Linguistic diversity benefits us all

Janet Holmes

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

IN SEPTEMBER last year, the British introduced a new English language entry requirement for non-EU skilled migrants. Migrants must prove they have been educated at an English-medium university or achieved a level 6 in the International English Language Testing System exam (unless they are soccer players signed to premiership clubs). Many New Zealanders are surprised to discover that we have similar requirements before skilled professional migrants are admitted to New Zealand. In fact, our specifications are even higher. And as far as I know, there is no exemption for footballers.

To many New Zealanders, such requirements seem eminently sensible. After all, if you want to work in New Zealand you should be able to speak the language of the majority group (even if, ironically it has no formal legal status).

But imagine if these linguistic requirements applied to our young people travelling overseas. Many seek work in countries where English is a foreign language, and where they do not speak the local language. I have a young friend working in Italy as a nanny, using English to the children, as agreed with her employers, and muddling along socially using her high school French as a bridge to understanding Italian.

Many young New Zealanders are working in Japan and Korea teaching English. They generally manage with minimal familiarity with the local language, and their foreign hosts are tolerant of their linguistic ethnocentrism and ignorance because they are employed to teach English. And, importantly, they don't usually intend to stay.

How different is the experience of young migrants from Samoa or China looking for jobs in Auckland or Wellington.

UNLIKE our lucky young New Zealanders, they often do not speak English fluently, and we are (myopically) not interested in the languages they could teach us and our children. Instead these young people are subjected to ridicule, and sometimes overt harassment, when they use their languages in public, even to each other. I have heard people on buses and trains commenting loudly and negatively about two people having a (private) conversation in a language other than English.

In almost every social context in New Zealand, people are expected to switch to English as soon as a monolingual English speaker enters the room. We regard this as a politeness issue. But one could argue that monolinguals should politely wait till others have finished their conversation in their preferred language. Instead of celebrating and enjoying linguistic diversity, we seem to feel threatened when others use a language we do not understand.

In multilingual societies, patterns of language use are very different. People choose the appropriate language on the basis of a range of social factors. Just as in New Zealand Maori is the preferred language of the marae, in multilingual countries such as Zaire and Singapore, a particular language may be selected according to the formality of the social setting or the occasion. Bank tellers in Ottawa use French or English according to the client's preference. In Hong Kong, multilinguals often switch to Chinese when talking about food.

More than half the world is bilingual; monolinguals are a minority globally. In countries where monolinguals dominate, it is important to foster appreciation of linguistic diversity and the sociolinguistic skills of those who can function comfortably in a range of languages.

Instead of feeling uncomfortable or threatened when we hear others using a language we do not understand, we should assume that they are using language for positive reasons, such as enhancing understanding and building social bonds. These people represent a valuable resource for New Zealand. They have the potential to enhance the linguistic resources of our country by bringing up their children as bilingual.

Just as we encourage parents to assist their children in acquiring a range of sporting skills, surely we should support their efforts to enhance their children's linguistic repertoires.

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