

The impact of Australian language policies on Italian From the White Australia Policy to the Recognition of Community Languages

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Abstract

Australian identity has always been marked by a dichotomy. Despite its original multilingual nature, the country was purposefully turned monolingual by government measures, which perceived English as an essential element to unite the Australian Federation. Although Australia began to be described as a multilingual society only after World War II, its multicultural identity was built over time, ever since the first European settlers arrived. The importance of European languages to the Australian Curriculum started to be officially recognised in the 1970s, when the government acknowledged demands raised from migrants' communities to include community languages in the Australian education system. Language policy resolutions were thus formulated in the 1980s and the 1990s, recognising the uniqueness of Australian society, 20% of which were born overseas. These policies allocated public funding to ethnic schools and multilingual services in order to guarantee language maintenance for children with a non-English speaking background and to offer all Australians intercultural enrichment and academic development. Not only did this transform the Australian education system but also Australians' perception of Italian, as the role of language education was affirmed as a means to foster mutual understanding between different cultures in Australian society.

Keywords: language policies, White Australia Policy, community language, Australian identity, language discrimination

Italian language in Australia

Before Australia was colonised, about 600 Aboriginal dialects were spoken on the continent, 20% of which are still spoken today. An important element of the debate on multiculturalism in Australia has always been represented by the role of Aboriginal languages and of languages other than English in Australian society and culture, and ultimately in its education system.

The role of languages other than English was instead diminished during the 19th century (Rando et al. 1992). The dominance of English then lasted throughout the first half of the 20th century but started to be questioned by a large portion of

ethnic communities as well as academics, who felt that assimilation policies had to be abandoned in order to allow Australia to become a fully multicultural society (Larsen 2017). This, according to Smolicz (1991), depended on the maintenance of community languages, and would produce positive effects on society:

«Economic benefits seem to be linked to cultural and civic advantages as well since, rather than being frustrated due to illiteracy in their home tongues, those who have taken advantage of the increased teaching of community languages in schools often consider themselves to be the proud possessors of two or more literary heritages which have enabled them to contribute creatively to Australian society in a variety of fields and walks of life, including trade and economics». (Smolicz (1991, p. 41)

In this light, the legitimacy of imposing English monolingualism became not only indefensible but also unacceptable.

The National Policy on Languages of 1987 advised for several strategies to be implemented by Australian schools and institutions. Firstly, everybody had to be given the opportunity to learn Standard English. Most importantly, languages other than English were to be maintained and transmitted to young generations. Moreover, studying a language different from English was valuable for every Australian's education and growth. Clyne (1997) acknowledged the value of the document, as

«[i]t provided a rationale for multilingualism based on a balance of social equity, cultural enrichment, and economic strategies and suggested [implementation] strategies in areas such as English and [English as a Second Language] teaching, languages other than English (LOTE), and Aboriginal education. It also recommended budgetary allocations, most of which were accepted». (Clyne 1997, p. 67)

By the end of the 20th century, it was clear Italian had a prominent role to play in a multicultural Australia, given the high numbers of Italian speaking people residing in the country. Starting from the beginning of the 1980s, Italian was the most spoken language after English and it was still in first place by 1992, when 420.000 Italian-speaking people registered to live in Australia.

These Italian speakers did not, however, represent a homogeneous community, as 45% of them spoke regional dialects, far from literate Italian, the only variety enjoying social prestige (Rando et al. 1992).

In the early '90s, a feeling of discontent started to spread in the Italian community, when the government started to favour the teaching of Japanese, Chinese, French and German, showing how language policies are constantly influenced by economical interest (Rando et al. 1992).

Australian language policies: from assimilation to multiculturalism

Although Australia began to be described as a multilingual society only after World War II, its multicultural identity was built over time, ever since the first European settlers arrived. There has been an ongoing and still unresolved tension between the dominance of the English language as a sign of a British tradition first, and of national independence later, and multilingualism as an undeniable factor of Australian social reality. Over the past two centuries there were periods in which either one or the other trend would dominate and dictate policies (Clyne 1991)¹.

The choice to adopt the term of Community Language “to denote languages other than English and Aboriginal languages employed within the Australian community” was coined in 1975 in order to “legitimise[...] their continuing existence as a part of Australian society” (Clyne 1991, p. 3). In 1991, Clyne identified definitions which were previously adopted (such as such as foreign, migrant or ethnic languages) as discriminatory or inadequate. This emphasis on terminology let us sense the presence of an ongoing debate on the matter, showing how political the definition was, as it was indicative of the attitude of the political and academic world towards the issue of language teaching. The 1970s were indeed crucial for language education, marking a true revolution in the domain of immigration and language policies.

The history of language teaching, and thus the one of Italian teaching, was indisputably tied to the evolution of language policies implemented in Australia, which culminated in the gravitation away from assimilation practices in favour of multicultural integration. These policies reflected the change in government attitude towards immigrants.

As Dixon noted in 1980, the white settlement took place in a multilingual scenery, in which hundreds of Aboriginal languages were in use. The following immigration flow contributed to the increase in the number of languages spoken in Australia, which started to include Scandinavian languages, German, French, Gaelic, Chinese, Irish, Welsh and Italian. As reported by Clyne, the 1861 Census documented the presence of around 78,000 overseas born in Australia, which – summed with the number of second generation Australia-born – resulted in a large number of speakers of languages other than English (Clyne 1991, Ferres 1881).

¹ Professor Michael Clyne (1939-2010), Australian linguist and active language teacher, “was an early member of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia and gained life membership for his contribution. [His work, according to Prof. Tony Liddicoat,] shaped Australia profoundly in many ways” (AFMLTA 2010). Prof. Clyne was an alumnus of The University of Melbourne, where he returned in 2001 to join the Linguistics department and directed the Research Unit for Multilingualism and Cross-Cultural Communication. He was an advocate of multiculturalism and defended the value of multilingualism in his publications.

From the 1850s onwards, this culturally heterogeneous scene represented a fertile terrain for initiatives such as the publication of newspapers in various languages and the spread of bilingual programs in schools. Although bilingual education was originally aimed at children from a diverse background, it later assumed a role in the education for English speaking children, as it constituted a chance for enrichment. Also, Lo Bianco reported how

«Linguists have calculated that prior to the establishment of the British colonies of Australia about 250 or 260 distinct Australian languages, representing a range of some 600 dialects, [...] were spoken across the continent. The majority of people were multilingual, knowing languages of proximal groups as well as their own and the languages of linked clans. While the first British settlers and the convicts were almost exclusively monolingual speakers of English [...], the colonies did not long remain monolingual. [Moreover,] in 1861 Victoria had a total population of about 600,000, of which some 60,000 were made up of non-British and non-Irish origins [...], with Chinese and Germans being the largest two groupings». (Lo Bianco 2009, pp. 17-18)

Bilingual schools generally followed one of the three most common models in use:

- (1) Some schools used to divide languages according to the subject taught or the time of the day. According to this approach, mostly adopted by Lutheran primary schools, literacy was taught in both English and German, history and geography could be imparted on either of the two languages (depending on the content and mathematics was taught in English;
- (2) Some private schools incorporated the teaching of German language and culture into most of the subjects, which were mostly taught in English;
- (3) A German- and an English-speaking teacher worked together in other private schools, each one teaching different subjects (Clyne 1991).

Clyne's focus on English-German schools could be based on two motivations. Either the majority of bilingual schools during the 1850s and 1860s appeared to be English-German schools, as the 1861 Census recorded 27,599 German-born living in Australia; or the incompleteness of documentation about bilingual education during the 19th century allowed him to summarise German schools' models, as they provided the most complete testimonies.

Mainstream primary schools of the time incorporated languages in their curriculum, but secondary schools mainly offered French, sometimes German and rarely Italian. As more migrants gradually experienced a language shift towards English, bilingual education started to be offered from part-time schools instead of conventional schools. The first part-time school offering bilingual education on Saturdays was Mill Park German school, near Melbourne, in 1857 (Clyne 1991).

As reported by Jupp, the education scene in Melbourne during the 19th century had every right to be defined as "Multilingual Melbourne 19th century style" (Clyne, in Jupp 2001, p. 787). Lo Bianco also acknowledged the value of Clyne's considerations in his Australian Education Review, in which he reiterated how in Australia there were

«more than 100 French, German, Hebrew and Gaelic bilingual programs, and numerous non-English newspapers and community publications of various kinds, primarily as language and religious maintenance activities within individual communities, [as well as] some examples of elite school programs using bilingual education methods». (Lo Bianco 2009, p. 18)

Before the Education Acts of the 1872-1880, schools in Australian colonies hence did not discriminate languages other than English, as there were no explicit norms determining that education should be imparted solely in English. Education became monolingual from the 1880s, when "the reality of the multicultural, multilingual nation which had started to develop waned [...], and Australia became the province of the monolingual English speaker" (Clyne 1991, p.12). Such norms were passed on the principle of English language being a symbol of loyalty to the British Empire, in years of fear for French and German nationalism spreading in Britain. The rise of nation states and the spread of nationalistic policies were not beneficial to the maintenance of Australian multilingualism and tolerance for teaching in languages other than English. It is worth noting that the widespread tolerance towards European languages did not apply to Aboriginal languages, seen as primeval dialects (Lo Bianco 2009).

The 1870s indeed represented the beginning of a dark age for multilingualism and language teaching, as the formalisation of the education system was ratified by official policies. Their aim was English monolingualism and they were employed as a uniforming element in preparation for political independence. School attendance thus started to be compulsory, Ministries of education were created in order to supervise teacher employment and the system was secularised. European languages were relegated to a marginal role and were treated as deplorably as Aboriginal ones (*ibid*).

This feelings of xenophobia and discrimination towards languages accompanied Australia's passage to the new century, as the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901, the most infamous law passed in Australia, was employed to prevent non-white immigration to the country. The Act is also known as *White Australia Policy* and obstructed immigration from non-European countries in order to maintain a strong British identity in Australia. Its aim was evident from the very first lines, in which the Act was defined as:

«An Act to place certain restrictions on Immigration and to provide for the removal from the Commonwealth of prohibited Immigrants. [Assented to 23rd December 1901]». (Commonwealth of Australia 1901)

Among other things, the act introduced a dictation test as a pre-requisite to enter the country. This required applicants to write words in a given European language, which were dictated by an officer. The Immigration Museum of Melbourne still offers the possibility to participate to a test simulation, during which visitors can activate a recording and write down what the voice is saying. After personally taking part to this simulation, it becomes obvious that the test would exclude not only non-Europeans coming to Australia, but also challenge many European migrants, as the dictation sounded rushed and included technical words.

The dictation test was a symptom of an unfair and rigid view of foreigners, or more specifically non-anglo immigrants:

«The immigration into the Commonwealth of the persons described in any of the following paragraphs of this section (herein-after called “prohibited immigrants”) [was] prohibited, namely:

(a) Any person who when asked to do so by an officer [failed] to write out at dictation and sign in the presence of the officer a passage of fifty words in length in a European language directed by the officer; [...]

(2) Any immigrant [could] at any time within one year after he [...] entered the Commonwealth be asked to comply with the requirements [...]

8. Any person who [was] not a British subject either natural-born or naturalised under a law of the United Kingdom or of the Commonwealth or of a State, and who [was] convicted of any crime of violence against the person, [was] liable, upon the expiration of any term of imprisonment imposed on him therefore, to be required to write out at dictation and sign in the presence of an officer a passage of fifty words in length in an European language directed by the officer, and if he [failed] to do so [was] deemed to be a prohibited immigrant and [...] deported from the Commonwealth pursuant to any order of the Minister». (Commonwealth of Australia 1901, pp. 1-5)

With regard to the Dictation Test, Lo Bianco (2009) correctly noted that “the intrinsic unfairness of the procedure was provided with the ‘cover’ of it being simply a routine and ‘objective’ language assessment” (p. 19). Not only were the immigrants required to complete the dictation test when entering Australia, but they could also be asked to repeat the test at any time during their first year of permanence in Australia. The season of discrimination towards languages other than English was only starting and lasted until the 1970s, when more inclusive policies started to be implemented. Starting from World War I, government policies resulted in a phase of “aggressive

monolingualism” (Clyne 1991, p. 15), which spread to all levels of society. Bilingual programmes and newspapers in languages other than English were shut down, and towns with German names were renamed.

All this was caused by a growing paranoia towards what immigrants could say about Australian institutions in languages that could not be understood by English speakers. Even teaching religion in German, for example, was regarded as a threat, as this was believed to “place in the minds of children at an impressionable age a respect and devotion to a foreign language which [could] alienate them for English” (Frank Tate, memo to Minister of Education, July 1919, in Clyne 1991, p. 13), and thus from loyalty to Australia and the British Empire (Clyne 1991; Jupp 2001; Mascitelli et al. 2012). In this climate, Victorian schools in which the curriculum was delivered through languages other than English could not obtain a registration after 1916, as decreed by the Victorian Parliament (Mascitelli et al. 2012). The rate of language shift towards English was not surprising and continued to rise after the Second World War.

The time between the First and the Second World Wars was further characterised by institutional intolerance towards languages other than English, as Education Acts between 1916 and 1918 strengthened the idea that English had to be the only language of use in Australia, with German representing the least acceptable one. “The period [was] the most aggressively monolingual in Australian history, with repressive policies applied uniformly to both immigrant and Indigenous minorities” (Lo Bianco 2009, p. 19).

In 1934, Act Regulations restricted publications in languages other than English, as a rigid system of licensing applied to newspapers written in foreign languages. Moreover, languages were perceived “as part of élite education”:

«In Australia, French or Latin were the only two languages taught widely in the secondary schools (none were taught in primary schools) and in a few secondary schools German was also taught (although not during the two world wars)». (Jupp 2001, 788)

The recruitment of foreigners commonly practiced in the mining industry also contributed to increase racial hatred towards immigrants. The presence of such sentiments among Australians motivated the choice to create an Adult Migrant Education Program in 1947 to assimilate foreigners. The Post War Migration Program initially privileged the entry of immigrants from the UK and Northern Europe, but later adapted to the increase in arrivals from Southern Europe and Middle East (Lo Bianco 2009). This happened because Britain gradually recovered after a difficult phase following WW2, hence less British subjects were forced to leave their country in search for fortune. The Immigration programs were destined to permanently change Australia and its demographic composition, slowly leading the

country to assume a more sympathetic attitude towards its own multifaceted nature. This was a gradual – yet initially involuntary – phenomenon, which culminated in Billy Sneddon's policy, which gravitated away from the principle of migrant assimilation in favour of integration (Clyne 1991; Jupp 2001).

The policies adopted to accomplish migrant assimilation were actual language engineering practices. After the war, migrants were offered biennial contracts in order to boost employment in unpopular areas, hence they did not represent competition for Australian workers. Migrant reception centres were created, in which newcomers were offered language courses, in addition to accommodation upon arrival. As noted by Jupp, “if non-English speaking migrants were to be brought to the country, it was the government’s responsibility to help them linguistically and to assist them assimilate” (Jupp 2001, p.789). The process of assimilation thus commenced immediately, and parents were advised to abandon their mother tongue when talking to their children in order to allow them to promptly familiarise with English. Courses of English as a second language were solely offered to adults, as children learned English in schools. Nonetheless, migrants’ children regularly experienced difficulties adapting to the new education system. Languages other than English stopped being perceived as a menace and publication of foreign language newspapers was not as restricted anymore, but the goal pursued by governments was assimilation. As a consequence, “migrants had to pursue language maintenance privately and secretly” (Jupp 2001, p.789). and a lot of them managed to continue using their language in spite of governmental guidelines. As previously discussed, during the years between the wars and the post-war period Greek and Italian immigrants were subject to racism and prejudice, which lead many Greek immigrants to modify their names. Not only, Italians and Russians living in Queensland shifted to English even more rapidly than German settlers in Victoria and South Australia.

Interestingly, 1968 marked the divide between the French and the community languages eras, since the study of languages ceased to be a requirement to enter many university programs. Before then, 44% of students learned a second language in secondary school and three quarters of them studied French – with German and Latin being the other languages studied in secondary schools (Bonyhady, cited by Lo Bianco 2009). “From the commencement of compulsory schooling in the late 1880s, and in private education from the 1850s until the late 1950s, French had enjoyed a practical monopoly in Australian school language choices” (Lo Bianco 2009, p. 20). As languages were taught according to the infamous grammar-translation method, the drop in enrolments was predictable. According to Lo Bianco’s data, 10% of Year 12 pupils were studying a language after the change in university admission policies.

In the ‘50s and the ‘60s the invitation to introduce languages such as Italian, Greek and Russian in the school curriculum were constantly ignored, until the policy of assimilation was abandoned in the 70’s (Clyne 1991; Jupp 2001). The 1973 Statement on Immigrant Education, Cultures and Languages represented a manifesto

for multiculturalism. Created by the Greek community in Melbourne, it was later shared by academics, teaching professionals as well as leading figures from ethnic communities. The aim was to affirm the value of language maintenance and to recognise it as complementary to English competence (Lo Bianco 2009). “By the mid-1970s the centre of attention in language education planning had moved away from elite languages taught for elite reasons at high school to community languages taught for community purposes in primary schools” (Lo Bianco 2009, p. 20). It was indeed a period of major changes in the field of language education, as

«• a rapid expansion of the languages taught in schools, with over 30 in some states becoming subject in final school examinations, an increase in the diversity offered as a tertiary level;

• a growing recognition of the importance of supporting mother-tongue development and literacy skills;

• the introduction of child migrant education from 1971 to complement long-established adult migrant teaching, providing for English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers and some intensive language centres for new arrivals;

[...]

• ethnic schools were brought into the mainstream through extensive involvement in developing full secondary education programs for small language subjects, and through teacher training. in the 1980s small grants were made available to these schools;

[...]

• improving the language capacity of departments such as Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence through increased language training». (Jupp 2001, p. 789)

It was only with the Migration Minister Billy Sneddon, in the second half of the 60's, that the rhetoric of integration was embraced. Australian policy makers realised that, in order to be competitive and to attract highly skilled migrants, they had to stop annihilating their cultures. This turning point occurred in an extremely dynamic political scene, both at a national and an international level. The late '60s were crucial for the decolonisation process and for the end of forcible removals of Aboriginal children from their communities, which gradually lead to the acknowledgement of the terrible condition in which Indigenous Australians were relegated. According to the Bringing them Home report, the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their communities dates back to the beginning of Australian colonisation. These policies of assimilation aimed to instil European values in the Indigenous population. Following the Aborigines Protection Act of 1869, the Aborigines Protection Board in Victoria had the power to legislate on the custody and the upbringing of Indigenous children. These forcibly removed children have been known as the Stolen Generations. The phenomenon reached scary proportions, as

“between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970” (Australian Government 2015b). It took many years for Australian institutions to apologise to Indigenous people, as the Prime Minister recognised their loss only in 2008. The situation has improved over the last decades, but Indigenous people are still discriminated and suffer higher rates of unemployment and substance abuse (Commonwealth of Australia 1997; Australian Government 2015b). Recent episodes of racism towards major aborigine football players - such as the case of Adam Goodes’ career ending after being systematically booed on the field - underline that true equality is still to be achieved.

Starting from the late 1960s, publicly pursuing discrimination against any culture other than the British one probably started to appear not only unfeasible, but also anachronistic. Also, the issues faced by the children of migrants in schools started to be publicly discussed, initially as problems connected to the individual child and solvable through English language courses (Vasta 1992). The Child Migrant Education Program of the 1970s started with some difficulties because of lack of adequate teaching materials and incomplete information about students’ backgrounds.

The importance of European languages to the Australian Curriculum started to be officially recognised. The Minister of Education supported the value of language education for two main reasons:

- Australian Federation had European roots;
- studying a second language was a means to strengthen pupils’ command of English (Merlino 1988).

Most of the policies for multiculturalism that are still in place today in Australia were introduced by the Whitlam government from 1972 onward. Whitlam could build on his predecessor’s legacy, who had already abolished the White Australia Policy, and his measures were destined to be formalised by the following government, who came into power in 1975. In particular, the Whitlam government created the Commonwealth school commission, which later played a prominent role in shaping the school curriculum, namely through the Curriculum Development Commission (Lo Bianco 2009). The existence of these bodies was a clear indicator that education had to be reformed to take into account Australian multicultural identity and that the school curriculum had to gradually become homogeneous. Obviously, all this had to be formally monitored. The 1980s and the 1990s were consequently characterised by abundant language policy resolutions.

In particular, language teaching was shaped by five main reports and three declarations. Firstly, the Galbally Report on post-arrival programs and services for migrants in 1978 definitively sealed the acknowledgment of multiculturalism by

conservative parties. The fact that over one fifth of Australians were born overseas, was presented as a positive trait that made the nation culturally diverse and unique (Galbally 1978). It also established ethnic schools should receive public funding. The report stated:

«Even though we have emphasised so heavily the value of teaching English to migrants we accept that there will always be a substantial number in the community who do not understand English, and we have formulated recommendations designed to ease the difficulties in communication faced by these people. These include financial incentives for bilingual staff occupying public contact positions whose duties involve substantial contact with migrants; intensive English courses to enable migrants with overseas professional and sub-professional qualifications to have them recognised here and help to relevant professionals in obtaining or upgrading knowledge of other cultures and languages (para. 4.6)». (*ibid.*, Recommendation 1.25)

It also recommended the support of:

«a) the development of information on all aspects of health care, including preventive care, in the main community languages and its distribution to all organisations which play a part in spreading information,
b) the development, with the producers of ethnic radio programs, of short information segments on health care to be broadcast on ethnic radio in community languages». (Galbally 1978, Recommendation 22a and 22b)

Later on, in 1987, the National Policy on Languages, a bipartisan report initiated founding programs in sign language, English as a second language, Asian languages and community languages, as well as implementing innovations in training of professional figures, in multilingual services and media. It also created the National Language and Literature of Australia and more than thirty research institutes. The NPL also selected nine “languages of wider teaching”, which were Italian, Arabic, Chinese, German, French, Greek, Indonesian, Japanese and Spanish. They had to receive support to guarantee language maintenance (Lo Bianco 2009, 1987). The main section of the policy dealt with education, elaborating on three fundamental principles: “English for All”, “Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages” and “A Language Other than English for All”. The first principle contained specifications for English courses for English-speaking Australians, English as a Second Language and English as a Second Dialect education where this was required. “Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages” entailed elements of bilingual and bicultural education for native speakers. “A LOTE for All” prescribed the teaching of community languages in school in order to guarantee

language maintenance, and to offer young Australians a chance for cultural growth and academic development. The policy also focused on languages of geo-political and economic importance to the nation (Lo Bianco 1990).

Moreover, the 1989 Hobart Declaration on Schooling, produced by the collaboration between Ministers of Education, territories and states, reaffirmed the value of LOTE. It was the first attempt to formulate common goals for Australian education, in compliance with the country's economic objectives. The declaration hence included the aim

«to respond to the current and emerging economic and social needs of the nation, and to provide those skills which will allow students maximum flexibility and adaptability in their future employment and other aspects of life». (MCEETYA 2014)

Language skills started to be perceived as an asset for business development. Albeit market-oriented, the declaration explicitly recognised that students were to study a second language during their compulsory schooling years, as “a knowledge of languages other than English” is also one of the key goals for education (Lo Bianco 2009; MCEETYA 2014).

The recommendations of the National Policy on Languages were re-interpreted and restricted by the Australian Language and Literacy Policy of 1991. The document focused on teaching LOTE for understanding foreign cultures rather than maintaining Australian internal multiculturalism. When recommending LOTE teaching as a part of the national curriculum, it also shifted away from social justice based arguments to lean towards economic aims and employment opportunities (Lo Bianco 2009). Clyne also confirmed that the policy represented a step back, as

«[t]he change of balance is apparent, with economically motivated second language acquisition taking precedence over socially motivated language maintenance, including the preservation of Aboriginal languages, as well as a de-professionalization of sections of the ESL teaching profession, and an instrumental emphasis on survival English literacy training». (Clyne 1997, p. 67)

The National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools program of 1994 penalised European languages, as 200 million dollars were allocated to four Asian languages, namely Mandarin, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean. The purpose of the program was explicitly business development, because of the growing role of Asian countries in Australia economic agenda. Many teaching programs in the above mentioned languages were founded in schools to attract public funding, resulting in Japanese overtaking French as the most studied language in Australia. The seriousness of programs created with such an intent was obviously questionable and doubted by many scholars, including Lo Bianco. When the NALSAS ended – in 2002

– an immediate decrease in enrolments and number of programs available followed (Lo Bianco 2009). The policy was reviewed in 2002 in a report for the Ministry of Education (Wyatt et al. 2002). The unsolved issues affecting Asian languages have been further analysed in Sturak et al. (2010). Another funding program for Asian languages was launched in 2008, as The National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP), as “the Australian Government announced the NALSSP to operate over 2008/09-2011/12 and committed funding of \$62.4m to enable it to achieve its objectives” (Sturak et al. 2010, p. 2).

The Commonwealth Literacy Policy (1997), instead, urged the education sector to assume English literacy as a priority rather than languages. The underlying reason being the very low literacy standards assessed in 1996. This undermined all of the progress made, but on the other hand, it was understandable for the government to stress the importance of improving literacy standards. Empirical experience in secondary education showed me how the gaps in students’ ability to spell and use punctuation properly are still evident and alarming. It is not uncommon for students to wonder about basic spelling and rely on teachers (even LOTE ones) to verify how to spell some words correctly.

While reaffirming the value of linguistic diversity, the Adelaide Declaration (1999) represented a step back for the full recognition of multiculturalism as a value in Australian society. According to Lo Bianco, the national goals revolved more around economic benefits rather than social equality (Lo Bianco 2009; MCEETYA 1999). The declaration emphasised the importance of employment opportunities as education was to equip students with “employment related skills and an understanding of the work environment, career options and pathways as a foundation for, and positive attitudes towards, vocational education and training, further education, employment and life-long learning” (MCEETYA 1999, Goal 1.5).

Finally, the Melbourne Declaration (2008) defined the end of Australian schooling as the creation of “active and informed citizen”, able to “understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (Barr et al. 2008, p. 9). Schools were therefore given an important role in fostering an appreciation of diversity and communication across cultures, by providing

«all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location; [and building] on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning, and work in partnership with local communities on all aspects of the schooling process, including to promote high expectations for the learning outcomes of Indigenous students». (Barr et al. 2008, p. 7)

In spite of the Declaration defining multiculturalism as an undeniable value for Australian identity, it stressed the importance of Asian languages without valuing European and other community languages adequately. The document added a rather significant annotation after listing languages among the main learning areas as “Languages (especially Asian languages)” (Barr et al. 2008, p. 15). This is still sadly the policy supported by Australian governments, according to mere business interests, embodied by the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA), in force since 2015 (Australian Government 2015a).

The role of language education in fostering multiculturalism

The role of language education as a means to foster mutual understanding between different cultures in Australian society has been rightfully stressed during the first Congress of the Applied Linguistic Association of Australia, in 1976 (Ingram et al 1978). The ALAA, founded in the same year and affiliated with the *Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée*, aimed to apply linguistics to language education in order to address the main language issues in Australian society.

Among its specific aims, the following were particularly relevant to comprehend the challenges faced by linguistics theorists and educational researchers, as well as policy makers, at the time:

«The specific aims of the Australian Association are to promote the application of linguistics to:

1. the methodology of teaching, learning and testing languages (mother tongue and foreign languages);
 2. multicultural education in Australian society, including aboriginal, migrants and other groups; [...]
 3. problems of language and society (including language standardisation)».
- (*Ib.*, p.vii)

The proceedings of the first ALAA conference depicted quite a contradictory scenario, in which schools predominantly taught French in spite of the French community being only the twentieth in Australia in terms of dimension. The 1971 language education system could be described as a “system of incongruities” (*ibid*, p. 74), which were starting to animate the debate among Australian linguists and language teaching theorists. The failure of the system to adapt to Australian society was evident when considering that, according to the Census conducted by the Australian Universities Commission in 1975, about 22% of Australian-born had one parent born in a foreign country in which English was not the first language, yet

French continued to be offered by fifteen Universities, German by twelve, while Italian, Russian and other European languages were relegated to a minority of institutions. In particular, Italian was taught by six universities, Greek by three, Spanish and Portuguese respectively by four and three. The heterogeneous character of Australian society was certainly being overlooked. The general decline in language courses enrolment, both in universities and secondary schools, mirrored the general perception that language learning was irrelevant to the average student. It could also be caused by the dominance of grammar-translation methods instead of language-based pedagogies. “In brief, Australian society traditionally but incorrectly [had] seen itself as homogeneous and monolingual and the language teaching system [had] ignored the situation” (*ibid*, p. 76), but there was hope for the spread of a cross-cultural empathy, which could only be fostered through a language education system adequate to Australian pluralist reality. Better communication had to be achieved thanks to the education system promoting a mutual understanding of different social groups' traditions and language proficiency. This would have ultimately resulted in society evolving into a more welcoming and peaceful environment (*ibid*).

«As students act out the role of the foreigner, trying to use his language as he would use it and see things as he would see them, reading what he would read, they are able to identify with them in a way which is not possible in social studies or comparative literature in translation. This experience opens the door to a deeper understanding of another culture and a wider tolerance of different ideas and patterns of behaviour». (Rivers 1968, p. 26)

Also, “the goal of biculturalism or other culture sensitivity must be linked to the goal of bilingualism” (Lambert and Tucker 1972, p. 177).

Ingram's focus on the necessity to contextualise language learning, abandoning digestive or traditional methods seems to have been taken into account by the University of Melbourne, as well as some secondary schools in Victoria.

Professor Quinn, in 1976, extensively dealt with the importance of linguistics to language teaching and learning. His contribution to the ALAA congress was full of regret, as he regarded the failure of applying linguistics to teaching methods as a “revolution that passed [Australia] by”. He maintained that

«a language teacher needs a systematic, organized and coherent view of the total structure not only of his foreign language, but also of his own native language, or of the native language of those he teaches. A language teacher needs a coherent perception of the systematic structure of the languages he is dealing with. (...) I want to suggest that this awareness of systematic structural patterns might be what linguistics has to offer». (Quinn 1978, p. 20)

The professor noted that linguistics could be useful when teaching basic rules, such as the interrogative form, to English speakers. For instance, every teacher of a language other than English eventually encounters a similar question to “What is the Italian translation of *did* in the sentence *Did you go to the market yesterday?*” raised by students. According to Quinn, a teacher trained in linguistics would provide more exhaustive answers than a teacher who has not been trained in linguistics.

Due to the nature of the Australian curriculum, the fact that students would promptly comprehend those answers is still questionable. Australian students do not learn about the structure of their own language at a young age. LOTE teachers are thus required to teach, for example, what a subject, a verb or an adjective are, before they can teach students about sentence logical analysis and sentence structure. More often than not, students find it hard to study a foreign language because they lack basic linguistic knowledge when it comes to their own. English language analysis is explored extensively only at a later stage, from Year 11 onwards, in a course that is subject to student choice (VCAA 2014a; VCAA 2014b). Consequently, students are likely to leave secondary schools without having ever studied what an adverb is, or learnt about relative clauses and direct object pronouns.

This might be the reason why CLIL programs are particularly suited to teaching languages, and in particular Italian, to English speaking children. It is an approach that focusses on content rather than grammar, and even if grammar is necessarily taught, it is mainly through an inductive, rather than deductive approach.

The perception of Italian in Australia: a parabolic path

After the sudden growth in Italian courses across Australia following the migration waves of the 1960s, animated debates about the reasons for introducing Italian into the educational curriculum emerged, as the views on teaching methods and the aims of courses varied.

For many, Italian represented a useful skill, while others justified the introduction of the subject as a means to confer dignity to ethnic cultures, as ‘democracy’ in education required the teaching of minority languages” (Lo Bianco 2001, p. 510). The choice was motivated by others on the grounds of Italian being an Australian language or in order to equip a minority with more influence in the Australian community (*ibid*).

«The history of the transformation of a despised language into the language of preference is one full of re-appropriation, re-evaluation and the ambivalent relations between the actual carriers of a life style and the imagined ones». (*Ibid.*, p. 510).

Italian teaching became formally established in an environment in which the majority of Italian immigrants spoke dialects, rather than standard Italian. The situation gave way to debates about which option had to be taught in Australian classrooms. Also, the language could not boast the same numbers of speakers as languages like Spanish or French. The choice of teaching it thus based on two main arguments:

- (1) It was (and still is) an important community language in Australia;
- (2) It had the status of language of culture, as Italian had always had a great artistic, literary and musical heritage. This is recognisable in the educational curriculum, according to which immigrant roots are taught, along with the VCE subject Italian renaissance.

Hence, Lo Bianco (2001) discerned between “two streams” in the history of Italian teaching in Australia, as Italian has been taught both as a foreign and as a community language. Teaching Italian as a foreign language applied to contexts in which learners had no contact with the language and very little contact with the Italian culture. Formal classes would thus be the sole means of instruction. Courses teaching Italian as a community language could, on the other hand, rely on the incidental contact with the language and the emotional connections with the Italian community in Australia.

Both streams were relevant throughout Italian teaching history, occurring at the same time but applying to different contexts. The parallel trends thus coexisted and ultimately led to Italian to rise above theoretical distinctions. As observed by Lo Bianco (2001), “Italian [was] the exemplar Australian community language, since it [had] more speakers and more speaker context than other languages. Italian [...] transcended its strictly emigrant associations to become the veritable second language of choice among the Australian community” (Bianco 2011, p. 511).

Italian went thus from being a language of culture during the colonisation period, to becoming a language of migrants during mass migration and then re-acquiring the status of language of culture again, thanks to the availability of language courses and the influence of Italian culture on Australian society, as well as the debates on community languages. While the reasons behind the first passage are trackable in the sudden arrival of migrants, perceived as a “weird mob”², the dynamics leading to the reappraisal of Italian language are more complex and their analysis deserves further development.

² An interesting description of the cultural shock experienced by Italian migrants during the post-war period in Australia was depicted by Culotta (1957).

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