

# Australia would be a better regional neighbour if it were better at Asian languages

Many commentators have noted the small number of successes and the many failures of Australia's pro-Asian literacy policies, such as the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS), which were introduced on an irregular basis from the 1990s.

The increased number of Australians learning an Asian language in the aftermath of the introduction of the policies is largely seen as a successful outcome, and the collapse in enrolments after the end of the programs as a failure. According to Professor of Language and Literacy Education, Joseph Lo Bianco, the failures are partially the result of the 'target setting' approach to policy making. I suggest that unrealistic targets combined with the allocation of funds for only a short period of time were part of the problem. It takes time to learn a language, especially one which uses a non-Latin writing system, and short term funding will not work in the medium term. I am often frustrated by those who complain that students do not achieve a high level of proficiency during their university Japanese and Mandarin language studies, but also complain about the standard of students' expression in English despite up to 12 years of schooling.

Since the launch of a campaign (see Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities) to increase awareness of the relative cheapness of language studies under the Australian government's recent changes to university funding called the 'Jobs Ready' Package, some are advocating for a return to the government funding levels of the 1990s.

While increased funding would be welcome—as long as it is directed to the front line language educators teaching Asian languages rather than short term travel programs—in this piece, I wish to take a look at the issues from a more optimistic perspective. Ironically, despite the low enrolment figures for Asian languages at both the high school and tertiary levels, I see some successful outcomes from the earlier policies which are only now becoming visible. Enrolment figures for language programs at Australian universities are notoriously difficult to access but according to ACARA, only 8.6 percent of students studied a 'language other than English' at

Year 12 level (the highest level of secondary school) in 2021. Japanese accounted for 20.8 percent of those enrolments and Chinese, 19.6 percent, French, the only other language with double digit enrolments, had 18.9 percent.

Admittedly the evidence for some of these successes is circumstantial, but there are some positive developments which can only be attributed to the introduction of the policies. In outlining what I consider are the successes, I make some suggestions for programs which will not necessarily cost a lot, but may help to improve the situation.

Firstly, as Lo Bianco indicates, Japanese language learning in Australia has been a success. According to a 2020 report by The Japan Foundation, the number of Japanese language learners across the educational system in Australia is increasing and nearly 80 percent of the world's Japanese language learners at the primary school level are in Australia. Of course, language learning at this level does not necessarily lead to learners being able to hold an adult conversation but it does foster a level of intercultural competency and linguistic diversity which serves to negate the potential for an early development of an English-centric mindset. But just as importantly, the success of Japanese language education begs the question as to 'Why Japanese has been so successful'?

I suggest that there are three factors behind this success. The first is the number of teachers, including at the primary level, who learnt Japanese in school. A significant number of these would have learnt Japanese as a result of NALSAS or the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP). That is, their engagement with Japanese is the result of the implementation of such programs. Unfortunately, many may be retiring within the next decade or so and without programs encouraging language learning and language teacher training, the supply of replacement teachers will be unavailable. In 2021, the then Acting Head of the NSW Secondary Principals Association said that NSW was already experiencing a shortage of language teachers. Teacher burnout is already leading to staff leaving the profession and retirements will only make this situation worse. The Federal Government's recent announcement on a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan is welcome but unfortunately there is no specific mention of language teaching.

Secondly, the attractiveness of Japan's pop culture in the form of *manga*, *anime* and gaming, together with the accompanying merchandising, serve as a motivation to begin Japanese language studies. Scholars William Armour and Sumiko Iida suggest that not all of these learners will continue with their language learning but an interest in J-Pop leads to some people beginning their language learning. While it

may not be possible for the pop culture in all other Asian countries/languages to have the same appeal, it is not difficult to see K-pop (Korean Pop) or similar acting as a motivational factor. Previously access to pop cultural products was limited, but some research[1] shows that streaming services, such as Netflix, are being used by university students for Japanese language learning outside the classroom. Increased availability of such platforms and the possible integration of them into the curriculum may be useful as a motivational sources.

The third factor is the ongoing support provided by The Japan Foundation in the form of library services, grants for workshops and material development. As an example, in the last five years, The Japan Foundation sponsored Language Assistants who spent two years in schools in the Australian states of Tasmania and Western Australia working with students and teachers. The Japan Foundation programs also offers Centre Visits where students visit its offices for excursions and has four Language Consultants in its Sydney Office working on resource development. Programs such as these mean that teachers at all levels of education, and in cities as well as in more remote areas, have access to materials and ongoing professional development opportunities which are not necessarily available for other languages. The value of such assistance cannot be overestimated. Ideally all languages would have access to similar facilities but in the absence of such support, a repository of uncopyrighted materials, both physical and virtual, funded by the Federal Government, would be useful. Such a service would not require a huge budget, but would support language educators across the country in a useful way.

Another positive outcome of the old policies—albeit subtle at one level but powerful at another—is a seeming shift in how representatives of the Federal Government refer to Asia. As recently as 2012, the use of the othering ‘the Asian region’ was in common, but now references to ‘our region’ are becoming more prevalent. I suggest that this shift, which not only clearly positions Australia in the Asian, or the broader Indo-Asia-Pacific, neighbourhood is partially the result of the former Asia literacy policies. That is, the present government representatives, and their speech writers, influenced by the former Asia literacy programs, view the countries in this region as neighbours rather than ‘others’.

Admittedly, this does not hide the reality that too few Australians are studying the languages of their neighbours to a high level of proficiency. Lo Bianco suggests that to improve Australia’s Asian literacy, language education should be compulsory. Or to put it another way, compulsory language education would help to make

Australians better neighbours. While Lo Bianco does not indicate the age when Asian language learning should be compulsory, it is generally acknowledged the earlier the better. The Australian Curriculum outlines content descriptions from the 'Foundation to Year 2' level. The focus at this level is on sounds through rhymes, songs and games. That is, it is fun and age appropriate. However, in order that these activities can be included in a curriculum, especially if languages education is made compulsory, teachers need training. Unfortunately, now, this is not the case and unless something radical is done, this situation is likely to get worse due to the number of teachers reaching retirement age in the next few years.

The reality is, despite the expressions of optimism above, there is a lack of non-English language training, Asian or otherwise, in the trainee primary school teacher curricula in Australian universities. As an example, there is no compulsory language requirement in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) curriculum at the Universities of Wollongong or Sydney although a Primary Languages Specialisation will be available at the latter university from 2025. This a welcome development and hopefully will be adopted by other universities in the near future. I believe all trainee primary school teachers should be required to study a language, preferably an Asian language. The language subject need only be at a beginner/elementary level, but the benefits to the teachers and their students in terms of improved intercultural capabilities and a greater understanding of the language learning processes faced by some of their non-heritage English language students, are undeniable. Moreover, the trainee teachers will be better prepared once all states make language learning in primary schools compulsory as must surely happen. Australia's most populous state New South Wales continues to drag the chain, partially because of the lack of language teachers noted above. That is, it is a classic Catch-22 situation.

But we must not forget that one of the problems with NALSAS was the need to (re)train teachers quickly so that they could teach an Asian language. There were many problems with this situation, not least of which was that once trained, many retired within a few years leaving another supply problem. This situation should not be allowed to occur again. Regarding language method subjects for secondary schools, it is admittedly difficult for universities to provide teacher qualification programs for a range of Asian languages but if universities agreed to some level of language specialisation which could be provided cross-institutionally, the situation would be infinitely better than the present situation. For this to occur, Education Schools in universities need to recognise the value of languages and be willing to be flexible. Improvements in the provision of such programs will help to improve Asian

language enrolments at all levels of the education system, demonstrate Australia's location in our region more clearly and make Australians better regional neighbours by talking *with* our neighbours rather than *at* them which is not unusual when conversations are in English.

To sum up, enrolments in Asian language programs in Australia are undeniably low and the situation needs to improve. I suggest that a reconsideration of the outcomes of the old programs over a longer period will show that there are more positives than just the short-term rise in enrolments. These positive outcomes should be taken into account when thinking about a way forward. To this end, a deeper look at why Japanese has been so successful may help. Whatever programs or policies are adopted, the issues about language teacher training—at both the primary and secondary levels—must be addressed.

*Image: Tertiary students in Melbourne. Credit: Monash University/Flickr.*

**[1] Ward, Rowena, Toshiyuki Nakamura and Laura Emily Clark (unpublished) 'Motivations to study Japanese at the Intermediate and Advanced levels in Australian Universities'.**