

Exploring Challenges, Strategies, and Human Impacts of Bilingual Class in Indonesian Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

Bilingual learning has been increasingly implemented in Indonesian secondary schools to enhance students' English proficiency and global competitiveness; however, its classroom implementation remains uneven and challenging. This study aims to explore the challenges, instructional strategies, and human impacts of bilingual learning in everyday school practices. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted at SMPS Iskandar Muda Aceh Utara through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and school administrators. The findings reveal that bilingual learning encounters interconnected challenges at multiple levels, including students' limited academic English proficiency, teachers' pedagogical and linguistic constraints, and insufficient institutional and policy support. Although many students demonstrate conceptual understanding, they often struggle to articulate academic ideas in English, while teachers struggle to balance content mastery and language use. To address these challenges, teachers and schools adopt adaptive strategies such as code-switching, scaffolding, flexible language practices, and gradual implementation of bilingual instruction. Beyond instructional outcomes, the study highlights significant human impacts, particularly on students' motivation, socio-emotional development, and classroom engagement. Initial anxiety and hesitation are commonly observed; however, supportive instructional practices foster increased confidence, resilience, and active participation over time. This study concludes that bilingual learning should be understood not merely as a technical instructional model, but as a human-centered educational practice shaped by linguistic readiness, emotional dynamics, and institutional context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, bilingual education has become a central concern for educational systems worldwide, particularly in non-English-speaking countries striving to compete globally. The growing need for English proficiency, driven by the dominance of English in international academia, business, and digital communication, has prompted many nations to adopt bilingual education programs at various levels of education. Secondary school, as a formative stage in students' academic and cognitive development, has emerged as a critical focus for bilingual education initiatives. In this context, the implementation of bilingual learning is not merely a pedagogical shift, but also a sociocultural and psychological phenomenon with far-reaching implications for students, educators, and society.

In Indonesia, the trend toward bilingual education has been steadily growing, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas. Many private and public schools have begun integrating English as a medium of instruction alongside Bahasa Indonesia as part of broader efforts to enhance students' global competitiveness and readiness. However, the implementation of bilingual learning in Indonesian secondary schools remains uneven and complex. Challenges such as limited teacher preparedness, insufficient training in bilingual pedagogies, inadequate instructional resources, and disparities between schools continue to shape classroom practices. In addition, concerns related to linguistic dominance and the potential erosion of local cultural and religious values further complicate the acceptance and sustainability of bilingual programs. Despite the growing adoption of bilingual instruction, studies that examine its implementation comprehensively, particularly those that address its human impacts, remain limited.

Previous research has provided important insights into bilingual learning in Indonesia, yet much of the existing literature tends to examine the issue from fragmented perspectives. Studies have highlighted cognitive benefits and emotional discomfort experienced by students when dealing with complex subject matter delivered in English [1]. Other research has highlighted teachers' struggles to balance content delivery and language instruction due to limited linguistic and pedagogical competence [2]. Parental perceptions have also been explored, revealing ambivalence between the perceived prestige of English and concerns about cultural and religious identity [3]. In resource-limited contexts, some studies have documented creative institutional adaptations, though these often focus on structural strategies rather than students' lived experiences [4]. More recent work has begun to address psychological dimensions such as anxiety and confidence, yet these studies rarely connect emotional outcomes with instructional strategies or institutional practices [5].

Although these studies contribute valuable knowledge, they often treat challenges, strategies, and impacts as separate issues. As a result, the interconnected nature of bilingual education remains insufficiently explored. The voices of key stakeholders, including students navigating academic demands in two languages, teachers managing pedagogical and linguistic responsibilities, and parents negotiating cultural expectations, are still underrepresented in a single, integrated analysis. This gap highlights the need for research

that captures bilingual learning as a lived educational experience rather than solely as a technical instructional model.

Addressing this gap requires an approach that enables in-depth exploration of experiences, perceptions, and meanings in bilingual classrooms. A qualitative perspective is particularly appropriate, as it enables the examination of how bilingual learning is understood, enacted, and experienced by those directly involved. Through classroom observations and in-depth interviews, such an approach can reveal the nuanced realities of bilingual instruction that are often overlooked by quantitative measures alone.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore bilingual learning in Indonesian secondary schools by focusing on three interrelated dimensions: challenges in implementation, strategies employed by teachers and schools, and the human impacts experienced by students, teachers, and parents. By emphasizing lived experiences, this research aims to present a holistic understanding of bilingual learning that encompasses cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions. The human-centered focus of this study distinguishes it from prior research and contributes a more comprehensive perspective on bilingual education within the Indonesian context.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges, strategies, and human impacts of bilingual learning in Indonesian secondary schools. A qualitative approach was selected because the research focused on understanding participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their educational context rather than quantifying variables. Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to capture the depth and complexity of human experiences, particularly in educational settings where social, emotional, and cultural dimensions intersect with instructional practices [6]. The case study design was chosen to enable an in-depth examination of bilingual learning within its real-life context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its setting are not clearly defined. This approach is especially relevant in the Indonesian context, where bilingual education is shaped by policy, culture, and classroom realities simultaneously [7].

The research was conducted at SMPS Iskandar Muda Aceh Utara, a secondary school that actively implements bilingual learning. The site was selected because of its ongoing bilingual program, which provides a rich context for examining instructional practices and their impacts. Participants in this study included teachers involved in bilingual instruction, students enrolled in bilingual classes, and parents whose children participated in the program. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants with direct experience in bilingual learning, ensuring that the collected data were both relevant and information-rich. Individuals who had been involved in the bilingual program for at least one academic year were prioritized to ensure sufficient exposure and experience to provide meaningful insights [8].

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews in order to capture both observable practices and participants' perspectives. Classroom observations were conducted to document how bilingual instruction was implemented in natural classroom settings, focusing on teaching strategies, student engagement, language

use, and emerging challenges. An observation guide was used to ensure systematic data collection, supported by detailed field notes and, where permitted, audio or visual recordings to enhance accuracy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, students, and school administrators to explore their experiences, challenges, strategies, and perceptions of bilingual learning. This interview format provided a balance between consistency and flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on issues that were significant to them while remaining aligned with the research objectives [9]. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes across the data set. The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and defining their meanings in relation to the research questions [10]. This approach ensured that the findings remained grounded in participants' experiences while allowing for interpretive depth. To enhance the study's trustworthiness, triangulation of data sources and methods was employed, along with careful documentation of analytic decisions. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data storage, ensuring that participants' rights and well-being were protected in accordance with established ethical guidelines.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Research Context and Overview of Bilingual Implementation

This section presents an overview of the research context and the general implementation of bilingual learning at SMPS Iskandar Muda Aceh Utara. The findings are drawn from qualitative data collected through classroom observations and interviews with teachers, students, and school administrators. This contextual overview is intended to provide a foundation for understanding the specific challenges, strategies, and human impacts discussed in subsequent sections.

Bilingual learning at SMPS Iskandar Muda is implemented through the integration of English and Bahasa Indonesia in selected subjects, particularly those considered core academic areas. English is used as a medium of instruction to varying degrees, depending on the subject matter, teacher proficiency, and students' language readiness. Rather than enforcing full English instruction, the school adopts a flexible approach that allows teachers to adjust language use based on classroom conditions. This flexibility is intended to prevent cognitive overload while still exposing students to academic English in meaningful contexts.

Classroom observations revealed that dynamic language practices characterize bilingual instruction. Teachers frequently alternate between English and Bahasa Indonesia to clarify concepts, provide instructions, and respond to students' questions. Visual aids, simplified explanations, and contextual examples are commonly used to support comprehension. Students demonstrate varied levels of engagement and confidence when interacting in English, with some actively participating and others remaining hesitant, particularly during oral activities. These variations reflect differences in students' prior exposure to English and their academic language proficiency.

Interviews with teachers and school administrators indicate that the bilingual program is shaped largely by internal school initiatives rather than a rigid external policy framework. Teachers are encouraged to experiment with instructional strategies that suit their classroom realities, while school leaders emphasize gradual implementation and adaptability. Although the program is viewed as beneficial for improving students' English exposure and global awareness, participants acknowledge that its success depends heavily on teacher capacity, institutional support, and students' emotional readiness. This context highlights that bilingual learning at SMPS Iskandar Muda is not a standardized model but a negotiated practice shaped by pedagogical, linguistic, and human considerations.

3.2 Challenges in Implementing Bilingual Learning

The findings indicate that implementing bilingual learning at SMPS Iskandar Muda faces a range of interrelated challenges at the linguistic, pedagogical, and institutional levels. These challenges do not occur in isolation; instead, they intersect and shape the daily realities of bilingual classroom practices. Data from interviews and classroom observations reveal that limitations in students' language readiness, teachers' instructional capacity, and institutional support collectively influence the effectiveness of bilingual learning.

Students' Linguistic Readiness and Academic Language Challenges

One of the most prominent challenges identified in this study relates to students' linguistic readiness, particularly their ability to use English for academic purposes. Many students reported limited vocabulary and low confidence when required to respond or express ideas in English during classroom activities. Although students often understood the subject matter conceptually, they struggled to articulate their understanding in English. This challenge was evident in classroom interactions, where students tended to remain silent or switch to Bahasa Indonesia when faced with complex questions.

This finding reflects the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) proposed by Cummins, which explains why learners may develop conversational fluency more quickly than academic language competence [11]. In the observed classrooms, students demonstrated basic comprehension and everyday communication skills, yet struggled with academic discourse that required abstract reasoning and subject-specific terminology. As a result, bilingual instruction sometimes created cognitive pressure, affecting students' participation and confidence.

From a socio-emotional perspective, limited linguistic readiness also contributed to feelings of anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Several students expressed concern about being judged by peers when speaking English, which led to reduced classroom engagement. These emotional responses suggest that language challenges in bilingual classrooms extend beyond cognitive difficulties and directly influence students' willingness to participate in learning activities.

Teachers' Pedagogical and Linguistic Constraints

In addition to student-related challenges, teachers faced significant constraints in implementing bilingual learning effectively. Interviews revealed that teachers struggled to balance content delivery with language instruction, particularly when teaching complex subject matter. Teachers emphasized the need to ensure that students understood the lesson content, while simultaneously attempting to maintain the use of English as part of the bilingual program. This dual responsibility often led to instructional tension, as teachers had to decide whether to prioritize conceptual understanding or language exposure.

These challenges align with previous research highlighting the demanding nature of bilingual instruction, which requires teachers to possess both strong subject-matter knowledge and adequate language proficiency [12]. Classroom observations showed that teachers frequently used code-switching and simplified language to support student comprehension. While these strategies were effective in preventing misunderstanding, they also reflected teachers' limited confidence in sustaining extended academic discourse in English.

Furthermore, teachers reported increased workload related to lesson preparation, material adaptation, and classroom management in bilingual settings. The lack of systematic training in bilingual pedagogy contributed to uncertainty in instructional decision-making, particularly regarding how much English to use and how to address students' language difficulties. These pedagogical constraints indicate that bilingual learning places additional demands on teachers that are not always supported by sufficient professional development.

Institutional and Policy-Related Constraints

At the institutional level, challenges emerged regarding resources, training opportunities, and policy clarity. School administrators acknowledged that while the bilingual program was actively implemented, institutional support remained limited. Access to bilingual teaching materials, structured teacher training, and external guidance was reported as insufficient. As a result, much of the program's implementation relied on individual teacher initiative rather than a coordinated institutional framework.

Moreover, the absence of clear and consistent national policies governing bilingual education in secondary schools contributed to uncertainty at the school level. Without a unified framework, schools were required to interpret and adapt bilingual practices independently, resulting in inconsistent implementation. This situation reflects broader concerns raised in previous studies regarding the sustainability of bilingual programs in contexts where policy support is fragmented or inconsistent [13].

These institutional constraints highlight that challenges in bilingual learning are not solely rooted in classroom practices, but are also shaped by broader structural and policy conditions. The findings suggest that effective bilingual education requires alignment between classroom strategies, teacher capacity, and institutional support. Without such alignment, bilingual learning risks becoming an uneven and burdensome practice rather than a sustainable educational innovation.

3.3 Strategies to Address Bilingual Learning Challenges

The findings indicate that teachers and school administrators at SMPS Iskandar Muda employ a range of adaptive strategies to address the challenges associated with bilingual learning. These strategies emerge as practical responses to students' linguistic limitations, teachers' instructional constraints, and institutional conditions. Rather than relying on rigid instructional models, bilingual learning is implemented through flexible and context-sensitive practices that prioritize student comprehension while maintaining exposure to English.

Classroom-Level Instructional Strategies

At the classroom level, teachers adopt adaptive instructional strategies to ensure that bilingual learning remains accessible to students with varying levels of English proficiency. Classroom observations revealed frequent use of code-switching between English and Bahasa Indonesia, particularly when explaining complex concepts or responding to students' questions. This practice enables teachers to maintain lesson flow while preventing misunderstanding and disengagement. Students reported that the strategic use of Bahasa Indonesia helped them grasp subject content more clearly, especially when encountering unfamiliar academic terminology.

In addition to code-switching, teachers employed scaffolding strategies such as simplified language input, repetition, visual aids, and contextual examples. These approaches supported students' gradual development of academic language skills without compromising their understanding of subject matter. Such practices are consistent with the concept of scaffolding in bilingual classrooms, where instructional support is adjusted to learners' current abilities and progressively reduced as competence increases [14]. Through these strategies, bilingual instruction becomes a supportive process rather than a source of excessive cognitive pressure.

From a pedagogical perspective, teachers emphasized that flexibility was essential in managing bilingual instruction. Instead of enforcing full English use, they adjusted language choice based on lesson objectives, students' responses, and classroom dynamics. This approach reflects a pragmatic understanding of bilingual learning as a gradual process that requires sensitivity to students' linguistic and emotional readiness.

School-Level Support and Implementation Strategies

Beyond classroom practices, school-level strategies also play a significant role in supporting the implementation of bilingual learning. Interviews with school administrators indicated that bilingual instruction is introduced gradually rather than imposed uniformly across subjects. This phased approach allows students and teachers to adapt to the demands of bilingual learning over time, reducing resistance and anxiety. School leaders emphasized that flexibility and teacher autonomy were prioritized in order to accommodate diverse classroom realities.

Collaboration among teachers also emerged as a key institutional strategy. Teachers engaged in informal discussions and shared experiences regarding bilingual instruction, lesson planning, and student responses. Although formal professional development

opportunities were limited, this collaborative culture enabled teachers to exchange practical solutions and instructional ideas. Such collaboration contributes to a supportive teaching environment and helps mitigate the challenges associated with bilingual pedagogy.

These school-level strategies align with broader perspectives on bilingual education that emphasize the importance of contextual adaptation and institutional support. By allowing gradual implementation and encouraging teacher collaboration, the school creates conditions that enable bilingual learning to function as a sustainable practice rather than a rigid policy requirement [15]. The findings suggest that effective bilingual education depends not only on individual teacher competence, but also on institutional flexibility and collective commitment.

3.4 Human Impacts of Bilingual Learning

The findings reveal that bilingual learning at SMPS Iskandar Muda produces significant human impacts that extend beyond academic outcomes. These impacts are reflected in students' motivation, socio-emotional development, and classroom engagement. Rather than functioning solely as a linguistic or instructional approach, bilingual learning shapes how students perceive themselves as learners, how teachers experience their professional roles, and how parents interpret their children's educational trajectories. This perspective aligns with prior research that emphasizes that bilingual education influences learners' identity and self-concept in multilingual school environments [19].

Impacts on Students

One of the most visible human impacts of bilingual learning is its influence on students' motivation and self-perception. Interview data indicate that students initially experienced difficulty and hesitation when engaging with subject matter delivered partly in English. Feelings of uncertainty and fear of making mistakes were common, particularly during oral participation. Such responses are consistent with findings that limited academic language proficiency may negatively affect learners' confidence in bilingual classrooms [20]. However, over time, many students reported increased confidence and a sense of pride as they became more familiar with bilingual classroom practices.

The use of English was gradually perceived not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity to acquire skills considered valuable for future academic and professional contexts. From a motivational perspective, bilingual learning stimulated both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Students expressed a growing awareness that English proficiency could expand access to global knowledge and opportunities, which encouraged greater effort and persistence in learning activities. This finding resonates with studies suggesting that bilingual instruction can enhance learners' motivation when language learning is meaningfully connected to academic content and future aspirations [16]. Nevertheless, motivation was not uniform across all students, as those with lower language proficiency continued to experience pressure and anxiety in certain learning situations, a condition frequently discussed in second language learning literature [21].

Socio-Emotional Impacts

Bilingual learning also had notable socio-emotional implications for students. While exposure to two languages fostered adaptability, resilience, and openness to new learning experiences, it simultaneously introduced emotional challenges. Several students reported anxiety related to speaking English in front of peers, particularly when they were unsure of grammatical accuracy or pronunciation. These emotional responses influenced participation patterns, with some students choosing to remain silent rather than risk making errors. Similar patterns have been observed in studies of affective factors in second-language communication [22].

At the same time, supportive classroom practices and gradual bilingual implementation helped mitigate these challenges. Teachers' use of encouragement, flexible language practices, and non-threatening classroom interactions contributed to a learning environment where students felt increasingly comfortable experimenting with English. This balance between challenge and support reflects the importance of affective factors in bilingual education, as emotional well-being plays a critical role in language acquisition and academic engagement [17]. When bilingual instruction was implemented with sensitivity to students' emotional needs, it contributed positively to socio-emotional growth rather than becoming a source of sustained stress, as also highlighted in research on supportive bilingual learning environments [23].

Student Engagement

Another key human impact identified in this study concerns student engagement in classroom activities. Classroom observations showed that bilingual learning encouraged more interactive and communicative forms of participation, particularly when teachers employed contextualized explanations, group discussions, and visual supports. Such instructional practices are widely recognized as effective in promoting active engagement in bilingual and content-based learning settings [24].

Students were more engaged when bilingual instruction was framed as a shared learning process rather than a rigid requirement to use English exclusively. In such contexts, students demonstrated greater willingness to ask questions, collaborate with peers, and contribute ideas. This finding supports the view that bilingual learning can transform classroom dynamics by promoting active engagement, provided that instructional practices are aligned with students' linguistic readiness and learning needs [18]. Consequently, bilingual learning not only influenced language development but also reshaped patterns of interaction and participation within the classroom, a trend similarly reported in prior bilingual education studies [25].

4. CONCLUSION

This study underscores that bilingual learning in Indonesian secondary schools is a multifaceted educational practice shaped by the interaction of pedagogical, linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Rather than positioning bilingual instruction as uniformly effective or ineffective, the study highlights its context-dependent nature, in which success is closely linked to instructional design, teacher preparedness, and institutional

responsiveness. The conclusion emphasizes that bilingual learning is most effective when approached as a flexible, human-centered process that acknowledges learners' linguistic readiness and emotional realities.

From both theoretical and practical perspectives, this study has important implications for bilingual education policy and classroom practice. It suggests that effective bilingual learning requires more than curriculum mandates or language targets; it demands continuous teacher development, adaptive pedagogy, and supportive school cultures. Educational stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, and policymakers, are encouraged to view bilingual learning as an evolving practice that must be aligned with students' cognitive and socio-emotional needs. This perspective contributes to a more inclusive and sustainable understanding of bilingual education in multilingual contexts such as Indonesia.

This study is bounded by several limitations that frame the interpretation of its conclusions. As a qualitative case study conducted in a single secondary school, the findings are context-specific and not intended for broad generalization across all Indonesian schools. The study focuses on lived experiences and classroom dynamics rather than measurable learning outcomes, and it reflects a particular institutional setting with its own cultural and organizational characteristics. These boundaries highlight the need for caution in applying the conclusions across different educational contexts.

Future research is encouraged to expand this inquiry by examining bilingual learning across multiple schools, regions, and educational levels, and by using mixed-method or longitudinal designs. Further studies could explore the long-term academic and psychological impacts of bilingual instruction, comparative models of implementation, or the role of parental and community involvement in supporting bilingual education. By doing so, future research can deepen understanding of how bilingual learning can be sustainably integrated into diverse educational systems.

In terms of broader contribution, this study offers insights not only for educators and researchers but also for the general public by promoting a more nuanced view of bilingual education. It highlights that bilingual learning is not merely about language mastery but about fostering students' confidence, adaptability, and global awareness. By emphasizing the human dimension of bilingual instruction, this research contributes to public discourse on equitable and meaningful education in an increasingly interconnected world.

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