

Considering the ‘Appeal’ of ‘the Four Priority Asian Languages’ in Australian Secondary School Education

by

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In 2008, the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, declared his intention to make Australia ‘the most Asia-literate nation in the Western world’ (Kirby 2008). Thus, in a new national-level policy initiative launched the same year, the Rudd government declared that four Asian languages—(Mandarin) Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean—be accorded special prioritization within the Australian school system. This policy initiative, known as the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP), set an aspirational target of at least 12% of students completing Year 12 (i.e. the final year of school education) with fluency in one of these four languages ‘sufficient for engaging in trade and commerce in Asia and/or university study’ by the year 2020 (DEEWR 2010: 1).

Against this background, this study will consider the ‘appeal’ of these four Asian LOTES (‘Languages Other Than English’) at the secondary school level, both from the perspective of the individuals responsible for deciding which LOTES should feature on school curricula (e.g. principals and other administrators); and students, particularly those considering whether to continue studying LOTE in upper secondary school (where it is not compulsory) or to ‘drop’ the subject. Specifically, the study is concerned with highlighting and discussing factors that these ‘school-level decision-makers’ and students may (or may wish to) take into account before deciding whether to embrace any of these four LOTES. These factors may pertain either to the languages *per se* or to the general language education environment in Australia.

How Appealing has LOTE been at the Secondary School Level?

In theory at least, LOTE occupies an important place in Australian school education. The subject has been designated one of eight so-called ‘Key Learning Areas’ (KLAs) in the national curriculum framework, as affirmed by the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century (see MCEETYA 1999). Over the past few decades, a wide variety of LOTEs has been taught in Australian schools at both the primary and secondary levels. In recent years, a concerted effort has been made to enhance the appeal of LOTE study at the upper secondary level (Years 11 and 12). Several of Australia’s leading universities have introduced schemes that award ‘bonus points’ to students who pursue LOTE study at the upper secondary level (see Group of Eight 2011). At the same time, state examination boards adjust upwards the results of ‘more difficult’ subjects (which include most LOTEs) in relation to subjects regarded as ‘less difficult’, through a system known as ‘scaling’ (see University Admissions Centre 2006; Victoria Tertiary Admissions Centre 2005).

Despite the above, there has been widespread disappointment at the low rate of student participation in LOTE study. In a report entitled ‘Languages in Crisis: A Rescue Plan for Australia’, Australia’s ‘Group of Eight’ leading universities warned of a ‘drift towards monolingualism’ with serious consequences for the Australian economy and national security. The ‘crisis’ is considered particularly serious at the upper secondary level, where the number of LOTE students and programmes has declined dramatically over recent decades. In the 1960s, around 40% of Australian students pursued language study until the completion of their upper secondary education (Group of Eight 2007: 1). As of 2007, only 13% of Australian Year 12 students were studying a LOTE subject, as compared with 99% of their counterparts in the Netherlands (Clyne, Pauwels and Sussex 2007: 2). As of 2010, Asian languages were being studied by only 5.8% of Australian Year 12 students; and, of those, a mere 3–4% were second language (L2) learners (Asia Education Foundation 2010). Against this background, it is perhaps understandable that the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations has criticised the above-mentioned NALSSP aspirational target as ‘unrealistic’ (AFMLTA 2011).

Naturally, given the diversity of conditions prevailing in secondary schools across Australia, it would be virtually impossible to gauge accurately the ‘appeal’ of one LOTE subject relative to another. One immediate complicating factor in this respect is the heterogeneous nature of the Australian population. In Australian discourse on school-level language education, a distinction is frequently drawn between ‘heritage learners’ and ‘non-heritage learners’ (alternatively referred to as ‘background learners’ and ‘non-background learners’ respectively). Amid this discourse, however, there are indications that the diversity within Australia’s ‘heritage learner’ communities is insufficiently appreciated, particularly in terms of the different levels of student proficiency in the heritage LOTE (Slaughter 2007a: 190). Nonetheless, given the well-documented attachment of immigrant communities around the world to their ancestral heritage, it is likely that a student with, say, Korean ancestry, will evince a much stronger interest in Korean LOTE than will the average student from any other ethnic background. In this regard, there will surely also be those who opt to study their own ‘heritage LOTE’ on the basis of parental pressure, or with the purpose of enhancing their university entrance scores.

Of course, ethnic origin is by no means the only factor influencing LOTE choices. Since the late 1980s, education departments in individual States and Territories have been implementing their own language-in-education policies (Ingram 2003: 2), resulting not only in variations as regards which LOTEs are taught in schools, but also in significant discrepancies in the duration, amount and timing of compulsory LOTE study (see MCEETYA 1997; Stretton 2005). Clearly, LOTE choices vary significantly according to the circumstances in individual schools, where the attitudes of 'school-level decision-makers' assume critical importance. In one study sponsored by the Education Department of Western Australia and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, school decision-makers were found to have been influenced by a wide range of factors—some geared to local conditions, others more general—when choosing which LOTEs should feature on their school curricula. These factors included: the continuity of language from primary to secondary schools; 'perceived future benefits to students'; the ethnic composition of the local community; the availability of re-sourcing options (e.g. programmes offered through consular agencies); and teacher availability and continuity (Vardon & Mackerras 1998: Chapter 8). It is worth remembering that the priorities of school decision-makers may not always concur with those of individual students and/or their parents. Indeed, given the financial, personnel and other constraints under which schools operate, only a limited selection of LOTE subjects is usually available to students, especially in the state sector. From the perspective of a secondary school student, LOTE choice may boil down to a choice between two languages. Indeed, as Kelly & Jones (2003: 13) have pointed out, Australian schools tend to offer only one Asian LOTE and one European LOTE. The straight choice for most students entering upper secondary education is simply one of whether to continue or discontinue their study of a particular LOTE. In terms of general student attitudes to LOTE, Janine Jung, Peter Boman and David Williams report that a majority of studies have revealed attitudes that are either 'negative' or 'have negative associations'. Here, they highlight three recurring categories of negativity, namely that students consider LOTE uninteresting ('boring'), not valuable ('irrelevant', 'unimportant'), and academically challenging ('too hard') (Jung et al 2007: 16–17).

Against this background, I shall now focus on three widely discussed, general factors which school decision-makers and students might consider or be influenced by when making their LOTE choices. These are: a) the instrumental value of the LOTE; b) the perceived difficulty of the LOTE as an object of study; and c) societal attitudes towards the native-speakers/countries associated with the LOTE (to the extent that such can be gauged).

Instrumental Value

In considering what motivates individuals to learn other languages, numerous academics (e.g. Gardner 1985; Gardner & Lambert 1972; Krashen 1981) have highlighted the importance of 'instrumental motivation', a concept defined by Grover Hudson (2000) as 'the desire to obtain something practical or concrete from the study of a second language, typically a job, higher pay or higher social status' (Hudson 2000: 171). While the instrumental value of foreign language ability has long been underappreciated in English-speaking societies, many now regard monolingualism as a serious disadvantage in today's global labour environment. 'English', as David Graddol (2006: 57) puts it, 'is no longer the only 'big' language in the world'; rather,

its position as a global language is now ‘in the care of multilingual speakers’. Thus, amid the competition for employment in the global marketplace, Graddol warns that monolingual English-speakers face a ‘bleak economic future’ (ibid., p. 16).

In Australia, the economic incentives for foreign language learning are ubiquitously stressed. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to assert that recent policy and official discourse on LOTE have been characterised by an instrumental, utilitarian view of foreign language education. In this regard, Hugh Passmore has noted a preoccupation with ‘pure economic instrumentalism’ stretching back to the late 1980s, a time when Australian government policy began to position education as a means of increasing the country’s international competitiveness (Passmore 2009: 10). The National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) initiative, introduced in 1994 by a Labor government, perhaps best exemplifies the economic instrumentalist approach to language education. NALSAS was implemented on the recommendations of a committee of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which described the development of an Asian languages capacity as ‘a matter of national importance’ (Rudd 1994: i). It was NALSAS that first stipulated that Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean should take precedence over all other languages. It has thus become common to speak of ‘the four priority Asian languages’ (Asia Education Foundation 2010; Henderson 2007; Kirkpatrick 1995). Although NALSAS was abandoned in 2002 by a Liberal-led government, four years short of its projected period of implementation, it was effectively re-introduced in 2008, albeit under a new name, by a newly-elected Labor government. The new policy, the above-mentioned National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP), again prioritizes Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean over all other languages and manifests the same preoccupation with economic matters. In focusing on the instrumental value of just four Asian LOTEs, it has been argued, particularly by advocates of multicultural education, that the policy and discourse neglect the linguistic needs of most immigrant communities. At the same time, language education specialists like Kent Anderson & Joseph Lo Bianco (2009) lament the policy’s apparent disregard for the educational/cognitive benefits of language education.

Perceived Difficulty

In public discourse on language education, various opinions have been expressed as regards which languages are and are not ‘too difficult’ to be taught in schools. Despite the lack of consensus, some empirical attempts have been made to classify languages according to their difficulty vis-à-vis native English-speaking learners. On the basis of its own research, the US-based Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has categorised languages into four groups according to the amount of time required for Anglophones to attain speaking proficiency (Liskin-Gasparro 1982). Similarly, Barry Chiswick and Paul Miller (2007) claim to have devised a method of measuring quantitatively the ‘distance’ between English and various languages, based on the difficulty experienced by Americans in learning them. It should be noted, however, that some have questioned the wisdom of equating linguistic difference with learning difficulty. In the view of David Crystal (1987: 371), even the basic task of quantifying linguistic difference is highly complex because of the many variables involved. Nonetheless, one broad category of languages frequently identified as inappropriate target languages for schoolchildren in

English-speaking countries are Non-Roman script Asian languages. The underlying premise here appears to be that such languages, because of their 'linguistic distance' from English, will take an unreasonably long time for native English-speaking students to master, perhaps especially when compared with European languages. John Cavanagh and Michael Watkins, for instance, have claimed that students of 'exotic' Asian languages will require a study period 'ten times as long' as that needed for cognate European languages (Cavanagh & Watkins 1995: 18). On such grounds, Luke Slattery argues that such languages should be studied only by 'Anglophones who have cut their teeth on a European language' (Slattery 2009).

If a language earns a reputation for being 'too difficult', there is at least a possibility that some decision-makers will opt not to include it on their school curriculum, irrespective of Federal or State/Territory policy guidelines. It is perhaps logical to assume that many students will also be inclined to avoid languages they perceive as especially difficult, whether by virtue of its reputation or through personal experience. The question of language difficulty is perhaps particularly germane in upper secondary level education, where grades in university matriculation examinations assume such a critical importance to a student's future. Aside from concerns about grades, students may be more likely to persevere with a language if they believe they have a good chance of mastering it. In this regard, Katherine Ramage (1990) found, in a study of high school French and Spanish learners, that a desire to achieve language mastery was characteristic of learners opting to continue study beyond the compulsory two years.

The actual 'difficulty' of a given language will surely depend to some extent on the individual learning it. With regard to Asian LOTEs, there appears to be a widespread assumption in Australia, articulated frequently in public discourse, that heritage learners enjoy an unfair 'linguistic advantage' over non-heritage learners. As Yvette Slaughter points out, however, the notion of the unfair advantage is sometimes based on the presumption that students who 'look Asian' speak an Asian language fluently (Slaughter 2007a: 190). In fact, as Michael Clyne (2005) has clarified, levels of proficiency in heritage languages may vary considerably among pupils from immigrant backgrounds, irrespective of their physical appearance. Nonetheless, in the interests of redressing linguistic imbalances, examination boards in some states have felt the need to introduce separate examinations for first- and second-language speakers of various languages. In the state of Victoria, different examinations are set for first- and second-language speakers of all four Asian priority languages, while for Chinese there exists an additional category entitled 'Second Language Advanced' (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2011: 4). While such measures may help to level the playing-field where examination grades are concerned, they can do nothing, ultimately, to bridge gaps in actual language ability between second-language (L2) learners and first-language (L1) speakers.

Attitudes towards People and Countries Associated with Languages of Study

It has frequently been argued that a positive attitude towards the native-speakers of a given language and the countries from which they come will increase a learner's motivation for studying that language. In this regard, Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972) have stressed the importance of 'integrative motivation', which, in simple terms, refers to the desire to learn a second language in order to communicate with the speakers of that language. As

Gardner (1985: 54) puts it, ‘an integrative orientation refers to ‘that class of reasons that suggest that the individual is learning a second language in order to learn about, interact with or become closer to the second language community’. According to Gardner and Lambert, ‘an integrative and friendly outlook towards the other group whose language is being learnt can differentially sensitize the learner to the audio-lingual features of the language, making him more perceptive to forms of pronunciation and accent’ (Gardner and Lambert 1972: 134). Conversely, it has also been argued that a negative view of a particular people will engender a reluctance to learn their language. For Robert Kaplan & Richard Baldauf, the principle that ‘if I don’t like you, I won’t learn your language’ represents a ‘truism of language education’ (Kaplan & Baldauf 1997: 134–135). However, it is worth remembering that, in the context of recent debates on national security in Australia and other Western countries, concerns have frequently been voiced about the scarcity of individuals capable of speaking ‘strategically important’ languages, who can be deployed for intelligence-gathering or public relations purposes. In other words, some have sought to encourage students to learn the languages of countries and peoples whose public image may be overwhelmingly negative.

In a country as ethnically diverse as Australia, it is likely that students (and, perhaps crucially, the parents who raise and influence them) will form some of their attitudes towards other peoples and countries on the basis of personal experience. It is likely, however, that attitudes will also be influenced by public (particularly media) discourse, in which some countries and peoples are depicted in a much less favourable light than others. Since it would be impossible to gauge with any degree of certainty the attitudes of all individuals in any society, I shall merely report here any already-identified Australian attitude trends vis-à-vis the countries and/or populations associated with the LOTEs in question.

Considering the Appeal of the Four Priority Asian LOTEs: Some Possible Pros and Cons

I shall now consider the appeal of the four Asian priority LOTEs in turn. The situation regarding each LOTE will be discussed primarily through the prism of the three factors identified in the previous section, though reference will also be made to any other factors considered germane to the discussion. Since, as Lo Bianco (2008) has pointed out, the decision to prioritize these particular four LOTEs was made with little regard for the interests of Australia’s ethnic minority communities, it is the perspective of ‘non-heritage students’ that will be considered here.

Considering the Appeal of Chinese LOTE

Andrew Shearer (2010: 3) has described the rise of China as ‘the most significant external event affecting Australia for several decades’. Even if one cannot agree with this assertion, it is impossible to deny the key role China has played in Australia’s recent economic development. Currently, China is Australia’s largest trading partner as well as its largest export market. Understandably, then, the case for Chinese LOTE is frequently presented in utilitarian terms. Consider the following excerpt from a Victoria education department publication:

In China, Australian companies are involved in a variety of industries including building and construction, transport and distribution, high-value manufacturing, environmental management, food processing, information technology, telecommunications, advertising and design. In addition, Australia is involved in the very important services sector namely law, banking and insurance, education and tourism. . . . The future is bright for young Australians with Chinese language skills and an understanding of Chinese culture. The size of Chinese markets and other markets accessible through Chinese intermediaries will lead to Chinese becoming a key trade language. Knowledge of Chinese can open doors to a wide range of employment opportunities in the areas of banking, finance, business, education, hospitality, retail and tourism. (Victoria Department of Education 2007a)

A similar discourse is evident also in material disseminated by some schools, like the following:

Learning Chinese is an investment in your future! China and Australia are building a relationship that goes beyond economics. Government to Government agreements have been negotiated which allow for regular educational and cultural exchanges. . . . To learn Chinese is to take a very decisive step toward understanding the rich cultural heritage of one of the world's oldest civilizations. (Hilder Road State School 2011)

One person who has long emphasised the instrumental value of Chinese is Kevin Rudd, himself a fluent Chinese-speaker and key architect of the NALSAS initiative. It has been suggested that Rudd's election as prime minister in 2007 heightened the public appeal of Chinese across Australia. Although Rudd occupied Australia's top executive office for only two and a half years, he is regarded by some as a 'role model' for students (Orton 2008) and has been personally credited with increasing enrolments in Chinese courses (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2009). Chinese LOTE has benefitted from especially fervent advocacy from sections of the academic community. In 2008, the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) convened a 'national forum' on the future of Chinese language education in Australian schools, attracting participation from government, the business community, schools and the Australian Parents Council (Asia Education Foundation 2008). The Chinese government has also been actively promoting Chinese LOTE, most notably through its Office of Chinese Language Council International (commonly known as '*Hanban*'). In Victoria, for instance, *Hanban* operates a 'Chinese Teacher Training Centre' in partnership with the State government and has funded study visits to China by school principals. According to Vardon & Mackerras (1998), some principals have been induced to include Chinese LOTE on their school curriculum out of a desire to attract fee-paying students from China.

One factor that appears to have limited the appeal of Chinese LOTE is the apparently widespread perception in Australia that the Chinese language is somehow 'too difficult' for the average student. There are, of course, those who would reject this premise (see Gao 1996, Orton 2009, Willis 1995). Jane Orton argues that Chinese—with a word order that is 'very close to English', no inflections and declensions, and a relative lack of aspect markers—is actually less complex than French. In Orton's assessment, English-speaking learners of Chinese 'can make terrific communicative progress very quickly' (Orton 2009). It would probably be fair to say, however, that the preponderant view is that mastering Chinese would represent a challenging and time-consuming task for most native English-speaking learners. John

DeFrancis (1966) and Andy Kirkpatrick (1995) highlight the difficulty of mastering the complex Chinese writing system. David Moser (1991), in a work entitled 'Why Chinese is So Damn Hard', estimates that it would take about three times as long for a native English-speaker to reach a level of comfortable fluency in speaking, reading and writing Chinese, as it would take to reach a comparable level in French. In this connection, Tom Hyland (2008) notes that, although a native English-speaker is estimated to require 2200 hours of study in order to attain proficiency in Chinese, Australian secondary school students generally receive only about 500 hours of LOTE instruction. Kirkpatrick (1995) identifies the tonal pronunciation of Chinese as a further potential stumbling-block for students.

Amid the 'Chinese as difficult language' discourse is the widely held view that students from a non-Chinese background enjoy an unfair linguistic advantage over their Chinese-background classmates. According to Jane Orton (2008: 18), the unfair advantage is, to some extent, a reality, in that Chinese background students 'with very high levels of language expertise' are permitted to take L2 level assessment in all States and Territories except Victoria. To level this playing-field, Orton has called for the establishment of three distinct, nationally-recognised learning streams that differentiate second-language (L2) learners from both Chinese heritage students 'living in Australia by the time they begin their primary schooling'. i.e. 'background speakers' (BS), and those 'who do not come to Australia until their secondary school years', i.e. 'first language (L1) users' (Orton 2008: 5). While this measure may help eliminate any unfair advantages in terms of examination grades, it cannot redress the imbalance in actual language ability. First-generation immigrants and their offspring will remain the most proficient Chinese-speakers in Australian society and may hold an important advantage in vocational situations. Moreover, in light of the vast number of highly competent English-speakers in China, some argue that opportunities for Australian learners to use Chinese in international commercial contexts will also be limited. According to Graddol, China now 'produces over 20 million new users of English each year', thus raising the possibility that 'within a few years, there could be more English speakers in China than in India' (Graddol 2006: 95).

While generalizations are often problematic, it would seem that China's image has improved significantly among the Australian public in recent decades. In the view of Joshua Kurlantzick (2007), China has transformed its image 'from pariah as recently as the 1980s to close friend'. Indeed, in a 2006 Lowy Institute poll, a sizeable proportion of respondents rated China as favourably as the United States. It is difficult to predict, however, to what extent public attitudes may change in future in parallel with the growth of China's influence, both globally and vis-à-vis Australia. In this regard, Andrew Shearer highlights the dilemma facing Australian policy-makers as they seek to balance their country's economic imperatives with its traditional values.

For the first time in our history, we face the situation where our largest trading partner is neither a developed nation, nor a democracy, nor part of the Western alliance. Increasingly our strategic commentators are seeing our alliance obligations clashing with, or at a minimum diverging from, our longer-term economic interests. (Shearer 2011: 2)

While hardly conclusive, there are indications that some Australians are starting to harbour more ambivalent attitudes to China. For instance, in a 2010 Lowy poll, 57% of respondents felt the Australian government was allowing too much investment from China (a 7% rise on

the previous year), while 46% thought it likely that China would pose a military threat to Australia in the subsequent 20 years (Hanson 2010: 1). Similar findings were recorded in a 2011 Lowy poll, though 75% of respondents still believed that China's economic growth was good for Australia (Davis 2011: 2). Thus far, there does not appear to be any evidence to suggest that the appeal of Chinese LOTE has been influenced negatively by public attitudes towards the People's Republic of China.

Although it is often imprudent to make long-term predictions, it does appear likely that China's global prominence coupled with its strong, symbiotic economic relationship with Australia will be enough to guarantee a prominent position for Chinese LOTE for many decades to come. Indeed, given the increase of China's economic and political power relative to that of Indonesia, Japan and Korea, it is conceivable that Chinese could soon be regarded as Australia's number one language-in-education policy priority. As one possible indication of future trends, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) recommended in a 2011 draft report that Chinese be chosen as one of the initial two priority languages in primary schools launching language education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2011: 35). However, as long as LOTE remains a non-compulsory subject at the crucial upper secondary level, it would be premature to anticipate a mass increase in Chinese study at that level among students of non-Chinese heritage.

Although a compelling instrumentalist rationale for Chinese LOTE has existed for at least the past two decades, student uptake has remained consistently low, particularly at the upper secondary level. Chinese was being studied by 5,256 Australian Year 12 pupils nationwide in 2008. Although a substantial increase on the 2000 figure of 2,935, it still meant that 94% of L2 learners had dropped the subject before reaching Year 12. According to Ben Jensen, only 300 students in Australia who were learning Chinese in their final year of secondary school in 2011 did not have a Chinese background (Jensen 2011). Recent immigration trends suggest that the already sizeable native Chinese-speaking community will continue to rise steadily over the next few decades, thereby exacerbating both the real and the perceived 'linguistic imbalance' relative to non-heritage learners.

Considering the Appeal of Indonesian LOTE

Indonesian was the first of the Asian LOTEs to establish itself in the school system, having been introduced at the secondary level in 1966 (Slaughter 2007b). Australia's interest in the Indonesian language has been recognised in several national-level policy initiatives, starting with the 1987 National Policy on Languages (NPL), which designated it a 'language of wider teaching'. In the 1991 Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP), Indonesian was listed among the 14 'priority languages' and, subsequently, as one of the four priority languages in the NALSAS initiative. Following the introduction of NALSAS, enrolments in Indonesian LOTE increased sharply across all levels, from around 90,000 in 1994 to more than 316,000 in 2001 (Erebus Consulting Partners 2002).

From a perspective of policy-makers, Indonesian is a language of high strategic importance. Indonesia is Australia's closest Asian neighbour, the world's fourth most populous country

and the largest Muslim-majority nation. Moreover, Australia has already established itself as the Western world's primary repository of expertise on the Indonesian language and Indonesian affairs, an asset the Australian government would surely wish to preserve. From the perspective of students and school decision-makers, the potential instrumental value of Indonesian ability is not without significance. As Hugh Passmore (2009: 28–29) explains, 'more so than nearly any other foreign language, an Australian speaker of Indonesian has significant career opportunities in the fields of tourism, academia, defence, development and intelligence'. A similar discourse is disseminated also in official publications, e.g. Victoria Department of Education (2007b) and on the websites of some schools. Although Indonesia probably does not currently rank among Asia's foremost economic powerhouses, a report by the Standard Chartered Bank predicts that Indonesia will become the world's seventh largest economy by 2045 (Lacey 2009). Given the country's geographical proximity to Australia, ease of travel provides students with a further practical incentive to study Indonesian. In 2010, Australians made 771,792 visits to Indonesia (Statistics Indonesia 2011).

Indonesian would seem to enjoy one distinct advantage over the other three 'priority Asian LOTEs', namely a reputation for being easy to learn. Andy Kirkpatrick (1995) has singled out Indonesian as the only relevant Asian language potentially accessible to English background speakers in the school context. As James Sneddon (2003) has explained, those who study Indonesian 'need spend next to no time mastering the writing system and can concentrate on actually learning the language', unlike the student of Chinese and Japanese, who is 'diverted from studying the language by the need to spend a great deal of time learning written characters' (Sneddon 2003: 16). The 'Indonesian as simple language' discourse is evident also in PR-material disseminated by state-level educational authorities and individual schools. Consider the following example from the Victoria Department of Education:

It is interesting to know that Indonesian and Malaysian (sic) are a little easier for English speakers to learn than some other Asian languages. They use the Latin script and are non-tonal languages so English speakers can pick them up quickly. (Victoria Department of Education 2007b: 2)

While views like the above are widespread, research by the US-based Foreign Service Institute (FSI) concluded that a native speaker of English with above average aptitude for learning languages but no prior knowledge of Indonesian would require 900 class hours to reach a level of 'general professional proficiency' (Jackson and Kaplan 1999: 78).

In the view of Michelle Kohler and Philip Mahnken (2010: 6), Indonesian LOTE is especially susceptible to 'external influences', such as the complexities of Australia's overarching relationship with Indonesia, events that take place in Indonesia, and community attitudes towards Indonesia. In this regard, numerous commentators (e.g. Lindsey 2007; Mackie 2007; Mahony 2005) have noted a high degree of public antipathy in Australia towards Indonesia, much of it fuelled by negative media coverage. As Jamie Mackie (2007: 108) sees it, news reports about Indonesia in the Australian media are 'too often presented in a sensationalist and adverse way', with little evidence of good news stories. Several highly negative incidents have occurred over the past decade, perhaps most notably the so-called 'Bali bombings' of 2002, which killed 88 Australian tourists. Due to the perceived threat of terrorism, the Australian government frequently urges its citizens to avoid travel to Indonesia (see Department of Foreign Affairs

and Trade 2011). Edward Aspinall has criticised the approach of the Labor government, arguing that 'despite all the feel-good talk about better relations and Asia literacy, a culture of fearfulness and risk aversion permeates all facets of the Australia's relationship with Indonesia, from the top down' (Aspinall 2009).

The negative impact of anti-Indonesian sentiment on the study of Indonesian LOTE has been described by Yvette Slaughter (2007b). Slaughter reports that more than 70% of Indonesian LOTE teachers in her survey expressed concern at 'the negative influence emanating from sections of the parental community', illustrated most graphically by the parents who lobbied the Victoria education department to demand the withdrawal of Indonesian LOTE from their children's curriculum (Slaughter 2007b: 302). In the following comment, a LOTE teacher describes the kind of public opinions that have undermined the study of Indonesian.

Many of us in the language 'business' firmly believe that perceptions of the general Australian public towards Indonesia are a prime factor in the decline of interest in Indonesian. Almost everything that is reported on Indonesia in the Australian media is 'bad press'; negative publicity on everything from terrorism, corruption, seeming inconsistencies in the treatment of Australians in the Indonesian courts compared to Indonesian citizens, and that ever-present but more or less simmering below the surface belief, particularly among older generations, that Indonesia will one day attempt to invade Australia. (Indonesia Matters 2007)

This linkage of public opprobrium towards a country with the eschewal of its language would seem to vindicate Kaplan and Baldauf's view that 'if I don't like you, I won't learn your language'. Without question, Indonesian LOTE has fared the worst of the four Asian priority languages in relative terms over the past decade. In this regard, Kohler & Mahnken (2010) report a dramatic decline over the period 2000 to 2009, in terms of both enrolments and programmes. According to Lane (2010), 99% of students discontinue their studies before Year 12, leading to the current (2011) situation, described by Greg Sheridan (2011), where fewer Australian Year 12 students study Indonesian than in the 1970s. Although, as of 2010, Indonesian remained the third most studied LOTE in Australian schools, 63% of all students were studying it in the K-6 years (i.e. at kindergarten and primary school) (Kohler and Mahnken 2010: 5).

In short, the overarching theme of current discourse on Indonesian LOTE is that of crisis, with fears for the very survival of the subject at the secondary school level. The Asia Education Foundation has expressed its fear that Indonesian 'could be virtually extinct' at the Year 12 level by 2020, labelling it 'a language without a clearly articulated educational rationale that resonates with students, families and school communities' (Asia Education Foundation 2010: 14). While more sophisticated and compelling advocacy might help to stem the seemingly inexorable decline of Indonesian LOTE, a revival of genuine interest is likely to depend much more on events and developments within Indonesia.

Considering the Appeal of Japanese LOTE

The position of Japanese LOTE in Australian school education is long established. The language was first taught in Australian secondary schools in 1967 (Kamada 1994) and achieved widespread appeal in the 1980s, in parallel with the rise of Japan as a global economic power

(see Marriott 1994). The dramatic increase in Japanese study over that period has been described by some (e.g. Furukawa, Jonak & Negishi 1999; Hanihara Chow 2003) as a 'tsunami'. Today, Australia is widely recognized as a world leader in Japanese language education, ranking fourth behind only South Korea, China and Indonesia in terms of student numbers. As of 2010, Japanese was the most widely taught language across Australian school and university education; a situation which, as De Kretser & Spence-Brown (2010: 4) point out, is 'unique' within the Western world.

The 'tsunami' of interest in Japanese occurred due largely to the language's perceived instrumental value, and the instrumentalist discourse still prevails, as exemplified in the following message to prospective students delivered by the Victoria Department of Education:

Learning Japanese is an investment in your future . . . knowledge of Japanese may lead to greater employment opportunities in the areas of banking, business, education, finance, hospitality, retail and tourism. (Victoria Department of Education 2007c: 1)

However, according to Geoff Miller, the boom in Japanese study during the 1980s and 1990s failed to produce the anticipated boom in employment opportunities for young Australian Japanese-speakers, for the following reasons:

The Australian mining houses which sold enormous quantities of raw materials to Japan didn't believe that they needed significant numbers of Australian Japanese-speakers to make their sales (indeed, much of the trade was facilitated by Japanese trading houses, rather than by the Australian firms themselves or Australian intermediaries). And Japanese firms operating in Australia preferred to employ English-speaking Japanese. Even Japanese tourism firms chose to employ Japanese rather than Australian Japanese-speakers 'because Japanese tourists feel more comfortable with their own people'. (Miller 2011)

It could be argued nonetheless that non-native Japanese-speakers would face comparatively less competition in employment situations with native-speakers than would, say, non-native speakers of Chinese, due to the relatively small size of Australia's Japanese community (the 2006 Census recorded just 30,780 Japan-born residents). This certainly seems to be the case in the education sector, where non-native speakers constitute the overwhelming majority of Japanese LOTE teachers (in stark contrast to Chinese LOTE). Moreover, thousands of Australians have found employment in Japan, particularly as teachers of English. Since 1987, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme has provided Australian graduates with an opportunity to teach in Japanese schools, albeit for a limited period. According to Katsumi Kakazu (2001), a sizeable number of JET alumni have become teachers of Japanese upon their return to Australia. Further, Australians between the ages of 18 and 30 are eligible to take a year's 'working holiday' in Japan, under a reciprocal scheme launched in 1981 (Marriott 1994).

One factor that must surely enhance the appeal of Japanese LOTE is the strong and durable network of connections that exists between Australia and Japan, at both the institutional and interpersonal level. A considerable number of Australian schools have established exchange programmes and sister-school affiliations with counterparts in Japan. Such links undoubtedly facilitate interaction between Australian and Japanese students. While it is difficult to gauge accurately public sentiment towards any country, some opinion polls suggest that Australians

generally regard Japan in a positive light. For instance, in a 2011 Lowy Institute poll, 83% of Australian respondents said they trusted Japan 'to act responsibly in the world' either 'somewhat' or 'a great deal' (Hanson 2011: 5). When respondents were asked to express their feelings towards Japan on a scale of 0 to 100, they gave Japan a favourability rating of 67, the fourth-highest overall (as compared with 57 for South Korea, 53 for China, 51 for Indonesia and 34 for North Korea). Although sections of the mass media have reported stories of Australian official anger over Japan's Antarctic whaling activities (see Alford 2010), particularly since Labor's return to power in 2007, it is unclear what impact, if any, this issue has had on enrolments in Japanese LOTE. What is almost certainly the case, however, is that Japanese contemporary culture has made a greater impact in Australian society than its equivalents in other Asian countries. The impact has been particularly pronounced among children of school age, with whom Japanese animations, comics and computer games have achieved considerable popularity.

One possible impediment to the appeal of Japanese is its reputation as a 'difficult' language. Some research findings suggest that this reputation is justified. For instance, Brown, Hill and Iwashita (2000) and Komiya-Samimy & Tabuse (1992) found that achievement levels among native English-speaking students of Japanese were lower by comparison with those studying European languages. The Foreign Service Institute of the US State Department rates Japanese as a Category 4 language (the most difficult for native-English speakers) (Bernstein et al 1999: 364). In the assessment of Jordan & Lambert (1991: 13), Japanese should probably be regarded as the most difficult of the Category 4 languages (the others being Chinese, Korean and Arabic) if both the spoken and written languages are factored into the comparison.

To judge from the fall in student enrolments since 2000, the appeal of Japanese LOTE has clearly been waning. While Hugh Stretton (2005: 158) would attribute some of this decline to a realization that mastery of Japanese is difficult for students to achieve, Anne de Kretser has also noted a general diminution in appreciation for the instrumental value of Japanese LOTE. Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s, there was much talk of parents wanting their children to study Japanese because of the perceived advantages for their future, Japan has now, to quote De Kretser, 'lost visibility in an economic sense' (Lane 2010). In 2009, China overtook Japan as Australia's leading trading partner (Shearer 2010). Hence, in the context of the prevailing instrumental discourse, it is perhaps logical that Japanese should also sometimes be portrayed as under particular threat from Chinese (see Lane 2010; Liu & Lo Bianco 2007; Slattery 2007b). According to De Kretser, some new schools have introduced Chinese programmes in preference to Japanese (Lane 2010). One relative advantage that Japanese LOTE does enjoy, however, is a firmly established position in the Australian consciousness. According to Joseph Lo Bianco, Japanese has transcended its original 'trade associations' and now represents for Australians 'the classic foreign language', a language of culture 'in which the foreign is leavened with increasing familiarity' (Lo Bianco 2003a: 182). As De Kretser and Spence-Brown (2010: 70) put it, Japanese is not a 'minority language' as in other parts of the Western world, but is now 'the Australian mainstream', which would suggest that it should retain a degree of appeal at least in the short- to medium-term.

Considering the Appeal of Korean LOTE

Korean is the world's 11th most commonly spoken language, mother tongue to some 80 million people worldwide, including 150,000 Australian residents. Even before receiving priority status under NALSAS, Korean had gained recognition in a number of Federal and State-level policy documents, most notably the 1987 National Policy on Languages (NPL), the State Language Policy of New South Wales (1988) and the report on the so-called 'Northeast Asian Ascendancy' (Garnaut 1989). On the face of it, the instrumental rationale for learning Korean would appear compelling, given that South Korea is currently (in 2011) Australia's fourth largest trading-partner, its third largest source of international students and its eighth largest source of overseas tourists (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2011). According to the Queensland Studies Authority, a knowledge of Korean can provide 'valuable career opportunities in fields such as journalism, media, business management, marketing, e-commerce, information technology, corporate law, education, research, health care, tourism, diplomacy, foreign affairs and trade, banking, defence, international law, translating, and interpreting' (Queensland Studies Authority 2008: 2). There are also potential employment opportunities in South Korea. Australian graduates can often find employment as English teachers in private language schools (*hagwon*), while any graduate under the age of 62 may apply to work on the government-run 'English Program in Korea' (EPIK). Young Australians are also able to apply for a one-year 'working holiday' visa.

Despite the closeness of their country's economic relationship with South Korea, most Australians appear to have little awareness of that country (see Kwon & Trotman 2002). In the view of Seong-Chul Shin, both North Korea and South Korea remain largely 'invisible to most Australians' in contrast to 'their very visible neighbours, Japan and China' (Shin 2010: 31). In part, this lack of awareness may be a corollary of difficulties South Korea has had in creating a 'brand image' for itself in the consciousness of the international community. As Lee Joo-Hee puts it: 'while Japan is known for its sushi, Sony Walkman and Tokyo's Ginza district and China is famous for Kung Fu and the Great Wall, Korea is recognized for—well, it's hard to say' (Lee 2005). Against this, it should be pointed out that over the past few years South Korean popular culture—most notably, pop music and drama—has begun to gain significant recognition in Japan, China and Southeast Asia, though this has not yet been the case in Australia.

Any school decision-maker considering the introduction of Korean into their school curriculum will doubtless be aware of its reputation as a difficult language for English-speakers (see Sohn 1989). While very little research appears to have been conducted on public attitudes to Korean LOTE, one survey did find that many parents and staff (including some of the LOTE teachers) saw Korean as being 'difficult to learn', largely because of its 'different script' (Vardon & Mackerras 1998: 112). The American Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has classified Korean as a 'Category 4' language, i.e. one requiring 2,400–2,760 hours of study to attain proficiency (Kirkpatrick 1995).

In public discourse, Korean has unquestionably received the least attention of the four priority Asian languages. It has also, by a vast margin, been the least studied. During the years of

NALSAS policy support and funding, Korean LOTE enjoyed no significant increase in student uptake (Erebus Consulting Partners 2002), and enrolments have remained extremely low; barely more than 1% of those in Japanese. As of 2008, a mere 0.1% of Year 12 students nationwide were learning Korean; and more than 97% of these were either 'Korean L1' or 'heritage speakers'. In 2009, only 49 of Australia's 9,562 schools were offering Korean on their curricula. As the Asia Education Foundation (2010: 20) put it, 'the total national cohort of teachers teaching Korean could be fitted into a large classroom'. The lack of traction gained thus far by Korean LOTE has also had negative implications for the training and employment of teaching staff and the production of teaching resources, which, in turn, represents a disincentive for any school-level decision-makers contemplating the introduction of a new LOTE.

It is hard to envisage any improvement in the above situation if Korean were to lose its 'priority language' status, yet it is not inconceivable that such could occur, particularly in the event of a change of government. Indeed, following the abandonment of NALSAS in 2002, Korean was the only priority language to be downgraded by the Howard Liberal-led government to the status of a 'Tier Two Language', i.e. a language of 'international application' and 'important interests', but not one of 'Australia's major priorities' (Lo Bianco 2003b: 25). Despite the priority status accorded it in past and present national-level policies, Korean LOTE has failed to receive wholehearted support from all State/Territory education systems. Rather, as Shin (2010: 6) puts it, the commitment has been 'varied'. Korean is also evidently regarded by numerous language education specialists as less important than the other priority languages. In a report prepared for the Australian Council for Educational Research, Lo Bianco & Slaughter (2009) recommended that Korean be classified only as a 'Tier 2 language', eligible for 'extensive support', but with no expectation of entitlement to continuation for the engagement of system-wide available teaching staff (Lo Bianco & Slaughter 2009: 62). Similarly, in a report from the Griffith Asia Institute (2009), Korean was again the only NALSSP language not accorded priority language status.

Given all of the above, there is little reason to anticipate any significant increase of interest in Korean LOTE at the secondary school level. Rather, as Shin puts it, the future of the Korean language in Australian schools is 'at risk' (Shin 2010: 42).

Conclusion

Given that the Australian economy seems likely to remain dependent on Asian markets for the foreseeable future, the goal of 'Asia literacy' and the requisite prioritization of Asian LOTES will continue to be urged by Australian business and diplomatic elites with interests in Asian countries. Moreover, to judge from the precedent of the past two decades, an Asia-centric language-in-education policy will be advocated by a significant section of Australia's political elite. It is worth remembering, however, that no national consensus has ever existed as regards the desirability of prioritizing Asian language study. Indeed, despite their shared preoccupation with instrumental goals, the language-in-education policies of Australia's two main political parties, Labor and Liberal, have displayed stark differences, particularly on the question of Asian languages. Stark differences of opinion are evident also in the public discourse on

Asian language education. The ‘Asianist’ position is exemplified in a much-publicised report from the Griffith Asia Institute (2009), which advocated that half of Australia’s citizens become competent in one of the main Asian languages within 30 years. A contrary view is put forth by Luke Slattery, who advocates that the emphasis be placed instead on ‘those European languages with which English has an affinity: German, French, Spanish and Italian’ (Slattery 2009). In Slattery’s view, any overemphasis on Asian languages would carry with it ‘the unmistakable whiff of social engineering’ (Slattery 2007a). In a country still overwhelmingly composed of European immigrants, there are reasons to question the emotional appeal of Asian languages across Australian society. In this connection, Kazuo Ogoura (2010) suggests that most Australians, despite their country’s growing economic and political interdependence with Asian countries, do not wish to see Australia as ‘part of Asia’. In Ogoura’s view, the fact that the overwhelming majority of students who learn Asian languages are themselves of Asian origin indicates ‘a basic psychic schism’ in Australia’s national character.

Although decision-makers in many schools will surely be guided by Federal and/or State/Territory policies when considering their LOTE choices, it is clear that non-heritage students have thus far remained unconvinced by the instrumentalist rationales for Asian LOTE put forth by the policy-makers. There are certainly questions to what extent practical skills in Asian LOTE—to the extent that such can be fostered under the current system—will generate tangible employment opportunities for non-heritage learners, not least in view of the sizeable (and, certainly in the case of Chinese, steadily expanding) pool of native-speakers living in Australia. In this connection, Vardon & Mackerras (1998: 89) have warned that ‘long-term harm’ will come to a language if students are ‘sold’ it on the basis of future employment that does not eventuate. As concern continues over the low rate of Asian LOTE uptake at the upper secondary level, research by Katherine Ramage (1990: 201) suggests that students will not be motivated to continue studying a language purely out of recognition of its practical value. Rather, what does motivate students, Ramage found, is an interest in culture and a desire to attain proficiency in all language skills. Given the current language-learning environment, it is difficult to envisage a major surge in the appeal of any of the four priority Asian languages among ‘non-heritage’ secondary school students.

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