

## **Don't overlook Indonesian as a starting point**

*Jamie Mackie, June 24, 2009*

THERE are strong arguments in favour of a much higher degree of bilingualism and multilingualism in Australia, and a far greater knowledge of Asian languages. I am strongly in favour of actively pursuing these, but I suspect that the arguments advanced in favour of either one do not necessarily help the case for the other.

In fact, they may be in conflict. So we badly need much more discussion and debate about what we are trying to achieve.

The report from the Griffith Asian Institute on Building an Asia-Literate Australia, An Australian Strategy for Asian Language Proficiency, headed by Michael Wesley, proposes that Australia needs half of its population to be fluent in an Asian language within 30 years, that two-thirds of Australians under 40 should speak an Asian language, arguing that we must abandon Australia's monolingual mindset if we are to keep up with the four (increasingly multilingual) Asian powerhouses.

It outlines an \$11.3 billion, 30-year plan with three implementation phases, aiming to integrate a language teaching program from early primary school to university level.

That all points in a desirable direction, but there is one set of basic questions I feel we must answer about our objectives before embarking on it. Do we want so many Asian-language speakers for essentially economic or vocational reasons - to be able to communicate better with our customers and suppliers there - or for a broader socio-cultural reason, to draw us into closer engagement with our Asian neighbours? Or, if a bit of both, how much?

And how many of those Asian-language speakers will be able to find jobs where that knowledge is relevant to their employment? At present, the prospects are not enticing. In "Don't start with Asian tongues" (HES, June 17), Luke Slattery also seeks to abolish our monolingual mind-set, but argues that while bilingualism must be our minimal aim, the emphasis should be on cognate languages with which English has an affinity: German, French, Spanish and Italian.

The study of character-based Asian languages should be reserved for Anglophones who have already cut their teeth on a European language, since it takes three times as many tuition hours for English speakers to learn character-based languages.

That sort of cognate apprentice tongue would then give students an appetite for more, and a useful understanding of how foreign languages differ from ours.

But in that case Chinese and Japanese will have to take their place as third in the multilingual queue, not second.

Indonesian may be an exception as a second-language option, however, since it is not character-based and is relatively easy to get started on.

If we were to cut it loose from the constraining framework of other traditional year-long, three-classes a week university language courses and create a far greater diversity of intensive short-course options (preferably linked into full-immersion periods of in-country study to add real social and cultural familiarity), we could do better with Indonesian in the next few years than we have during the past 50.

In the half-century since it was first introduced into Australia, Indonesian has not made as much impact as we initially hoped on the highly Eurocentric character of our university curriculums, or on the thinking of our academic colleagues, or on the attitudes of Australians more broadly towards Indonesia.

Nor have large numbers of students ever taken it up, and those numbers have been falling for over a decade, during the Howard era.

Our one success has been to create a core group of Indonesia specialists in our universities, a few government departments, the army and (some) parts of the media, which now forms an invaluable national asset of the highest international standing. But will even that small group survive much longer as many of its senior members approach retirement?

I hope to provoke some debate on these issues in a paper, *The Past and Future of Indonesian Studies*, at the Indonesia Council conference at the University of Sydney in mid-July. But the debate must range far wider than that if we are ever to find the most appropriate solutions here.

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