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Language is a deep and profound reflection of who we are.

In my early days here, I remember an Australian asking me: "You're who?" and I said "Yes I'm Hieu", and I remember my English teacher asking me, "How ya goin', mate ?" And he was very confused when I replied, "I am going by bus".

I have learnt and discovered much, much more since then about the Australian language and about Australianness.

I have learnt much about the beauty of language. In my own process of learning and using English I have discovered the beauty and grandeur of this language, and also in the process rediscovered and expanded my appreciation of the beauty and grandeur of my first language, Vietnamese.

It is a most wonderful thing to have another language. Put simply, it expands the mind.

English has become the world's Lingua Franca.

A key reason, I believe, is its 'multicultural' tradition, as Melvin Bragg said in his book and television series *The Adventure of English*, and I quote:

"For centuries, English was outstandingly successful at feeding off other languages and turning them into English, often endowing them with a quality which made them seem agelessly English. Now it is feeding other languages." Unquote.

Languages cross-fertilize each other. James Britton, in his book *Language and Learning*, wrote :

“our world representation comes from our experience of the world, with language as the organising principle ...”

English can be a great benefit to our multicultural world and our multicultural world can be a great benefit to English.

The ability to use English has become important, or even essential, for people around the world.

The disadvantage and even danger, for native English speakers, is that we can succumb to a subtle arrogance and feel we have no need to learn another language.

To so succumb - to relegate the learning of other languages to some sort of luxury, or indulgence, or as just being too much trouble to bother - would be our very great loss.

Psychiatrist and author Dr. Norman Doidge, in an interview on the *7.30 Report* last week, pointed to the recent research that indicates the great plasticity of the brain, how important it is to ‘get our brain wired’.

He said:

‘In the '60s, there were things that were part of a kind of classical education that people did away with 'cause they thought that they were irrelevant. Like an almost fanatical attention to elocution and handwriting, or memorising long poems.

But, it now turns out that what these activities did is, they exercised very important parts of the brain that allow you to think in long sentences, have deep internal monologues and a certain amount of grace in all kinds of expression.’

And of course it is exactly these things that learning another language does for us.

We are wired to learn language. We cannot think without it.

The relationships of words are the keys to our thinking.

The human brain functions like a symphony orchestra. Think of language as music. Language rings the bells of the senses as much as it turns the pages of our mental dictionaries.

We are wired for language and the latest research indicates that we are wired by our language.

Understanding a language is such a key to understanding a culture, for when we understand a language we also learn to understand the thinking - the culture - behind the language.

In our brain, language is the music of our ideas. If we are lucky enough to have a second language we have another musical key for our ideas.

We have a role, a rich and particular inheritance, to give English to the world - this remarkable plastic mongrel language, the richness of which comes from its history and ability for creative word-theft.

At the same time we would be so foolish if we did not place huge importance on gaining the gifts other languages bring.

Asian nations are our closest neighbours and should play a large part in our global outlook. We need to wire ourselves for that.

The main Asian languages studied in this State in government schools are Japanese, Indonesian, Mandarin and Vietnamese.

Sadly over the past five years, there has been a decline in the number of students studying an Asian language. Nationally, only 5.8 per cent of students study an Asian language in Year 12.

On the other hand, Asian students, as part of their compulsory curriculum, learn at least one foreign language, mostly English, in their first year of high school, with equal importance placed on the learning of English as on other subjects in the curriculum.

The power that languages give our brain is enormous.

The great German writer Goethe put it beautifully:

"For just when ideas fail, a word comes in to save the situation."