

# As English Spreads, Indonesians Fear for Their Language

By Norimitsu Onishi

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Paulina Sugiarto's three children played together at a mall here the other day, chattering not in Indonesia's national language, but English. Their fluency often draws admiring questions from other Indonesian parents Ms. Sugiarto encounters in this city's upscale malls.

But the children's ability in English obscured the fact that, though born and raised in Indonesia, they were struggling with the Indonesian language, known as Bahasa Indonesia. Their parents, who grew up speaking the Indonesian language but went to college in the United States and Australia, talk to their children in English. And the children attend a private school where English is the main language of instruction. "They know they're Indonesian," Ms. Sugiarto, 34, said. "They love Indonesia. They just can't speak Bahasa Indonesia. It's tragic."

Indonesia's linguistic legacy is increasingly under threat as growing numbers of wealthy and upper-middle-class families shun public schools where Indonesian remains the main language but English is often taught poorly. They are turning, instead, to private schools that focus on English and devote little time, if any, to Indonesian.

For some Indonesians, as mastery of English has become increasingly tied to social standing, Indonesian has been relegated to second-class status. In extreme cases, people take pride in speaking Indonesian poorly.

The global spread of English, with its sometimes corrosive effects on local languages, has caused much hand-wringing in many non-English-speaking corners of the world. But the implications may be more far-reaching in Indonesia, where generations of political leaders promoted Indonesian to unite the nation and forge a national identity out of countless ethnic groups, ancient cultures and disparate dialects.

The government recently announced that it would require all private schools to teach the nation's official language to its Indonesian students by 2013. Details remain sketchy, though.

"These schools operate here, but don't offer Bahasa to our citizens," said Suyanto, who oversees primary and secondary education at the Education Ministry. "If we don't regulate them, in the long run this could be dangerous for the continuity of our language," said Mr. Suyanto, who like many Indonesians uses one name. "If this big country doesn't have a strong language to unite it, it could be dangerous."

The seemingly reflexive preference for English has begun to attract criticism in the popular culture. Last year, a woman, whose father is Indonesian and her mother American, was crowned Miss Indonesia despite her poor command of Indonesian. The judges were later denounced in the news media and in the blogosphere for being impressed by her English fluency and for disregarding the fact that, despite growing up here, she needed interpreters to translate the judges' questions.

In 1928, nationalists seeking independence from Dutch rule chose Indonesian, a form of Malay, as the language of civic unity. While a small percentage of educated Indonesians spoke Dutch, Indonesian became the preferred language of intellectuals. Each language had a social rank, said Arief Rachman, an education expert. “If you spoke Javanese, you were below,” he said, referring to the main language on the island of Java. “If you spoke Indonesian, you were a bit above. If you spoke Dutch, you were at the top.”

Leaders, especially Suharto, the general who ruled Indonesia until 1998, enforced teaching of Indonesian and curbed use of English. “During the Suharto era, Bahasa Indonesia was the only language that we could see or read. English was at the bottom of the rung,” said Aimee Dawis, who teaches communications at Universitas Indonesia. “It was used to create a national identity, and it worked, because all of us spoke Bahasa Indonesia. Now the dilution of Bahasa Indonesia is not the result of a deliberate government policy. It’s just occurring naturally.”

With Indonesia’s democratization in the past decade, experts say, English became the new Dutch. Regulations were loosened, allowing Indonesian children to attend private schools that did not follow the national curriculum, but offered English. The more expensive ones, with tuition costing several thousand dollars a year, usually employ native speakers of English, said Elena Racho, vice chairwoman of the Association of National Plus Schools, an umbrella organization for private schools.

But with the popularity of private schools booming, hundreds have opened in recent years, Ms. Racho said. The less expensive ones, unable to hire foreigners, are often staffed with Indonesians teaching all subjects in English, if often imperfect English, she added. Many children attending those schools end up speaking Indonesian poorly, experts said. Uchu Riza — who owns a private school that teaches both languages and also owns the local franchise of Kidzania, an amusement park where children can try out different professions — said some Indonesians were willing to sacrifice Indonesian for a language with perceived higher status. “Sometimes they look down on people who don’t speak English,” she said. She added: “In some families, the grandchildren cannot speak with the grandmother because they don’t speak Bahasa Indonesia. That’s sad.”

Anna Surti Ariani, a psychologist who provides counseling at private schools and in her own practice, said some parents even displayed “a negative pride” that their children spoke poor Indonesian. Schools typically advise the parents to speak to their children in English at home even though the parents may be far from fluent in the language. “Sometimes the parents even ask the baby sitters not to speak in Indonesian but in English,” Ms. Ariani said.

It is a sight often seen in this city’s malls on weekends: Indonesian parents addressing their children in sometimes halting English, followed by nannies using what English words they know.

But Della Raymena Jovanka, 30, a mother of two preschoolers, has developed misgivings. Her son Fathiy, 4, attended an English play group and was enrolled in a kindergarten focusing on English; Ms. Jovanka allowed him to watch only English TV programs.

The result was that her son responded to his parents only in English and had difficulties with Indonesian. Ms. Jovanka was considering sending her son to a regular public school next year. But friends and relatives were pressing her to choose a private school so that her son could become fluent in English.

Asked whether she would rather have her son become fluent in English or Indonesian, Ms. Jovanka said, "To be honest, English. But this can become a big problem in his socialization. He's Indonesian. He lives in Indonesia. If he can't communicate with people, it'll be a big problem."

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