

Australia has a long history of multiculturalism which has seen us become one of the world's most culturally and linguistically diverse nations. Despite our linguistic plurality, for the large part we remain monolingual while other parts of the world have become increasingly multilingual. Recent events including globalization and Asia's increasing economic power have forced us to reassess our linguistic status. In response, the State Government is committed to having all Foundation Year students in government schools learning a second language by 2015. As a bilingual Australian and an advocate for the teaching and learning of languages in Australian schools, I argue that learning languages will not only have economic, political and social benefits for Australian society, but will also have clear economic and cognitive advantages for Australian school students.

Educating our students so they can talk to the economies of the twenty first century will have economic benefits for both Australian society and the student. Until recently, the US and European superpowers enjoyed economic dominance throughout the world. This has shifted, however, as Europe and the US have undergone economic crises and Asia has become increasingly industrialized and modernized. Consequently, Australia is dealing less with English speaking countries and trading more with emerging Asian economies, including China and India and this trend is expected to continue. As the Australian Treasury (2011, p. 4.4) highlights, although 'China and India accounted for less than a tenth of world gross domestic product (GDP) in 1990 and almost a fifth in 2010 [..], [i]n 2020 they are projected to account for more than a quarter of world GDP – which will be equivalent to the combined share of US, Japan and ASEAN-5'. These figures are striking and highlight the need for us to become 'Asia literate' so we can capitalize fully on these markets and maximise growth to our economy (Australian Education Ministers 2008, p. 4). This will also have economic benefits for students with these languages, as their skills are sought after by businesses highly dependent on these emerging markets.

Competent German speakers will not only benefit Australia economically, but will also mean financial gain for speakers of the code. As stated in The Group of Eight *Languages in Crisis* Discussion Paper (2007, p. 6), there is a further area of 'potential growth in the Australian economy which cannot be realised

without foreign language skills'. Germany is the world's largest importer of wine; however, Australia's top four wine export markets are English-speaking countries (The Group of Eight 2007, p. 6). Currently, Australia is a minor player in the German wine market; we only have a 2.6 per cent market share, when imported wine accounts for 78 per cent of wine consumed in Germany (Deutsche Wein Statistik 2010/11 & *Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation*, cited in Australian Government Austrade, 2011). Clearly, we need to capitalise on the German wine market and to do this we need confident and competent German speakers. Apart from benefits to the Australian economy, speaking German will have benefits for students. Germany is not only the fourth largest economy in the world, but is also the sixth largest exporter to Australia world wide (Goethe-Institut, pp. 1 & 2). This has obvious economic benefits for students with German on their resume; not only will they have access to this lucrative market, but German will also boost their chances of employment in business and marketing.

Asian literacy will allow us to engage with and build strong relationships with Asia so we maintain stability in our region. Traditionally, South East Asia has enjoyed stability through a strong American presence in the region. As Thayer (2010, p. 1) points out, however, this trend is unlikely to continue, as '[t]he US ha[s] fewer resources to shape strategic developments in the Asia-Pacific'. In contrast, 'China's strong economic growth has resulted in rising defence budgets' which has seen it modernise and transform its military forces and strategic weight in the region (Thayer 2010, p. 1). Similarly, India has grown in economic and strategic strength so that Asia is now home to two of the world's largest armed forces. As Ridout (2009) argues 'One of the biggest mega-shifts facing Australia [...] is the shift in economic and strategic weight and influence to the Asia Pacific. It's our neighbourhood and we need to do more to recognise that'. As alluded to by Ridout, the challenge to Australia is to 'engage[e] and build strong relationships with Asia' (Australian Education Ministers 2008, p .4). Although we currently have dialogue, we need to forge stronger ties with Asia in order to create stability, and to do this effectively, we need to negotiate meaning in Asian languages. Studies have shown that 'longer term [...] partnerships depend upon relationship-building and relationship management and, to do this, cultural and linguistic knowledge of the target language is essential' (European Languages Activity Network 2006,

p. 6). We therefore need competent Asian speakers, particularly of Mandarin, and Hindi, in order to maintain stability in our region.

Learning languages will facilitate a more cohesive society by building awareness and respect of other people and cultures. 'Australia has seen many waves of immigration which have contributed to an increasingly complex social demographic' (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2009, p. 5). Despite the many advantages such diversity offers, local debate about our capacity to support large numbers of immigrants has led to "them" and "us" notions of citizenship', with many minority groups feeling alienated (Tsolidis 2008, p. 218). The 'us and them' dichotomy is not confined to recent arrivals but also includes Indigenous Australians, who for the large part, remain on the periphery of Australian society. The Melbourne Declaration (2008, p. 6) states that 'schooling [must] contribut[e] to a socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social and religious diversity'. Language learning does more than study the code of a particular group; equally important is the intercultural dimension, which is much more than just knowing about another culture. As Scarino and Liddicoat (2009, p. 21) argue, 'learning to be intercultural involves learning to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others'. By reflecting on our own culture, 'in relation to an additional [one]', we are able to see ours 'for the first time as what it really is, as just one possible world view and not the *only* [one]'(Scarino & Liddicoat 2009, p. 33; Crozet & Liddicoat 1999, p. 115). Such an understanding is 'where variable points of view are recognised, mediated, and accepted' leading to greater tolerance and social cohesion (Scarino & Liddicoat 2009, p. 33). This is clearly the case in schools in which Aboriginal language and culture is being taught to mixed groups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; these schools report greater group cohesion, respect and reconciliation (Aboriginal Languages, standards P-10 and protocols p. 12; Maier p. 214). Although this is occurring in the school context, it is likely to ripple into the wider community. As Chavez (1984) argues 'once social change begins it cannot be reversed'.

Language learning for Indigenous students will not only allow them to preserve their heritage code, but will also improve their English literacy thus having clear economic benefits. In 2009, forty percent of Year nine Indigenous students in Victoria failed the national reading test while nationally forty percent of our Indigenous students failed to meet minimum standards in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Topsfield 2010). All Australian Education Ministers take these figures seriously and admit that 'Australia has failed to improve educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians' (Australian Education Ministers 2008, p. 4). The Victorian State Government is committed to improving Indigenous students' outcomes and recognises the importance of the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages as an integral part of this process. (The Victorian Government 2009, p. 11). Undoubtedly, the Government is aware of studies that suggest 'that bilingual education assists acquisition of basic literacy [...] skills for students from non-English speaking backgrounds' and is also aware of programs in which Indigenous outcomes have been improved through students' engagement with their heritage language (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee 2000, p. 62). One such program involving the teaching and learning of the local Wiradjuri language is underway at Parkes High School NSW. Since 2006, Wiradjuri has been taught to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with positive results. As Maier (p. 214) argues 'Wiradjuri is helping improve student literacy; identifying nouns, verbs and pronouns, using suffixes and comparing English and Wiradjuri grammatical structures [is] all [helping to] improve student literacy' (Maier pp. 211 & 214). Clearly, this program is helping Indigenous students develop literacy skills not accessible to them in a mainstream literacy lesson. This will naturally have economic benefits for these students by increasing their future employability.

Learning languages has clear cognitive benefits for students. As Bialystok (2007, p. 210) argues, unlike monolinguals who only have one active code and its associated structure and sounds, the bilingual has two competing representational systems which the speaker needs to control depending on the situation. Recent research by Bialystok shows that this ability to control attention to one particular linguistic system over another has both immediate and lasting cognitive benefits. The study investigated groups of monolingual and bilingual children and compared their performance on a number of tasks.

Bialystok (2007, p. 215) found that the bilingual children were more proficient at being able to focus their attention in the presence of conflicting information and that 'the source of the advantage [...] is their bilingualism'. This processing advantage has been found across several domains of thought, including language tasks (Bialystok, 1988; Cromdal, 1999; Galambos & Goldin-Meadow, 1990, cited in Bialystok et al. 2005, p. 40), concepts of quantity (Bialystok & Codd, 1997; Saxe, 1988, cited in Bialystok et al. 2005, p. 40), spatial concepts (Bialystok & Majunder, 1998, cited in Bialystok et al. 2005, p. 40), and problem solving (Kessler & Quinn, 1987; Secada, 1991, cited in Bialystok et al. 2005, p. 40). In addition, Bialystok (2007, p. 219) notes that these processes also decline later in bilinguals thus making them more resistant to the onset of dementia. Thus learning a second language not only 'bolster[s]' cognitive development, but also makes cognitive skills more 'durable' and 'resilient' (Bialystok 2007, p. 220).

Language learning will have clear benefits for both the student and Australian society. Asian languages are clearly a priority in order to communicate with the emerging economies as well as to maintain stability in the region. This will have obvious economic benefits for speakers of those codes as their skills are sought after by the Government and business alike. Similarly, competent German speakers will not only mean potential economic growth for Australia, but will also have financial benefits for those speakers. Economic benefit will also be gained by Indigenous students as they engage with their heritage language in the school setting. Apart from economic advantages, language learning will also allow for a more cohesive society and have clear cognitive benefits for students.

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