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Literacy in English and the transformation of self and society in Post-Soeharto Indonesia

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Among several hundred indigenous languages, Bahasa Indonesia gained pre-eminence as the national language of Indonesia during the country's first 50 years of independence. The fall of Soeharto in 1998 and the subsequent devolution of power to the regions might have been expected to lead to a resurgence in use of local languages but instead it appears to be English which is filling the ecological spaces. Propagated by government, demanded by employers, broadcast by the media, imposed by schools and encouraged by parents, the language not surprisingly occupies an important space in the developing mindset of many young Indonesians, going far beyond its actual practical value in daily life. Drawing on two empirical studies in Sumatra, one a large-scale evaluation of educational provision, the other a case study of English learning at school, the paper shows how the degree of investment which young Indonesians make in the language is not solely a matter of personal agency but is constrained by inequalities in the distribution of cultural, social and economic capital. Unless radical curriculum changes are introduced, the spread of English may in the long-term only serve to deepen these inequalities.

Keywords: Literacy, identity, sociocultural context, multilingualism, social inequality

Introduction: The linguistic ecology of post-Soeharto Indonesia

Sometimes referred to as the 'sleeping giant' of Southeast Asia, Indonesia is the fourth largest nation in the world with a population of almost 240 million (Gordon, 2005). Furthermore, although it is not an Islamic state, it has the largest Muslim population in the world. In such a large country, linguistic diversity is to be expected: Indonesia is currently estimated to have 737 living languages, or nearly 11% of the 6900 living languages in the world (Gordon, 2005).

1. Bahasa Indonesia

Among all of these languages, Indonesian or *Bahasa Indonesia* has a unique and privileged position. A sequence of events during the first half of the twentieth century created the conditions which enabled *Bahasa Indonesia* to achieve this position. Malay – originally a trading language which existed in a number of varieties in major urban areas – was made an official language of the Dutch East Indies in 1918 (Moeliono, 1993), primarily because the colonial authorities were concerned that if Dutch was widely used then the population would have too easy access to ideas from abroad (Alisjahbana, 1978:125). By the late 1920s the nascent Indonesian nationalist movement had identified Malay as the common language of all Indonesians: in 1928 the Second Indonesian Youth Congress renamed Malay as *Bahasa Indonesia* and declared that it was to be the language of national unity. The next crucial stage was the Japanese occupation of Indonesia between 1942 and 1945. The Japanese

authorities decreed that no European languages were to be used in the occupied territories but, pragmatically, they also recognised that in the short term it would be impossible to introduce Japanese as the language of public administration. It was therefore decided that *Bahasa Indonesia* should be used for all public purposes. Alisjahbana describes vividly how, almost overnight, Indonesians were required by their Japanese masters to use *Bahasa Indonesia* in many contexts where it had never been used before (Alisjahbana, 1978:126-127). Finally, the declaration of independence in 1945 was accompanied by a decision that *Bahasa Indonesia* was to be the national language (Daud, 1996).

Thereafter, in a relatively short period of time Indonesian went through a process of standardisation and was adopted as the sole language for use in parliament, government, the law, almost all levels of education (including higher education), commerce, the cinema, and all national and much local press and broadcasting (Alisjahbana, 1978). In 1992 it was calculated that 60% of the population of Indonesia spoke *Bahasa Indonesia* (Errington, 1992). By 2000 there were estimated to be approximately 23 million native speakers of *Bahasa Indonesia* (11% of the population) and up to 140 million second language speakers, approximately 68% of the population (Gordon, 2005).¹

From one perspective, then, *Bahasa Indonesia* would seem to have achieved an unassailable position as the language of central government, of national unity and of modernisation. Indeed, the adoption of *Bahasa Indonesia* has been described by Joshua Fishman (1978:333) as a “linguistic miracle” and “the envy of the multilingual world”.²

Yet there is little evidence that Indonesians themselves share this enthusiasm for what has been achieved with their language. Its rapid growth and its successful adoption in so many areas of activity are apparently taken for granted, and many people are somewhat dismissive of what is perceived to be (in comparison with English) a ‘simple’ language. One possible explanation for the absence of overt pride in the national language is the fact that, for most of its speakers, *Bahasa Indonesia* is a second language and thus not an identity marker in the same way that a first language might be assumed to be. Another cause may be found in the way that *Bahasa Indonesia* is taught in schools, stressing the importance of memorising rhetorical and syntactical categories of analysis. The school syllabus also emphasises the prescriptive concept of a *Bahasa Indonesia* which is ‘*baik dan benar*’ (‘good and correct’).

2. The other indigenous languages

What then of Indonesia’s other indigenous languages? Table 1, drawing on several independent surveys carried out between 1989 and 2001, lists the country’s ten most widely spoken local languages.

¹ Adult literacy was estimated by UNESCO to have reached 92.5% among males and 83.4% among females by 2002-2003 (www.uis.unesco.org/profiles/EN/GEN/3600.html accessed on 20th November 2005). This makes sense only if literacy in languages other than *Bahasa Indonesia* is also included.

² However, Schiffman (2004) notes wryly that perhaps part of Indonesia’s success in rejecting the former colonial language can be attributed to the fact that it was Dutch and not English that was being rejected.

Table 1 Ten most widely used local languages in Indonesia (all from Gordon, 2005)

Language	Speakers (million)	Year of survey
Jawa	75	1989
Sunda	27	1990
Madura	14	1995
Minang	7	1981
Batak (various dialects)	6	1989-1991
Banjar	5	2001
Bali	4	2001
Bugis	4	1991
Aceh	3	1999
Betawi	3	1993

By far the most widely used of the local languages is Javanese (*Bahasa Jawa*). In 1989 there were already estimated to be more than 75 million speakers (Gordon, 2005), with the majority concentrated in Central and East Java and in a considerable number of small pockets in and around government established population resettlement (*transmigrasi*) districts in rural areas throughout the country. At the other extreme there are many languages with very small numbers of speakers. An example is Bukat, a language of Central Kalimantan, which in 1981 was estimated to have just 400 speakers (Gordon, 2005).

Multilingualism, in one guise or another, is widespread and is considered to be unexceptional. However, it is a complex phenomenon in the Indonesian context and has been insufficiently studied. Most commonly it is manifested as L1 mastery of a local language with *Bahasa Indonesia* (learnt at school) used as L2. Another common form is found in families of mixed parentage, where two local languages (with or without *Bahasa Indonesia*) are used in the home.

But it is important not to exaggerate the extent of multilingualism. There is a growing number of people, especially in urban areas, who are monolingual in *Bahasa Indonesia*. And in many rural areas throughout the country there are still considerable pockets of people – particularly older and less well educated groups – who are monolingual in their local language. If the estimates provided by Gordon (above) are to be believed, then there must be approximately 80 million people (32% of the population) who do not use *Bahasa Indonesia* either as a first or as a second language (though they may have studied it in primary school).³

Throughout the Soeharto regime (1966-1998) Indonesia was governed through a multilayered but highly centralistic system. The regional languages received little attention during this period⁴ and *Bahasa Indonesia* was employed as one of many centralising instruments (together with a tightly controlled national curriculum for

³ Nevertheless, some of these non-users of *Bahasa Indonesia* may be multilingual in two or more local languages.

⁴ Nominally, use of six of the major local languages was tolerated in the first few years of primary education, although this was not encouraged. In reality many primary school teachers – especially in the early years – have always used the local language as medium of instruction, and they continue to do so. But there are very few published teaching materials to support this use of the mother tongue.

schools, a government political movement which remained in power throughout this period, a conspicuous role for the military in civic life, and so on).

Following the collapse of the Soeharto government and the birth of democracy, a radical government decentralisation process was introduced. This process is still ongoing. As in other contexts where totalitarian regimes have fallen, it has been accompanied by a growth in local pride which is expressed through demands for the break up of provinces and districts into much smaller ethnically-based units. It might be assumed, then, that this movement towards regional autonomy would be accompanied by a resurgence of pride in and use of local languages but in fact this has yet to be seen.⁵ Some private radio stations have been using the major local languages for many years, but the new privately owned regional television stations are tending not to: for example, Banten TV uses *Bahasa Indonesia* whilst JakTV (Jakarta) broadcasts largely in English (of which more later). (Exceptionally, Bali TV uses both *Bahasa Bali* and *Bahasa Indonesia*.) Similarly, despite the potential value of widespread L1 literacy for local informal economies (Bruthiaux, 2002), there is little evidence of moves to introduce local languages into provincial primary school curricula.

Moreover, not only are the local languages ignored by the media and the education system, but there is evidence that in fact many of them are under threat of extinction. Kraus draws a “grimly pessimistic conclusion about the number of languages [in Indonesia] which soon will be counted among those no longer learned by children, if they are not already in that state of decline” (1998:6).

3. *Non-indigenous languages*

In addition to the 737 indigenous languages which we have been discussing, three languages which originate from outside Indonesia also play significant – and very different – roles. These are Arabic, Chinese and English.

Arabic, as the language of Islam, is used on a daily basis by an estimated 170 million⁶ Indonesians in their obligatory prayers and for a multitude of other religious functions. Individual competence in the language covers a broad spectrum, from pure memorisation of the prayers through to fluency in all skills.

The public use of Chinese was banned during the Soeharto era.⁷ This restriction has now been removed and the Indonesian Chinese population are once again free to publish and broadcast in any language they choose. Mandarin has become a popular optional subject in some urban schools.

⁵ In 2003, one of the authors interviewed the Provincial Head of Planning in a newly created province regarding the number of local languages to be found in that province and what plans there were, if any, to use these mother tongues in the education process. The official found the questions amusing and replied, ‘Let’s get the economy sorted out first before we start worrying about minor languages in rural areas.’ Crystal (2000:103-105) discusses the difficulty of responding to this type of argument.

⁶ Library of Congress Country Studies, <http://islam.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http%3A%2F%2Floc.gov%2Ffrd%2Fcs%2Fidtoc.html> accessed on 24th November 2005.

⁷ In the mid-1970s one author observed a notice next to a public telephone in Kendari, Sulawesi, which read, ‘No Chinese to be spoken into this phone’.

English was formally identified as the ‘first foreign language’ of Indonesia shortly after independence in 1945. In this way, the former colonial languages of Dutch and Japanese were explicitly rejected. English thus became a compulsory subject in the secondary school curriculum from the early years of independence and it continues to be a subject which is considered to be of major significance.

It is not only through conscious policy-making, however, that English has gained its present authority and prestige in Indonesian society; it has become essential “cultural capital for an information-driven global world” (Gee, Allen & Clinton, 2001: 176). The evolving labour market puts a high value on proficiency in English, as seen in the English language job advertisements in the national broadsheets as well as the language qualifications demanded by much less prestigious posts advertised in local newspapers. As in most other Southeast Asian countries (Nunan, 2003), English has assumed a gate-keeping role in diverse work environments. Meanwhile, even in remote areas of the country television broadcasts the language into the home and music on the radio fills the airwaves with its tones. New products are increasingly labelled and promoted in English. For example, an article in the respected Jakarta daily *Kompas* noted a growing tendency for novels aimed at the teenage market to have titles in English, even though they are written in *Bahasa Indonesia*. Examples include *Jakarta Undercover* by Moammar Emka, *Me vs High Heels* (Maria Ardelia) and *Eiffel, I’m in Love* (Rachmania Arunita).⁸ Computers for work and play are further expanding the range of valued English literacy skills.

As its economic and cultural stock rises, the language flows into new areas of the education system – into the entrance requirements of prestigious universities, for example, and into primary schools in towns across the country. Coleman and Pudjiastuti (1995) examined what happened when the Indonesian national curriculum was modified in the mid-1990s to encourage provinces, districts and individual schools to develop their own ‘local content’ (*muatan lokal*) for 30% of teaching time. The expectation of the Ministry of Education & Culture had been that this time for local content would be used to develop either locally appropriate vocational skills or traditional arts. However, Coleman and Pudjiastuti found that in fact in many parts of the country the ‘local content’ time in the primary school curriculum was being used to teach English. Although still officially not part of the primary school curriculum the teaching of English in primary schools is now widespread. In short, by the beginning of the 21st century, English was already widely recognised as a key to social and economic advancement, such that a Sumatran teacher felt able to say to her pupils: “It’s already past the year 2000, everything and everyone uses English, if you don’t know English, you are nothing!”⁹

Drawing on two recently-conducted empirical studies of education in Sumatra, the rest of this paper investigates some of the processes by which this important cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) is acquired. In Bourdieu’s social theory, “education is....a game where social inequalities are reproduced in ways that are systematically misrecognised” (Grenfell & James, 1998: 22). It should not be a surprise to find, therefore, that despite its apparent availability to all in the national curriculum,

⁸ www.kompas.com/kompas%2Dcetak/0510/02/kehidupan/2096001.htm published on 2nd October 2005, accessed on 20th November 2005.

⁹ Recorded by one of the authors in Jambi, 2002.

literacy in English is a prize competed for with most vigour by already socially and economically advantaged sections of society.

The state of state education

The first study was a large-scale survey of state education in the province of Riau, commissioned by the then provincial governor, carried out by a team of researchers from a British university in cooperation with three local researchers, two of whom were serving secondary school teachers of English. The survey utilized a number of different data sources. Available official statistics were analyzed and visits were made to all the main organizations responsible for delivering state education in the province. The survey team visited a total of 64 schools from Primary to Senior High, selected to represent a range of quality levels based on their national examination results. In each school interviews were carried out with headteachers or their representatives. In some schools teachers and pupils were interviewed too, and a range of subject classes were observed. In addition, a questionnaire was completed by almost 200 headteachers which elicited facts about their schools and their views on the main challenges they faced.

Although not specifically targeting English, the survey revealed severe and increasing structural imbalances in the provision of language education in the province.

1. Local autonomy

In the years since the fall of Soeharto in 1998, the decentralization of power has intensified in education as in other fields (Bjork, 2004). A theme running through the Riau survey was of a few individual actors taking the initiative to improve their situation, while the majority were content to carry on as before. While individuals have always made a difference even in the most comprehensive of education systems, the novel opportunities provided by regional autonomy were beginning to create visible differences in educational provision. For example, the head of a district education office was able in his first few months in the post to, amongst other things, increase the salary of his supervisors by 600%, lobby the central government for funding for two new secondary schools, and enable diploma-holding teachers to upgrade their qualifications to degree level. A dynamic primary school headteacher in the provincial capital Pekanbaru had introduced several innovations, notably extra-curricular English lessons for pupils in cooperation with a local private language college – the college teachers taught, and the school teachers acted as classroom assistants. He admitted that without the enthusiastic support of parents, such reforms could not have succeeded.

As the survey report points out (Coleman *et al.*, 2004: 59), while some Indonesian children will be benefiting from these individual initiatives, new policies of autonomy have brought with them “considerable confusion” leading to “duplication of work, lack of accountability, waste of resources and uncertainty and inconsistency.” Bjork (2004) makes the point that many educators, socialized during the Soeharto period, regard the devolution reforms as merely another central government edict to which the usual safe response is verbal acquiescence without any significant change in behaviour.

Other aspects of regional autonomy may be adversely affecting the poorest sections of society. Although state education is supposedly free, the Riau survey shows that parents are in fact having to pay increasing amounts of money for their children's schooling and this can help dissuade some in poorer areas from sending their children to school at all. Such costs include "registration and re-registration fees, school fees (which may be given a euphemistic name such as 'development contribution'), purchase of uniforms, purchase of textbooks, examination fees, graduation fees" (Coleman *et al.*, 2004: 46).

Meanwhile, elements of competition are being introduced into the system, at different levels. In some districts, schools are encouraged to compete against each other for the best pupils, through TV advertising and the introduction of special selection exams, for instance. Within some schools, headteachers are introducing streaming by creating 'Prestige classes' (*Kelas Unggul*) for high performing students and 'Acceleration classes' (*Kelas Akselerasi*) which cover the curriculum in fewer years than normal classes. Membership of these classes usually entails extra costs and longer school hours, but endows pupils with academic self-confidence, the best classrooms and the often the best teachers.

2. Teaching quality

Despite a 300% increase in early 2001, teachers' income is still extremely low. The Riau report (Coleman *et al.*, 2004: 73) considers that "many of the problems facing the education system in Riau – and in other parts of Indonesia – stem from this fact." Low morale inevitably affects performance, and headteachers complain as much of teacher attendance as pupil attendance.¹⁰ One headteacher admitted "I don't have the heart to impose discipline on them."

Certainly there is little incentive for teachers to innovate, and the survey reveals a very traditional teaching methodology (referred to locally as the *klasikal* approach) in all subject areas (ibid.: 93): "By far the most common approach which we observed was an almost uniform one in which the teacher reads aloud from a book, or dictates the content of a book, or writes on the blackboard ... or extemporizes at length on a particular topic." Pupils' roles in such classes are limited to listening and copying down information, along with occasional individual or choral responses to teacher prompts. Regarding English, this methodology implies a very restricted form of literacy, and as pupils get closer to national examinations lessons become almost exclusively a matter of enhancing 'test-literacy'.¹¹

Such methods suit teachers whose own level of English literacy is low, since it enables them to master the 'content' of lessons in advance. Headteachers often complained of the English proficiency of their teachers; this is understandable because they had had to learn the language in an era when opportunities for exposure and practice were even more limited than the present time. The problem of low proficiency is connected, of course, to the problem of low salaries. The more literate a

¹⁰ Usman *et al.* (2004) calculated teacher absenteeism in primary and junior high schools in Indonesia to be in the region of 19%. They also found a negative correlation between teacher absenteeism and pupils' performance in tests.

¹¹ There are clear parallels between this extremely restricted repertoire of pedagogical behaviours and the 'safe talk' identified by Keith Chick in South African primary schools (Chick 1996).

teacher in English, the higher their earning potential outside school, through private tutoring, teaching at a local language school or even more lucrative commercial work.

The Riau survey suggests that almost all problems associated with literacy teaching quality are worse in rural areas than urban. Teacher qualifications are worse, there are more teachers without official status, there are fewer specialist subject teachers (including English), and there are far fewer opportunities for in-service training. Such 'postcode discrimination' against teachers must inevitably inhibit the learning of their pupils.

3. Material resources

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Indonesia's expenditure on education as a proportion of GNP has been significantly lower than in other Southeast Asian nations (British Council, 2003), while the population increases relentlessly. The Riau survey reports some of the effects of this under-investment in the poor quality of many school buildings and a shortage of classrooms, and the rehabilitation of school buildings has been one of the priorities of the World Bank loan-funded Basic Education Project. As usual, the problem appears to be greater in rural areas. One village primary school headteacher explained that for his 247 pupils, "only three classrooms are in good condition....In Building 1 (3 classrooms) the roof is leaking, the ceiling has collapsed and the floor is in poor condition." As the report states (Coleman *et al.*, 2004: 130), "conditions like these must have a deleterious effect on teachers' motivation, on pupils' attitudes towards learning and – in extreme cases – on the health and safety of all users of school buildings".

Textbook supply also emerges as a major problem, with differential effects on the provinces' children. For example, in 70% of the schools outside Pekanbaru, over half the students do not have their own textbook in English. In class this means that the lesson is slowed down for all pupils as texts have to be dictated and copied; outside school, no textbook effectively means no homework can be done. Meanwhile, school libraries are almost non-existent outside Pekanbaru and only a "very, very small number of schools" have access to the internet. "Consequently", the report states (*ibid.*: 122), "children in some districts and towns may have no access to printed or to online sources of information outside school."

The general picture presented by the survey of education in Riau province is of a state education system struggling to provide the basic requirements for developing literacy in English. Nunan's (2003) recent survey of English in the Asia-Pacific region suggests that its problems are far from unique; in many of the countries he describes he notes a lack of proficiency on the part of teachers, a lack of adequate exposure to the language and a predominantly non-communicative teaching methodology which denies learners opportunities to practice. The result, he says, is that "many students leave high school with only the most limited ability to communicate in the language." (*ibid.*: 608). Without any historical ties to the language and deprived of investment over many years, the problems of English language education in provincial Indonesia are probably especially intense, but as the Riau report makes clear, they are not shared equally (Coleman *et al.*, 2004: 136): "It seems to be a system which gives priority to certain parts of the province, especially urban centres. It is also a system which provides better resources to those schools which are attended by children from more middle-class families." In the next section

we move from a macro-level to a micro-level perspective, to explore some of the processes underlying this structural inequality.

The social construction of personal agency

The second study investigated the evolving motivation to learn English of a single cohort of pupils during their first two years in junior high school in the neighbouring Sumatran province of Jambi. The school was situated in an emerging middle-class area, was managed by a dynamic and well-respected headteacher, and was recognised as one of the top three junior high schools in the city, though average family income was still very low by global standards and the school facilities very basic. The researcher (one of the authors) made three field visits over a 20-month period, gave questionnaires to the whole cohort (approximately 200 pupils) at beginning and end, interviewed and observed in class a small group of eleven ‘focal’ learners, and interviewed the eight English teachers in the school. The overall aim was to identify trends in the motivation of the whole cohort as they experienced formal school learning of English, while exploring the attitudes and activities of a few chosen learners in more depth (Lamb, 2004a, 2004b).

Despite the relatively advantageous conditions for learning provided by this school, teachers and learners alike conceded that real progress in English was only possible by studying privately outside the school. One teacher put it bluntly: “They can’t success (sic) in English if they don’t take a course.”¹² Over 50% of the school pupils had taken private courses in English during the time they were in the junior high school, with an average length of eleven months, at over 20 different institutions. Admittedly, these institutions differ enormously in the quality of provision – in some cases the instructor is a teacher from the pupils’ own school – but their potential importance can be gauged from the fact that motivated and achieving learners tended to refer first to their private tutoring in English when asked about their current study of the language, and only second to their school lessons. The courses are not immune from criticism, and in the classes observed the teaching methodology was not significantly different from school lessons; but in the better institutions classes are much smaller, allowing for more frequent and more meaningful interaction between learner and teacher, and between the learners themselves.

Furthermore, many of the learners in this school claimed to use English in a variety of activities outside school, and the time spent on these had increased over the 20 months they had studied the language in school: in their questionnaire responses 36% of learners said they listened to English songs ‘almost everyday’, 25% did some kind of language study and 24% watched English language TV programmes or films (subtitled in Indonesian). Even though the possibility of oral communication in English with foreigners is small (there are very few living in the city), the motivated ‘focal’ learners put a high value on their extra-curricular use of English in their interviews, whether their particular enthusiasm was pop music, Playstation games or the teenage English magazine *Cool N’Smart*.

It appears, therefore, that personal agency plays a crucial role in the acquisition of English in this context. But private language courses cost money, and though the

¹² All teacher and learner quotations here are the original words unless stated otherwise.

learners may choose to attend a course themselves, they need parents or other benefactors who can pay for them. Supplementary textbooks, dictionaries, cassettes, computer software and other material are also pre-requisites for use of English outside school and are additional expenses. Another factor is leisure time; as several teachers pointed out, learners from poorer homes may very often have to help boost the family income by working after school, at home, in the market or in the fields.

The socio-economic background of students is important not only for providing the financial means for the exercise of personal agency: we argue that it may also help create and sustain the motivation to study. Over the 20 months of junior high school covered by this research, the learners became more negative about the experience of studying English in school. While 83% considered themselves happy with their school English lessons just after they began studying, after 20 months this fell to 49%. Significantly fewer learners were satisfied with their current level of proficiency. Even the very motivated 'focal' learners expressed strong dissatisfaction with their school English lessons in their final interviews, with the teacher often blamed directly as in this comment; "I don't like the teacher, my English teacher ... because she is very ... what is it? *Pemarah* (gets angry easily)". Yet despite this overall deterioration in attitude towards their school English lessons, the learners' perception of the importance of English in their own lives actually increased after 20 months of study, 186 of the 187 learners in the cohort considered it 'important' or 'very important', with a statistically significant rise in the number choosing the latter option. In their questionnaire responses they indicated that it is important for a number of different reasons too, including its potential role in their future career, for meeting foreigners and learning about foreign cultures, to get good school grades and to satisfy their parents' wishes. Four of the seven 'focal' learners previously identified as highly motivated had had unhappy experiences in school during their second year, yet all maintained a strong desire to learn the language, and judging from teacher reports and their performance over the three conversations with the researcher, their proficiency was developing. For example, the learner who criticized her teacher for getting angry quickly (see above) soon went on to talk enthusiastically about the different private courses she was taking: "I soon want to finish at MEC (Master English Course) and want to continue at another course, a good one like EF or LIA (Indonesia-American Association) ... I don't want to leave English, if I leave it for a while, then I'll start to forget it."

All the eight English teachers in the school mentioned family background as a significant factor in maintaining learner motivation. Here are two teachers' comments:

"If their parents don't think about English, or they don't care about English, they never give suggestions to the students to study English, they never guide the students ... when they have to study at home, ah, it's impossible for the students."

"Most of the students who are good at English, they have good family, they have good background, they have many motivation to study, it is something that influence ... if their parents give motivation to study ... Their parents they suggest to their child, their son or their daughter, how important English now, all of sector need English now ... you want to be engineer? You want

technology? ... You know the book are from abroad, there is no book which sell in Indonesia, how can we get knowledge in a book if we cannot speak English”

This emphasis on family corresponds to frequency of mentions of ‘significant others’ in interviews with learners. Their precise role varied: for one boy, the arrival of an auntie from studying in an English-speaking country provided an initial spark of interest in the language; for two of the girls, their older siblings studying at prestigious institutions in Java offered role-models of successful learners; for another girl, her mother’s struggle to learn English in order to gain entry to a local Master’s degree programme acted as a spur to her own efforts.

Peers also played a role according to the teachers. One commented “don’t forget their friends, yeah, their friends who has the same motivation in English, it will be important”, and another reflected on his own experience: “when I was a student my friends always give motivation to study hard, ‘what will you be next time ... in the future?’” The introduction of streaming in the school in the last two years has helped these motivated learners because, as in their private courses, they find themselves among like-minded pupils; “Get into the *‘kelas unggul’*” say two of the girls as advice on how to learn English, to a hypothetical new entrant to the school, “it’s more intense, we study in the afternoons, there are lots of competitions”. They also tend to get the best teachers too. In contrast, two of the motivated girls in a regular class complained bitterly in their second interview about the disruption caused by their classmates: “they don’t have any desire!”

Lack of peer support is a significant problem according to the teacher interviewed from a rural school. She claims her pupils are afraid to use English: “they are afraid, this is the problem ... not just for me but for all other teacher in Jambi ... especially for the school not ... in the big city.” And later in her interview she explains this fear: “If their friends speak in English, some of their friends laughing, laughing, smile with their friends ... makes the students shamed”. She uses the phrase *‘kebarat-baratan’*, which means ‘pretending to be like a westerner.’ It appears that English is not a legitimate code of interaction for these youngsters and its use is likely to inspire scorn, much as Stroud and Wee (in press) found among Malay-speaking Singaporeans.

By contrast, in the urban, middle-class junior high school the use of English may inspire admiration, as it is recognised as both a means of becoming, through study and professional work, the worldly Indonesian they aspire to be, and an essential characteristic of that identity (Lamb, 2004). Indeed one of the characteristics that seems to distinguish the highly motivated and active learners of English in the ‘focal group’ from the less motivated is that they are able to articulate future goals, and these all involve the ‘upward and outward mobility’ that Lin (1996) noted in Hong Kong. For example:

“I want study in abroad ... the school in abroad must be very great”

“[10 years from now] Still studying, taking Economics ... and doing some small business, like buying and selling, cos maybe later it’ll become a big business ... I could become a textile magnate!” [translated]

“I hope ... I’ll already be a graduate, hopefully in Medicine ... I’ll be living in Yogya [in Java], cos I’ll study there, they say that’s where there’s the best higher education” [translated]

“I really want to go to my birthplace, Fayetteville ... maybe I will be journalist so I can go everywhere, maybe businesswoman ... maybe I want to have two *tempat tinggal* [homes] in foreign and in Indonesia”

As Csizér and Dörnyei (2005: 29) have proposed, language learning motivation may gain some of its strength from “identification processes within the individual’s self-concept.” That is, individuals are motivated to reduce the discrepancy between their present situation and future ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Learners who understand how English could transform their lives and can envision clearly a future English-speaking self are therefore more likely to be motivated to learn the language than those who cannot conceive of themselves in that role. Family and friends play a part in shaping these ‘possible selves’, providing through encouragement, advice and shared endeavours the cultural capital which enables these adolescents to feel ‘at home’ with the language even at this early stage of their learning path, and enabling “the healthy growth and co-construction of individual motivation” (Ushioda, 2006: 155).

By contrast those who lack this supportive background may view English as alien and intimidating. As one of the less motivated learners, recently arrived in Jambi from a rural area, put it: “wherever we go here we need English ... we’re tested in English, everywhere we need English.” One of the few learners in the school who had had no experience of English at primary school, he was keenly aware that he lagged behind some of his classmates and throughout the three interviews continued to claim that he wanted to learn English. But placed in a regular class he found the English lessons dull and was often observed misbehaving. He took no action to learn the language outside school, and when asked what advice he would give a new student in the school to learn English, he said he would not presume to tell him since his friends would think him arrogant. In the third interview, he laughed at the idea that the conversation could be conducted in English. Sadly, this learner is probably much more typical of Indonesian youngsters in general than the motivated learners in our ‘focal group’. As Lin (1996: 63) said of the majority population in Hong Kong, “they would find it unnatural and pompous to use English. They are thus placed in a frustrating dilemma where they universally recognise the importance of English for their future but at the same time have little access to the symbolic capital necessary for successfully acquiring it.”

Transformation of self and society

The first study described here showed how access to English, as to other forms of academic knowledge, is far from equally distributed. The second study shows that even within apparently privileged sectors, individual learners have to exercise their own personal agency to acquire literacy in English, mainly through activities outside school, though selection in elite classes helps. This requires money and time which tend to be the preserve of the emerging middle-class. Moreover, when learners ‘invest’ in the language, to use Norton’s (2000) terminology, they are at least partly motivated by an understanding of the power of English to transform their future lives,

an understanding which is constructed through long-term interactions with parents, other relatives and friends.

If this scenario is correct, it has serious implications for education and ultimately for society at large. First of all, the differences in motivation and achievement observed over the first 20 months of study may be predicted to intensify as the learners continue their schooling. This is what Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) call the ‘Matthew effect’ (i.e. from the Gospel parable in which the ‘rich get richer and the poor get poorer’), where those who are able to profit from practice opportunities do better, get more encouragement and find yet more practice opportunities opening up to them. By contrast, the learners who evinced less motivation at the beginning and had made no visible progress after 20 months are in danger of being left behind. Jones and Jones (2001) make the point that foreign language study is particularly vulnerable to a downward spiral of motivation because it is ‘cumulative’, with each lesson tending to build on the previous one.

By the time they graduate from school, the most prestigious institutions and the highest-paying jobs will only be accessible for those who can demonstrate a high level of literacy in English. These opportunities will therefore be denied to the vast majority of Indonesian school-leavers. As Lin has written of Hong Kong (1996: 76), it is realistic to accept that a globalizing society needs an elite workforce highly literate in English, but “it is outright social injustice if only the children of the elite can become members of the elite.”

Finally, many Indonesians recognise that English is required for the transformation of their society, but the way in which it is being acquired is through individuals acting autonomously with the object of transforming themselves by joining an exclusive club of cosmopolitan English-speaking Indonesians. The competition for places in this club is turning the language into a luxury consumer product, sold by high-street language schools and profit-seeking publishing companies. More seriously, while the intention is that English serves the nation, paradoxically it may deepen existing social divisions and help divert the attention of the elite from the problems and preoccupations of the rural poor. As if they were aware of this possibility, some of the achieving English learners in Jambi made a point of expressing their social conscience. One 12-year-old girl, for example, states her ambition is to become a businesswoman but quickly adds “so I can help build Indonesia, so it isn’t left behind”. Two of the other girls say they want to be doctors, but both independently qualify the statement by saying that they will be the type who helps poor people. The Riau survey too uncovered some uneasiness among stakeholders about growing social inequalities. The headmaster of a primary school wrote:

“We want to do well, but we’re not supported by the [available] resources and infrastructure, this is caused by the fact that our school is located in a village ... we rarely receive any assistance or attention from the government. Whether from the central or regional [government].” [translated]

Another senior secondary school headteacher made this plea: “Please pay attention to us as well, even though we are far from the centre of the city, especially in terms of training, and the provision of teaching staff and support staff” (Coleman *et al.*, 2004: 136-7).

Implications

Phillipson (2002: 12) has challenged English language educators in Asia with this statement: “In our contemporary world, 10-20% of the population are getting obscenely richer, the English-speaking haves that consume 80% of the available resources, whereas the remainder are being systematically impoverished, the non-English-speaking have-nots.” English language education policy in Indonesia, and in most other Southeast Asian nations, is based on the assumption that Phillipson is wrong: the English-speaking haves will, through their service to the national economy, help the non-English-speakers lift themselves out of poverty. The central issue for these governments is how to ensure that the 10-20% do not become a self-reproducing elite.

This is hardly a new problem. In his comprehensive survey of Indonesian education in the 1970s, Beeby (1979) identifies precisely this tension between ensuring that education contributes to national development and maintaining equal opportunity. The two studies reported here indicate that, whatever the contribution to the economy, the education system is in danger of perpetuating social inequalities. Not only are there serious structural imbalances in the provision of state education but even the very desire to become literate in English is unequally distributed. Though a small elite may be successfully acquiring this literacy and may serve the nation well in their future careers, they are the children of the already better-off.

A standard approach to rectifying social inequalities is the large-scale reallocation of resources to target deprived areas. Recently the government in neighbouring Malaysia has identified mastery of English as a means of equalising opportunities for rural people and bridging the urban-rural divide (Hazita, 2002). Accordingly there has been major investment in English education in rural areas. However, Hazita (*ibid.*: 309) reports that “the social realities of these rural communities render the imposition of literacy practices for English especially irrelevant, as the immediate environment does not currently reflect their needs ... There is very little need for the use of English in the immediate social environment.” If this is true for Malaysia, with its historical and cultural links with English, then it is likely to be even truer for Indonesia. The outcome of such a reform would most probably be just the intensification of the dull exam-oriented English lessons which are alienating even the children of the urban middle-class. What is more, the micro-level analysis of English learning in Jambi suggests that even if rural schools were resourced to the level of this urban junior high school, it is no guarantee that the majority would make progress in the language unless they were endowed by family background with the right kind of economic and cultural capital to make long-term investments in the language on their own initiative.

This in turn suggests that what is needed is a curriculum that puts learner motivation at its core: conceding that, at the present time, with realistic levels of material and human resources, and with competition from all the other subjects in the curriculum, there are severe limits on how much English can be learned at school, but that at the very least, all learners should be *encouraged* to learn it outside school, now or in the future. This does not mean the kind of controlling extrinsic motivation which relies on fear of the consequences of failure, but instead encouraging the development

of a personal identification with the language, of a genuine belief in the possibility of one day being an English user. Gaining literacy in English could then become what Kern (2000: 35) calls an “apprenticeship in particular ways of being,” rather than, as it has been, merely the acquisition of a set of reading and writing skills for examination success.

Such an L2 literacy curriculum, putting motivation at its core, presents many challenges to the current system which can only be briefly mentioned here. As Hyltenstam and Stroud (2002: 12) have pointed out, in developing countries “formal schooling tends to ‘bracket off’ learning from the social world and the cultural intertextualities of the community”, and in Soeharto’s Indonesia schools were conventionally built as self-contained inward-looking quadrangles centred on a flagpole. But both the desire and opportunity to become literate in English derive from beyond the school gates. What is needed in fact is a lowering of barriers between classroom and society, so that the increasing presence of English in the environment (the songs, the product labels, the job advertisements, the public posters) becomes a valuable resource for learning in school, providing part of the subject matter and the reason for learners to become literate in English. This in turn implies new roles for teachers, working not just as instructors of a discrete body of nationally-examined knowledge and skill but also as enthusiastic guides for the critical exploration of local literacy practices as English, Indonesian, indigenous and other non-indigenous languages (notably Mandarin Chinese) compete for space in the linguistic ecosystem. Finally, unequal access to English literacy would inevitably survive even such radical curricular reform; one way to counter this is to explicitly link instruction to development ethics, and recognise (as the Sumatran adolescents studied here apparently do) that acquiring literacy is a privilege which brings with it responsibilities towards those who are still denied it.

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