

## Maintaining Multilingualism in a Multi Culture Country: The Case of Indonesia

**Abdul Muth'im**



English Language Education  
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education  
Lambung Mangkurat University, Banjarmasin, Indonesia, Postal code: 70125  
Corresponding Author: [abdul\\_muthim@ulm.ac.id](mailto:abdul_muthim@ulm.ac.id)

**Cayandrawati Sutiono**



English Language Education  
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education  
Lambung Mangkurat University, Banjarmasin, Indonesia  
Email: [cayandrawati01@ulm.ac.id](mailto:cayandrawati01@ulm.ac.id)

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### Abstract

This article aims to describe how Indonesia, as a country of multilingualism or multi-languages maintains the languages in the country. Since Indonesia is a multilingual country, it must also be a multicultural country. As a rule, cultures are usually developed through languages, and the development of languages is influenced by cultures. The relationship of cultures and languages are reciprocal. However, in some cases, the differences in language may result in disharmony in the community. Praise to God the Almighty, until recently, Indonesia can maintain this multilingual status in addition to its multi-cultural situation. Bahasa Indonesia goes along with local languages harmoniously. This phenomenon may invite the following question: “How can Indonesia, as a multilingual country, maintain the languages among a multi-cultural community?” This article attempts to explore and discuss this issue.

*Keywords:* local language, multilingualism, multi-culture, national language, official language

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## Introduction

The idea of being able to communicate in different languages, generally known as multilingualism, might be most people's obsession. With this ability, one will be able to understand what other people say and write in their language well and be understood by other people without misunderstanding when they speak or write in a language other than his/hers. Multilingualism opens opportunities and access for the communicants to learn, teach, and interact with each other. In other words, multilingualism enables people to engage in multiple dimensions of life.

Indonesia ranks most populous after India, China, and the USA in 2022. According to World Development Indicators, World Bank, 1 July 2023, the number of Indonesian population was as many as 275,501,000. In terms of languages used in the country, Indonesia is also known as the country with the most languages. Based on a study conducted by Aji et al. (2022), Indonesia was the second most linguistically diverse and the fourth most populous nation of the world in 2019. The research on language mapping conducted by Indonesia's Language Agency (*Badan Bahasa*) in 2015, uncovered that as many as 659 regional languages are spoken as a mother tongue in Indonesia and each of these languages has dialectal or sub-dialectal variations. It is estimated that there could be as many as 1,318 Indonesian mother tongues. At an event held in the Ministry of Education and Culture in March 2019, the Head of the Ministry's Language and Book Agency mentioned that approximately 79 percent of Indonesians communicate mainly in their mother tongue. Lewis, Simons, and Fenning (in Cohen and Ravindranath, 2014) identified several hundred languages; precisely, 706 distinct languages are spoken throughout the archipelago.

From this viewpoint, Indonesia is indeed a multilingual country. The primary language used in Indonesia is Bahasa Indonesia whose speakers reach 198 million (Aji, et. al., 2022). The use of Bahasa Indonesia goes along with local languages harmoniously. Among those local languages, 10 local languages are spoken the most. Referring to the study carried out by Aji, et al. (2022), the top ten most spoken local languages were *Javanese*, spoken by 84 million; *Sundanese*, spoken by 34 million; *Madurese*, spoken by 7 million; *Minangkabau*, spoken by 6 million; *Buginese*, spoken by 6 million; *Betawi*, spoken by 5 million; *Acehnese*, spoken by 4 million; *Banjarese*, spoken by 4 million; *Balinese*, spoken by 3 million; *Palembang Malay (Musi)*, spoken by 3 million. People might be curious about this phenomenon and ask "How could Indonesia maintain that multilingualism status?"

## Maintaining Local languages

Referring to the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, article 36, it is stated that "Bahasa Negara adalah Bahasa Indonesia" which means that the national language is Bahasa Indonesia. However, though Bahasa Indonesia is an official national language, the Indonesian government does not oblige its people to use Bahasa Indonesia as a means of communication. Local languages are not only allowed but also encouraged. Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 24 of 2009 regarding Flag, Language, Symbols of State, and National Anthem article 42 states that "(1) Negara memajukan kebudayaan nasional Indonesia di tengah peradaban dunia dengan menjamin masyarakat dalam memelihara dan mengembangkan nilai-nilai budayanya, (2) Negara menghormati dan memelihara bahasa daerah sebagai kekayaan budaya nasional" (p. 17). Translated into English the two statements mean that (1) The state advances Indonesian national culture amidst world civilization by ensuring that society maintains and develops its cultural values", and (2) The state respects and maintains local languages as national cultural treasures.

Since Indonesia is a multilingual country it is also automatically a multicultural culture. The development of language simultaneously occurs with the development of culture or vice-versa.

### The relationship between language and culture

Language by *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* written by Richards, et. al. (1987) is “the system of human communication using a structured arrangement of sounds (or their written representation) to form larger units, e.g. morphemes, words, and sentences” (p.153). Another definition is given by Finocchiaro (in Mu'in et. al., 2018) who states that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, which permits all people in a given culture, or other people who have learned the system of that culture to communicate or to interact).

Conceptually, the essence of language can be viewed from different viewpoints. Richards and Rodgers, (1986) categorize language into (1) structural view, (2) functional view, and (3) interactional view.

In the structural view, language is understood as a system of structurally related elements for coding of meaning. In this view, learning language means learning elements of language, such as phonological units (e.g. phonemes), grammatical units (e.g. clauses, phrases, sentences), grammatical operations (e.g. adding, shifting, joining, or transforming), and learning elements of lexical items (e.g. function words and content words). It is these language elements they will be learning when they learn.

In the functional view, language is believed as a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning. The focus of learning language is the semantic dimension of language rather than merely learning the grammatical characteristics of language. For proponents of this view the forms and structures of language are adapted to, and shaped by, grammar external principles, that is, their communicative functions.

In the interactional view, language is considered a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and the performance of social transactions between individuals. One of the linguists who hold this view is Mary Finocchiaro (1989). Her book “*English as a Second/Foreign Language*” mentions six practical purposes of language.

- 1) *Personal*: the purpose is to express one's emotions, needs, thoughts, desires, or attitudes; to clarify or classify ideas in one's mind.
- 2) *Interpersonal*: the purpose is to establish and maintain good social relations with individuals and groups, such as expressing praise, and sympathy, joy at another's success, inquiring about health, apologizing, and inviting.
- 3) *Directive*: the purpose is to control the behavior of others through advice, warnings, requests, persuasion, suggestions, orders, or discussion.
- 4) *Referential*: the purpose is to talk about objects or events in the immediate setting or environment or the culture; to discuss the present, the past, and the future.
- 5) *Metalinguistic*: the purpose is to talk about language, for example, “What does ..... mean?”
- 6) *Imaginative*: the purpose is to use language creatively in rhyming, composing poetry, writing, or speaking.

Culture is believed that the growth of language, especially L1, goes along with the development of the culture by which the language is used as a means of communication. This is because by speaking the language, therefore, one automatically (to a greater or lesser extent) aligns oneself with the culture of the language (Tang, 1999). Tang then argues that language itself is

already culture. Based on this idea, several questions arise, for example, “What is culture?”, “How can culture be integrated in language?”, and “How can the language used reflect the elements of culture of the community?”

It seems that there is no single definition of culture available. According to Balwin et al. (in Levy, 2007) there are more than 300 definitions of culture. For instance, Hobby (2004) defines culture as “what is agreed to be right and what is agreed to be true” (p. 7). In quite a similar definition, Kaikkonen (1997) defines culture as “a common agreement between the members of the community on the values, norms, rules, role expectations and meanings which guide the behavior and communication of the members” (p. 49). Lindsay, Robins, and Terrel (in Levy, 2007) culture is “everything you believe and everything you do that enables you to identify with people that distinguishes him/her from people” (p. 108). Hinkel (2001) on the other hand, argued that “culture may find its manifestations in body language, gestures, concept of time, hospitality customs, and even expressions of friendliness” (p. 443).

Some important points can be highlighted here from the above definitions. First, the term culture implies that there must be a common agreement among the members. Second, some norms, values, rules, role expectations, and meanings are applied and tight and all the community members consider true and right. Third, culture becomes guidance for all the members of the community in conducting behavior and in the way they communicate. Lastly, culture is manifested in various manifestations and expressions.

The common agreement does not develop in a day and becomes part of one’s life. According to Levy (2007), “Our cultural orientation begins at birth” (p. 105). This means that, as in the process of acquiring a native language, reaching a common agreement must go through a long process and continuous practices, too. Only through these processes and practices, a common agreement is finally reached by each individual in the community. Once the common agreement is reached, it becomes the norms, values, rules, role expectations, and meanings of the community. Consequently, every member of the community should respect this common agreement and should abide by it. If not, the member of the community violating this common agreement may be categorized as against his or her culture. This is because when one becomes a member of the culture, they are not only by notionally agreeing to its practices, or simply by participating in them, but by being accepted by the membership (Levy, 2007).

What norms, values, rules, role expectations, and meanings are applied and tight all the community members?” Almost unlimited. For example, it is a common agreement for Indonesian people that talking to older persons such as parents or teachers must be different from the way they talk to their peers of the same age. Talking to older people should be polite both in terms of manner and in terms of word choice. Conversely, talking to a peer of the same age does not necessitate the two conditions.

Body language and gestures in communication also function as the manifestation of culture. For instance, when one is speaking and the listener nods their head up and down, this is commonly understood as a sign of agreement. However, when the listener repeatedly shakes his or her head to the right or left or vice versa, it is commonly agreed by all community members as a sign of disagreement. Waving a hand toward their body is commonly understood as a request to approach closer to the speaker. How can all these become a common agreement among the community members? Through long processes and continuous practices.

The concept of time is also developed through lengthy processes and continuous practices before it becomes culture. The words indicating times such as the following: “*nanti* (later), and ‘*besok*’ (tomorrow), etc. are two examples that indicate common agreement that, in terms of time, it is flexible, not as rigid as may be applied by and in other countries. ‘*Nanti*’ (later) is a concept of time that ranges from a few seconds after this time until the unlimited range of time in the future. The word ‘*besok*’ (tomorrow), though it is more specific than ‘*nanti*’, still has uncertainty because it may mean in the morning, in the afternoon, and may mean in the evening.

When someone drops by their neighborhood, and coincidentally, the family he or she is visiting is having lunch, for instance, it is a common agreement in the culture for the host's family to offer them to have the meal together. They are not expected to say “*Let us finish our meal first, and we'll meet you after that*”. If they do this, the family may be said not to be hostile to their neighbor. For the neighbor, there is also a common agreement among the community to refuse the first offer, though they are really starving and the food served teases their appetite. Only after the third offer they are expected to accept the offer. Otherwise, if he or she accepts the offer for the first time, they may be categorized as impolite.

Additionally, visiting a neighbor without telling them in advance is common in Indonesian culture. On the contrary, if someone tries to get permission in advance by saying, for example, “*May I come to your house at 4 o'clock this afternoon?*” this request seems weird and strange to most community members. This is because of their common agreement that such kind of request is usually extended for certain occasions only such as when a family of a boy wants to propose a girl in the other family for their son. In general, the neighbor visited may not feel disturbed either.

Asking someone known or unknown with this question “*Mau ke mana, pak/bu?*” (“*Where are you going, sir/mam?*”), for some people in other cultures, e.g. Western culture, may be understood as interfering their business. In the Indonesian context, however, it indicates the opposite. Asking this question to either the known person or the unknown one shows that they are friendly to others. In contrast, if they do not do this, **they** may be labeled as unfriendly - although they do not care where the person is going. The question they raise is not a real question that needs to be answered. It is just a piece of cultural expression to show that they are friendly. Nothing to do with the interference of someone's business.

Paying someone's meal without the permission of the person paid is also a common practice in Indonesian culture. In the culture of other communities, this practice may be understood as an insult in the sense that the paid person cannot pay their bill. In Indonesian culture, however, this practice is understood to indicate that he or she is culturally well-behaved. The person paid is expected not to refuse this because if they do that and say, “*Don't bother, I have money*”, this response may indicate arrogant and disrespectful good intentions of others. Sometimes, they do not know who has paid for their bill. It is the cashier who usually tells who the person is. Someone whom they have known before.

In connection with preserving culture and language, Alamsyah (2017) argued that the attempt to preserve culture should be started with local languages with which such cultural values can be shared or communicated among the community members. For instance, at home, all family members use the local language as a daily means of communication. This is especially true when the parents come from the same ethnic background. A Banjarese mother and a Banjarese father communicate with their children in Banjarese since they are born and raised. At the same time, all values, norms, and cultures of Banjarese ethnicity are inherited through the Banjarese language. A

Javanese father and a Javanese mother do the same thing with their children from an early age of their children, teaching their children Javanese values, norms, and culture in the Javanese language. A Sundanese mother and a Sundanese father also do the same way with their children. Even, in the field of education, teachers are permitted to use local languages in teaching especially for the students of lower levels of education (Nurakhir, 2016).

When the parents come from different ethnic backgrounds, for example, the father comes from the Javanese tribe and the mother comes from the Banjarese tribe the insistence on using each local language is not conducive to family communication. The father whose mother tongue is Javanese may not and cannot insist on using his mother tongue, Javanese, and the mother may not and cannot insist on using her mother tongue, Banjarese. If this situation occurs miscommunication in the family may happen. All members of the family are affected. What is the solution? The use of Bahasa Indonesia is the solution.

Values in an ethnic group are also handed down more effectively from the older generation to the younger generation when they are stated in the local language. However, cultural awareness does not develop instantly. It develops through a long process. Levy (2007) stated that cultural orientation begins at birth. For instance, in Banjarese culture, it is common for parents to instill in their children to be always economical by saying "*Lebih baik ganting dari pada pagat*".

"*Ganting*" and "*Pagat*" are two examples of Banjarese language used to describe the condition of a rope. "*Ganting*" is the description of the situation of a rope that is almost completely cutting off, but not cutting off yet. The two ends of the rope are still connected, though the connection is in danger situation or very weak. "*Pagat*" describes the situation of a rope that has been completely cut off and separated into two ends. The two ends of the rope do not have any more connection. By saying this, parents want to remind their children to be economical. "Saving some amount of income how small the income is will be better than spending all the income though the income is more than is needed without spending for the safe side.

### **Maintaining Bahasa Indonesia**

The use of Bahasa Indonesia had been long popular among the people living in the Indonesian archipelagos (previously known as *Nusantara*). They realized that their local languages were inadequate to accomplish their communicative needs with other people from other archipelagos. Javanese can only be understood among and by Javanese; Sundanese can only also be understood among and by Sundanese; so as with other local languages. To overcome this communication barrier, they then interacted in Malay as the lingua franca. Bahasa Indonesia is one of the variations of Malay. It is the mother and the origin of Bahasa Indonesia.

Supported by the spirit of independence and driven by the need to have a language that can facilitate and accommodate communication among and between Indonesian people coming from different language backgrounds, some youth organizations held a meeting in Djakarta for two days from 27-28 October 1928. There were several crucial issues discussed at the meeting, one of them was about national language. The meeting resulted in 3 pledges, called "*Sumpah Pemuda*" or the youth pledge. The content of the pledge is as follows:

**Bahasa Indonesia English*****Pertama***

*Kami putera dan putri Indonesia,  
mengaku bertumpah darah yang satu,  
Indonesia.*

***Kedua***

*Kami putra dan putri indonesia,  
mengaku berbangsa yang satu,  
bangsa indonesia.*

***Ketiga***

*Kami putra dan putri Indonesia,  
menjunjung bahasa persatuan,  
bahasa Indonesia.*

***First***

We are the sons and daughters of Indonesia,  
confessing to having one motherland,  
Indonesia.

***Second***

We are the sons and daughters of Indonesia,  
confessing to having one nation,  
Indonesia.

***Third***

We are the sons and daughters of Indonesia,  
respecting the unifying language,  
Indonesian language.

From that moment, the use of Bahasa Indonesia became increasingly popular among “Nusantara” people. The peak of this was when the *Panitia Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia, PPKI* (The Preparation Committee for Indonesian Independence) was assigned to set up the Indonesian constitution. In the constitution, a great number of fundamental issues concerning the nation, state management, and the rights and obligations of the state as well as the people were discussed and formulated. In one article, i.e., Chapter XV, article 36 of the bill of the 1945 Constitution of Indonesia, it was stated that was “Bahasa nasional adalah bahasa Indonesia” which means that the national language shall be Bahasa Indonesia. As a result, when Indonesia proclaimed its independence from colonial countries, the Dutch and Japan, on August 17, 1945, Indonesia adopted the constitution that had already been prepared by the PPKI, including the article about the national language.

The decision to choose Bahasa Indonesia as the national language is the right choice. Long before and after the proclamation of Indonesia’s independence, Bahasa Indonesia has been used as a means of official communication in the community. It is used as a means of unifying the various ethnic groups in the country (Setyabudi, 2017). Despite the diversity of regional languages, Bahasa Indonesia is now widely used in every aspect of life. Ridwan (2018), for instance, mentions some of the areas of life in which Bahasa Indonesia is used: politics, culture, and society.

It may be reasonable to claim that Indonesia is overwhelmingly bilingual; indeed many people have a good command of three or four languages. In infancy, most people learn at least one local languages and later learn Bahasa Indonesia at school, in the streets of cities, or on television and radio. It is not clear how many people know Bahasa Indonesia in infancy as their very first language, but at the dawn of the 21st century, it is estimated the number will be increasing. Bahasa Indonesia tends to be most used in the modern environment of major urban areas. The local languages tend to dominate in rural areas and small towns and are mostly used in homes, fields, and markets.

Bahasa Indonesia is the medium of instruction in educational institutions at all levels throughout the country. In the early years of the Republic, local languages continued to be used in some places as the medium of instruction in the first years of primary school. However, this practice has now almost entirely disappeared. In schools and universities, most textbooks are in Bahasa Indonesia. At the tertiary level, especially in highly specialized courses and at the advanced

level of study, textbooks in English are also widely used. Although there are several newspapers in English and Chinese, their circulation is relatively small and Bahasa Indonesia is by far the dominant language in the country's print media. Indonesia's domestic satellite system brings television to almost every corner of the country. Except for some newscasts in English and a small number of cultural programs in regional languages, domestic programs are entirely in Bahasa Indonesia. Almost all programs of foreign origin are dubbed into Bahasa Indonesia or have Bahasa Indonesia subtitles. Similarly, Bahasa Indonesia dominates in the very diverse and vibrant domain of radio broadcasting, although there are a small number of specialist programs in English and some local languages.

In politics, administration and the judiciary, Bahasa Indonesia is the sole official language. It is the language of legislation, political campaigning, national and local government, court proceedings, and the military. In some instances, judges may refer to old statutes and court records in Dutch to help them reach their decisions. In some rural areas of the country, for example in the hinterland of Java and the mountains of West Papua, local languages may also play a role in the administration and the propagation of government policies.

Indonesia hosts a sparkling variety of traditional verbal arts (poetry, historical narratives, romances, drama, etc.) which are expressed in local languages, but modern genres are expressed mainly through Bahasa Indonesia. Modern literature (novels, short stories, stage plays, free-form poetry, etc.) has developed since the late years of the 19th century and has produced such internationally recognized figures as novelists, dramatists, poets, and cinematographers. Indonesian is also the language of the nation's breezy, inventive popular arts: TV melodrama and comedy, pop novels, popular songs, cartoons, and comics.

### **Maintaining foreign in Indonesia**

Maintaining a foreign language for Indonesian people is harder than maintaining and catering foreign language. Before Indonesian independence, there had been some foreign languages imposed by the colonialists to be learned by Indonesian people. Two of them were Dutch and Japanese. During the colonization of the Netherlands, Dutch was introduced by the colonialists to the Indonesian natives. This happened around three and a half centuries. However, as soon as Indonesia got its freedom from the Netherlands, not many Indonesian people maintained and catered to the language. Only the old generation who was enjoying the situation and kept using the Dutch. The young generation did not.

When the Japanese occupied Indonesia for about three and half years, the Japanese government also imposed the Japanese language on the Indonesian people. In such a period, many Indonesian people could communicate in Japanese. This is because of the strict way they implemented the teaching system. As a result, many Indonesians could communicate in Japanese. However, again, when Japan was defeated by the Allied Forces led by America in World War II, the people stopped learning and communicating in Japanese.

The goal of teaching Dutch and Japanese to Indonesian people, especially the aristocratic or noblemen group of Indonesia, was to provide them with the ability to work in government offices. After some periods after the independence, several foreign languages, such as French, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, and English were taught to Indonesian students.

Regarding the length of the colonization, it must be the Dutch that the foreign language was chosen. This is because the Netherlands colonized Indonesia for more than three and a half



centuries. Japanese colonized Indonesia much shorter than that – only three and half years. Referring to the population, the foreign language that must be chosen must be Arabic. This is because almost 90% of the Indonesian population are Muslims. It is reasonable to expect that Arabic should be selected as a foreign language to be taught. However, neither the Dutch, nor the Japanese, nor the Arabic was chosen as a foreign language to be taught for Indonesian students, especially the school run by the Government. Amazingly, the selected foreign language to be taught is English.

Why is English chosen as the primary foreign language to be taught in Indonesian schools. According to B. Kachru (1985a in Kachru and Smith, 2008), English is not only used to communicate in English-speaking countries but also in non-speaking English countries. Kachru and Smith (2008) group the use of English is available in three circles, namely: (1) the Inner-Circle, (2) the Outer-Circle, and (3) the Expanding-Circle. The three categories are then elaborated as follows:

*The inner circle* represents the traditional historical and sociolinguistic bases of English in the regions where it is used as a primary language (including the UK, USA, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand).

*The Outer Circle* represents the regions of the world formerly colonized by Britain and the USA. In these regions, English has been adopted as an additional language for international purposes of administration, education, law, etc (e.g., India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Singapore).

*The Expanding Circle* includes the areas in which English is primarily used as a medium of international communication (e.g. China, Europe, Japan, Korea, the Middle East).

Considering the kinds of English used in those circles, it is clear then that English in Indonesia is not a primary language as it is used in the UK, USA, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. In Indonesia English is not used for international purposes in administration, education, law, etc. Either, as it is practiced in India, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Singapore. English in Indonesia belongs to the Expanding Circle because it is primarily used just as a medium of international communication.

In the events of international scope, the language used is of course a “neutral” English as the medium of communication. What I mean by neutral English here is the English which is used by the majority of educated people, such as doctors, teachers, etc. In other words, the English used should be standard one in the sense that the participants from different language backgrounds and various cultural backgrounds will not misunderstand the message conveyed.

Maintaining and catering to foreign languages in Indonesia is extremely difficult. The main reason for this difficulty is the lack of exposure to the foreign language learned. Without having the ability to communicate in a foreign language, people think that they can still survive. Extra efforts must be made.

## Conclusion

It cannot be denied that Indonesia is multilingual. Local languages are maintained and catered through cultural strategy: handed down from generation to generation naturally. Whereas, foreign languages are maintained mainly through formal education which is run by the Government or by the private. In this way, it is hoped that Indonesia will maintain its status as a multilingual country.

To end this essay, “Maintaining Multilingualism in a Multi Culture Country: the Case of Indonesia,” allow me to quote the following motto introduced and encouraged by *Balai Bahasa* (Language Agency).

1. *Gunakan Bahasa Indonesia* (Use Bahasa Indonesia)
2. *Pertahankan Bahasa daerah* (Maintain local language)
3. *Pelajari Bahasa asing* (Learn foreign language)

### About the Authors:

**Abdul Muth'im** is a Professor in TEFL. He got both his Master degree and Doctor degree from the English Language Education Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. His research interest is TEFL especially issues on writing. Two courses he is teaching now are Academic Reading & Writing, and Research Methods in ELT. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000000208682734>

**Cayandrawati Sutiono** is an Associate Professor in TESL. She got her MA degree from School of Education of the University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA and got her Doctorate degree from the English Department, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. Her research interests are TEFL in general and especially issues on reading. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000000290668156>

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