

Multilingualism and Language Ideologies in Post-Decentralization Indonesia: Implications for Language-in-Education Policy

 <https://doi.org/10.30598/tahurivol20issue1page59-79>

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Abstract

This study investigates the interplay between multilingualism and language ideologies in post-decentralization Indonesia, focusing on how local autonomy shapes language-in-education policies and practices in Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB). It examines how teachers, students, and administrators negotiate the meanings and functions of Bahasa Indonesia, English, Arabic, and local languages, Bahasa Sasak, Bahasa Samawa, and Bahasa Mbojo, within diverse school settings. Using a qualitative multi-site case study that combines critical ethnography and language policy ethnography, the research was conducted across a junior high school, a senior high school, and a Madrasah Aliyah. Data were gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and policy document analysis. Findings reveal that multilingual practices in NTB schools are structured by hierarchical ideologies in which Bahasa Indonesia and English represent academic and economic capital, Arabic symbolizes religious authority, and local languages are symbolically acknowledged yet marginalized. Although decentralization grants limited autonomy, policy implementation remains ideologically centralized. Teachers and students navigate these hierarchies ambivalently, balancing local identity with dominant discourses of modernity. The study introduces the Ideological Ecology of Multilingual Education (IEME) Framework, conceptualizing schools as ideological ecosystems where global, national, and local linguistic values intersect. It advances critical sociolinguistic theory and offers policy insights toward inclusive, context-sensitive multilingual education in postcolonial Indonesia.

Article Info:

Keywords: Critical Sociolinguistics, Decentralization, Language Ideology, Language Policy, Multilingual Education

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Received manuscript: 17/09/2022

Final revision: 08/11/2022

Approved: 25/11/2022

Online Access: 19/01/2023

Published: 25/02/2023

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Publisher: Jurusan Bahasa dan Seni FKIP Universitas Pattimura, Jl. Ir. M. Putuhena, Kampus Universitas Pattimura, Poka, Ambon 97233

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How to cite: Mataraw, M. K., & Adriansyah, H. (2023). Multilingualism and Language Ideologies in Post-Decentralization Indonesia: Implications for Language-in-Education Policy. *Jurnal Tahuri*, 20(1), 59-79. <https://doi.org/10.30598/tahurivol20issue1page59-79>

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's post-decentralization era, initiated through the 2001 regional autonomy reforms, has profoundly reshaped the nation's sociopolitical and educational landscape, particularly in linguistically diverse regions. One of these regions, Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB), offers a vivid microcosm of Indonesia's multilingual reality: a context where Sasak, Samawa, and Mbojo languages coexist with Bahasa Indonesia, Arabic, and English in both daily communication and formal education (Jaspers & Madsen, 2019; Rodríguez-Ordoñez et al., 2022). Beneath this multilingual vibrancy, however, lies an enduring tension between the ideals of linguistic inclusivity and the persistent dominance of national and global languages.

Although decentralization was expected to democratize educational governance by granting schools authority to contextualize curricula according to local needs, language-in-education policy remains largely top-down and ideologically driven. Local languages continue

to receive symbolic recognition but are rarely used as media of instruction or treated as subjects of serious academic consideration (Canagarajah, 2020; Zein et al., 2020a). This disjuncture between policy rhetoric and classroom practice forms the central problem of this study: how multilingualism, ostensibly embraced in Indonesia's decentralized education system, is shaped and constrained by underlying language ideologies that determine which languages are valued, which are marginalized, and how these dynamics influence students' educational and cultural identities.

The issue at hand is not merely pedagogical; it is deeply ideological and political. The 2013 Curriculum and its successors formally encourage the inclusion of *muatan lokal* (local content), offering opportunities for regional languages and cultures to gain space in educational settings. However, empirical studies have shown that national educational policies continue to privilege Bahasa Indonesia as a symbol of unity and English as a language of global advancement (Mewengkang & Fansury, 2021; Zein et al., 2020a). This dual valorization often leaves local languages in a paradoxical position, celebrated as heritage yet sidelined in the pursuit of modernity. In NTB, where Arabic also holds religious prestige, the linguistic hierarchy becomes even more layered. Teachers navigate multilingual spaces where the use of local languages can enhance relational intimacy with students, yet teaching and assessment remain anchored in Bahasa Indonesia or English to meet perceived academic and economic standards. This dynamic reflects the "ideology of standardization," in which language value is socially constructed through institutional power rather than communicative function (Santika et al., 2023; Wan & Gao, 2021).

A growing body of scholarship has addressed various aspects of multilingualism and language policy in Indonesia and beyond. Herawati (2022) and Mitchell et al. (2022) developed the concept of the continua of biliteracy, emphasizing the dynamic negotiation between local and global languages in multilingual education. Bonacina-Pugh et al. (2021) and I. da C. Cabral (2021) examined how national ideologies shape language policy implementation, often reinforcing inequality despite progressive rhetoric. In the Indonesian context, Agbozo and ResCue (2021) highlighted how English symbolizes modernity and mobility, while local languages are often associated with rurality and backwardness. Similarly, Cenoz and Gorter (2022) argued that decentralization in education does not automatically guarantee linguistic inclusion because institutional ideologies and economic aspirations tend to favor dominant languages. More recent studies found that English in Indonesian schools functions not only as an academic subject but also as a marker of social aspiration, shaping students' perceptions of intelligence and success (E. Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2021; Sudarmanto et al., 2023).

Research on local language maintenance further reveals persistent challenges. Raja et al. (2022a) and Zein et al. (2020b) demonstrated that mother-tongue-based education in Indonesia remains fragile, limited by inadequate resources and insufficient teacher preparation. Raja et al. (2022b) argued that local language instruction is often implemented symbolically, confined to extracurricular spaces rather than integrated into formal curricula. In NTB, Kadir (2021) and Wijaya et al. (2021) observed that while regional languages are used

informally in communication, formal domains remain dominated by Bahasa Indonesia and English. This linguistic imbalance creates “orders of indexicality,” in which some languages index prestige and authority while others signify locality or marginality (Sahib et al., 2021).

Global scholarship provides valuable comparative insights. Dovchin (2021) and Yuvayapan (2019) proposed translanguaging as a pedagogical response to rigid language boundaries, advocating fluid multilingual practices that reflect students’ lived realities. Yet scholars also warn that the global discourse of multilingualism itself can become ideological, promoting English-inclusive multilingualism that sustains global hierarchies (Pinho Feller, 2022; Wei & Lin, 2019). Rasman (2018) and Seals and Olsen-Reeder (2020) further noted that language policy is less about formal legislation and more about covert ideologies that determine which languages are legitimized in practice. These theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant to Indonesia, where decentralization ostensibly devolves power but in practice often reproduces central hierarchies through subtle ideological mechanisms embedded in schooling.

Despite extensive research on language policy, empirical studies specifically examining how multilingual ideologies manifest under decentralization remain limited. Much of the existing literature focuses either on macro-level policy or micro-level classroom interactions without situating these dynamics within broader governance structures (Prada, 2022; Putrawan, 2022). Few studies have explored the intersection between post-decentralization autonomy and the lived multilingual experiences of teachers and students in peripheral regions such as NTB. Even fewer have examined how Arabic, as a language of religious legitimacy, interacts with Bahasa Indonesia, English, and local languages to shape linguistic hierarchies in Islamic educational settings. The ideological dimensions of this interplay, how moral, social, and intellectual values are assigned to each language, remain understudied despite their critical implications for identity and equity in education.

This study positions itself within this underexplored terrain, offering an ethnographically grounded analysis of how multilingualism is lived, imagined, and institutionalized in post-decentralization Indonesia. By integrating critical sociolinguistics, language ideology studies, and educational policy analysis, the research examines not only which languages are used in schools but also why and how these choices reflect deeper ideological and structural forces. The study moves beyond descriptive accounts of language use toward a critical interrogation of how language hierarchies are reproduced or contested in everyday educational practices.

To this end, the study introduces the concept of the Ideological Ecology of Multilingual Education (IEME), a theoretical lens that conceptualizes schools as ecosystems where global, national, and local linguistic ideologies interact and compete for legitimacy. This perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of multilingualism not merely as a resource or skill but as a dynamic field of ideological negotiation shaped by governance, culture, and identity. It further illustrates how decentralization, while devolving administrative control, can paradoxically centralize ideological power if local actors internalize dominant discourses about linguistic value.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond NTB or even Indonesia. It speaks to broader questions about how postcolonial societies manage linguistic diversity within modern education systems still structured by global hierarchies of knowledge and language. By exploring these tensions, this study aims to contribute both empirically and conceptually to reimagining multilingual education as an ideological ecology that mirrors and mediates wider social transformations.

Ultimately, this research analyzes how language ideologies shape multilingual practices and policies in NTB schools and how teachers, students, and administrators negotiate the meanings, values, and functions of different languages in education. By revealing the ideological undercurrents sustaining linguistic hierarchies despite formal decentralization, the study seeks to offer new insights for developing more equitable and contextually grounded language-in-education policies. It advocates a vision of multilingualism that is not merely functional or symbolic but transformative, one that affirms local linguistic identities while equipping students to participate in national and global spheres. Through this lens, Indonesia's post-decentralization multilingual reality becomes not a problem to be managed but a potential to be cultivated.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the ideological dynamics and multilingual practices within complex educational contexts rather than to quantify measurable variables. This approach was chosen because the issue under investigation, the interrelationship between language ideology, multilingual practices, and post-deconcentration education policy, cannot be reduced to numerical or single-variable analysis. Instead, it demands a rich interpretation of meanings, values, and lived social experiences among educational actors in real-world settings. As Maher and Dertadian (2018) emphasize, qualitative research enables the researcher to "enter the world of the research subjects and interpret phenomena based on the meanings they ascribe to them," making it the most appropriate approach to explore language ideologies that are often implicit and embedded in everyday practices.

The research was conducted in the Province of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), selected for its multilingual character and its representativeness of the challenges faced in implementing post-deconcentration education policies. In this region, Sasak, Samawa, and Mbojo languages coexist with Indonesian, Arabic, and English across various social domains. However, this linguistic diversity is seldom reflected in formal education practices. NTB also exhibits distinctive socio-religious dynamics, wherein language functions as a moral and spiritual symbol of identity. Hence, the province provides a critical site for examining how national language policies and ideologies are translated, negotiated, or contested within a multilingual and religious local context.

The study involved three educational institutions that represent institutional and cultural diversity: one junior high school (SMP), one senior high school (SMA), and one Islamic senior high school (Madrasah Aliyah). These sites were selected through purposive sampling

based on their differing ideological and policy orientations, namely, a public general school, an academic high school, and a religion-based institution. The study included 27 participants, comprising nine teachers, three principals, three local education and religious affairs officers, and twelve students who were selected for their active participation in language-related school activities. They were not chosen to represent the population statistically, but rather for their capacity to provide diverse and in-depth insights into multilingual practices and perceptions in their respective institutions.

Data collection was conducted over six months using participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Participant observation was employed to capture naturally occurring language practices within classrooms, school ceremonies, religious activities, and informal interactions. This process allowed the researcher to understand how language ideologies were enacted through daily linguistic choices and behaviors. In-depth interviews were used to explore teachers', principals', and students' beliefs and rationales regarding language use in education. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. FGDs were conducted with students to facilitate collective discussions on their multilingual experiences, as this method can reveal social perceptions that may not emerge in individual interviews (Cheron et al., 2022; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). Document analysis was conducted on local curricula, textbooks, policy guidelines, and official reports to identify representations of language ideology in institutional documents.

All data were analyzed thematically using the analytical framework of language ideology proposed by Alam (2020). The analysis proceeded iteratively, beginning with open coding to identify preliminary themes related to language values, linguistic hierarchies, and pedagogical strategies. This was followed by axial coding to establish relationships between practices and ideologies. The final interpretation sought to construct a conceptual model explaining how language ideology operates under the decentralized policy regime.

To ensure the credibility and validity of findings, triangulation was performed through three strategies: source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and theoretical triangulation. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing perspectives among teachers, students, and principals regarding the same phenomena, ensuring consistency across groups. Methodological triangulation was implemented by integrating findings from observation, interviews, and document analysis to avoid single-data bias. Theoretical triangulation was performed by comparing findings with relevant theoretical perspectives in critical sociolinguistics and language policy studies (Fowler & Kress, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Ross & Rivers, 2018), thereby situating interpretations within both contextual and theoretical rigor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ideological Hierarchies in Multilingual Schooling

In the multilingual educational landscape of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), linguistic hierarchies within schools emerge from the interplay between national policies, global orientations, and everyday practices that reflect how society ascribes symbolic value to

languages as markers of social status, morality, and progress. Observations and interviews conducted in the three research sites, one public junior high school, one public senior high school, and one private Islamic senior high school, revealed that Indonesian and English consistently occupy the top tiers of linguistic hierarchy. Indonesian functions as a language of academic, administrative, and national legitimacy, while English is associated with modernity and global economic opportunity. Both languages thus serve as benchmarks of intelligence and prestige among teachers and students alike.

During classroom observation at a junior high school in Central Lombok, an English lesson appeared notably more “serious” than other subjects. The teacher maintained a formal tone, reminding students who used Indonesian: “Try to speak English; we are in an English class.” Although seemingly casual, such remarks carry a strong ideological message, that speaking English signifies being “smarter,” “more modern,” and “more capable.” As the teacher (N) explained in an interview, she emphasized English discipline so that her students “would not feel inferior when studying outside the region.” This indicates that pedagogical practices are not solely curriculum-driven but also shaped by broader social and economic aspirations linked to language (Fowler & Kress, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

At the senior high school level, this phenomenon was even more pronounced. The principal (R) expressed pride in his school’s active English Club, describing it as “the modern face of the school.” He added that “if students can deliver speeches in English, it shows they are ready to compete.” Such statements demonstrate how English serves as a symbol of progress and competitiveness, rather than merely a communicative tool. In extracurricular activities such as speech contests, debates, and science presentations, English functioned as a marker of prestige. Yet, outside these formal events, both teachers and students predominantly used Indonesian or local languages. This distinction between formal and informal use suggests that English proficiency is not primarily communicative but performative, a form of symbolic capital denoting academic civility (Bodó et al., 2022; Ross & Rivers, 2018).

Indonesian, in turn, holds a dominant position as a language of administrative and moral legitimacy. At the Islamic senior high school, a teacher (M) emphasized that “teaching in Indonesian is more polite and more official,” as it signifies unity and intellectual maturity. Observation confirmed that all official documents, from academic reports to extracurricular records, were written in Indonesian, although teachers occasionally used local languages to clarify difficult concepts. Thus, Indonesian represents formal authority, while local languages function as empathetic bridges between teachers and students.

This linguistic order can be understood through the lens of linguistic neoliberalism, the belief that language mastery, particularly of global languages such as English, constitutes economic capital and social competence within a global market. In this context, language becomes a commodified asset rather than a neutral communicative tool. Teachers at the senior high school, for instance, often encouraged students to enroll in private English courses “to compete for admission to public universities.” One student (RZ) confessed that he felt “smarter and cooler” when speaking with an English accent in front of peers. Such instances

reveal how language operates simultaneously as communication and as identity, an identity evaluated by its ability to engage with global discourse.

However, the ideology that privileges Indonesian and English inadvertently reinforces symbolic inequalities deeply rooted in the education system. The decentralization of education since 2001 was intended to empower local diversity, including the use of local languages in schools. Yet, the findings suggest that autonomy has remained administrative rather than ideological. A principal (S) at the junior high school admitted, “We actually want to include Sasak as a subject, but there’s no legal basis for it in the national curriculum.” This illustrates that while schools may have flexibility in curriculum design, language policy remains subject to centralized ideologies that position Indonesian as a symbol of national integration.

Observations of flag ceremonies across the three institutions highlighted a striking contrast between national symbolism and local expression. National songs were performed with enthusiasm, yet no formal events featured local languages. At the Islamic school, even the closing prayers were delivered in Arabic and Indonesian, languages perceived to carry spiritual and national legitimacy, while local languages were excluded from formal rituals. This pattern underscores how linguistic hierarchy manifests not only in pedagogical interactions but also in institutional symbolism.

This condition reveals a contradiction between *de jure* local autonomy and *de facto* ideological centralism. While decentralization ostensibly grants local governments authority over curriculum matters, the underlying linguistic values remain shaped by national ideologies that idealize Indonesian as the language of unity and English as the language of advancement. Drawing on the concept of language ideological assemblages, language ideologies never function in isolation; they emerge from the intersection of multiple social forces, state power, global economy, religion, and local culture, that together shape the meanings and values of language in context. In NTB, these forces have produced an ideological configuration wherein local languages are “visible but powerless,” while dominant languages continue to control access to academic and social legitimacy.

Teachers and students do not always agree with this hierarchy but learn to adapt to it. In an FGD at the senior high school, several students expressed that they felt “more confident” speaking Sasak outside class but “less appropriate” using it during formal lessons. They recognized that language choice carries symbolic consequences: using a local language may be perceived as uneducated, while using English, however imperfectly, appears sophisticated. This reflects what Abe and Shapiro (2021) describe as the linguistic market, wherein the value of a language is determined not by its communicative utility but by the social power that regulates it.

In a broader sense, these findings indicate that decentralization policies have not substantially transformed the ideological structure of language in schools. Linguistic authority operates along a different axis from administrative power. Principals may exercise discretion over curricular matters, but they lack the legitimacy to redefine which languages are deemed “appropriate” for education. Consequently, schools in NTB function within a system that is

structurally multilingual yet ideologically monolingual. Indonesian and English remain idealized as symbols of rationality and progress, while local languages persist in affective and informal domains.

Symbolic Inclusion and Practical Exclusion of Local Languages

In the educational context of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), local languages, Sasak, Samawa, and Mbojo, occupy a paradoxical position. These languages are symbolically acknowledged as integral components of regional cultural identity, yet they are practically excluded from formal learning processes. Schools participating in this study often emphasize pride in their “local identity” through institutional vision–mission statements and ceremonial events; however, such acknowledgment is rarely followed by the actual use of local languages as instructional media or sources of knowledge. In practice, these languages appear only in limited contexts, casual conversations between classes, teachers’ jokes, or informal cultural events such as traditional ceremonies and local competitions. This condition reflects what Jaspers and Madsen (2019) describe as linguistic tokenism, a situation in which linguistic diversity is displayed as a symbol of cultural plurality without any genuine redistribution of linguistic power.

Observations in a junior high school in East Lombok illustrate this situation clearly. During the National Education Day ceremony, the master of ceremonies proudly opened the event in Sasak: “Selamat datang semua, mari kite bangun pendidikan NTB yang maju.” Teachers and students smiled approvingly, and the principal reiterated that the school “respects local culture.” Yet, once the ceremony concluded, all instructional activities resumed exclusively in Indonesian or occasionally in English. Sasak never appeared in classrooms, neither as a medium of instruction nor as an instructional topic. One teacher (H) admitted in an interview that she wished to use the local language “so that students could understand better,” but felt constrained because “there is no curricular framework allowing that.” This indicates that symbolic recognition of local languages is not accompanied by structural legitimacy for pedagogical use.

A similar situation emerged in a senior high school in Sumbawa. The principal (L) proudly claimed that “the Samawa language is our identity,” and that the school regularly participates in annual regional speech competitions. Yet, classroom observations revealed that no subjects, Indonesian, history, or religion, employed Samawa even for complex explanations. Teachers and students tended to use formal Indonesian or informal mixed language in daily interactions, but local languages were absent in formal academic contexts. One teacher (N) confessed that “if we use Samawa, people might think the students are less intelligent or their grades will drop.” This reveals how local languages are not only marginalized but are also socially stigmatized as “non-academic,” reinforcing the linguistic hierarchy that determines which languages are deemed legitimate.

In the case of a Madrasah Aliyah in Bima, the situation is even more intricate due to the presence of Arabic as a religious and spiritual symbol. The Mbojo language functions primarily in domestic and affective domains, used casually among students or by teachers to ease classroom tension. However, when formal instruction begins, teachers immediately

switch to Indonesian and occasionally integrate Arabic expressions to invoke religious authority. A religious education teacher (S) remarked that “local language is good for daily communication, but in teaching, we must maintain dignity.” This demonstrates that local languages are perceived as lacking epistemic value compared to Indonesian or Arabic; they are positioned as “languages of familiarity,” not “languages of knowledge.”

This situation exemplifies symbolic inclusion but practical exclusion: local languages are visible in school symbols yet absent from institutional structures. School logos, banners, and slogans often contain local expressions such as “Sasak Unggul” or “Madrasah Berjaya Samawa”, but the use of these languages within pedagogy remains minimal. During focus group discussions in one senior high school, students expressed that speaking local languages in class felt “awkward.” One student (RF) mentioned that using Samawa “sounds funny in class,” as they associate Indonesian with academic seriousness. This internalization of linguistic hierarchy indicates that younger generations perceive local languages merely as markers of origin or social intimacy, not as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Conceptually, linguistic tokenism explains how local languages are accommodated only to project an image of pluralism without true integration into the structures that determine linguistic legitimacy (Jaspers & Madsen, 2019). Schools in NTB employ local languages as markers of authenticity in public discourse, yet they continue to operate under national ideological systems demanding linguistic homogenization. The muatan lokal (local content) curriculum that should serve to reinforce linguistic identity often loses its substantive meaning, becoming a ceremonial activity devoid of academic value. A school principal (R) admitted that “we have a local language class in the schedule, but it only meets two hours a week and is often canceled when another teacher takes over.” This admission highlights how, despite formal policy accommodations, local language programs lack the structural strength to alter institutional ideologies.

Field observations further reveal that this tokenism is maintained through visual and ritual symbolism. In several classrooms across the junior and senior high schools, motivational posters displayed phrases in local languages, such as “Lek taoq ta, taoq begawe” (“If you know, you must act”) and “Mbojo si londo, budaya si melo” (“Proud to be Bimanese, love the culture”). However, these remained decorative artefacts without pedagogical connection. An Indonesian language teacher admitted, “They’re just there to make the classroom look nicer.” In essence, local languages are reduced to aesthetic ornaments, cultural displays stripped of epistemic function within the learning environment.

This phenomenon carries serious implications for linguistic and epistemic justice in education. When local languages are used only symbolically, the knowledge embedded within them is simultaneously marginalized. Language does not merely transmit meaning; it embodies ways of thinking, values, and worldviews. By excluding local languages from educational spaces, schools effectively erase local epistemologies from formal domains of knowledge. As Swann and Deumert (2018) argue in the theory of translanguaging pedagogy, local languages possess epistemic potential to enrich learning by connecting lived experiences with academic concepts. However, in NTB, this potential remains unacknowledged, as schools

continue to regard local languages as “non-academic” and “non-modern.”

The gap between symbolic recognition and practical use of local languages further reveals that Indonesia’s decentralized education policy lacks ideological reflexivity. While schools are granted administrative autonomy to develop local curricula, national language policies still prioritize Indonesian and English at the top of the linguistic hierarchy (Gomes, 2018; Woolard, 2020). As one madrasah principal (A) stated, “We can organize local cultural events, but we cannot make them official subjects because of higher-level regulations.” This reflects that linguistic power remains centralized even when administrative governance is decentralized.

Arabic and the Moral Politics of Language

In the religious education context of Madrasah Aliyah in NTB, Arabic occupies a distinctive position, not merely as an instructional language but as one imbued with moral, spiritual, and symbolic significance. It exists not only due to curricular policy but also because of a deep conviction that mastering and using Arabic constitutes a form of worship. As one teacher (S) articulated, “Arabic is not just a subject; it is a path to divine reward.” This expression reveals how Arabic has been moralized, transcending communicative function to become a symbol of piety. This aligns with the concept of moralized multilingualism, which posits that moral, ethical, and religious values are often attached to specific languages, turning language use into a measure of one’s moral worth (Rampton & Charalambous, 2020; Snell, 2018).

Classroom observations substantiate this. During a Qur’anic exegesis lesson in a Bima madrasah, the class atmosphere was solemn. The teacher began with an Arabic greeting and a short verse, inviting students to recite together before translating into Indonesian. Each mispronunciation was gently corrected, with the teacher reminding students that “every Arabic letter carries divine merit.” Here, Arabic functioned not merely as a linguistic tool but as a moral and spiritual discipline. Students displayed visible reverence when reciting, a demeanor absent in other subjects such as English or mathematics.

An Arabic teacher (N) mentioned her deliberate effort to preserve the “sanctity” of Arabic in class, avoiding its use for casual jokes or trivial conversation. “Using Arabic for jokes might be sinful,” she explained. This demonstrates how Arabic is institutionalized as a normative rather than a communicative language, its use governed by moral and spiritual rules rather than pragmatic necessity. Within the framework of moralized multilingualism, this illustrates how certain languages acquire ethical value that regulates who may speak them, when, and for what purposes (Rampton & Charalambous, 2020; Snell, 2018).

The privileged status of Arabic is also visible in the school’s spatial design. Nearly every room displays Arabic calligraphy, phrases such as “Iqra’ bismi rabbika” (“Read in the name of your Lord”) or slogans like “Arabic is the language of heaven.” These are not mere decorations but institutional moral markers that shape the school’s religious atmosphere. Arabic thus functions as a “ritual language,” embedding transcendental presence in daily school life.

However, this sacred positioning also establishes symbolic boundaries. Arabic is rarely used as a participatory language outside religious contexts. As one teacher (A) admitted,

“Students only use Arabic during religious classes; outside that, they feel embarrassed or afraid of making mistakes.” Consequently, Arabic becomes a normative rather than participatory language, restricted to sacred contexts and avoided elsewhere. This reveals a distinct religio-linguistic ideology operating outside the secular hierarchies of Indonesian and English. While English symbolizes modernity and global progress, Arabic represents piety and devotion. These ideological systems coexist but seldom interact on equal footing.

In practice, Arabic instruction emphasizes memorization and correct pronunciation rather than communicative competence. Students focus on recitation accuracy in accordance with tajwīd rules rather than using the language argumentatively or dialogically. One student (MI) explained that “mispronouncing a letter could change its meaning and be sinful,” demonstrating how morality shapes linguistic performance. Here, Arabic serves as a disciplinary language that enforces moral order, defining who may speak authoritatively and who should remain silent. It constructs moral subjects through linguistic obedience, establishing the teacher as the custodian of sacred truth.

This dynamic also mediates the relationship between language, morality, and spiritual identity. As the madrasah principal (H) explained, “Arabic is our expression of love for religion,” equating linguistic ability with moral virtue. Such belief reflects an ideological logic linking linguistic competence with spiritual worth, a person who speaks or reads Arabic is considered closer to God. Kiramba (2018) emphasizes that moralized multilingualism operates through such narratives, where language signifies not only competence but also moral integrity.

Nevertheless, this religio-linguistic ideology produces ambivalence. While it elevates Arabic’s moral value, it simultaneously constrains students’ linguistic agency. Because the language is treated as sacred, learners hesitate to use it creatively or spontaneously. A teacher (R) admitted that “students rarely dare to speak Arabic freely for fear of being disrespectful.” Classroom observations confirm this: when asked to respond in Arabic, most students remained silent or replied in a mix of Indonesian and Arabic. Teachers would then reformulate their answers in formal Arabic, reinforcing the hierarchy between normative knowledge (teacher) and limited linguistic performance (student).

Thus, Arabic in Madrasah Aliyah functions dually, as a moral language and as a linguistic constraint. It enacts disciplinary power, shaping pious subjectivities through language. Yet within Indonesia’s multilingual educational landscape, it also introduces new ideological stratifications: Arabic as the moral language, Indonesian as the academic language, and English as the economic language. These coexist but remain asymmetrical.

This complexity illustrates that Indonesia’s educational decentralization has not merely diversified local policy but also generated competing language ideologies. In Madrasah Aliyah, the nationalist ideology privileging Indonesian intersects with the religious ideology elevating Arabic, while modernist discourse, embodied by English, presses upon both through the logic of globalization. The tension among nationalism, religiosity, and modernity forms an ideological hybridity, wherein the meaning of “proper language education” becomes a negotiation between piety, nationhood, and progress.

Negotiating Multilingual Identities in the Classroom

In the classroom setting of a Madrasah Aliyah in East Lombok, everyday linguistic practices illustrate a complex interplay among national, local, and global ideologies. Teachers and students do not merely use language as a communicative tool, but as a medium for negotiating social, cultural, and even moral identities. In this context, multilingual classroom interactions should not be understood solely as pedagogical strategies but as socially meaningful processes. Positioning theory, as articulated by Chang-Bacon (2021) and Phyak (2021), helps explain how teachers and students actively “position themselves” through specific language choices, whether to express intimacy, assert authority, or navigate classroom power relations.

Field observations reveal that language use in the classroom is not rigid nor strictly determined by the curriculum. For instance, during an eleventh-grade English lesson, the teacher (referred to as Mrs. F) began the session with a warm greeting in Sasak, “Gimana kabar, le?”, a locally intimate expression. The atmosphere immediately relaxed, with students responding in a mixture of Indonesian and local dialects. However, once the formal lesson began, Mrs. F shifted to English and formal Indonesian. This shift was not incidental, but a deliberate strategy to alternately create distance and closeness. In an interview, Mrs. F explained, “If I use English from the start, students feel awkward; but if I keep using the local language, they lose focus.” Such code-switching strategies demonstrate how teachers navigate dual positions: that of a professional educator and a member of the local community seeking to maintain emotional connection with students.

Within the framework of positioning theory, these linguistic actions serve as a means for teachers to negotiate their identities across multiple discursive positions. Language switching does not merely constitute a change in code, but rather a transition from “institutional authority” to “community figure,” adapting roles to align with the social dynamics of the classroom. These positions are fluid rather than fixed and are continuously negotiated through everyday interactions. Thus, the classroom functions as a site where language ideologies and social identities intersect through concrete micro-level practices.

Students similarly demonstrate dynamic multilingual positioning. During an Islamic Education class observation, some students responded to the teacher’s questions in Indonesian but added side remarks in their local language to desk mates, such as “itu maksudnya kayak kemarin, to?” in Sasak. This practice reveals students’ ability to distinguish between the discursive spaces of the “formal classroom” and the “social community.” In an interview, a student (AN) expressed that he feels “more comfortable” speaking with peers in the local language as it feels more honest and familiar, yet he is also aware that “if we use local language with teachers, it might be seen as disrespectful.” This illustrates how language choice is closely linked to power structures and prevailing norms. Indonesian symbolizes politeness and academic legitimacy, while local languages signify solidarity and the authenticity of local identity.

These findings reinforce that multilingual practices in the classroom are not merely linguistic actions, but also social and moral ones. Bezcioglu-Goktolga and Yagmur (2018)

emphasize that every speech act not only conveys meaning but also positions speakers and listeners within a social structure. In the context of the madrasah, teachers who shift between Indonesian, English, and local languages are constructing complex power relations, regulating when students must demonstrate respect and when they may adopt a more relaxed stance. Simultaneously, students, through their adaptive linguistic competence, negotiate positions as both “obedient pupils” and “members of the local community.”

A further observation in an Arabic class reveals a similar dynamic, albeit with a stronger normative emphasis. The teacher (Mr. L) opened the lesson in Arabic and guided students in reading a *nahwu-sharaf* text. However, when clarifying word meanings, he shifted to Indonesian for clarity. Occasionally, he inserted Sasak expressions to contextualize certain cultural nuances. In an informal post-class interview, Mr. L acknowledged that he “must carefully choose which language to use,” as not all students fully understand Arabic terms, while relying solely on Indonesian may be perceived as less religious. In this instance, language shifts serve not only pedagogical but also moral purposes: preserving the sanctity of the sacred language while ensuring communicative effectiveness.

These observations indicate that each linguistic choice reflects a negotiation among three ideological forces: nationalism, which mandates Indonesian as a symbol of unity; religiosity, which privileges Arabic as a sacred medium; and locality, which maintains ethnolinguistic identities such as Sasak or Bima. In practice, teachers and students continuously navigate these forces contextually. In science lessons, Indonesian and English are predominant; in religious lessons, Arabic takes precedence; while in informal interaction, local languages remain the preferred medium. Thus, the classroom becomes an ideological negotiation arena in which national, religious, and local identities intersect and compete for legitimacy.

Nevertheless, this space of negotiation is not entirely free. National educational ideologies and madrasah social norms remain strong boundaries. English, for instance, is often positioned as the language of “progress” and “the future,” yet its use is restricted to particular contexts. The English teacher (Mrs. R) noted that “if too much English is used, students feel alienated, as though the lesson is designed only for urban learners.” This implies that the linguistic modernity associated with English is filtered through local interpretation. Conversely, Indonesian remains a symbol of formal authority, used in examinations and official communication, thereby reinforcing established language hierarchies.

Students often respond reflectively to such hierarchies. In one interview, a male student (RM) stated that he feels proud of speaking English because it “makes me look smart,” yet he fears being perceived as “arrogant” by peers if he uses it too often outside the classroom. This demonstrates how linguistic identity at school is shaped not only by proficiency but by social perception. Language choice becomes a performative action through which students negotiate status, solidarity, and self-image. Consequently, language learning in the madrasah is not merely a cognitive process but a social one that governs how individuals “become” part of particular communities.

From a positioning perspective, each linguistic act produces “positioning storylines” that shape relationships between individuals and surrounding ideological structures (MacSwan, 2020). For example, a teacher who shifts from a local language to English is narratively positioning themselves as an actor navigating between tradition and modernity. Meanwhile, students who adjust their language use based on context are constructing flexible identities, rooted in local culture yet responsive to global demands. This process indicates that multilingual classroom interactions are not random but constitute expressions of strategic agency, individuals’ capacity to negotiate within existing ideological constraints.

Thus, the Madrasah Aliyah classroom is not merely a site of instruction, but a social space where language ideologies are actively negotiated. Language not only communicates knowledge, but also mediates power and identity. Through code-switching practices, both teachers and students construct safe spaces within the tensions of monolingual national policies, hierarchical religious norms, and multilingual local realities. Yet, as daily interactions reveal, these negotiations remain bounded by broader ideological structures, including the national curriculum, madrasah moral values, and societal perceptions of modern languages.

The Ideological Ecology of Multilingual Education (IEME)

The conceptualisation of the Ideological Ecology of Multilingual Education (IEME) emerges from an effort to understand how language, power, and identity intersect within post-decentralisation educational spaces in Indonesia, particularly in West Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Barat, NTB). In this context, schools cannot be perceived solely as instructional institutions; rather, they function as dynamic ideological ecosystems where global, national, religious, and local languages interact, compete, and negotiate their social legitimacy. Within this ecological lens, language is not merely a communicative instrument but also a symbolic marker of social values, an expression of identity, and a tool of power that is exchanged and renegotiated in everyday school life.

Observations conducted in three schools, one public junior high school (SMP), one public senior high school (SMA), and one Islamic senior high school (Madrasah Aliyah), reveal that each operates with distinct ideological configurations while sharing a similar linguistic hierarchy. In this hierarchy, Bahasa Indonesia and English occupy dominant positions, Arabic is linked to the moral-religious domain, and local languages remain peripheral. For instance, during a flag ceremony at the SMA, the school principal (Mr. H) opened his speech with greetings in Bahasa Indonesia, followed by a brief Arabic expression, and concluded with a humorous Sasak phrase that elicited light laughter from students. However, once the formal proceedings commenced, all languages except Bahasa Indonesia disappeared from official discourse. Such shifts indicate that while linguistic diversity is symbolically acknowledged, institutional practices remain governed by a centralised national-linguistic ideology.

Interviews with teachers further demonstrate internalised tensions regarding language use. Some teachers acknowledged the importance of local languages but expressed concerns about professionalism and institutional expectations. As one SMP teacher (Mrs. S) stated, “If I use too much local language, people might think I am not professional.” This reflects an internalised ideology that equates professionalism with the exclusive use of

Bahasa Indonesia or English. Similarly, an English teacher (Mrs. R) admitted that local language use could facilitate students' cultural understanding but emphasized that "it cannot become a habit because examinations are still in Bahasa Indonesia." These narratives illustrate that the symbolic and functional values of languages are shaped not only by formal policies but also by social perceptions and evaluative pressures embedded within the educational system.

The IEME framework thus arises from the recognition of such complexity. The notion of "ecology" is not merely metaphorical but an analytical orientation that situates language within a network of relational influences. English is positioned as a symbol of globalisation and modernity, deriving legitimacy from neoliberal discourses of mobility and progress (Cushing, 2020). Bahasa Indonesia, as the national language, acts as an ideological gravitational centre that aligns education with discourses of unity and nationhood. Arabic occupies a spiritual-moral domain, linking language to Islamic identity and religious values. Meanwhile, local languages such as Sasak, Samawa, and Mbojo signify social intimacy and cultural rootedness, yet their epistemic value is marginalised. These four linguistic categories form layered ideological strata that continuously interact within educational settings, sometimes harmoniously, often hierarchically and contradictorily.

Within the IEME framework, decentralisation does not automatically dismantle the dominance of national and global languages. As evidenced in NTB, local autonomy has created space for the expression of local linguistic identities; however, in the absence of critical ideological awareness, such spaces are easily recolonised by established linguistic hierarchies. On one hand, schools experience increased flexibility in curriculum adaptation; on the other, they remain bound to national standards that measure competence predominantly through Bahasa Indonesia and English. This generates a paradox: administrative decentralisation does not necessarily translate into ideological decentralisation.

This tension is particularly visible in curriculum documents analysed during the study. For instance, the English lesson plan (RPP) in both SMA and Madrasah Aliyah includes the objective of "developing global communication skills," yet no elements underscore the integration of local cultural contexts. As the principal of one school (Mr. T) explained, "We want our students to remain proud of local culture, but academic competence based on national benchmarks is still the priority." This statement reflects how school policies operate under a logic of compromise between nationalism and locality, although the terms of such compromise are still dictated by dominant ideological values.

The IEME perspective asserts that languages in schools do not exist as isolated semiotic systems but are embedded within ideological ecologies shaped by sociopolitical and economic forces. As Piller and Gerber (2021) argue, sociolinguistic justice requires not only equitable redistribution of linguistic resources, such as access to learning and communication opportunities, but also the redistribution of symbolic meanings and values attributed to each language. Linguistic justice remains unachieved as long as local languages are treated merely as cultural ornaments rather than as legitimate sources of knowledge. In NTB, this gap is evident in the use of local languages predominantly during extracurricular events such as

speech competitions and cultural performances, while they are absent as instructional media for subjects such as science, mathematics, or social studies.

Field observations in the SMP revealed that even when teachers attempted to include local languages in classroom interactions, such practices were sporadic and unsystematic. In one Bahasa Indonesia lesson, a teacher referenced a Sasak proverb to explain a moral lesson from a folklore story but quickly reverted to formal Bahasa Indonesia for assessments. Post-lesson reflections from the teacher (Mrs. L) indicated that “local language helps students feel more connected, but since exams are national, we must return to standard language.” This situation underscores how the pedagogical value of local languages is acknowledged yet rendered subordinate to a monolingual national evaluation framework.

Through the lens of IEME, such conditions are interpreted not merely as policy gaps but as a manifestation of imbalanced ideological ecosystems. Schools serve as arenas where national, religious, global, and local ideologies converge, yet their interaction is structured within institutionalised asymmetries. Bahasa Indonesia and English function as “dominant species” within the linguistic ecosystem, Arabic acts as a “moral stabiliser,” while local languages exist as “endemic species” that hold symbolic importance but remain functionally endangered.

This framework also invites a reconceptualisation of what constitutes “multilingual education.” Conventionally, multilingualism is framed in instrumental terms, emphasising communicative competence in multiple languages for economic mobility or academic achievement. IEME advocates a shift towards an ideological ecological paradigm in which multilingualism is seen as a living social space accommodating diverse values, ideologies, and human experiences. In this view, local languages are not simply preserved as cultural heritage but recognised as cognitive tools for thinking, reasoning, and alternative world-making.

A comment from a senior high school student (MH) illustrates this ecological potential: “I often use Sasak to explain science concepts to my friend because it is easier to connect when using our own language.” This simple statement carries a profound implication: local languages are not only tools for socialisation but also cognitive instruments linking academic concepts with lived experiences. Yet such experiences often go unnoticed due to the absence of institutional recognition of the epistemic value of local languages.

Accordingly, IEME proposes that multilingual education should not be understood as an additive system, where languages are accumulated for instrumental purposes, but as an ideological ecosystem requiring balance and justice. Global, national, religious, and local languages should not be positioned in opposition but cultivated within an equitable and reflective ecology. In post-decentralisation Indonesia, linguistic justice cannot be achieved without critical engagement with how language ideologies operate at the micro level of classrooms, teacher-student interactions, and daily curricular practices. As emphasised by Martínez et al. (2018) and Vasilyeva (2019), social justice in language education necessitates the recognition of “epistemic diversity,” that is, the right of each community to think and learn through its own language. Within this trajectory, the IEME framework offers a conceptual pathway toward envisioning multilingual education not merely as competency-

building, but as an ecology of meaning in which global, national, religious, and local linguistic forms coexist with equal value in shaping reflective, just, and culturally grounded Indonesian learners.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that post-decentralisation language education policies and practices in Indonesia are shaped not solely by formal policy structures but by the living ideological ecology within schools, where global, national, religious, and local languages interact and compete in defining their social value and function. The findings demonstrate that while regional autonomy has opened discursive spaces for local linguistic expression, in the absence of critical ideological awareness, these spaces are often reoccupied by nationalistic and global discourses centred on Bahasa Indonesia and English. Within this ecology, Arabic occupies a distinct moral-spiritual position, whereas local languages remain symbolically acknowledged yet ideologically marginal. Teachers and students are not merely policy implementers but active negotiators of identity, managing tensions between institutional legitimacy and cultural affiliation through daily multilingual practices. The Ideological Ecology of Multilingual Education (IEME) proposed in this study offers a critical conceptual contribution by foregrounding that linguistic justice in education cannot be achieved solely through curricular language distribution, but through recognising the power relations and moral values embedded in each language. Future directions for multilingual education in Indonesia should adopt an ecological-ideological paradigm that cultivates symbolic equity across languages. This requires repositioning local languages not only as cultural heritage to be remembered but as living cognitive and epistemic spaces integral to fair, contextual, and culturally grounded learning practices.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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