

## Students at risk of being jacks of all languages, masters of none

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COMEDIAN Jimmy Durante's catchphrase was "everybody wants ta get into the act" and, when it comes to schools and schooling, the same rule applies. Interest groups are lining up to get into the act.

Apparently, toddlers now need careers counselling, the creative arts have, with Peter Garrett's help, managed to edge their way on to the national stage and a broader study of Asian languages in Australia, we are told in a recent report by Griffith University's Asia Institute, urgently needs a boost at university and school level. This is because it is "critical for the country's prosperity that half of all Australians become competent in a key Asian language over the next 30 years".

This latter claim comes even though it is English that is the established assistant language of India, the world's second most populous nation (with 90 million English speakers), and of Pakistan. In mainland China, there are an estimated 10 million English speakers, many of these involved in business.

Why do so many of our Asian neighbours aspire to speak English? Because it is English that is the lingua franca of international commerce, finance, the media and diplomacy, not Cantonese, not Wu, not Min, nor even Mandarin (the four major Chinese languages). The same prevalence of English as the second language applies in Japan and Indonesia, and increasingly in the formerly Francophone sections of Vietnam and Cambodia.

And if the Asian language supporters wish to point to a recent huge increase in the number of Chinese language websites, I can point to a huge Chinese online population talking mainly to itself, and that only when the Beijing Government allows it.

While I unreservedly support the view that we need to know more about our Asian neighbours, their lives, their culture and, in a seriously analytical fashion, their histories, I am more than sceptical about the suggestion we need to switch scarce school resources into a scatter-gun Asian languages policy for our non-Asian descent students.

This is a proposed policy that will get them ready to speak in what is likely to be, at best, a halting fashion at a time when Asian countries are increasing their English language programs. That being the case, while it may be a well-meaning plan to have a broad approach to Asian languages in Australian schools, is it logical?

It would be more sensible, and bearing in mind almost all Australians speak English as a first and second language, to have a focused languages policy that stipulates at least one nominated European language and one nominated Asian language to be strongly supported for national study at a basic level in years kindergarten to 10, for functional and cultural reasons.

The intensive teaching of very difficult (for a Westerner) Asian languages, to often reluctant students, should not be the responsibility of already over-burdened schools, asked to engage in an ad hoc approach to language education. This has always been the modern Anglophone dilemma. Everybody else, from Finland to Fiji, needs to learn English because it is the major global language. Which, therefore, of the nine non-English world languages that have more than 100 million speakers, should we Australians learn in an act of economic and cultural reciprocity? All? None? Some? If the latter, which?

For example, to illustrate the nature of the problem, there are more than 40 VCE studies in modern languages, most of them community languages, ranging from Albanian to Yiddish, with most of those studies undertaken by students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Of these studies, the major Asian languages are Mandarin Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean, a hangover from an earlier national priority language program and each of these four has tiny year 12 numbers.

A more focused national approach would allow greater concentration on a single Asian language as well as the opportunity for students to take additional non-English language studies on to year 12, but strictly as a locally supported option.

The upshot of a more controlled, more balanced and less opportunistic approach to language education would hopefully be that the majority of Australian students would be reasonably fluent in at least one language that interests them instead of very, very ordinary at many.

A narrowing of a strategically funded Asian language program would mean that additional, intensive after-school commercial or diplomacy-related language studies would have to be the province of the universities, the business sector, the defence forces or the Federal Government. Indeed, this was the case with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who attended a Mandarin college in China after completing Asian studies at university.

There'll be howls, of course, if we narrow the options, but please can we get away from that destructive, linguistic infighting and special pleading that has led to Australia's Tower of Babel arrangement where many of our students can count from one to 10, say "good morning", identify foreign vegetables, and do very little else, in half-a-dozen different languages. We need to stop asserting, without substantive evidence, that the study of more Asian languages is better for the nation.

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