

LANGUAGE LESSONS: A SPECIAL REPORT

AUSTRALIA

Push to be 'Asia language literate'

SYDNEY: Australia is seeking to boost teaching of Asian languages at schools amid growing concerns about a national drop in Asian-language proficiency. The federal government is aiming for at least 12 per cent of 17-year-olds completing Year 12 to be fluent in either Chinese, Bahasa Indonesia, Japanese or Korean by 2020.

A joint statement adopted by all state and federal governments in December 2008 identified languages as one of eight key learning areas and stressed the need for young Australians to become "Asia language literate".

The statement, called the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, was issued amid concerns among educators that a generation of younger Australians would be poorly positioned to understand and engage with the region and its cultures.

A government-funded report, released last year by former prime minister Kevin Rudd, found a sharp decline in the number of students enrolling in Asian languages.

The report, by the Asia Education Foundation, an organisation which supports Asia literacy programmes at schools, found the number of students learning Bahasa Indonesia had dropped by 10,000 a year from 2005, while enrolments in Japanese had decreased from 419,488 in 2000 to 351,579 in 2008. Of final-year Chinese language students, 94 per cent were from a Chinese-speaking background.

According to state enrolment figures, the most widely taught language in Australia is Japanese. Other second languages taught in schools include German, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic and Latin.

The report called for more partnerships between Australian and overseas schools, improved teaching materials, a boost to the number and quality of language teachers, and the establishment of councils to oversee specific language programmes in languages such as Japanese and Chinese.

The executive director of the foundation, Ms Kathe Kirby, told The Straits Times that Australian governments and schools need to increase enrolments in Asian languages and expose the students to more teaching hours. About 18 per cent of Australian students learn a second language and less than 6 per cent pursue it all the way through to their final year.

"We have been going backwards in the past five years," said Ms Kirby. "It has been difficult to get Australian kids to learn a second language. Our educators and political leaders in the past bought into the idea that everybody in the world is learning English and so we'll be fine. That attitude now is starting to be debunked. Businesses, in particular, are starting to understand it is not the case."

JONATHAN PEARLMAN



A lesson in progress at a state-run high school in Muntinlupa, Manila. The Chinese language project starts in June in three state-run high schools and only students with above-average ability in English may study the new language. PHOTO: REUTERS

THE PHILIPPINES

Chinese route to new job openings

Language to be taught in 3 state high schools

BY ALASTAIR MCINDOE
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MANILA: Chinese will be taught for the first time in selected Philippine government schools in the academic year starting June, in an initiative the authorities hope will eventually open new job opportunities for state-educated children.

The inclusion of Chinese language in the curricu-

lum is yet another sign of closer economic and cultural ties between the Philippines and China.

Not so long ago, China barely figured in this country's trade statistics; now, it is the Philippines' third biggest trading partner after Japan and the United States. The course and teacher training are being handled by the Confucius Institute, a Chinese government agency promoting the language and culture globally.

"We have high hopes that teaching Chinese will

lead to career paths," said the head of the Philippine Department of Education's foreign languages unit, Ms Rose Domingo.

She noted that the ability to speak Mandarin will be increasingly in demand in the local hotel and outsourcing sectors.

State-run schools in the Philippines, where the children of low-income families get free schooling, have just begun teaching languages other than English. Pilot projects to teach Spanish, French and Japanese were launched in the 2009 academic year and the one for German started last year. Now, 79 schools are teaching one of these languages, and the numbers are expanding, although they still represent only a fraction of the 5,677 state high schools.

Chinese will initially be offered in three state high schools in the cities of Loag, Cebu and Zamboanga on the country's three main island groups in a trial programme.

Only students with an above-average command of English may study the language, a reflection of the importance of first mastering English, the country's second language after Filipino.

In the Philippines, the primary language of instruction is Filipino. At the secondary level, it is the medium of instruction for history and social studies while English is used for science and maths.

Dr Lourdes Nepomuceno, director of the Confucius Institute in Angeles City, said Chinese is already the foreign language of the moment in many private and international schools in the country.

She noted that young Filipinos of Chinese descent - many of them with family ties to Fujian province - are also increasingly learning the language.

"But our focus is mainstream society," she said.

Chinese teacher Sun Zhongwang said students should learn at least 2,400 Chinese characters by the end of the course, which will be taught in the last two years of high school when they are around 15 years old.

Although it is not stated as a primary goal of teaching Chinese, educators recognise that knowledge of a foreign language could improve the employment prospects of new generations of overseas workers.

"It's a consideration and for Mandarin-speakers we see new demands in both the local and global markets," said programme co-ordinator Marivic Tolitol.

A requirement by the Japanese government that nurses from the Philippines and Indonesia pass a Japanese-language professional exam after three years of working there shows just how crucial knowledge of a foreign language can be.

According to reports, only three nurses - two Indonesians and one Filipino - passed the test last year, while the other 251 applicants failed.

China, meanwhile, is an increasingly important source of investments and development loans. And Chinese nationals now top the list of foreigners staying in the Philippines.

Mr Zhuang Ming Deng, associate editor of the Siongpo Manila business newspaper serving the Chinese community here, said: "More Filipinos definitely see China figuring in their future."

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