

## **Language barrier we don't want to breach**

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Earlier this year I signed up at the local TAFE to learn Indonesian. A few days before the class began I received a phone call. My course had been cancelled because of a lack of interest. In the nation's capital, there was not the demand to run even one class teaching the language of our nearest and most important neighbour.

My experience isn't unique and it's part of one of the bigger puzzles of the past 30 years. Ever since Bob Hawke became prime minister, Australia's engagement with Asia has been official policy. Our political elites have advocated and cajoled Australians to take an interest in our region.

Yet, with the exception of widening the spots where we travel for holiday, most Australians haven't really engaged with the Asia-Pacific. This is most apparent when looking at the number of Australians who learn a second language. A 2009 report found Australia is one of the most monolingual developed nations in the world, with more than three-quarters of Australians speaking only English.

The younger generation may be more comfortable with the idea of Australia's Asian future, but they are no more willing to learn the region's languages. This year's HSC exams in NSW will see a record low level of students tested on their foreign language skills. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, our channel to the region, takes in more graduates with French than with Mandarin and Indonesian combined.

This problem is well known to the government. Indeed, we can expect that it will feature prominently in Ken Henry's Australia in the Asian Century white paper. If he follows past reports, we can expect a call for significant government spending to encourage more teachers to host more classes and to make it easier and cheaper for Australians to learn an Asian language. However, the problem seems less with the government's supply of language services than the public's demand for them.

The most obvious reason why few of us learn a second language, particularly an Asian language, is that it doesn't pay. Australians increasingly work in healthcare and retail, with construction, power generation and transport all growing. These are sectors of the economy that don't offer better jobs or higher salaries to those with foreign language skills.

While it seems intuitive that those working in tourism or education could benefit from a second language, Australia has enjoyed strong growth in both sectors without needing extra language skills. Foreign students need to demonstrate reasonable levels of English to get a place here and most tourists learn, or want to learn, a bit of the local language, reducing Australia's need.

It is this distance between our day-to-day work environment and the rhetoric about Australia's future within Asia that has been the defining experience for most of us. And when most parents see no benefit for themselves from learning an Asian language we cannot be surprised when they don't insist their children learn one either.

Another possible reason why Australians don't seem interested in learning an Asian language is culture. NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell has noted that large parts of his state are still essentially monocultural. One of the reasons French and Spanish classes attract some of us is the romantic appeal we attach to these languages and cultures. Among Asian countries, only Japan seems to have broken through with a similar appeal.

If Australians don't want to watch movies from Vietnam or read the history of Indonesia, they will have no great interest in learning these countries' languages. Australians with dreams of making it big overseas almost always mean succeeding in the US or European markets, not in Southeast Asia. However, as the market turmoil in the US and Europe makes clear, Australia's prosperity depends on good links with Asia.

And not just sending more minerals to China. Australia's top export markets include Japan, India and Korea while we import from Singapore and Thailand. Yet these links have been built up by only a small part of our business sector. In Thailand, where hundreds of thousands of Australians holiday every year, less than 3000 Australian businesses have a presence. Indeed, last year investment from Thailand in Australia was more than double Australian investment in Thailand.

So how can we get Australians wanting to speak to and do business with our region? A new program by the federal Department of Education that seeks to turn parents into advocates for extra language skills, rather than simply adding new classes, is a good start. This is an attempt to stimulate demand for languages after a policy focus on supply. If advocacy fails, maybe bribery could work. Incentives for language have been piecemeal. Governments and educational institutions across the country could agree on a long-term package of enticements. These could include bonus tertiary entry marks for language skills, higher Austudy payments for those doing languages, or tax breaks for parents whose children learn a regional language.

Yet even measures such as these may not be enough without some breakthrough in popular imagination. After 30 years of bipartisan government advocacy of the importance of engagement with Asia, Australians seem happy for our government to look north, but are reluctant to do so themselves. As Paul Keating argued recently, the biggest single challenge is to have Australia psychologically wish to be part of the region around it. Until that changes the classrooms will remain empty, however much the government wishes otherwise.

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