

Bahasa push must not lose steam



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At the end of a recent visit to Indonesia, the tour guide took the opportunity to apologise for his English. "I wish to ask for your understanding and apology if my English was not good but I can say my English is better than your Bahasa," he declared.

The guide's apology came from the heart, no doubt, but in the shadow play world of the Javanese he came across as an Indonesian who was immensely proud of his Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language) and would have preferred his foreign visitors to know his language.

It is a sentiment replicated across the Indonesian archipelago of 240 million people. That is not to say that they harbour anti-English language feelings. Many people, especially children, are keen to learn English or a foreign language as a second language but at the same time would dearly love foreigners to speak their tongue.

Kevin Rudd's strategy to make Australia the most Asia-literate country in the West has gone down well in Indonesia and the rest of the region, from Malaysia and Singapore to the economic powerhouses of China and India.

They approve of his vision for the next generation of Australian businessmen and businesswomen, economists, accountants, lawyers, architects, artists, filmmakers and performers to develop language skills to open the region to them.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, during his recent visit to Australia, was profuse in his admiration for Australia's Bahasa skills. "I know of no other



Plaudits: President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, with Kevin Rudd in Canberra, admires Australia's Bahasa focus.

Western country where Bahasa Indonesia is widely taught in the school curriculum," he said. "I know of no other Western country with more Indonesianists in your governments, universities and think tanks, and no other Western country has more Indonesians studying in their universities and high schools.

"I extend my deepest gratitude to the professors, teachers, students and families across Australia who have been so kind and generous in welcoming tens of thousands of Indonesian students into your campuses and your homes. I have heard heart-warming stories from various Indonesians who studied and worked in this country, including from my son Ibas, who spent five years at Curtin University. So allow me to say on behalf of many Indonesian parents, 'Terima kasih, Australia' — 'Thank you, Australia'.

"The bottom line is that we still have a lot of work to do when it comes to people-to-people contact

and when it comes to appreciating the facts of each other's national life.

"That is why I keenly welcome the Asian language studies program initiated by the Australian Government."

Through its mission in Australia, Indonesia is supporting the program by providing Indonesian language teaching assistance in several Australian primary and high schools.

Dr Yudhoyono singled out Balai Bahasa, a Perth-based non-profit organisation, for spearheading free Bahasa courses with the support of the Indonesian Consulate-General in Perth. As the President said, Balai Bahasa's success has led to the launch of a language centre in Canberra, with more planned for other parts of Australia.

It would seem that Asian language studies, especially Indonesian, are taking off in leaps and bounds. But that simply is not the case. The country lags behind and is actually playing catch-up to the enthusiasm

of the 1960s when 40 per cent of Year 12 students studied a second language. Now only 15 per cent do, with a dismal one per cent taking up Indonesian.

The problems can be traced back to the Howard government's 2002 closure of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools program, which spawned a vicious cycle of adverse reactions.

Without funding, schools and universities cut back on Asian language courses, students were not learning Indonesian and universities were not producing enough Bahasa teachers and institutions were not offering classes because there weren't enough teachers.

The Rudd Government has revived the language program, with \$62.4 million funding over three years until next year, but is bogged down in a lot of rhetoric while trying to claw back some of the past gains that were lost over the past decade.

The gains over the past two years

have been modest, with a lot of restatement of principles and modest investment in teacher training. It will take some years to see the benefits and growth.

A positive move is the commissioning of David Hill, professor of South-East Asian Studies at Murdoch University, to conduct a \$350,000 two-year study under an Australian Learning and Teaching Council fellowship, to prepare a strategic plan for learning Bahasa Indonesia in universities.

With a growing strong demand for Indonesian language graduates (the Commonwealth and ANZ banks have about 7000 staff in Indonesia), there remains a lot more to be done to satisfy the business community's concerns that students are not coming up with the skills.

In Bahasa teaching, private schools now have an edge over State schools, which are hamstrung by a lack of funding, which in turn has failed to encourage student interest.

The WA Indonesian Language Teachers Association recognises this but it would be up to the State Government to commit more funding and devise a strategy to encourage Bahasa learning and retain the thousands of primary and lower secondary students who study the language but drop out in Years 11 and 12.

Schools could look at hiring language teachers from Indonesia to make up for the current shortage. HECS fees could be exempted for Bahasa study. Modifying the Indonesia travel advisory to remove negative perceptions would also give incentives to students to travel to Indonesia for in-country studies.

It is outdated and an incorrect assumption that the Indonesian language is not important in the job market. It is a valuable skill that would bring enormous opportunities and, as our tour guide implied, open doors and win friends in the region.