Terima kasih banyak

Like most Brit’s and indeed most of the world’s population I had no idea what this simple phrase meant before embarking on my trip of a lifetime to Indonesia. I was offered a unique experience to learn a language which I had never encountered before and which is not widely spoken around the world. I, a Westerner, speaking Indonesian was a rare commodity and my attempts at Indonesian was a touch the many locals I encountered highly appreciated.

Indonesia is a fascinating country; hugely diverse, home to both natural and cultural wonders and experiencing a tumultuous history. Comprising 17,508 islands which are scattered both sides of the equator; Indonesia is the world’s largest archipelagic state and the fourth most populous country. The language reflects this: Bahasa Indonesia is the official language and is used in administration, business and the media. Nonetheless it is the mother tongue of less than 10% of the population. For most it is their second language and they speak one of the more than 700 bahasa daerah (local languages). This ranks Indonesia second only to Papua New Guinea in linguistic diversity. Despite this the Indonesian language represents the uniting force for the hundreds of ethnic groups scattered over the many islands.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/34/Indonesia_2002_CIA_map.png
Indonesian was first developed from Old Malay, an old Austronesian language. There have been many influences on the language, the most notable being the Dutch and British colonists of the 16th century. At the start of the 20th century the Persio-Arabic script was replaced by the Latin alphabet under European influence.

My grapples with the Indonesian language took place in Labundo-Bundo on Buton island in South-East Sulawesi, a village it took four days, three planes, two boats and a minibus to reach. Tourists are not allowed on the island, so I was privileged enough to be one of the only Westerners or indeed one of the only people on the Island not born there. Consequently I was surrounded by locals whose interaction with foreigners was extremely limited and who spoke virtually no English. I was to stay on this island for six weeks staying with a local family. My primary purpose on the island was to complete my dissertation research on the behaviour of the Buton macaque, an endemic and threatened species. But first I completed a language and cultural course to introduce me to the country and the rudiments of the language. This proved vitally important later on in conversing with my local family and the local guides who were helping me to find the macaques.

The course consisted of several language sessions in which we learnt the language and vocabulary and practiced our pronunciation. We were in a fairly small group of about 8-10. Indonesian is generally considered an easy language to learn with its phonetic spelling, simple pronunciation (something I am willing to dispute) and the fact that verbs don’t change for tense (which I was entirely grateful for after my struggles with French and Spanish verbs).
The major component of the course was going out around the village and the island and putting into practice what we had learnt in the classroom. The highlights included visiting a market where our newly found language skills were put into practice bartering and making purchases. We were really tested since none of the locals spoke English so there was no opportunity to cheat! A particularly special moment was visiting the local school where we joined a class of ten year olds. We introduced ourselves in Indonesian and asked a few questions to the children before being quizzed by the children; a challenging experience, trying to understand the questions and formulate a reply in Indonesian. In return we then taught them some English. The experience did not stop here though – the children remembered me, so for weeks after I would stop and have a quick chat in Indonesian as I passed them in the village. The pinnacle was a visit to a traditional bajo village; a village on stilts in the sea which we visited in a dugout canoe. Following protocol we first visited the house of the kepala desa (head villager). We proceeded to introduce ourselves followed by a question and answer session to find out more about their highly unusual culture.

The course introduced me to the basics of the language; nonetheless this was only the beginning of my language experience. After completing my language course I was in Indonesia for a further eight weeks and during this time I improved greatly upon the skills already learnt.

Whilst doing my dissertation research I learnt some monkey specific language which was highly useful when questioning the local guides to clarify difficulties over identifying the macaques and their behaviour. Furthermore in spare moments between behavioural scans and at times when the macaques were nowhere to be found there was ample time to practice conversational skills.
and the guides were great unofficial teachers to develop my vocabulary. My language training also enabled me to chat to and thank my host family who spoke no English.

Following my sojourn in the jungle I traveled to Bali where I spent time traveling around. In contrast to Buton, in Bali nearly everyone spoke English and there were many tourists. For this reason virtually none of the visitors make an effort to speak Indonesian since they would be highly unlikely to have encountered the language before and they have little impetus to try since many of the locals speak English. I am happy to say I was different. I can now fully appreciate how speaking or at least attempting to speak the language can enhance your trip and help you to see a whole new dimension of a place. Furthermore I could see how much the locals appreciated my attempts with their exclamations of “wow, you can speak Indonesian” or sometimes their switch to rapid Indonesian which did generally leave me a little confused! Nonetheless, they were all really enthusiastic in their encouragement of me trying to practice my Indonesian. I made many friends amongst the locals and learnt so much about the local culture. Additionally I obtained many bargains when shopping no doubt aided by the unusual skill of being able to barter in Indoneisan, something which set me apart from other tourists. I am still in touch with some of the locals I met on my travels and we both benefit by the language practice and cultural exchange.
I have had the trip of a lifetime, made partly possible from a generous bursary from the Pressland Fund. The opportunity to attend a language course put me in great stead to further develop my skills, chatting with locals, making many friends and learning about a whole new culture. I won’t forget the proud moment when I was able to hold a conversation with a local, an achievement considering a few weeks earlier I had never uttered a word of Indonesian. Returning to England I am also finding words of Indonesian slipping out and I’m eager to return to practice my newfound language skills.

And in case you were wondering, the simple phrase at the start is ‘Thank you very much’.