

# No reason Malay language can't be as successful as English

By [Dzulkifli Abdul Razak](#) - April 13, 2022 @ 12:15am



*NSTP file pic*

It is rather disheartening to read that Indonesia's education, culture, research and technology minister has short-sightedly rejected the prime minister's proposal that "Bahasa Melayu should be used as the intermediary language between the two countries as well as the official language of Asean".

This reportedly happened during the latter's visit to Indonesia recently when the minister said: "I, as minister of education and culture, research and technology, of course, rejected the proposal.

"I urge the entire community to work hand-in-hand with the government to continue to empower and defend the Indonesian language."

This seems to imply his view that Bahasa Indonesia is the more appropriate choice as the official language of Asean. It goes without saying that Bahasa Indonesia is the most widely-spoken language in Asean.

It has been likened to a storm in a teacup, which is essentially avoidable if there is a deeper understanding on how the "English language" has prospered as not only a national/regional language, but a global one too.

This is possible because more non-natives use it as a second language than there are native speakers or Anglophones.

English natives speakers broadly cover the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand (now also native Aotearoa) and the Republic of Ireland. It is a co-official language of the United Nations, European Union and many other world and regional international organisations.

Despite the variability among the many accents and dialects of English used — also vocabulary, idioms, grammar and spelling — among the various users, it does not typically prevent them from understanding each other collectively.

North American English speakers and British English speakers do not pit themselves as users of American language versus British language, although the number of the former is greater and has wider spread as compared with the latter. By doing so, they benefited better in asserting cooperation and influence internationally.

Our Indonesian counterpart can achieve the same, by accepting the *rumpun bahasa* (like the Anglophones) as the basis for common understanding in Asean without breaking it down to Bahasa Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and its variants of the different *suku kaum*, including those Malays far and wide like in Sri Lanka and South Africa.

In fact, the prime minister's proposal is about Bahasa Melayu, and not Bahasa Malaysia, as such, making the reference to Bahasa Indonesia to sound the "rejection" rather out of line.

It was not meant to pit the two against each other, but to pull together like the English counterparts.

It is instructive to note that the idiom "storm in a teacup" is also known as "tempest in teacup" by the Americans, making it the "perfect storm" in catapulting Bahasa Melayu to the next level internationally.

After all, users of Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia often unlock smiles and collegiality in conversations even as complete strangers, what more with friends and family ties. It is after all, a commonly rooted Austronesian language officially spoken in Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore.

For the most part, the two countries were in the same empire and kingdom — the Kesultanan Melaka and Kesultanan Aceh from about 14th to 16th century, and 16th to 18th century, respectively. With the interference of the British and Dutch colonisers,

languages and cultures were the most vulnerable since the colonialists found themselves ignorant of both.

Unable to rule over a population who spoke a "foreign" language and used an unfamiliar script, they set to "civilise" the people through Latin or Romanised versions. Consequently, both manipulated ways to represent the Malay lingua franca with Latin alphabets, leading to usage and spelling differences between Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia.

This forced the initial split of the *rumpun bahasa* into what the British and Dutch found convenient, noting that between them there was little cultural heritage to share.

Hence, Christmas Day in Malaya (later Malaysia) was translated as Hari Krismas, whereas in Indonesia as Hari Natal, disrupting the *rumpun bahasa* whereas long before then, people of the region not only spoke a familiar language but wrote it with a similar jawi script.

As late as 1941, a book entitled *Peladjaran Bahasa Melajoe* was found in Batavia (now Jakarta) to prove that there was Bahasa Melayu before it was fragmented to serve the colonial agenda.

This is one historical factor that cannot be dismissed and must be put right come what may!

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**The writer, an NST columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector**