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# English, multilingualism and globalisation in Indonesia

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A love triangle: Why Indonesia should move towards multilingual education

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## Introduction

Indonesia is the second most linguistically diverse nation in the world. It has established its reputation as one of the largest markets of English language education. This paper examines the context of multilingualism in Indonesia in relation to the increasingly dominant role of English from my viewpoint as a researcher. I begin the paper by outlining how Indonesia is currently adapting to the role of English as a global language. I then discuss the position of English within the linguistic ecology of the country, highlighting how its promotion in the educational system adversely affects the maintenance of the indigenous and heritage languages. Finally, I point to the need for deliberate action in education that promotes multilingualism. I argue for a redirection in the Indonesian educational system towards multilingual education in order to ensure the preservation of the indigenous and heritage languages while adopting English as a *Lingua Franca*.

## English as a global language and Indonesia

It is not an exaggeration to say that for the first time in the history of humankind, a language could achieve truly global dimensions, becoming the driving force for globalisation with influences permeating the economic, political, cultural, ideological and religious spheres. The language is English, a language that is now widely adopted as a *lingua franca* for international communication involving people from various linguistic, ethnic, national, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, 2015).

The global status is also reflected at a continent-regional level such as in the ASEAN (Association of

South East Asian Nations) Economic Community, as English has recently been officialised as its working language (Stroupe & Kimura, 2015). English has been voluntarily adopted by ASEAN members (Brunei Darussalam, The Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar) to communicate with one another. This voluntary adoption of English among the ten ASEAN member states means that English plays an official role in cultural contexts beyond its traditional Anglo-American cultural sphere (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

Indonesia, as a founding member of ASEAN, has a key role to play. The country has massive human resources. It has a population reaching 264 million in 2017, making it ASEAN's most populous country, and the fourth most populous in the world. Having such an enormous population means Indonesia's reputation as one of the largest markets of English language education has increased considerably (Zein, 2017).

There have been significant political movements in the past eight years, seeing Soesilo Bambang



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Yudhoyono maintaining the status quo in 2009 and Joko Widodo taking over the national leadership in 2014. Furthermore, Indonesia has become the largest economy in the rapidly growing ASEAN region and a member of the G20, with its young and dynamic workforce driving strong economic growth. While the need to be able to compete globally using English is undeniable, there is also an urgent need for Indonesians to be able to communicate successfully in the regional context, that is, with their ASEAN counterparts. This context brings a heightened emphasis on the use of English to communicate, work and trade with ASEAN members such as Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand and others (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2012a, 2012b).

The enthusiasm of the public for the use of English is reflected in nearly all domains of life (Hamied, 2013), including primary (Zein, 2017) and secondary education (Sukyadi, 2015). English is already a compulsory subject in the secondary curriculum and, although it is not compulsory in primary schools, nearly all primary schools offer English instruction, not to mention the proliferation of private English courses (Lamb & Coleman, 2008; Zein, 2013). The labour market places high value on English proficiency, as seen in the English language job advertisements. Many employers require applicants to demonstrate a strong command of English proficiency, and those graduating from a university overseas are offered much higher salaries than local graduates. Meanwhile, airlines unanimously use English along with Indonesian when giving announcements to passengers. Not only do national radio and television stations selectively broadcast in English, many local television companies also follow suit and fill their programme schedule with Hollywood movies and English songs. New products, from soaps to instant noodles, from clothes to novels targeted at young adults, are labelled and promoted in English (Lamb & Coleman, 2008; Hamied, 2013).

### **English within Indonesian's linguistic ecology**

The public enthusiasm notwithstanding, English language education in Indonesia is an intricate phenomenon. Governmental ambivalence has contributed to the indifferent political stance of government officials with regard to their attitudes towards English. In the past, there was strong governmental support for English, but evidence from

recent years is contradictory. Opponents of global English argue for a more traditional approach to education, advocating for local cultural and religious values to develop character building while neglecting the apparent need for English mastery (Zein, 2017). This attitude is in stark contrast to other ASEAN countries such as Vietnam with their 2020 National Foreign Language Plan (Phuong & Nhu, 2015) and Cambodia, which has included English in their system from primary, secondary and tertiary education and will integrate English into the pre-school curriculum in 2018 (MoEYS, 2016).

In order to thoroughly examine English language education in Indonesia, it is important to understand the country's linguistic ecology (Hamied, 2012). In Indonesia, English is in a unique position. It is situated within the second largest linguistic ecology in the world; only Papua New Guinea encompasses a greater number of indigenous languages. A total of 707 are alive within Indonesian's linguistic ecology, but 272 of them are endangered and 76 are dying (Ethnologue, 2017). More than half (52.53%) of the country's 264 million population in 2017 are speakers of major indigenous languages such as Javanese, Sundanese, Batak, Minangkabau and Balinese. The largest linguistic community consists of speakers of Javanese as the first language, which accounts for approximately 34.70% of the population (Montolalu & Suryadinata, 2007). There are more than 400 ethnic groups in Indonesia, spreading across the archipelago from Sabang in West Sumatra to Merauke in Papua. A few of these ethnic groups may share the same language, but each has a unique culture.

Although Javanese is the language of the ethnic majority in Indonesia, the language has not been adopted as the national language. One reason is precisely because it is the language of the ethnic majority, one whose powerful position might threaten other ethnic groups. During the national independence movement, the founding fathers of the country aspired for a more 'democratic' language that is not spoken by an ethnic majority (Alisjahbana, 1976). Secondly, Javanese has an inherent structural complexity and a linguistic hierarchy that would make it difficult for other ethnic groups who do not share the same social concepts to learn it (Bertrand, 2003).

An old form of Malay called Kwe'nlon was considered a suitable choice for various reasons. The language was spoken only by around 2% of the population, which made it less of a threat to other ethnicities. Furthermore, the fact that Malay does

not have a social hierarchy and is easier to learn than Javanese or other major languages in Nusantara was also an important factor (Ostler, 2005). For several centuries, Malay had also been spoken as a lingua franca by traders around the Malaccan peninsula, making it a popular choice among people of different backgrounds. Moreover, the language had political significance due to support from independence movement groups. For example, Sarekat Islam had dubbed it as ‘the language of unity against the Dutch’ (Bertrand, 2003: 273). These reasons sufficed to convince the participants of the 1928 Second Congress of Indonesian Youth to unanimously choose Malay as the national language. It was then renamed *Bahasa Indonesia*, or ‘Indonesian language’.

The speakers of Indonesian have increased significantly ever since its conception. Montolalu and Suryadinata (2007) reported that those speaking Indonesian as a first language constituted 11.93% of the population in 1980, 17.11% in 1990 and 34.00% in 2000. In recent years, the total number of speakers of Indonesian as a first language has reached 23 million people, and another 140 million people, which is or more than half of the total population, speak it as a second language (Ethnologue, 2017). Indonesian has been so superior in the various settings of the country’s political, economic and social spheres that it realises an unparalleled linguistic achievement (Dardjowidjojo, 1998; Hamied, 2013). Dardjowidjojo (1998: 36) even claimed that Indonesian ‘has achieved the status of a national language in its true sense’.

Such a linguistic hegemony has come at a price. On the one hand, the language has increased national pride in the way in which it has become a symbol of nationhood. The language also serves as the official language for communication at the national level, as well as the medium of instruction in educational institutions (Anas, 1993; Dardjowidjojo, 1998). On the other hand, Indonesian’s linguistic supremacy means that many learners might receive instruction in their mother tongue – usually a local language – during primary education, only to discontinue it in secondary school. The supremacy of Indonesian has also created linguistic devaluation in that many indigenous and heritage languages such as Arabic and Chinese are given no place in schooling. Only five languages are included in the curricula: Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Batak, and Buginese. Textbooks are available only in the first three of these five languages. This is despite the government’s proclaimed intent to maintain the local values, cultures and linguistic treasures of all ethnic groups

(Bertrand, 2003). This additive perspective of multilingualism as regards the Indonesian language reached its lowest point during the New Order Era, when a ban was imposed regarding public use of Chinese. Fortunately, the restriction has now been lifted and Indonesians of Chinese ethnicity are free to publish and broadcast in the language of their heritage (Lamb & Coleman, 2008).

An additive perspective to multilingualism within the Indonesian context is also applied to English. The significance of English at the global level in terms of world politics, the economy and popular culture means the language has increasing prestige in Indonesian society. This is reflected in the proliferation of primary schools offering English instruction (Zein, 2013). Proponents of primary school English instruction argue that it is relevant to local aspiration to give children a competitive edge to compete in a globalised world (Lestari, 2003; Zein, 2013). However, the promotion of English in primary schools has actually worsened multilingualism. Many primary schools have decided to drop indigenous languages from their timetable and replace them with English (Hadisantosa, 2010). In addition, heritage languages have no place in the primary curriculum. Children in DKI Jakarta, for example, are not given tuition in the Chinese language, even though there are areas within the capital where people of Chinese heritage are the majority. The recognition of English for the transformation of the society has also led to autonomous acts of individuals joining exclusive cosmopolitan English clubs. This is aggravated by corporations capitalising on the huge demand for English instruction by demanding exorbitant fees from those joining private courses. Rather than serving the nation, English has instead, and ironically, widened the currently existing socio-economic disparities within the society (Lamb & Coleman, 2008).

It is apparent that the Indonesian multilingual context has been denied space within the country’s educational system. Indigenous and heritage languages struggle to co-exist with Indonesian and English, making them a perfect sample case of the adoption of the subtractive perspective of multilingualism. Indonesian and English, on the other hand, enjoy the spatial linguistic privileges that heritage and indigenous languages fail to occupy. Their existence demonstrates the implementation of the additive perspective of multilingualism in the country. Despite the considerable success of Indonesian that has been claimed as ‘a linguistic miracle’ (Alisjahbana, 1976) and the increased supremacy of English, the relatively

short history of language planning and policy in Indonesia has not proved conducive to the maintenance of diversity. This provides evidence in support of Lo Bianco's (2010: 47) contention that 'historical analysis of state language planning activity would show that the bulk of this action has been against rather than in favour of multilingualism'.

This is the point where Indonesia's multilingualism creates educational dilemmas (Hamied, 2012). Educational policymakers are challenged with questions such as, should Indonesian be taught from the earliest stage of education in all schools? Or should it be postponed until students are bilingual? Should English be taught at primary level, or should it be postponed until they are proficient in Indonesian? And what about its impact on the teaching of indigenous and heritage languages?

It appears that there is a 'love triangle' situation. Indonesia has to reconcile the additive perspective of multilingualism given to Indonesian and English on the one hand with the subtractive perspective of multilingualism attached to indigenous and heritage languages on the other. From the perspective of the linguistic human rights (LHR) paradigm as a source of language planning and policy, the loss of languages due to the social and educational imposition of dominant national and world languages such as English threatens linguistic diversity (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2017). This threat, nonetheless, can possibly be averted through deliberate action in education that promotes multilingualism.

## Towards multilingual education

A pressing issue confronting Indonesia is the place of English in the education curriculum. The issue of whether or not English should be placed in the primary curriculum has been ongoing for years (see Zein, 2017), and now it is even more complicated because of the considerations relating to indigenous and heritage languages. It has been suggested that ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, should delay primary English language education to provide space for indigenous languages (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2012b).

Nevertheless, in the context of multilingual countries in Asia, Tsui (2004: 1) asserted that the countries 'have the common goals of nation building, full integration with the global economy and full participation in international politics'. Most Asian countries are multilingual and multi-ethnic; and within these multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual countries, there has been a shift towards

English-knowing bilingualism as the core of the multilingual societies. The bi-literate, trilingual Hong Kong, a special administrative government of China (Gao, 2011), and English-dominant Singapore that has ethnic languages such as Hokkien and Tamil as well as its own variety of English, Singlish (Chua, 2011), are two notable examples. With English becoming an Asian language, experiencing an indigenisation process and being used for intercultural communication purposes (Baldauf et al., 2011), its place is even more important in multilingual Indonesia.

Thus, the need for English as a language of global importance that opens the door to upward social and economic mobility should not deny the promotion of the national language as a means of national identity and the maintenance of the indigenous and heritage languages and cultures. This means that the multilingual context of Indonesia necessitates a move to a perspective on multilingualism that places equal importance on the preservation of heritage and indigenous languages and cultures. Hamied (2012: 66) stated that, '[i]n the Indonesian context, language varieties could be seen as a mosaic ornamented by hundreds of ethnic languages. If one of the ornaments were taken out, the mosaic would not remain as beautiful'. This is a balancing act of language-in-education policy-making in which Indonesia takes into account the endogenous factors relating to the local interests as well as the exogenous global factors where English is crucial (Tsui, 2004).

Mutual understanding between members of Indonesia's multilingual society demands awareness of linguistic and cultural differences, and so the teaching of cultures becomes inseparable from English language teaching. Within this line of reasoning, the development of a multilingual and multicultural perspective in the education of citizens is beneficial because it is related to the development of social harmony (Agnihotri, 2014). Therefore, a unified curriculum that caters for English language education within the multilingual and multicultural context of Indonesia is of vital importance (Hamied, 2012).

Such a unified curriculum would focus on the development of a complementary relationship between English and other languages. For this to happen, it requires a move away from the monolingual view of language teaching that treats languages as separate entities to a pedagogy that allows fluid, mobile and multiple discursive resources in multilingual classrooms (Zein, *in press*). This requires Indonesian teachers of English to move away from the monolingual

pedagogy, where use of the first language (L1) should be entirely avoided, to a translanguaging pedagogy where L1s are valued and deliberately utilised (Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2014).

This is the place where the use of translanguaging occurs, as Indonesian local teachers cultivate English, Indonesian and/or indigenous or heritage languages in a scaffolded discourse. In this respect, translanguaging involves more than mechanical processes of cultivation and the production of multilingual resources where teachers can use English along with other languages, be it Indonesian or an indigenous or heritage language. It is a metadiscursive practice that allows teachers to exercise their multilingual repertoire through scaffolding in order to promote learning. During the process, there is what Jenkins (2015) called 'repertoire in flux', which includes particular items of English being used as a first language and other languages and which may receive either temporary or long-term influence on one another during the course of interaction by the multilingual interlocutors. In doing so, teachers encourage learners towards metadiscursive translanguaging practices to assemble the elements of their linguistic repertoire before being able to produce the standardised forms of the L2 (García, 2014) (see Zein, *in press*, for elaboration in the Indonesian classroom).

Second, the unified curriculum requires a multicultural approach to education. As a consequence, there is a need to produce and translate local and regional literatures. Hamied (2012) recommended the use of translations of Indonesian literature into English, so that learners could learn about their own cultures comprising aesthetic, religious and socio-political values. For example, Makassar children could learn Madurese and Sumbawan cultural content through texts in English. They could then explain the cultural content to one another. In this respect, the aim of the curriculum is more than mere provision of informational access but acceleration of intercultural competence (Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001). Thus, learning English in multilingual Indonesian classrooms would enable the cultivation of English alongside Indonesian and indigenous or heritage languages, through local culture-embedded materials.

The next stage of this practice is when the curriculum emphasises ASEAN or Asian cultures rather than Anglo-American cultures. Learners need to focus on the cultures of ASEAN member states rather than on cultures that traditionally impose British or American English (Kirkpatrick, 2012a, 2012b, 2016). Kirkpatrick (2012a) argues that, in order for learners to be able to successfully

communicate in the regional context, they need to know the cultures and literatures of the region. Thus, the content of the English curriculum within the ASEAN region 'needs to include topics of regional and local cultures that are relevant for lingua franca users in these contexts; it is a cross-cultural course based on ASEAN' and 'the curriculum must therefore be designed to allow students to be able to engage critically in discussions about their own cultures and cultural values and interests in English' (Kirkpatrick, 2012a: 40). This means, for example, Indonesian learners learning English to communicate with Filipinos and Vietnamese in ASEAN settings will need provision of topics and materials that describe and discuss cultural, aesthetic, religious and socio-political values that are important for Filipinos and Vietnamese.

In conclusion, the current practice of language education in Indonesia is unsustainable for multilingualism. The Indonesian government needs to move away from the subtractive perspective of multilingualism to a new perspective that adopts multilingual education. This requires the formulation of a multilingual curriculum that caters for the teaching of indigenous and heritage languages alongside Indonesian and English. The movement also necessitates a paradigm shift in terms of pedagogy where translanguaging is used by teachers to exercise their multilingual repertoire through scaffolded instruction. Furthermore, there is a need for the production of locally embedded materials, including those of the local cultures as well as the ASEAN and Asian cultures, in order to appropriately respond to the increasing role of English as a Lingua Franca.

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