

**MINANGKAKBAU CHILDREN TO
INDONESIA ADULTS:
Promoting Public policy through Indonesian
Language Teaching in West Sumatra, Indonesia**

**Rebecca Fanany
Z. Mawardi Effendi**

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**MINANGKABAU CHILDREN TO INDONESIAN ADULTS:
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Rebecca Fanany* and Z Mawardi Effendi**

The Indonesian government uses language classes not only to teach school children the Indonesian language but also to convey norms and values for national citizenship. The overall effect of Indonesian language instruction in West Sumatra is to define language domains; convey the state's values, inform students of public policy campaigns, and teach good citizenship.

Introduction: Language In And Out Of School

The Status of Indonesian

The first language of most Indonesian children is not *Bahasa Indonesia*, the national language of their nation, but rather one of the hundreds of local languages (*bahasa daerah*) spoken throughout the archipelago. For this reason, one of the primary goals of the early years of school education in Indonesia is to develop the ability to use Indonesian fluently in an academic setting (Lana, 1993). Throughout the remainder of a student's school career, Indonesian remains a major component of the curriculum, with mastery of the language being closely related to a successful educational outcome.

The magnitude of this task should not be underestimated. The two hundred or so local languages used in Indonesia are not merely dialects of Indonesian, or the closely related Malay, but are distinct languages. Many belong to the Austronesian family of languages, just as Indonesian does, but others do not. Some of the local

* Rebecca Fanany is a lecturer in Indonesian at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. She is currently completing a book on Minang Proverbs to be published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.

** Z Mawardi Effendi is Dean of the Faculty of Social Science Education at IKIP Padang in Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia, where he also heads the Learning Resources Center. He has written extensively on educational delivery systems and locus of control.

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languages are linguistically close to Indonesian, but they are different enough that children need to learn standard Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia Baku*) as a second language.

Language Domains in Indonesia

The existence of language domains has been noted and described by linguists such as Fishman (1972) and Trudgill (1992). The domain of a language, dialect, or style is the set of contexts in which it is used by speakers. In other words, speakers adjust their language use based on the nature of their interaction and switch between languages, or codes, as the situation demands. This ability to code-switch is part of a speaker's mastery of a first language and one of the many aspects of competence in any language.

In Indonesia, the domains, or functional roles, of local languages and Indonesian are distinct and do not overlap. Overwhelmingly, local languages are associated with day to day activities in the home, or with friends and family, and relate to all the commonplace tasks and activities that occupy a large part of most people's time. Indonesian, by contrast, is the language used in formal and official contexts, including official business in the work place, radio and television broadcasts, press reporting, a large majority of books and magazines, and education. Indonesian is also used as the means of communication between those who do not speak the same local language, as on formal public occasions or among Indonesians from different parts of the country (Badudu, 1988).

Not surprisingly, most Indonesians probably have some facility at least in spoken Indonesian, although language ability varies observably across the nation. Additionally, as might be expected, most Indonesians develop at an early age the ability to shift codes, that is, to switch between languages and language varieties according to the situation. Nonetheless, many Indonesians feel most comfortable speaking their local language, particularly at home or in non-official situations (Anwar, 1990).

Language in Education in Indonesia

The language of all Indonesian formal education is *Bahasa Indonesia*, which is a compulsory subject at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in all public and private schools and universities. Children generally do not have much ability in Indonesian when they begin school at age six, so primary school teachers are

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permitted to use the local language if and when required in grades one to three. By the fourth grade, all instruction is expected to be in Indonesian. By the end of the nine years of compulsory instruction, all students are expected to have near-native fluency in Indonesian.

Many children entering school have already been exposed to Indonesian at least through television, but most have had little practice speaking the language and generally cannot do so fluently. Even children whose parents speak two different local languages rarely speak Indonesian as a first language. Most of these children adopt their mother's language, but language use is also influenced by the presence of other family members, by whether the child lives in one of the parents' regions of origin, and by the amount of interaction with the community outside the home. Even if their first language is Indonesian, these children may use a non-standard dialect of the language and need to learn the more formal, standard version in school.

The Indonesian curriculum for each grade covers a combination of national and local topics on a wide variety of subjects. The language curriculum for each grade is prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Much of the material contained in textbooks is produced nationally, as are the standard final examinations. Nonetheless, provincial authorities have a certain amount of control over the curriculum segments known to educators as "local content." Local content lessons contain material felt by the provincial Department of Education to be of significance to children of their region, who may be different in background and ethnic identity than students in other areas. At the primary level, for example, nationally prescribed material deals with national holidays, historical figures and sites, and places of interest throughout the country. Local content at this level might concern local culture, aspects of *adat* (traditional laws and customs), and history of the local ethnic group or groups.

The regional differences in curriculum reflect efforts of provincial authorities to encourage educational outcomes appropriate to local needs. However, these concerns are secondary to the goal of enculturating an orientation to the Indonesian nation. Discussion in the rest of this article concerns the situation in the province of West Sumatra and the Indonesian language materials used in its schools at the present time. These texts are intended to create in students a concept of national identity which centers on the use of Indonesian language in all public contexts.

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Language And Education In West Sumatra

Sociolinguistic Background

The overwhelming majority of the 4.2 million residents of West Sumatra belong to the Minangkabau ethnic group. *Bahasa Minang* is the first language of most Minangkabau, both in West Sumatra and elsewhere in Indonesia. Minang is related to Malay and Indonesian, but linguists usually classify it as a separate language (Omar, 1992). Speakers of Indonesian or Malay cannot grasp more than isolated words when Minang is spoken. The language has four recognizable dialects that identify the speaker's place of origin. The Minang spoken in Padang, the provincial capital, is considered by many Minang to represent the standard dialect (Medan, 1988), and other Indonesians often call the language *Bahasa Padang*, regardless of dialect.

Many non-Minang feel that familiarity with Indonesian is quite high in West Sumatra, even among those with comparatively little formal education. Medan (1988) suggests that adoption of Indonesian in West Sumatra has been slow, but Indonesian-speaking visitors to the province usually find that most people can at least understand Indonesian, even if the locals might be more comfortable speaking Minang.

The province supports one weekly and two daily Indonesian-language newspapers. Numerous Indonesian-language magazines are available around the province. Five national television stations broadcast daily in Indonesian, and most of the many national and local radio stations also use Indonesian.

There are four languages with distinct domains in use in West Sumatra. Indonesian is used for official spoken and written communications of all kinds, including government, education, and the media. It is also used for communication with people outside the Minang community. Minang is spoken in non-official contexts, such as discussion of general topics in family settings and in the workplace. English is the language of the educational elite and serves primarily as a status language rather than a language of communication. Arabic, the language of religion, is used in a range of greetings and exclamations and also for daily prayers and the Friday sermon in mosques. Its use wins the speaker acceptance in his social group. Code switching among these four languages is common.

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Rates of participation in education are high in West Sumatra. There are more than 5100 public and private primary and secondary schools under the supervision of the Department of Education and Culture (*Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan*) in West Sumatra, and an additional 501 religious primary and secondary schools are overseen by the Department of Religion (*Departemen Agama*) (BPS, 1994). The Minangkabau culture traditionally places a high value on education and learning (Bappeda, 1993; Navis, 1984). In 1992, for example, 96.25% of West Sumatran children aged 7-12 were enrolled in some kind of school (Bappeda, 1993).

Indonesian Language Materials in West Sumatra

Primary school lessons in language texts consist of readings followed by comprehension activities. At higher levels, students are introduced to more complex readings, are taught Indonesian grammar, and are given practice in literacy skills such as letter writing, filling out forms, and understanding classified advertisements. Some higher level lessons require students to do research about the topic of the lesson. For example, a lesson about the function of community health centers might require students to visit a health center to learn about the services provided there. Other lessons introduce students to words and symbols associated with public education campaigns, asking them to find these symbols in their own community.

Public policy campaigns feature prominently in language textbooks. In West Sumatra, one of the most commonly mentioned campaigns, especially at the primary level, is health promotion. The texts cover all of the health promotion campaigns running in the province, including environmental hygiene, use of public health facilities, maternal and child health, family planning, and traffic safety. Junior and senior high school textbooks deal with additional public policy issues such as transmigration, use of village level cooperatives, and appropriate public behavior.

Upper level language texts in West Sumatra cover many topics that most English-speaking countries would not include in language classes. High school English classes in English-speaking countries focus on classic and modern literature. But Indonesian language texts also discuss agriculture, industry, sports, work, energy, government, botany, and natural resources. This is because Minang children are expected to study all these subjects exclusively in Indonesian. Since they tend not to use Indonesian outside of school,

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the Indonesian class is the only place they are likely to develop the linguistic tools needed for their studies.

The Effects Of Indonesian Language Instruction

Defining Language Domains

People in West Sumatra normally use Indonesian to discuss matters relating to family planning, health, citizenship and the like. Language textbooks have fixed these topics within the domain of Indonesian as the language of public, official, and formal discourse. Minang, on the other hand, better fits the traditions of matrilineal West Sumatran society. Concepts of traditional leadership and government, individual conduct and family relationships, and the behavior prescribed by *adat* can all be expressed easily and appropriately in Minang. Minang lacks specific vocabulary for many of the public policy topics covered in Indonesian language materials, though these issues can be discussed in general terms or with occasional Indonesian borrowings.

When the two domains come together in a discussion, speakers sometimes switch back and forth between languages. *Adat* leaders and Minang experts in the fields of traditions and customs often attempt to reconcile the demands of the modern Indonesian state with the principles of Minangkabau tradition (see, for example, Hakimy, 1984). Most seek a national identity as Indonesians and a personal identification as Minang. Code switching between the languages reflects this double identity. For instance, Hakimy (1984), as part of a discussion of the role of the wife as head of the family, states that the wife should "[Indonesian] make sure that government programs relating to a happy household run as they are supposed to by participating in family planning that is [Minang] possible and appropriate and in accordance with custom and does not violate the traditions of the community" (1984:98)¹. In this example, the author uses Indonesian when speaking of government family planning programs and Minang when speaking of custom and tradition, as would be expected from the language domains imparted by the schools.

¹ The original of this quote is: "mengatur terlaksananya program pemerintah rumah tangga bahagia dengan pelaksanaan keluarga berencana (KB) yang disesuaikan dengan mungkin jo patuik, manuruik alua nan luruih dan manampua jalan nan pasa" (Hakimy, 1984:98). The boldface section is in Indonesian; the regular type is in Minang.

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Teaching the State's Values

Education has traditionally been viewed as a matter of instilling in students the knowledge, skills, and values considered important in their society (Silberman, 1970). In the west, concerns about increasing cultural diversity have led to an "erosion" of authoritative cultural understanding and a shift away from explicit teaching of values and ideals (Hum, 1985). This has not happened in Indonesia. In Indonesia, education aims to give students the essentials for responsible membership in the Indonesian nation. Many aspects of government policy and attitudes, public conduct, and the norms of Indonesian society are taught through Indonesian language study.

The effect on Minangkabau children is two-fold. First, they learn to express their thoughts on these topics in Indonesian, becoming familiar with the way they are discussed in the press and other public forums. Indonesian classes make them aware of symbols and acronyms associated with agencies such as those for family planning and health. They also become familiar with slogans and catchwords used in public education campaigns on safety, public conduct, and health. Meanwhile, they learn ways of speaking and writing about all of these topics in Indonesian. Thus, while learning Indonesian, children also learn how to communicate about specific public policy issues.

The second effect of acquiring citizenship awareness through language classes is that children learn to think in ways promoted by the government. For example, language lessons encourage Minang children to make use of public facilities, to not litter, to behave responsibly when walking or driving, and to respect the national philosophy and leaders. Children spend a great deal of time talking and writing about public education campaigns in their language classes. The texts frequently concern family planning programs run by the national family planning agency, *Badan Koordinasi Keluarga Berencana Nasional*, and this emphasis has had a noticeable effect. Most westerners hesitate to discuss birth control in general conversations, but Minang readily discuss it in detail in Indonesian even though other personal matters are not approached so openly.

² If a person has but one or two children, Indonesians commonly respond by saying that the speaker must have used birth control. Likewise, Indonesians often cite birth control as the reason they have few or no children. This kind of forthrightness about birth control is rare among English speakers, especially when speaking to strangers.

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Family planning falls sociolinguistically within the domain of Indonesian, and Minang may not feel the same reticence about this topic that they might in their native language, because the topic has become desensitized for them in their second language.

Conclusion

In many cultures, education acts as a modernizing force that teaches children norms and attitudes that are required in a modern society but that are inappropriate or unnecessary in a traditional society (Hurn, 1985). Education in developing nations has been observed to promote innovation rather than tradition and to foster reliance on new knowledge and experience rather than on custom (Inkeles and Smith, 1974). This is the case in West Sumatra, and in Indonesia in general, where Indonesian language teaching reinforces the use of Indonesian as the language of official public discourse and fosters in individuals the development of an Indonesian identity alongside their personal Minangkabau ethnic identity. The public policy content of Indonesian language texts attests to the government's emphasis on education for good citizenship. The use of Indonesian lessons to give students information on public policy instills in children the message that as Indonesian citizens they must not only read, write, speak, and understand Indonesian, but also be conversant in the attitudes and views needed to take their place as Indonesian adults.

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