

# Why

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# Indian leaders warm to Mandarin

By James Lamont and GirijaShivakumar in New Delhi

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India is considering introducing the teaching of Mandarin in state schools, a move that would represent a policy shift for a country that has long played down the importance of learning the Chinese language.

China is India's largest trading partner and neighbour across the Himalayas. Yet the country's languages are barely taught in India. According to Chinese diplomats, India responded tepidly to a proposal by Beijing to establish Confucius Institutes, which teach Chinese, in the country's main centres of learning.

The change is being driven by KapilSibal, minister of human resources development, who has tried to push for widespread reform in India's education sector since taking over the portfolio last year.

MrSibal has held talks with Chinese officials on the practicalities of giving Indian teachers the skills to teach Mandarin courses, the possibility of Chinese teachers coming to India and the expansion of university student exchanges. He has also consulted India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) about broadening language training within the national curriculum. MrSibal, who attended the World Economic Forum in Tianjin, favours Mandarin teaching in primary schools to instil an early interest in China, the world's fastest growing large economy.

An estimated 60 per cent of India's 1.2bn population is under the age of 25. MrSibal said India's "demographic dividend" could help the country dominate the global services industry and, in the future, export talent to countries with ageing societies.

While many Indians speak English, Mandarin would give them greater international competitiveness. Should Mr Sibal's proposal gain traction, India could at a stroke increase massively the number of the world's Mandarin speakers.

Arun Kapur, director at Vasant Valley, a large secondary school in New Delhi, welcomed the promotion of Mandarin.

"We have other foreign languages. I'm surprised CBSE did not introduce Mandarin earlier, especially since it has so many people speaking it," he said. "Why has it taken CBSE so long? With so many speakers [of Mandarin], it's good for India to know what the world is saying."

New Delhi's interest in promoting Mandarin comes as the number of students learning the language across the globe continues to grow.

Mandarin is now the fourth most studied A-level language in the UK after French, Spanish and German.

China is keen for foreigners to learn Mandarin. In recent years, Beijing has funded programmes "enhancing its cultural and soft power and international competitiveness", in the words of one senior Chinese propaganda official.

A key element in this strategy to increase China's global influence is the funding of the Confucius Institutes. Established in 2004, the institutions provide Chinese language and culture classes but present a world view that is in line with Chinese Communist party objectives.

By the end of last year, the Chinese government had helped fund and establish 282 Confucius Institutes and 272 Confucius Classrooms in 88 countries.

A total of 260,000 people worldwide were enrolled in Confucius Centres last year. According to the Confucius Institute Headquarters in Beijing, another 250 institutions from more than 50 countries have expressed interest in establishing their own Confucius Institutes or classrooms.

In the US, the Asia Society identified 263 Chinese language programmes in elementary and secondary schools in 2004 and 779 such programmes in 2008, an almost 200 per cent increase. In Japan, apart from English, Chinese is the foreign language of choice.

*Additional reporting by Chris Cook, Jamil Anderlini, Michiyo Nakamoto and Daniel Dombey*

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