual teaching at the International Grammar School, Sydney, which could serve as a model for similar private ventures. Both projects are now well established and offer convenient vantage points for taking a critical look at some of the wares still being cried in the community-language market place and for examining the many apprehensions to which these have given rise. The consideration of language study as part of the development of general literacy is implicit in this.

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I start with two propositions for which no apology is made, despite the shrillness of counter-assertions from the Education Department of New South Wales.:

- In the early 'seventies the Wyndham scheme led to a steep decline in the linguistic competence of all but a handful of students entering first year university.
- This was not an isolated phenomenon. It was aggravated by the effects of the much earlier abandonment of the systematic teaching of English language in primary schools.

Those responsible for this latter policy argued – and still argue – that the old 'parsing and analysis' grind served no useful purpose, that it increased neither the power nor the accuracy of children's expression, and that something called 'communication', apparently vested with a new mystical meaning, was what language was all about. The disease quickly infected foreign language teaching, and 'communication' (quoted to allow for its occult connotations) took the place of grammar in its widest sense.

Language teachers have always, of course, believed that language is a means of communication. They have regarded it as equally axiomatic that there are levels of communication, from the crudest to the most subtle and sophisticated; and that, as with any other discipline, the heights can be attained only by those who understand the mechanics of what they are doing and develop the powers of manipulation and discrimination which this understanding confers. They realise that splitting an infinitive may be only aesthetically objectionable at times, but that at other times it may lead to saying something not intended. They recognise that at the level of usage to say 'the judge was disinterested' means, to those duly schooled, that he was doing his job properly; whereas to the new 'communicators' it might mean that His Honour couldn't care less and shouldn't be on the bench.

The German Department's pilot primary classes sprang from the conviction that 'communication' was a Bad Thing and, further, that there was a large element of tawdry sham in expounding Goethe and Kleist to university students incapable of understanding a sentence of their works – and pretending this was serious tertiary education. The students resorted either to reading the works in translation or to regurgitating their lecture notes, liberally larded with scraps of half-digested secondary literature, so that blind (or desperate) faith in received wisdom took the place of the more difficult and rewarding grappling with primary evidence. Second-handness became the order of the day.

Since the study of languages in the high school had clearly fallen into neglectment and low price, the solution appeared to lie in moving much farther down the system, into primary and infants classes, in the hope that, at worst, sheer

length of exposure might remedy what a few periods a week over five or six years manifestly could not. (There were, of course, other hopes and these will be treated later.)

The high school dilemma was exacerbated by the fact that languages, in the golden past, had been almost the exclusive preserve of selective high schools, and even then, in the case of German, usually available only to a small group of children who had already demonstrated high competence in French. With the spread of comprehensive high schools and the decline in the selective system, however, language teaching came to be offered to pupils of a much wider ability range. There was nothing wrong with this, but it created problems which linger stubbornly on. The hard core of highly trained language teachers, once concentrated in a few schools, was now spread thinly over the whole system while, for a long time, teaching methods, course content, and ultimate expectations remained much the same. The public examination system called the shots, and its inflexibility led to deep divisions between those whose main concern was the preservation of academic standards and those who were concerned that children who, having conscientiously followed courses that were beyond their capacity, should at the end of the day be stigmatised as failures.

The first consequence was a watering down of marking standards; the second, still with us, a watering down of course content. The solution – a division of the Year 12 examination into University Entrance and Leaving Certificate – has been so well canvassed that it need not be debated again here. The fact is that it hasn't happened, and the uneasy compromise that has resulted palpably has affected what reasonably can be done in first year university courses.

It is, for example, possible to do extremely well in 2-unit German without writing a word of the language. In the more exacting 3-unit paper examiners are expressly forbidden to give extra credit to students who write their comprehension answers in German rather than English. In the 2-Unit paper a student can gain full marks in one section for memorising the content of articles in a teeny-bopper magazine: e.g., which pop-singer sang which song at which rock festival? The reasons for this 'magazine option' probably were to introduce students to current popular language and to give less able students short, not too intellectually demanding, passages that might interest them. The linguistic objective is quite worthy, but it is not reflected in the way in which the subject is examined. It is, on the other hand, debatable whether or not the memorising of useless ephemera should play a part in education at any level.

The fact remains that many able students choose the option because they can gain full marks in it, and to say that they have understood the language to answer the questions is nonsense. Because of the importance of the examination teachers very properly want to ensure that their pupils do well in it, and a translation of the

minimal amount of German involved is very easily memorised. The linguistic benefits are nowhere apparent. Many such students – this is cold fact – come up to the university still unable to decline the definite article or to distinguish between it and the parallel forms used as relative pronouns. And at this point we start them reading Goethe and Kleist.

The absurdity of this position led us back into the infants school. Strengthened by the volume of jargon-ridden dilettantism currently being peddled in the public system in the name of educational reform, the conviction has gained ground among many parents whose children are its victims that really progressive thinking in education today lies in turning back the clock, in some areas at least. The new National Language Policy may offer the opportunity to start at grass-roots level – the teaching of language to infants. If its full benefits are to be felt and to flow on through secondary to tertiary education, then it is imperative that it should be developed as a serious educational exercise and not merely as a pious obeisance before the altar of multi-culturalism, improperly understood.

Achieving this end means much more active participation in the schools by those who have hitherto been their most trenchant critics: those academics whose myopic inertia has allowed the jargon-mongers to inherit the educational earth.

From the experience of the Paddington project and, more recently, the International Grammar School, and from the debates to which they have given rise, a number of points of contention have emerged. They are:

- The ‘right age’ to start
- The teaching language.
- Course content
- The place of formal grammar in the development of general literacy.
- Speaking and writing
- Language maintenance.

These will be discussed in turn.

### *The ‘right age’*

It is often argued that it is pointless to begin teaching languages to very small children because they don’t learn as ‘efficiently’ as older ones, who are capable of understanding and applying abstract rules. The argument is patently preposterous. It confuses learning about the language with learning the language itself. Apart from the fact that much language learning is non-conceptual, one has only to observe how much more authentically and quickly our small migrant children pick up English than their older brothers and sisters, let alone their parents, to realise that ‘efficiency’ of learning involves much more than the ability to reason abstractly.

Other objections to the German classes at Paddington and to the whole concept of the International Grammar School have been, that the early learning of a second language leads to an indefinable malady called 'linguistic interference', and that it retards the children's 'concept development'. No credible neurological evidence is ever advanced for these assertions and empirical experience points unmistakably in the opposite direction. By 'linguistic interference' the objectors evidently mean the kind of Milwaukee Deutsch spoken by people who have been badly taught or brought up in an environment in which languages have been indiscriminately mixed. If 'concept development' means what it appears to mean, the available evidence suggests that this is promoted rather than prejudiced by the properly directed early learning of a second language.

The simplest answer to the question of the right age is to be found at the purely bread-and-butter level. Most practical language teachers will agree that, if they were to pin-point the major obstacle in the way of their students' understanding of and expressing themselves in a second language, it would be simply that the students don't know enough words. Without words, there's not much they can say.

There is nothing new or profound in the notion that the longer you do something seriously, the better you will become at it; and the uncluttered minds of little children pick up and retain words at a phenomenal rate. They do not need to be taught pronunciation; they acquire it authentically, rapidly, and with the correct intonation by imitation. They do not even need to be taught to read a second language which uses Latin script; if they begin a few months behind their learning to read English, they make the necessary phonetic adjustments with surprisingly little guidance.

Further, at a more sophisticated level, children appear to have an instinctive sense for inflectional systems, possibly bound up with their talent for mimicry. For example, when they first begin to learn German verbs they forget most of the words themselves after the first lesson, but when questioned at the following one they will almost infallibly use the English verb with the correct -e inflection; and this automatic connection of pronoun with ending continues as their knowledge expands. Similarly, the use of accusative and dative after prepositions, and the fluctuation between the two in some cases, are things that small children pick up by ear long before any understanding of the principles involved is possible. When you explain the rules later at the appropriate age you are simply telling them why they do things that they are already doing with confidence. The reverse procedure, commonly used with 12-year-old beginners, of teaching the rules and then expecting them to apply them, leads to difficulties which only the most competent children overcome.

Closely related to these matters is the vexed question of whether we should use English or the second language in teaching.

## *The teaching language*

The 'direct method' controversy first surfaced in New South Wales schools in the 'twenties and has been debated sporadically ever since. It tends to generate great passion.

One thing must be said at the outset, and said with no intention to give offence: with few exceptions, even teachers with excellent language majors behind them, if they have not spent a considerable time in the appropriate country, are incapable of standing in front of a class for 40 minutes and teaching French or German (or whatever) in the target language. This is not criticism, it is a fact of life. They may be competent teachers who have achieved first rate results under the system which produced them (and most of us), but the requisite easy fluency is not there. Student and teacher exchanges are already chipping away at the problem, but the process is slow.

There is, however, another equally practical side to the question. Given the sort of syllabus that has to be followed and the limited time available to cover it – three or four periods weekly in Years 7-10, six or nine in Years 11-12 – it is questionable whether or not direct method teaching is economical at this level, no matter what one thinks of it generally. Why spend endless hours miming out the meaning of new words or grammatical concepts when a few well-chosen English sentences would achieve the end in a fraction of the time and with more certain results?

This is a pertinent question susceptible of many answers according to the time available, the background of the pupils and teachers and so on. The syllabus and the public examinations, both of which lay heavy emphasis on background and 'knowledge about' the language and its speakers, are also weighty considerations. What the promised new language policy offers is an escape from these restrictions into a world in which time pressure and artificial goals no longer apply, but which will require a thoroughgoing reorientation of our thinking.

When the first pilot classes at infants level in Sydney began some were staffed by secondary teachers with no preliminary training in infants work. One such class of 5- and 6-year-olds was opened with the words: 'there are three genders in the German Language and you use a different form of the definite article for each.' Rather as in Coleridge's anecdote of his country vicar father, quoting Pindar in his Greek to congregations of bemused rustics, the children listened to this unassailable truth wide-eyed and open-mouthed and the class collapsed within a month. The bull had been grabbed imprudently by the foot; but there is a lesson there for anyone who prefers not to be gored.

Irrespective of one's views of direct method at secondary level, it is the natural and efficient approach with very small children and, if pursued consistently, does away

with the intermediate 'translation' stage which bedevils language learning at secondary level. This is not to denigrate translation, which is the most sophisticated and difficult of all the language skills; but it is an art which few ever learn to practise with refinement and those who do must be so proficient in both languages as to avoid the pitfall of interpreting the one in terms of the other. Secondary teachers have for decades paid coy lip-service to the goal of 'thinking' in the foreign language, while knowing full well that it cannot be achieved in the conditions under which they must teach. It is here that the virtues of the early start and their implications for method become most readily apparent.

If you begin at pre-school (as at the International Grammar School) or in kindergarten (as at Paddington) – i.e. at the pre-literate stage in both cases – you can follow the natural order in which children acquire their native languages (comprehension, speaking, reading, writing) and you can develop them, though more narrowly and with less sophistication, not far behind their progress in English. With a few months' practice a skilled teacher can develop the art of explaining new material as it occurs without lapsing into English, in the full knowledge that the time so spent is all grist to the mill. Explaining the language in the language means hearing and understanding more and more of it, expanding the range of expression and, in fact, achieving all those ends which are impossible of achievement at secondary level.

We all know from frustrating experience that the most difficult thing to do under typical high school conditions is to teach children to speak the foreign languages we profess. Some of them learn to read and write with commendable competence; but even with the much heavier emphasis on aural/oral work in more recent syllabuses, none progress much past the set question-set answer level of active speech or even begin to be able to hold their own in a normal conversation conducted at normal speed, even within very limited areas of content. This, again, is not criticism either of teachers or of pupils. The skill simply can't be developed in the time available.

If learning begins seven years before and if the language to be acquired is spoken constantly in the classroom, the position is quite different. You can speak at normal speed and with normal intonation from the outset, gearing vocabulary and construction to the children's level (as you must also do, to a lesser extent, when speaking English to them). As they pick up words and phrases they use them at the appropriate time and this process continues by multiplication rather than addition. The central teaching problem is manipulating situations so that the children can use their limited knowledge of the new language most of the time. There is a lengthy 'pidgin' period, in which they throw in English words where they don't know the foreign ones, often inflecting them as though they were, in fact, words from the other language. This is no cause for alarm. It is certainly not the dreaded spectre of 'linguistic interference'. The children's power of expression is simply lagging behind what they want to express (and can now express in English). They are barely

conscious of the fact that they are speaking another language and the gaps become less frequent as their vocabularies expand. The point is perhaps best made by noting that the process also applies in reverse: for example, the present Year 6 at Paddington habitually refer to the Mediterranean as 'the Mittelmeer' because they happen to have done all their Geography in German. To suggest that this springs from, or causes, some deep-seated psychological malaise is grotesque. It amounts to no more than calling something a 'thingummy' if the right word doesn't occur to you at the right time.

### *Course content*

The question of course content is intimately bound up with that of the teaching language and is also of critical importance. The premises are again so different from those of the high school as to dictate a wholly different approach. Kindergarten children have little or no conception of nationality, though some may know the words that describe it; nor is the fact that different people in different countries speak different languages and have different customs anything but a vague something that they hear adults talking about from time to time.

These children use language to talk about their own immediate preoccupations and it is on this footing that we must meet them. It is of passing architectural interest to know that the typical Black Forest house is built of double brick with a steeply sloping roof to unburden itself of surplus snow – as generations of Year 7 students have learnt to their edification from a still extant German primer – but 5-year-olds are as supremely indifferent to such scraps of information as our generation was to the penchant for gardening of the pen of our French aunt.

Talk to them, however, about their dogs and cats and dolls and about who fell over and skinned his knee in the playground and who pushed him and you are immediately in business. You are also teaching much more frequently used vocabulary and, if you construct your sentences properly and use judicious repetition, drilling the basic constructions in a way which is much more likely to lead to their active use.

Once children's interest in the new language is engaged in this way it is a small and natural step to begin using it to teach parts of the school curriculum. Mathematics is an excellent vehicle for promoting 'thinking' in the new tongue. If the concepts are taught in parallel with their being taught in English, quite complex mental problems can soon be given to the class which produce immediate answers – right or wrong – in the target language: a sure sign that all the thinking has been done in that language. This is also part of their everyday life and therefore far less likely to be seen as some exotic chore. It continues to spread their vocabulary over the whole range of their interests and of their potential future reading Time, which is the enemy



in high school, is here on one's side. The child still has 13 years of schooling ahead and there is not yet an examination syllabus which dictates that so many things, often only obscurely related to language, are covered in so many weeks.

Where the organisation of lessons is concerned there are also radical differences between the infants and secondary approaches. The well planned lesson (exposition, examples, repetition, final summary) is just not on with 5-year-olds, who often dictate – and fruitfully dictate – the course of the lesson themselves. This is not to say that we needn't know where we are going; but the neat compartmentalising of information is neither necessary nor practical at this age – if, indeed, it is really desirable at any stage of language learning. Vocabulary lists have very properly been anathema even at secondary level for some decades now. For the same reason, the teaching of parts of the body, days of the week, members of the family . . . through dreary repetition in arid contexts, which lead on to the next set of dreary repetitions in equally arid contexts, is the death of productive teaching to infants classes.

The setting of goals by the term rather than by the week, not to speak of by the lesson, has a number of advantages at this level which are no longer available a few years later. If the vocabulary and constructions to be taught are carefully built into every aspect of the lessons – Arithmetic, Geography, stories, songs, games – so that they recur repeatedly in contexts in which they are naturally used, the learning may be slower than in the intensive repetition lesson, but it will ultimately be more permanent and authentically 'usable'. Furthermore, the fund of knowledge acquired will be greater. Artificial repetition fixes only the limited material repeated. Spaced, unobtrusive repetition, which exploits the love of little children for chanting, constantly reliving familiar situations and the like, gathers around the basic things taught a host of additional material customarily associated with them, and this is language learning in the true sense. The age of receptivity to these techniques is limited: what is meat and drink to infants becomes cause for embarrassment, inhibition and downright resistance in adolescents. The moral is that we should do the right thing at the right time.

The sophistication of what is taught increases naturally as the children progress up the school, and the degree to which teachers need to monitor their presentation of it diminishes. The time arrives in about Year 4 where translation can be introduced in a limited way to promote rapid understanding without vitiating the now well entrenched habit of 'thinking' in the second language. By now, with growing awareness and grasp of concepts, the children have begun looking at each language more analytically, noting differences and being curious about them. It is pedagogical common sense to make capital of that curiosity and this leads inevitably to the formal analysis of language.

## *The place of formal grammar*

The teaching of grammar, because of the continuing controversy surrounding it, must occupy a central position in this paper. Like any form of abstract reasoning, the learning and application of grammatical rules is difficult for less able children and there is some force in the argument that ramming them down their throats in the style of the 'thirties, as an isolated study only tenuously connected with oral and written expression, produces an aversion from analysing language generally.

But the fact that something may have been badly taught in the past is probably the worst possible reason for abandoning it for all eternity. It says nothing about the value of the thing itself; and the havoc wrought by the 'communicators', possibly better described as communicants, or partakers in some new sacred rite which converts dross into gold by as yet imperfectly understood processes – the havoc wrought by them in the standards of literacy of a whole generation testifies to that truth.

Children, in fact, find the apparatus of language, when properly taught, as fascinating as they find that of any other aspect of the natural world; and there is no aspect of the natural world which is closer to them or more vital to their progress and well-being than speech and writing. When grammar becomes the springboard for the examination of linguistic change, the uses and misuses of words, the study of etymologies and the insights into social conditions and changes that these can give us, it acquires a significance over and above its primary value in increasing and refining their range of expression. And this study can begin at an elementary level at a very early age.

At Paddington and at the International Grammar School we have found that teaching of the parts of speech and their functions can begin late in Year 2 (i.e. with seven and eight year olds). The touchstone is curiosity. When the children begin to ask why certain things happen – e.g. in German, why *der* becomes *den, des, dem* – the time is ripe to begin explaining.

The ultimate point – and space precludes any outlining of the intermediate steps – is that mastery of the notions of accusative, genitive and dative not only explains some things which the children have been doing correctly for some time, but puzzling over, it also gives them the tool for the infinite extension of that ability by manipulating any new material learned outside the familiar contexts of the classroom. One of the commonest criticisms of direct method as practised by some is that it sets itself the impossible task of teaching the foreign language, with very little exposure, by thousands of individual examples, requiring a Herculean feat of rote learning. But using the language to teach the language and at the same time teaching the rules by which it is manipulated are not mutually exclusive activities: they are in all respects complementary, as they are in the mother tongue.

The determining factors, mundane but crucial, are the age of beginning and the number of years available for teaching. If, at infants level, you teach certain commonly occurring constructions by rote – e.g. those involving modal verbs and dependent infinitives – the children quickly begin fitting new vocabulary as it is learnt into the strange framework without being given rules for doing so. By Year 4 you can (e.g. in German) give the rule for the placing of the infinitive; and the conscious application of the rule then leads to a more rapid increase in the use of the construction, with consequent widening of the range of expression. Once you have thus shown what knowledge of a rule can do, you have established with the children the respectability of rules generally.

This view, however, is officially contested and some attention must be paid to the counter-argument. The present syllabus for Years 7-10 in English contains the statement:

The view that systematic training in the mechanics of formal English improves students' writing is rejected. Research has generally shown that there is no casual connection between teaching students a course in grammar and improving their ability to write.

When an ex cathedra departmental pronouncement begins, as so many of them do, with that glibly portentous absolution from all future sins, 'the research shows . . .', one knows that an ill wind is blowing and is well counselled to caution. What research, done by whom, where, and with what controls and objectives? The research, which is nearly always thus formulated as a monolithic entity, unless spelt out in great detail and with all necessary reservations, amounts to no more than a naive article of faith behind which its proponents shelter their prejudices, rather like born-again fundamentalists hiding behind their Bibles.

When rationalised prejudices of this kind become institutionalised, the damage they can do is incalculable. Although the Education Department has dropped its former absolute veto on the teaching of grammar, many school inspectors still frown on it and, in some cases, report unfavourably on teachers who still teach it. The majority of those now emerging from training colleges have had little or no training in the formal analysis of language and have absorbed the attitude that it is faintly disreputable without themselves having the background necessary to test the objections to it critically. Prejudice begets prejudice and error becomes self-perpetuating. A part of the two projects here under discussion has been to confront younger teachers with the, to them, ultimately blasphemous proposition that grammar matters. The test has been elementary: Does it matter whether you use or omit commas before defining relative pronouns? Even when the exotic terms are explained the failure rate is one hundred percent. When one then points out that use or omission can lead to gross change of meaning – i.e. a failure to 'communicate' – the result is devastating. One feels as though, like Nietzsche, one has just killed God.

An optimistic portent for the future is that the point is generally taken and leads to a painful revision of premises.

Evidence like this – startling when you consider its implications for the education system – points unequivocally in one direction: progress in education for literacy today consists in turning back the clock; tarting up the hands, perhaps, but ineluctably turning them back. To be reactionary in this is to be a true revolutionary; but the task of undoing the creeping slovenliness of decades is daunting. It will take years to accomplish and then only with persistence and the public organisation of kindred spirits. The simple example just quoted demonstrates that we are not talking merely of the importance of the grasp of grammatical concepts for the teaching of foreign languages. It is no less important for the promotion of precision and refinement in the mother tongue. Appeals to the authority of ‘the’ research will do nothing to lay to rest the misgivings of those of us who are confronted daily with the problems of children from semi-literate or non-English speaking homes, whose difficulties with the language will never be overcome unless someone teaches them ‘why’ certain things are wrong and others right. Similarly, even those who have grown up in reasonably literate homes will never realise their full potential as users of the language unless we engage their interest in how it works, with the consequent extension of their power to manipulate it.

### *Speaking and writing*

By the time children who began their second language learning at or about age 5 reach Year 7 certain assumptions can be made about them which would mean a complete re-thinking and diversifying of current syllabuses. These are:

- They already pronounce the language properly, understand it spoken at normal speed and have great facility in the set question-set answer type of conversation.
- Within strict limits they are capable of free, if frequently incorrect, conversation.
- They can write reasonably correctly within certain confines, are comfortable with basic grammatical concepts like case, and therefore are in a position to develop their writing skill rapidly.
- They can read material commensurate with the interests of their age group, though with simpler constructions and a narrower range of vocabulary and idiom than would be found in unedited texts for native speakers. More independent work habits and the use of dictionaries should, however, make such books readily accessible to them.
- They will have covered in the normal course of events most of the civilisation and cultural background material at present mandatory in secondary syllabuses.

These assumptions apply to the Paddington project, where from Kindergarten to Year 6, at least three half-hour lessons per week have been given, supplemented by regular homework. The more elaborate International Grammar School scheme has not yet been operating long enough to determine precisely how it will proceed from Year 7; but the fact that infants children are already using the text books used at their level in the countries concerned indicates that that practice will continue with little modification at secondary level.

It is as well here to show in outline the stages by which the position set out above is reached. Some work in word recognition is done in Kindergarten but the emphasis is otherwise entirely oral: a largely passive vocabulary is built up covering all aspects of the children's day and simple arithmetical concepts are developed parallel to their work in English. From about half way through Year 1 (five-six year-olds) reading of connected texts begins and the foreign culture is introduced. The children are by now taking sufficient interest in the evening television news to follow the weather reports and the more sensational news items. It is then no great matter to talk to them about these things in the second language. They are also developing concepts of time and space so that, using a map of the world, one can relate Australia to the country whose language they are learning, the seasonal differences and so on. This covers much of the work now done in junior high school. By the time they reach Year 6 their command of the spoken language exceeds that of all but a few School Certificate candidates and probably that of most Higher School Certificate candidates as well. In addition, they have ranged over the whole area of their daily activities in aural/oral and written work and have read a selection of doctored books of similar content to those they have read in English.

The consequences of this for Year 7 and, eventually, for first year university are not far to seek. If syllabuses are revised to cater for the better pupils so prepared, they will already be reading 'serious' literature in Year 7 and expanding that reading as they progress to the Higher School Certificate: that is, they will be following courses different in scope, but not vastly different in kind, from those they follow in English. They will also need teachers capable of developing their oral/aural skills at the same pace as these were developed in the primary school. When they enter university they will be equipped in all respects to follow genuinely tertiary level courses, whereas these at present contain a large, though generally unacknowledged, element of pretence.

If the promise held out by the new National Language Policy is to bear fruit, farsighted planning is a priority. If this is not done and the policy is seen to fail, it will be generations before it is revived. Consequently, the universities can no longer afford to ignore or to patronise what goes on at the other end of the educational scale: the genuineness of what can be done in Arts I is heavily dependent on what happens in the pre-literate and primary classes. What many of us regard as something of a crisis in literacy at present has been brought about by just such neglect. It has been

slow to build up and it will be slow to disappear, but the opportunity to do something about it is with us now. If the solutions are left to departmental ideologues we can look forward to nothing but a compounding of past felonies, smeared over with that thin veneer of respectability always conferred by 'the' research.

### *Language maintenance*

It is appropriate to look finally at some of the pitfalls in the way of the promised renaissance. These have been dug slowly and have produced attitudes and practices in the younger generation of language teachers (English is included here as a language) which need urgent revision. They are exemplified in the syllabus statement quoted above. The principle implicit in it has been widely and uncritically accepted as one of the eternal verities, and this attitude can be reversed only by a patient process of persuasion, founded on more solidly based empirical observation in ordinary classroom conditions over a period of many years than can ever be provided by the clinical and often suspect conditions under which 'the' research has been conducted.

At the core of the problem is the decay in the passion for exactitude which was once taken as read as a central objective of language teaching. That this passion degenerated in some quarters into desiccated pedantry is one of the factors which caused the systematic study of grammar to fall into disrepute. One extreme characteristically generates its opposite, and the result was the adoption of the doctrine 'grammar doesn't matter', the guileless assumption being that most children grow up hearing the language correctly spoken about them and don't need to know why one said what. For those who did want to know a nebulous entity called 'functional grammar' was introduced, which consisted of writing 'I seen it' and 'I done it' on the board and asking: 'What's wrong with that?'

The communicants would have to answer: 'Nothing.' After all, we all know what's meant and there appears to be no ambiguity involved. Apart from the fact that this approach, like the misconceived direct method teaching mentioned above, replaces the teaching of principles with the inherently absurd attempt to teach by an infinite number of examples, it rests upon an underlying fallacy. The fact that, at the crudest level of expression, a 'mistake', no matter how jarring on the ear, may not distort meaning, doesn't mean that a mistake that is the same in kind will not distort meaning at another level. Split infinitives and failure to use the possessive case before a gerund are cases in point. Against this the argument is advanced: 'Such constructions occur rarely, seldom lead to misunderstanding, and can't be taught to the average child in any case; so why bother?' Pursued to its absurd extreme this argument would reduce language to three monosyllables meaning food, drink and sex, thus ensuring the survival and propagation of the race and carrying the 'doesn't matter' attitude to its logical conclusion.

What this school of thought really maintains is that public education is directed only at ensuring minimal literacy for those incapable of achieving anything higher and that it has no responsibility towards those whose needs are more demanding and who may – sinister thought! – distinguish themselves in some sphere if given the chance. Applied to other fields the attitude would abolish the teaching of the differential calculus because so few ever need or can understand it, and would admonish the music teacher not to correct the aspiring violinist who plays B-flat instead of B-natural. After all, it's nearly right and we all know what it should have sounded like anyway.

The essential pedagogical point at issue is that, once children are told 'grammar doesn't matter', 'spelling doesn't matter' they rapidly reach the stage where nothing much matters. Indolent and slovenly habits of mind carry over into other areas. You are well back down the road to that ignorance which public education (one would have thought) was originally intended to combat.

This is the background against which the present position of languages in the schools must be seen.

The point has been reached where foreign language study in any rigorous sense attracts the gibe of 'elitism' (a term commonly confounded with the pursuit of quality and excellence because it assumes that some things do, in fact, matter). This has led to one of the most extraordinary recent developments in New South Wales education. The community languages movement was firmly entrenched by the late 'seventies and finding favour on all sides because it was 'relevant' (and had sundry less reputable political side-benefits which were not so loudly trumpeted). Funding was made available through tied Federal grants to help put classes in these languages on a workable basis during school time. The communicants, uneasy at the prospect that a form of study repugnant to their thinking should be slipping into the curriculum through the back door, solved the problem by a master stroke of the jargon-monger's art which already occupies an honoured place in Ed-speak. Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, Greek, Italian, they said, were 'Community Languages', therefore 'relevant' and respectable and eligible for funding. French and German, on the other hand, were 'foreign languages', and therefore neither relevant, nor respectable, nor eligible for funding, and to be kept out of the primary schools at all costs.

Unhappily at this point that prince of heretics the Commonwealth Statistician, whether from malice or from an old-fashioned attachment to factual accuracy, let it be known that German was the third most widely spoken language among our migrant communities (though not, you will recall, a community language); and the deviousness of the communicants became apparent. It was not the foreignness of French and German which disturbed them, but their association with a tradition in the schools, no matter how far gone in decay, of academic rigour which was 'elitist'

and the preserve of that minimal percentage of able students whose right to any form of education was (in any case) suspect.

After much dodging and weaving and an abortive attempt to redefine foreignness, some funding was forthcoming for German. But by then a new concept had entrenched itself, which is the final business of this article and perhaps the greatest danger in the way of the full realisation of the potential of the new language policy. This is the concept of 'language maintenance'.

As with many aspects of current multicultural policy, language maintenance has its roots in good intentions and, if properly understood and implemented, is no bad thing. Its beginnings were in the still extant Saturday Schools, run by the various immigrant groups to teach young children the languages of their parents. When tied Federal grants became available for the purpose, State Governments assumed the responsibility for performing the same function within the school system, recognising the right of migrant children to retain their ancestral languages and to do so within school hours.

This was, however, first done on a withdrawal basis. The migrant children were taken out of class for special lessons in the languages of their parents and these groups became known to their chauvinistic young peers – with an inevitability which astonishingly was not foreseen – as the 'wog classes'. Divisiveness rather than harmonious integration was the result. If the English speakers were involved in the exercise at all, it was at the level of 'Civilisation' – customs, festivals, national dress, folk-dancing – on the apparent assumption that there is such a thing as civilisation without language, access to which might, indeed, be hindered by the intrusion of a linguistic element.

Even if one sat down and tried, one would be hard put to it to evolve a policy more educationally unsound or more calculated to aggravate the problem it sought to solve. The sense of alienation among migrant children springs very largely from the fact that English is not spoken in their homes and from the embarrassment they feel that their parents speak broken English or no English at all in the presence of English speakers. The obvious remedy is to open the other languages to the English speakers; but with that perversity which marks so much public policy-making in education this is the one course which the ideologues, hedged about with their irrational prejudices and shibboleths, have eschewed with grim consistency. In its place they have put a sort of spurious, transplanted folk-lore, the wearing of fancy dress and performing of ancient rituals generally indulged in in their countries of origin solely for the benefit of sentimental tourists and playing no more part in the daily lives of the people than sheep mustering and ritualistic singings of 'The Wild Colonial Boy' do in ours. Witness the painful spectacle of embarrassed, improbably costumed schoolchildren dancing round the maypole once a year in Rothenburg ob



der Tauber to the accompaniment of clicking cameras, often wielded by people from neighbouring villages who find the performance quite as exotic as the tourists.

The implications of all of this are clear: language means discipline and disciplines are out except in Mathematics. Schooling otherwise consists in 'educational experiences' of a nebulous kind which in some unspecified way are supposed to motivate the children to all sorts of great deeds and the formation of worthy attitudes which will 'prepare them for life'. The justification for the withdrawal language classes has never been an educational one. They have been seen as fulfilling a purely social purpose, meeting the passing needs of particular social groups – and these needs were more those of the parents than of the children. The disturbing thing is that this attitude (which still persists, though not to the same extent as a few years ago) is brought to bear on traditionally academic disciplines, giving them a totally new orientation. Therein lies the danger for the National League Policy. Will it be regarded as serving a similar social purpose, with the emphasis on language maintenance for migrant groups and on 'civilisation' for the English speakers, designed to promote their understanding of the cultures of our main migrant communities, with a few names of festivals and other scraps of vocabulary thrown in? Or will the earlier start be used to make practical the realisation of those academic aims which language study has traditionally been intended to pursue? The longer years of study, beginning at a more receptive age, set the stage for the courses which will lead on to university work of genuine intellectual rigour. For many of those unlikely to proceed to tertiary study the heavier oral component of courses can provide a satisfaction and practical achievement seldom attained by slower children in our present typical secondary courses.

### *Conclusion*

It will be clear that the new language policy, when fully effective, could have far-reaching consequences at many levels of education, perhaps changing the whole climate of language learning in Australia. Its importance for language and related courses at universities cannot be overemphasised, and here there are three central issues which need to be addressed without delay:

- The quality and type of teaching.
- The content of courses and the balance in them between background and formal elements.
- The role of the language disciplines in developing in students a sensitivity to notions of exactitude, succinctness, elegance and general erudition: to all of those things, in short, comprehended under the term 'literacy'.

These issues cut across official attitudes and will meet resistance of the kind already encountered in the two projects upon which this paper is based. The first of

the objections has substance, the second is the typical bureaucratic defence against anything that smacks of innovation. There can be no doubt that shortage of appropriately trained teachers is a formidable barrier in the way of realisation of all the hopes we may hold for the new policy. The expense involved will certainly be grossly exaggerated by the communicators and their ilk and should not loom too large in the minds of those who wish to see the policy work.

We must not lose sight of the fact that we are looking at long-term, not overnight, change; certainly not at the kind of bandwagonism which has characterised New South Wales education over the past three decades, when every year has produced its flashy panacea for all the ills of the school system, each contributing to the disarray in which the system now finds itself.

There is, firstly, a largely untapped source of native speaking teachers of our major second languages who, though they may not be specifically trained as language teachers, can be schooled over a period of years in the skills needed for teaching their native tongues to infants children. At this level simply being able to talk the language literately and to speak to little children on their own terms are the essential skills (rather as children of privileged backgrounds once learned languages from their foreign nannies). The small measure of subject expertise involved (e.g. in Mathematics) is readily acquired. Discipline in the use of vocabulary and idiom, and in the systematic repetition of those constructions necessary to enable children to manipulate new words as they learn them, is slower in coming but becomes habit with a few months' practice.

Further, because of the limited bounds within which the language is used, it would require no great reorientation of our present teacher training to bring non-native speakers to the point where they could teach entirely in the second language at this level. Imperfect accents and occasional grammatical slips, while not to be encouraged, should not be seen as outweighing the great long-term benefits to be reaped.

Much has been made over the years by departmental objectors to Paddington-type projects of the cost not only of training suitable teachers but also of some conjectural massive expenditure on ancillary resources. This is poppycock. Those who immediately begin thinking in terms of language laboratories and other expensive gadgetry, excellent adjuncts though they may be for teaching at higher levels, have fallen prey to the blandishments of the electronic salesmen rather than being guided by the educators who work daily in the field. Our experience is that the simpler and more straightforward the approach, the more effective it is. The setting up and dismantling of elaborate 'teaching aids' is not only time-wasting, it also distracts the children from the business in hand, centring their attention on the gadgets rather than on what they are supposed to teach. Resources for teaching infants classes can be prepared by the teachers themselves with negligible expense;

and resources of this kind, tailored to the individual needs of classes, are those most likely to produce the desired results.

More serious than either of the objections is the generally philistine climate which has come to surround the question of literacy generally over the years. It is here that university Arts Faculties, with their central role in preparing teachers, have a major part to play. If academics are concerned about the quality of their present students they must show a much wider interest in the education system than in the past. The low esteem into which traditional humanities subjects – preeminently the languages – have fallen in the schools has its roots in the watering down of the disciplinary content in them in favour of a tendency to regard them as frilly ornaments which bear no real relation to the serious things of life. This attitude has particular force in guiding the subject choices of more able students. Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, attract them because they are reputedly difficult, while the languages are increasingly dismissed as Mickey Mouse subjects to be taken only if it is necessary to make up the numbers.

There appears to be a surprising ignorance in the universities of the extent to which lollipop courses – non-sexist education, peace studies, personal development, and the rest of the pseudo-progressive clap-trap currently being touted around the cheaper booths of education's Vanity Fair – have taken root in the primary schools and in the minds of younger teachers, who accept their respectability as axiomatic. Such courses are gaining ground at the expense of those subjects upon which Arts faculties subsist. There is a belief abroad that the flight from the Humanities among able students is attributable primarily to the growing venality and materialism of their outlook, to their following those courses most likely to lead to the monied professions. The grain of truth in this – it has always been there – should not blind us to the fact that many young people are primarily seeking satisfaction, intellectual and spiritual, from their education and that they find this only if they are challenged. The attempt to popularise humanities subjects by approximating their content to that of mass-circulation women's magazines is hardly the way to reinstate them in the favour of those we should most wish to attract.

The conclusions of this article are based upon thirteen years' experience of daily teaching children from three to twelve years old, observing their reactions to learning a second language, their varied abilities to master its mechanics and the way in which their study motivates them to wish to know 'about' languages – the way they work, their relatedness to one another, the way in which meanings and notions of correctness and wrongness change slowly over the years. The children concerned are acquiring and learning to respect a general erudition which has nothing to do with bread-and-butter issues but is there, and unashamedly so, for its civilising effects and for the attitudes it begets towards schooling as a whole. As against this we have been able to keep in close contact, in Years 7 to 12, with children whose education has contained none of these elements because, so the argument runs, they no longer

'matter'. It is here that our direct experience over an extended period takes issue with 'the' research.

We encounter daily in our secondary classes the evidence of the atrophy of the critical faculty to which the popularisation of the humanities has led. The language of television commercials, designed by its nature as an opiate to critical thinking, is increasingly the language of English, History and General Studies essays. Tall, opaque words are gaining ground apace not simply because syndicated American soapies come cheaper but because verbiage for its own sake is seen as the better part of having something to say and knowing how to say it. Lifts have become elevators, cars have become limousines and automobiles, education has become the educative process, society has become the societal context, while 'situation', 'as such', and their ilk have achieved such random ubiquitousness as to be now largely meaningless. The content of many student essays is reduced to that chase after wind which so properly stirred Ecclesiastes to his moral depths.

To say these things is not simply to indulge in that nostalgic pining after the good old days with which each fading generation castigates the foibles of the one supplanting it. When the stock market becomes overinflated a 'correction' occurs which is something akin to the turning back the clock spoken of earlier – a salutary but periodically necessary process to restore sanity and a due sense of perspective. Similarly, it is timely now that we voice our alarm at the rapid devaluation of what ought to be our most prized possession, the language which expresses the quality of our thinking and of our lives. When its cultivation is seen either as 'irrelevant' or as of no account, and left in the fumbling hands of dilettantes in the back rooms of education departments, the writing is on the wall.

Today it is the 'communicators'. Next come the Goths.

### **Comment: I**

RONALD DUNLOP\*

And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating . . .  
T.S. Eliot, 1940

I recall observing some years ago to the mayor of my municipality that while it took humanity thousands of years to evolve modern roads, it took our local Council

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