

BILINGUAL EDUCATION: IS IT WORTH THE WHILE?

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Abstract: Responding to the era of globalization, national education system in Indonesia has implemented bilingual program based on the Act no 20 year 2003 about the System of National Education which states that the government establishes at least one school in all level of education to be developed into an international standard school. However, the implementation of this bilingual program through international standard schools brings about some challenges and controversies. This paper attempts to discuss about what bilingual education is, the reason why bilingual education is important, application of bilingual education in some parts of the world, and finally the implementation of bilingual education in Indonesia.

Keywords: bilingual education, international standard schools

INTRODUCTION

"Ok class, today we will review about 'How to remind a note'".

This is a sentence produced by an art teacher in one of popular International Standard Schools in Malang. My friends and I were observing a bilingual art class at fourth grade when we heard that sentence. We got confused at that time, but finally I learned that what the teacher meant was the ways to remember notes easily. This is probably the most common phenomenon happens at schools which claim themselves as international standard schools with bilingual classes.

An international standard school (SBI) is a national school which runs the education based on the national standard of education and international qualities and which enables the students to have both national and international qualities. Nationally standard quality is measured by national standard of education while internationally standard quality is measured by some international criteria through benchmarking. Directorate General of Higher Education (2008) states that an international standard school is equivalent to ISS + X, where ISS is a school that meets all standards of national education while X refers to educational standards from at least one country which belongs to an Organization for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD) and/or from other developed countries with certain advantages in the educational field. X here involves four things: (a) reinforcement, enrichment, expansion, and/or addition to national standard of education; (b) ICT (information communication technology); (c) foreign language mastery; and (d) cross cultural understanding.

Point (c) shows us about foreign language mastery. Hence, the implementation of SBI is closely related to the use of foreign language, which is English, as a medium of instruction. By using L2 as the medium of instruction in the classroom, it can be said that SBI involves the implementation of bilingual education.

Bilingual education is not a new thing. It has been implemented by many countries with different reasons. This article will review the implementation of bilingual program in some places like America, Europe, Southeast Asia, and especially Indonesia.

What Is Bilingual Education?

Bilingual education is defined as "any system of school education in which, at a given moment in time and for a varying amount of time, simultaneously or consecutively, instruction is planned and

given in at least two languages" (Appel, 1987). From this definition, most programs of bilingual education suit into one of these categories:

- a. Instruction is given in both languages simultaneously;
- b. Instruction is given first in L1 and the pupil is taught until such time when he is able to use L2 as a mean of learning;
- c. The largest part of instruction is given through L2, and L1 is introduced at a later stage, first as a subject and later as a medium of instruction.

Another definition for bilingual education is bilingual education refers to specific school programming in which English as a second language (ESL) students are taught math, science and social studies in their native language whenever possible (Williams, 2009). In general, bilingual education involves teaching academic content in two languages, in a native and secondary language with varying amounts of each language used in accordance with the program model.

The following are several different types of bilingual program (Hammers, 1989; Appel, 1987):

- a. **Transitional or the assimilationist model**
The minority language is mainly used in the early grades, typically for no more than three years, since its most important function is to bridge the gap between the home and the school. In other words it is to ensure that students do not fall behind in content areas like math, science, and social studies while they are learning English. The minority language is only used in school to make it easier for the child to adjust to existing educational demands. The goal is to help students transition to mainstream, English-only classrooms as quickly as possible, and the

linguistic goal of such programs is English acquisition only. Based on Macnamara' phrasing, the minority language is seen as a disease from which the child must be cured.

- b. **Pluralistic or maintenance model**
The minority language in itself is not considered a problem, but rather societal attitudes toward the minority language, related to the oppressed socio-economic position of the minority group. In this view, the minority language has a value of its own and is as important as the majority language. Hence, it is not only used as an initial medium of instruction for the minority group but also in later classes. The model is sometimes also called 'a language shelter' model'.
- c. **the immersion model**
Immersion means that a group of L1 speaking children receive all or part of their schooling through a L2 as medium of instruction. The immersion approach is based on two assumptions: (1) that a L2 is learned in a similar way to a L1; and (2) that a language is best learned in a stimulating context which enhances the language functions and exposes the child to the natural forms of language. There are three types of immersion: early total immersion, early partial immersion, and late immersion.

Why Bilingual Education?

Different countries of course have different background and reasons in running bilingual education. But typically, they share the same factors such as what Appel (1987) shares:

- a. **Social historical and ideological factors**
In terms of social historical and ideological factors, bilingual

education program was established concerning the political, economic, ideological and educational issues. Politically, former colonies became independent and most of these countries are multilingual as a consequence of the arbitrary divisions by colonial powers. Economically, the countries face serious problems of economic development. As economic development demands the use of a language of wider communication, the language of the colonizer is still used and often remains the official or one of the official languages. From demographic perspective, it can be seen from the massive movement of populations for different purposes. From the educational point of view, developing countries have to plan nationwide education. They started planning the education program which should answer the demands of their ethnic minorities.

b. Intergroup power-relation factors

The nature of contacts between two ethno-linguistic groups, with the tendency that one dominates the other, determines inter-ethnic relations. The minority group tends to minimize the risks of assimilation and subtraction in education. Power relations therefore determine the direction of language planning in education.

c. Social psychological factors

The outcome of bilingual education depends upon a number of pre-school factors, they are: (1) to what extent is the child proficient in the school language? and (2) to what extent has he developed the cognitive function in one or both of his languages before starting school?

Bilingual Education in America

In the United States, the term *bilingual education* generally refers to programs that provide support to students with limited English proficiency. Some of these programs teach academic subjects in the students' home language (usually Spanish) while also requiring language-minority students to take classes in English as a second language (ESL). Other programs aim to teach English to language-minority students by immersing them in English-only classes.

Romaine (1989) describes that after First World War, various states in United States passed laws which prevented schools authorities from interfering with the use of German and other foreign languages in the public schools. But after the Dade County program which was set up in 1963 with the aims to educate children from both Cuban and American homes bilingually in English and Spanish got succeed, followed by the success of other bilingual education programs in several schools, the government passed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968. Its aim is to provide instruction in the mother tongue only as an aid to allow the children to proceed into ordinary mainstream classes in the majority language. Its purpose was to equip the educational needs of children of 'limited English-speaking ability in schools having a high concentration of such children from families with incomes below \$3,000'. However, the model of bilingual education prescribed by the federal government was opposed in its aim and principles to the Dade County program had pioneered. The federal regulation only supported transitional bilingualism. There was no intention to maintain the students' home language. One of the reasons why bilingual education has been viewed negatively by many people in the US is the fear that its aim to maintain languages, and by implication cultures, other than English. Ex-president Re'agan has also spoken out strongly against the desirability of

maintaining native languages. He claimed that to have a bilingual education program that is dedicated to preserve their native language is absolutely wrong and against American concept. In 1983 president Reagan proposed to cut the federal budget for bilingual education. The Congress took testimony from the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) and U.S. English. NABE argued that bilingual education has brought many benefits, while U.S. English claimed that bilingual education retarded the acquisition of English and the integration of the students into the mainstream.

Bilingual Education in European Union

From European point of view, the following are basic types of bilingual programs:

- Bilingual programs are programs in which the learners are partly or fully 'immersed' in a foreign language with the aim to achieve almost 'native-like' language proficiency.
- Many bilingual programs that operate in monolingual countries complement formal foreign language instruction by the teaching of many or all school subjects in a foreign language.
- Bilingual programs are programs in which the foreign language is used as a medium of instruction alongside the use of students' mother tongue from a very diversified group.

To raise the nationalism spirit, almost all European Schools teach their students using their mother tongue and also teach at least two other European languages. Basic instruction is given in the eleven official languages of the European Union: Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish. The new official languages of the EU are added since 10 countries join in 2004 and two more in 2007. The students' mother tongue

(L1) therefore remains their first language throughout the School.

Learning, understanding and use of foreign languages are encouraged to make sure the unity of the school and to support genuine multicultural education. The following are ways to ensure it:

- a. L2 (English, French, or German) is compulsory throughout the school, from the first grade of primary education. In secondary school, some classes will be taught in L2.
- b. All students must study L3 (a second foreign language), starting in the second year of secondary school. Any language available in the School may be chosen.
- c. Students may choose to study a third foreign language (L4) from the fourth year of secondary school.
- d. Language classes are composed of mixed nationalities and taught by a native speaker.
- e. A weekly "European Hour" in the primary school brings together children from all sections for cultural and artistic activities and games.
- f. In the secondary school, classes in art, music and sport are always composed of mixed nationalities.
- g. From the third year of secondary school, history and geography are studied in the pupil's first foreign language, also called the "working language" (English, French, or German). Economics, which may be taken as an option from the fourth year of the secondary school, is also studied in a working language. From the third year, therefore, all social science subjects are taught to groups of mixed nationalities.

Bilingual Education in Southeast Asia

Bilingual education has become popular in several places in Southeast Asia

since the mid-1990s. For example Thailand has applied parallel immersion, where core subjects are taught in both the mother-tongue and a second language (usually English) and Malaysia has also applied immersion program, where content taught in a non-native language. In Malaysia, the government instructs the use of English immersion for Math, Science and IT. The difficulties and challenges of the US experience have not been replicated in these Asian countries, but still the implementation of this bilingual education brings some controversies. Generally, it can be said that there is widespread acknowledgment of the need to improve English competence in the population. Bilingual program, where language is taught through subject content, is believed the most effective way attaining this. The most difficult factors are the shortage of teachers linguistically competent to teach in a second language and the costs involved in the use of expatriate native speakers for this purpose.

Bilingual Education in Indonesia

Indonesia has its own reasons in running bilingual education. First, globalization era demands the human resource to be able to compete in technology and management. Bilingual education is believed to be the most possible way in reaching this. Second, the implementation of bilingual education is based on Act no 20 year 2003 about the System of National Education which states that the government establishes at least one school in all level of education to be developed into an international standard school.

Just like in other places, the implementation of bilingual program through international standard school program in Indonesia also brings challenges and difficulties. Bax (2010) reports some issues related to the implementation of English Bilingual Education in Indonesia. Among others, some are identified here. First, probably

the most challenging factor is the teachers' ability in using English. Since they are not specialists in English, there are some inaccuracies found. In fact, their ability in English is still very low, even for just short informal talk. Second is financial factor. Government actually has given extra funding for schools that join this program. However, they are still allowed to get some additional fund from parents under government's regulation to support the development of the facilities. This condition makes the fact that going to an international standard school means parents should prepare a lot of money. The third factor involves the material. International standard schools are actually provided with books and other relevant materials by the ministry and are given a lot of fund to buy the books. However, commercially produced materials do not usually fit the Indonesian curriculum, which become problems for the teachers. Based on the condition, some suggestions offered here are:

- a. More intensive training for the teachers. Do not expect them too much. Do not ever think that they will master English as well as teach content subject by using English in a short time. It takes patience and continuous training.
- b. Do more researches to see the improvement or the weaknesses in the implementation of bilingual education.
- c. Be open and give the parents understanding that bilingual education brings a lot of benefits for students' personal growth.
- d. The teachers should be encouraged to continue learning English. Start from the simple classroom English. Then continue to use English in more specific area.
- e. Partnership. Subject matter teachers ask English teacher to work together.
- f. Teachers are encouraged to develop their own teaching

materials which are more suitable to use in their classroom rather than they have to use commercially published books.

The success of bilingual program can not be reached in a short time. This program is still an infant so it needs patience and understanding from many parts to raise this program excellently. Every elements involved should be active and creative in developing this program. The key in implementing bilingual education should be applied and adapted according to the local conditions. Of course the condition in Indonesia is very different from the condition in United States. But still we can learn from the success and the failures of other places which have applied bilingual education.

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