

Talking to our neighbours means learning their language

Hamish McDonald, Sydney Morning Herald, February 21, 2009

IT'S ABOUT time your columnist finds himself inside Kevin Rudd's tent, having strangely missed out on the 2020 Summit and other sessions of brainstorming.

The occasion is this week's conference on the Australia-Indonesia relationship, involving about 160 of the usual suspects from government, business, academia and the media sitting in Sydney's Hotel InterContinental and wondering how to take it further.

Things have never been better at top level, but the consensus is that the relationship leaves a lot to be desired in what's called the "people-to-people" level - despite record numbers of Australians visiting Indonesia, and more than 15,000 Indonesians studying here.

On the Australian side, the chief concern is the steady decline in the numbers of our children studying the Indonesian language in schools.

There is a decline in language study generally in our schools. In the 1960s about 40 per cent of year 12 students studied a second language. Now it is less than 15 per cent.

The decline is most evident in Indonesian, once the strongest Asian language by numbers in our schools. Only about 1 per cent of those school leavers study Indonesian.

There are about 400 enrolled in Indonesian at universities, a large slab of them at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Only 2 per cent of tertiary students now study Asia-related subjects at our universities. Our once-renowned university departments of Asian studies are dwindling, with only some 400 specialist academics left, from nearly 700 in 1992.

In schools, the cohort of teachers trained in the 1960s and 1970s to teach Indonesian are getting close to retirement, with few replacements.

A lot of the blame attaches to John Howard's Anglocentric world, when special funding for Asian-language studies was cut from the federal budget after 1996. But the decline started well before he came to government, and was only slowed partially by the extra funding under the Hawke and Keating governments.

In its first budget, the Rudd Government went part of the way to restoring Asian language funding for schools. But the allocation - \$62 million over three years, spread over Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese and Korean studies in high schools - is pitifully inadequate to meet Mr Rudd's goal of having 12 per cent of school leavers fluent in one of these languages by 2020.

The Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, explains that one problem is "capacity restraints" - the lack of teachers fluent enough to teach the languages at high school. Efforts are being made to recruit native speakers from overseas, he says.

The problem, it seems to a growing number of people involved, is choice. Up until year 10, we are unabashed about giving children no choice about learning English, mathematics, and Australian history. But in many schools, languages are optional at all levels. Then from year 11, students have a smorgasbord of choice. Most go for the options likely to increase their score in university entrance exams. Unless it is a language spoken in their home, students increasingly shy away from languages.

At primary schools, the approach is even more dilettantish. Languages are selected according to which local part-time teacher is around, and kids rarely get more than an hour's exposure a week.

If we are serious about tackling our monolingualism, we surely need a more systematic approach, starting foreign languages in our 7500 primary schools, as happens in countries such as Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands.

If we are serious that Indonesia is the country we need to understand, can there be any doubt that its language is the one we should insist on our schools teaching?

As I've argued before, Indonesian is eminently suitable as the standard foreign language at primary schools: it uses the Roman alphabet, is spelled phonetically, has a straightforward grammar and can be used without much embarrassment at any level (unlike, say, Japanese or French). It contains linguistic pathways to other languages, notably Hindi/Urdu and Arabic. Children who learn one language are more ready to tackle another.

This is a strategic choice that even Kevin Rudd seems to be shying away from, despite all the fine words at this week's conference.

It's easy to understand why. Despite its recent democratisation and peace settlements in Aceh and Timor, Indonesia still carries a fairly negative image with the Australian public. There are noisy lobbies - from ethnic communities, teachers of European languages, and the cultural arms of European governments - arguing in favour of choice.

We have a small enough effort as it is, and the task is huge. We shouldn't spread that effort so thin.

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