

## The Role of Indonesian Language in English Language Learning: A Study of Pre-Service English Teachers

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### ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan peran Bahasa Indonesia dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris dan menguji relevansinya bagi calon guru Bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif yang melibatkan mahasiswa angkatan 2024 Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris yang terdaftar dalam mata kuliah Bahasa Indonesia di Universitas Negeri Makassar. Partisipan dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan observasi kelas, dan dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña, yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Bahasa Indonesia berfungsi sebagai alat bantu yang memfasilitasi pemahaman siswa tentang konsep tata bahasa, kosakata, dan konten pembelajaran, sekaligus mengurangi kecemasan yang terkait dengan penggunaan Bahasa Inggris. Lebih lanjut, penggunaan strategis Bahasa Indonesia mendukung manajemen kelas dan meningkatkan interaksi pembelajaran. Namun, ketergantungan yang berlebihan pada Bahasa Indonesia dapat membatasi paparan terhadap bahasa sasaran dan mendorong ketergantungan pada terjemahan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa penguasaan Bahasa Indonesia yang kuat merupakan kompetensi pendukung penting bagi calon guru Bahasa Inggris, yang memungkinkan mereka untuk merancang praktik pembelajaran yang lebih efektif dan sesuai konteks.

This study aims to describe the role of Indonesian in English language learning and examine its relevance for prospective English teachers. The research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design involving students of the 2024 cohort of the English Education Study Program who were enrolled in an Indonesian language course at Universitas Negeri Makassar. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that Indonesian serves as a scaffolding tool that facilitates students' understanding of grammatical concepts, vocabulary, and instructional content, while also reducing anxiety associated with the use of English. Furthermore, the strategic use of Indonesian supports classroom management and enhances learning interactions. However, excessive reliance on Indonesian may limit exposure to the target language and foster dependence on translation. The study concludes that a strong command of Indonesian constitutes an important supporting competence for prospective English teachers, enabling them to design more effective and contextually appropriate instructional practices



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## INTRODUCTION

English, as an international language, plays a highly strategic role in the contemporary era of globalization. In Indonesia, English has been taught from elementary school through higher education and has become one of the compulsory subjects in the national curriculum. Nevertheless, one issue that continues to generate debate among academics and educational practitioners concerns the extent to which the use of the first language—in the Indonesian context, Bahasa Indonesia—should be permitted or even encouraged in English language classrooms.

The use of Bahasa Indonesia in English language classrooms is not an unfamiliar phenomenon. Almost every English teacher or lecturer in Indonesia has encountered situations in which switching to Bahasa Indonesia becomes necessary to help students understand complex materials, provide clear instructions, or establish a closer emotional connection with learners. Such experiences often create a pedagogical dilemma. On the one hand, there is a widespread belief that an ideal English classroom should implement an English-only policy. On the other hand, classroom realities indicate that the use of Bahasa Indonesia is sometimes unavoidable and may even be beneficial in certain instructional contexts.

This issue becomes increasingly relevant for students enrolled in English Language Education programs who are preparing to become future English teachers. As prospective educators, they are expected not only to demonstrate active and productive English proficiency but also to understand effective teaching strategies, including appropriate language management in the classroom. Consequently, several important questions emerge: Does a strong command of Bahasa Indonesia constitute a weakness or a strength for prospective English teachers? Under what circumstances can the use of Bahasa Indonesia be pedagogically justified?

Numerous previous studies have attempted to address these questions from various perspectives. Cook (2001), through his concept of *multicompetence*, argues that bilingual speakers do not merely use two languages separately; rather, they possess a unique mental system in which both languages interact dynamically. This perspective challenges the traditional assumption that the use of the first language in foreign language classrooms is entirely detrimental. Similarly, Canagarajah (2011) contends that *translanguaging*—the flexible use of multiple linguistic resources—is a natural communicative practice that can be effectively utilized in language teaching contexts.

In contrast, Krashen (1982), through his Input Hypothesis, maintains that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners receive sufficient exposure to comprehensible target-language input ( $i + 1$ ). If the first language dominates classroom interaction, the quantity and quality of target-language input may decrease, potentially hindering language acquisition. This view is consistent with communicative language teaching principles, which emphasize that learners should be exposed to authentic and meaningful language use situations (Long, 2017).

Within the Indonesian context, several local studies have also explored this issue. Siddiq, Kustati, and Yustina (2020) found that English teachers in Indonesian EFL classrooms frequently employ code-mixing and code-switching to explain vocabulary and grammar, particularly when teaching students with lower levels of English proficiency. Likewise, Rasman (2018) reported that both students and English teachers hold diverse perspectives regarding the use of the first language in the classroom. Some regard it as a beneficial translanguaging practice, while others express concern that such a habit may weaken learners' English language competence.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this article aims to: (1) examine theoretically and empirically the roles and functions of Bahasa Indonesia in English language teaching and learning; (2) analyze the positive and negative impacts of using Bahasa Indonesia in English classrooms; (3) identify specific situations in which the use of Bahasa Indonesia can be pedagogically justified; and (4) formulate recommendations for prospective English teachers regarding the effective and proportional management of Bahasa Indonesia use in the classroom. It is expected that this article will provide practical contributions to the development of the pedagogical competence of prospective English teachers in Indonesia.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. This approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of English Language Education students' perceptions regarding the role of Bahasa Indonesia in the process of English language learning. The study was

conducted among students of the 2024 cohort of the English Language Education Study Program who were enrolled in the Bahasa Indonesia course at Universitas Negeri Makassar.

The participants consisted of English Language Education students from the 2024 cohort selected through purposive sampling. The participants were chosen based on the consideration that, as prospective English teachers, they had experience using both Bahasa Indonesia and English in academic settings and were therefore able to provide information relevant to the objectives of the study.

The research data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires were administered to gather students' perspectives on the functions, benefits, and impacts of using Bahasa Indonesia in English language learning. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain more comprehensive insights into students' experiences in using both Bahasa Indonesia and English during the learning process. In addition, classroom observations were carried out to obtain supporting data regarding the actual use of both languages in instructional activities.

The data collection process was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher developed the research instruments, including questionnaire and interview guidelines, based on predetermined indicators. Second, the questionnaires were distributed to the participants. Third, several participants were selected for in-depth interviews based on the variation of responses obtained from the questionnaires. Finally, the data gathered from the questionnaires, interviews, and observations were documented and transcribed for further analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, the researcher organized and categorized the data into themes related to the role of Bahasa Indonesia in English language learning. The data were then presented in the form of descriptive narratives and thematic tables to facilitate interpretation. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn based on recurring patterns and themes identified throughout the analysis process. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. This triangulation process contributed to ensuring the credibility and consistency of the research findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Functions and Roles of Bahasa Indonesia in English Language Classrooms

The literature review conducted in this study reveals that the use of Bahasa Indonesia in English language classrooms in Indonesia is a multifaceted phenomenon. In other words, Bahasa Indonesia does not merely serve as a "fallback language" when teachers encounter difficulties expressing ideas in English. Rather, in many cases, its use is guided by deliberate and well-planned pedagogical purposes. The findings from the analysis of various sources indicate that Bahasa Indonesia performs several important functions that support the teaching and learning process. At least five major functions of Bahasa Indonesia in English language classrooms were identified, as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Functions of Bahasa Indonesia Use in English Language Classrooms

No.	Function of Bahasa Indonesia Use	Classroom Situation Example	Recommended Use
1.	Explaining complex grammatical	The teacher explains the difference between the <i>past perfect</i> and <i>simple past</i> tenses using Bahasa Indonesia.	Use briefly and follow with examples in English.
2.	Providing instructional directions	Instructions for group activities or assignments are delivered in Bahasa Indonesia for beginner learners.	Gradually reduce its use as students' proficiency improves.

3.	Clarifying new vocabulary	Difficult words are translated into Bahasa Indonesia to facilitate reading comprehension.	Use only for critical vocabulary that cannot be easily inferred from context.
4.	Building rapport and learners' confidence	The teacher uses Bahasa Indonesia when students experience communication breakdowns or feel anxious about speaking.	Employ as an affective strategy rather than as a routine practice.
5.	Classroom management and discipline	Classroom rules or disciplinary reminders are communicated in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure understanding.	May be used when necessary; however, a target-language environment should still be maintained whenever possible.

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that each function of Bahasa Indonesia use in English language classrooms is associated with specific contexts and limitations that teachers should carefully consider. This finding is consistent with Atkinson's (1987) argument that the use of the first language in foreign language classrooms is acceptable provided that it is employed selectively, purposefully, and in a controlled manner. Conversely, unplanned and excessive use of the first language may be counterproductive to students' English language development.

Based on classroom observations conducted in English Language Education courses, lecturers were found to use Bahasa Indonesia primarily during the initial stages of explaining complex grammatical and linguistic concepts. For example, Bahasa Indonesia was often used to clarify distinctions between active and passive constructions across different tenses or to explain theoretical concepts in discourse analysis and pragmatics that require a deep level of conceptual understanding. Once students had grasped the underlying concepts, lecturers typically shifted back to English for practice activities, discussions, and further application of the material. This instructional pattern is commonly referred to in the literature as *sandwiching*, a technique in which explanations in the first language are embedded between segments of target-language use. Such an approach allows teachers to facilitate comprehension while maintaining substantial exposure to the target language throughout the learning process.

#### **Positive and Negative Impacts of Using Bahasa Indonesia in English Language Classrooms**

The use of Bahasa Indonesia in English language classrooms produces both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it can provide substantial benefits that facilitate the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, it may create challenges and hinder language development if not managed appropriately. The impact of Bahasa Indonesia use largely depends on the frequency, purpose, and context in which it is employed. When used strategically and in moderation, it can serve as an effective pedagogical tool; however, excessive reliance on it may reduce opportunities for meaningful exposure to and practice of the target language. Table 2 summarizes the positive and negative impacts of using Bahasa Indonesia in English language classrooms based on findings from the literature review.

Table 2. Positive and Negative Impacts of Using Bahasa Indonesia in English Language Classrooms

<b>Positive Impacts</b>	<b>Negative Impacts</b>
Facilitates learners' understanding of complex concepts, particularly at the beginner level.	Reduces exposure to the target language (English input).
Decreases students' language anxiety and increases their confidence in participating in classroom activities.	Encourages students' dependence on direct translation.
Speeds up the delivery of complex instructions, especially in large classes.	Hinders the development of communicative competence in authentic language-use situations.
Reinforces cultural identity and contextual relevance in English language teaching.	Reduces learners' motivation to think and communicate in English.

#### **Mastery of Bahasa Indonesia as a Competence of Prospective English Teachers**

One issue that is often overlooked in discussions of English teacher competence is the importance of a strong command of Bahasa Indonesia. Implicitly, there is a common assumption that a competent prospective English teacher is one who can speak and write English fluently, while proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia is considered either irrelevant or even potentially detrimental. This perspective, however, represents an oversimplification that warrants critical reconsideration.

The effective language teachers require not only linguistic competence in the target language but also pedagogical competence, contextual competence, and interactional awareness. Contextual competence encompasses teachers' understanding of their learners' cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds, including an awareness of how Bahasa Indonesia functions and how it interacts with English in the minds of Indonesian learners.

A strong command of Bahasa Indonesia enables prospective English teachers to provide accurate explanations of structural differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English. Such knowledge is particularly valuable in helping students avoid language errors resulting from linguistic interference. Common instances of Indonesian interference in English include the omission of sentence subjects (since Bahasa Indonesia does not always require explicit subjects), the use of double negation, and difficulties with English articles (*a*, *an*, and *the*), which have no direct equivalents in Bahasa Indonesia.

The author's experience in English language teaching methodology classes further confirms this point. When lecturers explained why Indonesian learners frequently make errors in the use of English tenses for example, omitting past tense forms because Bahasa Indonesia does not employ verb conjugation prospective teachers were able to understand the underlying causes of these difficulties and subsequently formulate more appropriate instructional strategies. Such comparative understanding is only possible when prospective teachers possess a solid command of Bahasa Indonesia and strong metalinguistic awareness; that is, the ability not only to use language but also to analyze and reflect upon it critically.

The effective language teachers are characterized by a high level of *language awareness*, which includes an understanding of how language operates from structural, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic perspectives. For English teachers in Indonesia, this language awareness should encompass a comprehensive understanding of Bahasa Indonesia as the learners' first language. Such understanding enables teachers to anticipate potential learning difficulties, identify sources of linguistic interference, and design instructional practices that are responsive to students' linguistic needs.

Therefore, mastery of Bahasa Indonesia should not be viewed as a competing competence that undermines English proficiency. Rather, it should be regarded as a complementary professional asset that strengthens prospective teachers' pedagogical effectiveness. By understanding both languages and the relationship between them, prospective English teachers are better equipped to facilitate learning, address students' difficulties, and create more meaningful and effective language learning experiences.

### **Recommendations for a Proportional and Reflective Use of Bahasa Indonesia in English Language Teaching**

Based on the literature review and the analysis of learning experiences discussed in the preceding sections, this article proposes a model for the use of Bahasa Indonesia that is proportional, contextual, and reflective for prospective English teachers. This model is founded on the principle that the use of Bahasa Indonesia should not be viewed as a binary issue of whether it is simply "allowed" or "not allowed." Rather, it should be regarded as a continuum of pedagogical choices that must be managed intelligently and responsively according to learners' needs.

First, prospective teachers should develop *self-reflection* regarding their language-use practices in the classroom. This involves consciously monitoring how frequently they use Bahasa Indonesia, for what purposes it is employed, and whether its use genuinely facilitates learning or inadvertently limits students' language development. Johnson and Golombek (2011) emphasize that reflective teachers continuously evaluate their instructional practices based on both empirical evidence and theoretical understanding. Through systematic reflection, teachers can make more informed decisions about when and how the first language should be incorporated into instruction.

Second, prospective teachers should possess a strong understanding of the concepts of *scaffolding* and the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* proposed by Vygotsky (1978). Such understanding enables them to determine when learners require first-language support as a bridge to comprehension and when they are ready to engage independently with the target language. The most effective use of

Bahasa Indonesia is temporary and gradually decreases as learners' proficiency increases, in accordance with the principle of progressive scaffolding.

Third, prospective teachers should develop alternative instructional strategies before resorting to Bahasa Indonesia. These strategies may include the use of visual aids, such as pictures, diagrams, and videos, to explain concepts; the use of gestures and facial expressions to clarify meaning; the simplification or paraphrasing of English expressions; and the provision of contextualized examples and analogies. Only when these strategies have been implemented and learners still encounter substantial difficulties should the use of Bahasa Indonesia be considered as a pedagogical option.

Fourth, prospective teachers should continuously enhance their English language competence, including both linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) and communicative competence (pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence). The higher a teacher's level of English proficiency, the less dependent they will be on Bahasa Indonesia as a communicative "fallback." At the same time, a strong command of Bahasa Indonesia should be regarded as a professional asset rather than a limitation, as it enables teachers to better understand the linguistic challenges faced by learners and to design more effective remedial and preventive instructional strategies.

By integrating these four components, prospective English teachers can develop teaching practices that are not only linguistically effective but also pedagogically responsive to the needs and characteristics of Indonesian bilingual learners. Such an approach promotes a balanced use of Bahasa Indonesia and English, maximizing learning opportunities while supporting students' gradual development toward greater proficiency and autonomy in the target language.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the use of Bahasa Indonesia in English language learning is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be simply categorized as either "good" or "bad" without considering the context in which it occurs. Bahasa Indonesia has the potential to serve significant pedagogical functions, including acting as a form of cognitive scaffolding, reducing language anxiety, facilitating concept clarification, and supporting classroom management. However, these benefits can only be realized when its use is selective, purposeful, and proportionate.

For prospective English teachers, a strong command of Bahasa Indonesia should not be viewed as an obstacle but rather as a valuable complementary competence. A thorough understanding of the structure and functioning of Bahasa Indonesia enables prospective teachers to become more aware of the sources of linguistic interference experienced by learners. Consequently, they are better positioned to design instructional strategies that effectively address students' learning difficulties and linguistic needs. Nevertheless, proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia must always be accompanied by the continuous development of English language competence. This balance ensures that the use of Bahasa Indonesia in the classroom remains a strategic pedagogical choice rather than a substitute resulting from limited English proficiency on the part of the teacher.

This study recommends that English Language Education programs in Indonesian higher education institutions integrate discussions of classroom language management, including the pedagogical use of the first language, into courses on language teaching methodology and microteaching. Furthermore, prospective teachers should be encouraged to cultivate reflective teaching practices by critically examining their language-use habits in the classroom. Through continuous reflection, evaluation, and evidence-based decision-making, they can progressively enhance the effectiveness of their language teaching practices and better respond to the needs of Indonesian learners in bilingual educational contexts.

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