

Towards an Australian strategy for Asian language proficiency

Michael Wesley et al, "Building an Asia Literate Australia" Report 10 June 2009

As Australia embraces a global future, we face a growing skills shortfall: the ability to understand and operate in languages and cultures other than our own.

Australia's location, size and economic and social makeup mean that we will always be a global nation. Australia has the second-highest proportion of its people living and working abroad in the world. Long-term trends show a steady internationalisation of our society and economy. Australia is becoming increasingly integrated into the dynamic region to its north. New, Asian powerhouses are rising. As China's and India's influence spreads, and Japan and Indonesia become major players, our region will increasingly conduct its business in the languages of the big Asian powers, and be shaped by their mind-sets and preferences¹.

In this context, we face a serious skills crisis. Australia is lagging further and further behind comparable nations in the international skills of its people. At the core of our continued prosperity and security as a global nation must be a capacity to understand and operate in languages, cultures and mindsets other than our own. Over three-quarters of Australians speak English only – making Australia the third most monolingual developed nation in the world.

Most of the world is multilingual, and investing more in learning other languages and cultures. A monolingual Australia will fall further and further behind.

All of the world's most successful, stable and dynamic societies are increasingly embracing an international future — but unlike us, most have high proportions of citizens who speak several languages and can operate comfortably in cultures other than their own. The knowledge of more than one language gives a person an edge in judgement and competence. Qualified, multilingual competitors have an advantage against monolingual Australians in global companies and organisations.

With language and knowledge of the cultures, histories, societies of the people who use that language, comes a different way of seeing the world. The realization that there are other ways of seeing the world allows us to understand better the way we look at the world and react to it. Cultural self-awareness is a vital asset for Australians operating in a global realm across many cultures and languages.

It is true that more and more people around the world are learning English as a second language. But just because someone speaks to us in English doesn't necessarily mean they see the world as we do. Relying on others who speak English, or on interpreters, brings major disadvantages - we may miss crucial nuances or differences in meaning or intent.

Learning another language contributes significantly to communication and literacy skills in English. Language study enhances listening and speaking skills, deepens the understanding of grammar, and builds the ability to analyse, categorise, find patterns and express and defend opinions. Neurological research shows that bilingual speakers have denser brain tissue in areas of language, memory and attention than monolingual speakers.

If we are to address this skills shortfall, we need to take decisive action. Within a generation, Australia needs over half of its population to be competent in a second language. Two-thirds of Australians under the age of forty need to have either high-level, sound, or basic proficiency in a second language.

Introduction to the report "Building an Asia Literate Australia" published 10 June 2009 – read entire document at: <http://www.griffith.edu.au/australian-strategy-asian-language-proficiency/report>