

ACEHNESE-SPEAKING PARENTS' CHOICE OF LANGUAGE OF THE CHILDREN: PARENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS BILINGUALISM IN ACEHNESE-INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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Language shift is a notion on the change in the use of a person's heritage language that results in a loss of that person's ability to use his or her heritage language. Likewise, cultural shift is a change in participating in one's heritage culture that results in a loss of understanding and adherence to one's cultural heritage. In her study, Withers suggests some factors that affect a shift in language and culture: the prestige of the dominant language and the comparatively lesser status of the heritage language, the lack of societal support for the ethnic group and its heritage language, the perception of the heritage language as unnecessary by subsequent generations, a decrease of group identification through the heritage language, a low level of acquisition of the heritage language at the time of decreased use of that language, an increased amount of contact with the dominant culture, an increased use of the dominant language instead of the heritage language with children, and attitudes against keeping the heritage language.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Language choice

INTRODUCTION

As a person who was raised as an Acehnese-Indonesian bilingual, I have never considered being one as such of privilege, until one experience hit me and left me with a big question mark in my head. I was in my dentist's waiting room for my regular check up. That day, I took my 3 years-old nephew with me so that I would have a companion to talk with when I was waiting. My nephew was a very talkative child. We talked a lot while I was waiting for my turn. While we were talking - in Acehnese of course - a small girl, I believe she was 4 to 5 years-old, approached us.

I could tell that she wanted to make friend and to play with my nephew. She started asking some questions, in Indonesian, which were replied with silence by my nephew. This girl did not give up. She kept trying to get my nephew to play with her. She took his hand and finally they were in the middle of a play, with my nephew was still in silence. While they were playing, I started a conversation with the girl's mother, in Acehese (she was an Acehese and spoke Acehese fluently). Suddenly, in the middle of the play, the girl run to her mother and asked her, in Indonesian, why my nephew did not want to talk to her. Hearing that question, I told her that he wanted to talk to her but it is not easy for him because he did not speak Indonesian as good as he spoke Acehese. Shortly after that, my nephew approached me and said some things to me (I cannot recall what he was telling me) in Acehese. Hearing this, the girl's mother made a surprising remark, in Indonesian, "*Lihat adek itu, dia pintar sekali*". "*Dia bisa bahasa Aceh!*" ("Look at the little boy, how smart he is". He can speak Acehese!").

DISCUSSION

Background of Study

Acehnese language is one of 727 languages spoken in Indonesia as recorded. This number consists of 726 local languages and 1 official (national) language: Indonesian language. Indonesian is a combination of Malay language, local languages, and foreign languages. Indonesian language is aimed as the lingua franca of the country to unite the citizens who are from different ethnicities and speak completely different languages. This position makes Indonesian as the dominant language used throughout Indonesia, with approximately all Indonesian who have ever gone to school would speak the language (information was retrieved from the official website of National Coordinating Agency for Surveys and Mapping of Indonesian Government).

As other local languages, that are the languages of certain ethnicity in certain area in Indonesia, Acehese is the language of Acehese people who originally live

in Aceh Province – Indonesia. However, over years, the use of the language is declining, from the only language used for all purposes to the language used only within family at home or with certain friends in informal occasions. Indonesian government policy to have Indonesian as the only language used in formal occasions, contributes to the decline. It is not uncommon to hear an Acehnese speaks Indonesian at school, business transaction, government and public offices, etc., instead of Acehnese. The absence of Acehnese also continues to the media. This means an Acehnese would be more exposed to Indonesian language than to their mother tongue, Acehnese.

Thus, it is comprehensible that in Acehnese context, being bilingual, having Acehnese as L1 and Indonesian as L2 is a necessity (read: obligatory). Acehnese people, who traditionally acquire Acehnese at home from parents and other family members and start to acquire Indonesian when they go to school, have a new pattern in acquiring their L2. Instead of waiting for the children to learn Indonesian at school, Acehnese-speaking parents presently introduce the L2 simultaneously with the L1. This new pattern affects the result of L1 acquisition. With the environment is very much exposed with Indonesian language (all media, school, friends, market, etc.), the children tend to acquire Indonesian faster and easier than Acehnese. This leads to the dominance of L2 to L1. The very high and important status of Indonesian language, even leads some bilingual parents to choose not to speak Acehnese anymore to their children. It is ironic to see Acehnese-speaking parents speak in Acehnese to each other while they speak in Indonesian to the children. However, it is very common now, especially for parents who live in cities.

Looking back at the illustration given in the beginning of this article, I question myself: “Who is responsible when a child is not “smart enough” to speak his own mother tongue?” “Who is responsible when a child cannot be a bilingual when s/he has a complete potential to be one?” The girl’s mother’s remark implies that it is the girl’s fault for not being “smart enough” to speak Acehnese. But, is it?

Doing this study, I want to understand more about what Acehnese-speaking parents have been experiencing while living in an environment that is very much ex-

posed with Indonesian language, especially in regard to the development of their children's bilingualism. As I mentioned previously, my inspiration for this study comes from the phenomena that many Acehese-speaking young parents do not speak Acehese anymore to their children. I hope this study is able to answer my question about Acehese children and the language(s) their parents chose for them. In other words, by doing this study I am expecting to gain practical experience and explicit examples of the attitude of Acehese-speaking parents towards bilingualism for their children.

Review of Related Research

The present study focuses on how Acehese-speaking parents perceive and use Acehese and Indonesian languages under the influence of social variables; means it is examining the attitudes of Acehese-speaking parents toward the learning and maintenance of Acehese language for their children.

The available researches on language attitude always involve the discussion of the minority language and the majority/dominant language; means the language of the minority group and the majority group. In Acehese-Indonesian context, the case is quite different. There is no majority group that imposed its language to the minority group. Acehese is the language of Acehese people, but Indonesian is not language of Indonesian people because there is no group or culture called Indonesia. As mentioned previously, Indonesian is a hybrid language that was created by combining Malay, local, and foreign languages. It aims to be the lingua franca for people from different groups and cultures in Indonesia. Thus, in Indonesian language context, there is no major culture that dominates other culture, unless, a notion of Indonesian culture, as the manifestation of the "melting pot", is acknowledged. Until then, Indonesia is just a name of a country where people from different ethnicities originated. This fact gave me difficulty to find the most related research to the phenomenon discussed previously. Therefore, for this study, I have simplified the phenomenon by giving Acehese the term "minority language" and

Indonesian as the "majority language. The choice of these terms based on the fact that Indonesian language has wider use than the Acehnese and, somehow, it is taking the place of the latter language.

Researches available on parents' attitudes toward language of their children mostly discuss the parents' choice and perception on the language of instruction at school. Researches on Hmong language (Withers, 2004), Vietnamese parents (Young and Tran, 1999), linguistics minority parents (Lee, 1999) imply that parents are more favourable to have their children to study in a bilingual program, so that the heritage language of the children will be maintained. This result suggests that parents have positive attitude toward bilingualism of their children.

A study on how language minority parents help their children become bilingual in the family context (Li, 1999) gives closer understanding to Acehnese context. This study concluded that language minority parents who communicate on a daily basis with their children have a crucial influence on the development of their children's bilingualism. It is better for them to take initial actions to enable their children to develop both their L1 and L2, and to get together with the two respective cultures, rather than wait passively for schools and communities to reach out to them. The study showed that language minority parents' positive attitudes toward both languages and cultures and supportive interactions with their children at home are very important to the children's bilingualism and identity establishment.

The result of the above study suggests that it is the parents' choice to raise their children as a monolingual, bilingual, or even multilingual. I would say that it is quite a loss when parents choose not to raise their children as bilingual when they have all the potential to be one. Another question then is raised. What factors influence parents' choice in raising their children to be monolingual or bilingual? Some previous researches have some perspectives on this issue.

Even though it did not come from similar situation as in Acehnese-Indonesian context, the Schumann's (1986) acculturation model might be useful to help to illustrate the condition of language choice in Aceh. This model highlights factors of eth-

nic group relations and associates language learning with three primary social factors: social dominance, integration strategy, and enclosure.

Social dominance covers discussions on the perceived political, cultural, technical, or economic superiority of a group affects the likelihood of groups learning each other's languages. In Indonesia, the role of Indonesian language is so powerful. As the main language used for all forms of activity in all levels, Indonesian is the language that one should know and speak to be successful. The domination of Indonesian and the absence of Acehnese in many aspects of life affect how the languages perceived.

The second social factor of acculturation is integration strategy, which includes three degrees: assimilation to the dominant culture and language, preservation of one's native culture and language, and adaptation to the host culture while maintaining one's native culture and language. During the New Order era (1965-1998), the only president in the era, Suharto, had a *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (United in Diversity) campaign that promoted the melting pot for all citizens. As a new country, after fighting for independence from Dutch colonialism for more than 350 years, Indonesian people needed to feel united. Therefore to decrease the differences, the government tried to "Indonesianize" the country by preventing the citizens to use their ethnic symbols in formal occasions and places throughout the country. This includes the discouragement to use the native language in most places.

The social factor of enclosure refers to the lack of shared social institutions, such as schools and professions that might influence the need and opportunities to learn L2s. As mentioned previously, Indonesian government policy has created the absence of the use of Acehnese language (L1) in formal places: school, business, offices, etc.

The application of the acculturation model of Schumann leads to comprehension that Indonesian language is the high variety and Acehnese language is the low variety of languages in Acehnese-Indonesian context. These varieties are based on the use of the languages for different purposes and functions at different situa-

tions. For example, high variety is usually used as written content in formal institutions and low variety is used as informal language at home (Wu, 2005). These varieties may affect the attitude towards the languages. Thus, one will have more positive attitude toward the high variety than the low one.

The discussion above leads me to understand that the Acehnese-speaking parents do not have hesitation to have their children acquire Indonesian as the L2 or even as the L1 because they have positive attitude towards Indonesian language. Another question, then, is raised. Do the parents have negative attitude towards Acehnese language (L1) due to the fact the use of Indonesian (L2) is so dominant in almost all aspects? A study by Wu (2005) on Chinese parents' attitudes towards bilingualism explained this phenomenon.

The result of the study shows that Chinese parents have positive attitudes toward maintaining heritage language but feel hopeless in some ways. They think it is important for their children to maintain Chinese as well as to learn English well for academic purposes. However, because of pressure from the mainstream society, they all agree that it is hard for their children to maintain Chinese proficiency. This picture, I believe, corresponds to the situation in Aceh. When it comes to what language to speak to the children, parents often feel weak and hopeless. They want to maintain the native language, since it is part of the identity to be an Acehnese, but in the same time they have to consider the need of their children to be well educated. Parents want to make sure that their children are fully proficient in the language of the instruction when they start the school. Therefore, they focus more on whether their children can speak Indonesian, so that they can be successful, than whether they can speak Acehnese, which is their mother tongue.

As encountered by previous discussion, practical advantages, such as social status, education and job opportunities, play a role in the choice of language. However, cultural aspect, such as self image and having ability to communicate to people from the same culture, is still the significant factor in the choice (Lao, 2004). Therefore, a campaign to promote "proud" to be part of a culture would help to maintain the feeling of ownership of the culture. In Acehnese-Indonesian context this

would be a shift from the notion of “melting pot” to “salad bowl”. As part of Indonesian big family, all Acehnese should feel as one union with other Indonesians of different ethnicities. In the same time, Acehnese people should be proud of their identity by maintaining the culture and the language of Aceh. This is urgently needed to avoid the emergence of negative attitude toward Acehnese culture and language, since it may lead to language and cultural shift.

Language shift is a notion on the change in the use of a person’s heritage language that results in a loss of that person’s ability to use his or her heritage language. Likewise, cultural shift is a change in participating in one’s heritage culture that results in a loss of understanding and adherence to one’s cultural heritage (Withers, 2004). In her study, Withers suggests some factors that affect a shift in language and culture: the prestige of the dominant language and the comparatively lesser status of the heritage language, the lack of societal support for the ethnic group and its heritage language, the perception of the heritage language as unnecessary by subsequent generations, a decrease of group identification through the heritage language, a low level of acquisition of the heritage language at the time of decreased use of that language, an increased amount of contact with the dominant culture, an increased use of the dominant language instead of the heritage language with children, and attitudes against keeping the heritage language (Withers, 2004).

Other prominent factors include the use of the primary language of the dominant culture exclusively in at least some areas, a change in the environment in which the heritage language is used, and an infiltration of words or phrases from the dominant language into the minority language (Withers, 2004). Most of the factors were part of the previous discussion in this present study. Thus, the phenomena of language and cultural shift are happening in Acehnese-Indonesian context.

Overall, researchers suggest that individuals have agency to make choices for them, especially in their language acquisitions. This can be the parents, government, more dominated culture, etc. In language minority discussion, this perspective

has often led to deficiency perspectives toward minorities (Monzó, 2005) that may lead to the negative attitude of its language and culture. Therefore, this study aims to find how linguistic and social aspects influence the perception and the attitude of Acehnese-speaking parents towards Acehnese and Indonesian language. In the same time, it aims to find the rationale behind Acehnese-speaking parents' choice of the language of their children, regarding to their bilingualism.

Research Methodology

As it has been stated in previous discussion, this study is devoted to find the answer on how Acehnese-speaking parents perceive Acehnese and Indonesian language and the attitudes they might have towards the languages. In the same time, it tries to find the attitude of the parents towards their children's bilingualism. The perception and attitude of the parents, as has been explained in the literature review, are proved to have relation on the choice of the language the parents choose to raise their children.

There four main questions on the topic are raised in this study. They are:

1. What is Acehnese-speaking parents' perception on Acehnese and Indonesian language?
2. What are Acehnese-speaking parents' attitudes toward their children's language and literacy learning in Acehnese and Indonesian language?
3. What do the parents think of their children's abilities in Acehnese and Indonesian?
4. How do parents act or what have they done based on their attitudes to support (or to not support) their children's bilingual development?

The main resource for data collection is the questionnaire and the researcher's observation. In this study, Acehnese-speaking parents—the mother or the father from 10 families—were asked to fill in the questionnaires. The questionnaire is in open-ended form and it includes some questions about respondent's characteristics,

general family information, attitudes toward bilingualism, and children's Acehese learning experiences. For the effectiveness sake, the questionnaire is in Indonesian language. Any necessary information was translated into English for the purpose of data analysis.

The characteristics of the participants for this study are purposely the ones who live in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh Province, and already have one child, at least. The parents were the only member of the family being asked to fill in the questionnaire. The participants have Acehese ethnicity and speak Acehese language fluently (the mother, the father, or both). The participants are also Acehese-Indonesian bilingual. The participants are young parents between age 20 to 40 years-old, taking to consideration that parents within this range of age can give better and reliable data since they are still "raising" their children. Other characteristics such as parents' and children's age, parents' and children's birth place or living place, etc. are not taken into consideration.

The participation for this study is voluntary and the participants were chosen randomly. The questionnaires were distributed through an email-list where the researcher is a member. The first ten responds that were qualified with all the requirements mentioned previously were taken immediately as the participants of the study. The name of the participants were kept anonymous and for further discussion in this study they will be addressed as Family 1, Family 2,, Family 10. When a specific parent is mentioned, s/he will be addressed as 'the mother' or 'the father'.

Analysis and Discussion

General Family Information

Since each family only need to provide answers for one questionnaire, having only the mother or the father as the representative of the family is all it takes. The questionnaires were filled in by eight mothers and two fathers. The questionnaires were constructed in Indonesian. Therefore, all the answers are also in Indonesian.

The following discussion is based on the answers provided in the questionnaires and the personal observation and experience of the researcher as she is also an Acehnese and an Acehnese – Indonesian bilingual who was born and raised in Banda Aceh.

All parents both the mother and the father who participated in this study consider themselves as holding Acehnese ethnicity. All of them are Acehnese - Indonesian bilinguals, regardless of their language performance quality. Some parents mentioned that they also speak English. Parents from Family 6 speak Japanese moderately since they lived in Japan for few years. All parents agree that the main language spoken outside the home is Indonesian, for both the mother and the father, and also for the children. From ten families, seven families have Indonesian as the main language in the family and only two families (Family 3 and Family 10) have Acehnese as the main language to communicate within family context. One family (Family 9) has English as the main language in the family since they lived in the United States for 7 years. But they are back in Banda Aceh now.

It is interesting to acknowledge that although all parents are Acehnese and they speak Acehnese language, only parents from five families speak Acehnese to each other (Family 3, Family 4, Family 6, Family 7, and Family 10). The other parents speak Indonesian to each other with little bit code-switching of Acehnese once in a while. Based on the researcher's observation and experience, this phenomenon usually is the result of how and where the parents met and started the relationship. Acehnese is a family language. Therefore, one tends to speak in Indonesian when having relationship outside a family context. If this is the case with the parents of this study, it is not too surprising that the parents do not speak Acehnese to each other because they started the relationship in Indonesian language environment. This usually continued to the time they got married and had a family. The families whose parents speak Acehnese to each other might have completely different case with the previous one. They might meet and start their relationship in Acehnese environment so that the language they used while they were dating continued to be used while they are having their own family now.

However, it is shocking to know that from five families whose parents speak Acehnese to each other, only two families have their children speak Acehnese at home. Parents from the other three families decide to speak Indonesian to their children (Family 4, Family 6 and Family 7). The reason for this avoidance is provided in the next discussion. In addition, parents who speak Indonesian to each other also speak Indonesian to the children.

The children from the families that have Acehnese as the main language speak Acehnese not only to the parents but also to the sibling(s). The other children from other families speak Indonesian to the sibling(s) since this is the only language they know to speak. Only children from Family 9 speak English to each other.

The nature of conversation is mutual, means the children speak to the parents in the language the parents speak to them. However, children from Family 9 always have English – Indonesian switching when they speak to the parents while the parents always speak Indonesian to them. Parents from Family 10 mentioned that even though they always speak Acehnese to the children, the children sometime switch to Indonesian. This is due to the fact that the children are in their first years of school and they just learned their Indonesian language. In addition, children from Family 3 constantly speak Acehnese to the parents. And the other families have their children speak Indonesian to the parents.

Attitudes towards Bilingualism

All parents have very positive attitude towards Acehnese. For them Acehnese is important because it is part of their identity. Since all the parents are Acehnese and this makes their children also hold Acehnese ethnicity, they agree that it is also important for the children to be able to speak and to maintain Acehnese language. However, Indonesian language is important as well for both the parents and the children. The importance of Indonesian is due to the fact that the language is the only language used at school, offices, markets, etc. Not being able to speak Indonesian will lead to handicapped situation for the whole family, while not being able to

speak Acehnese will not give big effect since everybody who have experience in Indonesian educational system, speaks Indonesian and does not have any hesitation to speak the language.

When it comes to the literacy, the parents agree that a skill for Indonesian literacy is a must, for them and for the children. Similar as the reason previously provided for Indonesian speaking ability, skill for the literacy is a need for survival reason because everything is written in Indonesian. On the contrary, the parents do not really think that Acehnese literacy is as important as Indonesian. This is understandable since presently Acehnese language literacy has been transformed into Latin transcription (traditionally, it is written in Arabic transcription). Therefore, in logic, if one is able to read and to write Indonesian (Indonesian is written in Latin transcription), s/he will be able to read and to write in Acehnese. In addition, Acehnese is a language that is not transferred formally in classroom. It is a family language that is transferred from generation to generation through oral tradition. This nature adds the hesitation on the importance of Acehnese literacy.

For the parents, having their children able to speak both Acehnese and Indonesian is preferable. However, they agree that Indonesian is more important language to acquire than Acehnese. While the parents are in favour to have the children speak both Acehnese and Indonesian, the environment itself is not supportive to create that situation. As mentioned previously, Acehnese is a family language. Once the children outside the home, the main language they are exposed to is Indonesian. The neighbourhood is not encouraging to have the children to be able to speak Acehnese.

Children Experience of Acehnese Learning

All parents have positive attitude towards their children bilingualism (Acehnese - Indonesian). However, only parents from Family 3 and Family 10 who really did some efforts to make their children speak Acehnese (Indonesian usually will be start acquired automatically once the children enter their first school. In some

cases, it can be earlier with all the expose of Indonesian language from the neighborhood and media). The most visible effort is by speaking in Acehese to the children. In addition, parents from Family 3 also provide entertainment in Acehese such as Acehese songs, film, etc. Unfortunately, there is no family that provide reading in Acehese as the material to enhance the children's Acehese language ability.

Parents who have Acehese speaking children admitted that their children show better communication performance in their Indonesian than their Acehese. This is not surprising since the children's language ability in Acehese is limited inside the scope of the family. Compare it with Indonesian that is used in more various situations: school, market, friendship, etc. In addition, since most of the media are in Indonesian, it is expected to see the children perform better in Indonesian than in Acehese.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion provided previously, it is clear that all parents have positive attitude towards bilingualism. They agree that being bilingual give more benefit than only being monolingual. This positive attitude is caused by the fact that all the respondents are Acehese – Indonesian bilingual and they hold Acehese ethnicity. Therefore, being able to speak Acehese is important for them since it is part of their identity. And being able to speak Indonesian is a necessity for survival reason. The children who are Acehese are seen as having importance to keep their Acehese identity by speaking Acehese language. Unfortunately this positive attitude does not correspond with the fact within the family.

The data from questionnaires show that from ten families participated in this study, only two families have Acehese as the main language in the family. The other parents tend to speak Indonesian to the children although in the same time they speak Acehese to their spouse. This avoidance of speaking the mother tongue with-

in the family context is the result of the very high status Indonesian has. Parents consider Indonesian as the more important language to be acquired by the children.

In addition, the data also show that there is no attention paid for Acehnese literacy. The parents from two families that have Acehnese as the family language mentioned that they do not provide any mean of literacy in Acehnese for their children. However, some entertainments such as song and film in Acehnese are available in the house.

Having been raised in a multilingual and multicultural country like Indonesia, children from Acehnese-speaking parents have all the potential to be bilingual or even multilingual. However, the gradual process of assimilation and acculturation in Indonesia leads to language loss of native languages and language shift to Indonesian. Parents tend to think that children learn their native languages automatically. Therefore, it would be better to speak Indonesian to the children so that they will be ready with the language when they are entering school. Contradictorily, children then failed to acquire their native language and then the native language is typically not maintained and is rarely developed.

To conclude, from all data provided in this study, it is understood that when Acehnese is considered as important for emotional reason, Indonesian is important for practical reason. And in this Acehnese – Indonesian context, practical reason wins!

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