

Teaching a Bilingual Class for Lower Primary Level: Challenges and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Bilingual education is a system of education that uses two languages as classroom instruction. The demand for bilingual schools has increased quite significantly in Indonesia. Yet, bilingual teachers often face challenges in teaching bilingual classes especially those teaching at lower primary level. This study seeks to understand a teacher's challenges and strategies in teaching a bilingual class. Adopting a qualitative case study with a first-grade primary school teacher as the participant, data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated two major kinds of challenges: internal and external. Similarly, the strategies adopted corresponded two the teacher's internal and external motivations. This study suggests that bilingual teachers need to be provided with ample guidance and supervision in their bilingual classroom practice in order to create impactful learning. Further, collaboration between the school, teachers and parents is also necessary for the program to run smoothly.

Keywords: bilingual education, lower primary level, teacher's challenges, and strategies

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, bilingual education was implemented in 2004, as the government adopted an education system that necessitated schools to acquire 'international standards. Rosel and Baker (1996) describe bilingual education as a program that trains non-English native students in the

classroom to learn the subject in their language and change it to use English as the language instruction. In Indonesia, Bilingual class programs use English as medium instruction. EMI indicates that English is utilized both as the subject's content and as the language of instruction for a part of the school curriculum (Haidar, 2017). Unfortunately, the policy of International Standard School, or better known as *Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional* (SBI) and *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional* (RSBI), has been revoked by the government, which in turn causes the dismissal of bilingual classes (Jayanti, 2019). Despite the dismissal of SBI and RSBI, the demand for bilingual education in the country continues to rise, especially among private schools. In these schools, English is used as the medium for instruction, even at the lower primary level. In practice, EMI is preferred by some private schools over public schools. Thus, parents who are concerned with a better future for their children would rather send them to private schools that use EMI in bilingual classrooms. (Ernawati et al, 2021). However, teacher qualifications have often become an issue in such education system, as many of these private schools do not necessarily provide teachers' training for bilingual education. A study by Haryanto (2021) reported that many of the teachers who teach bilingual classes are English graduates, but they are also often required to teach science and maths in English. In view of this, this study, therefore, seeks to understand the challenges encountered by a teacher teaching a bilingual class at a lower primary level while also identifying the strategies employed to overcome the obstacles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Bialystok (2016), bilingual education is defined as a school program that use two languages in the teaching and learning process for non-language academic subjects. Bilingual education is thus marked, among others, by classrooms where two languages are used in practice (Garcia, 2015). Within the Indonesian context, the languages used for instruction in these bilingual classrooms are English and *Bahasa Indonesia*.

Goodwin (2017), however, indicates that implementing dual language education is complex and requires committed principals and teachers. All school stakeholders—principals, teachers, staff, families, and students—need to work collaboratively to create a school community that is embracing, hence enabling to facilitate the practice of such dual language education. Yet, a number of scholars (e.g., Goodwin, 2017; Schachter & Gass, 2013) observe that most teacher preparation programs and in-service training neglect bilingual education topics and teaching practices. In such an educational context, it is imperative that teachers be given tailored professional development and collaborative planning time to prepare their teaching, as well as being equipped with adequate resources so that their practices are developmentally appropriate and attentive to context. They may also need to shift their perspective into seeing language diversity as an asset rather than a deficit. A study by Jackson, Guzman, and Ramos (2010 cited in Hernandez, 2017) indicates that most bilingual candidates enter the teaching profession with a limited understanding of their own cultural self, selfhood, and identity. Hernandez (2017) also points out that many bilingual teacher candidates lack experience teaching in bilingual settings, due to their own schooling exposure.

Within the Indonesian bilingual education context, Wijaya's (2021) study highlights two major issues faced by teachers in teaching bilingual classes. These issues emerged from both internal and external factors. The issues were considered 'internal' when they stem from the education system itself, such as the problems related to the curriculum and assessment. It needs to be noted that the curriculum and the assessment system implemented by bilingual schools are different from those outlined by the government. Such schools require teachers to draw on two types of curricula (i.e., the Cambridge curriculum and the national curriculum) as well as implementing different assessment report systems in the class, where at the end of the semester students will get two kinds of report; Indonesia version and English version. Meanwhile, the external issues are those that relate to the students, students' parents, and school policy.

Another major challenge highlighted by Safei (2022) is that bilingual teachers are often required to deliver non-language subjects, such as science and mathematics, despite the fact that they do not have the appropriate educational background for it. Such expectations have, in turn, created additional 'burden' for these teachers. The issue becomes even more challenging when the teachers are assigned to teach at lower primary level. According to Shulman (1987), professional knowledge of primary teachers includes not only knowledge of educational aims, purposes, and values, but also knowledge of educational contexts and general pedagogical knowledge, which includes teaching strategies, techniques, classroom management and organisation. Teaching at primary level, therefore, requires adjusting to certain psychological and developmental criteria, adhering to principles of teaching to young learners. In regard to the teaching of young learners, Nunan (2010) highlighted five major challenges commonly encountered by English teachers; these challenges related to (1) cognitive development, (2) motivation, (3) attention, (4) multilevel groups, and (5) assessment.

In addition, Dick et al. (2005) explained that by providing the students with information about the instruction's goals will enable them to choose an efficient learning technique and assess the instruction's applicability. Therefore, teachers must be able to offer these two components when giving instruction to the young learners. Getting the students' attention is another difficult task. As children's attention spans are short, the first thing teachers should be able to accomplish is get the pupils' attention. Keeping the students' attention during the lesson is crucial to ensuring that they retain the material and can apply it (Dick, et al., 2005).

Regarding the explanation above, this article examines teaching in bilingual class for lower primary level in one of private schools in Jambi, Indonesia. I address three research questions as follows:

1. What are the challenges encountered by a bilingual teacher in teaching bilingual class for lower primary level?
2. How does the teacher overcome the challenges in teaching bilingual class for lower primary level?

METHOD

This study applied qualitative research design with a single case study approach. Cresswell (2012) explains case study is research that focuses on a specific issue with a case in a program, event, activity or individual. The data were collected through a zoom conference meeting (online), since Cindy (the participant) is living in a different city from me. I used a sociodemographic questionnaire for collecting basic information about Cindy then following semi-structured interview (Litchman, 2006) to gain in depth information about challenges that she faced as a bilingual teacher and what strategies she used to overcome those challenges. The interview was running about 2 hours, and all the interview process was recorded during the zoom meeting conference. After interviewing Cindy, I transcribed all the interview recordings into transcription by using qualitative data analysis. Then all the data were classified into some theme “coding” (Cohen & Manion, 2018)

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This study has presented data analysis that classified into two; challenges and strategies to overcome the challenges which has four themes and eleven sub-themes. The challenges were classified into two: internal and external, about the first category, further classification was made: no experience in teaching bilingual class, curriculum, and subject. For the second category were divided into three parts as follows; less of proper training, lack of parents’ awareness, and various students’ previous background and proficiency level. Moreover, the strategies to overcome the challenges were classified into two themes; internal motivation and external motivation. The internal motivation has four; self-initiative for arranging additional classes, applying proper teaching technique, translanguaging, and good communication with parents. In addition, the external motivation was divided into two categories; bilingual class policy and training from institution and publisher, and collaboration with principal from institution and publisher.

Internal Challenges

1. No experience in teaching bilingual

“The most challenging thing is from myself; I did not trust myself because switching off teaching from senior high school to elementary students in bilingual class was a big deal for me. Besides, I did not have any experience teaching young learners, especially for bilingual class”

Cindy explained that she has no experience teaching in bilingual class. Even though she holds a bachelor of education, teaching in bilingual class was the first time for her. She added that teaching English for young learners has already challenged her, because her previous experience was teaching English in senior high school for about four years.

Cindy’s statement about her feeling is supported by Richard (2006) which mentioned that primary teaching is a vocation, rather than priesthood, a primary teacher should have an inner calling to be a good primary teacher. It is true that many teachers cannot develop their teaching skill effectively without an inner calling. It means that it is better for young learners’ teachers, teach because of their passion and feeling. Passion will

drive their motivation by themselves to improve their capability and give the best for their students in the classroom.

2. Curriculum and Subjects

“Talking about curriculum, this school has K-13 as the main curriculum. However, the school was trying to provide other subjects that are not included in K-13 such as reading presentation. I also have to teach non-English subjects such as science, physical education, art and craft and reading presentations. I do not think that I am good enough to teach PE or Art and Craft. I think the school should find other teachers with that expertise. If teaching science is still ok, because it is theory not practical like PE or art and craft.” The school uses its own curriculum, and it is quite challenging for me at first”

Cindy described that the school uses national curriculum 2013 as the main curriculum. But, the school has its own policy to apply their own curriculum for some subjects such as science, math, physical education, art and craft. All the subjects are delivered in English as the medium instruction. Since she graduated from English education, she has no clue about teaching other non-English subjects by using English. Moreover, teaching for Physical Education and Art and Craft is another problem for her. She clarified that teaching lessons theoretically is much easier than teaching lessons practically. During PE class she has to force herself to do the kinaesthetic which she does not like. Cindy suggests for the school to match teachers with their expertise in order to get students' better understanding during the learning process.

Cindy's explanation above about teaching based on non-major is supported by Haryanto (2021), “the fact is many teachers who teach in bilingual classes are English graduates but they also teach science and math in English”. Furthermore, Haryanto also mentioned that it is important for a teacher to understand the complex concept of a lesson, if the teacher does not understand and is given the wrong concept of the lesson. Then the students will never get real information and even miss understanding about the lesson. This case shows that there is a mismatch between teachers' previous education background and their current work.

External Challenges

1. Less of proper training

“Unfortunately, since the first day I joined this school. There is no proper and routine training for bilingual teachers. I have to say that the school is still learning. Mostly, training just comes from book publishers, not from school.”

In the interview, Cindy tells me many times and complains that the school does not provide any proper and intensive training for novice bilingual teachers like her. She admitted that the school is still in the developing process and needs to learn more about bilingual class programs further. She described the situation, that the school lacks

human resources, so she is the one who has to be creative and learn by herself. While, she also just attended training from book publishers which are not frequently organized.

Her statement about intensive training for bilingual context is supported by Fitriati (2015) discovered that it raised teachers' tension, reinforced a sense of uneasiness, and decreased confidence. Teachers admitted that it was hard to teach mathematics and science subjects in English without prior training in English as a medium instruction context. This statement shows that prior training for bilingual teachers is essential especially for those with no or less experience. Training will help bilingual teachers in preparing themselves before entering the real bilingual class situation.

2. Lack of parents' awareness

"If you are talking about parents in bilingual class. I expected that they would know the consequences of enrolling kids in bilingual class. Parents should assist their children with doing homework and have additional classes. But, some of them just lay it down to teachers, to take responsibility for their child's academic progress."

As homeroom teacher, Cindy has to be close enough with students' parents to give some reports about students' learning progress. Unfortunately, there are some parents who are not considerate enough for giving attention to their child's school activity. As a teacher, it is very unfortunate for parents enrolling their kids in bilingual classes with less assistance as bilingual classes have more assignments and are quite demanding compared to regular classes. Therefore, Cindy expected parents to involve more in their kid's learning activity at home.

Her problems above are supported by Guo (2010) finding that there are conflicting perspectives of teachers and bilingual parents relating to their particular role within the education of children.

3. Various Students' Previous Education Background and Proficiency and Competency Level

"Because there was no placement test for students. The students; education background and competency level are so random. It is hard for me to teach those who are still illiterate but joined in bilingual class. Another case is they cannot speak English."

"I can classify all the students into three categories in terms of proficiency and competency level. The first group is those who are fluent in English and mostly they have graduated from a Bilingual kindergarten school or they usually speak English in their home with parents or other family members. Second is the moderate group, those who understand English but find it hard to speak in English. For example, they know how to introduce themselves but speak in English with limited vocabulary. The last is those who do not understand English and some of them are illiterate."

During three years of teaching in bilingual class, Cindy has got some different number of students each year. She explained that every year has different challenges, but the most challenging class is the third year. She must assist 24 four students with various previous education backgrounds and level of competency.

Furthermore, Cindy also regrets that the school does not provide any placement test for the new students in Bilingual class. In her point of view, students who want to join bilingual classes should follow the placement test, to measure their English proficiency and learning competence. Since learning in Bilingual class is more challenging than regular class, it is better for knowing students' competence level and setting the standard. In her class, she can categorize students' proficiency and competency level into three groups; fluent, moderate, and lowest.

Those problems that Cindy elaborates above are explained by Garton (2014) learners' factors such as discipline problem, motivation, and mixed level classes are the biggest problems teachers face in teaching Young Learners.

Strategies in Teaching Bilingual Class

Internal Motivation

1. Additional Class

“Since some of the students were not fluent in speaking English. So, I and another teacher decided to arrange additional classes. Because I thought it would not be a bilingual class if there were some students who do not understand English. I felt very worried for some students with low proficiency. Additional classes helped them a lot to catch up with other friends. I also gave them additional assignments, so they can learn at home with their parents.”

After months of teaching in bilingual class, Cindy has observed her students' ability. Since then, she decided to arrange additional classes in the afternoon after school three times a week for students who are still left behind by their friends. She also gives students more assignments and additional material to take home, so students can re-learn the lesson with their family.

As Thomas & Collier (2017) mentioned, teachers must use the most recent, innovative, and research-based teaching methods. It is preferable for teachers to provide several values to meaning by using mime, gesture, visuals, word charts, chant, music, movement, graphic organizers, and other methods. Cindy was trying to apply some teaching techniques to maximize teaching and learning process in the classroom.

2. Applying appropriate teaching technique

“During online class, I used the games to seek students' attention. This game is so basic, and I distribute the game to all of the students. I made quiz games for an online class. In addition, I also use google form for assignments, and ask students to make video presentations at home. Sometimes, I also search for

interesting videos on YouTube as additional material for singing and dancing activities.”

Being creative for young learners' teachers is an obligation for Cindy. She explained that she usually finds additional resources and re-create it as interesting games. During covid-19 she maximizes technology to simplify her job in distributing assignments by using google form. Additionally, she also uses videos from YouTube for dancing and singing activities in the classroom. By applying these teaching techniques, her students will be more active and interested in learning in the classroom.

Kenner et al (2008) mentioned that during an on-going bilingual training program found that teachers knew bilingualism is an asset, but questioned how bilingual strategies could be used in the classroom, and whether children could sufficiently learn in English.

3. Translanguaging

“At first, I always used English teaching for science and other subjects. But then, many students did not understand the lesson. There are some concepts that are hard to be delivered in English such as science vocabulary. Academic vocabulary is different from daily life vocabulary. So, I use translanguaging to simplified lesson delivery to the children in the classroom”

At the beginning of the teaching process in bilingual class, Cindy tends to use full English in explaining lessons to the students. However, this teaching technique was complained about by students' parents because most students do not understand the lesson. Then, Cindy tried to use translanguaging by mixing the English and *Bahasa Indonesia* to elaborate the materials to the students.

Translanguaging concept was supported by Lewis et al (2012) which explained that translanguaging allows the child to make use of his/her stronger language in order to promote development of his/her weaker language, thereby enriching understanding, which can contribute to greater proficiency in both languages.

4. Having good communication with students' parents

“I can say that my relationship with students' parents is quite good. Not only by chatting in the WhatsApp group about students' learning progress. Parents sometimes come to school to talk more and consult with me about what they should do to motivate their kids. Some parents are concerned enough with their kids even though some of them are busy and I need to reach out to them first”

As a homeroom teacher, Cindy always tries to connect with students' parents to communicate every single progress of her students. She made a WhatsApp group to facilitate intense communication between her and parents. She always shares everything in the WhatsApp group. Moreover, if parents want to talk personally about their kids to Cindy, they can chat personally or just come to school and have a consultation. However, for some parents who are not active in the group or

communicate with her, she has to reach out to the parents and intertwine the relationship between them.

Good communicator is one of the important roles for a teacher, just like Cindy did. As Cable (2003) reported that bilingual teaching assistants perceived their role as effectively bridging communication between home and school, and this can be attributed to knowing the children, parents, and living in the local community.

External Factor

1. Bilingual class policy, training from schools and institution,

“After two years of bilingual class availability. The school finally tried to make a policy regarding this program. Such as: intensive parents meeting, more trainings were provided, and placement tests for new students.”

Since the bilingual class was established in 2020, Cindy tried to persuade and give any suggestion for bilingual class development to the school’s stakeholders. Finally, after two years of teaching in Bilingual, Cindy’s voice was listened to by the principal to implement some policies including arrangement of parents meeting, training for bilingual teachers and the best is placement test for the upcoming students in the newest academic year.

School policy in something essential, it is also affected to the teachers’ competence, as Orosco & O’Conor (2013) explained Educators must be provided with assistance in generating opportunities to create the proper set of circumstances to efficiently foster translanguaging and biliteracy. “School policy may need to be developed to provide teachers with culturally responsive professional development.”

2. Collaboration with principal and other teachers

“The communication between me, the principal and other teachers is also getting stronger. So, we discussed everything for students’ learning progress and outcome.”

After working for three years as a bilingual teacher, Cindy felt that her relationship with the principal and other teachers is getting stronger. She often discussed everything for the bilingual program, including the students’ progress and outcome. The strengths and the weaknesses, what things need to be improved from the class. So, the school also finally provides more training for teachers, not only for bilingual teachers but also other regular class teachers.

“I always ask my colleagues to discuss students. I think peer sharing is very helpful, where I and my colleagues can talk and find any solution regarding the bilingual class.”

Another thing Cindy often does is discuss her problems in terms of bilingual class with other teachers who are teaching in her class or other bilingual classes. She mentioned that peer sharing is one of the best ways to find solutions in bilingual class programs.

Additionally, Thomas & Collier (2017) has explained that peer teaching plays a vital role in cognitive development across the curriculum by promoting problem solving and critical thinking. Team teaching requires cooperation and organization, but two brains are better than one when it comes to producing new teaching tactics and responding to student needs.

CONCLUSION

The study was to investigate teacher's experience, challenges, and strategies in teaching bilingual class for lower primary level. Through the literature review and data collection with interviews I have gained some insights of bilingual class programs. The finding showed that bilingual teachers still found some challenges that were classified as internal and external factors, and the teacher tried to apply strategies which were categorized into two types; internal and external motivation. Furthermore, it showed that bilingual teachers needed to be supervised intensively before joining the program. As a result, Bilingual Education has a great impact on students' learning progress if the collaboration between school, teacher and parents runs smoothly.

From the results of the study, bilingual classes can be considered as one of the good education systems. However, schools, teachers, and parents should have better collaboration in this system. In order to improve students' progress in bilingual class. Then for the next researcher, I suggest conducting more research in bilingual context, especially from the school's stakeholder perspective to gain further data about bilingual policy and how it should be implemented in the ideal way, especially in Indonesia.

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