

# **An analysis of teacher's multilingual practices used in teaching EFL students**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to analyze the multilingual practices and predominant languages used by an English teacher during classroom activities. It also sought to assess students' reactions to the teacher's language use and to determine the rationale for the teacher's choice of each language in the English language classroom. Six observations were conducted in the three selected classes to assess the use of Indonesian, English, Kluet, Jamee and Acehnese in classroom activities. A total of 48 student respondents from three classes completed the questionnaires, with the English teacher at Junior High School 1 Kluet Timur serving as the sample. The results showed that Indonesian was the most dominant language used in the classroom with a rate of 47.1%, followed by English, Kluet Jamee and Acehnese. The responses to the questionnaire showed that the students believed that using Indonesian and local languages in learning English could help them to understand the material presented by the teacher. In addition, the study showed that the teacher's reason for using Indonesian and local languages was to enhance students' comprehension of English materials, which ensure effective learning.

**Keywords:** *EFL students; Languages used; Multilingualism; Teacher's practice; Kluet*

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## **1. Introduction**

In any human community, language plays an important role in communication (Brown, 2000), serving as a means to convey messages or information to other people. Some people possess proficiency in more than one language, a phenomenon referred to as bilingualism or multilingualism (Wardhaugh, 2010). The way people utilize language for communication or for other purposes, undergoes changes upon the context in which they are engaged and the intended purpose of the language use (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

English holds a significant position as a subject taught at all educational levels, ranging from elementary and junior high school to senior high school and college. Based on a preliminary observation conducted at SMPN 1 Kluet Timur, it is evident that the teacher has initiated direct communication in English during lessons. However, both the teacher and students frequently find themselves in situations where communication occurs in more than one language, such as Indonesian or even the students' native language, within the English classroom. Mukti and Muljani (2016) advocate for English to be the primary language of instruction, emphasizing the importance of teachers and lecturers being proficient in English to effectively conduct teaching activities (Harmer, 2007). Despite this perspective, the reality in the field demonstrates that not all English teachers adhere to using English exclusively in their classrooms. When determining the language of instruction in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, teachers have various options; they can opt for English only, a combination of English and Indonesian, or the students' native language (Satriah et al., 2019). In practice, English teachers in the observed setting predominantly use Indonesian and the students' mother tongue to explain lesson content in the English classroom.

In our observation, we also noted that both teachers and students engage in communication using multiple languages. The teacher frequently switched between languages, a practice influenced by the students' limited knowledge and proficiency in English vocabulary. This language switching was particularly evident when students faced challenges in responding to questions posed by the researcher, such as identifying the day, profession, or objects in the classroom. The local languages employed were diverse, encompassing all the indigenous languages spoken in South Aceh, including Kluet, Jamee, and Acehnese.

This phenomenon presents a significant contribution to the study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as it may provide a fresh perspective on the utilization of non-English languages in the EFL classroom. The frequency with which these languages are employed in English classes is a critical factor that can impact students' proficiency in improving their English skills. The success of English language learning is heavily influenced by classroom dynamics, particularly in Indonesia where the majority of schools are still not accustomed to using English as the medium of instruction in English language classrooms. This study aims to analyze the language used by the teacher in the English classroom. The central research question addressed in this study is what

languages are used by the English teacher in the English language classroom at SMPN 1 Kluet Timur?

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Language teaching and sociolinguistics*

Language serves as a tool to articulate the contents of our minds, a means of communication to convey messages, and a reflection of a nation's cultural development (Fadilah, 2020). In the learning process, both teachers and students often employ formal languages such as Indonesian and English, alongside their native languages (Hawanti, 2014). Manara (2007), as cited in Hasrina et al. (2018), suggests that the use of students' mother tongue (L1) in the classroom depends on the students' proficiency level; it can be utilized when proficiency is low, and its usage should decrease as proficiency levels rise. Additionally, teachers use L1 to connect students' native language knowledge to their second language (L2) learning.

In the realm of sociolinguistics, language teaching aids educators in comprehending community characteristics and language usage patterns. According to Wardhaugh (2010) and Yousaf (2004), sociolinguistics explores the connection between language and society to understand language structure and its role in communication. Holmes (2001) further asserts that sociolinguistics delves into the relationship between language and its context of use. Murdani (2011) adds that sociolinguistic studies help second language teachers understand both community characteristics and language usage within that community.

### *2.2. Multilingual context*

According to Ludi (2000), a multilingual individual possesses the ability to adapt their language choice based on the situation, seamlessly switching from one language to another to balance their communicative capabilities. Additionally, Pateda (1990) defines multilingualism as the ability to speak three or more languages, signifying that individuals classified as multilingual can engage in conversations using three or more languages within the same context (Goh & Silver, 2004). Multilingualism also implies the concurrent presence of two or more languages in a given space and time (Moyer, 2011). In the case of Indonesia, a significant portion of the population is considered multilingual, as many individuals can communicate in at least two languages: the national language (Indonesian) and their local language (mother tongue).

Globally, there are more than 7000 languages spoken (Eberhard et al., 2021; Varan, 2021), each possessing unique characteristics that distinguish them from one another. Indonesia, being a country with a rich linguistic landscape, is home to numerous local languages, with Bahasa Indonesia serving as the national language (Arifin, 2017). In Indonesia alone, there are approximately 718 active languages (Sukma, 2021), symbolizing the ethnic diversity of the country, extending from Sabang to Meurauke. The strategic position of Indonesia has shaped the linguistic landscape in trading, migrating

and colonizing enabling multi languages to occur. This has made Indonesians often navigate multiple languages, switching between them depending on social and situational contexts. However, this linguistic richness also presents challenges, such as language endangerment and the complexity of formulating inclusive language policies.

### *2.3. Teacher's language use in the English classroom*

The use of language in educational settings, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, plays a pivotal role in shaping the effectiveness of teaching and learning. In Indonesia, where multilingualism is widespread, educators often navigate between different languages to better support their students' learning processes. This practice is especially evident in regions like Kluet Timur, where English teachers frequently incorporate local languages such as Kluet, Jamee, and Acehnese into their instruction. The purpose of blending these languages is to create a bridge between students' native tongues and English, thereby ensuring that instructional content is accessible and comprehensible to everyone. By adopting this multilingual approach, teachers aim to make learning more inclusive, engaging, and ultimately, more effective.

In Kluet Timur, the integration of local languages into the classroom is a deliberate strategy employed to ensure that explanations are fully understood. The recognition of linguistic diversity within the classroom allows teachers to leverage students' native languages as a scaffold for learning English. This method aligns with the perspectives of scholars like Al-Nofaie (2010), who argue that using students' native languages (L1) in the classroom can significantly aid in their understanding and retention of new concepts in English. By incorporating familiar languages into their teaching, educators provide a linguistic foundation that supports the acquisition of new vocabulary and concepts, making the learning experience more relatable and easier to grasp.

However, the practice of using local languages alongside English in EFL instruction is met with differing opinions. Zulfah (2015) advocates for the exclusive use of English in the classroom, suggesting that it offers a more realistic context for students, which better prepares them for real-world language use. Similarly, Sharma (2006) posits that continuous exposure to English accelerates the learning process, as it encourages students to think and communicate directly in the target language. Despite these arguments, the reality in multilingual regions like Kluet Timur often necessitates a more flexible approach, where mixing languages becomes a practical solution to ensure students remain engaged and comprehend the material.

The ultimate goal of EFL teachers is to ensure that students thoroughly understand the material being taught. As Aza (2021) points out, incorporating multiple languages into classroom instruction can be an effective way to enhance students' proficiency in English. This view is supported by Abdulloh (2021) and Hasrina et al. (2018), who observe that the use of L1 alongside English can facilitate vocabulary acquisition and improve overall language skills. Students often report feeling more comfortable and

confident when allowed to use their native language in tandem with English, leading to greater participation in classroom activities and a more proactive approach to learning.

Educators often believe that the strategic use of multiple languages during instruction can boost students' linguistic proficiency across both their native language and the target language. Cummins (2008) and Hult (2017) emphasize that incorporating L1 with English instruction can provide a stronger foundation, making it easier for students to transition to full English proficiency. Wahib (2020) notes that Indonesian, as the predominant language used by teachers in the EFL classroom, plays a crucial role in explaining complex concepts, managing classroom dynamics, and ensuring that students remain aligned with the lesson's objectives. English, on the other hand, is typically utilized for more challenging content, where the use of the target language is essential for fostering language proficiency.

Nevertheless, there are concerns regarding the potential limitations of relying too heavily on L1 in the EFL classroom. Ellis (2008) warns that excessive dependence on the native language might limit students' exposure to English, thereby reducing the valuable input they receive in the target language. This concern is echoed by Anggrahini (2019), who asserts that students require maximum exposure to English to develop their language skills effectively. Dependence on L1 may lead to a slower acquisition of English, as students may become too comfortable with using their native language and avoid the challenge of fully engaging with English. Some students even express reluctance to use their native language in English classes, fearing that it may hinder their progress in mastering the target language.

The blending of languages in the EFL classroom is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural context of human communication. Throughout history, the movement of people across regions—whether due to power dynamics, survival needs, or sociopolitical changes—has led to the development of multilingual communities. This historical context helps explain why multilingualism is so prevalent in regions like Kluet Timur and why it continues to play a significant role in education today. The persistence of language blending in educational settings underscores its importance as an instructional tool, particularly in environments where linguistic diversity is the norm.

Thus, the use of multiple languages in the EFL classroom, particularly in multilingual regions like Kluet Timur, reflects a pragmatic approach to teaching that acknowledges the complexities of language learning. While Indonesian and local languages provide crucial support for students in understanding English, it is essential for educators to maintain a balance that ensures students receive ample exposure to English. Navigating these linguistic challenges requires careful consideration, as teachers aim to use language in a way that enhances, rather than hinders, students' progress toward achieving proficiency in English.

### **3. Method**

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the language use of teachers in English classrooms at SMPN 1 Kluet Timur, South Aceh District. The aim was to understand language use from the participants' perspective, as emphasized by Ary et al. (2006). Observations were conducted across three classes, focusing on 20 specific classroom activities, such as greeting students, leading prayers, checking attendance, explaining new concepts, and more. The researcher systematically recorded the teacher's use of language during six observation sessions held on January 7th, 10th, 11th, and 14th, 2022.

#### *3.1. Participants*

The study involved one English teacher and 48 students from the 8th and 9th grades. Due to the pandemic, the 8th grade was split into two classes, 8-A and 8-B. The selected teacher, experienced in using multiple languages during lessons, was chosen for her familiarity with the linguistic diversity of the region. The 8th and 9th graders were chosen based on prior observations and the teacher's recommendation, as these students were more accustomed to using English in the classroom compared to 7th graders, who were still building their vocabulary.

#### *3.2. Instrument*

Observation was the primary method for data collection, with the second researcher adopting a non-participant role. The researcher remained in the classroom to observe and document the teacher's language use, using a specifically designed observation sheet. The observation sheet, adapted from Leoanak and Amalo (2018), was structured to record each instance of language use by marking checkboxes (✓) corresponding to the languages employed.

#### *3.3. Data collection*

Data were collected through classroom observations and audio recordings, which captured the interaction between the teacher and students. The observations were conducted over four to six sessions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the language dynamics. One lesson lasts for 80 minutes. Author two took detailed notes and marked the languages used on the observation sheets during each session.

#### *3.4. Data analysis*

The data from the observation sheets were analyzed to identify the dominant languages used in the classroom. This involved transcribing the recorded data, coding the languages, and calculating the percentage of each language's use. Additionally, specific expressions used by the teacher were documented to provide contextual examples of language use during the observed sessions. In analyzing data, we (all authors) grouped the teacher and students' utterances into language use category and we then calculated

the percentage of each language used in the classroom. The results were explained in themes. We used Creswell's qualitative data analysis starting from taking raw data, organizing and preparing data for analysis, reading all data.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. Dominant language usage in the English classroom

This study observed that the English teacher at SMPN 1 Kluet Timur employed a mix of five languages—Indonesian, English, Kluet, Jamee, and Acehnese—during classroom activities. Among these, Indonesian was the most dominant, accounting for 47.1% of the language use, followed by English at 28.1%. The use of local languages (Kluet 14.9%, Jamee 8.2%, and Acehnese 1.7%) was also notable, reflecting the teacher's adaptation to the linguistic diversity of the students.

No.	Language used	Percentages
1.	English	28.1%
2.	Indonesian	47.1 %
3.	Kluet	14.9 %
4.	Jamee	8.2 %
5.	Acehnese	1.7 %
	Totals	100%

Indonesian was used extensively in various routine classroom activities such as greeting students, asking about their conditions, and checking attendance. For instance, during classroom greetings, the teacher alternated between English and Indonesian, ensuring that students were engaged and understood the flow of the lesson:

##### Excerpt 1:

- **T:** “Good morning, everyone.”
- **S:** “Good morning mom.”
- **T:** “How are you today?”
- **S:** “I'm fine Ma'am.”

In another instance, the teacher switched to Indonesian to ensure inclusivity:

##### Excerpt 2:

- **T:** “*Bagaimana kabarnya hari ini? Sehat semua?*” [How are you today? Are you all well?]
- **S:** “*Sehat ma'am*” and “*Sehat buk.*” [Well mom].

The strategic use of Indonesian as the dominant language aligns with Wahib's (2020) findings that Indonesian is often employed to enhance students' comprehension and manage classroom interactions effectively. This is particularly important in multilingual settings, where students may struggle with English-only instruction.

#### 4.2. Language functions

Indonesian was crucial for managing classroom activities and ensuring that students fully understood the lesson content. For example, the teacher used Indonesian to perform attendance checks, a routine that helped establish order and clarity at the beginning of each lesson:

##### Excerpt 3:

- **T:** *“Baiklah sebelum kita lanjutkan pelajaran kita saya absen dulu!”* [Alright, before we continue our lesson, let me check the attendance first].

Moreover, when revisiting previous lessons or introducing new concepts, the teacher often relied on Indonesian to ensure that students grasped the material. This was evident in the explicit grammar explanations provided:

##### Excerpt 4:

- **T:** *“Kemaren saya katakan ingat saja S M A S nya itu is, M nya itu am, A nya itu are.”* [Yesterday I told you, just remember S M A: “S” means is, “M” means am, “A” means are].

The reliance on Indonesian for these key instructional functions reflects the need to cater to students’ linguistic capabilities and ensure that the educational content is accessible. This approach is supported by Cummins’ (2008) theory of bilingual education, which emphasizes the importance of using students’ first language (L1) to scaffold learning in the second language (L2). Silviyanti, Waluyo and Alya (2023) confirmed that teachers of ELT employ more strategies to encourage students speak in English, and using Indonesian language cannot be neglected.

#### 4.3. Code-switching

The teacher’s code-switching between Indonesian, English, and local languages was a deliberate strategy to facilitate comprehension and bridge the gap between students’ existing linguistic knowledge and new English concepts. For instance, while discussing the concept of a “card,” the teacher contextualized the term using the Kluet language, drawing on culturally relevant examples:

##### Excerpt 5:

- **T:** *“Card di Meng bahaso kluet no pe bagi bate keno mbah-mbah be jop-jop rumah.”* [In Kluet language, the card is like a “bate” that was brought to every house].

This practice of incorporating local languages into the classroom discourse is consistent with sociolinguistic theories that highlight the role of language as a social and

cultural tool (Wardhaugh, 2010). By integrating students' native languages, the teacher not only made the content more relatable but also reinforced their linguistic identities, which is crucial in a multilingual educational environment (Moyer, 2011). Code switching often happen in a class with multilingual speakers. The finding is in line with Silviyanti, Waluyo, and Alya (2023) that teachers' effort to switch language is one of the ways to make students aware of teacher's instructions.

#### *4.4. Students' responses to multilingual practices*

Students responded positively to the teacher's multilingual approach, particularly the use of Indonesian and local languages. These practices made the lessons more comprehensible and less intimidating, thus encouraging active participation. During a vocabulary lesson, for instance, the teacher reinforced new English words by providing translations and explanations in the students' first languages:

#### **Excerpt 6:**

- **T:** *“Keep away from children artinya jauhkan dari anak-anak.”* [“Keep away from children” in Indonesian means “jauhkan dari anak-anak”].

The dual-language approach not only facilitated better retention of new vocabulary but also increased students' confidence in using English. This observation is supported by Afifah, Sari, and Yusuf (2020), who found that code-switching to the L1 can significantly enhance students' understanding and retention of new language concepts. Moreover, this method aligns with Cummins' (2008) interdependence hypothesis, which posits that cognitive and literacy skills transfer from the L1 to the L2, provided that the L1 is adequately supported. The teacher's use of local languages thus played a critical role in scaffolding English language learning, enabling students to build on their existing linguistic resources.

#### *4.5. Comparison with previous studies*

While previous research, such as that by Wahib (2020), has predominantly focused on the use of Indonesian in EFL classrooms, this study offers new insights by demonstrating the effective inclusion of local languages like Kluet and Jamee. The findings suggest that integrating multiple languages into classroom instruction can be more effective than relying solely on the national language (Indonesian) or the target language (English).

This multilingual approach is particularly beneficial in linguistically diverse settings, where students' familiarity with multiple languages can be leveraged to enhance their overall language acquisition. The use of local languages in this study supports the argument that language teaching should be adapted to the linguistic realities of the classroom, as suggested by Ludi (2000) and Murdani (2011).

#### 4.6. Pedagogical implications

The study's findings have important implications for EFL teaching in multilingual contexts. The teacher's practice of code-switching between English, Indonesian, and local languages not only facilitated comprehension but also reduced students' anxiety and built their confidence in using English. For example, when a student struggled with pronunciation, the teacher corrected them in a supportive manner:

##### **Excerpt 7:**

- **T:** *"Bukan write bacaanya w nya tidak dibaca ya!"* [The pronunciation is not "write," the "w" is not read!].

Such interactions illustrate the importance of a supportive and inclusive classroom environment, where students feel comfortable experimenting with a new language. This approach aligns with the findings of Zulfah, Rasyid, Rahman, and Rahman (2015), who emphasize that reducing students' fear of making mistakes is crucial for effective language learning. The strategic use of multiple languages in the classroom also aligns with the principles of translanguaging, where students are encouraged to use all their linguistic resources to make meaning and enhance learning (Garcia & Wei, 2014). By allowing students to express themselves in their L1 while gradually incorporating L2, the teacher fostered a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment.

The English teacher at SMPN 1 Kluet Timur effectively utilized a combination of Indonesian, English, and local languages (Kluet, Jamee, Acehese) to teach English. Indonesian was the dominant language due to its role in facilitating comprehension and managing classroom activities. However, the inclusion of local languages was equally crucial, as it helped bridge the gap between students' prior linguistic knowledge and new English concepts, making the learning process more accessible and inclusive. This multilingual approach not only improved students' understanding but also increased their confidence and participation in the classroom, highlighting the need for a flexible and context-sensitive approach to language teaching in multilingual settings.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the teacher's language use in an English classroom at SMPN 1 Kluet Timur, highlighting the multilingual nature of the classroom. The findings show that the teacher used five different languages: English, Indonesian, Kluet, Jamee and Acehese. Of these, Indonesian emerged as the dominant language, accounting for 47.1% of total language use. Teachers' reliance on Indonesian was evident in a variety of instructional activities, including greeting students, leading prayers, taking attendance, monitoring classroom conditions, reviewing previous lessons, explaining new vocabulary and complex concepts, explicitly teaching grammar, assessing students' comprehension, explaining differences between students' L1 and English, drawing attention to correct pronunciation, organizing classroom tasks, maintaining discipline, giving praise and

feedback, encouraging students' participation, building motivation and confidence in learning English, and closing lessons.

Conversely, certain activities, such as introducing unfamiliar material or topics, building and strengthening interpersonal relationships between teacher and students, and reducing students' anxiety about learning English, were not frequently used by teachers. The study emphasizes that the use of Indonesian and local languages such as Kluet, Jamee and Acehnese in the EFL classroom plays a crucial role in helping students to understand the material. These languages not only serve as a bridge to English learning, but also create a more comfortable and supportive environment, which facilitates the absorption of classroom content. The findings suggest that the strategic use of both Indonesian and local languages can improve students' overall learning experience by making the material more accessible and reducing potential barriers to comprehension.

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