

LEARNING CONTENT SUBJECTS THROUGH ENGLISH: INDONESIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' VOICES

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Abstract

The purpose of the research study reported here was to explore the voices of Indonesian students towards the use of English as a medium of instruction and towards the role of their mother tongue, *Bahasa Indonesia*, at their high schools. The participants of this study were 20 students of some high schools in Surabaya, Indonesia where English has been intensively introduced as a medium of instruction. The survey was conducted by distributing questionnaires and conducting interviews. The results showed that while the majority of the respondents felt the need to master the English language, they also felt that they faced many linguistic constraints, with some mentioning that they preferred the use of English alongside their mother tongue during the teaching learning process.

Keywords: Content learning, English as a medium of instruction, high school

การเรียนรู้วิชาต่างๆ โดยการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ:

จากความคิดเห็นของนักเรียนอินโดนีเซียระดับมัธยมศึกษา

บทคัดย่อ:

วัตถุประสงค์ของการศึกษานี้เพื่อการสำรวจความคิดเห็นของนักเรียนที่อินโดนีเซียที่มีต่อการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อการสอนและต่อบทบาทของภาษาแม่คือ ภาษา *Bahasa Indonesia* ในโรงเรียนมัธยม มีนักศึกษา เข้าร่วมในการศึกษาครั้งนี้จากโรงเรียนมัธยม 20 แห่งในสุราบายา อินโดนีเซีย ที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อการสอน การสำรวจนี้ใช้แบบสอบถามและการสัมภาษณ์ ผลการศึกษาพบว่าผู้ตอบแบบสอบถามส่วนใหญ่รู้สึกว่าเป็นต้องแก่ภาษาอังกฤษแม้จะยังรู้สึกว่ายังมีข้อจำกัด ทางภาษา มาก มีการกล่าวว่าการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษควบคู่ไปกับภาษาแม่ในการเรียนการสอน

คำสำคัญ:

การเรียนรู้วิชาต่างๆ โดยใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อ การเรียนการสอน โรงเรียนมัธยม

The use of English in Indonesia has been exploding. The Indonesian Department of National Education, for example, has allowed schools to make English a required subject starting as early as the first grade of elementary school. In many schools, English is allocated two hours (2x60 minutes) at every grade per week.

Since 2003, the government has also tried to develop international schools that use English as the medium of instruction. The Ministry of National Education's Strategic Plan for 2005-2009, as cited by Coleman (2009), stated that

In order to improve the nation's ability to compete ... central government and the relevant rural district government [*kabupaten*] or urban district government [*kota*] [need to] develop I12 international standard primary, junior secondary, senior secondary and senior vocational schools throughout Indonesia.

Furthermore, as discussed by Coleman (2009), this programme has a target that at least each of four categories (primary, junior secondary, senior secondary and vocational secondary) will have one international standard school in every district in the country. There are currently approximately 450 rural and urban districts in Indonesia. It means that in the near future, there will be approximately 1,800 international standard schools throughout the country.

To achieve this goal, the Ministry of National Education has categorized schools into 3 types representing 3 stages (steps) of becoming international schools in Indonesia. The first one is schools with national standard (regular national schools). The second type is labeled as *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (RSBI)* (outstanding local school), while the third type is *Sekolah Berstandar Internasional (SBI)* (international standard school).

RSBI schools receive a substantial subsidy from central government to accelerate their performance in becoming international schools. In 2009, as shown on the table below, a junior secondary school in the province of West Java had received IDR 1,018,000,000 (or approximately USD 107.157.90) for their funds (Fahturahman, 2009 as quoted by Coleman, 2009).

Table I: Financial Subsidy given by the Indonesian Government

Source of funds (in 2009)	IDR (millions)	USD
Routine, central government	62	6,526.32
Routine, district	256	26,947.37
<i>Sub-total routine</i>	318	33,473.70
<i>RSBI</i> , central government	300	31,578.95
<i>RSBI</i> , province	240	25,263.16
<i>RSBI</i> , district	160	16,842.11
<i>Sub-total RSBI</i>	700	73,684.22
<i>Total routine + RSBI</i>	1,018	107,157.90

Furthermore, *RSBI* students have to pay extra tuition fees because their schools charge each student a monthly tuition fee of up to IDR 2 million (approximately USD 210.53). This leads to the belief that *RSBI* schools are available only for children from wealthy families.

Approximately 170 *RSBI* primary schools and 700 *RSBI* secondary schools were established between 2007 and 2009 (Coleman, 2009). In Surabaya itself, in the year of 2011, according to Taswin (2012), the head of Local Department of National Education, written in a newspaper article *Surabaya Stop Penambahan RSBI Baru* there are 23 *RSBI* schools: 8 public and 3 private senior schools, 7 vocational schools, 3 public and 1 private junior high schools, and 1 public elementary school. None of these schools has become an internationally standard school. In practice, these schools establish *RSBI* classes which operate in parallel to regular classes, although better facilities are provided in the *RSBI* classes.

At *RSBI* secondary schools, science, mathematics and core vocational subjects are taught using English; other subjects, apart from foreign languages, are taught using the mother tongue (*Bahasa Indonesia*). In *RSBI* primary schools, teaching science and mathematics through English begins in Year 4.

By using English as the medium of instruction, it is believed that students will get “two for one” – both content knowledge and increased language proficiency (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). This is interesting as the selection of the language of instruction is actually a vital factor for learners. Studies have shown that students’ academic performances, for example, could be influenced by the language used in classrooms. However language

educational policy is often imposed by a governing body and excludes students' points of view.

Therefore this study would like to address students' perceptions towards:

1. The importance of English.
2. The use of English as medium of instruction in their *RSBI* classes.
3. The use of *Bahasa Indonesia* in their *RSBI* classes.
4. The use of both languages in their *RSBI* classes.

Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative approach that is looking at a change in national or school policy, and the perspectives of students who experienced this policy. As suggested by Dörnyei (2007), a piece of qualitative research study typically involves a small sample size of participant, analyzes the data with words, and is concerned with subjective opinions. By having qualitative approach, I was hoped to gather an in-depth understanding of my subjects.

Participants in this study were 20 students who were studying at 4 different public junior high schools considered as *RSBI*. The study was carried out in December 2011 – January 2012. Participants were selected based on snowball sampling (Dörnyei, 2007) in which some respondents were asked to recruit further participants who were also high school students studying at *RSBI* schools. The subjects were made up of 8 males and 12 females. All of them were on their second year. This small number of respondents is not aimed at generalizing but clarifying the idea (Patton, 2001).

In this study, the instruments employed were questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Nunan (1992) discussed that survey (using questionnaire) is the most popular research method to elicit facts in educational research, and it enables the researchers to obtain the general conditions of respondents. Richards (2003) pointed out that the interview is the best instrument for studying perceptions/beliefs/attitudes. The semi-structured format was used and basically designed to yield more details.

A set of questionnaires were distributed to all respondents. The questionnaires comprised 15 questions and were divided into two parts, each of which contained questions related to the profiles of the respondents and

their perceptions towards the use of English and Indonesian in their content classes. The first part presented the open-ended and close-ended questions asking for the respondents' personal details such as: gender, English learning experiences, and where they are currently studying.

In the second part, students were asked to rate the following statements on the 3-point Likert Scale (1 - disagree, 2 - not sure, 3 - agree):

1. I personally believe that the mastery of English is very important.
2. I personally believe that English language and the western culture are superior to *Bahasa Indonesia* and the Indonesian culture.
3. My teacher has become better because of using English for teaching his/her subject.
4. I understand my lesson better when my teacher speaks in English.
5. My teacher delivers his/her lessons in English only.
6. My teacher uses *Bahasa Indonesia* in his/her *RSBI* classes.
7. I am allowed to use *Bahasa Indonesia* in such classes.
8. In general, I feel that *Bahasa Indonesia* should not be used in such classes.
9. In general, I feel that the use of English as a medium of instruction in my school is really beneficial.

In addition, respondents were asked to provide opinions (answers) to the following questions:

1. How do you feel about the use of English as the medium of instruction in your *RSBI* classes?
2. How do you feel about the use of *Bahasa Indonesia* in your *RSBI* classes?
3. In general, as a medium of instruction, which language do you prefer in your classes? English or Indonesian?

Six students who had filled in the questionnaire were then randomly chosen for semi-structured interviews. The guiding interview questions developed were generally similar to the questions written for the questionnaires. Each interview took about 20 minutes. Before the actual interviews, respondents were informed that the exchanges were to be tape-recorded. All interviews were done voluntarily and the respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their answers. Indonesian was used to pose the questions, and the interviewees could choose *Bahasa Indonesia* or English to respond to

the questions. They were asked to state their opinions and comments regarding the questions.

The questionnaires were then analyzed. First, I organized the data (the subjects' responses) in the following table:

Table 2. Data Analysis

ID	Question no	Responses	Notes/Codes

Microsoft Excel 2007 was used. And categories were devised for the answers and then coded.

Next, data from the recorded interviews were transcribed carefully. Interesting responses were noted down and would be quoted verbatim.

The last step was to summarize and interpret the data obtained from questionnaires and interviews. Patterns that were emerging and examined, possible associations between one variable and another were also identified.

Findings and Discussion

This part is divided into four parts namely (1) the importance of English, (2) students' perceptions towards the use of English as the medium of instruction, (3) the perceptions towards the use of *Bahasa Indonesia*, and (4) the perceptions towards the use of English and *Bahasa Indonesia* in their content classes. Each of them is described below.

The importance of English

Overall all students who filled in the questionnaires and who were interviewed believed that English is very important in their lives. Some interviewees believed that English is essential for the advancement of knowledge. Interviewee (student) A said, "English is vital for scientific and technological studies. Many books are written in English. Most of the

instructions of electronic appliances today are written in English. If you do not understand the language, you cannot read the books and the instructions. That's why we have to master it". Student *C* stated, "The majority of media publications including newspapers and magazines are in English. So if you want to finish the whole reading material and get the information that you want, you must be able to read in English".

Other students believed that English is very important because it is needed for international communication. As interviewee *B* stated, "English is spoken by millions of people. If you travel to other countries, you need English to communicate with the local citizens. If you work at international firms, you also need English because it is the medium of communication".

Considering the importance of English, all interviewees mentioned that they have learned the language at least for the past 10 years. 4 interviewees added that they had studied at language courses as well. "I have been learning English since my elementary school. I also join language courses because I want to see great improvements in me", said student *F*.

The interviewees admitted that their family members had exerted profound influences on their learning motivations. The family members often highlighted the critical importance of English language so that the students were more motivated to learn it. To this, interviewee *F* commented, "I remember that I was told by my grandparents, parents, aunties, and uncles that English is very important. That's why I have tried very hard to master English. I start studying English when I was 5 by joining a language course". Some family members also seemed to bring positive influences and motivate the students to learn English. As student *A* added, "My uncle's family has been living in Australia for years and some of my relatives live in European countries. Most of the time they speak and write in English. That's why I want to learn English so that I can communicate with them easily".

Further interviews also revealed that it was their parents and family members who requested them to study at *RSBI* schools. As said by student *D*, "My parents asked me to study at *RSBI* because they believe that I can really improve my English if I use it every day at school".

Apparently students (and their parents) who choose *RSBI* perceive English as a basic competence which their children need to survive in this era of globalisation. They assume that the best way to learn English is to have

much exposure to English. Thus having a child learn everything in English would therefore appear to be superior to learning English separately.

Phillipson (1992) calls this as “the maximum exposure fallacy”. Many people think that the more one is exposed to hear the second/foreign language, e.g. English, the easier he/she will acquire the language. If this happens in a natural setting where one can hear English all day and where one can practice using it naturally, the maximum exposure will surely help this person learn or acquire the language. It is not, however, applicable in a school setting where English is used as a language of instruction. In other words, using English as a medium of instruction will *not* contribute to one's language learning process.

Studies have shown that using English as a medium of instruction, in fact, will make it a barrier to knowledge of subject matter. If students do not understand the language used to deliver the lessons, if they do not grasp the language well enough to understand what is being taught, then they will not comprehend the subject matters delivered by their teachers. On the contrary, if the mother tongue is used, the students are more likely to understand everything their teacher is saying.

Students' perceptions towards the use of English as a medium of instruction in their RSBI classes

Considering students' perceptions related to the importance of English, we asked the interviewees to comment on the possibility of having English *only* in the classroom. Only one interviewee was in agreement with the statement that English should remain as the *only* medium of instruction at school level. An argument proposed by this particular student was that students would have more chances to improve their English if the courses are conducted in English.

Student *D* believed “We need to master English; thus we need to get much exposure to the language. Thus if English is used as the medium of instruction, well .. perhaps we can get exposure to the language and the content”. However he also noted that to implement such policy, teachers and students need to have high English proficiency.

The majority of interviewees, though, were not happy if only English is used because they found it hard to understand the school subjects if they were

delivered in English. "My English proficiency is limited. I find it difficult to understand lessons delivered in English only", commented interviewee *C*.

Additionally, in responding the question "How did you feel about the use of English as the medium of instruction in your *RSBI* classes?", those who filled in the questionnaire said that although they knew that English is one of the most important languages in the world, they had problems in using English as the medium of instruction. The main problem was related to the level of proficiency. This point of view was also established by all interviewees. Interviewee *E*, for example, added, "I want to learn English, but I do not want to learn my school subjects using English. Considering my current level of proficiency, I find it hard to understand the lectures".

Not only is the students' proficiency hinder the learning process, teachers' proficiency was also a problem to the implementation of English-as-a-medium-of-instruction-policy. As student *F* commented, "My teachers obviously have very limited English proficiency. It is very difficult to understand their English. They make many grammatical mistakes, have limited vocabularies".

It is not surprising that 16 out of 20 respondents thought that their teachers were not becoming better because of using English as the medium of instruction. No respondents opted for "agree" while the other 4 respondents chose "not-sure". In addition, the questionnaires also revealed that none of the respondents' teachers delivered his/her lectures in English only, and that all teachers still used *Bahasa Indonesia* in their teaching. This finding might indicate that the level proficiency of teachers of *RSBI* was still low.

In 2009, a survey was done by the Indonesian government (Ministry of Education) to measure the English proficiency of 27,000 teachers and headmasters working in *RSBI* secondary schools. TOEIC was used as the basis for measurement. Most teachers and headmasters observed fell into the novice and elementary levels. A small number of teachers were in their advanced working proficiency and general professional proficiency levels. English teachers had higher proficiency level which is not surprising considering that they are language teachers. The table below which showed the complete results of the survey was taken from Coleman (2009):

Table 3. Language Proficiency of Teachers and Heads of RSBI Schools

Proficiency level	Score	All teachers, 2007-2008	All heads, 2007-2008	English teachers, 2008
General Professional	905-990	0.1%	0.0%	1.1%
Advanced Working	785-900	0.6%	0.2%	4.4%
Basic Working	605-780	3.6%	3.6%	21.7%
Intermediate	405-600	12.9%	14.6%	39.4%
Elementary	255-400	32.1%	30.5%	26.1%
Novice	10-250	50.7%	51.0%	7.4%
Total		100.0%	99.9%	100.1%

The results of this 2009-survey pointed out that the majority of *RSBI* teachers (and headmasters) were not ready for teaching their content subjects using English.

Similar case happens in secondary schools in Tanzania. A study done by Qorro (2002) demonstrated that the majority of teachers have low English proficiency. The headmaster of one of the secondary schools observed, for example, admitted that, of the 45 teachers in his school only 3 understood English well and used it correctly. Such situation prevails in most public secondary schools in Tanzania (Qorro, 2002).

Another finding of this present study implied that adopting English as a medium of instruction may have no necessary connection with western language and cultural imperialism. 12 students involved in this present study remained neutral regarding the question of whether English language and culture are superior to Indonesian language and culture, 5 opted "disagree" and only 3 agreed to the statement. This is not line with what Philipson (1992) has argued that Immersion program (in which English is used as the medium of instruction) is an instrument of the western countries to impose their language (English) and their cultures for their own benefits. Apparently the perception of English and its culture is now changing at least among the youngsters.

Students' perceptions towards the use of Bahasa Indonesia in their RSBI classes

This study also found that all respondents disagreed to the statement "In general, I feel that *Bahasa Indonesia* should not be used in my *RSBI* classes". All respondents state that they prefer their teachers frequently mix English and Indonesian. Code mixing is seen as a common phenomenon which is, in their opinion, used (1) to further describe the English terminology, (2) to deliver lessons when teachers have difficulty in delivering lessons in English and (3) when students do not understand the lessons delivered in English.

It seems that the amount of code mixing in classroom was largely related to the instructors' and students' English language competence. Students interviewed claimed that English is used only when their teachers read directly from the notes or power point presentation. Others admitted that more proficient instructors would mix English and Indonesian when they saw that their students did not understand the lectures in English.

Related to the issue of whether students were allowed to use their mother tongue (*Bahasa Indonesia*) in their classrooms, all students who filled in the questionnaires stated that they had permission to do so. All interviewees mentioned that they were grateful for such opportunity because they felt more confident and comfortable in using their mother tongue. Some interviewees felt that using their *Bahasa Indonesia* more efficient and saving a lot of time.

"But for what purposes?" The interviewees were asked. Student *D* said, "Mostly to check our comprehension and to define difficult concepts or new vocabularies with our friends". Student *E* mentioned, "To discuss our classroom tasks". It seems that students felt the necessity of using their mother tongue in their classrooms. Thus it is not surprising then when the majority of the respondents (17 out of 20) disagreed to the statement "In general, I feel that *Bahasa Indonesia* should not be used in my English-as-a-medium-of-instruction classes". The other 3 respondents, however, remained neutral (not sure).

If students are comfortable in using Indonesian, does it mean that it is unnecessary to implement the English-as-a-medium-of-instruction policy in Indonesian schools? Does it mean that students prefer to use *Bahasa Indonesia* in their learning?

When asked to rate the following statement: "In general, I feel that the use of English as a medium of instruction in my school is really beneficial", the results of the questionnaire showed that the majority (15 students) opted "not sure" which implies that they remained rather neutral. Only one student completely agreed with this statement while the rest disagreed. Apparently all students preferred to use *Bahasa Indonesia* in their studies, thus when they were asked "In general, as a medium of instruction, which language do you prefer in your school? English or Indonesian?", all respondents answered "Indonesian". To this, interviewee *D* told us, "Yes I agree that English is important and by having English as the medium of instruction we can get much exposure. But considering our and teachers' present level of language proficiency, I think we are not ready to implement such policy. It is better to use *Bahasa Indonesia*".

Students' perceptions towards the use of English and Bahasa Indonesia in their content classes

All interviewees noted that the policy of implementing English as a medium of instruction had exposed them more to English language. However so far it brought negative effects namely (1) students did not understand the subjects taught, and (2) they should take informal courses to improve their English. In addition, two interviewees added, "We have to pay more for the tuition fees".

Thus interviewee *C* noted that English language is of great importance and she would love to learn that but not to use it as the medium of instruction. Interviewee *A* further stated, "I think using English as a medium of instruction is different from learning English".

Considering the limited proficiency of both teachers and students, interviewees suggested the use of *Bahasa Indonesia* and English in teaching school subjects because they believe that such approach will increase their understanding. Similar case actually happens in secondary schools in China. Lao (2006) observes that

when English is the only medium allowed in discussions, students are quiet due to nervousness or lack of English competence. In contrast, when both Chinese and English are allowed as media for discussions, the atmosphere gets heated. Students immediately offer

help when their peers are unable to make themselves understood in English. Generally speaking, there is more participation and meaningful communication sustains longer when both Chinese and English can be used in class discussions.

This supports Igboanusi's (2001) call that both mother tongue and English should complement each other in the teaching and learning tasks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has tried to address the students' perceptions towards the use of English and *Bahasa Indonesia* in their content courses. The subjects of this research were 20 students who were studying on their second year of senior high school. They were studying at 4 different public junior high schools which are often attributed as *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (RSBI)*.

There are 4 implications that can be derived from this present study, which are outlined below.

- The findings of this study suggest that students prefer to use *Bahasa Indonesia* in their classroom although at the same time they are aware of the importance of English. This finding somehow implies that students' mother tongue will always exist in classrooms. No matter how hard they may try, learners cannot escape the influence of their mother tongue. Studies have shown that students automatically think first in their mother tongue; they cannot go straight into thinking ideas in English. Storch and Wigglesworth's study (2003) demonstrates that mother tongue actually provides 'cognitive support' during language analysis and in the completion of cognitively demanding tasks. It allows students to work at cognitively higher levels and may be a normal psychological process'. Thus it might be a good idea, as suggested by the interviewees, to use both the students' mother tongue and English to deliver lectures.
- Learning English is different from using English as a medium of instruction. Asking all teachers to teach in English is a strategy which carries many risks with it. There must be alternative ways of improving English teaching and learning which are not hazardous. There must be other methods to provide students with more opportunities to use English. Students, for example, might be encouraged to speak English outside their English classrooms. This can be an effective way to learn

English. An interesting comment is expressed by Qorro (2002) who conducted her research in Tanzania:

The use of English as a medium actually defeats the whole purpose of teaching English language. For example, let us suppose that, in the school mentioned above the 3 teachers who use English correctly are the teachers of English language, and the other 42 are teachers of subjects other than English. Is it not the case that the efforts of the 3 teachers of English are likely to be eroded by the 42 teachers who use incorrect English in teaching their subjects?

- Using English as a medium of instruction will be useful *only* for students and teachers with adequate English proficiency. However it is important to note that teachers who will use English to deliver their lessons must also have high pedagogical competency. A person who has high language proficiency might have difficulties in delivering a lesson in English simply because there is no correlation between language score and pedagogical competence, because TOEFL score, for example does not necessarily reflect the teachers' ability to teach subjects in English. Thus if English-as-a-medium-of-instruction policy is to be implemented, the curriculum of teacher education should be reviewed to incorporate English language acquisition.
- Traditionally learning and teaching English was perceived as learning and teaching American or British culture (Kachru, 1992). But now, the situation is completely different as English is used by many people in the world. For that reason, one must distinguish here between English as a medium and English as a message. According to Kachru (1995), the medium refers to the *form* of language – its phonology, morphology and syntax, and the message embodies the *functions* in which the medium is used. English then should be viewed as an entity which can be separated from western culture. The medium is still the same but the message may be completely different.

This study also recommends possible directions for future studies. The participants in this current study were 20 students studying at 4 different public schools in Surabaya; thus, the results may not be generalized to other educational contexts. Future studies may use a wider sample population from both private and public schools in East Java province or in Indonesia. This would increase the validity of the research and its findings. Future research

may also focus on teachers' perceptions towards the use of English and *Bahasa Indonesia*. This is because teachers also play important role in the process of language teaching and learning so that their voices must be taken into account. Another plausible direction is to observe the perceptions towards the use of English in people's daily lives. This might be interesting because of the growing use of English in Indonesia nowadays.

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