

Monoglot graduates face a bleak future

Miki Perkins, The Age, May 6, 2009

When Steve Buck was in primary school he became fascinated with stories about ancient Japanese samurai warriors, their discipline, strength and entrepreneurial flair.

Captivated by a culture in stark contrast to life in the outer-Melbourne suburb of Seaford, Buck and his twin brother Ian began studying Japanese. They liked the language so much that when a drop in student numbers meant their high school couldn't offer it beyond year 11, they transferred to Frankston High.

"Japanese to me was the opening to a new world — a world where people ate differently, spoke differently, lived differently. It was hard not to fall in love with such a beautiful civilisation," Buck says.

But studying Japanese in year 12 made the Buck brothers, now 19, rare in Australia. These days, only 12 per cent of year 12 students study a foreign language, and just over half of those choose an Asian language. In contrast, in the 1960s about 40 per cent of year 12s did a language.

Language experts, teachers and policy makers say Asian languages in Australia are in crisis: we're becoming a staunchly monolingual nation in an era when much of the globe is flexing its multilingual muscle. And unless Australia halts this decline, they warn, the educational, economic and security consequences will be dire.

"If we don't focus on Asia literacy, both language and cultural awareness, we're going to get left behind," says Kathe Kirby, executive director of Asialink and the Asia Education Foundation. "The prosperity, security, and capacity of our children to operate in an internationally mobile world will be severely affected."

Travel bans, a funding drought and the spectre of fundamentalist Islam have all hamstrung efforts to reinvigorate Asian language learning.

Monoglot graduates face a bleak future. Kirby points out it is common — particularly in developing Asian nations — for emerging students to be trilingual. Mandarin is now the most widely spoken language in the world. By the middle of this century, Hindi, and its closely related counterpart Urdu, are tipped to rival both English and Spanish as the second most widely spoken native languages.

But in what Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has dubbed the "Asian century", Australia is lagging behind. In the past decade alone, the number of languages offered at Australian universities has dropped from 66 to 29, according to a recent report from the Group of Eight universities.

Fewer than 3 per cent of university students study an Asian language, and academics say the situation is worsening. With Asia the only region likely to experience growth during the global financial crisis, only businesses with the right linguistic and cultural mix will prosper.

"We must exploit our unique access to Asia just to maintain current economic performance and our high standard of living, never mind improving them," says Melbourne University professor of Asian law, Tim Lindsey. Australia has national imperatives in trade, strategic policy and diplomacy that are inextricably tied to Asia. "These societies will largely determine Australia's national security and place in interfaith and cross-cultural dialogues in the coming decades," he says.

The need to boost Asia literacy is a problem with which Australia's Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister is well acquainted. During the Keating years, Rudd was the architect of an Asian language strategy that focused on Japanese, Mandarin, Indonesian and Korean. The federal National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools program doled out \$208 million over eight years, or about \$26 million a year, which was matched by the states. The number of students studying Asian languages doubled. But the Howard government axed the program in 2002 and student numbers started to slide. Between 2001 and 2005, the number of Government school students studying Indonesian and Japanese declined by about 60,000, while the number enrolled in Chinese only marginally increased.

During his election campaign, Rudd promised to reinvigorate Asia literacy, and earlier this year, Education Minister Julia Gillard launched another strategy: the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program. Its ambitious goal is to double the number of students studying an Asian language by 2015. But at only \$15.6 million a year over four years, experts say the money is a mere drop in the ocean.

"It would be churlish to say it's not welcome but we've been announcing new programs for years," says Joseph Lo Bianco, language and literacy education chairman at Melbourne University's Graduate School of Education. "The most important issue is that people have to accept this is not a country with a long tradition of successful bilingualism, like Canada. We will need a cultural shift."

Australian Secondary Principals Association head Andrew Blair says if Government has any policy boldness this will just be the first suite of funding. There is a pressing need for larger resources. "If we're going to be competitive, we have to embrace Asia; at the moment it's a nicety."

In its defence, the Government says that in addition to the program, it has recently agreed to include languages in the second phase of the new national curriculum and committed \$14.9 million to establish an Asian scholarship scheme.

In February, Rudd stood before a bilateral conference of senior Indonesian politicians, diplomats and experts and admitted that Australia needed to do better — "a lot better" — in its level of Indonesian language study and the development of Indonesian studies at Australian universities. Foreign Minister Stephen Smith echoed his concerns, saying it was time to build a new generation of Australian Indonesian specialists because they had almost become an "endangered species".

And yesterday, a powerful alliance of business groups, unions and major corporations joined forces to call for a greater educational focus on Asia in light of the economic downturn.

But Australians are losing the ability to speak to our nearest neighbours, a rising democracy of 237 million people and home to the world's largest Muslim population.

Nationwide, the number of year 12 students enrolled in Indonesian has dropped from 1745 in 2003 to 1465 in 2007, according to data from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Between 2001 and 2005, the number of Indonesian language learners fell by 20 per cent. Figures from the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority show numbers of students doing Indonesian at year 12 in Victoria also fell, from 1015 five years ago to 848 last year.

Professor Tim Lindsey says the \$62.4 million in Asian studies program will get Indonesian language learners "almost nowhere". "What we have now is collapse in Indonesia studies around Australia — we are at its lowest ebb," Lindsey says.

He says that despite the best efforts of dedicated Indonesian teachers, Australia continues to harbour negative perceptions of Indonesia shaped by events such as the Bali bombings in 2002, the incarceration of Schapelle Corby and the Bali Nine.

While tourism in places like Bali has bounced back to pre-bombing levels, educational travel to Indonesia has all but stopped, stymied by Government travel warnings that deter insurance companies from covering school trips.

Carey Grammar Indonesian teacher Vicky Dalamagas entered the profession during the Keating years when the Education Department had money to train Indonesian teachers, and languages other than English were compulsory to year 10.

Travel warnings remain a deterrent to parents wanting their children to study Indonesian, she says. "A lot of kids used to keep on until year 10 so that they could go on a school trip, and once they went to Indonesia, they discovered they really loved it."

Dalamagas remains optimistic, pointing out that the relationship between the two countries has strengthened and this might increase the take-up of Indonesian.

But student numbers are not the only measure of success, as Dr Jane Orton of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education found when she undertook an investigation into Chinese (Mandarin)

language learning. Orton was staggered to find that schools nationwide didn't need to increase the numbers of Chinese language students. Rather, the problem was getting them to stick with it. Almost 95 per cent of students studying Chinese dropped out before year 11, and only 3 per cent of all students took Chinese at year 12. The overwhelming number of highly competent Chinese home speakers in class meant it was rare for classroom-only learners to do well, Orton says.

It also takes 3.5 times as long to develop a proficiency in Chinese as it does in a European language, yet the subject was given the same time in school as other languages.

Year 11 Melbourne Grammar student Oscar Berry agrees that learning Chinese is time consuming, but he says the high mark-up at VCE level should be enough to convince wary students. There are about 970 students learning Mandarin at Melbourne Grammar School.

"People think they can get by just using English but it opens up a whole lot of the world having another language," Berry says.

Orton recommends that three streams of Chinese learning be created nationally to cater for classroom, home-speaking and mother-tongue learners, and the amount of class time spent on Chinese be boosted.

For Japanese devotees like the Buck twins, the picture is different from other Asian language learners. For years the Japanese Government has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars in teaching resources to Australian schools, a conscious decision to fix any lingering perception of a clash of cultures more than half a century after World War II.

It also encourages its citizens to give a year of service to their country, and many volunteer as Japanese language assistants.

Frankston High School Japanese teacher Judith Guzys-McAuliffe says parents steer their children away from Japanese because they worry they won't be able to help them with the homework. She hopes a policy shift will show the parents of Australia's future Asian language learners the value of different cultural approaches.

"The Japanese have a saying: 'If you're planning for one year, plant rice. If you're planning for two years plant trees. And if you're planning for 100 years, educate the people'," she says.

Miki Perkins is the education reporter with The Age:

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/when-fortune-fades-20090505-au0a.html?page=-1>

Language challenges:

- In the 1960s, about 40 per cent of year 12 students studied a foreign language. Today, the number is 12 per cent...
- Few more than half of those year 12 language students are choosing an Asian language
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