Internationalizing university curriculum with multilingual knowledge and skills: power, politics and policy

*Lynne Li*

**Abstract**

This paper addresses the increasingly globalized higher education system and the role of multilingual knowledge and skills in internationalizing education and the university curriculum. Through examining issues around internationalization of education and curriculum in universities, this paper explores the role of multilingual knowledge and skills in contemporary global entrepreneur-style higher education within the theoretical framework of economic value and the political power of languages. It argues that curriculum design in Australian tertiary institutions has not been aligned adequately enough to meet the needs of learners, even though the Australian federal government’s policy on internationalization generally points to engaging university students and academics in language learning for global and local sustainability and national security. The recently established Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU), funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), will be cited as a monumental step towards such an endeavour. The paper also stresses that the key for a university to be a globally oriented, fully-fledged and highly competitive entity lies in its strategic priority to tackle challenges posed by the tide of global literacy.

**Multilingual knowledge and skills in global contexts**

The internationalization of education has recently grown into a major field of research, engaging policy-makers and university academics of all disciplines from every corner of the globe. Researchers have approached the issue from various dimensions and often explored its implications for the following interrelated areas: government policy, strategy planning and management for institutions, the quality of education involving curriculum internationalization and the role of language and culture in these internationalizing processes.¹ The past fifty to one hundred years of globalization has not only witnessed the changing landscape of education
but also generated numerous extended terms and terminologies, such as ‘internationalizing higher education’, ‘internationalizing curriculum’, ‘New Englishes’, ‘Global English’, ‘global languages’ and ‘global literacy’.

Great Britain, the motherland of the English language, has enjoyed many decades of English being the dominant global communicating medium. Therefore, there are now different varieties of English as expressed in ‘New Englishes’, ‘World Englishes’ and English as a business language in the form of ‘English Lingua Franca’.

For example, there was the ‘Blair Initiative’, which was announced on 18 June 1999, aiming to reinforce the work of the British Council (http://www.britcoun.org/home.htm) and to strengthen the United Kingdom’s interests by increasing its share of the global market in foreign students, especially against its two other major competitors, American and Australian universities. The massive expansion of British, American and Australian universities into distance education, initially in such fields as accounting and business administration and now in almost all disciplinary fields, is a realization of Bourdieu’s ‘linguistic capital’.

Bourdieu makes an analogy between the function of language and that of the currency for business and trade; languages are ‘currency for education’, which bears linguistic capital. In the case of the ‘Blair Initiative’, the linguistic capital of the English language is transformed into jobs for these universities and their related service industries.

However, as the globalization process penetrates deeper into our economic and political life, shortly after the announcement of the ‘Blair Initiative’, the British Minister for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, made the following statement:

> It makes good economic sense to use English fluency as a platform to underpin our economic competitiveness and to promote our culture overseas. . . . But we need to situate English in the overall multilingual ecology and in global and local linguistic hierarchies. For language specialists, this requires critically assessing how our professionalism is contributed and exercised.

This acknowledges that universities, with their language specialists and professionals, must produce post-colonial, post-national global citizens who will work in global contexts. Transnational corporations, financial organizations and super-national bureaucracies could be contexts in which ‘global and local linguistic hierarchies’ exist.

The urgent need for learning foreign languages is also reflected in Scott’s keynote address entitled ‘Many calls, little action: Global illiteracy in the United States’. This call for urgent action was delivered at the ‘National Language Conference: A Call to Action’, 22–24 June 2004. Co-sponsored by the US Department of Defense and the Center for the Advanced Study of Language at the University of Maryland, this conference hosted an audience of four hundred including Members of Congress, US Army generals and
other senior officers, Department of Defense and Department of State officials, notable academic linguists and language specialists, and corporate executives. In his keynote address, Scott outlined the role of US universities in preparing graduates for an increasingly inter-connected world in which the knowledge of other languages and cultures is a critical need for the second time in history since the Second World War. By reviewing the many calls for global understanding and language competence for the past hundred years, Scott started by quoting several excerpts, one of which is the ‘Report of the Joint Inquiry into the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001’, as below:

Prior to September 11, the Intelligence Community was not prepared to handle the challenge it faced in translating the volumes of foreign language counterterrorism intelligence it collected. Agencies within the Intelligence Community experienced backlogs in material awaiting translation, a shortage of language specialists and language-qualified field officers, and a readiness level of only thirty per cent in the most critical terrorism-related languages used by terrorists.8

Scott explained why sustained actions have been rare. He claims that the slow response to so many calls for learning ‘foreign’ languages and cultures poses serious consequences not only for economic responsiveness and competitiveness, but also for national military security and a globally aware American population as a whole.

Surprisingly for many, President George W. Bush called, in his ‘National Security Language Initiative’, in January 2006, to expand the foreign language capacity of the United States. Until this point when the United States as a nation, from at least the governmental and university academic levels, has become aware that multilingual knowledge and skills are of great interest to sustainable public policy and national security, and that learning foreign languages has not only economic value but also political power.9

Bourdieu10 not only outlines the economic value of language, he also pinpoints the relevance between the official language and political unity, and between unification of the market through language and symbolic domination of the market. Philipson’s theories on ‘linguistic imperialism’11 and Pennycook’s ‘cultural politics of English’12 are reflections as well as affirmation of the political function of language promotion by UK, US and Australian governments from as early as the Second World War.

Canagarajah’s Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching13 adds a strong voice against a government’s use of professional platforms to sell education or to provide English language teaching and training for launching their international crusade. Almost at the same time, this view is reflected with a less political tone by Hinchcliff in his keynote speech at a conference on the Internationalization of Education:
The globalization process is transformed creating in us a fundamental humility with the learning and wisdom of their cultures, a respect for the needs of our students and faculty, and a desire to be with others for creative learning engagements. This is not a vague eclecticism but a strategic initiative requiring us to be authentic within our own culture and willing to engage meaningfully with others who remain equally authentic. The relationship develops when the dialogue is honest, constructive and collegial.¹⁴

Tonkin takes this further, aiming for a more multicultural and multilingual local and global community, suggesting that while more and more people are speaking English, a greater number of people around the world are learning other languages, leaving Americans behind and presumably the British as well. Tonkin points out that academics need language to move beyond a narrow context for intellectual exchange, stressing that university academics are increasingly expected to be multilingual.¹⁵

On the continent of Europe, the importance of languages is largely seen in the area of employment. In 2002, the Council of Europe created Europass, a language passport by which citizens can increase their mobility within the European Union.¹⁶ The Europass criteria stipulated that one must at least partly master the language of the country in which one intends to work or within which one wants to negotiate contracts. Citizens describe their language skills on a scale based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Perhaps this is why it is not surprising to find a research study showing that about 52.7 per cent of Europeans are fluent in at least one language other than their mother tongue, while only 9.3 per cent of people can claim such bilingual fluency in the United States,¹⁷ where languages have often been sidelined against other priorities.

By contrast, Africa is multilingual. Its populations have grown accustomed to the influx of other languages of power during and after colonization.¹⁸ One study examines how the British language policy in Africa promoted a form of linguistic apartheid and argues that it led to a contradictory situation not paralleled in the case of French, Portuguese and Spanish as colonial languages.¹⁹ However, the major consequence of linguistic apartheid has been the rapid spread of ‘New Englishes’, which have become an important part of today’s English varieties.

Furthermore, Asia is also multilingual and opening broadly to English.²⁰ In turning to China, the first half of the twentieth century was mostly involved in international and domestic wars. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, China has seen tremendous changes in language policy since the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949.²¹ The policies that have been implemented include the spreading and promotion of Chinese as the standard form for the official Chinese language followed by the reformation of the Chinese writing system, especially the use of
a simplified form of Chinese traditional characters. Along with these developments, there have also been measures to promote foreign language education. While Russian was the preferred language in the 1960s, largely due to the special political tie between China and Soviet Union, English has enjoyed supremacy as the main foreign language since the Communist Party of China took power in 1949. This dominant status suffered a setback during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), after which the emphasis on learning English resumed and continued to prevail until today: English is a compulsory subject in all Chinese secondary schools and universities.22

English language has been playing a key role in the processes of globalization and the internationalization of education due to its economic value and the political power attributed to it in the global contexts. It has brought both symbolic and realistic advantages and benefits to institutions and nations where people are able to speak English language either as their mother tongue or as a second or foreign language. What internationalizing process would eventually mean to universities and nations is yet to be revealed, but the rationale behind this trend of internationalization of education and internationalization of curriculum is associated with the powerful attributes of multilingual knowledge and skills. Like globalization, they have become irreversible trends of our time.23

Multilingual knowledge and skills in Australian universities:

dmulticultural phenomenon

Learning new languages in social contexts and in formal classrooms are two major sources from which one can obtain multilingual knowledge and skills. The former source of language learning is effective as long as such social contexts are available or affordable. The latter is what university knowledge workers can do a great deal with: through strategic policy decisions regarding curriculum design and linking disciplinary knowledge and incorporating it with language studies.

Traditionally people learn a new language primarily for utilitarian reasons, such as finding a job, and sometimes for humanistic reasons or for leisure, such as an interest in exploring a new culture and travelling. The utilitarian reasons are closely connected to economic purposes. In a post-industrial society, it has been argued that the linguistic skills of workers at all levels carry important weight.24 The communication skills and literacy demanded by new technologies, represented by competence in one or more foreign languages, all deliver economic benefits. Heller suggests that languages are being treated more and more as economic commodities.25 All these arguments are in line with Bourdieu’s ‘linguistic capital’.26

However, some scholars tend to take language learning as a means of promoting intercultural competence and cultural identities.27 Lo Bianco et al.28 regard second language learning and teaching as part of intercultural competence either for a global citizen, a global institution or a nation;
this intercultural competence carries with it better understanding of the ideological values of ethnic and national identity. It is ultimately for these humanistic reasons that students should learn languages, even though they may have started learning the language for utilitarian reasons. The following is their advice to the Australian government about what a language education policy should be:

A language education policy of a nation that takes seriously the highest intellectual, cultural and civilizational ideals of the great experiences of humanity must be global, taking in both Asian and European and fusing these together to help forge a uniquely Australian world literacy.

Australia’s recent history has seen the federal government’s support for language education, particularly Asian language education, fluctuate with the rise, fall and subsequent rise of Asian economies. At the time when Singh proposed that Asia literacy played a role in reproducing colonialist narratives about the West, Asian language education had been introduced into Australian schools as a part of the Keating Labor Government’s commitment to Asia literacy. Since then, the role of Asia literacy has gone through ups and downs, according to changing political influences and the tendency to either support or ignore Asian migrants and Asian language education in Australian schools. The rise of ‘white Australia politics’ at the time of the Howard government and later Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party, for example, represented one extremist end of the Australian political spectrum. Such political actors questioned the need for Asian language education and argued that Asian language education came at the expense of rural, Anglophone Australians. It is evident that many policy makers had underestimated the ‘discomfort of sections of Australian society with the cultural shifts required embedding Asian languages and cultures as part of the knowledge economy’. This tension in culture shifts is also investigated by Leitner and Slaughter.

Since the Labor Party regained power in 2007, Laurie Ferguson, Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services under the Rudd government, has called for all Australians to celebrate the diversity of the more than 200 languages spoken in Australia, and he noted that linguistic diversity is the foundation of the world’s highest level of cultural diversity in Australia. It is believed that there has since been a general government mandate to internationalize the curriculum to serve national economic interests. In an era when ‘emerging economic powers have school students who are setting the global pace’, multilingual knowledge and skills can no longer be considered irrelevant or peripheral in an increasingly competitive international employment market. As part of the response by the Australian federal government, actions are now being taken to standardize the national curriculum including English and other languages.
The latest development is the national debate on how to internationalize the national curriculum for schools in a staged manner. The first stage in developing the Australian national curriculum is to include the subjects of English, history, maths and science subjects into schools from Reception to Year 10. Peter Garrett, the federal Education Minister, has said it was a ‘landmark decision’, which would allow Australian students to be taught a world-class curriculum.38

According to Australian language policy experts Anderson and Lo Bianco, the staged approach towards standardizing the school curriculum would have English as ‘one of the first cabs off the rank and language other than English are following in the second group’.39 In their engagement with the national debate on standardizing the national curriculum for schools, Anderson and Lo Bianco showcased the knowledge and benefit one can gain from learning and speaking another language and provided implications on the language policy for Australian schools and universities.

Every university today takes internationalizing education and curriculum as priorities in strategic papers, as evidenced from the universities’ online documents. Research studies have also proven this. According to a survey conducted as early as 1995, thirty-seven out of thirty-eight Australian universities included a policy of internationalization in their business plans.40 Clyne, Marginson and Woock mapped out the ‘Internationalization of Higher Education’ in the practices of international education in Australian universities. They examined the cultural, political and economic assumptions on which these practices are based and how international education reflected, and contributed to, contemporary changes in the organizational culture of Australian universities. In its analysis of the organizational practices of international education in Australian universities, the study suggests that Australian universities are generally responsive to the broader processes of globalization and that they are starting to build intellectual connections between the learning of languages other than English and of other disciplines.42

Australian universities are now beating the drums on internationalizing their curricula by keying in the trend of internationalization of education into their strategic plans and priorities. However, as Australian higher education advances, new ways of thinking about the curriculum need to be developed to meet the changing imperatives of the global environment. The question of what is a well-defined curriculum must be addressed. Internationalization tends to destabilize conventional frameworks of curriculum design and implementation at local, national and international levels. Rizvi and Walsh claim that ‘the issue of cultural diversification of Australian higher education lies at the heart of the goals of internationalized curriculum’,43 which reflects the unique demographic composition of multicultural and multilingual Australia.
The essential nature of well-defined curricula for quality programs is the key for all disciplinary areas of learning and teaching. They are crucial for programs to meet the needs of the learners, as well as the benchmarks and targets, and to achieve far-reaching goals. Above all, they could build a solid territory for the program to grow in and the rich soil for the program to reach fruition. So, what is a well-defined internationalized curriculum?

In reflecting on a substantial and expanding literature on how the internationalization of education is manifested, its implications for various aspects of education, as well as the place of language and culture in teaching and learning, Crichton and Scarino pointed out that there is a ‘general agreement in the literature on the need for internationalization to include an ‘intercultural dimension’’. Later in their discussion, they elaborated this ‘intercultural dimension’ further:

> It is based on this understanding of the intercultural (dimension) that we seek to address the gap between the international and intercultural dimensions of higher education by highlighting the integral relationship between language and culture in learning, and the reality of the continuous presence of at least two languages and cultures in international education.

Scarino et al. also argue that ‘the literature on international education focuses on mapping modes of delivery in international education’. In the meantime, they also emphasize the need to recognize that it is these modes, together with language and culture, that mediate the delivery of programs, through a case study of collaboration between an Australian university and an educational institution in Malaysia. They argue that international education per se involves collaboration and that this collaboration is mediated through language and culture. In other words, learning the language and culture of others becomes a condition for intercultural collaboration to take place and a prerequisite for the ‘intercultural dimension’ to be included in a well-defined internationalized curriculum.

Although Australian universities are generally responsive to the broader processes of globalization, a number of questions still remain: Have the university curricula in Australian tertiary institutions been aligned enough to include that ‘intercultural dimension’ in order to meet the needs of the learners in their development of global literacy? How far have the Australian universities ridden the tide of this ‘uniquely Australian world literacy’ in this highly multicultural and multilingual diversification of Australian higher education?

In order to address these questions, it is necessary to first look at how Australian universities have made use of the readily available sources of multilingual knowledge and skills in the university and in the multicultural and multilingual Australian contexts. The last but not the least important question to address should be how the universities can better build
intellectual connections between language disciplines with other disciplinary fields and enable cross-university collaboration in curriculum intervention in order to make that happen.

**Multilingual knowledge and skills: manifestations and endeavours in Australia**

Today, the learning of new languages has much more value and advantages than in the past, no matter what their initial needs were. Multilingual knowledge and skills may become ‘a matter of keeping one’s job and maintaining one’s survival’ particularly in this highly globalized education and employment market. In other words, university graduates with skills in a new language can not only have better chance to find a job, but also have more chance to sustain and secure that job, and thereby have a stronger sense of life satisfaction, fulfilment and security in their future careers. This may well be why we have recently experienced steady increase in the enrolment numbers in university language programs; in RMIT language program, for instance, there were 30—50% increases each year from 2002—2008. A good half of the students enrolled in RMIT’s language programs are international students, who are taking up a new language as their third language at least, as they have already had English as their second language.

Thus, first and foremost, the multilingual international student population themselves are manifestations of multilingual knowledge and skills. Linguistically diverse students share the same learning content and learning space with local students, but there is a lack of pedagogies conducive to the collaborative production and exchange of knowledge that they possess or can access. Singh argues that internationalizing education by having local and international students pedagogically connected can help make real sense of internationalizing education and curriculum.

Along this line, Tran explores the experiences of Vietnamese and Chinese international students regarding their ways of constructing knowledge in disciplinary writing. Tran concludes that while we recognize the students’ prior cultural knowledge and skills, institutions should work harder to better meet the needs of international students and to consider integrating their prior background knowledge and prior professional experience into this new learning context.

Another manifestation of multilingual knowledge and skills is the increase in non-English-speaking university knowledge workers. In parallel with developments in Asia literacy, speakers of other languages ride the tides of the political ups and downs. Large numbers of non-English-speaking knowledge workers enter the university ‘war zone’; that is, they become caught in the centre of the debate on internationalizing education by themselves being active agents of this internationalizing process. To a large extent, this cohort of knowledge workers personifies the significance of internationalizing higher education and makes the university’s strategic
priorities more visible and plausible in local contexts. Although there are reports that incidents of discrimination against international knowledge workers generally continue to occur,\textsuperscript{54} these workers are continuing to rise in number and seemingly becoming a sustained workforce in the Australian education sector, including higher education.

The usual and obvious platform for acquiring multilingual knowledge and skills is through the language programs of schools, colleges and universities. Almost all Australian universities offer at least one language, taking any one of the following forms, individually or in combination:\textsuperscript{55}

1. Stand-alone degrees, eg. Bachelor of Language Studies;
2. Double degrees by collaborating with other disciplines;
3. Core learning capabilities embedded in a disciplinary area other than language: students are requested to obtain these learning capabilities in order to complete their major degrees, e.g. Bachelor of Arts (International Studies) of RMIT;
4. University-wide open electives bearing a certain number of credit points.

However, the number of languages taught in Australian schools and universities has dropped drastically, from sixty-six to less than thirty in the past decade.\textsuperscript{56} Facing the fact that languages are in crises,\textsuperscript{57} the need for a national network was identified by two studies funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) on beginners’ languages in Australian universities.\textsuperscript{58} A subsequent national languages colloquium called ‘Beyond the Crisis’ was staged in February 2009, which was led and supported by the Australian Academy of the Humanities (http://www.humanities.org.au/). As a result of these background initiatives and events, the Languages and Cultures Network of Australian Universities (LCNAU: http://www.lcnau.org/) was formally established via its Inaugural Colloquium in September 2011.

This LCNAU Network is crucial to Australia as a nation for Australia’s education sector to effectively participate in a globalized world. In particular, this Network will promote a stronger language culture in higher education in Australia, by building strategic leadership across disciplines and institutions through a tertiary languages network. This would include cross-university and cross-disciplinary collaboration in curriculum intervention with multilingual knowledge and skills which are as well deeply rooted and grounded in the linguistic diversity of local and international students and global knowledge workers in our universities.

Despite initiatives by the universities to facilitate academics’ and students’ understanding of the English language for both local and international students, pedagogical interactions between language programs and other disciplines are lacking.\textsuperscript{59} This absence of language pedagogies for promoting inter-disciplinary interactions is a key problem confronting Australian universities. Consequently such pedagogical and intellectual
interactions between language programs and others is a significant issue in internationalizing curriculum. This is where the LCNAU Network could come into play and make appropriate connections. It is envisaged that LCNAU will provide a vital link across the languages sector, with a view to enabling increased systematic and regular collaboration and exchange, including a need for a strand of language leadership around models of delivery, models of assessment and cross-disciplinary curriculum development.

However, this LCNAU project is funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) for a period of only two years. This means that by the end of 2012, this LCNAU Network will be expected to operate on its own, relying on voluntary contributions of motivated university academics and the policy-makers at universities who can take to their strategic and political priorities the internationalization of education through a well-defined curriculum. The success of the strategic priorities for their higher education institutions will rely on internationalizing the curriculum with an ‘Intercultural Dimension’, in such a way that can embrace the multicultural and multilingual nature of the unique Australian demography.

Conclusion

Learning more than one language is becoming omnipresent, great fun and even stylish. It is prevalent either through self-study, in informal social contexts, or in formal classroom situations—in primary schools, secondary colleges, TAFE colleges and universities, wherever the economic value and political power of multilingual knowledge and skills can start to take root.

Multilingual knowledge and cross-cultural communication skills can no longer be marginalized from the internationalization of the curriculum if university graduates are to extend their learning capabilities in order to access employment opportunities inside and outside Australia. Graduates are on a quest for a global passport through an internationalized curriculum in universities, as they strive to obtain not only enough credit points for their degrees but also sharpen their edges in the increasingly competitive world employment market with this added-on multilingual knowledge and skills. Language learning has become an immediate agenda for globally oriented learners in order to boost their international career profile, not just for utilitarian benefits but also for deeper intercultural understanding and understanding of an interconnected world.

With the LCNAU project and its activities unfolding, it is anticipated that graduates’ capabilities in terms of multilingual knowledge and skills can top the agenda of the policy-actors at the federal governmental level to generate top-level policy initiatives, such as the ‘Blair Initiative’ in Britain and George Bush’s ‘National Security Language Initiative’ in the US. By weaving together the economic and political significance of languages, such initiatives can
bring changes to languages and culture education to contribute to the processes of multilingual knowledge production and re-production inherent in the rich diversification of Australian demography.

The LCNAU network is no doubt an active driver and engine for a multilingual-knowledge-driven approach towards reconceptualizing the internationalization of education and university curricula through incorporating multilingual knowledge and skills. It also aims to provide guidance for Australian universities to facilitate language education to carve out a central place for them as global universities.60

Multilingual knowledge and skills is essential for an individual’s career prospects as well as for the career sustainability of both students and university academics, and it is equally critical to national security and national public policy. Only by engaging in the process of internationalization of education and curriculum through learning new languages and cultures can the tertiary institutions, and Australia as a nation, safely navigate the challenges posed by the rising tide of global literacy. It takes many generations to reach this level of awareness:

   Learning ‘foreign’ languages should no longer be considered ‘foreign’; they are world languages, as well as English, at the time of globalization.61

Now it is possible to come to terms with the profound implications this globalization process has brought to education and the internationalizing of education with or without multilingual knowledge and skills.

Lynne Li is lecturer of language studies at RMIT University where she also coordinates the Chinese Language Program at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Lynne has also lectured in Business English and TESOL/LOTE methodology in RMIT, and is now on LCNAU project as the RMIT representative.

Endnotes


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30. Ibid.


39. K. Anderson and J. Lo Bianco, ‘Speak, and ye shall find knowledge’.
40. F. Rizvi and L. Walsh, ‘Difference, globalisation and the internationalisation of curriculum’.


42. Ibid.


45. Ibid, p.4.


47. K. Anderson and J. Lo Bianco, ‘Speak, and ye shall find knowledge’.


52. Ibid.


54. Ibid.

55. L. Li, ‘Challenges of educational leadership’.

56. K. Anderson and J. Lo Bianco, ‘Speak, and ye shall find knowledge’.


59. L. Li, ‘Challenges of Educational Leadership’.
