



Negotiating Indonesian and English as Media of Instruction: Students' Preferences and Identity in Indonesian EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Bilingual instruction integrating Indonesian and English has become increasingly prominent in multilingual higher education contexts; however, students' preferences regarding instructional language use remain underexplored. This study investigated the preferences of Indonesian university students for using Indonesian, English, or both as the medium of instruction in English language classrooms and examined the factors influencing these preferences. Employing a mixed-method sequential explanatory design, data were collected through questionnaires administered to 23 English education students (N = 23), followed by semi-structured interviews with six participants (N = 6). The findings indicated that the students generally preferred bilingual instruction over monolingual approaches. Indonesian was perceived to support comprehension, attention, emotional comfort and classroom participation, while English was associated with academic competitiveness, professional opportunities, and global communication. The study further revealed that students' preferences were shaped by four interconnected dimensions: self-assurance, identity, glamour, and attentiveness. These findings demonstrated that the students negotiated Indonesian and English as complementary rather than competing linguistic resources within multilingual classroom interaction. The study highlights the importance of more inclusive, learner-centered, and context-sensitive bilingual instructional practices in multilingual higher education settings.

A. Introduction

Language of instruction plays a central role in shaping students' access to knowledge, classroom participation, academic achievement, and identity formation in multilingual societies. In Indonesia, Indonesian has historically functioned as the primary medium of instruction across educational levels, serving not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a means of strengthening national cohesion among students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Zein et al., 2020; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Rizky & Rohmana, 2025). Its use supports inclusivity because it minimizes linguistic barriers and enables students from different regions to engage more effectively in classroom interaction (Walker et al., 2019). However, rapid globalization, international academic mobility, and increasing labor market competition have significantly elevated the role of English in higher education. As a result, many Indonesian universities have gradually introduced English-medium instruction (EMI) to enhance students' international competitiveness and academic readiness in global contexts (Bowker, 2020; Santoso et al., 2024; Heriyawati et al., 2026).

Language of instruction has become one of the most contested issues in higher education worldwide. While universities increasingly adopt English-medium instruction (EMI) to enhance international competitiveness and global academic engagement, growing evidence suggests that its implementation does not always align with students' learning needs and linguistic realities, particularly in non-English-speaking countries (Bowker, 2020; Zein et al., 2020; Istikharoh & Utami, 2024). In Indonesia, this tension is becoming increasingly visible as universities expand EMI programs despite the continued dominance of Indonesian as the national language and primary medium of instruction. The growing coexistence of Indonesian and English in academic settings has created a complex linguistic landscape in which students are expected to navigate both local educational inclusivity and global academic demands (Umniyah et al., 2025; Suwendi et al., 2024). In this context, language of instruction is no longer merely a pedagogical choice but a strategic educational issue that shapes students' learning experiences, academic participation, and identity construction.

Despite its global value, the increasing adoption of EMI has generated important pedagogical tensions, particularly in multilingual classrooms where students possess diverse levels of English proficiency. While English is often associated with academic advancement, international communication, and modernization (Macaro et al., 2018;

Hidayat, 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024), its dominant use in classroom instruction may also create barriers to comprehension, participation, and interaction. Previous studies have shown that students frequently experience difficulties understanding abstract content delivered entirely in English, resulting in cognitive overload, classroom anxiety, and reduced participation (Deni & Fahriany, 2020; Almoayidi, 2018). These challenges become more significant in contexts where learners' linguistic readiness varies considerably, making English-only instruction less universally effective than often assumed (Kustati et al., 2020; Sulistiyo et al., 2020). Consequently, questions regarding the appropriateness of instructional language practices have become increasingly important in efforts to create more inclusive and effective English language learning environments.

In response to these concerns, bilingual instruction has gained increasing attention as an alternative approach that accommodates both global and local linguistic realities. Research has shown that the strategic use of learners' first language can support comprehension, reduce anxiety, and strengthen classroom engagement during second-language learning (Silviyanti et al., 2024; D. M. M. Sari & Prasetyo, 2021). Rather than functioning as an obstacle to English acquisition, Indonesian may serve as a cognitive and affective resource that enables learners to negotiate meaning more effectively. At the same time, studies have increasingly emphasized that students' responses toward instructional language are influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by emotional and identity-related factors. Preferences toward Indonesian and English are often shaped by perceptions of prestige, cultural affiliation, social mobility, and future aspirations (Mahmud et al., 2023; Alqarni et al., 2024). English, for example, is frequently associated with intelligence, professionalism, and global opportunity, while Indonesian remains closely connected to emotional expression, familiarity, and national identity.

Although previous research has provided important insights into EMI and bilingual instruction, much of the existing literature still tends to examine linguistic, cognitive, affective, and identity-related dimensions separately. Many studies focus primarily on institutional policy, teaching strategies, or measurable academic outcomes, while students themselves are often positioned merely as recipients of instructional decisions rather than active negotiators of classroom language practices (Liu, 2019). Wahyuni and Bee Tin (2024) further argue that learners' own perspectives regarding what facilitates or constrains their learning remain insufficiently explored, despite their

importance for achieving pedagogical alignment. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how students simultaneously negotiate comprehension, emotional comfort, participation, identity, and aspiration in bilingual instructional settings. This fragmented perspective risks producing instructional practices that fail to fully address students' actual classroom experiences and sociolinguistic realities (Mahmud et al., 2023).

This study addresses that gap by examining students' preferences regarding the use of Indonesian, English, or a combination of both as the medium of instruction in English language classrooms. Unlike studies that focus primarily on policy effectiveness or language outcomes, the present study centers students' lived experiences and perceptions of bilingual instruction. Specifically, it investigates how linguistic, emotional, and identity-related dimensions interact in shaping learners' instructional language preferences within multilingual classrooms. By integrating these dimensions simultaneously, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of bilingual classroom experiences and moves beyond fragmented discussions that isolate cognitive, affective, or symbolic aspects of language use from one another.

The study also contributes to broader discussions on English-Medium Instruction and multilingual education, particularly in Global South contexts where tensions between global English and local languages continue to shape educational practices. Rather than positioning Indonesian and English as competing alternatives, this research explores how students negotiate both languages as complementary resources within classroom interaction. In doing so, the study provides context-sensitive insights that may inform more inclusive, flexible, and learner-centered bilingual instructional practices in Indonesian higher education and other multilingual educational settings.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify students' preferences regarding the use of Indonesian, English, or bilingual instruction in English language classrooms. It also seeks to examine the linguistic, emotional, and identity-related factors influencing those preferences and to explore the pedagogical implications of student-informed bilingual practices for developing more inclusive and effective English language instruction.

B. Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a sequential explanatory design to investigate Indonesian university students' preferences regarding the use of Indonesian, English, or both as media of instruction in English language classrooms. In



this design, quantitative data were collected and analyzed first to identify general patterns of language preference, followed by qualitative interviews to explain and contextualize the initial findings (Morse, 2015). This approach was selected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' preferences by integrating numerical trends with in-depth accounts of their learning experiences (Strijker et al., 2020).

The participants were twenty-three students ($N = 23$) from the English Education Department of a university in Aceh, Indonesia. All participants were actively enrolled and had completed approximately four years of English language study, ensuring substantial experience with both English-medium and bilingual instructional practices. The questionnaire phase served an exploratory purpose and was not intended for broad statistical generalization. Based on variation in questionnaire responses, six students ($N = 6$) were purposively selected for follow-up interviews to represent differing preferences for Indonesian, English, and bilingual instruction. This maximum-variation strategy enhanced the depth and credibility of the qualitative findings.

Data were collected using two instruments: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire was adapted from Mbato and Kharismawan (2018) and consisted of twenty-three closed-ended items measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with no neutral option in order to encourage clearer attitudinal responses (Rdz-Navarro & Asu, 2015). Prior to administration, the instrument was reviewed by two experts in English language education to establish face and content validity. Minor contextual revisions were made without altering the original constructs. The internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire responses in this study was satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$). The interview guide, adapted from Magill et al. (2017), contained six open-ended questions exploring students' confidence, identity, perceptions of prestige, and preferences regarding instructional language use.

The questionnaire was distributed online through Google Forms and remained open for one week. After the quantitative data were analyzed, six participants were interviewed by phone for approximately thirty minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically through inductive coding and category development adapted from Stocco et al. (2017). The coding process was reviewed by a second researcher to strengthen credibility and ensure interpretive consistency.

This study adhered to research ethics principles. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Participants' identities were anonymized, and all digital records were securely stored and accessed only by the researchers.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study concerning students' preferences regarding the use of Indonesian, English, and bilingual instruction in English language classrooms. The results are organized based on the major patterns emerging from both quantitative and qualitative data, focusing on how students perceive instructional language in relation to comprehension, confidence, identity, classroom participation, and social meaning. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, questionnaire findings are integrated with interview excerpts that reflect students' lived experiences and personal perspectives. The discussion then interprets these findings in relation to previous studies, theoretical perspectives, and broader debates on bilingual instruction and English-Medium Instruction in multilingual educational contexts.

1. Results

The findings of this study indicate that students generally prefer bilingual instruction, with Indonesian and English serving different yet complementary roles in English language classrooms. Overall, students viewed English as important for academic development, professional opportunities, leadership, and global communication, while Indonesian remained highly valued for comprehension, emotional comfort, attentiveness, and classroom participation. Rather than positioning Indonesian and English as competing languages, students tended to negotiate the use of both languages depending on classroom situations, communicative purposes, and learning needs. The quantitative findings further reveal that students' instructional language preferences are closely related to four interconnected dimensions, namely self-assurance, identity, glamour, and attentiveness.

The questionnaire findings indicate that most participants favored bilingual instruction over monolingual approaches. Responses categorized as "agree" and "strongly agree" appeared more frequently in items supporting the combination of Indonesian and English than in items promoting English-only or Indonesian-only



instruction. Most students acknowledged that English plays an important role in improving future career opportunities, international communication, and academic competitiveness. At the same time, they also believed that Indonesian helps them understand difficult materials more effectively, follow classroom explanations more easily, and participate more confidently during discussions. These findings suggest that students do not perceive Indonesian as a barrier to English learning, but rather as a supportive linguistic resource that facilitates comprehension while still enabling them to develop English proficiency. Table 1 presents a summary of the major quantitative trends regarding students' instructional language preferences in English language classrooms.

Table 1. Students' preferences toward medium of instruction (N = 23)

Questionnaire Item	Mean	Agree/ Strongly Agree
English is important for future career opportunities	3.65	91.3%
English supports global communication and leadership	3.57	87.0%
Indonesian helps me understand difficult material	3.74	95.7%
Indonesian makes classroom explanations clearer	3.61	91.3%
Bilingual instruction supports classroom participation	3.52	87.0%
I feel more confident using Indonesian during discussions	3.48	82.6%
English-only instruction sometimes creates anxiety	3.35	78.3%
English reflects professionalism and prestige	3.30	78.3%
Bilingual instruction helps me stay focused in class	3.61	91.3%

As shown in Table 1, the highest levels of agreement were found for items related to the supportive role of Indonesian in learning, particularly in helping students understand difficult material (95.7%) and making classroom explanations clearer (91.3%). High levels of agreement were also observed for the importance of English in future career opportunities (91.3%) and global communication and leadership (87.0%). In addition, most participants agreed that bilingual instruction supports classroom participation (87.0%) and helps them stay focused during classroom activities (91.3%). These findings indicate that students recognize the value of both languages and tend to favor a balanced instructional approach rather than exclusive reliance on either Indonesian or English.

The quantitative findings indicate that students do not position Indonesian as an obstacle to English learning. Instead, Indonesian is perceived as a supportive linguistic resource that facilitates comprehension while still allowing students to improve their

English proficiency. These patterns suggest that students value balance rather than exclusivity in classroom language use.

The questionnaire findings also reveal noticeable differences in students' confidence levels when using Indonesian and English. A larger proportion of participants reported feeling more confident expressing opinions, asking questions, and responding spontaneously in Indonesian than in English. Although students acknowledged the importance of English, many still experienced hesitation and anxiety when communicating fully in English, particularly during interactive classroom situations. This pattern highlights the importance of emotional and psychological dimensions in shaping students' instructional language preferences.

The interview findings strongly support the quantitative trends regarding students' confidence and emotional comfort in language use. Across interviews, participants repeatedly described how bilingual instruction increased their self-assurance during classroom interaction. Several students explained that exclusive English instruction sometimes created anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and reluctance to participate.

A respondent shared the following:

"... when I speak English with someone who is more fluent than me, I sometimes feel afraid that they might laugh at my mistakes. However, I feel more confident speaking with friends who are still learning English like I am ..." (Interview with R5, November, 2023)

The same opinion was mentioned by R2:

"I feel more confident speaking English with my friends because I can mix it with Indonesian. However, I do not feel very confident speaking English in front of a large audience." (Interview with R2, November, 2023)

R4 also explained the same opinion:

"It depends on whom I speak English with. When I speak English with native speakers, I tend to feel shy and less confident because they can easily notice my mistakes. However, I feel more confident speaking English with my friends." (Interview with R4, November 20, 2023).

These responses indicate that students' preference for Indonesian is not necessarily caused by rejection of English, but rather by the need for emotional security during learning activities. Indonesian functions as a supportive medium that reduces communication pressure and enables students to participate more actively during classroom interaction. Interestingly, several participants also explained that confidence in English depended on classroom context. Students reported feeling more

comfortable using English for prepared presentations or reading activities, but less confident during spontaneous discussions or argumentative interactions. This suggests that self-assurance in language learning is situational and closely related to perceived communicative risk.

The findings also demonstrate that instructional language preference is closely connected to students' sense of identity and self-expression. Questionnaire responses reveal that students associate English and Indonesian with different symbolic and social meanings. English was frequently linked with intelligence, prestige, professionalism, and modernity, whereas Indonesian was more commonly associated with authenticity, familiarity, emotional expression, and cultural identity.

To clarify these symbolic perceptions, Table 2 summarizes the dominant dimensions influencing students' instructional language preferences.

Table 2. Major dimensions influencing students' instructional language preferences

Dimension	Dominant Tendency Identified
Self-assurance	Students feel more confident when Indonesian is allowed during classroom interaction
Identity	Indonesian reflects cultural belonging, while English reflects academic and global identity
Glamour	English is associated with prestige, professionalism, and social recognition
Attentiveness	Bilingual instruction improves concentration, comprehension, and classroom engagement

As shown in Table 2, students' instructional language preferences are influenced by four interrelated dimensions: self-assurance, identity, glamour, and attentiveness. While Indonesian is valued for confidence and cultural belonging, English is associated with prestige and global orientation. Bilingual instruction, however, appears to accommodate both dimensions simultaneously. The interview findings reinforce these quantitative patterns. One participant (R1) stated: "... I can express and represent my identity through both English and Indonesian." (Interview with R1, November 16, 2023).

R5 similarly reflected:

"As a student in this department, speaking English can certainly represent part of my identity. Sometimes, when people hear me speaking English on campus, they immediately assume that I am a student from this department, even though my English is still not perfect. However, that does not mean I am not proud of the Indonesian language. I was born and raised in Indonesia, and Indonesian is my first language, so it also represents who I am." (Interview with R5, November, 2023).

R6 also similarly believed:

"If you ask me which language represents my identity as an English student, I would say English. However, it would be different if you asked me as an Indonesian citizen." (Interview with R6, November, 2023).

On the other hand, R3 claimed that Indonesian language could represent her identity.

"Actually, Indonesian represents my identity because it is my mother tongue and my first language. Besides that, I am also an Indonesian citizen, so Indonesian is the language that truly reflects who I am." (Interview with R3, November 20, 2023).

These responses illustrate that students do not view language merely as a communication tool, but also as part of their personal and cultural identity. Indonesian provides emotional familiarity and allows students to express nuanced ideas more comfortably. At the same time, students did not reject English identity entirely. Instead, they appeared to negotiate between local identity and global aspiration, reflecting a hybrid linguistic orientation within multilingual classrooms.

Another important dimension emerging from both quantitative and qualitative findings is the perception of English as glamorous, prestigious, and socially valuable. Questionnaire responses indicated that many students associated English proficiency with intelligence, professionalism, and social recognition. English was frequently viewed as a symbol of educational achievement and modern identity.

Interview data further reinforce this perception. R1 explained:

"Honestly, yes. I feel more intelligent when using English in daily activities. Speaking English also makes me feel more prestigious because not everyone can understand what I am saying. Only certain people are able to understand me." (Interview with R1, November 16, 2023).

Similarly, R2 stated:

"I also feel more confident and prestigious when speaking English because it is an international language used by many people around the world. Being able to understand and speak English makes me feel proud since it allows me to communicate with people from different countries." (Interview with R2, November, 2023).

Another participant (R3) commented:

"...I am an Indonesian citizen who truly loves my country. I feel happy when speaking Bahasa Indonesia. As part of the younger generation, I believe we should continue preserving the Indonesian language so that it will not disappear in the future ..." (Interview with R3, November 20, 2023).

R4 also mentioned:

"Yes, definitely. Speaking Indonesian gives me a sense of pride because it is my national language, and I believe I should appreciate and value the language of my own country." (Interview with R4, November 20, 2023).

These findings suggest that English carries symbolic capital beyond its communicative function. For several participants, English represented ambition, future mobility, and social recognition. However, despite these positive perceptions, students still preferred bilingual instruction because exclusive English use could reduce comprehension and classroom engagement. The final factor emerging from the findings is attentiveness, particularly in relation to students' concentration, focus, and ability to follow classroom explanations. Many participants explained that bilingual instruction helped them maintain attention during lectures, especially when discussing difficult or abstract concepts.

One participant commented:

"As an Indonesian, I have learned Indonesian since childhood. I believe I need to study English more intensively than Indonesian because English can help me communicate and connect with people from different countries." (Interview with R1, November 16, 2023).

Another participant shared:

"I prefer to study English intensively because I want to deepen my knowledge in English. I have neighbor lived in an English speaking environment. In addition, English is not my mother tongue. So, it is difficult for me to speak English well if I do not study it intensively ..." (Interview with R6, November 25, 2023).

These responses indicate that attentiveness is strongly influenced by linguistic accessibility. Students reported that exclusive English instruction occasionally caused cognitive overload, especially when unfamiliar vocabulary or complex academic explanations were involved. In contrast, the use of Indonesian enabled students to regain focus and process information more effectively.

The questionnaire findings support this pattern, as many participants agreed that bilingual instruction improves comprehension and helps them remain engaged during lessons. This demonstrates that attentiveness is not solely related to motivation, but also to the linguistic clarity of instructional delivery.

Across both quantitative and qualitative findings, a consistent pattern emerges: students prefer bilingual instruction because it allows them to balance aspiration with accessibility. English is valued for its global, academic, and professional importance, while

Indonesian continues to play an essential role in comprehension, confidence, attentiveness, and identity expression. The integration of questionnaire and interview findings strengthens the credibility of the results, as quantitative patterns are consistently supported by students' lived experiences and personal narratives.

2. Discussion

This study examined students' preferences regarding the use of Indonesian and English as media of instruction in English language classrooms and explored the factors shaping those preferences. The findings show that most students favor bilingual instruction rather than relying exclusively on either Indonesian or English. Indonesian was generally preferred for comprehension, interaction, and emotional comfort, while English was valued for its academic, professional, and symbolic importance. Importantly, students did not position the two languages as competing alternatives. Instead, they viewed Indonesian and English as serving different but complementary functions within classroom learning. Both the questionnaire and interview findings consistently demonstrate that students negotiate language choice according to classroom needs, confidence levels, and communicative goals.

These findings suggest that students' instructional language preferences are shaped not only by linguistic ability but also by pragmatic, emotional, and symbolic considerations. Students recognized the importance of English for leadership, employability, international communication, and future mobility, which supports findings from previous studies emphasizing the instrumental value of English in higher education contexts (Hoerudin, 2023; Mbato & Kharismawan, 2018; Ortega, 2019; Rido, 2020). At the same time, students consistently relied on Indonesian to maintain comprehension, emotional security, and interactional ease, especially when discussing complex material or participating in peer communication (Tanjung, 2018; Wahyuningsih & Erzad, 2023). Rather than reflecting resistance toward English, this reliance on Indonesian appears to represent an adaptive classroom strategy that allows students to remain engaged while still benefiting from English exposure. In this sense, bilingualism functions less as a compromise and more as a practical response to multilingual learning realities.

The findings also point to the importance of understanding language choice as socially and emotionally situated rather than purely instructional. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Indonesian functioned not only as a cognitive scaffold supporting comprehension and participation (S. N. Sari & Aminatun, 2021; Rabbianty et al., 2025),

but also as a language closely connected to emotional expression and national identity (Fossati, 2021; Mulyanah & Krisnawati, 2022). English, meanwhile, was associated with prestige, modernity, and symbolic capital, reflecting broader global discourses that position English proficiency as a marker of intelligence, advancement, and social status (Osborne, 2018; Dewaele, 2018; Haidar, 2019).

However, the findings of this study indicate that these symbolic meanings are not fixed or stable. Students moved dynamically between Indonesian and English depending on the situation, suggesting that language use in multilingual classrooms involves continuous negotiation between local identity and global aspiration (Nursanti & Andriyanti, 2021; Osborne, 2018). This extends existing sociolinguistic and language ideology frameworks by showing that cognitive, affective, and symbolic dimensions of language are deeply interconnected in actual classroom interaction rather than operating as separate domains (Ortega, 2019; Gao & Zheng, 2024).

The study's contribution becomes particularly visible in its identification of four interrelated factors shaping students' instructional language preferences: self-assurance, identity, glamour, and attentiveness. Previous studies on bilingual instruction and English-medium instruction often focus primarily on proficiency, policy effectiveness, or academic outcomes (Macaro et al., 2018; Alqarni et al., 2024). Although affective and identity-related issues have been discussed separately in earlier research (Dewaele, 2018; Nursanti & Andriyanti, 2021), they are rarely conceptualized together as interacting dimensions that simultaneously shape learners' classroom experiences.

In this study, self-assurance refers to students' confidence and emotional readiness when participating in classroom communication, while identity reflects the role of language in expressing belonging, cultural attachment, and self-representation. Glamour captures students' perceptions of English as prestigious, modern, and socially valuable (Haidar, 2019; Alrajafi, 2021), whereas attentiveness relates to students' ability to remain focused, engaged, and cognitively connected to classroom material. These factors are not isolated from one another. Instead, the findings show that they frequently overlap and sometimes conflict during classroom interaction. For example, students may value the prestige associated with English while still depending on Indonesian to maintain attentiveness and confidence during learning activities.

This interaction between the four factors represents an important conceptual contribution because it shifts the discussion away from viewing bilingual instruction

simply as a pedagogical tool for comprehension. Instead, bilingual instruction emerges as a multidimensional social and emotional process through which students negotiate aspiration, participation, identity, and learning effectiveness simultaneously (Ngo, 2024; Walker et al., 2019). In this regard, the study challenges simplified assumptions often found in English-medium instruction discourse, where English is implicitly treated as universally beneficial regardless of local classroom realities (Kedzierski, 2016; Macaro et al., 2018). The findings instead suggest that the effectiveness of instructional language depends heavily on how students emotionally and socially experience language use in multilingual educational settings.

Theoretically, the findings contribute to bilingual education and EMI scholarship by reinforcing the idea that language choice involves cognitive, affective, ideological, and interactional processes operating together (Ortega, 2019; Gao & Zheng, 2024). The study therefore supports calls for more flexible models of English-medium instruction that move beyond monolingual assumptions and recognize the coexistence of local and global linguistic resources within multilingual classrooms (Ngo, 2024; Galloway et al., 2020). Rather than framing local languages as obstacles to English acquisition, the findings suggest that strategic bilingual practices may actually support participation, confidence, and sustained engagement in English learning environments (Almoayidi, 2018; Walker et al., 2019). This perspective encourages a reconsideration of instructional language frameworks that are often shaped by idealized monolingual standards rather than by learners' actual experiences.

Practically, the findings indicate that rigid English-only approaches may unintentionally reduce students' classroom participation, confidence, and comprehension. Allowing strategic use of Indonesian alongside English appears to help students remain attentive and actively involved without necessarily reducing exposure to English itself. This supports earlier arguments that bilingual practices can strengthen learning outcomes when they are aligned with learners' sociolinguistic realities rather than imposed through uniform language policies (Alrajafi, 2021; Nursanti & Andriyanti, 2021). More broadly, the findings suggest that instructional language practices should be designed with greater sensitivity toward students' emotional readiness, interactional comfort, and classroom engagement.

Beyond the Indonesian context, this study also contributes to wider international discussions concerning English-Medium Instruction and multilingual education. Much



global EMI discourse continues to associate English-dominant instruction with educational quality, modernization, and internationalization (Akıncioğlu, 2023; Kedzierski, 2016). However, the findings from this study demonstrate that multilingual learners may experience English simultaneously as opportunity and constraint (Khatri, 2024; Rosmayanti, 2025). While English symbolizes aspiration and global mobility, exclusive English use may also create anxiety, communicative distance, and reduced participation when learners' local linguistic resources are marginalized (Rosmayanti, 2025; Umniyah et al., 2025; Kedzierski, 2016).

By showing how Indonesian and English can coexist productively within classroom interaction, this study provides evidence that multilingual instructional practices do not necessarily weaken English development (Gao & Zheng, 2023; Ngo, 2024). Instead, they may create more inclusive educational environments that better support participation, attentiveness, and comprehension (Galloway et al., 2020). In this regard, the findings also resonate with broader global efforts reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4, particularly the need to promote inclusive, equitable, and learner-centered educational practices within multilingual higher education contexts (Khatri, 2024; Sibawaihi et al., 2025).

Although derived from an Indonesian setting, the findings highlight a challenge that has become increasingly visible across multilingual higher education systems worldwide, namely how to reconcile the global prominence of English with the pedagogical, social, and cultural functions of local languages. This issue has gained growing attention as universities continue to expand English-medium instruction in response to internationalization agendas, while simultaneously serving student populations with diverse linguistic backgrounds and learning needs (Macaro et al., 2018; Galloway et al., 2020). The experiences reported by students in this study suggest that effective instructional language practices may depend less on the exclusive use of English and more on the ability to mobilize multiple linguistic resources to support comprehension, participation, and engagement. In this regard, the findings align with emerging research that emphasizes multilingual and translanguaging-oriented approaches as more responsive to the realities of linguistically diverse classrooms (Ngo, 2024; Gao & Zheng, 2024).

Beyond the Indonesian context, the findings suggest that the relationship between English and local languages should not be understood solely in terms of competition or replacement. Instead, students' preferences indicate that different languages may perform

complementary functions within the learning process, allowing learners to access academic content while simultaneously maintaining confidence, participation, and a sense of identity (Muhria et al., 2025; Ngo, 2024). Such insights are particularly relevant for multilingual educational settings where efforts to strengthen global competitiveness through English must also address questions of educational access, inclusion, and meaningful participation (Ortega, 2019). By demonstrating how bilingual instructional practices can support both academic engagement and linguistic inclusivity, the study offers evidence that educational quality and internationalization need not be treated as competing goals but can be pursued in mutually reinforcing ways within multilingual higher education environments.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample drawn from a single academic department limits the extent to which the results can be generalized to broader institutional or national contexts. In addition, the study relied primarily on self-reported perceptions gathered through questionnaires and interviews rather than direct classroom observation. As a result, the findings reflect students' reported experiences and interpretations rather than observable interactional behavior during instruction. Future research could expand this work by involving larger and more diverse participant groups, incorporating classroom observation, and employing longitudinal approaches to examine how students' language preferences and experiences develop over time. Such directions would help deepen understanding of how multilingual instructional practices operate across different educational contexts and learning environments.

D. Conclusion

This study examined students' preferences regarding the use of Indonesian and English as media of instruction in an Indonesian EFL context and explored the factors shaping those preferences. The findings demonstrate that students generally favor bilingual instruction rather than relying exclusively on either Indonesian or English. For these learners, bilingual instruction is not perceived as a transitional stage toward English-only classrooms, but rather as a context-sensitive instructional practice that simultaneously supports comprehension, emotional comfort, classroom participation, attentiveness, and identity expression. The study further reveals that students' instructional language preferences are shaped by four interconnected dimensions that is self-assurance, identity, glamour, and attentiveness which together illustrate that



language choice in multilingual classrooms is influenced not only by academic considerations, but also by emotional, social, and symbolic experiences.

The study contributes to bilingual education and English-Medium Instruction scholarship by offering a more integrated understanding of instructional language practices from the learners' perspective. Rather than viewing bilingual instruction as evidence of limited English proficiency, the findings position it as an adaptive pedagogical resource that helps students balance global aspirations with local linguistic and emotional needs. By identifying self-assurance, identity, glamour, and attentiveness as interconnected dimensions shaping classroom experiences, this study extends previous research that often separates cognitive, affective, and symbolic aspects of language use.

Practically, the findings suggest that rigid English-only approaches may unintentionally reduce students' confidence, attentiveness, and classroom participation in multilingual learning environments. In contrast, strategic bilingual practices appear to support more inclusive and learner-centered engagement while still maintaining opportunities for English development. Beyond the Indonesian context, the study also contributes to wider international discussions on multilingual education and EMI by demonstrating that the coexistence of local languages and English can function as a productive instructional strategy aligned with broader efforts toward inclusive and equitable quality education reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education).

Given the study's relatively small sample size and focus on a single institutional setting, future research should involve more diverse participant groups across different educational institutions and regions to provide broader comparative perspectives on bilingual instructional practices. Further studies may also incorporate classroom observation and longitudinal approaches to examine how students' language preferences, participation patterns, and emotional experiences evolve over time in multilingual learning environments. In addition, investigating teachers' instructional strategies and institutional language policies may provide deeper insight into how bilingual classroom dynamics are negotiated and implemented across different educational contexts.

Ultimately, this study highlights that bilingual instruction should not be understood as a compromise between local language use and English learning, but as a learner-centered pedagogical practice that supports both educational effectiveness and identity affirmation within multilingual societies.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used *Grammarly* to improve the clarity and readability of the text. All outputs generated by the tool were carefully reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this article.

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