Indonesian English Lectures on English and Identity: A Study of Yogyakarta - Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Indonesian English lecturers' perceptions about English in relation with their identities. Individual interviews were carried out with Indonesian English lecturers at universities in Yogyakarta. The data collected were analysed qualitatively.

The results reveal that the lecturers view English as mainly a tool for knowledge advancement and global communication. English is also believed to be enriching the participants' identity as Indonesians. Even though English is seen as a form of imposition, its positive aspects are believed to outstrip its negatives. There is, however, a perceived tension between English and Indonesian, the national language that represents their identities as Indonesians.

INTRODUCTION

It has recently been acknowledged that the population of so-called non-native speakers of English has outnumbered that of native speakers. This brings about the importance of how these so-called non-native speakers view English and its related issues of identity, intelligibility, and language ownership. It is precisely the aim of this research to fulfil one segment of such needs, that is through a study on how English language educators of Indonesian nationality view English in relation to their identities. Nine Indonesian English language lecturers were interviewed on their perceptions of English related to their religious and national identities. Certainly, it is not the purpose of this qualitative study to generalise the perceptions found in this research as commonly held among Indonesian English language lecturers. However, this study is believed to be capable of providing explorations into the area, which would result in enriching insights on the complexities of the frequently taken for granted English dissemination across the globe.

Findings in some earlier research on perception of English in various contexts have revealed that in some contexts English is viewed as merely an instrument to advance rather than as a language related to identity (Chew, 1999; Huang, 2005; Kadt, 1993; Xu, 2002). A more recent research in a Hungarian context furthermore found that Hungarian people prefer English as their main foreign language. The rejection to other foreign languages and the increasing popularity of English in Hungary was found as related to “macro-contextual, geopolitical factors” (Dornyei, Csizer, & Nemeth, 2006, p. 63), rather than merely instrumental orientations. Another study which focuses on attitudes towards South African Indian English show that the majority of participants prefer native speaker English and as a matter of fact refer to the language as reflecting “a higher socioeconomic standing
and better education" (Wiebesiek, Rudwick, & Zeller, 2011). Clearly, the studies above show that there is an issue of identity maintenance while getting the message across in communicating in English.

ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE (EIL)

Clearly, globalisation has a strong impact on English, which plays a pertinent role in how information is delivered among countries (Guillén, 2001, p. 252). As Seidlhofer puts it, "English functions as a global lingua franca" (2005, p. 339) with the largest ever scope, that is "over most of the world" (Chew, 1999, p. 43). This has made English a "global currency" (McKay, 2002, p. 18). Currently, the number of so-called non-native speakers of English is three times the number of native speakers. In fact, the non-native speaker population continuously increases, while the first language speakers is reducing in population (Crystal, 2006, p. 425).

Indeed, nowadays English cannot be seen as a simple realisation of linguistic imperialism. A key assumption of linguistic imperialism that language is invariable, controllable, and non-adaptable to circumstances is no longer applicable. As McKay stated, English represents "a complex process brought about both by those who actively promote the language and those who consciously choose to learn it" (2002, p. 24). As a matter of fact, globalisation does not simply lead to a globe with a single homogeneous language, culture, and identity, rather "different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 17).

There is no doubt that economic, social, political and cultural interactions across the globe have brought English to where it is today. Economic, social, political and cultural situations in the global era are ever changing, as English is also continuously developing and becoming plural in its manifestations. There is no longer any simple connection between English and one's national identity, as national identity has become "borderless identity". Indeed, "it is evident that we also need to rethink language in relation to changing global relations" (Pennycook, 2010, p. 684).

This study precisely targets the perception of English in Indonesia, with a focus on the perceptions of Indonesian university English language lecturers. It must be remembered that the Indonesian language has developed and is viewed as a national language unifying the multilingual and multi-faith Indonesia. This results in the possibility of participants expressing acceptance, rejection or concern about English in relation to their religions and/or the national language. In other words, there are two potential conflicts – English versus Islam and English versus the Indonesian language.

RESEARCH METHOD, LOCATION, AND PARTICIPANTS

This research is a qualitative study with semi-structured individual interviews as its means of data collection. The choice of a qualitative method is aimed at gaining more focused and in-depth results. Therefore, it is not the aim of this study to produce findings that can be used as a generalisation of all Indonesian contexts.

The study was carried out in Yogyakarta, an Indonesian city which is famous as the country's city of students due to its history and role in Indonesian education (DI Yogyakarta 2011). The city is located in Java, an island occupied by the majority of Indonesian population. Nine English language
lecturers were voluntarily recruited as participants. The universities where the investigation was conducted were:

1. Universitas Ahmad Dahlan (UAD), a private Islamic university, with a student body that is all Muslims. Originally, UAD was a pedagogical institute, which was upgraded to a university. Funded by Muhammadiyah, the second most prominent Islamic organisation in Indonesia, this university has an English literature department which is run under the Faculty of Letters.

2. Universitas Atmajaya Yogyakarta (UAJY), a private Catholic university. This university does not run an English department and, as a matter of fact, is not planning to establish one. UAJY does not only accommodate Catholic students, rather it welcomes students of various religious backgrounds.

3. Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), the oldest public university in Indonesia. UGM is one of the largest and most prominent universities in Indonesia. English Literature is run as a department under the Faculty of Letters.

4. Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII), the oldest private Islamic university in Indonesia. The student body of this university is all Muslims. Recently, this university upgraded its non-degree diploma program of English into a bachelor degree program.

5. Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga (UIN SuKa), a government-owned Islamic university with an all Muslims student body. Originally, this university was a public Islamic Studies Institute. Recently, this university has been approved by AusAID to receive scholarships on a "targeted scheme" enabling its lecturers to study in Australia. Its English department was established in 2009.

6. Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY), a private Islamic university. Similar to UAD, UII, and UIN, all students at UMY are Muslims. As reflected on its name, this university is funded by Muhammadiyah. An English Teacher Training department was established in 2010.

7. Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY), a government-owned pedagogical university. UNY was established as an Institute of Teacher Training and Education (Institut Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan or IKIP). Later, it was upgraded into a university, resulting in the accommodation of more varied study programs. Its English teaching department is one of the strongest in the country.

8. Universitas Sanata Dharma (USD), a private Catholic university. Similar to UAJY (point 1), USD accommodates students of various religious backgrounds. This university, like UIN SuKa and UNY, was originally established as a pedagogical institute. Two of its outstanding departments are English teaching under the Faculty of Education and English literature under the Faculty of Letters.

9. Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa (UST), a private secular university. UST is frequently referred to as a "nationalist" university, due to its affiliation with "Tamansiswa", an educational foundation established by Ki Hajar Dewantara who is known as the Indonesian "father of education".

The interviews were conducted in Indonesian. Considering most readers of this paper are English users, the findings presented in the body of this paper are the English translations. It is worth to note that the translations provided follow as closely as possible to the original excerpts in order to
maintain their original flavours. This consequently results in some translations to sometimes seem awkward. Should the readers need to refer to the original interview excerpts, the Indonesian versions are provided in Appendix 2 of this paper. Moreover, the fact that some excerpts are very contextual has also resulted in presenting short chunks of them to make no sense. Therefore, main ideas of long quotes are presented in bold. This is done in order to facilitate the readers in gaining full comprehensions of the excerpts.

As previously stated, the researcher is aware that findings of this study are insufficient to become representations of Indonesian situation in general. Indeed, the context of this study is limited to the area of Yogyakarta. Moreover it merely incorporates English language lecturers rather than all categories of lecturers, let alone the whole society of Yogyakarta. Therefore, it is not the aim of this paper to provide representative findings of Yogyakarta or Indonesia, rather this study is expected to be more of an explorative nature.

ENGLISH IN THE EYES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

In discussing findings of this study, the results are presented in three theme-based sections. The first part covers how the participants viewed English as not a simple manifestation of Western imperialism, followed by English as having positive or no impact onto the participants lives, and finally English as being viewed positively yet in contest with the national language — Indonesian.

ENGLISH AS NOT A FORM OF WESTERN IMPERIALISM

The spread of English can be interpreted as either “English has spread” where the spread is a natural process or “English has been spread” where there is an outside motivation imposing its spread (Widdowson, 1997, p. 136). This has brought Chew to his statement that fully accepting the spread of English as a means or manifestation of imperialism is to overestimate the current situation (Chew, 1999, p. 46). As a matter of fact, the results of this study show that the relationship between English and the West is not perceived by the participants as a simple manifestation of imperialism.

Among the participants, there was a feeling that even though English has been imposed from the outside, the benefits and advantages gained actually outstripped the imposition. Jelita, for instance, expressed her view, "What else can we do? Our people depends on it. We need it. Actually, we are not happy” (original excerpt in Appendix 2.1.).

The reasons given were often related to knowledge and communication. Those who suggested that English can bring an advancement of knowledge include the following:

Koko: I do not see it that way. Perhaps in certain matters, it can be seen as cultural domination. It does not have to be interpreted as imperialism, because there are advantages that can be felt by Indonesian people or society as a whole. It means access of information and knowledge, too. It is not solely disadvantageous (original excerpt in Appendix 2.2.)

Umar: I do not see it that way. Even if it is the consequence, I think we have to accept it. However, I do not see that it then becomes a cultural imperialism. Because, no matter what, Allah has stated that Allah created human beings consisting of diverse ethnics and languages. Therefore, this is a destiny or Sunatullah that we have to admit. The reality is that English has become the first rank language. Therefore, we cannot avoid facts. In usul fikih context,
the law of Islam, if we avoid the fact then we will be left behind (original excerpt in Appendix 2.3.)

The participants also argued against the view that English is a form of imperialism by suggesting the language to be only a communication tool. Zaky, for example, stated, “I do not think so. This is the need of a global world. English is used across all continents, so that it needs to be mastered. Whichever continents we go to, there are English speaking countries and English speakers” (original excerpt in Appendix 2.4.).

There is no doubt that English is not a neutral language. The above findings support Crystal’s claim that the “functionality” (Crystal, 2006, p. 427) of English in various domains, especially education and communication, has caused the language to be supported by the participants in this study. However, it is worth to note that the role of English, as stated by the participants, does not include “Westernising” Indonesia. This is consistent with Smith (1976, p. 38) who believes that English is in no capacity of making speakers “Western”, rather it is “a language of the world”.

Such findings are also in line with that of a relatively recent piece of research by Li. Li suggests that English as an International Language (EIL) is not a form of linguistic imperialism, because speakers choose to use English to benefit themselves. It should be noted, however, that 81% of his research participants was in support of native speaker accents (Li, 2009, p. 102). Indeed, Li’s research elicited a contradiction between the expression of identity and intelligibility.

ENGLISH HAS EITHER NO OR POSITIVE IMPACT TO BEING RELIGIOUS

Prior to conducting this study, it was expected that English would be perceived in contest with religion. The presupposition occurred because the context of study is Indonesia, where the majority population is Muslim. Earlier studies on English in other Muslim societies found the language to be frequently viewed in tension with Islam (Karmani, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Rahman, 2005; Widiyanto, 2005).

Unlike the anticipated outcome, however, the participants viewed English as either having a positive or no impact on their religious life. The most frequently given reason was that English has been and continues to be used by various people regardless of their religious backgrounds. Consequently, the participants also argued that English does not belong to any religion. For example, Galuh responded to the question of whether or not English belong to any religion by asserting, “I do not think so. Based on its history, I see that people who owned English did not have religion (original excerpt in Appendix 2.5.)

Some Muslim participants indicated the positive impact of English on religious life by referring to Muslim figures using the language for proselytising. Prabu, for instance, stated the following:

It happens to be that I am a Muslim. Even Buya Hamka [a well-known Indonesian Islamic preacher] spoke bilingually when he preached in Egypt and other places. Sometimes he used Arabic, sometimes English. So, it does not belong to a certain language or race (original excerpt in Appendix 2.6.)

The question of the possible relation between English and each individual’s religion was responded by the participants by disavowing any relationship between English and their faith. This
pattern was similar across all participants, regardless of religions. For example Galuh, who is a Catholic uttered, “Nothing. English is never used. It is simply because I can use English that when I meet a Catholic person who can use English, then we pray in English” (original excerpt in Appendix 2.7.)

In terms of the relationship between English and the participants’ religious life, the most frequently mentioned positive impact was that English facilitates the spread of religious teaching. An English language lecturer at one of the Islamic universities, for instance, believed that English is useful for proselytising to people of different language backgrounds across the globe. Cici indicated this notion in her excerpt below:

Of course there is, since some Muslims use English. Undeniably, they also have to be facilitated. In terms of religion, my religion, the teaching was given in Arabic. When it needs to be spread, to be expanded to various nations, then the spread of religion has to be in their languages. This can be English or other languages. It is clear that English helps the development of my religion (original excerpt in Appendix 2.8.)

Besides spreading the religion, the Muslim participants also believed that their English competence can enrich their religious life. Koko, for instance, acknowledged that he uses English to learn more about Islam by stating, “The enrichment of my knowledge about Islam is through English” (original excerpt in Appendix 2.9.)

The above reasons, namely spreading the teaching of and learning more about Islam, was found in earlier research. In his study, Hare found that English learning has two advantages for Muslims, namely “understanding the skills and achievements of others”, so that they can “convey the Islamic message to others” (1996, pp. 2-3). Findings in this study, similar to that of Hare, are unlike results of other research on different Islamic society contexts, where Islam stands as an opposition to English (Karmani, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Rahman, 2005).

ENGLISH IS VIEWED POSITIVELY, YET IS IN CONTEST WITH THE INDONESIAN LANGUAGE

Upon conducting further investigation on perceptions of English in relation to identity, it was found that English was seen as a communication tool. As such, English allows its speakers to become members of the global society. Zaky asserted that “as an Indonesian, I just want to say that we are part of the world. Therefore, it is better if we master one or several international languages” (original excerpt in Appendix 2.10.). Slightly further, Prabu stated that English can be used as a tool “to be heard” in the international arena. This was explicitly seen in his response, “As an Indonesian, why do I learn English? I learn English because I also want to be ‘heard’. Yes, ‘to be heard’, quote end quote. English is a tool for me to be ‘heard’” (original excerpt in Appendix 2.11.)

However, the participants expressed feelings of tensions between English and the Indonesian language, which represents Indonesian national identity. Among others, Oksana suggested in her excerpt that “I am proud of the Indonesian language, even though my Indonesian competence is really bad. However, again, I need to say something in English” (original excerpt in Appendix 2.12.).

Other than the above perceptions, competence in English was also viewed as boosting the participants’ confidence as Indonesians. Koko indicated such a perception by stating, “In my opinion,
it can boost the confidence as a nation. This means that we then feel at the same level as other nations, because we are able to use English. Therefore, we make a dialogue with other people” (original excerpt in Appendix 2.13).

Indeed, all the above indicate that national identity has become “borderless identity”, which is also ever changing. As Pennycook puts it, “it is evident that we also need to rethink language in relation to changing global relations” (Pennycook, 2010, p. 684). Overall, the findings suggest that the participants perceived English as a language with a collection of values embedded in it. It can be said that the language goes beyond the simple dichotomy of “integrative” and “instrumental” orientations (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, p. 44). Such dichotomy of orientations does not fit the context of this study, rather the participants stand in certain points of continuum between the two orientations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, the English language lecturer participants in this study felt that English does not deteriorate their identity as Indonesians. This urge for a language ecology where English is allowed to bloom, but is limited in its extent and at the same time prevented from interfering the Indonesian language. Indeed, this shows that the spread of English is not a simple form of imperialism, rather it involves “a complex process brought about both by those who actively promote the language and those who consciously choose to learn it” (McKay, 2002, p. 24).

Based on the findings, it can be argued that English competence provides a ‘distinctive Indonesian identity’ to the participants. To overcome the perceived tension between the Indonesian and English languages, a continuous negotiation between English and Indonesian needs to be maintained. In other words, the concept of identity should not be bound rigidly within national identity per se but rather it should be allowed some room to develop more flexibly. This will provide support for prospective further understandings of identity under the impact of the language uses, especially in the current English as an International Language (EIL) paradigm. All in all, this leads back to an acknowledgement of the dynamic and constantly questioning stance of EIL.

In terms of English and religion, there is no consensus upon whether or not English is related to any religion. However, English is believed to positively impact the participants’ religious lives. In fact, English was found to be perceived as similarly used by anybody regardless of their religious backgrounds.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1 - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**English**

1. Do you perceive English as Western imperialism? Why or why not?
2. Do you think English belong to a particular religion? If yes, what religion and why? If no, why not?

**Indonesian**

1. Apakah menurut Bapak/Ibu/Anda, bahasa Inggris merupakan suatu bentuk penjajahan Barat? Mengapa atau mengapa tidak?
2. Apakah menurut Bapak/Ibu/Anda, bahasa Inggris merupakan milik suatu agama tertentu? Jika ya, agama apa dan mengapa? Jika tidak, mengapa tidak?
APPENDIX 2 – ORIGINAL EXCERPTS (INDONESIAN VERSION)

2. Koko: Saya melihatnya tidak seperti itu. Mungkin dalam hal-hal tertentu bisa dilihat itu sebagai dominasi budaya. Tidak harus dimaknai sebagai penjajahan, karena ada keuntungan-keuntungannya juga yang bisa diasosiasikan oleh bangsa Indonesia atau masyarakat Indonesia secara luas. Akses informasi dan pengetahuan juga. Tidak semata-mata merugikan.
12. Oksana: Saya bangga dengan bahasa Indonesia, walaupun bahasa Indonesia saya sangat jelek. Tetapi juga kembali lagi. I need to say something in English.