

How to solve Australia's language learning crisis

The state of language learning in Australian schools is dire. [This weekend the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried an article entitled "Why students are turning away from learning foreign languages."](#) According to figures offered in the article, language learning in Australia might well be described as moribund: today only around 10% of HSC students study a language other than English (LOTE); that's down 30% from the 1960s when about 40% of Australian high school students studied a LOTE. In 2015, out of a NSW HSC student population of over 77,000, only around 7,000 took a LOTE.

The article explains this sad state of affairs in a number of ways:

- Australians think knowing only English is just fine and everyone is learning English anyway
- There is a lack of continuity in language programs
- Language teaching in schools is tokenistic
- Minimum class requirements of 15 students work against languages
- The small number of required HSC subjects works against choosing a language

Overall, the take-away message of the article is bleak: "That message [=that languages are useful] is really not cutting through."

A hard-working, passionate and dedicated high school LOTE teacher forwarded the link to the article to me with this question:

What more can us teachers do to change the Monolingual Mindset?!?!

The answer is really quite simple:

Demand action from our politicians to make a LOTE compulsory!

We don't leave it up to students whether they want to study maths, English, sciences or sports. We consider these subjects part of the core curriculum. A LOTE needs to be a required part of a well-rounded education in the same way that these subjects are.

Sadly, our politicians seem incapable of even imagining this simple solution. The objection comes in the slogan of "the crowded curriculum" – focussing on literacy, numeracy, the sciences and whatnot simply leaves no space for language learning, or so we are told. Our prime minister sums up Australia's linguistic tunnel vision on his blog:

Learning any language at school is valuable but difficult because there simply aren't enough hours in the school calendar for most students to achieve any real facility – as many Australians have discovered when they tried out their schoolboy or schoolgirl French on their first visit to Paris! ([Malcolm Turnbull blog](#))

What the prime minister fails to realize is that this is not a language education problem but an Australian problem. In NSW, for instance, a LOTE is compulsory for only 100 hours in Year 7 and 8. That is [insufficient](#)

[time on task](#) and, indeed, a pointless exercise. It does nothing for students other than instill a sense of linguistic inadequacy in them. No one achieves fluency in another language in 100 hours, particularly if those 100 hours are delivered in bits of two hours each, spread out over a school year.

But just because Australian curricula are designed in a way that makes language learning a pointless exercise for most students, does not mean that this is true of all language learning in school: while most Australians “on their first visit to Paris” may well be struggling linguistically, most international tourists who come to Australia are coping just fine on their first visit to Sydney. This is not because it is easier for a French, German or Japanese school kid to learn English than it is for an Australian school kid to learn French (or any other language) but because their school systems invest heavily in English language teaching.

Does making a language other than English compulsory throughout schooling come at the expense of a focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths)?

[View a short overview or listen to a more detailed explanation.](#)

No, it clearly does not, as a comparison with Finland shows. The Finnish education system is widely regarded as one of the best internationally, and regularly [outperforms Australia in the Program for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) rankings on numeracy, sciences and reading scores. In Finland, all students take two compulsory foreign languages throughout schooling; 44% of Finnish school students even study a third foreign language and 31% a fourth.](#) In fact, all countries that outperform Australia on PISA – which measures numeracy, sciences and reading – and most countries that perform more or less the same, have at least one compulsory foreign language in their school system.

In these countries, language learning is a core plank of education. Not surprising given the many benefits of language learning (I won't reiterate the multiple benefits of language learning here but if you wish, [view a short overview](#) or [listen to a more detailed explanation](#)). It is, in fact, not true that the message of the benefits of language learning “is really not cutting through.” It may not be cutting through to our politicians but it is cutting through to parents: [recent research conducted by Livia Gerber, for instance, found that Australian parents very much wished to give their children “the gift of bilingualism.”](#) Unfortunately, our public schools are failing them in this aspiration.

Further evidence that Australian families want high-quality language education for their children comes from the fact that [families who can afford it increasingly choose the International Baccalaureate \(IB\) offered by private schools over the HSC.](#) In the IB, all-round academic excellence includes the study of a second language. Universities value the all-rounder academic excellence of IB graduates, too: [IB scores systematically translate into higher Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank \(ATAR\) scores than HSC scores.](#) By contrast, choosing a language option in the HSC can work against high-achieving students because some languages, including those where the student is deemed a “background speaker”, scale poorly.

In sum, high-performing private schools following the IB system have a compulsory additional language; internationally, compulsory additional language learning is the norm, including in some of the world's most highly performing educational systems. So, why not in Australia's public schools? Why do we accept the

linguistic myopia of our political leaders who can't seem to imagine high-quality language education as a core plank of academic excellence?