

# **The Trends of Using English Among Indonesian Youngsters: A threat or an opportunity?**

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## **Introduction**

It is undeniable that English is the international language which is spoken by about fourth times speakers other than its native speakers (Jenkins, 2006 as cited in Caine, 2008). English with its variations has been accepted as the lingua franca of business, politics and everyday communication. This phenomenon can also be observed in Indonesia. Although it is not as widely used as it is in –probably- Malaysia, English has touched many aspects of life in Indonesia. It is quite common today to find shopping centres, offices, institutions, movies, and so on, in English, rather than in Bahasa Indonesia. More interestingly, many people, especially youngsters, are used to inserting English expressions in their conversation.

In view of this trend, ELT in Indonesia should have been pleased with the progress of getting Indonesian youngsters more exposed to English beyond the classroom confinement. However, is it a sign of success, or a ‘symptom’ of linguistic imperialism (Pennycook, 1994)?

Building on this concern of whether the use of English is a threat or an opportunity to ELT in Indonesia, the paper discusses the phenomenon, its effects, and its implication to the teaching of English in Indonesian context. Deriving from related studies such as language acquisition and linguistic imperialism, it will elaborate on how this phenomenon can be used to redirect the course of ELT in Indonesia. It is believed that the use of local literature and cultural comparison can minimize the negative effects as well as promote the dignity of Indonesian culture.

## **Theoretical Framework**

There are three points that will be dealt in this section. The first one is the spread of English; the second is the challenge English brings to the indigenous languages; and the third is its impact to EFL teaching.

### **a. The spread of English**

Kachru (1996) divides the spread of English into several phases, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which saw the spread of English to the British Isles. It was in the

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third phase, the Raj phase, that English spread to South Asia, South East Asia, and Africa. English is the fastest spreading language in history by far. It was spoken by some 5 million people in the early days of colonialism. By 1930, the number had risen to 200 million, and sixty years later, it was estimated that about 700 million people speak English (Jandt, 1998) either as first, second, or foreign language.

Due to the colonial expansion and the role of United Kingdom and, especially, United States in the twentieth century, English has grown to be the language of science, politics and popular culture (Graddol, 1997). Nevertheless, Kachru (1996) and Bhatt (2001) believe that the spread of English has given the 'pluricentric' nature of language for it also brought cultural, linguistic, and literary reincarnation of the English language (as cited in Caine, 2008). Therefore, although English is fairly influential in many parts of the world, it is concurrently influenced by the local cultural diversity. Hence the English variations emerged.

#### b. The Challenge

Since the Raj phase saw the English colonialism in Asia and Africa regions, Philipson (1992) asserts the prevalent imperialism in the language dominance within the previously colonized regions. He suspects the "continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.". The global use of English may improve communication all over the world while at the same time limits the exchange to those without access to English (Caine, 2008). The unequal status of languages also seems to prevail the power structure. In other words, only those able to speak English will get better positions and opportunities in life.

In addition, the rising number of people speaking English is inversely proportional to the number of people speaking other language. Jandt (1998) asserts that many of the world's 600 languages are on the verge of extinction. More and more children are unaware of their own native languages. It calls UNO's attention to dub 21 February as the Indigenous Language Day so that we are alert of this critical matter.

#### c. The Impacts

The global spread of English and its challenge resulted in different perspective of teaching EFL. Kachru (1996, as cited in Caine, 2008) suggests the slaughters of five sacred cows of English: the acquisitional cow, theoretical cow, pedagogical cow, sociolinguistic cow, and ideological cow. Kachru questions the concepts of language acquisition which promote native speaker proficiency as the standard of English language learners. Furthermore, he suggests professionals to reconsider the definition of native speakers. Meanwhile, in sacrificing pedagogical cow, professionals must change methods and material to reflect sensitivity towards local context. In sacrificing sociolinguistic cow, teachers should acknowledge the pluricentricity of Englishes, which means using more linguistic and literary cultural

identity. Finally, the last sacrifice is to encourage the power of English for the benefits of the users.

Although it is gaining less support, the native-like standard of proficiency still persist among the native and non-native speakers (Caine, 2008). Matsuda (2003), McKay (2003) and others propose then that such distinction should be eliminated. Without the binary of native/non-native, it is hoped that EFL teachers and learners will free themselves from worry and engage more with the dynamic use of English.

## Analysis and Discussion

A survey to 20 college students found that most of them are aware that they often insert English in their conversation. There are several reasons to why they use English in such a way:

- Spontaneity  
They often hear the words or expressions such as: *thanks, sorry, O My God* and know how to use it contextually since it is similar in Indonesian contexts.
- Inability to find Indonesian equivalence  
Words and expressions such as: *exposure, down-load, on line*, are better put in English since the terms are not familiar in Bahasa Indonesia.
- Practicality  
This is especially used in sms and email. Many are already familiar with abbreviations of 'u' (you), 'tq/thx' (thank you/thanks), 'b' (be), '4' (for), 'otw' (on the way)
- Prestige  
Although reluctant to admit, some agree that it is more prestigious or they think people will appreciate more if they use English. It shows that they sound or look educated. It looks like Philipson's assumption is correct: the structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.
- Practice  
It happens to English major students. Many try to practice English outside the classroom because they believe it will help improve their English skills.

Regarding this phenomenon, the use of English posits two possibilities: Is it a threat or an opportunity to EFL teaching? How would you feel or think when you, the EFL teachers, hear or read such mixed language? The professional ears and mind will be itchy to correct the mistakes –probably. On the other hand, what is wrong with using Bahasa Indonesia when the context is appropriate? It seems that we are discriminative toward our own language. Many start to look down Bahasa as inappropriate and inadequate. Is it a sign of language imperialism??

The use of 'broken' English in such a way first and foremost endangers the position of Bahasa Indonesia. If many youngsters do not bother enough to use Bahasa Indonesia appropriately, the language may disappear. The sign of language loss has been taken place in other indigenous language like Sundanese. Since Bahasa Indonesia is considered easier, and less hierarchical, many Sundanese do not speak the language fluently anymore. Will similar thing happen to Bahasa Indonesia if people start to believe that English is easier than Bahasa Indonesia?

In addition, the use of English may affect the youngsters' attitude towards both languages and culture. From the survey, it is seen that some youngsters, ranged from reluctantly to confidently, think that it is cool to use English. In other words, it is *not* cool to use Bahasa Indonesia? Even if there are equivalent words in Bahasa Indonesia, they do not bother to use them. According to Wikipedia, **Linguistic imperialism**, or **language imperialism**, "involves the transfer of a dominant [language](#) to other peoples. The transfer is essentially a demonstration of [power](#) — traditionally, [military power](#) but also, in the modern world, [economic power](#) — and aspects of the dominant [culture](#) are usually transferred along with the language." So, when Indonesian youngsters start to believe that English is much better than Bahasa Indonesia, it follows that they may adopt the culture of English easily. There is a tendency that they use English to show that they are fashionable, modern.

Besides, the use of English is usually in broken expressions, not in full sentences. It is a matter of inserting one word or phrase of English instead of Bahasa Indonesia in the youngster's speech or writings. This kind of English damages the structure of the language. Furthermore, it will probably be accepted if the English expressions are correct and appropriate. But it is quite another, when the expressions are neither correct nor appropriate. With all due respect, Kachru would not think it sociolinguistically flexible.

Nonetheless, the use of English like this can be an opportunity to improve EFL learners' skills. As Brown (2001) asserts that it will be beneficial to get authentic materials, this phenomenon provides exposures for students to explore. Teachers can obtain real examples of English use so that learners can discuss why should or why should not such expressions be used. Although Kachru (1996) discourages the concepts of errors inherent in language acquisition theory, there is no harm to introduce learners to what appropriate or inappropriate in accepted international communication.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of using English should be taken positively as the way to enrich Bahasa Indonesia. Just like English which is influenced by other languages such as German, French, Hindi, and Hebrew, Bahasa Indonesia can benefit from the growing influence of English. When some English

terms are more familiar and concise than their Indonesian counterparts, why not use them?

Accordingly, how to change the threat into opportunity in EFL teaching learning? The key is to think positively and reflect it in the EFL teaching. Errors, when they hinder understanding, should be treated immediately. It does not have to take native-like as the standard. It is adequate when the meaning is conveyed easily. Caine's paper (2008) about the case in Japan, shows that exposure to different variations of English enables learners to be more confident in using English, provided they are in supportive atmosphere of learning.

However, it doesn't mean we drop all the grammatical and discourse convention. To certain extent, the use of what so called 'standard English' should be maintained not because it is the best one; instead it is the reason of readability. As there is no direct communication in writing text, there is no other way than to understand what is printed. It follows then to stick to the linguistic competence.

Another way to change the threat of losing one's identity is to introduce local culture and literature in EFL classroom. Just like what many researchers (Rampton (2002), Cook (1999), etc.) believe, sociocultural contexts enable learners to reflect their own place in the society and international world. Local culture and literature provide a sense of belonging and pride. And when it is taught well, it provides critical literacy towards power and dominance.

More importantly, however, EFL classroom should provide a safe and supportive atmosphere in which the learners feel encouraged to learn, to converse, and to discuss in English.

## **Conclusion**

The trend of using English among Indonesian youngsters is a common phenomenon since English has grown to be the means of communication internationally. Whether we like it or not, English will play a greater part in conversation. It can be a threat to both languages, Bahasa Indonesia and English if it is not treated well and immediately. However, the trend can be an opportunity to improve both languages provided EFL professionals aware of the importance of sociocultural contexts as suggested by researchers and scholars. The sociocultural context enables learners to acknowledge their own culture as well as the different variations of English. It finally helps learners to engage in English better.

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