

## Language Policy in Indonesian Elementary Schools: Balancing National, Local, And Foreign Languages

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### ABSTRACT

With its linguistic diversity, Indonesia faces unique challenges in implementing an effective language policy in basic education. With more than 700 regional languages and a commitment to national unity, cultural preservation, and global competitiveness, the country's language policy seeks to balance the roles of Bahasa Indonesia, regional languages, and foreign languages, mainly English. A qualitative literature review approach was used to analyze existing scholarly works, policy documents, and government reports. This method identifies patterns in language policy implementation and common challenges schools face. It also examines the successes and failures of language policies in promoting national unity, cultural preservation, and global competitiveness. A comprehensive multilingual approach is recommended, integrating local languages in early childhood education, using Bahasa Indonesia as the primary language of instruction, and gradually introducing foreign languages. The study advocates for curricula tailored to local needs, better teacher training, and equitable distribution of resources to address gaps. This approach is critical to ensuring the sustainability of Indonesia's linguistic diversity, preserving cultural heritage, strengthening national identity, and improving students' global readiness.

**Keywords:** *language policy, elementary school, national, local, foreign.*

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world, with over 300 ethnic groups and more than 700 native languages (Humanika, 2017). This rich linguistic diversity is a cultural asset but presents significant challenges in formulating effective educational language policies. In elementary education, language policies aim to balance three key objectives: fostering national unity through Bahasa Indonesia, preserving cultural heritage through local languages, and preparing students for globalization through foreign language proficiency.

Promoting Bahasa Indonesia as the national language has been pivotal in uniting the country's diverse ethnic groups. Officially adopted in 1945, it serves as a unifying medium, ensuring mutual intelligibility and creating a shared national identity (Fischer, 1952). In elementary schools, Bahasa Indonesia is the primary medium of instruction, providing a standardized foundation for learners. However, in regions where Bahasa Indonesia is not the first language,

students often face slower academic progression and limited engagement in early education (Radjaban, 2013).

Local languages preserve Indonesia's cultural heritage and foster regional identity. The 2013 Curriculum supports their inclusion in early education to ease the transition to Bahasa Indonesia while maintaining students' connections to their cultural roots (Humanika, 2017). Despite these efforts, the use of local languages has declined due to urbanization, migration, and the growing dominance of Bahasa Indonesia in public and educational spheres. Regional disparities in resources and policy implementation further hinder the preservation of local languages.

Foreign language education, mainly English, is another significant component of Indonesia's language policy. English is introduced in elementary schools to enhance students' global competitiveness and future employability (Hamid & Ali, 2022). Early exposure to English has been shown to improve language acquisition, yet its prioritization raises concerns about neglecting local languages, threatening Indonesia's linguistic diversity (Humanika, 2017).

Balancing national, local, and foreign languages in education presents challenges and successes. Initiatives such as bilingual programs and multilingual pedagogy training for teachers have shown promise in addressing these demands. However, a lack of an integrated policy framework and unequal resource distribution across regions remain significant barriers to achieving an effective balance (Hamied, 2012).

This review explores the implementation of Indonesia's language policies in elementary schools, focusing on managing national, local, and foreign languages. Examining the successes and challenges of these policies highlights the importance of a balanced approach in fostering national cohesion, preserving cultural heritage, and equipping students for a globalized future.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative literature review approach, focusing on analyzing existing scholarly works to synthesize insights and identify patterns in the implementation of language policy in Indonesian elementary schools. The literature review method systematically examines various types of secondary data, including Academic Articles, Peer-reviewed journal articles discussing theoretical frameworks, case studies, and empirical research on language education in Indonesia. Studies exploring the roles of Bahasa Indonesia, local languages, and foreign languages in the educational system. Policy Documents on Government regulations and frameworks, such as the 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum, 2013), which emphasizes the role of Bahasa Indonesia as the primary language of instruction while supporting the inclusion of local and foreign languages, and Government Reports, Reports from institutions like the Ministry of Education and Culture

(Kemendikbud), which provide data on the implementation and outcomes of language policies. To ensure the reliability and relevance of the sources, the study adhered to criteria such as Topical Relevance, Publication Period, Credibility of Sources, and Diversity of Perspective. The selected sources were analyzed through thematic coding to identify Patterns in how language policies are implemented across different regions, Common challenges and barriers to balancing national, local, and foreign languages, Evidence of success or failure in achieving the policy goals of unity, cultural preservation, and global readiness. This approach provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of language policy in Indonesian elementary schools. It highlights gaps in research and practice, serving as a foundation for future studies.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Bahasa Indonesia: The National Language***

Bahasa Indonesia is the primary medium of instruction in elementary schools, underscoring its critical role as the national language. This policy ensures that students across Indonesia, regardless of their regional background, learn a common language that promotes unity and effective communication. Bahasa Indonesia is taught as a subject to deepen students' linguistic proficiency and to align with its status as the language of governance, education, and national identity.

Research, such as Lauder's (2008), highlights the policy's success in fostering communication and integration across Indonesia's diverse regions. As the primary instructional language, Bahasa Indonesia has enabled students from different ethnic groups to interact and learn in a shared linguistic framework, strengthening the nation's unity. The widespread use of Bahasa Indonesia in schools has also contributed to literacy improvements and facilitated mobility among citizens within the archipelago.

Despite its benefits, the implementation of Bahasa Indonesia faces challenges, particularly in remote and rural areas. Many children in these regions grow up speaking local languages at home and have limited exposure to Bahasa Indonesia before entering school. Sugiharto (2015) notes that this lack of familiarity can hinder their ability to adapt to the school environment, affecting their academic performance and confidence in language use. Such disparities highlight the need for targeted support in regions where Bahasa Indonesia is not widely spoken.

### ***Local Languages: Cultural Preservation***

The inclusion of local languages in the elementary curriculum is made possible by regional autonomy policies. Local governments can design curricula incorporating regional languages,

especially in early grades, to support cultural preservation and ease the transition to Bahasa Indonesia. This approach recognizes the importance of maintaining linguistic diversity as part of Indonesia's cultural heritage.

Programs in culturally rich provinces such as Java and Bali demonstrate the potential of local language instruction to preserve regional identity. Muslim (2017) reports that integrating local languages into the curriculum helps foster a sense of pride and belonging among students, ensuring that these languages remain relevant in their communities. Schools can also provide a more comfortable learning environment by teaching students in their mother tongue during the early years.

However, the sustainability of local language instruction faces significant challenges. Declining intergenerational transmission of local languages due to urbanization and shifts in family language practices has decreased the number of native speakers. Furthermore, Rahayu (2018) highlights the shortage of qualified teachers and educational materials, which limits the effective teaching of local languages. This gap often forces schools to deprioritize local languages in favor of Bahasa Indonesia and foreign languages.

### ***Foreign Languages: Global Competence***

Introducing foreign languages, mainly English, reflects Indonesia's aspiration to prepare its students for a globalized world. English is commonly taught in elementary schools, with greater emphasis in private and international schools. The growing demand for English proficiency has led some institutions to integrate English as an additional medium of instruction.

Including English in the curriculum has successfully equipped students with essential skills for international communication. Lie (2007) emphasizes the role of English instruction in enhancing Indonesia's global competitiveness, enabling students to access global knowledge and opportunities. This policy has been particularly effective in urban schools with better resources and trained English teachers.

Despite its successes, foreign language education in Indonesia is marked by significant inequalities. Rural schools often lack the resources and trained personnel to deliver effective English instruction, creating a gap between urban and rural students. Additionally, in some regions, an overemphasis on English may come at the expense of local language preservation and even the development of proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia. Balancing these priorities remains a persistent challenge for policymakers.

### ***Balancing the Three Languages***

One of the most complex aspects of Indonesia's language policy is balancing the promotion of Bahasa Indonesia, preserving local languages, and teaching foreign languages. Many schools, particularly in urban areas, prioritize Bahasa Indonesia and English due to their perceived practicality and global relevance. This often results in the marginalization of local languages, even in regions with strong cultural traditions.

The literature underscores the importance of adopting multilingual education policies that value all three language categories. Sugiono (2020) advocates for an integrated approach, where local languages are used in early grades, Bahasa Indonesia becomes the primary medium of instruction, and foreign languages are gradually introduced. Such an approach could ensure that students benefit from multilingualism's cultural, national, and global advantages. However, successful implementation requires equitable resource distribution, teacher training, and public awareness campaigns to highlight the value of linguistic diversity.

While significant strides have been made in promoting Bahasa Indonesia and foreign languages, preserving local languages remains a critical concern. Addressing these challenges requires careful planning and consistent efforts to achieve a balanced multilingual education system.

### **CONCLUSION**

Indonesia's language policy in elementary schools seeks to balance the roles of Bahasa Indonesia, local languages, and foreign languages to achieve national unity, cultural preservation, and global competitiveness. Bahasa Indonesia has successfully fostered communication and integration, though children in remote areas often face challenges due to limited exposure. Efforts to preserve local languages are promising in some regions, yet the decline in their use at home and a shortage of qualified teachers pose significant threats to their sustainability. While English and other foreign languages enhance global readiness, unequal access and overemphasizing foreign language instruction risk overshadowing local and national languages. A comprehensive multilingual approach, supported by equitable resources, teacher training, and inclusive curricula, is essential to address these challenges. By valuing all three language types, Indonesia can create an education system that preserves its cultural heritage, strengthens national identity, and prepares students for global opportunities.

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