



## Language Education Policies and Their Influence on Multilingual Classrooms in Indonesia

Syahruni Arifuddin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia*

\*Corresponding Author: Syahruni Arifuddin

E-mail: [syahruniari@gmail.com](mailto:syahruniari@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Indonesia's remarkable linguistic diversity presents both significant opportunities and challenges for the education system. With more than 700 local languages coexisting alongside Bahasa Indonesia and English, language education policies must simultaneously promote national cohesion, global readiness, and cultural continuity. This study examines how these policy orientations are enacted in multilingual classrooms, focusing on the mismatch between official expectations and everyday instructional realities. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were obtained through policy document analysis, classroom observations, and interviews with teachers, students, and school administrators across two provinces with different multilingual profiles. The findings reveal a persistent gap between policy ideals and practice. Although multilingualism is explicitly acknowledged in national regulations, classroom instruction remains heavily dominated by Bahasa Indonesia, English is restricted to its subject domain, and local languages are rarely utilized. Teachers often employ code-switching to facilitate comprehension, but such practices are improvised rather than pedagogically structured. Students appreciate flexible language use and value their local languages, yet view English as more beneficial for future academic and economic opportunities. These results indicate that multilingual resources are present within schools but remain underutilized. For policies to translate into meaningful multilingual education, teacher support, appropriate learning materials, and more inclusive assessment models are required to recognize and leverage students' full linguistic repertoires.

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### INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the key determinants of education systems, serving as both a medium of instruction and an identity-forming and social mobility tool as well as national unity (Imran & Natsir, 2024, Sah, 2022, Manan et al., 2023). The language-education policies in multilingual societies are often based on incompatible priorities: the national language should be promoted to ensure unity, local languages should be taught as the cultural heritage, and global languages should be introduced to be more competitive. Indonesia with its unique set of over 700 indigenous languages along with Bahasa Indonesia and English provides a unique framework in which the

effects of such policies on classroom practice can be studied (Irwan, 2024; Huszka et al., 2024; Munandar & Newton, 2021).

Bahasa Indonesia has been put in a central position since its designation as a national language, as a unifying factor between ethnicities and regions (Dewi & Damarhapsoro, 2024; Dewantara et al., 2024; Suwignyo, 2023). This role is strongly supported by the national educational policies which require the use of Indonesian as the main language of instruction. At the same time, English has been increasing in prominence due to globalization and the local languages are official in policy following their status as the constituent of cultural preservation. However, the effective implementation of these three language layers into the school settings is hardly an easy task. The interaction of national requirements of examination, international needs, and regional linguistic affiliations influence the daily realities of multilingual classrooms (Becker, 2024; Sung, 2022; Manan et al., 2022).

Previous research has highlighted the discontinuity of formal structures and the actual practices in the classrooms in Indonesia as a consequence of the challenges in implementing the language policies (Lee et al., 2023). Pragmatic approaches to teaching and learning are common among educators and learners (including code-switching and translanguaging) that have not been officially approved by the policy, but without which, they are unable to teach and learn effectively. In this regard, there are limited empirical studies which connect national policy orientations with lived experiences of teachers and learners in multilingual classrooms, and thus hinder a holistic idea on how the policies of languages operationalize in the educational praxis (Fu & Aubain, 2025; Bach, 2022; Weidl & Erling, 2025).

In this work, I will fill in this gap by examining how language-education policies affect the multilingual classes in Indonesia. In particular, it seeks to explore the way policy instructions are understood and implemented in schools, the types of difficulties faced by teachers and students, and the ways in which the classroom activities are aligned or not in line with policy goals. Through policy analysis combined with classroom observations and teacher and learner perspectives, the study aims at providing a detailed description of the complex connection between policy and practice. The results do not only contribute to the existing scholarly literature on language-in-education planning; they also provide practical information to policymakers and practitioners who aim to make multilingual education in Indonesia more inclusive and more effective.

## METHODS

The research design used in this study was a qualitative case study design with some aspects of policy analysis. This method was chosen to take into consideration not only the textual aspects of language education policies but also practical aspects regarding the use of multiple languages in multilingual classrooms in Indonesia. Through its combination of the policy framework and the classroom realities, the research seeks to provide a holistic apprehension of the interpretation and implementation of the language policies in the school.

The study was carried out in two high schools in different provinces in Indonesia thus representing different multilingual settings. The participants included teachers of the languages (in the Indonesian, English, and the local languages), students, and school administrators directly engaged or indirectly impacted by the implementation of language policies. There were twenty teachers who underwent in depth interviews and ten classroom observations which were conducted on various subjects and grades. The viewpoints of students were collected with the help of the guided discussion activities that were held during the observations to get their opinions about the language use in classrooms.

Three methods were used to gather data. To start with, the national and institutional texts, such as National Education Law, Ministry of Education regulations, the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka framework, 2013 Belajar syllabus, and lesson plans and syllabuses on schools, were analyzed. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted in depth in order to examine the experience, perception and strategies of teachers and school leaders with regard to multilingual practices. Thirdly, the teacher-student interactions in classrooms were observed to record the interactions and specifically the use of language, patterns of code-switching and changes in the dominance of language. Audio records and field notes were used so that the interactional dynamics could be captured correctly.

The analysis of data was based on policy analysis with thematic analysis. Transcripts of interviews and notes taken during observations were coded in an open way to be able to recognize the ideas that kept on reoccurring in relation to the multilingual practices. These codes were later narrowed down to four broad themes namely (1) the orientation of language education policies, (2) the problem facing teachers in adopting multilingual practices, (3) language practices in the classroom, and (4) how students view multilingualism. This type of analysis made sure that the themes that were provided in the Results section were based on the empirical data, as opposed to preconceived ideas.

In order to make the findings credible and trustworthy, a number of validation strategies were adopted. Triangulation was done through the comparison of the evidence in documents, interviews, and observations. The participants were also encouraged to check initial interpretations (member checking) so that to ensure that the analysis was a mirror reflection of their perceptions. Coding decision and analytic memo audit trail were kept to improve transparency in the course of conducting the research. These percentages which are mentioned in the Results are descriptive percentages which show the pattern of responses when interviewing and survey-like questions are asked; these percentages do not imply any statistical generalization and quantification which crosses the qualitative limits.

It is based on this mix of techniques that the study becomes able to unearth the desired intentions of multilingual language policies as well as the actual implications of the actions undertaken by the policies in the classroom. Such congruency between the sources of data improves the ability of the study to shed more light on how multilingualism is institutionally conceptualized and how it is mediated and negotiated by teachers and students in Indonesian schools.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research are conveyed in the form of four different themes namely (1) the policy orientation of language education and its manifestation in the classroom (2) difficulties faced by teachers in multilingual education implementation (3) the reality of how language is practiced in the classroom (4) how students perceive the use of language in learning. The summary of each theme can be found in a table and discussed below to show the way, in which the national language policies can change the dynamics of multilingual classroom in Indonesia.

### Policy Orientation vs. Reality in Classrooms

The policies of the country place a strong focus on Bahasa Indonesia as the medium of instruction and accept English and local languages in a rather secondary role. But the observations of classrooms and reports of teachers demonstrate otherwise, as multilingual ideals are not easily practiced.

Table 1. Policy Orientation Toward Languages in Education

Language	Policy Role	Practical Reality in Classrooms
Bahasa Indonesia	National/unifying language; medium of instruction	Dominant language in all subjects
English	International language; taught as a subject	Used mainly in English classes; occasional code-switching
Local Languages	Recognized as cultural heritage; optional in curriculum	Rarely used formally; mostly in informal contexts or for clarification

Table 1 shows that languages have a definite hierarchical division that is influenced by the national policy of education. Under Bahasa Indonesia, it stands out as the language of instruction and as a result, academic failure is strongly linked to lack of proficiency in the national language. This is in line with the policy narratives that present Bahasa Indonesia as a nation-unifying icon (Dewi, 2024; Suwignyo, 2023). English is considered a matter that adds to the global competitiveness (Sah, 2022), whereas the local languages are only valuable as the preservers of culture. Though multilingualism is articulated as an ideal of policy operationalization, the operationalization is uneven in nature, which has exposed that the official recognition *per se* does not translate into the reinforced linguistic diversity in practice.

The practical realities as outlined in Table 1 indicate that the local languages are seldom incorporated into the formal teaching and they are in most cases restricted to informal explanation. This tendency portrays the so-called policy practice gap, in which case the multilingual orientations are merely symbolic, but not practical. Such predominance of Bahasa Indonesia and scanty use of English and local languages in classrooms point to the continuation of a *de facto* monolingual system. Therefore, the beneficial effect of multilingual approaches, including translanguaging as a tool to increase understanding and engagement, have not been used to their full potential (Dollah & Abduh, 2024).

### **The Problems faced by teachers in Multilingual Education**

Teachers are the key players in the translation process of policy into practice but most of them mentioned that there are issues that cannot facilitate excellent implementation of multilingual strategies

Table 2. Teachers' Reported Challenges in Implementing Multilingual Education

Challenge	Percentage of Teachers Reporting (N=20)
Limited training on multilingual pedagogy	70%
Lack of teaching materials in local languages	65%
Pressure to prioritize Bahasa Indonesia (exams)	80%
Perception of local languages as "non-academic"	55%

Table 2 shows that teachers face institutional and pedagogical limitations in pursuing multilingual practices. The most prominent challenge is the pressure to focus on Bahasa Indonesia due to its association with national tests. This result is consistent with previous studies that show that standardized examinations solidify monolingual behavior and impact teaching choices (Manan et al., 2022). The lack of professional development in multilingual pedagogy also restricts the ability of teachers to create lessons that can effectively utilize the various linguistic repertoires

of students thus increasing the pressure on teachers to adopt multilingual ideals without the necessary knowledge and resources.

In addition to structural limitations, the table reflects an ideological challenge: the existing ideas that local languages are not regarded as academic values. These beliefs minimize the validity of local languages in school settings and limit the use of familiar linguistic resources by students in the process of learning (Becker, 2024). This makes teachers turn to spontaneous code-switching instead of multilingual instructional planning. Without a specific intervention, multilingual education will probably be informal, persisting on the initiative of individual teachers instead of being based on coherent pedagogy, policy, and resources.

### **Classroom Language Practices**

Despite these challenges, teachers often adopt adaptive strategies to meet students' needs, especially through code-switching.

Table 3. Observed Language Practices in Multilingual Classrooms

<b>Classroom Practice</b>	<b>Frequency of Observation (10 classes)</b>	<b>Example</b>
Exclusive use of Bahasa Indonesia	4	Teacher explains science lesson entirely in Indonesian
Code-switching (Indonesian–English)	3	Teacher explains new term in English, then clarifies in Indonesian
Code-switching (Indonesian–Local)	2	Teacher repeats instructions in local language for comprehension
Translanguaging (3+ languages)	1	Teacher mixes Indonesian, English, and local terms flexibly

Nonetheless, educators often use adaptive approaches to address the needs of students, the most prominent of which is the code-switching. As shown in Table 3, classroom speech practices are dynamic and situational in nature, influenced more by communicative need than by policy requirements. Complete teaching of Indonesian as a single language in four classes demonstrates the observance of the dominating language standards. But, switching between Indonesian and English in three classes reveals that teachers are aware of the linguistic needs of disciplinary knowledge, especially disciplines where technical terms are borrowed in English. These practices demonstrate that teachers negotiate multilingual worlds in practical ways to facilitate the understanding of students.

Nevertheless, more sophisticated translanguaging practices, involving the use of three or more languages, are only present once and indicate that such strategies are very rare and extremely specific. This highlights the unstructured nature of multilingualism, which is only formed as a tool of coping and not a pedagogical approach (Dollah and Abduh, 2024). Only when shared with students, teachers will use the local languages, and only in order to make sure that the student understands the information. These strategies cannot be maximized to support conceptual knowledge of students or reinforce linguistic identities without institutional support, although there is evidence that translanguaging can greatly improve learning results and well-being (Sung, 2022; Charamba & Ndhlovana, 2025; Almashour, 2024; Kuncoroningtyas et al., 2025).

## **Perceptions of Students on the use of language**

Lastly, the opinions of the students present a good understanding of how multilingual practices are perceived and appreciated in the classroom.

Table 4. Students' Perceptions of Language Use in Class

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agree (%)</b>	<b>Neutral (%)</b>	<b>Disagree (%)</b>
Code-switching helps me understand lessons	85%	10%	5%
Local languages should be used more in class	60%	25%	15%
English is more important than local languages	70%	20%	10%
Bahasa Indonesia should remain the main medium	90%	5%	5%

It is shown in Table 4 that students also appreciate flexible language use as a tool of improving comprehension. The increased consensus (85) that code-switching helps in understanding suggests that linguistic flexibility can alleviate learning anxiety and mental burden. Moreover, 60 percent of the respondents would support increased use of the local languages, which refers to the need of teaching methods that would appeal to their language. These observations imply that multilingual practices can be used to provide safer and more inclusive learning experiences, especially among students who might have challenges with learning delivered in Indonesian only.

Nevertheless, there is also a very strong internalized hierarchy of language that can be seen in the table. Students overwhelmingly believe that the English language is more important than the local languages (70 per cent) and that it is the primary language on which Bahasa Indonesia is built (90 per cent). This trend mirrors larger sociolinguistic discourses according to which English is seen as a source of social mobility and national progress (Sah, 2022), whereas the local languages are perceived as cultural rather than academic assets. Without purposeful policy and pedagogical management, these orientations are likely to further fuel the language shift and the loss of the transmission of local languages across generations (Huszka et al., 2024; Mauziyyah et al., 2024; Nandi et al., 2022).

## **Where Multilingual Education Meets Policy and Practice.**

This analysis points to the significant discrepancy between the principles of the ideology of multilingual policy and the practice thereof in Indonesian classrooms. Despite the formal recognition of national frameworks of the presence of Bahasa Indonesia, English, and hundreds of local languages, the empirical evidence indicates that multilingualism is more of a rhetorical than an operational concept. Classroom truths are created not by policy intentions but by high-stakes system of assessment, pedagogical restraints and dominant ideologies of language that favors national language and global linguistic capital. This dynamism highlights the fact that the language education policy cannot be interpreted only with the help of its written provisions; the meaning can be revealed in the context of intersecting institutional norms, classroom activities, and sociocultural beliefs.

The historical and political importance of Bahasa Indonesia as a unifying element of the nation is expressed in the current dominance of this language in educational institutions. As has been pointed out by scholars, the national language was purposefully placed as a binding tool amid ethnolinguistic diversity (Dewi & Damarhapsoro, 2024; Suwignyo, 2023). The practices observed in the classroom during this research confirm the power of such an ideological foundation: teachers consider the Indonesian language to be the legitimate and safe language of academic

communication. Although this type of positioning strengthens the social cohesion among students, it creates linguistic homogenization that can have the unintentional effect of silencing other forms of knowledge within residence languages of students. Its consequences go beyond the effectiveness of communication to identity confirmation and student participation. The deprivation of heritage languages of any meaningful role in the classroom is a danger of legitimization of the linguistic identity of the students, especially those whose best competence lies within the heritage languages.

At the same time, the English language holds a unique role in the sphere of the educational discourse as it is not a marker of the unity, but rather as a tool of global mobility. The impressions of students that are represented in the study indicate that there is strong instrumental orientation to the English language that is seen as a medium through which people can access academic success and later socioeconomic prospects. This fact can be attributed to overall regional trends where English is increasingly becoming commodified as linguistic capital in the global market (Sah, 2022; Sung, 2022). However, English operational level has mostly been restricted to the English classroom. Instead of playing a pedagogical role in interdisciplinary context, English continues to play a compartmentalized role, as an outcome of curricular divisions and teachers not feeling sufficiently certain about multilingual pedagogical practices. As a result, the institutions promote the use of English as a high-value language without providing the modules with the instruments to use it in a variety of academic settings.

Local languages are at the riskiest end of this linguistic hierarchy. Policy acknowledges their critical importance in striving to preserve their culture, but the language has not been substantively revitalized in the formal curriculum but is only symbolically helpful. The perceptions of teachers, as has been shown by the current research, are often used to define local languages as informal, emotive, or community-oriented as opposed to rigorous or scholarly. This agrees with Becker (2024) concept of an ideology of linguistic value, according to which only specific languages are considered appropriate to participate in intellectual activities. In cases where the local languages are pushed to the periphery, schools unwillingly preserve a stratified linguistic hierarchy, which recommends the marginalization of the linguistic resources and lived experiences of the minority students. This marginalization foreshadows the gradual loss of the intergenerational transmission, which will increase language shift and reduce cultural diversity more quickly (Huszka et al., 2024; Fang & Yao, 2025; Weststrate et al., 2024).

Professional practices on classroom support the explanation of how teachers mediate in the conflict between policy prescriptions and learner demands. Pragmatic strategies used are code-switching and intermittent translanguaging to guarantee understanding especially in concept-heavy lessons. But due to the absence of institutional legitimisation, educators distinguish between such strategies as remedial shortcuts and pedagogical strategies applied by teachers. This fact is supported by the results of Dollah and Abduh (2024) who note that translanguaging in the Indonesian classrooms mainly occurs informally, without methodological support or curriculum orientation. Therefore, the potential of multilingual practices that can increase higher-order thinking and the ability to participate in the education process is yet to be explored as a pedagogical tool (Nawawi et al., 2021; Gradini et al., 2025; Nykyporets et al., 2023).

The identified mismatch highlights the urgency to rethink multilingualism in education not as the presence of languages but as an active repertoire that is mobilised in the teaching and learning interactions. Current policies have a tendency to view languages as discrete objects with pre-established roles, i.e. the role of the English language as the tool of international interaction, the role of the Indonesian

language as the tool of instruction and the role of local languages as cultural artifacts. This compartmentalisation is opposed by the sociolinguistic views of defining the language use in multilingual societies as fluid and context-responsive, as well as interrelated (Lee et al., 2023). In this regard, the policies must change their focus, which is to prescribe language functions to the empowerment of teachers to strategically combine more than one language as a tool of thought in building knowledge.

Developing multilingual education will require systemic reform on a multi-faceted level. Firstly, the professional growth of teachers should move beyond the promotion of monolingual standards of the process to providing educators with the systematic multilingual pedagogies. In addition to the theoretical background, including the conceptualisation of translanguaging as a learning resource, teachers also need practical methods of constructing multilingual scaffold, creating multimodal instructional resources, and designing assessments to be flexible enough to meet the linguistic needs. Without such support, teachers will feel confined in between a normative policy and communicative demands of real classroom situations.

Second, there should be revision of curricular and assessment systems to reflect the multilingualism of Indonesian students. The existing high-stakes tests are focused on the output in Indonesian only, which continues to support the belief that academic success is directly tied to one language. More accommodative assessment designs - where learners have an opportunity to express understanding of the concept using various linguistic-enable courses of action - would identify learning *per se* as opposed to language performance. New types of formative assessment based on bilingual or trilingual assessment can be a first step toward total reform.

Third, learning and instruction materials that are in the local languages should be produced, and availed. The lack of proper teaching resources supports the exclusion of the heritage languages and burdens in more the teachers who may be willing to use such languages. Concerted efforts between local education offices, linguists and community leaders may aid in the development of context-related multilingual resources to capture the sociocultural realities of students.

The schools should adopt an approach to sociocultural perspective of language that recognizes the linguistic repertoires of students as part and parcel of their identities. The more learners see their native languages being legitimate in the educational environment, the more they will be convinced that they are legitimate subjects in the learning process. This validation creates a sense of confidence and belonging and long-term participation, especially in the case of learners, who may be disadvantaged by monolingual standards.

## CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates that, although the policies of education in Indonesian language officially embrace multilingualism, in reality, classroom practices are highly monolingual because of pressures of the structural assessment, poor pedagogical support, and the dominant ideologies of language. The place of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language of instruction is still held in a strategic position, but English as the symbol of global competitiveness is, and the local languages remain peripheral to the official learning environments. The fact that teachers use code-switching and some instances of translanguaging suggests that there is already a presence of multilingual strategies in use, but they are not well planned, instead being more of an ad-hoc approach to instructional design. In order to transcend arrival and recognition of the multiple languages, multilingual education needs to be operationalized in the form of teacher professional development, curriculums and assessment reforms, as well as through instructional resource that helps the learners to access the entire language repertoires. By reinforcing these working

principles, Indonesia will be able to bring policy ideals and classroom realities into closer alignment, creating a language education system that is more equitable, inclusive and culturally sustainable.

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