

# Learn the lingo to earn from Asia

Asia literacy is not a choice: the economic need is urgent and becoming more so, writes **Tim Lindsey**

**L**IKE it or not, our future is tied to our region as we enter the Asian century. Our history is starting to catch up with our geography, as the grim news from Shanghai, Jakarta and Kabul reminds us. This means that doing something immediately to reverse Australia's declining levels of Asia literacy is not really a matter of choice but an imperative. It will not be quick or easy or particularly popular, but the national interest demands that more, not all, Australians start learning Asian languages as a matter of urgency, whatever the objections, difficulties or costs.

The most overwhelming case for the national interest in resurrecting our national Asia literacy capacity comes of course from trade. We are constantly reminded that China is our largest trading partner (\$58 billion), well ahead of our cultural compatriots in the US or Europe, and that our resilience during the global financial crisis is a product of that relationship. Few realise, however, that (as the AsiaLink Index shows) the ASEAN countries taken as a bloc are a bigger trading partner (\$70.1bn) than China.

Together, ASEAN and China make our Western partners seem almost insignificant.

The response to this is the naive trope that Asians will all learn English, the global language of business, so all will be well. But this is simply not going to happen any time soon. Some Asian societies are even resisting. Malaysia, for example, has just announced that it will abandon a six-year attempt to make English a national language of instruction because it led to riots in the streets. And in places where English has achieved deeper penetration, such as Singapore or Hong Kong, it is still in limited use outside the elite.

Fluency in the local language offers a huge comparative advantage that interpreters can never replace. It is necessary for face-to-face engagement with most Asian societies, but it is also essential for the more detached task of accurately analysing and understanding them. Australia, sadly, still has the lowest second-

language capacity of all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries: 75 per cent speak only English.

The other reason arguments against prioritising Asian languages are missing the point relates to our national strategic interests, and has three aspects.

The first is military. Australian troops have been fighting (and dying) in two Asian wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before that they were in East Timor.

The recent defence white paper has (controversially) identified the rise of China as the key strategic issue in the years ahead. Asia literacy should be a no-brainer, surely?

The second relates to the continuing threat posed by terrorism in our region. The Marriott hotel bombing in Jakarta reminded us that terrorism is not restricted to distant conflict zones. Australia will continue to need sophisticated intelligence and security capacity in the years ahead to deal with threats to Australia and our regional allies, and that, in turn, will require the sort of deep local knowledge that is unattainable without language skills.

The third arises from the fact that Australians are always on the move in Asia, whether for business or official reasons (such as Stern Hu, the Marriott victims or our soldiers and diplomats), for pleasure (the Bali bomb victims) or for less desirable reasons (Schapelle Corby or the Bali Nine).

Australians will therefore keep getting embroiled in regional commercial, legal and political systems, and this will keep resonating loudly in our domestic politics. It is no accident that our largest diplomatic post is in Jakarta, not the US or Europe, and that our largest aid recipient is Indonesia.

Our state agencies responsible for defence, counter-terrorism, diplomacy and aid generally do a good job in tough circumstances coping with our ever-increasing trade, security and political commitments in Asia, but they do so at a time of shrinking private sector expertise. The supply of Asia-literate graduates is not



Illustration: Michael Perkins

meeting demand, as Australian businesses also point out. In 2007, for example, less than 1 per cent of year 12 students took Indonesian language and nationally only 85 domestic students enrolled in a Southeast Asian language degree course at tertiary level.

In other words, Australia already faces a national Asia-literacy crisis. It is obvious that our economic and strategic national interests urgently require more Asia-trained school and university graduates with regional language skills. It is equally obvious that the market won't provide them.

That means it is up to the government to engineer change, and that, in turn, means spending lots of money.

Sadly, the Rudd government's \$62.4 million National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program commitment to Asian languages over three years is not enough. Over

eight years the previous National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools program axed by John Howard spent twice as much each year as NALSSP and only doubled enrolments. Asia literacy in Australia now looks worse than it did before NALSAS.

So, can we move the debate on from whether to when, and how about putting some real money where Kevin Rudd's (Mandarin-speaking) mouth is? A whopping Asia literacy stimulus package for Asian language teaching (not just schools infrastructure) would be a good start.

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