Is English improving lives in a remote Indonesian village?

In a recent post, I reviewed language policy research that shows how compulsory English in China has given rise to new inequities and is far from being a means to fair development. In that context, compulsory English language learning is problematic for reasons of practical feasibility, allocative effectiveness and distributive justice. That macro language policy perspective is complemented by a school ethnography of English language learning in a small village in Indonesia. The study was conducted by Nicolaus Pasassung in 1999-2000 and has unfortunately never been published but the PhD dissertation it resulted in has now been made available here on Language on the Move.

The thesis titled Teaching English in an “Acquisition-Poor Environment”: An ethnographic example of a remote Indonesian EFL classroom grapples with the question why compulsory English language teaching in Indonesian high schools has been such a failure. That question in itself was not novel even at the time of the research: the World Bank, for instance, had funded the British Council to explore exactly that question a few years earlier and their answer had been that the English language curriculum and the English language teaching methods in Indonesian high schools were inadequate. The solution was relatively simple: the communicative approach was promoted as the panacea to Indonesia’s English language teaching woes.

However, as the researcher found when he spent almost a year in a remote village on the island of Sulawesi, the curricular and methodological problems in the junior high school he observed were part and parcel of a much larger complex that mitigated against the success of English language instruction; this complex also included the status of English, the cultural values of the school and wider society and the material conditions under which English language teaching took place.

To begin with, English and contexts where it was used were entirely alien to the village and there was no place for English in the community outside the classroom. Even in the classroom, the language had a tenuous hold. For instance, the thesis includes a poignant description of a lesson in which students were studying hotel dialogues from the prescribed textbook. Neither the students nor the teacher had any experience of hotels and a number of misunderstandings unfold as the teacher tries to teach and the students try to study vocabulary
items in English that they have no concept of in their native language: in a village that does not have electricity, “vacuum cleaner” is one such example where the researcher as participant observer is called upon by the teacher to explain what a “vacuum cleaner” might be.

This is one tiny example of a sheer endless list of obstacles that the students face: inappropriate materials, teachers’ limited proficiency, corruption, efforts to maintain a harmonious society where everyone keeps face, limited resources on every level etc. etc. all conspire to turn the compulsory English lessons in the junior high school under investigation into a meaningless waste of time. Not only does compulsory English study under these conditions not produce any results but it attracts a cost: the opportunity cost to spend the time invested into English lessons in a more productive way.

Like Guangwei Hu and Lubna Alsagoff in their review of compulsory English in Chinese secondary education, Nicolaus Passasung, too, recommends, inter alia, to make English language learning in Indonesian high schools an elective.

Would such a move further entrench the disparities between rural and urban populations and between the rich and the poor, as the proponents of compulsory English argue? In the world described by Pasassung, English simply doesn’t matter. Existing inequities are largely unaffected by English as securing a good education including learning English in itself is not enough to advance in a world where personal advancement depends on connections and even bribery. As one villager explains, without additional financial and social resources, his sons have little to gain from their education:

Why should I be bothered sending my children to university and spend a lot of money? A lot of graduates are unemployed. When someone finishes university, s/he only wants a white-collar job and would prefer being unemployed to working in a garden. I do not have anyone who can help my children find work in a government office, and I do not have enough money to bribe them. (quoted in Pasassung 2003, p. 145)