

Perspectives on the Use of English as the Language of Teaching in Indonesian Schools

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ABSTRACT

After independence from Dutch colonial rule, Indonesia adopted *Bahasa Indonesia* (BI) as the national language spurred growing nationalistic, political and practical concerns. Consequently, BI has overtaken Javanese and Sundanese as the nation's *lingua franca* for administrative, education, trade, culture, science, technology, and mass media purposes. However, the dawn of globalization and internationalization has imposed English language on many facets of contemporary Indonesian society. This has raised salient questions about the proliferation of English and by extension the fate of BI in Indonesia. Consequently, the main objective of this paper is to identify, examine and highlight the prospects and challenges of adopting English language as the medium of teaching in Indonesian schools. The paper finds that the challenges of adopting English as a medium of teaching and instruction is hampered by political, socioeconomic and most significantly historical factors due to colonialism and the *Sumpah Pemuda* proclamation of 28th October 1928. In spite of this, the author considers English adoption in schools has several Socioeconomic, Cultural and Geopolitical benefits. The paper concludes that training the nation's future leaders in bilingual or multilingual curricula will strongly position Indonesia on the path to greater socioeconomic growth and sustainable development.

Keywords : English Language, Teaching, Indonesia, Schools, Colonialism

I. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Indonesia is the largest economy in Southeast Asia with an economic base dominated by industry, agriculture, and services amounting to a total GDP of USD\$2.8 Trillion [1, 2]. The nation is a major trader in commodities with large exports of rubber, cocoa, coffee, crude oil and LNG [3]. In addition, Indonesia also bears the distinct hallmark as the largest exporter of crude palm oil (CPO) and palm related products accounting for 30-40 % of total global trade [4-6].

Geographically, Indonesia is the largest archipelagic sovereign nation in the world comprising 18,307 islands spanning an area of 1.9 million square kilometers [7, 8]. The largest inhabited islands are Java, Sumatra, Borneo, New Guinea and Sulawesi. The country is situated on

latitudes 11 °S and 6 °N, and longitudes 95 °E and 141 °E bordering Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Palau and Australia by sea and Malaysia, East-Timor and Papua New Guinea by land [9, 10]. The nations

landscape is dominated by coastal lowlands, island terrain and interior mountains with hot, humid and moderate tropical climatic conditions [11].

The sociopolitical landscape of Indonesia is dominated by a large variety of religious and ethnic groups which make up the population of 255 million people. The major religious divisions are Islam 87.2%, Christianity 9.9%, Hinduism 1.7%, and 0.9% Buddhism and Confucian beliefs making Indonesia the world's largest Muslim country [12-14].

The ethnic composition of the Indonesia consists of over 700 indigenous languages including 40.1% Javanese,

15.5% Sundanese, 3.7% Malay, 3.6% Batak, 3% Madurese, 2.9% Betawi, 2.7% Minangkabau, 2.7% Buginese, 2% Bantenese, 1.7% Banjarese, 1.7% Balinese, 1.4% Acehnese, 1.4% Dayak, 1.3% Sasak, 1.2% Chinese, while other groups make up the remainder [12, 15]. Conversely, the official language of the republic is Indonesian or *Bahasa Indonesia* (BI) which literally translates into “Indonesian Language” [16, 17]. The language is considered the homogeneous form of the Austronesian language that has dominated the culture and traditions of the archipelago for many generations [17, 18]. Globally, BI is considered the philological mode of communication of approximately 200 million people globally of which 22% and 78% are native speakers and second language speaks, respectively [19].

Historically, *Bahasa Indonesia* (BI) only becomes a national language in Indonesia after the declaration of independence from the Netherlands in 1945. However, prior to independence, over 60% of the native population used Javanese and Sundanese at the mode of communication for all purposes [20]. The paradigm shift in the *status quo* was catalysed by growing nationalistic, political and practical concerns after independence. Consequently, the Indonesian language has overtaken others to become the dominant language for all government affairs as well as education, communication, trade, culture, science, technology, and mass media [21-23].

More importantly, the use of BI is sanctioned by legal statutes gazetted in Chapter 15 of the Constitution of Republic of Indonesia and appears on all national symbols including the flag, coat of arms, and national anthem [24]. As a result, BI serves not only as the symbol of the Republic’s national language but the emblem of national unity amongst Indonesia’s ethnically and religiously diverse population [16, 20, 23]. The establishment of this precedent owes its origin particularly to the *Sumpah Pemuda* or “Youth Pledge” of 28th October 1928. This congress helped oversee the institution of the triplet ideals of one language, one motherland, and one nation in Indonesia [25-27]. According to analysts, the youth pledge helped to ensure the establishment of BI as an important feature in contemporary Indonesian society [22, 23, 28].

However, the advent of globalization and internationalization has necessitated the use of English

language in many facets of Indonesian society. English language is considered the official language of international diplomacy, business, and communication. The fundamental dynamics of these impending scenario presents salient questions about the fate of the BI in the face of growing calls for the proliferation of English language in everyday Indonesian society.

Consequently, the paper seeks to present the merits and demerits of adopting English language in Indonesia’s educational curriculum. It will present a concise expose on the prospects and challenges of using English as the language of teaching in Indonesian schools. The emphasis will be on the effects such policy shifts will have on the fate of primary and post primary schools in the archipelagic nation of 255 million people.

II. METHODS AND MATERIAL

A. Challenges

The challenges of adopting English as the language of teaching in Indonesian schools cannot be discussed without first addressing some salient points. It is of utmost importance to explore the current level of penetration of the English language in the country. This will provide important dimensions on the level of commitment required to identify and address the challenges. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EF- EPI), Indonesia is categorised in the moderate proficiency band of countries alongside, India, Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong. The EF EPI ranking is a measure of the proficiency of 63 countries based on data from adults in the age band 18 and above sampled from over 700,000 individuals across the globe. According to the EF EPI, Indonesia is ranked 28th overall among all the nations polled by the metric. In addition, the ranking suggests that despite its position, process in English proficiency in Indonesia has improved considerably in the last ten years [29].

However, despite the improvement in the metrics, the use of English language remains confined to the corridors of academic and scholarly circles particularly popular with younger generation Indonesians [30]. Furthermore, studies by Bautista and Gonzalez [31] surmise the use of English Language as a medium of instruction in schools particularly in the formative years of Indonesian children has been unsuccessful. According

to various studies the failure can be attributed to a number of sociolinguistic and educational reasons [32-34]. Consequently, it stands to reason that factors such as social, political, historical and economic reasons may have also compromised the growth, adoption and assimilation of English as a medium of instruction in Indonesian schools. Therefore the challenges of English language proficiency and its adoption for teaching in Indonesia will be examined based on these outcomes.

The **Political** challenges hindering the adoption and usage of English language for instruction Indonesia schools are rooted in the *Sumpah Pemuda* otherwise referred to as the “Youth Pledge”. The declaration of the *Kongres Pemuda Kedua* (Second Youth Congress) convened on 28th October 1928. Furthermore, the declaration acknowledged Indonesia as the motherland and nation of the Indonesian people united by one language *Bahasa Indonesia* (BI) [25-27]. Against this backdrop, BI has been firmly instituted as the language for all matters in the country. Hence the advent of English and its use afterwards faces significant challenges dethroning the established *lingua franca*.

The **Historical** challenges of adopting English in Indonesian schools began after the liberation of Indonesia from Dutch Colonial rule in 1949. Following the historic development was the rise of nationalism in the country which particularly helped ensure the spread of BI over Javanese and Sundanese. Furthermore, linguistic analysts have always opined that there is a close link between languages and power in any society. Consequently any language can automatically become dominant in a culture or society based on the power of its speakers. It stands to reason than that independence from the Dutch and the adoption of BI as the unifying language of choice gave rise to its dominance in the country. With its huge population, the probability of English gaining stronghold in Indonesia particularly after independence diminished overtime especially in the face of nationalism in the country at the time. Consequently, the history of debates about the efficacy of English language in contemporary Indonesian society is growing. Better yet, the calls for the removal of English language from the curricula in Indonesian elementary schools has arisen again in recent times.

The **Socioeconomic** challenges chiefly arise from poverty and other social problems in the country.

Despite declining rates of poverty studies have shown the link between poverty and literacy levels particularly in foreign languages such as English. Over the years, the rate of poverty in the country has declined from 17% in 2004 to 11 % in 2014 [35]. However, commentary by *Sundaryani* [28] posits the use of English language may not be “*pragmatically useful*” for people in the low economic strata of Indonesian society. The author goes further to assert that emphasis on English in the Indonesia system may be responsible for the growing chasm between people in the extremes of the socioeconomic spectrum in the country [28]. This somewhat confirms the role of socioeconomics on the challenges of English language adoption in schools in the country. Suffice to say, studying in English will pose problems particularly to educating the poor class of people in the society. However, empirical data from field research is needed to confirm this theory in the future.

B. Prospects

Despite the outlined challenges, the use of English in Indonesian schools as a medium of instruction has numerous potentials. The merits of this endeavour will be examined based on three broad themes of Socioeconomic, Cultural and Geopolitical dynamics.

The **Socioeconomic** prospects of using English as the language of teaching and or medium of instruction in Indonesian schools are numerous. Firstly this will expose children and the growing generation to the advantages of bilingual education which effectively improves their future prospects in the increasingly competitive job market. Furthermore, the use of English in schools presents the lower stratified demographics with the English language skills to rise out of poverty. Based in these prospects, the government needs to encourage the use of English as a medium of instruction in schools and universities in the country. According to Bautista and Gonzalez [31], primary schools in Indonesia now teach English to from kindergarten to high school to students for 8-9 years particularly in cities with minimal success. In addition, this needs to be extended to teachers who also required improved English language skills to train the future generation of the country. Furthermore, the use of English will encourage increase overall literacy levels, alleviate poverty and increase standards of living in the country through the provision of specialised jobs in the buildings

and infrastructure, housing development as well as renewable energy technologies which are rapidly expanding in Indonesia [36-38]. This assertion is corroborated by empirical findings that indicate a strong correlation between proficiency in English and levels of income, quality of life, ease of doing business, use of internet, and schooling in a country [29]. Furthermore, research findings indicate the English population and economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP) are correlated [39, 40]. Therefore English language proficiency is a critical tool for socioeconomic growth and sustainable development.

As one of the languages of international business, trade and diploma, English can greatly improve the **Geopolitical** prospects and global reputation of Indonesia. The trend has spurred significant investments in many developing countries around the world. In addition, the goal to increase literacy levels in English in the formative years of children is in line with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets. Goals 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, and 17 accentuate the need for quality education, gender equality, economic growth, peace and justice in developing countries. Consequently, Indonesia stands the chance to improve its international standing, living standards and socioeconomic growth and sustainable development by encouraging English language proficiency early in the lives of its future leaders.

The opportunities for improving and understanding the **Sociocultural** aspect of Indonesian society will be improved by adopting English language in the nation's schools and institutions of learning. This will better expose the youth to the history, culture and traditions of the society as presented by other academics, researchers and scholars abroad. In addition, this will effectively increase the sociocultural and tourism potentials of the country and by extension national income, efficiency and productivity.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper was aimed at examining the prospects and challenges of using English as the language of teaching in Indonesian schools. It presented an expose on the merits and demerits of adopting English language in Indonesia as Southeast Asia's largest economy and high demographics. The paper finds that the challenges of

implementing and adopting English as a medium of teaching and instruction is hampered by numerous historical, political, and socioeconomic factors. The most significant was found to be the historical due to the effects of colonialism advanced by the proclamation of the *Sumpah Pemuda*. Despite the outlined challenges the author believes English language adoption in schools has numerous benefits for Indonesian society. The prospects were discussed under broad themes namely Socioeconomic, Cultural and Geopolitical dynamics. The paper concludes by stating that adopting English for training the nation's future leaders will strongly position the country on the path to socioeconomic growth and sustainable development.

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