

ENGLISH TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR YOUNG LEARNERS IN BILINGUAL ELEMENTARY CLASSES IN AN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study investigates English teaching strategies employed by teachers in bilingual elementary classrooms within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Bilingual programs at the primary level present distinct instructional challenges, as English functions simultaneously as a subject and as the medium of instruction for other content areas, while students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. This descriptive qualitative study was conducted at a bilingual elementary school in Indonesia, involving two English teachers and one subject teacher selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. These findings reveal six interconnected English teaching strategies: routinized English exposure, activity-based instruction, scaffolding, code-switching, differentiated instruction, and alignment between instructional practices and curriculum. These strategies function in an integrated manner, adapted to the cognitive and linguistic development stages of young learners across grade levels. The study concludes that effective bilingual English instruction at the elementary level requires context-sensitive, student-centered strategies that balance language development and content comprehension. These findings contribute empirical insights to the limited body of research on English as a Medium of Instruction at the primary level in EFL settings.

Keywords – English Teaching Strategies, Young Learners, Bilingual Elementary, EFL context, English as a Medium of Instruction

Introduction

English has become an essential global language, prompting many elementary schools teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to introduce English language instruction at an early age, particularly through bilingual education programs (F Copland, 2014). As far as bilingual classes in the early elementary grades are concerned, English not only serves as the subject but also as the medium for

teaching other subjects, which makes teachers focus on strategies that are more relevant to the cognitive, emotional, and linguistic levels of young children. Unless a suitable English teaching strategy is employed, the students may find it difficult to understand the topics, and they will not be able to sustain academic interest. Young children are more likely to learn when activities are fun, interactive, and based on contextual learning. The increasing need for English language skills has seen schools

embrace bilingual education in recent years, not just as an educational strategy but also as a competitive advantage. This has added to the challenges of teaching, as teachers must now teach content and language simultaneously. This makes classroom strategies an important aspect of the success of bilingual education programs.

Bilingual elementary education refers to an educational approach in which two languages are used as media of instruction in teaching and learning processes (Baker & Wright, 2017). In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), bilingual classes face specific challenges, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and students' strong dependence on their native language, which can affect language learning outcomes (Butler, 2015). Teachers play a crucial role in overcoming these challenges by implementing effective teaching strategies that support comprehension while maintaining exposure to the target language. This study aims to increase students' exposure to English in a meaningful context and support natural language acquisition through daily interactions in the classroom.

A particular model commonly adopted within BIL schools is "English as a Medium of Instruction" (EMI). Applying EMI in a primary-level program includes the use of English to provide content instruction while taking into consideration the limitations of students' English language proficiency." As a result, "teachers are expected to simplify their input of language, incorporate images, gestures, demonstrations, examples, etc., to ensure their students grasp what is being presented in the content." Now, when speaking about EMI, it should be mentioned that "the immersion of language is very important, although this particular factor should be adapted to the level of the

developing child." However, when speaking about the challenges posed by EMI within an elementary EFL setting, particular challenges at the teachers' level include "the limited in-school exposure to real English, their heavy reliance on their mother tongue, their potential to struggle to keep up the English usage without confusing or frustrating them.

Young learners have cognitive and affective characteristics that distinguish them from older learners. They are at a stage of development where concrete experiences, play, and sensory engagement are essential for meaningful language learning, as they are not yet ready for abstract concepts. Therefore, TEYL pedagogy emphasizes a child-centered approach, play-based activities, and interactive learning rather than formal grammar instruction (Jalolova M B, 2025; Judijanto, 2026). Effective English teaching for young children involves songs, games, visual aids, and repetition to make learning contextual, enjoyable, and appropriate for children's developmental needs (Asdar, 2024; Manara & Hidajat, 2017).

Previous research has extensively discussed English teaching strategies for young learners and has proven them to be effective in various EFL settings. However, several significant gaps remain in the existing literature. First, there is little emphasis on implementing English teaching strategies, specifically in bilingual elementary classrooms in an EFL context, where English functions not merely as a subject but also as the medium of instruction for other content areas. A systematic review of EMI research in Indonesia revealed that primary education has received limited scholarly attention compared to secondary and higher education levels, resulting in an incomplete understanding of how EMI operates for young learners in this context (Lubis &

Adara, 2025). Second, existing studies on EMI and bilingual education have predominantly been conducted at the secondary and tertiary levels, leaving a gap in knowledge about the instructional practices employed by teachers working with younger learners in elementary bilingual settings (Ernawati et al., 2021). Third, most prior studies have focused on measuring learning outcomes rather than describing in depth the actual teaching practices, classroom strategies, and learning activities that teachers develop and implement daily (Li & Zou, 2021). Fourth, qualitative investigations into how teachers navigate the dual challenge of language and content in bilingual elementary classrooms remain scarce. Therefore, the present study attempts to address these gaps by exploring the English teaching strategies implemented in bilingual elementary classrooms within an EFL context, with a focus on describing classroom practices as they naturally occur.

Bilingual education in elementary schools is characterized by a teaching model that deliberately integrates two languages to develop literacy and subject matter learning while it maintains students' mother tongue and identity. The theoretical basis in the literature emphasizes additive bilingualism and plurilingual pedagogy that utilize mother tongue resources to facilitate new language acquisition and broader learning pathways. This study describes implementations that emphasize planned scheduling of partnering languages, classroom routines that support interlingual transfer, and systematic support for both the first language (L1) and second language (L2). The types of programs frequently documented in the corpus include dual-language immersion and two-way immersion models that aim to achieve bilingualism and biliteracy through balanced or majority/minority language instruction, such as district-wide dual-language programs

that maintain heritage languages while developing English academic skills.

Teaching English to young learners requires strategies tailored to their developmental characteristics. Children have relatively short attention spans, enjoy moving around, and learn more effectively through fun and meaningful activities. Therefore, teachers need to use interactive and varied strategies such as language games, songs, picture stories, flashcards, and the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach, which involves physical movements. In addition, a routine-based approach (classroom routines) is highly recommended. Children learn well through consistent repetition, such as opening greetings, simple instructions, or closing songs that are used at every meeting. Routines help students become familiar with certain language patterns and increase their confidence in responding. Teachers can also apply scaffolding strategies, which involve providing gradual support according to students' abilities, for example, by giving examples before asking students to speak independently.

Furthermore, a safe, warm, and structured classroom environment with clear routines and a supportive teacher-student relationship will increase students' confidence to communicate. The application of differentiated instruction through adjustments to tasks, pace, and learning media allows optimal fulfillment of individual language needs and interests, while teacher professional development and the availability of resources are important supporting factors in the successful implementation of story-based and technology-based strategies in young learner classrooms. This study is guided by one main research question: What English teaching strategies are employed by teachers in bilingual elementary classrooms in an EFL

context? And how do these strategies facilitate students' language acquisition and content comprehension?

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the English teaching strategies implemented in bilingual elementary classrooms within an EFL context. This approach was selected to document and describe actual teaching practices as they occur naturally, capturing the complexity and contextual nature of classroom interaction rather than testing hypotheses or measuring outcomes. Descriptive qualitative research has been widely used in the field of English language teaching (ELT) to investigate classroom-based phenomena, including teacher strategies and learner interactions.

This study was conducted in a bilingual elementary school where English serves as both a subject and a medium of instruction. The participants consisted of two English teachers and one subject teacher covering grades one through six, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in English teaching in bilingual classes. Inclusion criteria were: (1) holding a teaching qualification in English or primary education, (2) having at least one year of experience teaching in a bilingual classroom, and (3) actively using English as a medium of instruction. Student participants were also observed as part of the natural classroom environment, though they were not directly interviewed. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when no new themes or information emerge from additional data collection (Guest et al., 2020).

Data were collected through three techniques: classroom observation, semi-

structured interviews, and document analysis, in line with the principle of triangulation to enhance credibility. Nonparticipant observations were documented, including naturally occurring teaching strategies, using an observation checklist, and field notes, recording activities, teacher language, and scaffolding strategies applied (Cohen et al., 2018). Each class was observed several times to ensure consistency and capture a representative range of teaching practices. Interviews explored teachers' perceptions of effective strategies, challenges in bilingual settings, and their rationale for chosen approaches; sessions were recorded and transcribed. Document analysis of lesson plans, syllabi, and curriculum materials provided contextual information and confirmed findings from other methods (Glenn A. Bowen, 2016).

Three research instruments were developed and used to collect data in accordance with these three data collection methods. The first tool was a checklist for classroom observations, which was created to record instructional techniques as they were used in class methodically. The checklist addressed six dimensions: opening routines, interactive and activity-based methods, scaffolding and understanding assistance, linguistic code-switching patterns, differentiated instruction, and closing routines. In order to record contextual information beyond the checklist indicators, field notes were included with every observation. A semi-structured interview guide was created as the second tool to investigate teachers' opinions, motivations, and reflections about their methods of instruction in bilingual classrooms. Four main topics are covered in this guide: difficulties and adjustments, professional reflections, scaffolding and learner assistance, and teaching methodologies. The interviews were audio recorded with participants' prior agreement,

lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes, and were verbatim transcribed. A document analysis guide is the third tool, which is used to methodically go over curriculum materials, lesson plans, and syllabi. The linguistic objectives mentioned in lesson plans, the kinds of activities and methods outlined in the curriculum, and the consistency between planned instruction and observed strategies in the classroom are some of the factors that this tool focuses on. Findings from observational and interview data are triangulated and contextualized using document analysis.

Data in this study were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach was chosen because it is flexible, systematic, and suitable for descriptive qualitative research that aims to understand complex phenomena such as English teaching strategies in bilingual classroom environments.

The analysis followed six stages. First, researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reviewing interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documents. Second, initial codes were systematically generated across the dataset. Third, codes with conceptual similarities were grouped into potential themes using a thematic map. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined against the coded extracts and full dataset, with some merged or eliminated for coherence. Fifth, each theme was given a clear definition and name. Sixth, a written analysis was produced, reporting themes with supporting evidence from observations, interviews, and documents. Triangulation across the three data sources was applied throughout to validate emerging patterns. A reflective notebook was maintained to

document analytical decisions and ensure transparency.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents an integrated analysis of classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. The findings are interpreted in relation to relevant theories and previous studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of English teaching strategies in bilingual elementary classrooms. The analysis reveals six interconnected themes: routinized English exposure, activity-based instruction, scaffolding, code-switching, differentiated instruction, and alignment between pedagogy and curriculum.

Routinized English Exposure as Meaningful Input

The findings indicate that English exposure in the classroom was systematically embedded through daily instructional routines. Both teachers consistently initiated lessons using greetings, attendance checking, stating objectives, and reviewing previous material, followed by structured closing activities. This pattern suggests that English was not merely positioned as a subject but functioned as a medium of communication within classroom interaction. For instance, during observations, teachers repeatedly used simple English expressions such as “Good Morning”, “How are you today?”, and “Let’s review our lesson,” which were consistently responded to by students across grade levels. This repeated exposure enabled students to become familiar with common classroom expressions and gradually increased their confidence in using English. However, variations were observed in how routines were pedagogically utilized. In lower-grade classes, routines are dominated by repetition and pronunciation practice, whereas in upper-grade classes, routines are expanded to

include recall-based questions that require students to produce language actively.

These findings align with (Butler, 2015) and (Sue Garton & Fiona Copland, 2019) , who argue that predictable and repetitive exposure supports young learners in internalizing language patterns. Furthermore, the use of recall activities reflects the findings of (Lestari et al., 2019),who highlight that recalling prior knowledge helps students connect prior and new learning, thereby strengthening understanding. This suggests that routinized English exposure not only provides linguistic input but also functions as a scaffold for active language use, gradually shifting students from passive recognition to active production.

Activity-Based Instruction and Developmental Adaptation

Teachers used a range of techniques, such as songs, games, stories, Total Physical Response (TPR), pair work, and multimedia. These activities were all aimed at promoting active student participation. However, there were variations according to the students' level of development. Early grade instruction focused on songs, images, and physical objects, enabling students to make connections between language and their sensory experiences. By contrast, in upper grades, teachers focused on communicative activities (discussion, dialogues, presentations) to promote more independent language production. For example, in lower-grade classes, students were observed responding physically to commands such as “Stand up” or “Touch your head”, indicating comprehension through movement. In upper-grade classes, students were able to participate in short dialogues and group discussions, demonstrating a higher level of language use.

This development reflects a shift from experience-based learning toward communicative competence. In line with this, it was found that strategies such as games, discussions, and brainstorming significantly increased student participation and motivation (Lestari et al., 2019). Furthermore, researchers emphasize that language learning in the early stages should integrate structured instruction with game-based activities, as children learn more effectively when language is embedded in meaningful and enjoyable (Farida & Kalisa, 2025). Therefore, the activity-based instruction in this study demonstrates how teaching strategies are adapted to learners' cognitive and linguistic development. These findings indicate that activity-based instruction facilitates language acquisition by aligning learning strategies with learners' cognitive development, enabling a gradual transition from comprehension to.

Scaffolding as a Core Instructional Strategy

Scaffolding was considered to be an essential part of teaching practices. Learning was supported through modelling, repetition, clear and simple language, and questions. This facilitated the transition of students from "guided" to independent learning. There were differences in the scaffolding approaches across grade levels. The lower-grade teacher emphasized repetition and modelling, particularly for abstract concepts. In contrast, the higher-grade teacher used a step-by-step approach, beginning with visuals, followed by vocabulary, and then sentence construction. During classroom observations, teachers often demonstrated target sentences before asking students to repeat or modify them, such as modelling “This is a book” before asking students to describe objects independently. This gradual release of

responsibility helped students build confidence in producing language.

Theoretically, the application of scaffolding in this study can be understood through Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) framework, in which learners require support to perform beyond their independent capabilities. In bilingual classrooms, the provision of guidance becomes increasingly important, as students process language and subject matter simultaneously (Coonan et al., 2018). Thus, scaffolding in this study functions as a mechanism that facilitates language development by bridging the gap between students' current abilities and expected learning outcomes.

Code-Switching as a Strategic Pedagogical Tool

Code-switching is used strategically to enhance students' understanding. English remains the primary language of instruction, and teachers systematically combine English and Indonesian when students encounter difficulties. In certain contexts, regional languages are also used as a tool to provide additional explanations. This practice demonstrates a planned pedagogical function, so that code-switching cannot be viewed as a spontaneous phenomenon, but rather as a learning strategy consciously employed to support the effectiveness of the learning process. For instance, when students showed confusion, teachers briefly switched to Indonesian to clarify instructions or explain key vocabulary, before returning to English. This practice ensured that students maintained comprehension without losing exposure to the target language.

This argument aligns with the theoretical framework of translanguaging, which emphasizes that learners benefit from

utilizing their entire linguistic repertoire in the process of meaning construction (Mateus, 2014). Thus, code-switching can be considered a useful pedagogical accommodation, rather than a sign of a deficiency in the use of the target language. The implications of the findings underscore the importance of a flexible teaching approach in the context of foreign language learning.

Differentiated Instruction in Heterogeneous Classrooms

Differences in students' English proficiency levels necessitate the implementation of varied instructional approaches. In lower-grade classrooms, teachers tended to group students based on their ability levels while facilitating peer-assisted learning. In contrast, in upper-grade classrooms, teachers adopted mixed-ability grouping combined with continuous and active monitoring of the learning process. Observations showed that higher-proficiency students often supported their peers during group activities, helping explain tasks or vocabulary, which created a collaborative learning environment. Lower-proficiency students appeared more engaged and less anxious when working with peers.

This approach reflects adaptive pedagogical practices aimed at accommodating the diversity of students' linguistic competencies and educational backgrounds. Peer interactions play a crucial role in fostering a collaborative learning environment. Furthermore, such engagement helps reduce students' anxiety and encourages more active participation in classroom activities.

These findings indicate that peer engagement is a key component in supporting students' meaning-making processes. Therefore, the differentiated instruction in this study highlights the importance of flexible,

inclusive, and student-centered pedagogical strategies in the context of a bilingual classroom.

Alignment between Instructional Practices and Curriculum

The observations of teachers' strategies in the classroom are closely aligned with the curriculum in the analysis of lesson plans, syllabuses, and curriculum documents. Lesson plans showed evidence of communicative language objectives, vocabulary learning activities, and thematic lessons, which were observed in the classroom. The teachers' lesson plans were in line with the school curriculum standards, but could respond to students' needs. The tasks in the lesson plans included progressive tasks, activity-based learning, and content and language integration in English, which reflect the bilingual program's goals for language and content integration.

This alignment is consistent with findings from previous studies that emphasize the importance of coherence between curriculum design and classroom teaching practices in bilingual contexts and in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL). (Richards & Farrell, 2011) argue that effective language teaching requires systematic planning that links curriculum goals to teaching practices, thereby ensuring that teachers' daily activities meaningfully support broader educational goals. Similarly, curriculum coherence—defined as the extent to which learning activities, instructional materials, and assessment reinforce one another—is a critical factor in the success of language programs, particularly in multilingual contexts where students simultaneously develop language skills and content knowledge.

Furthermore, the alignment observed in this study reflects the principles of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), in which content and language objectives are systematically planned and integrated into learning activities (Do Coyle et al., 2010). In the context of bilingual elementary schools, this integration requires teachers not only to deliver subject matter in English but also to intentionally plan for language development within each lesson. Teachers align language and content objectives in their lesson planning. Students demonstrate greater improvement in both academic achievement and language proficiency compared to settings where content and language are treated as separate domains. The curriculum analyzed in this study reflects this integrated approach, with language objectives embedded alongside subject-specific learning targets within each thematic unit.

Our analysis of these documents indicates that the curriculum materials provide a systematic sequence for language development across all grade levels, with vocabulary, sentence structures, and language functions arranged sequentially to facilitate the development of language skills. Language curriculum materials should offer a sequence of development aligned with students' cognitive and linguistic development, as seen in the tiered thematic units in this study. Teachers' commitment to this curriculum sequence, while adapting their teaching practices to the classroom context, demonstrates their pedagogical autonomy and expertise

The alignment between teaching and curriculum design shows that curriculum implementation is contextualised. Teachers do not simply execute the curriculum but also interpret and modify it to suit the learning needs in the classroom. In this research, teachers still relied on the existing curriculum

design while using their professional judgement in choosing and adapting learning activities to suit the students' developmental needs. The results indicate that alignment is not simply a matter of following a plan but is a dynamic and reflective teaching practice. In this process, teachers contribute to closing the gap between the curriculum and classroom learning practices. Thus, the alignment found in this study demonstrates the significance of teachers' professionalism in implementing the curriculum goals into effective, responsive, and adaptive teaching practices in the learning environment of a bilingual elementary school.

Conclusions

This study reveals that English teaching strategies in bilingual elementary classrooms in an EFL context are implemented through six main practices: routinized English exposure, activity-based instruction, scaffolding, code-switching, differentiated instruction, and alignment between instructional practices and curriculum. These strategies are not applied separately but function in an integrated manner to support both language acquisition and content comprehension among young learners.

The research suggests that routinized English input offers regular and meaningful exposure to the language, allowing students to learn language structures through classroom interactions. Activity-based teaching and learning increase student engagement and

participation through the match between learners' cognitive and developmental needs and the learning activities. Scaffolding is essential to support progressive learning, enabling students to transition from guided to independent language use. Code-switching is used as a teaching strategy to ensure comprehension and minimise learning difficulties while maintaining English as the target language.

Furthermore, differentiated instruction addresses the diversity of students' proficiency levels and learning needs, promoting inclusive and equitable classroom participation. The alignment between instructional practices and curriculum demonstrates that effective bilingual education requires coherence between planned objectives and actual classroom implementation. Teachers not only follow the curriculum but also adapt and interpret it based on classroom realities, reflecting their professional competence and pedagogical flexibility.

Overall, the study demonstrates that effective English teaching in bilingual elementary classrooms is characterized by the integration of multiple context-sensitive strategies that are responsive to learners' needs, developmental stages, and the demands of bilingual instruction. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) at the primary level, particularly in EFL contexts where empirical studies remain limited.

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