

Multilingualism in Secondary Students: Its Effect on English Language Development in EFL Contexts

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Abstract : This community service investigates the role of multilingualism in supporting English language development among secondary students in an EFL context by employing a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative and qualitative data. This study was collected with SMKS Kesehatan Rambah Samo. The activity used two main instruments: a questionnaire measuring students' multilingual practices and perceptions, and semi-structured interviews to capture deeper explanations and personal experiences. Data collection began with administering questionnaires to multilingual students, followed by selecting interview participants based on varying questionnaire scores to ensure diverse perspectives. The findings reveal that multilingual practices are widely used and positively perceived by learners, with questionnaire results showing high mean scores for the use of first and local languages to support comprehension, vocabulary learning, and classroom communication. Students reported greater confidence, reduced anxiety, and stronger motivation when multilingual strategies were incorporated into instruction. Interview data further demonstrated that students rely on their multilingual repertoires to make sense of complex English input, express ideas more freely, and actively participate in class discussions. Although some instances of language interference were identified, these occurrences also reflected developing metalinguistic awareness and opportunities for corrective learning. The study contributes empirical evidence from the Indonesian EFL context, highlighting that structured and purposeful multilingual pedagogy can maximize students' engagement and linguistic outcomes. The findings suggest that multilingualism should be recognized as a valuable instructional resource rather than a barrier, and teachers are encouraged to adopt guided translanguaging strategies to strengthen comprehension, motivation, and language accuracy.

Keywords: multilingualism, EFL context, translanguaging

Abstrak : Pengabdian masyarakat ini menyelidiki peran multibahasa dalam mendukung perkembangan bahasa Inggris pada siswa sekolah menengah dalam konteks EFL dengan menggunakan desain metode campuran yang mengintegrasikan data kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Kegiatan ini dilaksanakan di SMKS Kesehatan Rambah Samo. Kegiatan ini menggunakan dua instrumen utama: kuesioner yang mengukur praktik dan persepsi multibahasa siswa, serta wawancara semi-terstruktur untuk memperoleh penjelasan yang lebih mendalam dan pengalaman pribadi. Pengumpulan data dimulai dengan penyebaran kuesioner kepada siswa multibahasa, kemudian memilih peserta wawancara berdasarkan variasi skor kuesioner untuk memastikan keberagaman perspektif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa praktik multibahasa digunakan secara luas dan dipersepsikan secara positif oleh para siswa, dengan hasil kuesioner yang menunjukkan skor rata-rata tinggi pada penggunaan bahasa pertama dan bahasa daerah untuk mendukung pemahaman, pembelajaran kosakata, dan komunikasi di kelas. Siswa melaporkan meningkatnya kepercayaan diri,

berkurangnya kecemasan, serta motivasi yang lebih kuat ketika strategi multibahasa diterapkan dalam pembelajaran. Data wawancara lebih lanjut menunjukkan bahwa siswa mengandalkan repertoar multibahasa mereka untuk memahami input bahasa Inggris yang kompleks, mengekspresikan ide dengan lebih bebas, dan secara aktif berpartisipasi dalam diskusi kelas. Meskipun beberapa kasus interferensi bahasa teridentifikasi, kejadian tersebut juga mencerminkan berkembangnya kesadaran metalinguistik serta peluang untuk pembelajaran korektif. Studi ini memberikan bukti empiris dari konteks EFL di Indonesia, menegaskan bahwa pedagogi multibahasa yang terstruktur dan terarah dapat memaksimalkan keterlibatan dan hasil belajar bahasa siswa. Temuan ini menyarankan bahwa multibahasa harus diakui sebagai sumber daya instruksional yang berharga, bukan hambatan, dan guru dianjurkan untuk menerapkan strategi translanguaging terpadu guna memperkuat pemahaman, motivasi, dan akurasi berbahasa.

Kata kunci: multilibahasa, konteks EFL, translanguaging.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalised and migration-rich world, multilingualism has become a defining social reality, especially in educational environments. Students across secondary schools increasingly bring diverse linguistic repertoires—encompassing mother tongues, regional dialects, national lingua francas, and foreign languages—into classroom interactions. This multiplicity of languages influences students' identity construction, social integration, and classroom participation. For instance, Bailey, Parrish, and Pierce (Liando et al., 2023) found that even “monolingual” students in English secondary schools were regularly exposed to multiple languages through peers and media, shaping their perceptions of multilingualism and linguistic identity. These findings underscore how multilingualism functions not merely as an individual attribute but as a pervasive social phenomenon that affects the lived experiences of learners in secondary education.

Within the specific context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, multilingualism poses both opportunities and challenges. In multilingual classrooms, students may experience limited authentic exposure to English outside school, which can slow their progress in developing communicative competence. A recent study of

Spanish secondary EFL learners revealed that out-of-school exposure to English—through media, online communication, or entertainment—was positively correlated with higher academic achievement in English (Erling & Brummer, 2023). This aligns with concerns in Indonesia and similar EFL contexts, where English is typically confined to classroom learning and students' daily lives are dominated by local or national languages. Consequently, teachers must navigate how multilingualism shapes engagement, attitudes, and language development, balancing the tension between maintaining home-language identities and achieving English proficiency.

However, pedagogical responses to multilingualism vary widely. Some education systems still adopt monolingual policies that implicitly treat students' linguistic diversity as a deficit rather than a resource. As Liando, Dallyono, Tatipang, and Lengkoan (Liando et al., 2023) observed in an Indonesian EFL classroom, translanguaging—strategically using students' local and national languages—proved to be a powerful pedagogical scaffold for English learning. Their findings challenge deficit discourses by illustrating that learners' linguistic repertoires can serve as bridges for comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative confidence. In this sense, multilingualism becomes not an obstacle but a

dynamic tool that enhances language learning when appropriately leveraged.

Theoretically, the relationship between multilingualism and language learning outcomes can be viewed through cognitive, affective, and sociocultural lenses. Multilingualism is often linked to greater cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness, which can facilitate cross-linguistic transfer and problem-solving in learning additional languages (Calafato, 2025). Empirically, recent activity from Norway demonstrates that multilingualism moderates the relationship between EFL learners' grit, enjoyment, and literacy achievement. Multilingual students who showed high levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and perseverance tended to perform better in literacy tasks than their monolingual peers, indicating that multilingualism strengthens motivational and affective pathways to achievement. Such findings highlight the intricate interplay between multilingualism and psychological dimensions of second language learning.

Similar insights have emerged from the Indonesian context (Ratminingsih et al., 2024) found that EFL students in Bali who perceived translanguaging positively also demonstrated higher English achievement levels. These learners reported that the ability to switch between English, Indonesian, and Balinese reduced anxiety and fostered deeper understanding. Likewise, (Cahya et al., 2023) reported a positive correlation between students' multilingual practices and their English proficiency in university settings, underscoring that multilingual exposure enhances both receptive and productive language skills. Together, these studies reaffirm that multilingualism—when integrated into pedagogy—can meaningfully influence English language development outcomes.

Beyond individual learning, institutional factors such as teachers' attitudes and school policies profoundly affect how multilingualism is handled in the classroom. (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2023) emphasized that emotional variables such as motivation, enjoyment, and perseverance are tightly connected to classroom practices. When teachers recognize and validate students' multilingual backgrounds, they create a more inclusive environment that encourages participation and resilience. Conversely, restrictive English-only policies can suppress learner confidence and hinder communicative risk-taking, ultimately limiting language development. This highlights the importance of teacher training and policy alignment to embrace multilingualism as a pedagogical strength.

Despite these advances, notable activity gaps persist. Many prior studies—particularly those in European and tertiary contexts—focus on learner beliefs and practices without explicitly examining how multilingualism influences English proficiency in secondary EFL settings. In Indonesia, while translanguaging activity is expanding, few studies have explored the direct links between students' multilingual profiles and measurable English language development. Therefore, key questions remain: How does students' ability in multiple languages facilitate or hinder their English learning? What mechanisms—identity negotiation, cross-linguistic transfer, exposure, or teacher mediation—drive these effects? Addressing these questions is essential for creating equitable, evidence-based approaches to English teaching in multilingual societies.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to investigate how multilingualism among secondary-school students influences their English language development in an EFL context, with a specific focus on Indonesia. The objectives are fourfold: (1) to describe students' multilingual profiles; (2) to examine

the relationship between multilingualism and English language development. By centring multilingualism as a core analytic variable, this activity extends prior studies by integrating social, cognitive, and pedagogical dimensions. Ultimately, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of multilingualism in EFL learning and offers practical strategies for teachers and policymakers to harness linguistic diversity as a resource for more effective English education.

METHOD

This study employed a mix method design. The mix method design is chosen to get more understanding on the phenomenon happened. This approach is particularly suited for addressing the activity questions. The activity focusing on a single secondary school where students commonly use regional languages, Bahasa Indonesia, and learn English at school. The school was selected purposively due to its multilingual student population and established. This context provides a fertile ground for investigating how multilingual practices emerge and shape English learning processes. This study was conducted with class XI students at SMKS Kesehatan Rambah Samo on 11th-12th October 2025. The participants include 30 multilingual secondary students involve in filling the questionnaires and 5 students was selected through purposive sampling based on their language backgrounds and engagement in English instruction to participate for interview. The instruments used were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The data from questionnaires analysed using descriptive statistic and categorize based on their score. Meanwhile, the interviews were analyzed into 3 stages (Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014): data condensation, data display, and

conclusion drawing/verification. The conceptual framework draws, as follows:

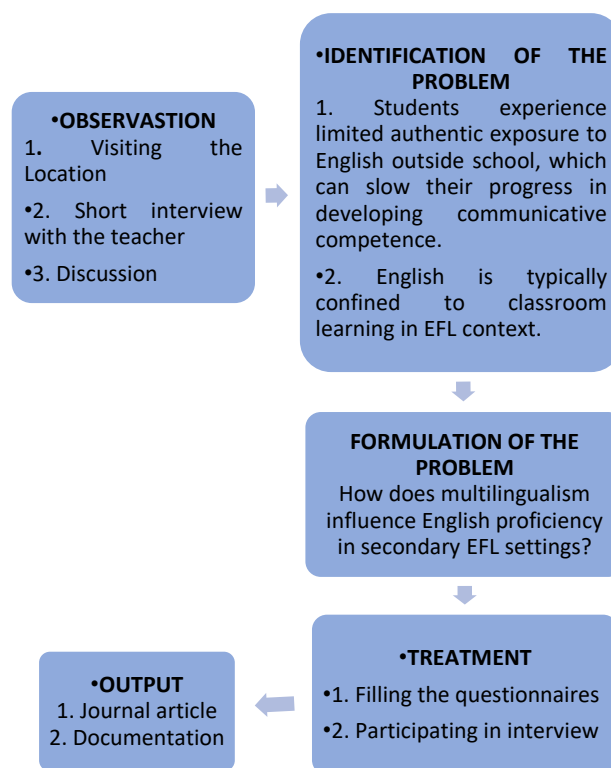


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is consisted of the findings and discussion section. The finding presents the result of questionnaires and interview results.

1. Multilingual Practices Among Secondary Students in EFL Classrooms

The result of multilingual use by the students is presented as below:

Table 1. Multilingual Practice among Secondary Students in EFL Classrooms

No	Statements	Mean	Interpretation
1	I often use my first language (L1) to understand	4.32	Very High

	English vocabulary.		
2	I mix my local language and English when talking with classmates.	4.18	High
3	My English teacher allows students to use Indonesian or other local languages in class.	4.05	High
4	I switch between English and my local language when I do classroom tasks.	4.21	High
5	Using multiple languages helps me express ideas better during English class discussions.	4.30	Very High
6	I prefer explanation s that combine English and my local	4.27	Very High

	language.		
7	I use my local language to help my friends understand English lessons.	4.10	High
8	I feel more confident when I can use more than one language in class.	4.20	High

From the table above, the average mean score is 4.20. It shows a high level of multilingual practice and perceived positive impact on English development. Students regularly use their first and local languages as supportive tools during English learning activities. This finding suggests that multilingualism is deeply embedded in students' classroom behavior and contributes to their linguistic and affective development.

Most students actively engage in code-switching and translanguaging practices. The highest-rated items were *"Using multiple languages helps me express ideas better"* and *"I prefer explanations that combine English and my local language,"* with means above 4.25. This indicates that multilingualism supports both comprehension and classroom interaction.

The interview data supported these quantitative findings. Several participants described how switching between languages helped them understand English more deeply. S1: *"When the teacher uses both English and Bahasa Indonesia, I can follow the lesson better because I understand the examples faster."*

S4: *“If I’m allowed to speak in both English and Indonesian, I feel less nervous and can express my ideas more freely.”*

Moreover, students described using their native language as a mental bridge for understanding English lessons.

S5: *“If the teacher explains difficult grammar only in English, I get confused. But when she uses both English and Indonesian, I understand it faster.”*

Student also shared that converting difficult English term into their L1 and L2 increase their motivation.

S2: *“I feel more enthusiastic when teacher mix English with others language I mastered to explain the material in the classroom”*

Furthermore, they used multilingual practices during collaborative work. S3, a Malay speaker, stated that mixing Malay and English during group discussions helps her participate without fear of grammatical errors.

S3: *“when I cannot understand some English material, I discuss with my friend. We mix the languages, sometimes using my mother tongue to make a clear understanding of some terms that we cannot speak in English.*

Students consistently reported that their multilingual backgrounds allow them to approach English learning more flexibly. This supports the quantitative finding that students prefer mixed-language explanations (Item 6, Mean = 4.27). The questionnaires result is in line with students interview results.

2. The Effect of Multilingualism on English Language Development

Multilingual influences students learning, it can be seen from the questionnaires results below:

Table 2. The Effect of Multilingualism

No	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
9	Using my other	4.05	High

	languages helps me understand English grammar more easily.		
10	Translating from my local language to English improves my vocabulary.	4.12	High
11	Multilingual discussions increase my motivation to learn English.	4.35	Very High
12	Mixing languages during lessons helps me participate more actively.	4.18	High
13	My English speaking skill has improved because I relate it to my other languages.	3.98	High
14	Multilingual classroom practices help me remember English words	4.10	High

	longer.		
15	Using multiple languages in English class makes learning more enjoyable.	4.32	Very High
16	I can better understand English reading texts when I relate them to my local language.	3.90	High

The average mean score of the effect of multilingualism in learning English is 4.13. It indicates that the students were in high level. These results show that students have good effects of multilingualism. Students strongly agreed that multilingualism enhances vocabulary retention, comprehension, and motivation. The highest-rated items—*“Multilingual discussions increase my motivation to learn English”* and *“Using multiple languages makes learning more enjoyable”*—reflect the affective benefits of multilingual learning.

The qualitative interviews reinforced these findings. Students described that using multiple languages during class discussions encouraged participation and made the learning process more engaging. However, some also acknowledged challenges such as language interference, where grammatical forms from L1 occasionally affected English production.

S2: *“I sometimes use my local grammar when I speak English, especially when I translate quickly.”*

This In addition, participants expressed that multilingual classroom practices made English lessons more comfortable and less intimidating.

S4: *“When we are allowed to use Bahasa Indonesia sometimes, I feel less nervous to speak English. It feels more natural.”*

This aligns with the high mean score for Item 11 (4.35), confirming that multilingualism fosters positive emotions, participation, and learner confidence. They can express their selves better when they can deal with the languages without worry about making mistakes and in choosing the appropriate words.

Some students acknowledged challenges in maintaining English accuracy due to interference from local languages. Student (S3) admitted:

S3: *“Sometimes I mix grammar rules from my local language with English. I realize it’s a mistake, but it happens when I translate too quickly.”*

Students also expressed that multilingualism strengthens their vocabulary development. Many reported that translating English terms into their L1 promotes better memory retention. S5, a Malay–Indonesian bilingual student, stated that converting new vocabulary into Malay and Indonesian helps him internalize words more effectively

S5: *“If I connect the meaning of the words into Malay, then into Indonesian, the words will be long last in my brain.”*

This perception aligns with the widespread belief among students that multilingual translation is not a sign of weakness but a strategic step toward mastering English vocabulary.

In the other hand, students face the difficulty in using the English as a foreign learner because of the different forms and rules of the languages. However, students viewed this as a temporary learning stage, which can be

overcome through teacher guidance and exposure.



Figure 2. Distribute the questionnaires

Discussion

The results revealed that most secondary students frequently engage in multilingual practices when learning English. A majority of respondents reported using their first language (L1) and second language (L2) to clarify vocabulary meaning, comprehend grammatical explanations, and communicate with peers during classroom interactions. The findings align with Sukarni & Nurhayati (2021) and Garcia & Wei (2020), who observed that translanguaging promotes cognitive flexibility and scaffolding in multilingual classrooms. Moreover, students show that code-switching and translanguaging are common strategies adopted by learners to facilitate understanding. In line with the study by Sukarni and Nurhayati (2021), who found that multilingual students strategically shift between languages to scaffold meaning-making in EFL classrooms. Similarly, Garcia and Wei (2020)

emphasize that translanguaging allows learners to maximize their entire linguistic repertoire, enhancing cognitive engagement and participation.

Students also perceived that the use of multiple languages made them feel more confident and expressive during discussions. This confidence stems from the flexibility to use familiar linguistic structures while experimenting with English expressions. According to Pratiwi et al. (2022), students who are allowed to use their L1 in the classroom tend to experience reduced anxiety and stronger communicative motivation. The current study supports this view, suggesting that multilingual environments create a psychologically supportive space where students can take risks in language use without fear of failure. Therefore, multilingualism functions not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a socio-affective tool that fosters participation and motivation in English learning.

The second objective explored the extent to which multilingual practices influence English language development in EFL contexts. Findings indicated that students who engaged in multilingual practices reported improvements in vocabulary retention, comprehension, and active participation. They also expressed that switching between languages helped them make meaningful connections between English and their local language structures, which in turn improved grammatical awareness. This resonates with Rashid et al. (2023), who found that bilingual and multilingual learners possess enhanced metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to analyze and internalize linguistic forms more effectively than monolingual peers. Moreover, Yuliana & Fadhilah (2022) argue that multilingual practices promote deeper conceptual understanding of language rules and patterns, ultimately leading to more sustainable proficiency growth. These results

correspond with Astuti & Kurniawan (2023), who found that inclusive multilingual practices improve students' engagement and self-efficacy in EFL contexts. This supports the caution raised by Nuraini et al. (2021) that excessive reliance on L1 may cause syntactic transfer errors.

However, not all effects were purely positive. A small proportion of respondents reported occasional confusion or interference when translating directly from their L1 to English. This aligns with the observation by Nuraini et al. (2021) that excessive dependency on the L1 may lead to syntactic and semantic transfer errors. Despite this, the overall pattern from the data shows that controlled and purposeful multilingual practices—especially those guided by the teacher—tend to enhance rather than hinder English learning outcomes. Hence, multilingualism should be recognized as a pedagogical asset rather than an obstacle in EFL instruction.

Beyond linguistic performance, the findings highlighted a strong motivational dimension associated with multilingual classroom environments. Students reported that being allowed to use multiple languages in the classroom made English learning more enjoyable and less intimidating. The sense of inclusion and identity validation stemming from the use of local languages fostered a more positive learning climate. Astuti & Kurniawan (2023) demonstrated that multilingual-inclusive pedagogy enhances learners' intrinsic motivation by recognizing their linguistic diversity as an educational strength. Likewise, Putri et al. (2022) found that the integration of students' native languages in instruction promotes engagement and classroom interaction. The present study reinforces these conclusions, showing that when students' linguistic identities are acknowledged, they become more active participants in their learning process.

Practically, these findings urge EFL teachers and curriculum designers to adopt multilingual-informed pedagogical strategies. This includes using L1 strategically for scaffolding difficult concepts, encouraging translanguaging for collaborative learning, and designing classroom activities that value linguistic plurality. As Rahman & Wulandari (2024) suggest, integrating multilingualism into EFL pedagogy fosters not only linguistic competence but also intercultural understanding, an essential competency in globalized education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclude that multilingual practices play a significant and positive role in supporting secondary students' English language development in EFL contexts. Students actively draw on their first and local languages to enhance comprehension, build vocabulary, increase confidence, and participate more meaningfully in classroom interactions. Although minor language interference occurs, it often serves as an opportunity for deeper metalinguistic reflection rather than a hindrance to learning. Both quantitative and qualitative data consistently show that multilingualism functions as an effective cognitive and affective scaffold that improves motivation, reduces anxiety, and strengthens overall language processing. Therefore, this study affirms that multilingual practice is not a pedagogical obstacle but a valuable learning resource that should be intentionally integrated into EFL instruction to optimize student engagement and linguistic outcomes.

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