

Why start with character-based Asian tongues?

Luke Slattery, June 17, 2009

AUSTRALIAN language policy is in crisis. A concerted national effort is needed to ensure that all students finish year 12 with proficiency in a second language. Bilingualism must be the minimum policy aim, as in Europe.

State and federal authorities should nominate a few priority languages along with stepped-out attainment targets: that is, 30 per cent of year 12 students should have a second language by 2012, 50 per cent by 2015 and 100 per cent by 2020.

The emphasis should be on those European languages with which English has an affinity: German, French, Spanish and Italian. These tongues have a dual action: they are relatively easy to learn and enrich one's knowledge of English.

In most instances the study of character-based Asian languages, such as Japanese and Chinese, should be reserved for Anglophones who have cut their teeth on a European language. This acknowledges a reality of language learning: it takes three times as many tuition hours for English speakers to learn character-based languages. All power to Kevin Rudd for his mastery of Mandarin, but he has been the beneficiary of untold hours of taxpayer-funded tuition.

Most students of a second language will get further faster with a cognate language. Linguists refer to this as the apprentice tongue, and it should ideally give students an appetite for more. It's at the next level that the languages of regional significance come into their own: they should be taught, for the most part, as third languages.

Bahasa Indonesia is an exception as it is relatively easy.

Asian language advocates rely almost exclusively on economic appeal to sell their message. What they forget is that English is the language of global commerce and the lingua franca of the regional marketplace. When China realises its ambitions of becoming an English-speaking power, it will join India, Singapore, Malaysia and Pakistan, to name but a few.

Asia is, in fact, becoming an Anglophone economic powerhouse. Australia will need some elite speakers of Mandarin, Korean and Japanese to work at the top levels of business, academe and government: most likely they will be native speakers who have emigrated to this country. A mass Asian language program would appeal to the Australia-is-an-Asian-nation cabal and be a world first: no other Western nation has attempted such a thing. But it would be lunacy.

What we do need is a policy that ensures all Australians finish school with a second language in order to take their place in a multilingual world. There are powerful cognitive, cultural and intellectual reasons for second language acquisition. We inhabit a moment in time when multilingualism is the global norm.

Australia, you're standing in it!

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<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25646326-7583,00.html>