

Minding our languages

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As Julia Gillard has said, this is the Asian century, and no country has more at stake in it than Australia. The countries of Asia are becoming more and more central to our future — economically, politically, socially, strategically, culturally. But as Asia becomes increasingly important to us, fewer Australians are learning about it. Nothing governments have tried in recent years seems to make any difference. It is time for some fresh thinking.

This is not a new problem. The number of Australians learning Asian languages and about Asian societies has been shrinking for years. The teaching of key languages such as Japanese and Indonesian is in danger of disappearing from secondary schools — the combined result of too few students and too few teachers. And with only a tiny handful of exceptions, the only students who learn Chinese at school are those of Chinese background.

The same thing is happening at universities. Asian languages are attracting fewer and fewer students, and those they do attract have not studied an Asian language at school, so their university courses start from scratch. That means the standard most can reach in a three or four-year degree program is pretty basic. In turn, that means the number of well-qualified teachers going into the secondary system is falling, which drives down the numbers who will start to learn Asian languages at school. A classic vicious circle.

Quite a lot of money has been spent trying to fix this problem. Back in his days as a Queensland state official, Kevin Rudd played a big role in trying to help the Keating government formulate a major national Asian language policy, and when he became prime minister he launched a scheme to make Australia the world's most "Asia-literate" society.

But it's not working. Two things seem to be getting in the way. First, the cycle of falling language competence means that no matter how much money is spent, there are too few teachers to expand language classes significantly. Second, young Australians are not interested enough to commit themselves to the sheer hard work of learning Asian languages.

Throwing more money at school and university language programs isn't going to fix the problem. We need to do something different. So here is a suggestion. Instead of trying to teach young Australians Asian languages here in Australia, we should give them a chance to learn them in Asia.

The basic idea is perfectly simple. Instead of spending money on expensive schemes to expand the teaching of Asian languages in Australia, we spend the money on sending young Australians to live in Asia and learn a language there. For example, someone wanting to study Indonesian would spend a year in Indonesia. Those wanting to learn more complex languages such as Chinese or Thai might go for two years.

The advantages are obvious. Students would learn from native-speaking teachers, and would build real fluency from being immersed in the language being spoken all around them. Simultaneously they would learn more than a language. They would learn about a country, its people, its culture and its outlook, and learn something important about Australia too, seeing it from a distance.

Of course, quite a few young Australians do this kind of thing already, often as part of a university course. But the total numbers who go and live in an Asian country to study remains far too small to make any kind of a dent in our growing Asian literacy deficit.

So the radical part of this idea is its scale. I'm suggesting that to educate Australia for the Asian century, the government should fund a year or two in Asia studying an Asian language for really large numbers of young Australians. Let's start with a target of 10,000 a year. With those kinds of numbers, Australia really would start to gain the depth and breadth of Asian literacy we are going to need. And for many Australians, Asia will become part of their life.

Sounds expensive? I'd estimate it might cost \$25,000 to send a student to live and study in Indonesia or China for a year. That would add up to \$250 million a year for 10,000 students, or \$375 million if half of them went for two years.

That is a lot of money, but \$375 million is less than 5 per cent of the \$8 billion a year that Australia's rapidly growing overseas aid budget is planned to reach over the next decade. This is where the money should be found. We need to ask whether our future in Asia might be better secured by spending a bit less on teaching our neighbours how to do things, and a bit more on learning about them.

When would students do this? My guess is anywhere between the ages of 18 and 27. The key is flexibility. Many people might take a gap year between school and post-secondary education, some might go during a university degree, and some after they have finished. Needless to say, the scheme would not be limited to those who are studying languages at university.

Indeed, the whole point would be that people with all kinds of backgrounds and career trajectories would add fluency in an Asian language and familiarity with an Asian country to their qualifications. Not just arts graduates but engineers, doctors, accountants and IT specialists.

Many details remain to be worked out. Ideally, they would live and study with students from their host country, so the best idea would be to establish programs integrated into existing universities.

Julia Gillard has commissioned former Treasury head Ken Henry to produce a white paper on how Australia can best secure its future in the Asian century. We can be sure that Asian literacy will be one of the big issues on their agenda. Perhaps they might want to keep this idea in mind.

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