



Asia Education Foundation

Parent attitudes towards Asian language learning in schools

Key Findings

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Key Findings

The following findings are based on an analysis of 240 responses to the parent survey ran by Asia Education Foundation in March-April 2015. The responding sample may be broadly described as parents who are interested in issues around their child's Asian language learning.

Which parents typically find it important that their child learns an Asian language at school?

These parents are most likely to have completed a tertiary qualification, specifically a Bachelor degree or higher. This observation is further supported by the fact that the survey respondents were collectively much more educated than the nationwide average. They are also likely to send their child to a non-government school.

From the perspective of linguistic background and language use, the parents are likely to speak at least one language other than English at home and use this language with their child, even though the frequency of use may vary considerably from one family to another. They see the study of an Asian language as being of equal importance to many other key learning areas, but less important than English, Mathematics and Science. These parents actively encourage their child to study an Asian language and communicate to their child positive views about the importance and/or usefulness of Asian language learning. They also typically support mandatory language studies throughout primary and secondary school.

Importantly, these parents have positive attitudes towards the learning of Asian languages in schools for non-instrumental reasons. They are not convinced that Australian businesses commonly value Asian language skills, despite, in their view, the increasing importance of Asia for Australian business and trade. Their reasons stem from overwhelmingly positive views concerning various aspects of Asia, in particular its cultural diversity and a desire to engage with its peoples and societies. They believe that Australian society can also learn from Asia, culturally, politically, economically or educationally.

Does the education level of parents matter?

It can make a difference and act as an equalising factor regardless of parents' linguistic background and language use. But, it is not a determining factor in parents' positive attitudes towards the learning of Asian languages in schools and the extent to which they support their child's Asian language learning. The relationship between level of education and positive attitudes is not necessarily causal.

Parents with a Bachelor or a Master's degree are more likely to consider it important that their child learns an Asian language than those without tertiary education or those who have completed a traineeship, apprenticeship or technical education qualification. However, there were parents without tertiary qualifications in the sample who consider Asian language learning as being very important for their child, while some highly-educated respondents do not find it important at all.

Does the language background of parents matter?

There is no significant difference between parents whose first language is English and those whose first language is not in terms of attitudes towards Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, their child's Asian language learning and the benefits of this learning. There is, however, a relationship between these attitudes and parents' language use at home: those who speak at least one language other than English at home—and typically use it with their child—have stronger views about the importance of learning an Asian language than those who do not; they are also more likely to see the multiple educational and intercultural benefits for their child of learning an Asian language.

Moreover, parents who speak a language other than English at home also express much more positive attitudes towards Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia than those who do not. This indicates a relationship between these positive attitudes and the extent of their intercultural experiences and exposure. This observation applied consistently across all thematic fields that were covered by the survey concerning attitudes towards Asia, i.e. business, politics, culture, society, history, and people.

Hence, language use matters more than linguistic background when it comes to parents having positive attitudes towards their child's Asian language learning. However, the causal direction of this relationship remains unclear. For example, parents who speak a (not-necessarily-Asian) language other than English at home may have positive attitudes towards the learning of Asian languages, but it is also possible that their child's Asian language study introduced them to the cultures of Asia and further promoted their interest in the region. It appears that both occurrences are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

Will mandatory language learning get more parents to support the learning of Asian languages in schools?

Parents who hold positive attitudes towards their child's learning of an Asian language tend to support mandatory language studies throughout primary and secondary school. The reverse appears to be true: parents who do not consider it important for their child to learn an Asian language at school also do not support mandatory language learning. (Note that mandatory language learning can be implemented at a systemic and/or school level.)

Making language learning mandatory at school would increase the number of students learning a language, but this language may not be an Asian language. And, such an approach may not necessarily foster positive attitudes towards Asian languages among parents – to state otherwise would be to assume causality. What it does provide are increased opportunities for education systems and schools to promote Asian languages and broader awareness of Asia among parents. It also lifts the public profile of languages in Australian education. However, the side-effects of mandatory language learning are yet to be comprehensively researched in Australia.

Nevertheless, the data suggest that other strategies to develop parents' positive attitudes towards the learning of Asian languages may be more effective than mandatory language learning in schools. Some parents in the sample do not encourage their child to learn an Asian language, even though it is mandatory, and communicate negative views to their child about this learning. Where mandatory Asian language learning exists, this must be accompanied by broader strategies to build parents' interest in and valuing of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.

Do parents support their child's Asian language learning because they think Australian businesses seek employees who speak an Asian language?

No. Less than 30 per cent of survey respondents believe that Australian businesses seriously value the ability of staff to speak an Asian language; 38 per cent thought they do so occasionally; and the remainder are even less convinced. This stands in contrast to how a substantial majority of respondents (70 per cent) consider it important that their child and other children across Australia learn an Asian language at school. This figure suggests that business needs and expectations are not the main driver behind parents' positive attitudes towards the importance and usefulness of studying an Asian language, even though they recognise that Asia is becoming increasingly important for Australian business and trade.

However, it is also plausible that parents are not sufficiently aware of cases where businesses, including major corporations, do value Asian language skills. The work of [Asialink Business](#), and [Asialink](#) more broadly, would lend support to this possibility. If so, this suggests more of a communication issue rather than an inherently attitudinal one.

So why do parents support their child's Asian language learning?

The parents who support their child's Asian language learning are most likely to do so because they have positive attitudes towards Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia. They are interested in Asian cultures and societies, admire the cultural diversity of the Asia region, and engage and interact with people of Asian background in their personal lives. These positive attitudes correlate strongly with parents' opinions on how important it is for them that their child learns an Asian language at school. This suggests that promoting parents' interest in and engagement with Asia may be a key strategy to boost parental support for Asian language learning in schools.

Overall, the parents surveyed typically agreed with the following statements:

- Australia has a strategic advantage over other western countries because it is close to Asia
- Australian governments should further strengthen their relationships with countries in Asia
- Australia should expand its business links with countries in Asia in the next decade
- Countries in Asia are increasingly important trade and business partners for Australia
- Australia is part of the Asia region
- Australian society can learn from Asia, culturally, politically, economically or educationally.

Parents who speak a language in addition to English are likely to have more positive attitudes towards Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia than those who do not. Nonetheless, parents, regardless of their linguistic background and language use, hold generally positive attitudes. And, the attitudes of those who speak English only are almost identical to the average results for the entire sample. Hence, (English) monolingualism does not appear to be a decisive factor in determining positive or negative attitudes towards Asia. However, language use, exposure and experiences, regardless of linguistic background, have a significant impact on the development of positive attitudes.

What role does parental engagement in children's Asian language learning play?

Parents who are engaged in their child's Asian language learning are much more likely to see this learning as valuable for their child. Two separate survey items related to parental engagement: 1) communicating one's views on Asian language learning to one's child; and 2) encouraging one's child to study an Asian language. Respondents who scored highly on these two items were much more likely to find Asian language learning important and useful for their child.

Moreover, the two items strongly correlate, which indicates that parental engagement in children's Asian language learning is a key factor in getting parents to value this learning. To lend further support to this observation, there were examples where respondents specified negative views about Asian language learning and communicated these views to their child. AEF's (2015) [*What Works 8: Parents and the learning of Asian languages in schools*](#) explored ways in which schools can work with parents to encourage and enable them to support their child's Asian language learning.

Out of all the factors tested in this study that have a potentially significant impact on parents' attitudes towards Asian language learning, parental engagement appears to be the only directly controllable factor at a systemic and school level. Parents' sociolinguistic experiences and education background are determined by a whole array of complex and interconnected variables that are near impossible for schools and school systems to directly influence.