

# The Urgency of Promoting Mother-Tongue-Based Education: A Case of Indonesia

Setiono Sugiharto

*Associate Professor of English, The English Department,  
Faculty of Education, Atma Jaya Catholic University, Jakarta, Indonesia  
Setiono.sugiharto@atmajaya.ac.id. His latest work on Language Imperialism will soon be  
published in The Routledge Handbook of Educational Linguistics  
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## Abstract

*This article argues that there is an urgent need to promote mother-tongue based education in the Indonesian context, primarily prompted by the gradual disappearance of the country's indigenous languages, which will be accelerated by the upcoming free-trade agreement in the ASEAN community.*

## Introduction

The International Linguistic Conference recently held in Bandar Lampung, one of the provinces in Indonesia, was attended by some two hundred linguists worldwide. The conference, which was initiated by the Indonesian Linguistic Society, centered on a pressing issue Indonesia is facing today: the threat of both the national or official language (i.e. Bahasa Indonesia) and the international language (mainly English) to the survival of hundreds of Indonesia's indigenous languages.

With the absence of a government policy requiring that local languages be used as a medium of instruction in schools and with the endangered status of the country's vernacular languages, members of the Indonesian Linguistic Society nationwide have made the following recommendation:

“In the past decades, home languages have suffered from a loss of transmission to younger generations. Many youth are no longer able to speak their mother tongue, even though learning the mother tongue provides a child's earliest opportunity to develop their academic potential as well as increasing their aptitude in learning additional languages. We the members of the Indonesian Linguistics Society pledge to pay special attention to the mother tongue languages spoken in our respective regions, to encourage their use, and to help the transmission of these languages to younger generations through education, research and community service.”

Concomitant with the observation of the International Mother Tongue Day, which falls on February 21, the above recommendation was passed in anticipation of an important event to take place in 2015. The ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) free-trade agreement will go into effect. The ASEAN Road Map has made it clear that English will be

the lingua franca of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2009). For example, The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Roadmap contains this action: "Support the citizens of Member States to become proficient in the English language, so that the citizens of the ASEAN region are able to communicate directly with one another and participate in the broader international community" (p. 69; see also statements on pages 68 and 111). Regional languages are mentioned only briefly (p. 69).

Young people in Indonesia are preparing for ASEAN integration by avidly learning English, suffering from "English Fever" (Krashen, 2006).

The Indonesian Linguistic Society is not arguing against the use of English. Rather, the recommendation was aimed at promoting the use of mother-tongue based education and research among both teachers and researchers. This requires at least two things. First, effective mother-tongue based teaching needs supporting facilities such as locally made curricula, the availability of school textbooks and other books written in the students' native languages, and well trained local language teachers. Second, local linguists and local teacher-researchers are encouraged to write research reports in their native languages, not necessarily in the national language. This can help document and sustain the survival of local languages.

This article discusses the current state of Indonesia's local languages and proposes efforts that need to be taken to preserve these languages through the promotion of mother-tongue education in Indonesia, a country with some 746 indigenous languages, but with a strong tendency towards monolingualism.

### **The Current State of Indonesia's Indigenous Languages**

Of approximately 746 indigenous languages in Indonesia, only 450 languages are officially documented by the Indonesia's Education and Culture Ministry (<http://sosbud.kompasiana.com/2014/04/23/>). Thus, some 296 undocumented local languages, scholars have suspected, have gone into extinction, with the number of native speakers being less than 500 people. Sadly, the official documented languages have been on the moribund state.

Zubaidah (2014) recorded that most of the endangered languages and those which have become extinct are local languages found in such Indonesia's provinces as Kalimantan, Papua, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Sumatra. She pointed out that such indigenous languages as *Mapia*, *Tandia*, *Bonerif*, and *Saponi* (spoken in Papua) and *Punan Merah* and *Kareho Uheng* (spoken in Kalimantan) have disappeared, while *Lom* (spoken in Sumatera), *Budong-budong*, *Dampai*, *Bahonsai* and *Baras* (spoken in Sulawesi), *Hoti* and *Kayeli* (spoken in Maluku) are all in a moribund state and are predicted to disappear soon.

A variety of factors have been blamed for the disappearance of Indonesia's indigenous languages. Chief amongst them are developing attitudes among Indonesian young generations to pride themselves as belonging to a modern society and the government's lackadaisical attitude toward the preservation of local languages. Research on the use of local languages in Indonesia among young generations has shown a rather shocking finding in that youngsters often refrain from using their home languages in the family for reasons that

conserving in their home languages is deemed conservative and primitive, lacks of a spirit of nationalism (the use of Indonesian serves as a unifying language among peoples of different races and ethnicities), and fails to keep abreast with modern life where English has become a language of a wider communication trans-nationally. Thus, being able to converse in the Indonesian language is considered more prestigious than being able to speak in one's native languages. Further, being able to speak in English promises better future career in the face of globalized world.

The government's lackadaisical attitude is another factor responsible for the disappearance of local languages in the country. Despite the regional autonomy granted by the central government to all provinces in Indonesia, the education system is still highly centralized. For example, the national mandated curriculum is still imposed to all provinces, almost without exception. As for the language teaching curriculum, it is the national language (i.e. the Indonesian language) and foreign language (mainly English) that are given privileges. School textbooks and the national assessment systems are written in Indonesian, and rarely are they written using the student's home languages. In addition, textbooks written in English are imported and distributed to meet the demands of English teaching in the provinces. Clearly, this all leads to the eventual marginalization of local languages.

### **The Urgency of Promoting Mother-Tongue Based Education: The Indonesian Context**

Young people's preference to shift either to the national language or an international language (nearly always English) has been seen as the greatest factor contributing to the demise of Indonesia's local languages (see Sugiharto, 2014b). If this shift continues, it is quite possible that Indonesia will become a monolingual country where only one language (i.e. the official one) will be used as a medium of communication. This tendency has been reported by Cohn, Bowden and McKinnon (2014) who report increased exclusive use of the Indonesian language among Indonesia's young people whose native languages are Sundanese and Javanese, two dominant ethnic languages with the greatest number of speakers in Indonesia. Ujang Suparman (personal communication, February 19, 2014) has informed me that most young native Lampung often avoid using their home language when interacting with their parents and peers, and converse in the Indonesian language instead. He imputed this shift to monolingualism to the shame of using local languages and to the prestige of the Indonesian language as the official language and unifying language among Indonesians.

This disparagement of local language varieties among their speakers reflects the effects of the strong imposition of the Indonesian language as a unifying language in education, not to mention the effects of globalization where English has seeped into all facets of life, including education.

The use of a single language in order to maintain national and international unity has been deemed fallacious. Kosonen and Benson (2013) argue that "using one language and excluding many others actually creates divisions, inequalities, inequities, because it means that hundreds of millions of people worldwide are forced to learn—or teach—through a language in which they are not proficient" (p. 2).

The use of national and international languages need not be subtractive—that is, at the expense of local languages—but many parents in Indonesia think that focusing only on the national and international language leads to better acquisition, and that local languages are only a hindrance.

The push to monolingualism in the Indoensian context is evident both through the Indonesian government's ardent promotion of the use of the official language in education and through the mushrooming marketization of English for early childhood education, the imposition of an English-only policy in many schools in Indonesia, and parents' strong preferences for sending their children to so-called "international" schools where English is the main medium of instruction (Sugiharto, 2014a).

Mother-tongue education can certainly help counter the dominant use of the Indonesian language and the English language. This can be done more effectively if the teaching of local languages serves more than just a local content, but instead must be mandated as a compulsory subject for all the students.

## Conclusion

The Indonesian Linguistic Society's recommendation for promoting the use of the mother tongue in the Indonesian community is very opportune, not only for the preservation efforts of the indigenous languages among the younger generations but also for the anticipation of the free-trade agreement among ASEAN member states in 2015, when regional languages will be threatened by more powerful languages and more English will be demanded. Ironically, protecting and promoting the native language will contribute to solving both problems.

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