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## IMMERSION PROGRAM AT INDONESIAN UNIVERSITIES: "GOOD" OR "EVIL"?

Flora Debora Floris<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In response to the need of English language, some universities in Indonesia are now implementing Immersion Program using English as a medium of instruction. This policy is often considered as a controversial one. Some people believe that the implementation of this program is not suitable in Indonesian context. In the near future, the dominance of English will displace and replace the indigenous languages in Indonesia. It will also result in the imposition of the English-speaking countries' culture so that the Indonesian culture will be marginalized. These arguments seem reasonable and unquestionable. Yet there are other points of view that need to be considered in judging whether the Immersion program is a good or an evil one. English in Indonesia is still a Foreign Language, and thus the exposure to it is very limited. Immersion program will enable the students to use English only inside the classrooms for about 5-7 hours. But even in the classrooms, they cannot "leave" their Bahasa Indonesia and their local languages. So English has no chance to replace or displace the native languages. English should no longer be viewed as the language of cultural imperialism. It is now regarded as a medium to convey and promote one's ideas or cultural identity. In this article, I shall argue that Immersion program at Indonesian universities which are suited to the Indonesian context are in fact beneficial.

### INTRODUCTION

It may be useful to start by giving a brief outline of the language position in Indonesia. Indonesia is a country of some 209 million people (500 tribes) who have between them an estimated 500 languages and dialects spoken in the archipelago (see <http://www.dfa-deplu.go.id/background/land.land.htm>). Some of the distinctly different local languages are: Acehnese, Batak, Sundanese, Javanese, Sasak, Dayak, Minahasa, Toraja, Buginese, Halmahera, Ambonese, Ceramese, and several Irianese languages.

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The national language of Indonesia is "Bahasa Indonesia" while English is considered as the first foreign language. Most people in Indonesia are bilingual. They use their local language or dialect when they speak to the members of their own community. And they will use Bahasa Indonesia to communicate with other people from other communities. Many Indonesian people are also multilingual. They can master at least 3 languages: their own local language, the national language and a foreign language usually English. Some of Indonesian people can also speak other foreign language(s) such as Mandarin, Japanese, Dutch, etc.

Most Indonesian people choose English as their first foreign language because of its important role. English is spoken by approximately a quarter of the world's population or about 1,500 million people (Crystal, 2002:10). Moreover it is the main language of books, newspapers, international business and conferences, science, technology, medicine, sports, music, etc. No other language has ever been spoken and written by so many people in so many places.

Nowadays, there is a huge need to learn English in Indonesia. As a response to this growing need, many top universities are interested in implementing Immersion Program using English as a medium of instruction. Petra Christian University for example, has stated that English will be used as the second medium of instruction in its classes by the academic year 2004/2005 (see [http://www.petra.ac.id/indonesian/focus\\_rencana.htm](http://www.petra.ac.id/indonesian/focus_rencana.htm)). It means that the academic subjects will be learned through the medium of a foreign language, i.e. English. In this Immersion program, the students will get "two for one" – both content knowledge and increased language proficiency (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 142). However there is still a wide debate about whether this kind of policy is suitable in Indonesia.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Negative Assumption: Immersion Program as a New Form of Neo-Colonialism

Philipson (1992) in his book "Linguistic Imperialism" argues that Immersion program is an instrument of the western

countries to impose their language (English) and their cultures for their own benefits.

Immersion program will result in the linguistic imperialism.<sup>2</sup> Immersion Program will foster the dominance of English, and then soon English can be a threat to the local languages (Bahasa Jawa, Bahasa Timor, Bahasa Sunda, etc) and to the national language (Bahasa Indonesia). This may happen because the students and the teachers are accustomed to use English to learn (and to teach) all of their school subjects everyday. Using English to communicate will be their habit, and they may prefer to use English rather than their native languages.

Immersion Program will also cause Cultural Imperialism<sup>3</sup>. Many people believe that language and culture are inseparable. Thus by learning and using English, they also learn and use Western cultures especially American and British cultures. Phillipson (1992: 57) believes that this phenomenon is dangerous especially because the cultural norms and values of the English-speaking world are often not suitable with the culture of the host country. Moreover, there is a possibility that soon the local culture may regrettably be submerged into the dominant culture of the foreign language.

The last argument is that Immersion is believed to accommodate the "Western Capitalism" which is closely related to the linguistic and cultural imperialism mentioned above. If the students and teachers all over the world cry out for English-only approach, people from the English-speaking countries will gain more benefit. They can ensure that classrooms all over the world will be predictable and uniform in their instructional practices. They can produce more and more books which are written in

<sup>2</sup> Ansre (1979), cited in Phillipson (1992: 57), describes linguistic imperialism as "the phenomenon in which the minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe that they can and they should use only that foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the more advanced aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, governments, the administration of justice, etc"

<sup>3</sup> Schiller (1976), as quoted by Phillipson (1992: 58), identifies Cultural Imperialism as "the sum of processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating statum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system".

English only without paying any attention to the local content. Furthermore, there is a strong possibility that the native speakers will be considered as the best teachers because they can speak English fluently and they have ability to teach Mathematics or Economics or other subjects as well. To this, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1992) say, "It has been British and American government policy since the mid-1950s to establish English as a universal second language to protect their capitalist interest".

These 3 assumptions seem reasonable and incontrovertible. However, I feel that they come only from "one side of a coin", from those who are not involved in designing and implementing the Immersion Program. Thus, in this paper, I will try to examine these assumptions in some detail. I will argue that these assumptions are not entirely correct.

### **EVALUATING THE NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE IMMERSION PROGRAM**

#### **1. English will not displace or replace native languages in Indonesia**

##### **a. English is still a Foreign Language**

The national language, the local language(s) and English are officially included in the National and Local Curriculum and are taught since Elementary School (see [http:// www. puskur.or.id/ potret\\_kurikulum\\_94.shtml](http://www.puskur.or.id/potret_kurikulum_94.shtml)). Nowadays, the government also allows universities to include another Foreign Language as one of their subjects. This proves that Indonesian government does not encourage the teaching of one language only. I believe that it is the intention of the government to make Indonesia as a multilingual country because by having more and more bilinguals and multilinguals living in the country, Indonesia will have an advantage over monolingual countries. Studies have shown that bilingual or multilingual people have higher-level intellectual skill and divergent thinking (Cummins and Swain, 1986: 10-11). Moreover, by living in a multilingual country, one can acquire two, or three or four languages with ease, and uses them for a variety of purposes. In this situation, people can get "alteration of linguistic codes due to the multilingual contexts of the use of English" (Kachru, 1992: 3).



One may argue that this may happen if all Indonesian universities do not apply Immersion Program. But the fact is that there are (and perhaps there will be more) English-medium-universities in the country. How about the students and the teachers who study and teach there? They learn and use English in the classrooms!

Yes, it is true that in the Immersion program, the students and the teachers use English as the medium of instruction. However, we should be aware that in Indonesia, English is regarded as a Foreign Language. It is not a Second Language or an official language, so it is not widely used in the community. The exposure of English, even in the English-medium-institutions, happens only in classrooms. The atmosphere outside the classrooms provides more exposure to Bahasa Indonesia and local languages. So when the students and the teachers leave the classrooms, they will be more exposed to their native languages and fewer opportunities to use English. Generally, the students (and the teachers) use English only for 5-7 hours per day. Thus, how can English threaten the existence of Bahasa Indonesia and the local languages?

In short, as Bisong (1995: 125) suggests, the exposure of English in a formal school situation could not threaten the existence of the indigenous languages. There is no way that the exposure of English in school situation could possibly compete with the exposure of the native languages presence outside the classroom.

#### **b. The local languages will always exist in the classrooms**

I believe that the students' mother tongue (in this case: the local languages and Bahasa Indonesia) will always exist in the classrooms, even in Immersion classes where the students and the teacher are required to use English only. Research findings have shown that the existence of the students' mother tongue in the classrooms cannot be neglected at least for three reasons.

The first one is that the use of the mother tongue in terms of translation is proved to be the students' preferred strategy. A research conducted by Balet (1985:18) at a Spanish secondary school reveals that most students find it easier to learn the target language words from their Spanish equivalents. Another research conducted by Eldridge (1996: 305) in a Turkish secondary school also shows the same thing. If the translation technique is preferred

by the students, I think it is normal. No matter how hard they may try, adult learners cannot escape the influence of their mother tongue. They will be asking themselves, "What does \_\_\_\_\_ mean?" and decoding their answers in their mother tongue either orally or mentally. Danchev (1982) argues that the students will unconsciously attempt to equate a target (new) language element with its closest and most common correlate with the mother tongue (see Harbord, 1992: 351).

The second argument is that the use of the mother tongue can lower the students' affective filter and create less threatening atmosphere. According to Krashen (1982), the affective filter is "an imaginary barrier which prevents learners from acquiring language from the available input" (see Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 39). A learner who is tense, anxious, or afraid may 'filter out' input, making it unavailable for acquisition. In Immersion class, some students perhaps will feel afraid, hesitant or nervous when the teacher asks them to answer in English, their foreign language. In this kind of situation, the teacher will likely switch to the mother tongue (Flowerdew, Li and Miller, 1998: 221 and Canagarajah, 2001: 133).

## **2. English will not cause Indonesian culture to be undervalued and marginalized**

Philipson (1992: 28) argues that English is a tool of cultural imperialism. Learning English language means learning English cultures as well. The English-medium institutions, which are busy "imposing alien tongues and values", are actually instruments used to marginalize the indigenous cultures.

Traditionally English was considered as the language of culture, and learning and teaching English was perceived as learning and teaching American or British culture (Kachru, 1992: 357). But now, the situation is completely different as English is used by approximately a quarter of the world's population. For that reason, one must distinguish here between English as a medium and English as a message.

According to Kachru (1995: 294), the medium refers to the *form* of language – its phonology, morphology and syntax, and the message embodies the *functions* in which the medium is used. In this case, the medium is English which is shared by all of us. But the

message represents multiple identities and contexts and visions. The message is diverse and cross-cultural.

I shall say that today, English is viewed as an entity which can be separated from American or British culture. The medium is still the same but the message may be completely different. I will discuss this point further in the next paragraphs.

## REASONS FOR FAVORING IMMERSION PROGRAM AT INDONESIAN UNIVERSITIES

### 1. English should be valued for its pragmatic functions

English is very important in the era of globalisation because it is the key to global communication, relations, and information. Therefore, I would want to suggest that those who opt for education in English do so for pragmatic reasons, i.e. to maximise their chances of success in a multilingual society and to communicate globally. They know that by mastering English, they can maximise their career prospects, obtain more knowledge and communicate with people from other countries. There is nothing wrong with the Immersion policy. In fact, as Bisong (1995:125) says,

“Why settle for monolingualism in a society that is constantly in a state of flux, when you can be multilingual and more at ease with a richer linguistic repertoire and an expanding consciousness?”

Knowledge of English is empowering, not disempowering!

### 2. English can be used to promote indigenous cultures

Kachru (1992: 4) points out that English language now is often valued as an important tool to impart local traditions and cultural values in pluralistic societies. Raja Rao (India), Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Karim Raslan (Malaysia), Catherine Lim (Singapore), and Pira Sudham (Thailand) are some of local writers who opt for English to promote their indigenous cultures. They have used the raw material of what is considered as a western medium, reshaped it and redesigned it. They have put “new messages” there. One of the writers, Achebe (1975), as quoted by Bisong (1995: 129), writes,

"I feel that English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings"

According to Kachru (1992: 4), the works of these writers reflect vitality, innovation and cultural and linguistic blends. Furthermore, these writers have proved that English does not colonize them; their medium is non-native (English), but their message is not.

I believe the same thing may happen in Indonesia. As we all know, Indonesia has 500 tribes. Each tribe or ethnic group has its own culture. Thus, Indonesian culture is made up of elements from the various sub-cultures of the different ethnic groups within the country's borders. This fact is amazing and we should be very proud of it. English, as a universal language, can be a major vehicle for International recognition. English can be used to put Indonesia on the world map as a cultural presence.

In short, I shall say that English should not be perceived as necessarily imparting only Western cultures. It is a universal language, and no country or culture or person has the right to claim it. It is our language, and each of us has the right to use it, for example to convey national identity which may be quite different from those of English-speaking countries. I completely agree with Achebe that "I have been given this language and I intend to use it" (see Bisong, 1995: 129).

Again, there is nothing wrong with the Immersion Program because it does not foster the dominance of western cultures. It is better then to view the universities which implement this kind of program as the places in which the students and the teachers can learn and use English freely to express their cultural identity and to get exposed to new ideas and perspectives.

#### **IMMERSION PROGRAM IN INDONESIAN CONTEXT**

It follows from what has been said in this article that English is the medium of a great deal of the world's knowledge. And by mastering the language, we can get access to the knowledge. English-medium universities (or Immersion programs) can be

considered as alternative ways to achieve the language mastery. Of course this program must be suited to Indonesian context.

### 1. The use of local content materials

In the English Immersion program, all classroom instruction and materials (books, worksheets, etc) are in English. But it does not mean that we should only use books and learning materials produced by people from western countries. In fact, there is evidence that the teaching material, ideological messages and pedagogy which are part of western communities are culturally inappropriate to the host countries. As a result, they cannot be used appropriately (Prodromou, 1998: 79)

I propose that there should be more production of local teaching and learning materials that are culturally and experientially appropriate for Indonesian students. Of course, the materials used are the ones that match the L2 proficiency of the students, cater to those students' learning needs, and maximize their opportunities for rapid L2 development. By doing this, we can minimize the problem of 'capitalist interest', motivate the students to learn and use English more and at the same time maintain the students' (and the teachers') sense of identity within their own culture.

Studies have shown that students who experience this can acquire normal English language proficiency and show the same or better level of general academic development. Furthermore, the students tend to develop positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures (Genesee, Swain and Lapkin as cited by Ellis, 1994: 226, also Maher and Bostwick, 1995: 86)

### 2. The recruitment of the qualified bilingual or multilingual teachers

*If right from the beginning, the students are taught by native speakers who are typically monolingual and unable to communicate with the students in the students' mother tongue, what will happen? I believe that the students will get shocked and have no motivation to learn the language because they suffer from a painful experience. If they cannot master the language, it means that there is a possibility that they will not understand their academic subjects. A research conducted in Canada has revealed that English-speaking*



*students who are "forced" to use French medium cannot have high academic achievement in Mathematics and Science. In general, studies have shown that this kind of approach (using monolingual native speakers) has well-documented negative effects (Cummins as quoted by Ellis, 1995:225; Baker and Jones, 1998). Thus, my suggestion is that there should be more recruitment of qualified bilingual or multilingual teachers. What do I mean by 'qualified teachers' here?*

First, qualified teachers in the Immersion program should have high language proficiency both in the students' mother tongue and in the target language (English). They have already trained to achieve high competency and proficiency in English language so that they know what it means to learn a foreign language. In this case, they are explicitly aware of the features of the language, can anticipate learning problems, can empathize with the students, and use the students' mother tongue if necessary (Cook, 2001: 176). In addition, I feel that qualified teachers in the Immersion program should also master not only General English but also English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It is because they must be able to conduct lectures in English and at the same time they also have to talk about their subjects such as Mathematics, Economics, Chemical Engineering, etc.

Second, qualified teachers in the Immersion program should also be trained in an educational system which shares similar cultural values with the students'. I propose this suggestion because what might be acceptable and appropriate in the context of the United States, for example, might not necessarily be so in Indonesia (Cook, 2001: 176).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that English is no longer perceived as the language of imperialism. Nowadays, people learn it for pragmatic reasons. Although, it is used as the medium of instruction in Indonesian universities, it will not displace or replace our Bahasa Indonesia and our local languages. It has its own functions and will continue to do so in our multilingual society. I have also argued that English is no longer considered as the language of cultural imperialism. In fact, English as the media can be used to convey our local messages. It can be used to express our

own ideas, facts and cultures which may be very different from the English-speaking countries. In response to the problem of 'capitalist interest', I have put two suggestions: (1) the production of the local teaching and learning materials, and (2) the recruitment of qualified bilingual or multilingual teachers.

To end this discussion, I would like to put the statement of Mashabela (1975) as cited in Crystal (1997: 101):

"Learning and using English will not only give us the much-needed unifying chord but will also land us into the exciting world of ideas; it will enable us to keep company with kings in the world of ideas and also make it possible for us to share the experiences of our own brothers in the world."

There is nothing wrong with the Immersion program. It is just a tool to increase the target language proficiency and get the content knowledge. Finally, I hope that this discussion will provide some useful insights especially for those who are engaging in the same practice.

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