



## Review of “Mastering Indonesian: A Guide to Reading Indonesian Language Newspapers”

<b>Title</b>	Mastering Indonesian: A Guide to Reading Indonesian Language Newspapers
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#### 1 Introduction

This book consists of sixty recent excerpts from contemporary Indonesian print and electronic news media. Each excerpt is provided with a vocabulary list, a few notes and a short set of questions on the article’s content. It is intended for learners of Indonesian who have a foundation in the language and who want to increase their vocabulary and readings skills while at the same time becoming more familiar with the Indonesian news genre. The authors have selected worthy materials, but they have chosen to present fairly ordinary language learning activities, neither utilising this opportunity to explore the genre of modern Indonesian print media more fully nor providing rich contexts for learners to build their overall reading proficiency.

#### 2 Topic selection

The choice of individual articles has been made well. They are generally topical and interesting and while they have a strong focus on Jakarta and national issues, there is also a nice spread of articles on particular regions, as well as Malaysia. The book is organised around ten topics, all pertinent to Indonesia, although an emphasis on issues like Accidents and Disasters, Corruption, Crime (the first three chapters) and Terrorism (the last chapter) does paint a bleak picture of the country. The other, more neutral sounding chapters are Economics, Education, Health, International Relations, Politics and Sport. Important social topics like human rights, gender issues and the environment are not so well represented (although the Sidoarjo mudflow disaster does appear in the Politics chapter). The sorts of stories that appear in cultural and human interest sections of newspapers are also underrepresented. The choice of Terrorism as a chapter heading is unfortunate, as it seems to legitimise a current stereotype of Indonesia as a centre for terrorist activity (a stereotype that I am sure the authors do not hold, but which is often found in the international media). This is not to deny the relevance of terrorism (worldwide, not just in Indonesia) or the value of the particular articles in this chapter. However, dispersing these articles in relevant chapters

such as Politics and Crime might have been a way to give less credence to the false idea that Indonesia is synonymous with terrorism.

### 3 Supporting materials: vocabulary, notes and questions

The authors have produced basic supporting materials as teaching aids for each article. More difficult vocabulary is bolded in the text and presented in an Indonesian-English word list at the end of the article. These lists are helpful, but one might also have hoped for learning activities that actually build vocabulary, e.g. through use of graphics, contextual clues or Indonesian language prompts. The vocabulary is followed by *Catatan* ‘Notes,’ which usually consist of two parts. First there is a short statement about the topic of the article, then a paragraph or two about some of the more difficult or interesting vocabulary found in the article. The discussion of vocabulary in the notes is helpful, often providing insights some learners would not be aware of. However, it seems odd to give the introduction to the topic of each article in these Notes, which follow the article itself. Learners would be greatly helped with more contextualising information, presented prior to reading each article, for example in the form of pre-reading activities. One glaring omission is that the date of publication for each article is missing. It is common practice to include some form of citation when reproducing any previously published material; in the case of these reading materials, knowing the date of publication is particularly important for providing a clue to the wider social-political context in which each story is imbedded.

At the end of each reading, there is a set of four or five questions which ask the reader to identify facts mentioned in the article. The questions are presented in English. No methodological discussion explains this choice nor suggests which language students should use in answering the questions. These activities suggest that the authors view reading in a foreign language to be a decoding-style translation task, rather than a process of engaging with the text to create meaning in the target language. This in turn explains the emphasis on testing rather than proficiency-based activities. At the end of each chapter (six articles on one topic) there is a pair of crossword puzzles. These generally present glosses, usually in English but sometimes in Indonesian, and ask the user to fill in the corresponding form in the other language. These crossword puzzles provide a varied and entertaining study format, but are essentially a test of how well users have memorized vocabulary lists and do not provide the kind of grammatical, semantic or pragmatic contexts that would facilitate the learning or reinforcement of vocabulary.

Although I would have liked to have seen more background for each article, the information that is provided is generally accurate and interesting. Indeed, the notes with each article are often presented in a light, humorous way, which is a welcome counterpoint to the seriousness of most of the articles. Comments on Indonesian humour related to some of the topics is particularly welcome. An example would be the joke that the acronym KUHP, which refers to the Criminal Justice Code, can be jokingly expanded to *Kasih Uang Habis Perkara* ‘give money and the matter is settled’ (p. 57). One of the more useful parts of the book is a section outlining the Indonesian Administrative System, with terminology for all levels of government administrative units in the country, their governing bodies and corresponding security units. An emphasis on acronyms in the various lessons is also appropriate.

### 4 The language of newspapers

An area where much more could have been made of the material presented here is precisely on the topic of newspapers as a genre. There are a few comments on the language and style of newspapers; for example, discussion of the use of initials rather than names to refer to certain individuals (p. 9. 49). More of this kind of thing would have been very welcome. Opportunities not taken include discussing the occasional appearance of non-standard grammar. Two unusual occurrences of the passive are *di evaluasi* (p. 106) rather than *dievaluasi* ‘to be evaluated’ and *amanatkan* in

the phrase *yang amanatkan oleh Kerajaan Malaysia* (p. 85) rather than the standard *diamanatkan* ‘to be stipulated’. Such ‘innovative’ grammar is actually not uncommon in Indonesian print media, and an internet search confirms that these are indeed authentic reproductions of the original articles. I applaud the authors for not ‘correcting’ these naturally occurring constructions. However, it would help learners to have these pointed out in order to support students’ confidence in their own knowledge of Indonesian grammar, to provide useful information about grammatical style in the Indonesian press and, not least of all, to assure readers that these are not typos. In the area of sub-genre, some extracts actually read as editorials rather than as news articles (for example the second article in *Economy*, p. 65). An explicit discussion of different types of newspaper items would provide more information about Indonesian newspaper writing style, and would also provide background to make it easier for the learner-reader to access the text. Such information about the newspaper genre could have gone a long way to making this a textbook for building press literacy, rather than simply a reader that happens to be based on texts from newspapers.

## 5 Accuracy

Although generally useful, this textbook is often marred by errors of content, which can be misleading for users. The expression *masak!* conveys disbelief and is here given a fanciful etymology based on *masak* ‘to cook’ (pp. 147, 213). While imagining something is unbelievable because it has been ‘cooked up’ might be a creative heuristic, it is not a correct definition or etymology. These are two unrelated words and should not be confounded. There are at least two cases where the incorrect root form is given for derived verbs. The authors give *serah* as the root of *mengerahkan* with the meaning ‘surrender, withdraw.’ The derived form of *serah* is in fact *menerahkan*, which can mean ‘surrender’. The root of *mengerahkan* is *kerah* and means ‘mobilise.’ On page 153 the authors describe the ‘unexpected’ use of *serah* in the article to say that the police ‘withdrew’ their forces before a crowd dispersed. However, when we realise that the police actually ‘mobilised’ their forces in order to disperse the crowd, there is no longer a vocabulary mystery. Similarly on page 165 we are given *menerapkan* (*serap*) ‘apply, absorb.’ This actually confounds two different forms: *menerapkan* (from *terap*) ‘apply’ and *menyerapkan* (from *serap*) ‘absorb.’ We are also given inconsistent definitions for *triliun*. On page 65 it is suggested readers can use their knowledge of English to understand this word, implying it means ‘trillion,’ while on page 69 *tiliun* is glossed as ‘billion.’ This is complicated by the fact that Echols and Shadily (1989) gloss *triliun* as ‘quintillion.’ The issue has to do with whether Indonesian now follows (American) English or Dutch usage (in either case the gloss ‘billion’ is incorrect). And this is complicated further by the fact that *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (Ali et al., 1995) gives competing definitions for cognate forms in European languages, but does not pass judgement on which meaning is correct for Indonesian. This is an opportunity where the authors could have discussed the evolving nature of the Indonesian language, but instead they simply give unexplained, contradictory definitions. A final misleading statement occurs in the discussion of the Administrative system, where it is claimed that Papua – unlike other provinces in Indonesian – has its own flag (p. 195), implying this is an officially recognised governmental flag, instead of the highly contentious separatist symbol that it in fact is.

## 6 Conclusion

This book will be useful for someone who wants some quick reading practice, or needs to provide an occasional supplement in a class. It does not, however, have the pedagogic foundation necessary to form the core of a full unit on reading, based as it is on the unstated assumption that reading is a grammar-translation activity. As a result, a teacher who would like to use these materials to help Indonesian language students develop a variety of reading strategies will need to prepare supplementary materials for each lesson. These might include schema-activating pre-reading activities; tasks to encourage skimming, scanning, and hypothesis building; and post-reading activities that engage more globally with issues encountered in the text and reinforce vocabulary.

The materials in this book do present interesting examples from Indonesian newspapers, but leave untapped their potential either to provide a guide to the genre or to push people to the point of “Mastering Indonesian.”

### **References**

- Ali, L. et al. (1995). *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (2nd ed.). Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.
- Echols, J.M., & Shadily, H. (1989). *An Indonesian-English Dictionary*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.