

National Need for a New Deal in Languages Education

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NOW that China is Australia's top trading partner, renewed focus has been placed on teaching Asian languages in schools. More than 300 million Chinese students are studying English, yet fewer than 15 per cent of Australian Year 12 students are learning any second language at all.

Queensland's figures are even worse: fewer than 6 per cent of Year 12 students are studying a language other than English. But if Kevin Rudd becomes prime minister, things are likely to change.

Rudd stole the show at APEC earlier this month when he spoke in Mandarin to Chinese President Hu Jintao, chatting about family life and living in China. Under a Labor government, Rudd says, a national Asian languages program would be implemented as a national priority, to prepare young Australians to compete with their geographic neighbours.

The present Federal Government provides funding to states and territories - \$112 million from 2005-2008 to teach a Language Other Than English (LOTE) in schools.

Each state runs its own language show and, in Queensland, some schools offer courses as early as Year 1, while others start their LOTE programs in Years 2, 3 or 4. "Most do it in Years 5, 6, 7 and 8 and after that it really becomes optional and once that happens not a lot of students take it up," says Queensland University of Technology language studies lecturer Julia Rothwell.

A compulsory, properly funded and enforced LOTE program is needed across state schools, says Modern Language Teachers Association of Queensland spokesperson Helen Best.

Learning a second language, she says, broadens children's outlook, improves their literacy and expands their view of the world beyond the experiences of Anglo-speaking Australia. "It's never been mandated in Education Queensland schools to do a language after Year 8," Best says.

Federal Labor would take expert advice from a yet-to-be-created National Curriculum Board on whether, and in what years of school, languages should be made compulsory, says Opposition education spokesman Stephen Smith.

But not everybody relies on governments to help their children become bilingual. Accountant Ian Schubert takes six-year-old daughter Crystal to Spanish classes on Saturdays at Alpha Tykes language school in Kenmore. Crystal has been learning Spanish for 18 months and Ian says she's well on her way to becoming fluent.

"She is now coming home and singing songs in Spanish and she's quite comfortable reading it," he says. "I'm sure it has helped her confidence in other areas too because her personality type is quite shy."

Ian says he and his wife Lisa believe being bilingual is a way to reduce barriers between people of different nationalities and cultures. "I'm not looking for Crystal to be the world's most successful person because she's learning Spanish, but if I could find a way to make the world a better place by reaching out to people, that's a good thing," he says.

Experts have long advocated children learning a second language. Alpha Tykes managing director Leann Webb says the golden age of learning for children is **before the age of five**, when their minds absorb knowledge more rapidly than at any other time in their lives.

The centre, which will open two more language schools at Mt Gravatt and Ashgrove this month, introduces children from 18 months to nine years of age to Spanish, French and Italian. The languages are taught in weekly one-hour lessons in a play-based curriculum which includes music, singing, storytelling, creative and physical activities.

Webb says it's common for children in Europe to be raised with two or three languages. In Finland, for example, children take three languages throughout schooling, 44 per cent take a fourth language and 31 per cent a fifth language.

"Australia is a monolingual nation in an increasingly globalised world; only 16 per cent of the population speaks a language other than English," Webb says.

Rudd says it must be a priority that "in the eyes of the developed world we become the most Asia-literate country in the Western world".

Others agree. "Speaking another language does more than allow you to order the right food when you go on holiday," Rothwell says. "Kevin Rudd (with Jintao) proved that it lifts credibility in commercial, economic and political negotiations. Ever-increasing numbers of young people travel and work overseas these days so it gives them more job opportunities.

The fact is more people in the world are bilingual than not. Europeans cannot understand why we don't speak another language. They see it as an indispensable part of their cultural tool box."

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop agrees a second language can enhance career prospects and improve business outcomes. "As the world becomes more connected, we need a range of skills to operate and communicate effectively across boundaries," she says.

In Queensland, Education Minister Rod Welford also claims to be an advocate of LOTE for all students, even though only 33,025 secondary students were learning a language in this state last year.

While Education Queensland says LOTE is mandated in Years 6 to 8, Best and others say the delivery and quality of the courses vary widely depending on staff, the commitment by individual principals to foreign language studies and other factors.

Seven languages are taught in Queensland schools: Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese and Korean. Small numbers of students also study Vietnamese, Spanish and Greek.

A trial now being held in the Moreton region could form the basis for a new style of LOTE programs in schools, where entry points will be Years 4, 6, 8 and possibly 11.

But Best says many mainstream Australians still struggle to grasp the benefit of learning another language. "Australia is still isolationist," she says. "Lots of people still don't see the point of learning another language and believe children should be learning their own language properly."

But Rothwell says literacy skills of a first and second language can support each other. "There is evidence that learning a second language to a reasonable level, senior secondary, for example -- can help students with their understanding and use of their own language," she says.

Rothwell also says that Australia is a multicultural society. "In a way, the world comes to us. If our children understand how these people see the world and maybe what challenges they've faced before arriving here, they're likely to be more accepting and understanding."

And the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry goes so far as to say that the lack of language in our schools could be placing the nation's future economic growth at risk. The peak body recently issued a blueprint for education in which it advocated compulsory language lessons at school from the age of seven or even younger.

It used Amazon, the online book company, as an example of the need for Australians to learn second languages to keep economic pace with the rest of the world. Amazon relocated its \$US8.4 billion retail customer service centre from the United Kingdom to Ireland to take advantage of the Emerald Isle's superior language skills. More than 40 per cent of adult Irish men and women speak a language other than English.

According to Mary Hicks, ACCI director of training and education, English language skills are becoming a basic skill around the world.

"Australians are increasingly competing for jobs with people who are just as competent in English as they are in their own native language and possibly one or two more," she says.

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