

How BIG is the Chinese opportunity?



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26 Jun 2014

Recent reports that Mandarin may be taught in some South African schools got tongues wagging about the size and shape of the 'Chinese opportunity' that may arise from this.

Central to that would be a need for language services (translation in education, trade and exchange programmes). So will we all have to learn Mandarin in schools and business courses?

Fair enough

It's a fair question. China's interests in Africa are burgeoning. The country is South Africa's biggest trade partner, and recent official visits between the SA and Chinese governments underlined their intent to give tangible effect to a collaboration agreement signed in 2013.

The overarching themes of this agreement are extensive, as alluded to above. The education component itself is expansive, and indicative of the Basic Education Ministry's wish to improve mathematics, science and technology results in our schools.

There's certainly merit to this wish. According to the World Economic Forum's Information Technology Report 2014, South Africans rank the quality of our education 146th out of 148 countries, ahead of Yemen and behind Egypt. In maths and science we rank stone last.

Choose wisely

But while the minister's intentions (and that of the government as a whole to pursue opportunities with the world's fastest-growing major economy) are laudable, a sober analysis (in the absence of any details) reveals that the opportunities may not be all that exciting, at least not for the language industry.

Regional language

Firstly, the global trend is no longer to broaden learners' language competence. Twenty years ago, learning Russian was de rigueur for British schools. Ten years ago, it was Mandarin's (first) turn. In both cases, little came of it, because neither is a world language (although Mandarin is a trans-border language to some extent, also spoken in Taiwan). Even French and German are heard less and less in British and SA schools.

Plus ça change...

If there were a real prospect of increased bilateral trade with China, that would have been a good reason to skill up in Mandarin. But none of the reporting suggests significant Chinese investment in South African manufacturing or marketing of our products in China.

China will in all likelihood continue to sell more electronics, textiles and cheaply manufactured consumer goods into South Africa, and we will reciprocate by exporting more raw materials and tourism. The (considerable and growing) investment we can expect will be confined to infrastructure to stimulate mining and exploration, and our comparatively low labour cost may result in more Chinese assembly plants on home soil.

Immediate markets

Since our more immediate markets are in southern Africa and the Indian Ocean Islands, a better bet would be French and Portuguese (international languages in the true sense of the word). In confirmation of this principle, Chinese has taken off in Australasia, due to the proximity of Chinese markets to countries in this region.

Tourism?

Tourism may well present an opportunity for increased economic activity. However, Chinese tourists are becoming far more adventurous, increasingly travelling individually (as opposed to the large groups of yesteryear) with English phrase books.

Learning from the Chinese

As concerns the prospect of our students benefiting from Chinese prowess in science, maths and tech education, that is questionable too.

China's Shanghai region easily tops the rankings in the OECD's triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), but there are problems with the manipulability of such ranking systems and extrapolating regional performance to apply to whole countries.

The Chinese elite may well do exceedingly well in these subjects, but on the whole probably not. A last consideration with respect to education is the prospect of another overhaul of our basic education curriculum, after a previous outing in 2009. A topic enjoying some attention is the 50/50 split between academic and vocational educational streams that the Chinese government has attained, a balance our Basic Education Ministry reportedly wants for SA too.

It is however doubtful that enough overlap exists between Chinese and SA curricula to present a translation opportunity. Given South Africa's history, we are likelier to have success with European models than Chinese ones.

No rush

It is therefore our view that there won't be a rapid escalation in the teaching of Chinese in our schools, FET colleges and universities, as trade will be confined to this side of the Chinese borders. Instead, our trading partners have a far greater likelihood of embracing English.

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