



**Local Languages:  
Why and How Should They Be Maintained  
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**Abstract**

In this paper, I argue that local languages used by linguistic minority groups of a multilingual/multicultural countries be taught as a means of instruction in the first years of a primary school, including early childhood education centres for the following reasons: 1. to build up students' self-confidence of their original cultures/languages; 2. to acknowledge students' rich knowledge before starting their formal education; 3. to preserve students' language and culture (linguistic and cultural maintenance); 4. to improve not only students' usage of their second language, but also their academic understanding of other subjects they learn in schools; and, 5. to strengthen national unity. In other words, it is argued here that building up students' self-confidence of their original cultures/languages, acknowledging their rich knowledge at the very start of their formal education, maintaining and/or preserving minority students' languages and cultures, improving their usage of their second language, and strengthening unity of a multilingual nation can be done by using minority language(s) as a means of instruction in their lower level of education years. By doing this, students' mastery of their own language(s) and cultures can be improved and, in turn, their mastery of the courses being taught and learned can also be better even when their "second language", in this context their national/official language, is used as a means of instruction in their later levels of education.

**Keywords:** vernaculars, language maintenance, culture, improvement, and official language

Language does not passively reflect reality; language actively creates reality (Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday in S. Wright, 2004, p. 3).

**1. Introduction**

In this era of globalized civilization, all people, consciously or subconsciously, try their best to be a major part of it by mastering one or two, if not all, of international languages, namely, Arabic, Chinese, French, English, Russian, and Spanish, languages of United Nations. If performing at an international stage is beyond their dream because of such problems as economic, educational, and political ones, mastering an official language or official languages of their

nation/state/country would be fine. This is understandable because national and/or world stages have their own language(s) as a means of communication among people involved. In other words, none can succeed at an international or even national stage just by relying on his/her local language competences. This is particularly true concerning writing in a language that has very strong international influence (see, for example, Verhoeven, 1987; Tans, 1993/1999/2007).

Despite their “insignificance” at national or international stages, however, local languages are widespread all over the world. It is known that there are about 7,000 languages<sup>1</sup> that are nowadays spoken globally. Most of them, around 90%, are used by about 100,000 people and around 200 languages are used by about one million people each. There are around 46 languages which are dying because they have only a few people who use them. Those language are dying, Foley (1997: 395) says, because of “a multilingual contact situation” which is very “extreme and tragic” in which most or “all of the speakers in a language community shift to speaking another language”. This has been made worse by language policies of those multilingual countries that, in general, have marginalised local languages (Tans et al., 2023; Gracia, 2003). Out of those 7,000 languages, there are 719 languages<sup>2</sup> in Indonesia alone, including Indonesian itself. In other words, there are 718 local languages in Indonesia or 10.27% of the total languages used around the world; India has 1.721 languages; the Philippines 120 languages; Pakistan 77 languages; Singapore has four official languages, that is: (1) English, the common language with “exclusive use in numerous public services”; (2) Malay (national language); (3) Mandarin; and, (4) Tamil<sup>3</sup>; East Timor has Portuguese and Tetum as its official languages, Indonesian and English as working languages, and 15

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<sup>1</sup> What is meant here is a human language defined as “a system of signs (e.g. speech sounds, hand gestures, letters) used to communicate messages” (Taylor & Taylor, 1990: 5); in that sense, Halliday says that “language does not passively reflect reality; language actively creates reality ...” (in Wright, 2004, p. 3). What is discussed in this paper, however, is not about this definition of a language or about a language in particular, which is an ontological issue, but this is about proposing a fair treatment of local languages, namely, languages which are not formally used in public administration, including education, of a multilingual/multicultural country. Such a proposal is crucial because those languages have indeed great contribution to the creation of a great multilingual/multicultural nation despite the fact that those vernaculars are being “marginalized” in day to day communication.

<sup>2</sup> There are 110 of those languages used in the Island of Sulawesi, the fifth biggest island in Indonesia, yet one has already died, 36 are dying; in Maluku Islands, there are 80 islands, yet 11 are dead, 22 are dying; in West Papua, there are 271 languages, 51 are dying (*Kompas*, 23 May, 2007). The formal/official language of Indonesia is Indonesian used by around 1,340 tribes living in the country. This is formally stated in Indonesian 1945 Constitution, Article 36 saying: The national language is Bahasa Indonesia. Concerning local languages and cultures, Article 32 of the 1945 Constitution says: (1) The state shall advance the national culture of Indonesia among the civilization of the world by ensuring the freedom of society to preserve and develop cultural values; (2) The state shall respect and preserve local languages as national cultural treasures. Foreign languages can also be used as a means of instruction in schools as stated by Law No. 24 of 2009 on “Flags, Languages, and Symbol of the Country, and National Anthem,” Article 29, paragraph 2.

<sup>3</sup> The official website of the Government of Singapore also adds that it has several ethnic groups, namely, 71.1% citizens/residents (i.e. 74.3% of them are Chinese, 13.5% Malay, 9.0% Indian; and 3.2% other), 28.9% non-citizen/resident. In Indonesia, its formal/official language is Indonesian; it has around 1,340 tribes.

local languages.

Within such contexts, it is always tempting to say that it is perhaps a good idea for a nation to adopt just one language out of those languages as a national/official/formal language. Some countries have tried to do that. Canada, for example, tried to adopt English as its national language, but failed and it now has both English and French as its national/official languages (Tans, 2007: 103). Australia has tried to do that as well and they have succeeded: English becomes its national language and all aboriginal languages have become “just” local languages<sup>4</sup>.

Indonesia has also done so. Since 28 October, 1928, Indonesian, originally derived from Malay, has become its major national language through its youth pledge which says that all Indonesians have strongly determined that Indonesia means “one nation, one language (Indonesian), and one state”. Since that year, therefore, Indonesian people have been consciously and subconsciously tried their best to make Indonesian a national language used in formal situations, including in teaching and learning (in formal education) in all Indonesian educational institutions.

To a certain extent, it has been very successful: Indonesian is used formally as the official language in the country. In schools, Indonesian students learn Indonesian as a school subject like English and they also learn in Indonesian. Indonesian teachers, of course, teach their students in Indonesian. Local languages are “just” used at home or in any informal situations.<sup>5</sup> Since their users try not to use them at home and at any informal situations as well, some of those languages, therefore, are dying as stated above.

The question is whether it is a good policy or not. My position related to this question is that it is not a good policy. This is why in this article I argue instead that local languages, also known as vernaculars, in multilingual countries like Indonesia, East Timor, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, may not be treated as official languages as they are not used in formal state conditions, but they have to be used as a means of education/instruction/teaching and learning in the first three or four years of elementary schools in which they learn literacy and numeracy as well as other subjects in their relevant local language(s).

By allowing them to learn in their very own local language, the students, I think,

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<sup>4</sup> When Europeans started to settle in Australia in 1788, there were 250 Aboriginal languages; yet, in 1990s, there were only 60 left (in Tans, 2007: 105).

<sup>5</sup> There have been some efforts by Indonesian Government, including several provinces, e.g. Aceh, Yogyakarta, and Bali, to preserve local languages as instructed by Indonesian Constitution, but those efforts are mainly fabricated to support, consciously and/or subconsciously, Indonesian language, namely, to improve students' mastery of it, including its vocabulary. In some places, each local language like Balinese or Javanese is studied as a school subject like mathematics, English, and geography based on a formal regulation. In some big airports, some pieces of flight information are announced in local languages, like Javanese at Juanda Airport and Balinese at Ngurah Rai Airport in addition to using English, a practice which is great, but it is not widely implemented throughout the archipelago. Furthermore, those local languages are not used as a means of instruction, that is, students learn any school subject in their own language as suggested in this article. This is why, I believe, such practices are not that effective to preserve local languages.

can then start to improve, right from their early years of schooling, four major competences of this century that they have to have, namely, critical thinking, creativity, communicating, and collaborating (see, for example, Harari, 2019: 268). This is crucial because I don't think that the students can improve those 4Cs, if they start their long journey of formal education in a language that they do not understand. This is why my thesis in this article is that local languages or, in the case of Singapore, languages which are not used as state languages, should be used as a means of education from early childhood education to the first three or four years of elementary education for such reasons as building up students' self-confidence of their original cultures/languages, acknowledging students' rich knowledge before starting their formal education, preserving students' language and culture (linguistic and cultural maintenance), improving students' usage of their second language (official/national language), and strengthening national unity as described below.

## 2. Why Local Languages Be Maintained (Some Axiological Issues)

In this session, I describe five axiological issues, namely five reasons why those local languages be used as a means of teaching and learning in early childhood education and in the first years of primary school education, namely from Year 1 to Year 3 or 4. In addition to these axiological issues, I also include five epistemological issues, that is, how we, teachers and good citizens as a whole, ensure that those great aim/goals, namely, keeping students' self-confidence of their original cultures/languages high, highly valuing their rich knowledge before starting their formal education, maintaining their languages and cultures, increasing their second/official/national language competences, and strengthening national unity, can be achieved (see Point 3).

### 2.1 To Build up Students' Self-confidence of Their Indigenous Cultures and Languages

One of the major aims of using a home language in the first years of schooling is to plant within our students' whole personality that they indeed come from a very culturally and linguistically rich and great background. It is proved by the fact that the language they use at home is also used in schools.

This is important because of the fact that when their language is used in schools, the students are very familiar with the language and, therefore, they would be more than happy to learn in that language.

Familiarity and happiness as such are, among other things, necessary precondition to succeed in their formal learning. This would have been different if they had been thought in a language that they do not use at home. They might think that they were from a cultural background which is useless because, among other

things, the language they use at home are not allowed to be used in such modern places as schools (Genesee, 1987; Gibbons, 1991). They could end up thinking, consciously and subconsciously, that they are worthless because the language they use at home is not well-appreciated in schools. It is pretty alarming because one's subconscious being determines, to a certain extent, one's success in life in general, in schools in particular (Neville, 1989).

## 2.2 To Acknowledge Students' Rich Knowledge before Schooling

Using a local language as a means of teaching and learning in early years of schooling is to build up students' self-confidence concerning their numerical, literacy, social, cultural, oral, and thinking competences that they have "mastered" before starting their formal schooling. This is logical because young children aged four to six years old must have been able to count, to talk (critically), and to think in their own language, that is, the language that they use relatively well in their home with their parent, siblings, peers, and neighbours. This, in turn, could improve their understanding of what is taught and learned in schools, i.e., they could read and write well, including their improved numeracy. This could be related to what M.A.K. Halliday has said as quoted above that a "language does not passively reflect reality; language actively creates reality." Before starting their first of year of schooling, they have certain realities provided by and within their (local) language which improves their academic achievement when it is used properly as means of instruction.

Students' improvement as such is supported by Cobbey (2007) and Walter & Dekker (2008) who find that students across Asia taught in their mother tongue demonstrate better examination results for certain subjects they have studied, including their national language that they study as a subject of its own, than students who do not have any opportunity to learn in their mother tongue (in Hanawalt, 2012: 203). This is why teaching minority students in their mother tongue is academically sound.

Learning in students' mother tongue is academically sound because, among other things, it acknowledges their existing competences on numeracy and their critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration as well as their knowledge on their culture/customs/traditions. It is understandable because it is known that young children aged 4 to six years old have good knowledge concerning, for example, numeracy. Young children of that age must be able to count in their language. This is why if they are taught using their mother tongue during their first years of their formal education, they will be able to comprehend what is taught and learned because it is relied on what they have already known and they can express it in their language that they can use well.

On the other hand, it will be very difficult for them to learn in a language that they do not understand. It is also true for us; if we cannot understand Russian, for



example, we will never be able to do mathematic problems in that language, even those which are very simple ones. Yet, it will not become a problem, if it is done in our language, particularly those which are simple; for mathematic problems which are pretty challenging, of course, their story is quite different, that is, learning them, even in a language we understand well, may not necessarily be easy to understand as it could be also related to what Gardner (1993) calls as our major intelligence(s).

### 2.3 To Preserve Students' Language and Culture (Linguistic and Cultural Maintenance)

Learning a local language as a school subject as practised in Java, Bali, and Aceh, can, of course, preserve the local language, but it is not sufficient. Using it as a means of instruction or a means of learning in schools, that is, in our students' early years of formal schooling, is believed to be more powerful to preserve/maintain a language and culture as the language is used in schools from time to time, across generations, as an integral part of their existence. In this context, teachers may write simple teaching books on topics/subjects they want to teach in local languages and their students may use them to improve their knowledge on any themes/topics/school subjects they learn in schools. These books, in turn, may also preserve their students' cultures/traditions because they cover simple issues concerning students' cultures, for example, how local people build up their houses, how they do their daily activities like cooking, farming, animal breeding, and environmental conservation. They may also cover issues related to local wisdoms or traditions concerning marriage, death, ethics/norms/values and other social activities needed to improve their standard of living. This, in turn, can preserve their cultures, including their local languages. This is urgent for all minority languages and cultures in general, particularly those which are dying. In Indonesia alone, for example, there have been 11 languages that have already been extinct in Maluku and one in Sulawesi. Whereas 114 languages are dying, namely, 36 in Sulawesi, 22 in Maluku, and 56 in Papua (in Tans, 2010: 148). This is why Hanawalt (2012: 206) suggests that there is an urgent need for us to let our students learn in their mother tongue in their early formal education which, in turn, can then be a strong bridge to their better mastery of their national language. By doing that their languages and cultures can be preserved and they can then improve their mastery of their national language, and through their national language, their mastery of any international languages like English and French and, of course, their understanding of any field of studies they are interested in at their higher levels of education later on in their lives.

### 2.4 To Improve Students' Usage of their Second Language and their Academic Competences

Linguistic interdependence theory suggests that one's competences in a language influence his/her competences in another language because of what is called linguistic interdependence in general, common underlying proficiency in particular, at both BISC (basic interpersonal communication skills) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) levels (Cummins & McNelly, 1987; Cumins, 1991). In other words, this theory of linguistic interdependence says that if a person is good at a local language (one's mother tongue or L-2), he/she must be good as well in using his/her second language (L-2) because that person can then rely on his/her knowledge on his/her L-1 to improve his/her understanding/usage of his/her L-2<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, if a person is not good at using his/her first language, he/she may also fail in using his L-2. In order to overcome that, it is necessary that he/she must "master" first his/her L-2 before trying to "master" his/her L-2. In this sense, the students should, therefore, not only learn in their L-1, including its vocabulary, structure, reading, writing, and listening as well as ways of thinking in their L-1, but also learn their L-1 before they are both taught in L-2 and learn their L-2.

In Indonesian context, it simply means that to be better at using Indonesian, their L-2, Indonesian students whose mother tongue is not Indonesian, should learn in their mother tongue. This includes their learning of Indonesian as a school subject. This is to better their understanding of Indonesian and other school subjects they have to learn. If not, they may fail in schools, not because they are indeed incompetent, but because they just do not understand the language used as a means of instruction, that is, Indonesian in this context.

### 2.5 To Strengthen National Unity

By preserving local languages/cultures as described before, it is believed that national unity can then be strengthened because people feel that their (national) government is fair to all local languages found in a country and to all kinds of cultures/values/norms/traditions that a nation has in its territory. This is crucial because national disunity/disintegration happens when a national government is not fair in treating its people, including their language(s) and culture(s). In this context, it is true that a language, in addition to culture, religion, and history, has a great contribution to a national unity, if it is well-managed or to a national disunity if it is poorly managed (Cf. Sumarsono, 2011: 168).

### 3. How Local Languages Be Maintained (Some Epistemological Issues)

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<sup>6</sup> For Indonesians, Indonesian can be an L-1 or L-2. For students who never have any contact to a local language, Indonesian is their L-1. Learning in Indonesian (their L-1) right from their start of early education, is, therefore, understandable. Yet, for students whose mother tongue is their local language, Indonesian is their L-2.

Using a local language as a means of learning/teaching in schools, as stated before, is indeed about how multilingual countries not only preserve/maintain their local languages and cultures, but also help students from minority backgrounds improve their self-confidence and academic/social performance in schools. The question is how it can be done so that local language usage as such can improve students' competences in linguistic and non-linguistic matters, self-confidence, and strengthen national unity right from the start of their formal schooling.

In this paper, I argue that it can be done by using students' local language in teaching them literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, cultures/traditions, and many more. In other words, their teachers teach their students using their students' L-1/mother tongue, that is, their students learn in their L-1/mother tongue.<sup>7</sup> In higher classes, e.g. starting from class/year/grade four on, students can then be taught in a majority language. In other words, they may then learn in a majority language, that is, in Indonesian in the context of Indonesia as a multilingual country, and learn the majority language as well. As some studies show that it can improve students' academic performance and their understanding of the majority language because of such reasons as linguistic interdependence (Cummins & McNeely, 1987)<sup>8</sup>.

In teaching reading and writing skills, for example, teachers may simply introduce alphabets, words, and, later, sentences using students' local language. In teaching the letters "A" and "B" capital or small "a" and "b", the following utterances may happen in Manggarai language, a language used in West Flores, Indonesia:

Teacher showing letter "A" capital and "a" small  
as well as "B" capital and "b" small teaching reading:

'Anak-anak hoo hurup "A" mese; hoo hurup "a" koe' (Boys and girls, this is letter "A" capital, this one is small "a"). 'Hoo hurup "B" mese' (This is letter "B" capital); 'hoo hurup "b" koe' (This is letter "b", small). 'Ome naa cama "B" agu "A", nu hoo "BA", baca na "BA" ko "ba" ome hurup koe' (If we put "B" and "A" like this "BA", we read it as "BA" or "ba" in small letters) . 'Nggitu kole ome naa cama nu nggoo "AB", baca na "AB" ko "ab" ome hurup koe' (That is also the case if we put "AB" like this, we read it "AB" or "ab" in small letters).

This is also the case for numeracy. The following dialogue could happen in the local language, that is Manggarai language in this context. The following

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<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the students' mother tongue is used as a means of learning, of instruction, of interaction, and of transaction within their school contexts.

<sup>8</sup> This, however, really needs further studies/researches in order to fully understand how using local languages in schools works for the benefits of both students and the preservation of their language(s)/culture(s).



dialogue could happen:

“‘Anak-anak, ca tamba ca sua iyo’ (Boys and girls, one plus one is two, right); ‘sua tamba sua pat’ (two plus two is four). ‘Ulang ma le hemi iyo’”( Please repeat it!).

By using the local language that they understand, the students would have no problem in understanding the teaching material because it is in the language they understand. It would be difficult for them to understand the teaching materials, if they are taught in a language that they do not really understand, that is, Indonesian in the context of Manggarai language as the students’ local language. This, of course, will be much worse, if the students are taught using Japanese that they do not understand at all. This is also the case for other topics/course/themes to be taught like moral issues. The students will understand the topics to be introduced, if they are introduced in the language they fully understand (Cf. Hanawalt, 2021). In that sense, I believe, using a local language, Manggarai language in such a context, to teach the students in early years of their formal education would help the students not only understand the materials being taught, but also preserve local languages/cultures which are in danger of loss or death. This happens because of, among other things, linguistic interdependence (Cummins, 1979/1991; Cummins & McNelly, 1987).

Yet, it seems that there are lot of things that we should do concerning this issue to make sure that our students are successful when teaching and learning occurs in their local language. In this sense, writing books in local languages or writing grammar and dictionaries of local languages is, of course, a priority. In addition, research and social service collaborations among tertiary institutions are also necessary to answer questions related to having more effective educational instructions in both local languages and an official language. In this sense, local language documentation project that has been done by NYTU and Nusa Cendana University scholars is a good example of such collaborations.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this era of an increasingly intensifying globalization, all things that seem to have international recognition are tried to be mastered by everyone who wants to be involved in any international activities, at least at national or regional level. International languages, namely those used internationally as the languages of UN are worth mentioning here. So are international cultures like singing, dancing, sport events, trading, information technology, and education during this era of 4.0/5.0 industrial revolution.

Focussing our attention on our local languages, i.e. languages used locally by a few people, seems, therefore, to be setting back our history. The question is

whether it is true or not. In this article, I argue that by correctly appreciating our local languages, including our cultures and wisdoms embedded in them, we can be better in understanding, even mastering, not only national, but also international languages. In other words, ones' successful journey to mastering international languages starts by mastering their local languages first. By jumping right away to international languages and ignoring those at local levels, those multilingual countries could fail.

It is common to see that in those multilingual countries, an official language or a national language used in official/state situations or as a means of instruction/interaction/transaction is usually decided, among other things, based on some political considerations which, to a certain extent, are great. In Indonesia, for example, Indonesian has been adopted as an official language by Indonesian politicians to ensure that the nation can then achieve its national goals by using Indonesian as a means of national communication, including a means of instruction, transaction, and interaction across the nation. Sadly, in order to make it more effective as a means of national/official communication, local languages are usually not allowed to be widely used in formal situations; they are not allowed to be used as a means of instruction.

On the other hand, it is acknowledged that using local languages as a means of education has some great benefits, namely, students' self-confidence of their original cultures/languages can be increased, their rich knowledge before starting their formal education can help them succeed in their formal studies, their languages and cultures can be preserved, and their national unity can be strengthened. It is, therefore, argued in this paper that local languages should be used as a means of instruction/teaching and learning in the first years of primary schools because of the benefits as such.

Using a local language as a means of instruction in such a multilingual environment is indeed how multilingual nations keep their students' self-confidence high in studying, help their students more successful in their formal education in schools and beyond when they finish their school, preserve their languages and cultures, and make their national unity stronger. In other words, if multilingual/multicultural nations want to lift up their students' confidence in studying, make them more successful in their lives, keep their languages and cultures from generations to generations, and strongly unite themselves as a nation, the only way to do it is to use local languages as a means of instruction in the early years of schooling, namely from grade 1 to grade four. After that they may learn in their L-2 and L-2 itself, that is, they may then use their L-2 as a means of instruction.

Treating them accordingly, the students will succeed because they understand their language used as a means of instruction. When in trouble to understand it, they can then rely on their L-1 competence to improve their L-2 competence because they have learned it through. On the other hand, they could fail later on, if they start their early journey of their formal education by learning in a language,

their L-2, that they do not really understand. Within such a context, they fail, not because they are incompetent, but simply because they do not understand the language being used. To prevent the problem, it is, therefore, crucial that students from minority backgrounds be taught first in their mother tongue during their first years of schooling, before being taught later using their L-2 as suggested before. Along the process though, it is acknowledged that using a local language alone as a means of instruction would not be effective, if it is not supported by good teaching/learning facilities or media. In other words, using a local language as a means of instruction without sufficient supporting learning facilities is useless. It is, therefore, urgent to write books on local languages, to have grammar and dictionaries of those languages, and to have effective teaching media used in teaching/learning, when local languages are used as a means of instruction in schools. This is why having research and social service collaborations among tertiary institutions is important to make sure that using local languages as a means of instruction in schools really works not only for our students' success in their formal learning, but also in maintaining and/or preserving our local languages, including our cultures that, in turn, can benefit all.

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