

Tribute to Fithrorozi: Writing in a spoken Malay dialect

This paper is a tribute to Fithrorozi, a writer and teacher who lived on Belitung Island and made his life's work the revitalization and maintenance of Belitung Malay, by writing essays and motivating elementary school children to write essays in their local dialect. Fithrorozi suddenly passed away at his own home on February 13th, 2026.

In schools in Indonesia in general, children start writing Bahasa Indonesia but not their native language or dialect, and as a result, they gradually learn to use Bahasa Indonesia for education, official functions, writing in general, and interaction with people outside of their native area, to the point that they prefer writing Bahasa Indonesia to their own language or dialect. This was the situation on Belitung as well, until around 2013, when Fithrorozi began to encourage his elementary school students to write essays in their own local Belitung dialect about their everyday life, families, studies, learning about Islam, going around to play in the forests and mining with their families, etc. Fithrorozi promoted Belitung Malay as a tool to revitalize its distinctive Malay culture. When he published his children's essays, it contributed to local prestige and gave residents the feeling of being proud of being Belitung Malay speakers (Mahmud, 2015).

This paper describes how Fithrorozi's initiative developed the process of writing in Belitung Malay, by discussing the essays—their orthography, grammar, lexicon, and topics. Aside from this, I will also compare the children's essays with Fithrorozi's own writings. I will note inconsistencies and variation in usage of features such as verb suffixes and definite articles, suggesting that Fithrorozi gave general guidance to his students but rejected systematic prescriptivism, encouraging the children to write whatever and however they wanted, but on the other hand he kept his own essays grammatically 'correct' and used a rich vocabulary, which was often unfamiliar to the children. I will describe these phenomena in detail.

This paper celebrates Fithrorozi's efforts and success so that Belitung children came to not feel awkward and uncomfortable writing their essays in their everyday language, although this seemed impossible at the beginning. This also led to the general public in Belitung changing their attitude towards their dialect, to feel pride in it and value it as their own cultural heritage.

References:

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