

# Language policy, identity, and bilingual education in Indonesia: a historical overview

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## Abstract

This article discusses the historical and political development of language policy, identity, and bilingual education in Indonesia. The language policy in Indonesia begins before the independence where the negotiation between Indonesian and Dutch used as a medium of instruction. During this period, Indonesian is declared as the national language and used widely in public and private schools. This momentum grows continually following the independence, despite the Dutch's effort to regain control in Indonesia. Post-independence is marked by the recognition of English as the first foreign language and is taught in schools. The promotion of vernaculars languages follows the development of language policy. This article contributes to the extension of understanding and the debates about the development of Indonesian language policy, identities, and bilingual education significantly.

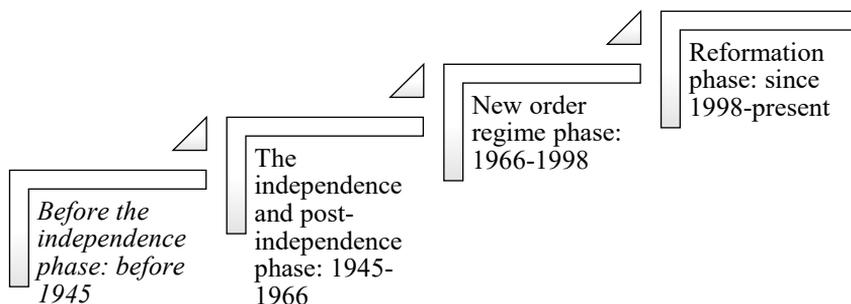
**Key words:** Indonesia, language policy, identity, bilingualism, bilingual education

## Introduction

This article depicts the debates on language policy, bilingualism and bilingual education in Indonesia. It commences with a description of historical and political perspectives of bilingual education policy and identity in the Indonesian context. Some authors have described historical aspects of Indonesian language policy (Alisjahbana, 1974a; Dardjowidjojo, 1998; Lo Bianco, 2012; Lowenberg, 1992), and language and curriculum change (Jazadi, 2003; Lie, 2009). These authors, excluding Lo Bianco, have predominantly discussed Indonesian language policy before the reformation phase. In this article, I extend the discussion by linking language policy and bilingualism with broader Indonesian political movements from before Indonesian Independence up until the current situation.

## Historical perspective of language policy

The historical development of Indonesian language policy is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Historical development of language policy in Indonesia**

### ***Before the independence phase: before 1945***

Historically, Indonesia was colonized by Europeans – predominantly Dutch – over three and a half centuries (Hoffman, 1979; Paauw, 2009). Despite the efforts of indigenous people and communities to attain/retain independence, Japan pursued colonization within Indonesia more recently. During these extended periods of expansion, only the elite within the Indonesian society was educated in a Dutch education system using Dutch as the medium of instruction (Hoffman, 1979). As a consequence, the Dutch language was not commonly used and recognized in the middle-lower Indonesian community. Subsequently, Malay (former name of the Indonesian language) became the *lingua franca* for the diverse population to communicate on a daily basis. In addition, Hoffman (1979) pointed out that in 1865 Malay was adopted officially as the second language by the Dutch government for trade and administrative affairs. This decision signaled the commencement of a bilingual agenda in Indonesian language policy where the colonized Dutch language was used alongside the Malay language until the early 1900s.

In 1901, the term ‘Malay’ (Bahasa Melayu) was replaced by ‘Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia)’ and was selected as the official language of the state and medium of instruction. This decision was recognized with the publication of a standardized Latin alphabet spelling system for Bahasa Indonesia, constructed by the Dutch scholar C.A. van Ophuijsen (Hoffman, 1979; Lowenberg, 1992). Following this recognition, Bahasa Indonesian was nationally declared as the only unified and national language via *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Pledge) on 28 October 1928. The use of Bahasa Indonesia has continually been widely adopted as the medium of instruction not only in governmental affairs but also in public schools from primary to university level up until the initial period of the Japanese invasion in 1942 (Paauw, 2009). This indicated the emerging development of *Bahasa Indonesia* and bilingualism since the recognition of Bahasa Indonesia in the periods of Japanese imperialism.

During the Japanese colonization from 1942 to 1945, the non-explicit bilingual language policy was changed. Anderson (1966) claimed that the Japanese immediately forbade the use of Dutch for any purpose. He stated that their ultimate goal was to institute Japanese as the language of administration and education, but this was not realistic in the short term. The immediate effect was that Indonesian became the sole language of education, administration, and the mass media. At this point, Anderson indicated that there was no resistance from the society due to Bahasa Indonesia (formerly known as Malay) had long been the *lingua-franca* of the archipelago, and this became the basis of an essentially political language of Indonesia. In addition, Anderson stated that the Indonesian language was seen as a language simple and flexible enough to be rapidly developed into a modern political language and more importantly was tied to no particular regional social structure. The Indonesian language was considered ‘national unifier’ (Anderson, 1966, p. 105). Paauw (2009) described that prior to the Japanese occupation, all texts used at the high school and university level were in Dutch. Consequently, these Dutch texts were promptly translated into Indonesian and new terminology was developed until the phase of Indonesian Independence.

### **The independence and post-independence phase: 1945-1966**

With Indonesian liberation declared on August 17, 1945, after the surrender of the Japanese at the end of World War II, the bilingual language agenda was transformed into a domestic bilingual language policy where Indonesian was designated the sole national language for formal administrative and educational affairs of the new nation. Simultaneously, Paauw (2009) argued that the existing vernacular (local) languages were acknowledged within national cultural heritage and used for intra-regional communications.

With independence, came the opportunity for Indonesia to divest itself of significant Dutch and Japanese influence. The languages that came to prominence in Indonesia during this period were categorized as: 1) regional or vernacular languages (*bahasa daerah*); 2) national language (*bahasa Indonesia*); and 3) foreign languages, e.g., English, German, and Arabic languages (Dardjowidjojo, 1998; Nababan, 1991). Interestingly, even though Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch and the Japanese consecutively, none of those colonized languages were studied formally in educational settings. English became the first foreign language taught from secondary school to higher education (Dardjowidjojo, 1998; Nababan, 1991). Alisjahbana (1974b) described English as a more important language for world science and knowledge rather than the colonized languages of Dutch and Japanese. This implicit bi/multilingualism policy has become part of the Indonesian national language policy and planning from the independence period (1940s-1950s) to the new order government regime (1960s-1990s).

### **New order regime phase: 1966-1998**

The bilingual agenda became more common prevalent in educational sectors. *Bahasa Indonesia* was strongly promoted through the use of 'good and correct' (*baik and benar*) language (Hooker, 1993). Allen (2013) argued that '*Bahasa Indonesia* came under close official scrutiny, with particular emphasis placed on modernizing and standardizing the language and on developing a language ideology' (p. 12). This marks the institutionalization of Indonesian language across Indonesia.

On the other hand, the central government promoted the teaching of English as a foreign language not only for secondary education but also more importantly for primary schools along with the teaching of vernacular languages. The implementation of this policy has created an implicit bilingual agenda and a distinct movement from monolingual to bilingual schools. In this period, many education institutions began considering using English as a medium of instruction. In higher education contexts, English flourished as it was frequently used in teaching subject in many universities (Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1994)

During this period, English was spreading among few elite and privileged Indonesians in educational and non-educational contexts. Fishman (1998) argued that although English was used among Indonesia's elite communities, the government emphasized the use of Indonesia's official language on many occasions. The United States of America supported the use of English in the Indonesian education systems. Lie (2009) claimed that during this period, there was significant assistance from the USA including teachers' education, and scholarships for further studies (MA and Ph.D.) in the USA. As a result, many Indonesian graduates expanded their abilities to learn English as a foreign language. This implies that both English and Indonesian as a form of bilingualism were used, despite the fact that it was prevalent in certain communities only.

### **Reformation phase: since 1998-present**

Two notable events explicitly recognized bilingual education. Firstly, the approval of the new Education Act (Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2003), which acknowledged the two languages (Indonesian and English) as a medium of instruction from primary to higher education levels. This signal indicated that the use of English, for example, not only as the unit of the course but also as the medium of instruction. Secondly, two following laws: the Law for Languages, Flags and National Anthem (Sekretaris Negara Republik Indonesia, 2009) and Law for Higher Education (Ministry of Law and Human Rights, 2012) supported the use of two languages (Indonesia and English) as a medium of instruction.

Since it was approved legally, bilingual education has been practiced at many education levels in Indonesia. In particular, the implementation of bilingual education policy in higher education aimed to promote universities in Indonesia to be internationally recognized. This policy intended not only to attract international students but also to expand the university partnership with other accredited and recognized institutions overseas such as joint double degree programs (Direktorat Pembinaan Sarana Akademik DIKTI, 2010; Setiawati, 2012).

The diversity of more than 240 million of the Indonesian population consists of more than 700 local languages and ethnicities across the Indonesian archipelago (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2014). Such diversity resulted in tensions among local identities. On the other hand, since then the number of international students enrolling in Indonesian higher education increased in recent years from 6200 students in 2011 to over 7000 international students in 2012 coming from 73 different countries (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014). Considering both factors, to maintain a national identity on the one hand, and to learn other culture and to engage globally, on the other side, become contributing factors perpetuating the implementation of bilingual education in Indonesia.

### **Identity, bilingualism, and bilingual education**

There are debates among scholars about introducing foreign languages (mainly English) as a medium of instruction in either early schooling periods such as kindergarten or at high schools and universities in Indonesia. Authors who are concerned with Asian languages claim that the use of English as a medium of instruction in early Asian education stages to the university including in Indonesia may disadvantage vernacular languages (Kirkpatrick, 2012) and do not benefit learners' cognitively (Ibrahim, 2004). On the other hand, English as a medium of instruction from early schooling to university can also bring learners cognitive and social advantages, such as bilingual/multilingual competences (Dewi, 2012; Lamb & Coleman, 2008; Lauder, 2010; Lo Bianco, 2012; Santoso, 2006; Setyorini & Sofwan, 2011). Within this debate, this research draws on the latter argument that the use of English, in addition to Indonesian, as a medium of instruction is a form of investment benefitting learners academically and socially both locally and internationally.

English has been adopted as a medium of instruction alongside Indonesian in tertiary levels through bilingual/immersion higher education programs since 2003. Dewi (2012) conducted a study of university lecturers and students on the use of English in relation to the intrusion on the Indonesian national identity. She identifies that the use of English in higher education helps both lecturers and students learn western cultures and values. She concludes 'English does not deteriorate their identity as Indonesians. English is allowed to bloom but is limited in its extent, and at the same time, it is prevented from interfering with Indonesian identity through the existence of a national language' (p. 23). Her research suggests that the implementation of English as a medium of instruction in higher education proves to be beneficial for Indonesian learners and their identities.

For adolescent Indonesian learners, English is seen as an imaging tool changing their lives from locally to globally-minded individuals. Several studies conducted by Lamb (2004a, 2004b, 2009) and Lamb and Coleman (2008) identify that the acquisition of English literacy can prepare many Indonesian learners for better employment and future careers. Lamb and Coleman claim:

Many Indonesians recognize that English is required for the transformation of their society, but the way in which it is being acquired is through individuals acting autonomously with the object of transforming themselves by joining an exclusive club of cosmopolitan English speaking Indonesians (2008: 201).

The ability to speak a foreign language in Indonesia especially English is seen as the mark of knowledgeable individual identity. Renandya (2004) argues that mastery of foreign language is seen as a symbol of modern identity and the mark of an educated person. Mastering another language can be what Turner and Allen (2007, p. 113) describe 'self- identity – a sense of knowing or belonging'. For Indonesian being able to speak a foreign language, they can be identified as a knowledgeable individual. This indicates the importance of mastering an additional foreign language in Indonesia. One of the ways is to put together English and Indonesian in the form of bilingual/multilingual education programs.

The use of English in bilingual education programs benefits Indonesian learners academically. Santoso (2006) and Setyorini and Sofwan (2011) argue that learners have the opportunities to practice English and to use English as a means of understanding the current development of science and technologies in the world. However, Santoso (2006) and Setyorini and Sofwan (2011) warn that to use English together with Indonesian as a medium of instruction efficiently, human resources are needed, as teachers and staff have to be highly proficient in English. This concept indicates that language and bilingualism/bilingual education are part of the Indonesian language policy that extends the debates nationally and locally within the context of Indonesia. The application of English in conjunction with Indonesian as a medium of instruction provides a meaningful and positive contribution to Indonesian national education and local identity.

### ***Language and identity tensions: nationalism and internationalization***

A number of scholars discuss the identity tensions related to the conflicting interests between participating in global English speaking communities and preserving national/local identities (Gill, 2004, Graddol, 1998, Tollefson and Tsui, 2004). In particular, these tensions refer to what Graddol (1998: 33) calls a 'global-local dilemma', which is the penetration of global values into the local language and cultural contexts.

The tensions between preserving national values and language and accommodating internationalization have become a current debate within the field of higher education. These debates not only occur in universities in the West, which are claimed as the center of knowledge production at the moment, but also universities in the East, which are the peripheral regions of knowledge development (Adnan, 2014). Tollefson and Tsui (2004) argue that to accommodate these two aspects of identities is a problematic issue because to understand the appropriate use of English requires the understanding of the culture of the dominant English speaking countries, which then contests with local cultures. This is also the case in Malaysian higher education policy, with the need to master English as the international language of science and the British Empire on the one hand, and the retaining of the Malay language as a symbol of national identity on the other (Gill, 2004). The case of Malaysian higher education resembles that of Indonesian higher education with respect to language use.

We argue that the identity tensions occurring when English is used as a medium of instruction along with the Indonesian national language are due to:

- The fears of losing Indonesian vernacular and national cultures resulting from a strong penetration of English as an international language in Indonesian higher education.
- The conflicting assumptions between Indonesian scholars: those graduated from domestic and western universities. Domestic graduates tend to view issues locally and overseas graduates tend to view issues from global perspectives. This result in disagreement on language education and practices.

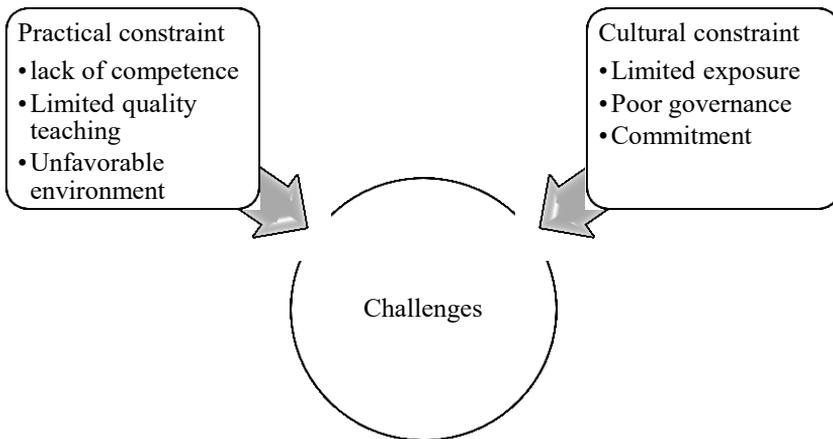
- The tensions between scholars who propose Indonesian (the national language) be internationally recognized and those who view it is as taken for granted that English is already available as a *lingua-franca*.

Kirkpatrick (2012: 338) further supports the claim that ‘the trends of bilingualism being realized as the national language and English along with the decline of other local languages can be seen to be developing in Indonesia. These trends can also be observed in the three countries that shared the history of being under French colonial rule: Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam’. This threat to local languages is another emerging issue within present-day bilingual language policy in Indonesia.

If these tensions are to be relieved at local and national levels in Indonesia, a policy supporting the movement from monolingual to bilingual higher education should be implemented. Such a change has already occurred in many parts of the world with the teaching of unit subjects through a bilingual medium of instruction. The investigations conducted in many parts of the globe can be considered models of bilingual higher education, such as universities in South Africa (Du Plessis, 2006, Van der Walt, 2010), many higher education institutions in China (Cui and Xiaoqiong, 2007, Wei, 2013), in technical universities in Russia (Khabarova and Molotkova, 2011), and in some European universities (Cenoz, 2012, Doiz et al., 2013). These changes to bilingual education are also implemented within the context of Indonesian higher education. The bilingual policy is pivotal to successful implementation since it will impact on the quality of higher education.

**Challenges of language and bilingual education policies**

The challenges of language and bilingual education policies in Indonesian is described in Figure 2. The challenges are depicted in three categories: practical, cultural, and political constraints.



**Figure 2: Constraints of language and bilingual education policy in Indonesia**

The implementation of a language and bilingual education policy has encountered challenges. In terms of practical challenges, there are limited numbers of qualified teachers who can use English effectively. Lie (2009) claimed that many teachers are less competent to teach English and use English as a medium of instruction particularly in private and rural educational institutions. Specifically in the higher education context, AR Welch (2007) claimed that the quality of teachers particularly in private higher education sectors is alarming, resulting in poor teaching and lack of facilities to support quality teaching and learnings. In addition, Lie (2009) identified four constraints including the politics of policy, the shortage of budget, limited qualified English teachers, and an unfavorable environment.

The cultural constraint is the unfavorable environment that limits the exposure to the target language particularly in many higher education institutions. The limited exposure is caused by the improper governance of a university. Anthony Welch (2012) claimed that poor quality governance of many Indonesian universities impacts on limited activities and engagement within the global community. In addition, Musthafa (2012) claimed that many areas in Indonesia are difficult to encounter activities and engagement with English as a medium of instruction except in a few privileged universities where exposure to English is quite dominant and extensive. In addition, Lie (2009) questioned the commitment of governments to fully support the realization of language and bilingual policy within educational contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This review provides a thoughtful understanding of the development of language policy, identities and bilingual education in Indonesia. Language policy is evolved and marked by two important movements: historical and political movements. These two movements influence the language policy prior to the Independence and on the development of language policy post-Independence up until present time. It seems to us that multilingual language policy that can accommodate vernaculars, national and foreign languages is the appropriate option for Indonesian context. Despite its impressive development, it encounters political, practical and cultural constraints. This concept is potentially useful to further investigate the current use of vernaculars, Indonesian and foreign language in Indonesian contexts. It is also important to explore the bilingual and multilingualism practice both in education and non-educational sectors.

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