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**Bahasa Indonesia, Ethnic Languages and English:
Perceptions on Indonesian Language Policy and
Planning**

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Abstract

Language policy and planning in Indonesia have been geared toward strengthening the national language Bahasa Indonesia and the preserving of hundreds of ethnic languages to strengthen its citizens' linguistic identity in the mid of the pervasive English influences especially to the young generations. The study examines perceptions regarding the competitive nature of Bahasa Indonesia, ethnic languages, and English in contemporary multilingual Indonesia. Utilizing text analysis from two social media Facebook and Whatsapp users who were highly experienced and qualified language teachers and lecturers, the study revealed that the posts demonstrated discussions over language policy issues regarding Bahasa Indonesia and the preservation of ethnic language as well as the concerns over the need for greater access and exposure of English that had been limited due to recent government policies. The users seemed highly cognizant of the importance of strengthening and preserving the national and ethnic languages, but were disappointed by the lack of consistency in the implementation of these. The users were also captivated by the purchasing power English has to offer for their students. The users perceived that the government's decision to reduce English instructional hours in the curriculum were highly politically charged and counterproductive to the nation's advancement.

Keywords: Bahasa Indonesia, English, Ethnic languages, language ideology, language policy and planning

Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelago nation with considerably varied ethno-linguistic population whose people speak around 700 ethnic languages (Lewis 2009; Paauw 2009 in Widodo 2016; Simpson 2007). The largest ethnic group is Javanese, which counts for over 103 million people and speakers of the language (Minahan 2012), followed by Sundanese which is used by 40 million speakers (Montolalu and Leo 2007). Most Indonesians are multilinguals, as one region could have people who speak different languages as a result of high mobility within the nation. The national language, Bahasa Indonesia, is spoken by comparable proportions of a population of more than 210 million. Bahasa Indonesia is spoken all throughout the archipelago as it was chosen as the basis for forging national unity (Goebel 2010; Seddon 2003).

In the field of language preservation, the Indonesian government is often referred to as one of its success stories in brightening up the nation through the national language, while preserving the ethnic languages and at the same time maintaining the harmony of the different

groups. Indonesia, as dictated by its state constitution, demonstrates the willingness to maintain the ethnic languages and to make efforts to let them flourish in society. The Fourth Revision of the Constitution in 2002 simplified this: “[The State] respects and protects the local languages as national cultural assets” (Coleman 2016). The local languages are to be seen as useful resources for preserving the culture and tradition for the nation rather than as forces creating a threat to national identity (Goebel 2018; Simpson 2007). In contemporary Indonesia, the conflicting ideologies regarding the values of Bahasa Indonesia, ethnic languages, and English, have grown stronger. However, not much has been explored on how these languages are perceived and whether language planning and policies have bearings in people’s use of languages.

Language Policy and Planning in Indonesia

Generally speaking, language policy provides structure and the context for the subsequent implementation of planning regarding the status and functions of languages in a particular state (Baldauf 2005). They embrace “the explicit, written, overt, de jure, official and ‘top-down’ decision-making about language, but also the implicit, unwritten, covert, de facto, grass-roots and unofficial ideas and assumptions” about language in a particular context of situation and culture (Schiffman 2006, 11). At the macro level, this concerns the decisions regarding the language of the curriculum and instruction, the media, and official state affairs as well as the preservation of the ethnic and minority languages. At the more micro level, they deal with what language the administrators, teachers, students, and general public use in particular context. The complex nature of language use in society and policy that infuses it often leads to the development of new policy (Baldauf 2005). Language policies in countries such as Indonesia have often been dictated by economic, political and social factors (Liddicoat and Baldauf 2008).

As a developing post-colonial country, Indonesia introduces English as a foreign language to its people to embrace and participate in, in the globalization. English was first taught in the formal education system in the 1975 national curriculum for secondary education (Kasihani 2000 in Emilia 2005). In its political position, the language was a foreign language that intersected with the state’s ideology to promote itself as the national language Bahasa Indonesia, and to preserve the hundreds of ethnic and local languages, in its attempt to guard the Indonesian characters and to fence them from the pervasive global cultures (Alwasilah 2001). As English is recognized as the global and international language (Crystal 2003; McKay 2010), the attitudes of the Indonesian people have shifted. The animus to study English at elementary school level and for families to introduce English to their children at a young age seemed to worry the government that feared that English would corrode the Indonesian values and culture (Alwasilah 2001; Lauder 2008). Observing the trends, the government in 2013 proposed that English should only be introduced in junior high school, after students have fully mastered their Bahasa Indonesia. In 2013, the Ministry of Education announced that English should not be taught in elementary schools because it was feared that English would interfere with the learning of Bahasa Indonesia. Not long after, the Ministry of Education also announced that English will no longer be a subject taught in elementary schools in 2014 (The Jakarta Post 2012). The rationale for the omission of English in the school curriculum is to allow Indonesian students ample time to master the Indonesian language first before embarking on the study of foreign languages.

Research Method

This study employs qualitative textual methods and discourse analysis, to inform a deeper and focused scrutiny of discourses practices within a specific context. The texts analysed in this study were taken from two social media platforms: Facebook and Whatsapp. These sources were selected as rendering their flexible features, including a relatively unlimited space for expressing the users' ideas, and the multimodality of sharing other artifacts such as images and videos. The users of these social media platforms were purposefully selected for their roles in the language education and linguistics fields. These are experienced teachers and lecturers with high qualifications. The texts selected were those posted in social media during the period of November 2018 – Mid January 2019, where users were analyzed for their perceptions toward language policy and planning in Indonesia. The data were translated but the features of the original texts were maintained so as to show the nature of Online communication through social media.

Findings and Discussion

In a complex multilingual Indonesia, language policy and planning could offer a challenging task to balance the state's control to promote and strengthen Bahasa Indonesia as the national language and lingua franca while preserving the local languages and while accommodating the aspiration of the people to learn and acquire English as an international language.

In the preservation of ethnic languages, through the social media users as linguists and language educators in Whatsapp threads, the data indicated that the ethnic languages face pressure from more socioculturally and economically dominant languages, which in many cases becomes the national language, Bahasa Indonesia, as shown in the thread of posts on Whatsapp:

Are you proud of being Sundanese?

No 🙅🙅🙅

Sundanese has lost a lot of words such as reueus, caah, sanga, getih

Sundanese youth these days only know pride, flood, rice, blood

This is Indonesianisation of Sundanese. Slowly but surely, Sundanese vocabulary will be replaced with Indonesian'

In these threads, the users' concerns over the phenomenon of linguistic shifts of one of the major ethnic languages, Sundanese, which is the third largest populous ethnic language (Anderson 1993; Muller-Gotama 2001) becomes apparent. The posts suggest that the Sundanese younger generation has begun to lose the ability to speak their ethnic language. This phenomenon has also been widely observed in other ethnic languages. Musgrave (2014) noted that the pressure on the ethnic languages by the national language was done to create more uniformity, resulting in threats to the viability of some of the ethnic languages, especially those in the Eastern part of Indonesia where the number of speakers is smaller. It is also noted that like other aspects of society, welfare and education, the Eastern part of Indonesia has less resources to maintain its ethnic languages (Musgrave 2014).

The data from Whatsapp also showed some issues regarding the prescriptive nature of the Indonesian government's policies in promoting standardized Bahasa Indonesia. Three are

presented here:

The mass media do not promote exemplary use of the standard Bahasa Indonesia. Sinetron has brought negative impacts but the gvt does nothing about it.

Lack of serious attempts to promote standard Indonesian by The Language Development Center. They should regulate billboards, posters, restaurant menus, commercials...

There is resistance toward standardized Bahasa Indonesia, too. People despise being corrected, right?

In the above Whatsapp posts, the writers expressed their concerns over the inconsistencies between the restrictive policies and regulations on, and the control of, the “incorrect” use of Bahasa Indonesia in media and public spaces. Granted, Bahasa Indonesia practically only functions in limited spaces such as the medium of instruction in schools and government-related official affairs (Sneddon 2003). In this regard, Indonesia is essentially diglossic due to the stark differences between the formal and informal usage (Errington 2000 in Sneddon 2003).

Regarding the position and use of English in Indonesia, scholars have pointed out that the policies regarding English are problematic. There is a strong tensions in the restriction of English by the government and the aspirations of the people, particularly the urban middle class, to gain more access to English. A Facebook post made by one of the nationally renowned mentor teachers showed her dismay in the lack of English learning hours in secondary schools, resulting in the low proficiency of the students and posing challenges for the teachers and students to attain a sufficient space for teaching and learning activities. She posted the image of the ASEAN logo with children from ASEAN countries holding their country flags along with the motto: “One Vision, One Identity, One Community.” In this context, she wrote:

This is the official motto of ASEAN. It was decided that its official working language is English. So, if we have only 90 minutes of English per week in high schools, and there is no English taught in ES, will our students be able to participate in their era?

Under the comment section of this post, there listed 48 comments that expressed disappointments and frustration on the limited English instructional hours. Two of them read:

Two instructional hours per week but (the students) are demanded to be fluent (cas cis cus) in English and get high scores in the exam...

I’m often confused how to teach (English)... only 2 instructional hours... I would just start teaching and there’s the bell... haddehh...La piye iki...

In the first comment, the Facebook user complained that it was extremely challenging to teach students in such short periods while the demand is high in the tests as well as the target proficiency of the learners. The expression *cas cis cus* is commonly understood by most Indonesians to mean someone who is highly proficient in English, and the speech of whom other Indonesians find difficult to follow.

The second comment lamented on the lack of time in teaching English, and that teaching periods went so quickly that the bell was felt before the lesson was finished. The insertion of a

mixture of slang and Javanese expressions haddehh...La piye iki... suggests a frustration in not knowing what to do in such situation.

In the last couple of decades, where globalization has increasingly penetrated the lives of most Indonesians, the demand for more access to learn English has dramatically increased, indicated by the introduction of English in elementary schools. In addition, English has become one of the requirements of securing jobs and admission to tertiary education. However, the elevated demand for English has been perceived by the state as a threat to Indonesian national identity and cultures. As observed by Alwasilah (1997), the state would see the importance of English for global participation but not to let English spread and pervade too deeply without the state's control. The Ministry of Education announcement in 2013 regarding the omission of English in elementary schools suggested the suspicious tendencies held by the government to control exposure to English for younger Indonesians,. Further, the Ministry of Education reduced the English teaching hours to only two instructional hours per week. With this limited instructional time, it is difficult to expect maximum learning outcomes. Students may gain good grades but these do not guarantee functional English ability (Hamied 2012; Renandya 2004). However, recently, societies have responded more aggressively. More secondary schools and tertiary education have taken initiatives to broaden opportunities for English use through enrichment programs or through using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) (Ibrahim 2004; Melati and Sandy 2015).

Conclusions

Multicultural and multilingual Indonesia affords numerous opportunities to its citizens, but the same time poses challenges to going forward. The nation, with rich social, cultural, and linguistic heritage, should do more to deal with the challenge to maintain its linguistic and cultural identity. However, Indonesia like many developing countries, is torn between a desire to embrace English to increase proficiency and to gain a more competitive edge in the era of globalization, but fears that a pervasive English may harm the country through its imposition on national and local languages (Kirkpatrick and Bui 2016). Alwasilah (2001) rightly observed that Indonesians are witnessing that Indonesian, English and ethnic languages are competing. The Indonesian government should take strategic moves in its language policy and planning in envisioning a prosperous Indonesia, so as to effectively position programs that preserve ethnic languages as national heritage, to strengthen Bahasa Indonesia as the glue with which to keep Indonesia unified in harmony, but also to embrace and increase access to English for the vast majority of Indonesians to improve their English proficiency, to ensure greater regional and global engagement.

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