Why Asian language studies fall on deaf ears

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It doesn’t seem to matter that the calls are mostly ignored – for the past 20 years or more, a succession of Australian governments have urged primary and secondary schools to have their students learn an Asian language.

The latest occurred last October, when the then prime minister, Julia Gillard, released the government’s Asian Century white paper, one of whose goals was for all students to have access to the study of Mandarin, Hindi, Indonesian or Japanese (the so-called big four).

Ms Gillard said she would force this curriculum change on the states and territories by tying it to federal funding for schools, although, as critics pointed out, it would cost $100 million a year to provide the necessary teachers and resources.

Peter Garrett, then schools minister, moved the goalposts back a bit by later announcing a $15 million national plan that would see “every child have access to the study of an Asian language from their first day of school by 2025”.

Australian exports to Asian countries are worth around $250 billion a year, so the region is economically and strategically crucial to Australia’s future. But neither state nor federal governments have ever acknowledged that Anglo-Australian kids refuse to spend the 2200 hours needed to get a real grasp of an Asian language – because it’s just too damned hard.

Researchers at Deakin University have now tried a new approach by switching the focus from the students to their teachers, with a plan to boost the “Asian literacy” of the pedagogues, arguing this will help increase the number of students learning a language from the big four.

In a 150-page report released last week, the researchers note that much of the debate in schools regarding education about Asia concerns “what we want kids to learn” rather than “what capacity do teachers and principals need to have to accomplish that”.

The co-author of the report, Deakin Professor Christine Halse, said the research found the critical factor for teachers and principals was a “person-to-person contact, direct engagement with Asia”. She said this shifted the “knowledge base from learning in a vacuum to what was important in terms of the curriculum, which was intercultural engagement”.

The report draws on an online survey completed by 1319 teachers and 432 principals, a majority in secondary schools. Although the curriculum requires schools to teach about Asia, the researchers found widespread diversity “in terms of the meaning, interpretation and penetration of Asia-related teaching and learning across different curriculum areas”.

Among their recommendations, the researchers call for a national plan to ensure principals and teachers at all stages of their careers have access to Asia-related professional learning, while Asia-relevant knowledge and skills should be included in initial teacher education.

They say teachers should also have opportunities to undertake exchange, travel and study programs in Asia, and they should be given extra training on how to use computers and the web to learn about and connect with Asia.

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