

Report to the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education on highlighting different and detailed benefits of bilingualism to school students to increase Australia's Asia Capability.

28/09/2025

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In this report to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education, I aim to encourage the committee to highlight different and often undiscussed benefits of bilingualism through language learning to Australian students to strengthen Australia's Asia capability. I have focused on three specific benefits: protection against cognitive decline amongst elderly people, increase in creativity and enhancements in cultural awareness. I provide an explanation of each argument, its relevance in an Australian context and my experience with these arguments in a schooling context. For this report, I assume that language education leads to a reasonable level of bilingualism.

During my own 2011-23 school education in Victoria, I did not hear these arguments from the Australian Government to encourage language learning even if academic circles did discuss these arguments. Concerning my linguistic background, I come from a white, English-speaking, Australian background and have previously studied Chinese for two semesters in primary school, French from 2011 to my current undergraduate university studies at the University of Melbourne and Russian from the commencement of my university studies in 2024. As a result, I aim to provide the Committee with different reasoning to provide to students to encourage their language learning and help Australia's Asia capability.

To start, bilingualism protects elderly people from cognitive decline. Each person has a cognitive reserve which aids them to maintain good cognitive performance in their old age (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 769). Life experiences including job and education complexity, marriage, physical fitness, positive and large support networks, leisure time and financial support in childhood create better cognitive reserve (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 771). However, researchers have also found that bilingualism aids cognitive reserve performance (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 769).

In particular, Gallo et al (2023) argue that bilingualism in two languages with a small language distance assist cognitive reserve maintenance. Linguists classify languages depending on their common origin performance (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 770). When languages come from the same branch, family or have other common features, they are more similar and hence have smaller language distance (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 770). For example, English and Dutch both form parts of the Western Germanic language branch of the Indo-European language family and hence have a small language distance (“Germanic Languages”, 2014). Contrarily, Mandarin has a greater language distance to English than Dutch as it is part of the Sino-Tibetan language family rather than the Indo-European language family (Matthews, 2014; “Germanic Languages”, 2014).

Bilingualism in two languages that have a small language distance means that speakers must have greater language control (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 775). As the two languages are similar, they must be always cautious to not confuse the language’s vocabulary or grammar together (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 770). They are thus always working on their improving their cognitive reserve when using their languages, hence mitigating threats of cognitive decline (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 770). On the contrary, this is not the case with languages that have a higher language distance (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 775).

This is critical in the case of Australia. If small language distance contributes towards protecting cognition in older people, Australia should assist Indo-European language education (Gallo et al, 2023, p. 775). Australia currently has 443,274 people living with dementia and is predicted to have 878,349 people with dementia by 2050 due to the country's ageing population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). However, if bilingualism in languages with close language distance can decrease the amount of people with dementia, less people will suffer from the disease. Not only will this assist families to have more time with their elderly relatives, but it will also help Australia's economy. In 2016, dementia cost Australia \$14.25 billion, hence more bilingualism in languages with small language distances will mean less funding is needed to support dementia patients (National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, 2017). Consequently, Australia needs to continue funding the education of languages with small language distance to avoid its population facing greater cognitive issues in their older years.

Although I was aware that language learning helped protect myself against dementia during my language education in school, I was unaware of the reasoning behind it. I believe greater explanation of why language learning prevents cognitive decline would encourage greater participation in school language education. Furthermore, I recommend that the government focuses education on Asian languages close to English. Although this argument creates a case for European languages close to English, it also supports the education of Indonesian and Malay due to their close language distance to English (Ozkok et al, 2022, p.4). Therefore, Australia's Asia capability will grow if students understand the mental benefits behind why they are learning an Asian language.

Secondly, bilingualism assists creativity through improving divergent and convergent thinking. Creativity is the combination of divergent and convergent thinking (Kharkhurin, 2017, p.2). Divergent thinking is the ability to create a wide range of new ideas through interconnecting unrelated ideas (Kharkhurin, 2017, p.2). Bilingualism assists with improving two concepts of divergent thinking: flexibility, or the ability to consider a variety of different approaches to a problem, and fluency, or the ability to consider a large quantity of approaches to a problem (Kharkhurin, 2017, p.2). Kharkhurin (2017) argues that when people speak two languages, they translate automatically concepts which are similar in each language. As a result, bilingual people are automatically considering various approaches to problems as a result of different words and concepts in each language, and hence working on their divergent thinking (Kharkhurin, 2017, p.13; Kharkhurin, 2025, p. 865). Thus, as bilingualism assists in the creation of a wide range of ideas through linking unrelated ideas, they improve their divergent thinking and thus have greater creativity.

Convergent thinking involves the ability to narrow down these new ideas to find the best solution to a problem by evaluating potential options (Kharkhurin, 2024, p. 865). With bilingual speakers, they are fighting to ensure they use the correct language and concepts when expressing themselves (Kharkhurin, 2024, p. 865). As a result, they are sorting through their potential and sometimes irrelevant ideas to express themselves correctly (Kharkhurin, 2024, p. 865). Thus, bilinguals train their convergent thinking abilities and improve their creativity,

Creativity is important for the future of Australia as it will help the country to find new solutions to pressing problems. Australia and the international community are faced with problems such as climate change which will play a big role in shaping the future (Wright,

2015). As a result, greater creativity will ensure that Australia can have the minds necessary to future-proof the country from these problems.

I did not receive any information during my schooling from the Australian Government as to the benefits for creativity as a result of language learning. Therefore, I believe that if students understood language learning's benefits for creativity, more students would study Asian languages and increase Australia's Asia capability.

Finally, bilingualism assists with intercultural competence. Intercultural competence involves the ability of an individual of one culture to interact effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures (Deardorff, 2011, p. 38). Deardorff (2011) illustrates that understanding a language is a necessary component in assisting the development of intercultural competence. It centres around three key requisites for outcomes key skills: attitude, or having respect of other cultures, openness to cultural learning and cultural curiosity; knowledge of one's own culture and other cultures' specifics; and skills of listening and observing other cultures (Deardorff, 2011, pp. 38-9).

The three skills for intercultural competence result in both internal outcomes and external outcomes (Deardorff, 2011, p. 39). Internal outcomes of adaptability and flexibility allow for people to better adjust to new cultural environments and use appropriate communication (Deardorff, 2011, p. 39). External outcomes involve the actual action of correct behaviour to achieve one's own goal (Deardorff, 2011, p. 39). As language classrooms focus not only on language learning but cultural dimensions, students can improve their approach to other cultures and become better communicators.

Having stronger intercultural communication is necessary for Australia's tolerance and acceptance of other people. Modern Australia is a multicultural society with over 27.6% of people being born overseas in 2021, hence to different cultures (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). For Australians to better communicate their goals effectively with their fellow citizens, intercultural competence is necessary. Furthermore, with the recent "March for Australia" demonstrators fighting against immigration to Australia, increasing cultural awareness and acceptance is important for ensuring the safety of all Australians and the effective running of multicultural Australia (Gallagher, 2025). Resultingly, the intercultural competencies gained through language learning and bilingualism is necessary for Australia.

Again, I received limited information from the Australian Government throughout my schooling as to the intercultural communicative benefits of language learning. I believe that allowing students to understand why language learning helps intercultural communication will cause them to have greater desire to continue language education and, as a result, build Australia's Asia capability.

In conclusion, I believe the Australian Government needs to provide and explain to students different reasons why language education benefits them. I have focused on explaining three reasons that I was largely ignorant of during my education: protection against cognitive decline, increased creativity and increased intercultural competence. The Australian Government would benefit from explaining and promoting these reasons to school students to assist them in continuing their language education especially in Asian languages. As a result, greater student understanding of different reasons why to learn languages will assist Australia to build its Asia capability.

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