

Australia's Asia Literacy Non-Problem

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- **The power shift to Asia:** Global economic and military power is rapidly moving from the North Atlantic to Asian capitals and centres of commerce.
- **Asia literacy alarm:** Commentators and academics have called for large-scale education programs worth billions of dollars to improve Australia's Asia literacy.
- **Asia literacy policy initiatives:** Both the Coalition and Labor have proposed policies to increase the number of students studying Languages Other Than English (LOTE), including key Asian languages.
- **Australia's language education policies:** The most populous states and territories already teach LOTE, including key Asian languages, on a compulsory basis at some levels of schooling.
- **The demographics of language education policy:** Calls to expand existing LOTE programs overlook both the extent of worldwide English literacy and the scale of Australia's readymade Asia literacy.
- **English is the pre-eminent world language:** With approximately 2 billion speakers globally, English remains the world's *lingua franca* and the language of globalisation.
- **English is an Asian language:** English is spoken by about 800 million people in Asia and is widely used as an official language in the region.
- **Australia speaks the languages of Asia:** Australia's multicultural composition means there are 2.2 million or so speakers of Asian languages in Australia, including approximately 650,000 speakers of Chinese languages.
- **Asian cultural literacy acquisition by osmosis:** With extensive interaction between diverse groups, Asian cultural literacy is being naturally spread throughout Australian society.
- **Australia is ready for the Asian Century:** Asia's English literacy and Australia's Asia literacy mean that new large-scale Asia literacy programs are not necessary for Australia to prosper in the Asian Century.

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Australia in the Asian Century

Although the world at large cannot ignore Asia because of its rapidly growing economic and military clout, the stakes are particularly high for Australia. Australia's strong security partnership with the United States and historical ties with Great Britain and Europe will no doubt remain important in the twenty-first century. However, Australia's deep economic ties to Asia mean that managing relations with Asia's ascendant powers will be key to ensuring our prosperity in the Asian Century.

Australia is increasingly economically reliant on Asian economies. The top four destinations for Australian exports in order of importance are China, Japan, South Korea and India, and Asian countries accounted for 7 out of Australia's top 10 trading partners in 2010–11.¹ These economic connections with Asia are set to expand: Australia is negotiating free-trade agreements with China, Japan, South Korea, India and Indonesia.²

The Australian tourism industry illustrates Australia's growing economic dependence on Asia. While North Atlantic economies suffer from ongoing financial meltdowns and paltry growth figures, Australia is increasingly drawing tourists from the rapidly rising Asian middle classes. In the year to May 2012, Australia welcomed 577,000 Chinese visitors, and Tourism Australia projects that Chinese tourists could inject as much as \$7 billion to \$9 billion annually into the Australian economy by 2020.³ With 2 billion middle-class consumers in India and China projected by 2050, the importance of Asian markets will only grow.⁴

In short, Australia sits on the doorstep of Asia's rising economic behemoths and is part of the engine room of the economic forces driving the Asian Century. Engaging with Asia is therefore something Australia simply cannot afford to get wrong.

Asia's rising fortunes

A seismic geo-strategic shift is taking place in world politics. After approximately 500 years of first European and then American economic and military pre-eminence, power is moving back to Asian capitals and centres of commerce.

The Chinese economy is on track to eclipse the US economy by 2020, and will grow to be twice the size of America's by 2050.⁵ By then, the Indian economy is also set to be the world's largest, with the Indonesian economy in fourth place.⁶

Asia's rapidly growing economic weight is not just making its economies large in absolute terms; Asian countries will also be home to hundreds of millions of new middle-class consumers. The share of global middle-class consumption attributed to wealthy industrialised nations is predicted to more than halve from 64% in 2012 to 30% by 2030, while India and China will have more than 2 billion middle-class consumers by mid-century.⁷

Asia's rise goes beyond the economic realm. With wealth comes the means to acquire military power. Now the world's second-largest defence spender, China's defence spending will equal that of the United States by 2025.⁸ China is not the only Asian nation ramping up military expenditure: India is now the world's biggest arms importer and expanded its defence budget by 17% in 2012.⁹

In both economic and military terms, the great powers of Asia will overtake even the greatest of the North Atlantic powers in a matter of decades.

Engaging with Asia is something Australia cannot afford to get wrong.

Figure 1: Asia



Source: CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), 'Asia,' *Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection*.

Language policy in the Asian Century

The seemingly inexorable rise of Asia raises the prospect that Australia has been lulled into a dangerous English-centric complacency. As Peter Hartcher, political and international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, puts it: 'Australia has coasted on the historical coincidence that two consecutive dominant powers, Imperial Britain and superpower America, spoke English. But history has turned.'¹⁰ Asia's rise is forcing Australian policymakers to confront the question of whether Australia is adequately prepared for a world in which the dominant powers are not part of the Anglosphere—those countries where English is the first language of the majority.¹¹

Citing our supposedly poor Asia literacy, commentators, academics and politicians bemoan what Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of *The Australian*, recently called the 'catastrophic decline in Asia literacy in Australia.'¹² The consensus is that not only are far too few Australians learning Asian languages, but we also lack the necessary cultural acumen to navigate political and economic relations with Asia.*

The seemingly inexorable rise of Asia raises the prospect that Australia has been lulled into a dangerous English-centric complacency.

* Asia literacy in this report refers to the ability to speak Asian languages *and* a familiarity with Asian cultures.

Although both sides of politics claim to be committed to improving Australia's Asia literacy, they have adopted erratic and tokenistic Asian studies policies.

Such alarm comes on the back of figures showing the lowest proportion ever of NSW final-year students enrolled in a second language in 2011.¹³ Of 72,391 HSC students, only 1,376 (1.9%) studied Japanese; 1,091 (1.5%) studied Chinese; 232 (0.3%) studied Indonesian; and a mere 42 (0.05%) studied Hindi.¹⁴ Given the importance of countries like Japan, China, Indonesia and India to Australia's prosperity and security, numbers like these are often cited as evidence of the worrying state of our Asia literacy.¹⁵

The orthodox view is that Australia's lacklustre Asia literacy requires a comprehensive government response to ensure that more Australian students learn Asian languages and gain familiarity with Asian cultures. Tim Lindsey, director of the Asian Law Centre at the University of Melbourne, says: 'If Australia is to be able to engage effectively with Asia in the years ahead, a very large investment by the Commonwealth in Asian studies in schools is urgently required.'¹⁶

This logic has led commentators, Asian studies academics, and educators to push for more resources to teach more students Asian languages for longer periods of time.[†] For example, William McKeith, former school principal and education adviser, has recommended that Languages Other Than English (LOTE) be 'mandatory components of the Australian curriculum' and be taught at the 'primary and secondary levels, with an hours allocation approaching that of maths and English.'¹⁷ Michael Wesley, executive director of the Lowy Institute, also advocates drastic reforms. In 2009, he proposed an ambitious and detailed 30-year program that would have cost \$11.3 billion and involved establishing a National Asian Languages Institute and teaching Asian languages and cultures at all educational levels.¹⁸

Asia literacy policy initiatives

Although both sides of politics at the national level claim to be committed to improving Australia's Asia literacy, they have adopted erratic and tokenistic Asian studies policies.

The National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP), which was a \$62.4 million 2008–12 Rudd government Asia literacy program, was not extended in the 2011 Budget.¹⁹ Despite this, the Gillard Labor government has announced a modest funding boost of \$870,000 for the government-funded Asia Education Foundation (AEF) to support Asian studies in Australian schools.²⁰ In addition, the 'shape paper' of the new Australian Curriculum, which is undergoing national consultation and will lay out 'what all young Australians should learn as they progress through schooling,' was 'written on the assumption that all Australian students will learn a language [other than English] in primary and secondary school.'²¹

Despite leading a government that scraped a large-scale Asia literacy program without proposing anything comparable in its place, Prime Minister Julia Gillard also said in May 2012 that Australia must broaden and deepen "Asia relevant capabilities" across the whole of Australian society.²² Peter Garrett, the minister for education, clarified the rationale for the government's general commitment to improving Australia's Asia literacy: 'The more children learn an Asian language, the better equipped they will be and the better equipped Australia will be to have a sustainable economy in the 21st century.'²³

The Coalition's Asia literacy policies have been equally confused and patchy. In 2002, the Howard government dismantled the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) program, which was set up by the Keating

[†] Learning an Asian language is distinct from learning about an Asian culture.

Nevertheless, language classes typically involve students learning about the cultures from which the languages come. Some level of Asia literacy in both its linguistic and cultural forms can therefore usually be acquired by taking classes in Asian languages.

government in 1994.²⁴ Having discontinued a program that doubled the number of students studying Asian languages, the Coalition now shares Labor's commitment to improving Australia's Asia literacy in both its cultural and linguistic forms.²⁵

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott has said: 'If Australians are to make their way in the world, we cannot rely on other people speaking our language.'²⁶ In November 2011, Julie Bishop, the shadow minister for foreign affairs, even went as far as to suggest that learning an Asian language 'should be mandatory.'²⁷ The Coalition's commitment to improving Asia literacy, which would reportedly cost \$1 billion, is reflected in its pledge that at least 40% of Year 12 students will study a language other than English and pre-schoolers will be exposed to a second language.²⁸

Beyond inconstant federal government funding for Asian studies, there is also some support among policymakers and politicians at the state and territory level for improving the study of LOTE, and by extension, Australia's Asia literacy.

The Victorian government invested an additional \$16.3 million over four years in Community Language Schools in 2011.²⁹ This funding was part of the Victorian Coalition government's push to have every student in government schools study a foreign language from Preparatory to Year 10.³⁰

Notwithstanding its less ambitious language policy, the Queensland government also hopes to improve LOTE learning. After realising that principals had been allowed to opt out of teaching LOTE, the Queensland government quickly moved to reinstate compulsory language subjects for all students in years 6 to 8, and reviewed the 'delivery of LOTE across all Queensland government schools.'³¹

Asian languages in Australian schools

As a result of Australia's federal system of government attributing responsibility for education policy to the states and territories, the place of LOTE in curriculums varies across the country. Nonetheless, learning LOTE is compulsory at some levels of schooling in the most populous states and territories with more than 75% of Australia's population, and LOTE are offered in the remaining states and territories. Although Asian languages are not taught in every school where LOTE are offered, key Asian languages, including Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese, are offered in all states and territories.

Learning LOTE is mandatory in Queensland, Victoria, the ACT and NSW. In Queensland, all students in years 6 to 8 in state schools are required to study LOTE.³² The Victorian government has introduced compulsory second language classes in primary schools and plans to provide second language education for every government school student from Preparatory to Year 10 by 2025.³³ In NSW, all students must study LOTE for at least 100 hours in years 7 to 10.³⁴ The ACT has mandated a minimum of 60 minutes of instruction per week of LOTE for all students in years 3 to 6, and 150 minutes per week for all students in years 7 and 8.³⁵ Priority Asian languages, including Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese, are offered as part of the compulsory language curriculums in all these jurisdictions, with many more Asian languages offered in NSW and Victoria.³⁶

Learning LOTE is optional in Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. It is encouraged in Western Australia, and schools are expected to offer high quality language programs from years 3 to 12.³⁷ Similarly, learning LOTE is encouraged in South Australia, with a minimum of 90 minutes of instruction per week from Reception to Year 7, through to 200–225 minutes per week at secondary level.³⁸ Studying LOTE is also 'supported and encouraged' in Tasmania and offered in the Northern Territory.³⁹ Priority Asian languages, including Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese, are offered in all jurisdictions in which LOTE are not compulsory.

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Figure 2: Asian languages education in states and territories

State/territory	Status of LOTE	Asian languages offered
NSW	Compulsory	Arabic, Assyrian, Bengali, Chinese, Dari, Farsi, Hebrew, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Lao, Punjabi, Russian, Tamil, Turkish, Urdu and Vietnamese
Victoria	Compulsory	Arabic, Chinese, Indonesian, Karen, Khmer, Korean, Thai, Turkish and Vietnamese
ACT	Compulsory	Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean
Queensland	Compulsory	Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese
South Australia	Encouraged	Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese
Western Australia	Encouraged	Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese
Tasmania	Encouraged	Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese
Northern Territory	Offered	Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese

The future of Australia’s language education programs

The two major Asian languages education programs—the NALSAS (under Keating and Howard) and the NALSSP (under Rudd)—were scrapped by the Howard and Gillard governments respectively and have not been replaced by anything comparable. Instead, the opposition and the government are either just promoting the study of LOTE in general (for example, the new Australian Curriculum or the pledge to expose pre-schoolers to LOTE), or providing limited funding to improve Asian studies (for example, \$870,000 to the AEF).

Given that proposed federal policies largely amount to vague plans to improve LOTE learning in general, the language education policies of the federal government and opposition are unlikely to produce higher student participation in Asian languages courses than current state and territory education programs.⁴⁰ They are therefore little more than unhelpful federal intrusions into a state and territory policy arena.

However, it still remains an open question whether current levels of Asian languages learning are high enough. Should the tokenistic approaches to Asian studies be replaced with a comprehensive program reminiscent of the Keating, Howard and Rudd years?

Recent estimates of the number of students learning Asian languages seem to suggest that a large-scale government program is necessary. Despite Asian languages being offered in all jurisdictions, research by the AEF shows that they are studied by very few students. For example, 99% of students taking Indonesian discontinue their studies before Year 12, while the number of schools offering Indonesian reportedly dropped by 40% between 2000 and 2008.⁴¹ Similarly, Japanese has an attrition rate of 94%, while the number of schools offering it has dropped by 15.6% in the same period.⁴²

As striking as these numbers are, on their own they do not make a strong case for a new large-scale Asia literacy program. Rather, they highlight an obvious lack of desire to learn Asian languages without telling us whether we actually need more students learning Asian languages.

This brings us to the ignored demographic dimension of language education policy. Two crucially important trends need to be considered when assessing the adequacy of Australia’s Asian languages learning: first, the growing English literacy in Asia and the rest of the world, and second, multicultural Australia’s substantial and increasing readymade Asia literacy.⁴³

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Before accepting the view of the Asia literacy alarmists, we need to ask some basic questions about the demographics of language policy. Do more students really need to learn Asian languages when English is the global *lingua franca* and an Asian language in both a demographic and an official sense? Do we need to worry about Australia's Asia literacy when multicultural Australia speaks many Asian languages and has widespread and growing Asian cultural awareness?

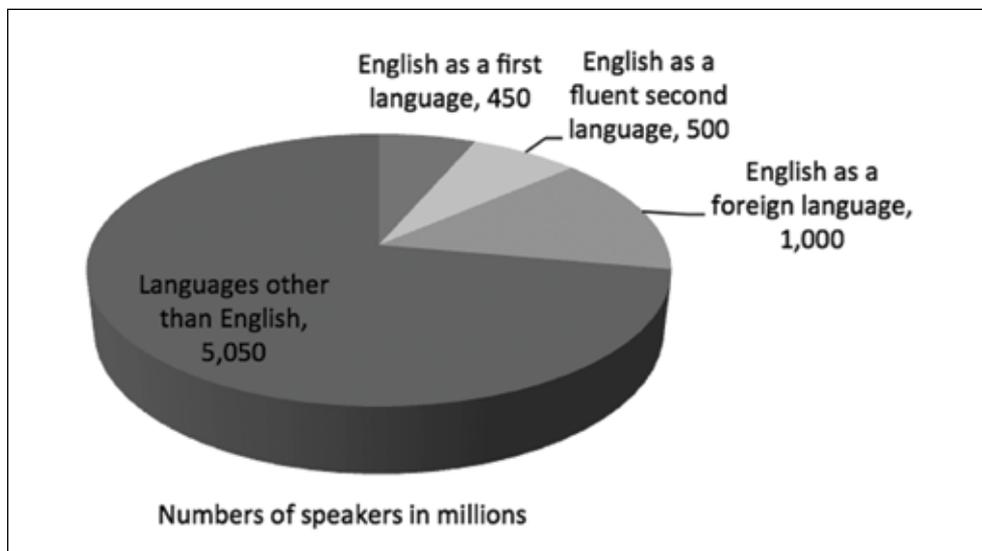
English is the global lingua franca

The CIA's *World Factbook* estimates that English is dwarfed by Mandarin in terms of the percentage of the world's population speaking it as a first language. English's 4.83% of the world's first language speakers is unimpressive when compared to Mandarin's 12.44%.⁴⁴ The prevalence of other widely spoken Asian languages, including Arabic (3.25%), Hindi (2.68%), Bengali (2.66%), Russian (2.12%), Japanese (1.8%), and Javanese (1.25%), seems to raise further questions about English's claim to pre-eminence.⁴⁵ However, this picture severely underplays the importance of English by focusing solely on the percentage of the world's population that speak it as a first language.

Estimates of the total number of English speakers worldwide vary widely. Nevertheless, according to experts like David Crystal, approximately one-fourth of the world's population can communicate in English, which means that close to 2 billion of the total global population of 7 billion are English speakers.⁴⁶ About 450 million people speak English as a first language, 500 million as a fluent second language, and another 1 billion as a foreign language.⁴⁷

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Figure 3: Number of English speakers worldwide



Source: Various.⁴⁸

Even if we take into account the number of people who use other world languages as second languages, English remains the most widely spoken language. Combining first and second language speakers, there are only 1,052 million Mandarin speakers, 487 million Hindi speakers, and 417 million Spanish speakers.⁴⁹

Asia has approximately 800 million English speakers, which means Asia has far more English speakers than the entire Anglosphere.

Mandarin, English's only real competitor in numerical terms, admittedly has more first and second language speakers than English. At the same time, China's steadily growing economy and immense demographic weight will continue to raise its profile. What is more, China is actively promoting Mandarin throughout the world via its network of 322 Confucius institutes and 369 Confucius classrooms in 96 countries.⁵⁰ Indicative of this, 40 million people were reportedly learning Chinese internationally in 2009.⁵¹

It is important to remember, however, that the vast majority of Mandarin speakers are concentrated in one country.⁵² Given that first and second language English speakers are geographically dispersed throughout the world in large numbers, and that there are about 1 billion foreign language speakers of English, it is unrivalled as a world language.

Added to English's already established global position, it will be even more widely used in the coming decades. Nearly one-third of the world's population is studying English; by 2050, half of the world's population will be largely proficient in it; and four of the six most populous countries in the world in 2050 (India, the United States, Nigeria and Pakistan) will have English as an official language.⁵³ Indeed, even though a country with English as its first language will no longer be the globe's dominant economic and military power when China takes that mantle from the United States in the next couple of decades, China will not hold the title for long. India, a country where English is already an official language, will have a larger economy and about 350 million more people than China by mid-century.⁵⁴

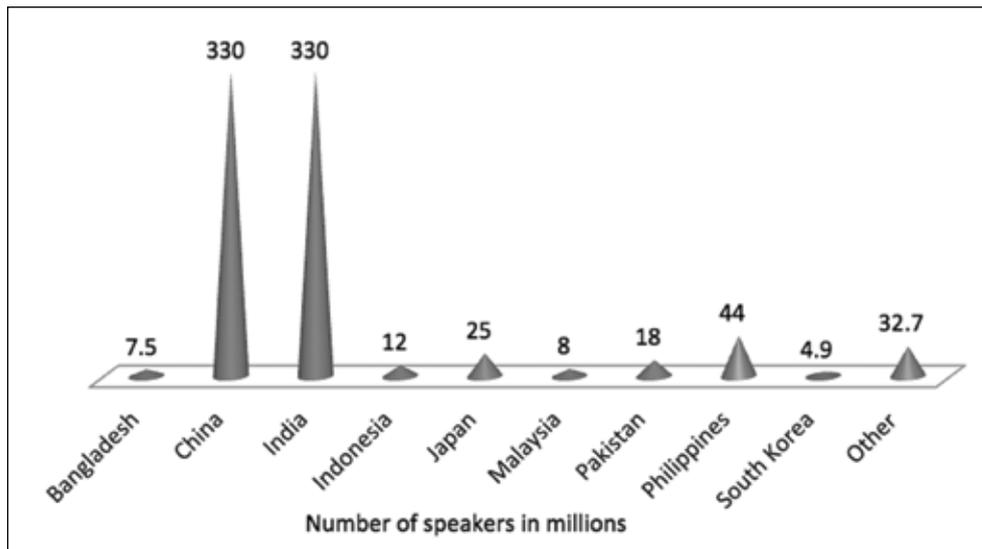
As well as being the world's pre-eminent common language in raw numerical terms, English is also the language of globalisation in its various different guises. Beyond global commerce and international tourism, English is also the language of more specialised forms of globalisation, including aviation, information technology, diplomacy and international terrorism, to name just a few examples.⁵⁵

Not only has English been the official language of aviation since 1950, but the International Civil Aviation Organization now also requires all airline pilots to speak conversational English.⁵⁶ It is estimated that about 55% of websites use English, while 80% of the world's electronically stored information is in English.⁵⁷ English is a working language of major multilateral diplomatic forums such as the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the African Union (AU), as well as being a globally popular language for bilateral diplomacy.⁵⁸ The dominance of English in diplomatic circles partly explains why Geoff Raby, former Australian ambassador to China, criticised Mandarin-speaking Kevin Rudd's diplomatic failures in China by saying: 'You don't need to speak Chinese to know China.'⁵⁹ The use of English as the *lingua franca* of globalisation is so widespread that it is even the language of the global jihad, serving as a means of communication between Arabic and non-Arabic-speaking jihadists.⁶⁰

English as an Asian language

English is also widespread in Asia. As with the number of English speakers worldwide, estimates of the number of English speakers in Asia vary widely. Authoritative recent estimates nevertheless suggest Asia has approximately 800 million English speakers, which means Asia has far more English speakers than the entire Anglosphere.⁶¹ This makes Asia 'demographically the heaviest user of English in the world.'⁶²

Figure 4: Number of English speakers in Asian countries



Source: Kingsley Bolton, 'English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the issue of proficiency,' *English Today* 24:2 (June 2008), 7.

Many important Asian countries also fall into the category of what linguists call “outer-circle” English-using societies,’ meaning societies where ‘English has been retained for important internal purposes after independence, and ... there is a *de jure* recognition of English in domains [such] as government, law, and education.’⁶³ These countries include major Asian economic and military powers like India and dynamic global commercial hubs like Singapore. In addition to being widely spoken in Asia, English is therefore an Asian language in an official sense.

English is also widely used in Asia’s two most populous countries. Not only does India use English as an official language, it is also home to the largest-selling English-language newspaper in the world (*The Times of India*).⁶⁴ Added to this, with some 330 million English speakers, India has more English speakers than the United States.⁶⁵

China, Asia’s largest country demographically and economically, also has approximately 330 million English speakers.⁶⁶ What is more, in 2003, China had about 1 million English teachers, as well as 125 million to 200 million school students and 6 million to 13 million university students learning English.⁶⁷ In the same year, China also had 19 English-language newspapers and magazines, an English-language television channel, and an English-language radio service.⁶⁸

Considering the prevalence of English in India and China, it is no exaggeration to say English is ‘now also manifestly an Asian language in its own right.’⁶⁹

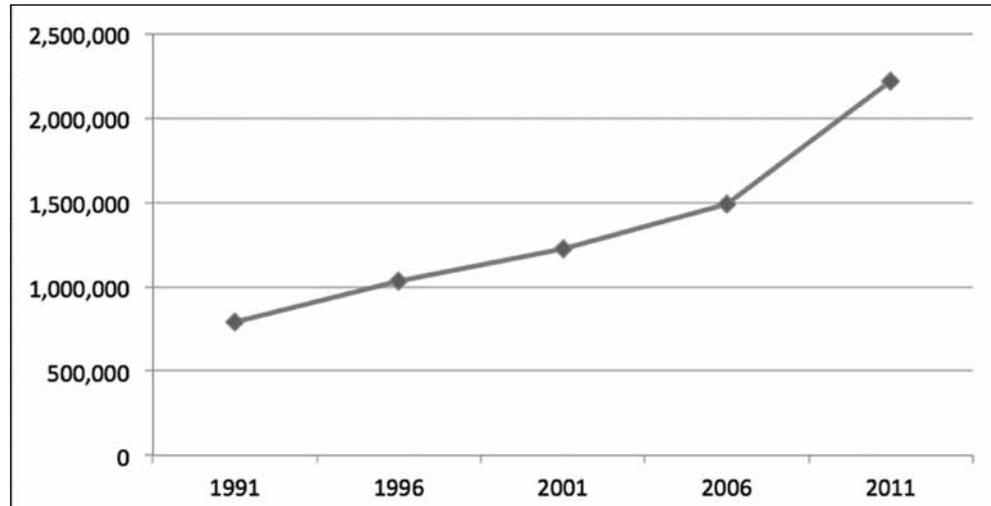
Australia’s Asian languages literacy

In addition to Asia and the rest of the world speaking Australia’s national language, Australia also speaks the languages of Asia. In 2011, about 2.2 million people (approximately 10% of the population) spoke Asian languages at home.⁷⁰ Given that Australia’s immigration program increasingly sources immigrants from Asia, its pool of Asia literate human capital will continue to grow.⁷¹

English is an Asian language in an official sense.

In 2011, approximately 2.2 million people (about 10% of the population) spoke Asian languages at home.

Figure 5: Total number of speakers of Asian languages in Australia, 1991–2011

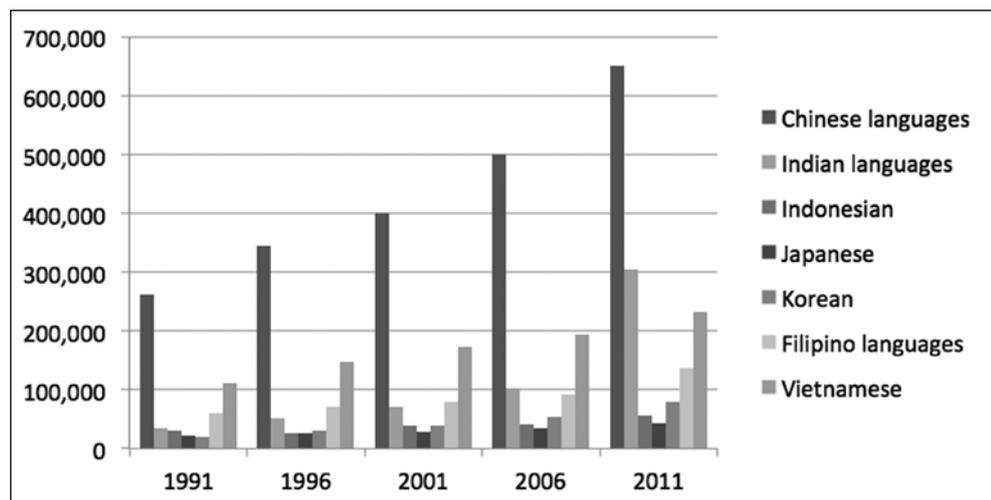


Source: Various.⁷²

According to 2011 Census data, the leading birthplace of immigrants arriving in Australia since 2006 was India (13.1%), which represents a 100% increase on the 2006 Census.⁷³ In the same period, the number of immigrants born in China increased by 54% and the number from the Philippines increased by 42%.⁷⁴

Data from the 2011–12 permanent immigration program confirms this trend. With Indian migrants taking 29,018 places, or 15.7% of the total immigration program of 185,000 places, India is Australia’s largest source of permanent migrants.⁷⁵ In the same period, Chinese migrants took 25,509 places, or 13.8% of the total immigration program, making China Australia’s second-largest source of permanent migrants.⁷⁶ Overall, 7 of the top 10 source countries in Australia’s immigration program in 2011–12 were from Asia: India, China, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, South Korea and Vietnam.⁷⁷

Figure 6: Number of speakers of select Asian languages in Australia, 1991–2011

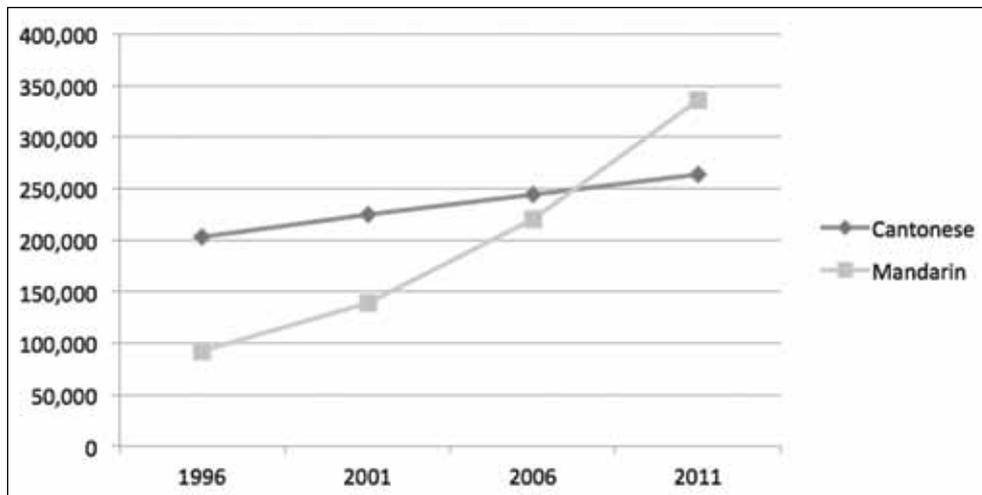


Source: Various.⁷⁸

Important Asian languages were very well represented in the 2011 Census. There were approximately 651,000 people who spoke Chinese languages at home, most notably Mandarin and Cantonese. This means more than half a million Australians have the language skills to engage with Australia’s most important trading partner and the country that will soon have the world’s largest economy and military expenditure.

Indian languages, including Hindi and Punjabi, had 305,000 or so speakers, while there were approximately 233,000 Vietnamese speakers; 137,000 speakers of Filipino languages; 80,000 Korean speakers; 56,000 Indonesian speakers; and 44,000 Japanese speakers.

Figure 7: Number of speakers of Cantonese and Mandarin in Australia, 1996–2011



Source: Various.⁷⁹

Although not everyone who speaks an Asian language at home will speak it well, the story is potentially even more encouraging than it initially appears. The census data measures the number of people who speak languages at home and will therefore not account for the speakers of Asian languages who do not have the opportunity to speak them at home. This means the above data may actually underestimate the number of Australians who speak Asian languages.

Readymade Asian cultural literacy

By measuring the number of people who speak Asian languages at home, the census data is also a good indicator of Asian cultural literacy. Although the connection will not hold in all cases, there is a good chance that someone who speaks an Asian language at home will have some kind of familial connection with the language, and as a result, will likely have some level of cultural literacy.

This large store of Asian cultural literacy is not just a potential asset to those Australians with existing familial connections to Asian cultures. Multicultural Australia's diverse composition also means that Asian cultural literacy is being acquired by wide sections of Australian society without the government enacting a policy response of any kind.

The 2006 Census data shows spouses were of different ancestries in 30% of all couples, while the rate of intermarriage has been increasing with each successive generation regardless of ethnic background.⁸⁰ What is more, 30% of all marriages in 2007 were between people who were born in different countries.⁸¹

As well as having diverse families, Australia has comparably low levels of residential segregation. Australians are more likely to live in mixed neighbourhoods than their British, Canadian, and in particular, American counterparts.⁸²

With its high levels of interaction between cultural groups in families and neighbourhoods, not to mention schools, universities and workplaces, Australia's healthy multicultural society makes cultural literacy acquisition almost inevitable. Without attending classes or purposefully engaging with Asian cultures, Australians are naturally acquiring Asian cultural literacy.

Asian cultural literacy is being acquired by wide sections of Australian society without government enacting a policy response of any kind.

To be sure, cultural literacy acquisition by osmosis might be slow and incomplete. Living alongside or even marrying someone from a different cultural group may only lead to a superficial understanding of another culture, and even that might take a long time to acquire. However, this is no reason for concern: Not only will deep cultural literacy not be required from the vast majority of Australians, but our multicultural composition means that many Australians already understand Asian cultures.

Asian languages-speaking Australia in an English-speaking Asia

Chris Bowen, immigration and citizenship minister, wrote in February 2011 that the 'genius of Australian multiculturalism' is its bipartisan support and the way it centres on citizenship and privileges respect for individual freedom and the rule of law above cultural diversity.⁸³ Although these virtues are striking and arguably distinct features of the Australian version of multiculturalism, another often overlooked element of the genius of Australian multiculturalism is the way it has set Australia up for success in the Asian Century. As Australia's multicultural composition makes clear, Australia will prosper in the Asian Century because it already speaks the languages of Asia and is home to widespread Asian cultural literacy.

Added to Australia's already large store of Asia literate human capital, Australia's national language is the global *lingua franca*. English is the world's pre-eminent common language, the international language of specialised fields like aviation, information technology and diplomacy, and an Asian language in both a demographic and an official sense.

Before committing potentially billions of dollars of public funds, commentators, academics and politicians must explain why more Asia literacy is required when Australia is already Asia literate and Asia is already English literate. Given that most contributions to the debate from Asia literacy alarmists have not been evidenced-based, such explanations are unlikely to be forthcoming. We should therefore be sceptical of calls to spend money to solve what is probably a non-problem.

The evidence considered in this report shows that Australia will have substantial and growing Asia literacy if levels of Asian languages learning remain static or even fall. However, even if Australia did not have a large store of readymade Asia literate human capital, it would still be unclear whether large-scale government programs to improve Asia literacy are necessary.

If, as Asia literacy alarmists claim, there is an overwhelming economic imperative for Australians to speak Asian languages, students would presumably take advantage of the Asian languages classes offered in all states and territories. The low uptake of Asian languages suggests that Asia literacy is not as important for success in the Asian Century as commentators, academics and politicians would have us believe. Students and parents are speaking and the message is clear: Learning Asian languages should be an optional extra.

To be sure, the scale of the global rebalancing from the North Atlantic to Asia is dramatic. However, this alone does not justify a change in language education policies. If Australia's LOTE programs are expanded, it should be on the basis of a sound educational rationale and not because of diffuse and unsubstantiated foreign policy concerns.

This is by no means a defence of mono-lingualism or Asia illiteracy. Given that the rise of Asia means valuable opportunities are likely to be associated with being Asia literate, it is important that Australian students have the option of learning Asian languages.⁸⁴ At the same time though, despite bi- or multi-lingualism being admittedly advantageous for a select few, as an English-speaking country in a world that speaks English, and with a multicultural society that is naturally Asia literate, Australia is well placed to prosper in the Asian Century.

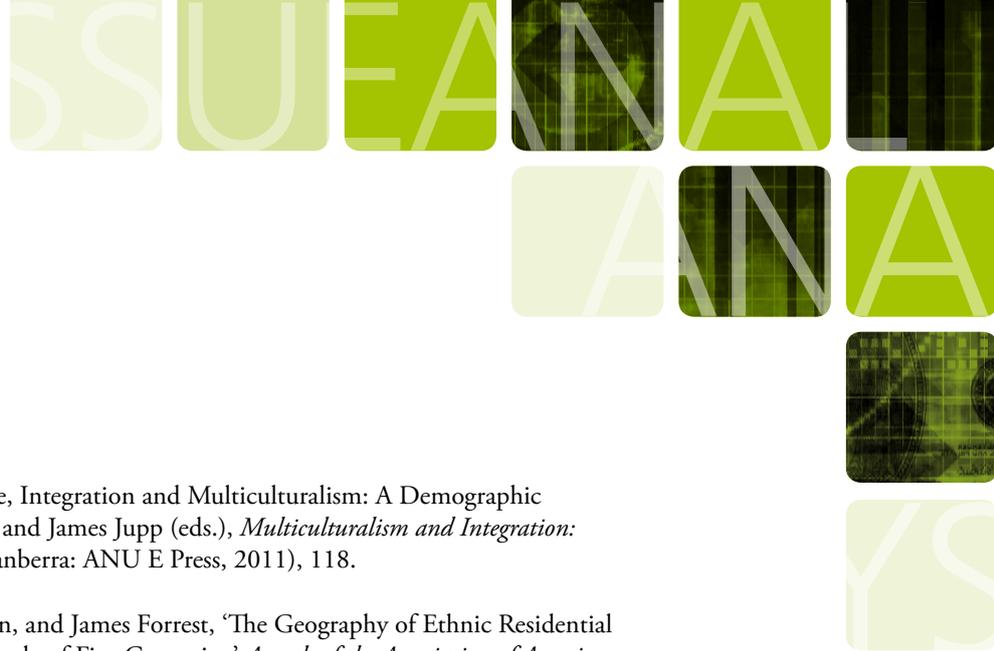
Australia will prosper in the Asian Century because it already speaks the languages of Asia and is home to widespread Asian cultural literacy.

Endnotes

- 1 DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), 'Trade at a Glance 2011.'
- 2 DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), 'Australia's Trade Agreements.'
- 3 'Is Sydney doing enough to attract Chinese tourists?' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (9 June 2012); Kellee Nolan, 'More Chinese, fewer Europeans visit Australia,' *The Herald Sun* (17 July 2012); Tourism Australia, *China 2020 Strategic Plan* (Tourism Australia, 2011), 1.
- 4 Philip Stephens, 'A rising tide of global prosperity,' *Business Spectator* (27 Apr 2012).
- 5 Peter Hartcher, 'Tipping point from West to rest just passed,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (17 April 2012); 'India to surpass China, will become world's largest economy by 2050: Report,' *The Economic Times* (28 March 2012).
- 6 As above.
- 7 Philip Stephens, 'A rising tide of global prosperity,' as above.
- 8 Chris Buckley, 'China boosts defense budget 11 percent after U.S. "pivot",' *Reuters* (4 Mar 2012); Christopher Layne, 'The Global Power Shift from West to East,' *The National Interest* (25 April 2012). Slightly more cautious predictions are that Chinese military spending will overtake US military spending in the '2020s or 2030s.' See Trefor Moss, '5 Things the Pentagon Isn't Telling Us About the Chinese Military,' *Foreign Policy* (23 May 2012).
- 9 Ben Doherty, 'India to test "China Killer" missile,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (18 April 2012); Nilanjana Bhowmick, 'Enter the Elephant: India Looks to Overhaul Its Military,' *Time* (3 April 2012).
- 10 Peter Hartcher, 'On the road to China, no Damascus conversion,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (15 May 2012).
- 11 There is debate as to whether countries where English is an official language and widely spoken but not the first language of the majority should be included in the Anglosphere. Examples include India, Pakistan and South Africa. This question notwithstanding, the Anglosphere is typically used to refer exclusively to Canada (excluding Québec), the United States, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand.
- 12 Greg Sheridan, 'Asian century will pass us by before this government acts,' *The Australian* (5 May 2012). In a similar vein, John Menadue argues: 'Asian language learning in Australia is in crisis.' See John Menadue, 'Deja vu as Australia returns from smoko for Asian century,' *The Age* (5 April 2012).
- 13 Tim Lindsey, 'No quick fix to Asia literacy crisis,' *The Australian* (3 May 2012).
- 14 As above. The low level of Asian languages learning becomes even starker when students of Asian background are removed from the equation. For example, approximately just 300 or 6% of the Year 12 students studying Mandarin across Australia are not of Chinese background. See 'Foreign languages on coalition agenda,' *skynews.com.au* (11 May 2012); Bernard Lane, 'Picking the next language winner is for losers,' *The Australian* (6 June 2012). Although commentators such as Hugh White have raised concerns about the numbers of Australians of non-Asian background learning Asian languages, it is utterly irrelevant whether students of Asian languages are of Asian background themselves. See Hugh White, 'Minding our languages,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (8 November 2011). All that matters is that there are Australians who are Asia literate.
- 15 As above.
- 16 Tim Lindsey, 'No quick fix to Asia literacy crisis,' as above. See also Justin Norrie, '\$2bn needed to achieve Abbott's language vision,' *The Conversation* (11 May 2012); Michael Clyne, 'What a lode of language,' *The Australian* (19 August 2009).
- 17 William Mckeith, 'Pave the way for Asian language,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (23 April 2012).
- 18 Michael Wesley, 'Australian Strategy for Asian Language Proficiency.'
- 19 DEEWR (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations), *National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program* (March 2010), 1.
- 20 Ministers' Media Centre, 'Delivering an "Asia literate" curriculum for Australia's students.'
- 21 ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority), 'Welcome to the Australian Curriculum online'; Ministers' Media Centre, 'New focus on languages under Australian Curriculum.'
- 22 'Australia's potential to be food superpower in Asian Century,' *ABC Radio Australia* (3 May 2012). See also Bernard Lane, 'Gillard talks up Asia literacy,' *The Australian* (5 May 2012).

- 23 Sheradyn Holderhead, 'Asian literacy critical to children,' *The Advertiser* (27 April 2012).
- 24 Peter Hartcher, 'On the road to China, no Damascus conversion,' as above.
- 25 As above.
- 26 As above. See also Bernard Lane, 'Picking the next language winner is for losers,' as above.
- 27 'Asian language should be mandatory for Australian schoolchildren, Julie Bishop says,' *news.com.au* (27 November 2011). In January 2012, the accounting body CPA Australia reiterated Bishop's recommendation when it argued that Asian languages should be compulsory because many school students would go on to work in Asia. See Bernard Lane, 'Foreign languages not optional,' *The Australian* (9 July 2012).
- 28 'Foreign languages on coalition agenda,' as above; Bianca Hall, 'Asian language plan "to cost \$1bn",' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (12 May 2012).
- 29 Government of Victoria, 'Coalition Government funds major increase in language education for Victorian families.'
- 30 As above.
- 31 Tanya Chilcott, 'Language subjects backflip in Queensland schools,' *The Courier-Mail* (17 January 2010).
- 32 DETE (Department of Education, Training and Employment), 'Mandatory languages in Years 6, 7 and 8.'
- 33 DEECD (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development), 'Languages Other Than English (LOTE) Domain.'
- 34 Department of Education and Communities, 'Teach Languages'; personal correspondence with the NSW Department of Education and Communities.
- 35 ACT Department of Education and Training, *Languages Pathway Plan* (Canberra: Government of ACT), 1.
- 36 DEECD (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development), *Languages in Victorian government schools* (Government of Victoria, 2010); personal correspondence with the NSW Department of Education and Communities.
- 37 Personal correspondence with the WA Department of Education.
- 38 Personal correspondence with the SA Department of Education and Child Development.
- 39 Department of Education, 'LOTE—Languages Other Than English'; personal correspondence with the Tasmanian Department of Education and the NT Department of Education and Training.
- 40 Although ensuring that at least 40% of Year 12 students study a language other than English might result in a significant increase in the number of students taking Asian languages in particular, the Coalition provides no indication of how they would achieve such an outcome.
- 41 AEF (Asia Education Foundation), 'Four Languages, Four Stories.'
- 42 As above.
- 43 Indicative of Australia's multicultural composition is 2011 Census data showing that about one in four Australians were born overseas and 43.1% of people have at least one overseas-born parent. See Malcolm Farr, 'We might need Jedi Knights to help pay the rent,' *The Telegraph* (21 June 2012).
- 44 CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), 'World,' *The World Factbook* (2 May 2012).
- 45 As above.
- 46 David Crystal, 'Two Thousand Million?' *English Today* 24:1 (March 2008), 5; Seth Mydans, 'Across cultures, English is the word,' *The New York Times* (14 May 2007); Indrajit Basu, "'Native English" is losing its power,' *Asia Times Online* (15 September 2006).
- 47 As above.
- 48 As above.
- 49 David Graddol, *English Next* (British Council, 2006), 62.
- 50 'Bangor University to set up Confucius Institute to spread Chinese understanding,' BBC (24 April 2012).
- 51 Jeffrey Gil, 'A Comparison of the Global Status of English and Chinese: Towards a New Global Language?' *English Today* 27:1 (March 2011), 55.
- 52 In 2001, there were only about 24 million speakers of Chinese languages outside China. As above, 54.
- 53 US Census Bureau, 'International Data Base'; Seth Mydans, 'Across cultures, English is the word,' as above; 'The triumph of English,' *The Economist* (20 December 2001).
- 54 'India to surpass China, will become world's largest economy by 2050: Report,' as above; US Census Bureau, 'International Data Base,' as above.

- 55 Seth Mydans, 'Across cultures, English is the word,' as above; 'The triumph of English,' as above.
- 56 Walter Seiler, 'English as a *lingua franca* in aviation,' *English Today* 25:2 (June 2009), 43.
- 57 Web Technology Surveys, 'Usage of content languages for websites'; Seth Mydans, 'Across cultures, English is the word,' as above.
- 58 UN (United Nations), 'UN official languages'; NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), 'Frequently Asked Questions'; ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), *Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Singapore: 20 November 2007), Article 34; AU (African Union), *Constitutive Act of the African Union* (Lomé: 11 July 2000), Article 25.
- 59 Michael Sainsbury, 'A bull in the China shop,' *The Australian* (19 July 2012).
- 60 Seth Mydans, 'Across cultures, English is the word,' as above.
- 61 Kingsley Bolton, 'English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the Issue of Proficiency,' *English Today* 24:2 (June 2008), 7. The remarkably high number of 800 million actually relies on a narrow understanding of Asia that only encompasses East, Southeast and South Asia. If Central and West Asia were included, the number would presumably be significantly higher. See also Seth Mydans, 'Across cultures, English is the word,' as above.
- 62 Tom McArthur, 'English as an Asian Language,' *ABD* 33:2 (2002), 4.
- 63 Kingsley Bolton, 'English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the Issue of Proficiency,' as above, 3.
- 64 CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), 'India,' *The World Factbook* (12 April 2012); 'Times now masthead of the world,' *The Times of India* (26 June 2005).
- 65 Kingsley Bolton, 'English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the Issue of Proficiency,' as above, 7; 'Indiaspeak: English is our 2nd language,' *The Times of India* (14 March 2010).
- 66 Kingsley Bolton, 'English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the Issue of Proficiency,' as above, 6. Although Bolton's figure of 330 million English speakers in China is consistent with common estimates of 200 million to 350 million, experts like Jian Yang have raised doubts about the extent of the English language skills of Chinese English speakers. See Jian Yang, 'Learners and Users of English in China,' *English Today* 22:2 (April 2006), 3. Yang argues: 'Most of them are merely learners, many of whom may never grow into proficient users.' As above, 8.
- 67 As above, 5 and 8; Jiang Yajun, 'English as a Chinese language,' *English Today* 19:2 (April 2003), 3.
- 68 As above, 7.
- 69 Tom McArthur, 'English as an Asian Language,' as above, 4. See also Luke Slattery, 'A blinkered approach to languages,' *The Australian* (7 November 2007).
- 70 All of the following census data can be generated at the Australian Bureau of Statistics website. See ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), 'Data & Analysis.' Although the ABS census data gives a good indication of the level of Australia's Asian languages literacy, it is at best a rough guide. This is because the data includes non-Australians who happen to be in Australia on census night, such as international students. In addition, there is a significant non-response rate (5.7% in 2006) for which the ABS imputes the response 'not stated', and there are often errors with the categorisation of languages. See ABS, 'Language Spoken at Home (LANP),' *Census Dictionary, 2006 (Reissue)*, Cat. No. 2901.0 (Canberra: ABS, 13 July 2007). See also Katherine Danks, 'Asian languages are lessons for the future,' *The Daily Telegraph* (16 June 2012).
- 71 DIAC (Department of Immigration and Citizenship), 'Fact Sheet 2—Key Facts in Immigration.'
- 72 ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), *2006 Census Tables*, Cat. No. 2068.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2007); ABS, '2011 Census Community Profiles.'
- 73 Malcolm Farr, 'We might need Jedi Knights to help pay the rent,' as above; 'Asian migration on the rise since 2006,' *Ninemsn* (21 June 2012).
- 74 As above.
- 75 Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, 'India now Australia's largest source of permanent migrants' (19 July 2012).
- 76 As above.
- 77 As above.
- 78 ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), *2006 Census Tables*, as above; ABS, '2011 Census Community Profiles.'
- 79 As above.



- 80 Siew-Ean Khoo, 'Intermarriage, Integration and Multiculturalism: A Demographic Perspective,' in Michael Clyne and James Jupp (eds.), *Multiculturalism and Integration: A Harmonious Relationship* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011), 118.
- 81 As above, 119.
- 82 Ron Johnston, Michael Poulsen, and James Forrest, 'The Geography of Ethnic Residential Segregation: A Comparative Study of Five Countries,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97:4 (December 2007), 733.
- 83 Chris Bowen, 'What makes multiculturalism great is mutual respect,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (17 February 2011).
- 84 Speaking an Asian language might be seen as a specialised skill rather than a general one like basic numeracy or English literacy. It may be akin to having a formal economics education that will likely provide valuable opportunities but is just one specialised skill among many that one could acquire. It is therefore appropriate that it be a matter for parents and children whether that skill is learnt at school.



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