



Asia Education Foundation

**Asia Literacy
Ambassadors**
Partnering Businesses & Schools

Asia literacy in an Asian context

Cocos (K) Islands District High School, WA and Nathan Masters

The remote Cocos (Keeling) Islands, a tiny Australian territory comprising of 27 islands serviced only by two planes a week and a ship every six to eight weeks, are approximately 3000kms NW of Perth. Cocos (K) Islands District High School has staff working across two campuses and services the educational needs of the Cocos (K) Islands community. The community of 550 people consists of settlements on two islands. West Island residents (approx 100) are predominantly expatriates and the school campus there operates a primary wing, as well as the secondary school (7-10). All Y11/12 students go to the mainland. On Home Island, 8kms across the lagoon, the school operates a primary campus (K-6) which caters for the Cocos Malay primary age students. All teachers live on WI and those who teach on HI travel daily across the lagoon.

One of the factors that makes for a successful Asia Literacy Ambassadors project has been found to be the proximity of the ambassador to the school. In the case of Cocos (K) Islands District High School, however, this wasn't going to be an option. Instead, the strength of the connection comes from the close relationship of the school's Arts and Indonesian teacher, Trish Waters, and the Ambassador, Nathan Masters, who works in the South-East Asia Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in Canberra.

A bridge to the wider world

Trish explained, "I saw the information about the Ambassadors project in the Asia Education Foundation newsletter. I'm always looking out for things to be a bridge between our isolated culture and mainland Australia and this seemed to be a great opportunity. Nathan was an easy choice for Ambassador - he has built his career on the basis of his Asia literacy, we work together well, and he was willing to come a long way to work with my students."

Asia Literacy: knowledge, skills and understandings about the diverse countries of Asia
ambassador.asiaeducation.edu.au



Nathan had his first trip to Indonesia when he was three. He always had a small interest in Asia, but it was only when he was in the military, as a combat engineer, that the opportunity came for him to study Indonesian. That was when he showed his affinity for learning languages.

Nathan continues, “I was trained as a linguist for the Australian Army in 2006 and 2007, first studying Indonesian for a year followed by Tetum (East Timorese) for three months. Prior to this, I had no experience of studying Asian languages and no real interest in Indonesia. Things certainly changed after I began studying. I also had the opportunity to travel to Indonesia on a number of occasions for further study and work.

“I left the military after around eight years’ service and I was offered a position in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. My experience with Indonesian language and issues has led to me being responsible for dealing with many matters regarding the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, which includes liaising with local government officials. This communication is assisted by my language proficiency, as people feel much more comfortable communicating in their native language.”

Unlike most of the other schools in the Asia Literacy Ambassadors project, where English is the first language, for most of the Cocos (K) District High School students, English is a second language.

Trish explained, “The language of the islands is a fusion of trading Malay brought here from different regions of the Indonesian /Malay archipelagos 200 years ago. Some parents, who studied on the mainland and then returned to the islands, are fluent in English and their children speak it more at home but most families speak ‘Cocos Malay’. As a language teacher, my job is to get parents to see the benefit of speaking a modern Asian language and Indonesian is the closest to their own language for reading and writing.”

Nathan visited the islands for a week and began his visit on Act of Self-Determination Day, an annual celebration, which takes place on 6 April. He was able to get to know people, meet the elders, watch the traditional boat races and generally get the feel of the place. After the feast, he was introduced to the community and was able to say a few words of introduction.

He spent the next three days with students, talking about Asian languages and the benefit of being Asia literate in a modern context. He used the “2020 Schools: Engage with Asia” DVD with the older students and played games with the younger ones. Trish said, “Nathan told the children about how government officials have to do research before international summits. He asked each child to represent a country and gave them counters representing gold, jewels, rice and other trade commodities. They had to figure out what counters were worth and how to communicate. Anarchy reigned during ensuing trading sessions before rules of trade were created and harmony of sorts returned to negotiation, with all trade partners looking out for their own best interests.”



As Asian as Australian

“Nathan’s visit really clarified why you need to have people who can speak other languages if you want to succeed in the modern world.”

The reactions from students were very positive. Asked why they thought Asia skills were important, responses included, “They are our neighbours, we should work together and not create conflict.” Commenting on key learnings, “In 2020, half the world’s population will come from Asia and most Australians don’t know about Asia.”

Although the Cocos (K) Islands are as Asian as they are Australian, the Asia Literacy Ambassadors project was able to make a significant contribution to students’ understanding of the need for language and cultural proficiency.