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Implementation of Bilingual Learning to Support Student's English Language Abilities in Elementary Schools: A Narrative Literature Review

Tiarnita Maria Sarjani Br. Siregar[1*], Sevvi Khadijah[2], Jopani Ramadhani[3], Siti Sarah Harahap[4], Abraem Prayenta Sinulingga[5]

[1,2,3,4,5] Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia.

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Korespondensi:

Phone: +6282258335473

Abstract: Bilingual learning that combines Indonesian and English is increasingly used in elementary schools, yet its implementation and outcomes are often described in general terms. This article reviews the literature on how bilingual learning is implemented in elementary schools, which teaching strategies are associated with students' English skills, and which challenges are reported. The study used a qualitative descriptive narrative literature review of 23 sources (books and journal articles) published between 1978 and 2025. Sources were selected for their relevance to bilingual learning, English language skills, and the elementary school level, and were analyzed thematically. The reviewed literature indicates that gradual language alternation, translanguaging, simple English classroom instructions, visual media, songs, games, and guided speaking activities are commonly associated with greater exposure to English, participation, and confidence, particularly in vocabulary, listening, and speaking. Cognitive benefits are also reported, but they appear to depend on adequate support for both languages. The challenges identified include uneven teacher English proficiency, differences in students' initial abilities, and limited teaching materials. These findings suggest that bilingual learning requires careful planning, teacher training, adequate resources, and family support. Because the evidence comes from a limited and varied set of sources, it should not be generalized without further empirical research.

Keywords: Bilingual Education, English Language Learning, Elementary School, Translanguaging, Literature Review

Abstrak: Pembelajaran dwibahasa yang menggabungkan bahasa Indonesia dan Inggris semakin banyak digunakan di sekolah dasar, namun implementasi dan hasilnya sering dijelaskan secara umum. Artikel ini mengulas literatur tentang bagaimana pembelajaran dwibahasa diterapkan di sekolah dasar, strategi pengajaran mana yang terkait dengan kemampuan bahasa Inggris siswa, dan tantangan apa yang dilaporkan. Studi ini menggunakan tinjauan literatur naratif deskriptif kualitatif dari 23 sumber (buku dan artikel jurnal) yang diterbitkan antara tahun 1978 dan 2025. Sumber-sumber dipilih karena relevansinya terhadap pembelajaran dwibahasa, keterampilan bahasa Inggris, dan tingkat sekolah dasar, dan dianalisis secara tematik. Literatur yang ditinjau menunjukkan bahwa pergantian bahasa secara bertahap, translinguage, instruksi kelas bahasa Inggris sederhana, media visual, lagu, permainan, dan aktivitas berbicara terpandu umumnya dikaitkan dengan paparan bahasa Inggris yang lebih besar, partisipasi, dan kepercayaan diri, terutama dalam kosakata, mendengarkan, dan berbicara. Manfaat kognitif juga dilaporkan, tetapi tampaknya bergantung pada dukungan yang memadai untuk kedua bahasa tersebut. Tantangan yang diidentifikasi meliputi kemampuan bahasa Inggris guru yang tidak merata, perbedaan kemampuan awal siswa, dan materi pengajaran yang terbatas. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran dwibahasa memerlukan perencanaan yang matang, pelatihan guru, sumber daya yang memadai, dan dukungan keluarga. Karena bukti berasal dari sumber yang terbatas dan beragam, hal ini tidak boleh digeneralisasi tanpa penelitian empiris lebih lanjut.

Kata kunci: Pendidikan Bilingual, Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, Sekolah Dasar, Translinguage, Tinjauan Pustaka

Email: sevvikhadijah3@gmail.com

Introduction

English proficiency is an important competency for students in a globalized world, yet many elementary school students still struggle to build vocabulary, understand language structure, and use English in real communication. One approach that has attracted attention is bilingual learning, which uses two languages as the medium of instruction. This approach emphasizes not only linguistic aspects but also critical thinking, cross-cultural understanding, and the ability to receive and convey information in two languages in a balanced manner. In the Indonesian context, bilingual learning usually combines Indonesian and English, and it is believed to help students improve their English without neglecting their mother tongue (Cummins, 2000; Genesee, 2008).

Several studies report positive results. Bilingual approaches are reported to improve students' vocabulary, speaking skills, and understanding of English structures (Yuliana, 2020; Hapsari & Lestari, 2022), and the use of English in integrated subject learning has been linked to stronger literacy and communicative confidence (Mariani & Safitri, 2019). Translanguaging, the dynamic use of both languages, is also argued to give students access to broader knowledge through the language they know best (García & Wei, 2014). Bilingual learning has likewise been examined in local elementary school settings, for example by Andriani (2025).

The literature, however, does not describe bilingual learning as uniformly beneficial. Cummins' (2000) threshold hypothesis suggests that the cognitive benefits of bilingualism depend on students reaching a sufficient level of competence in both languages. In Indonesia, implementation is constrained by a limited number of teachers competent in bilingual teaching, a lack of appropriate materials, and the absence of a standardized model for elementary schools (Setiawan & Nurlaksana, 2021). Models also differ considerably, from early bilingual education and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) to translanguaging and immersion (Mehisto et al., 2008), so findings from one model cannot be applied directly to another.

Previous work therefore tends to address single skills, single schools, or theoretical foundations separately. There appears to be a need to bring together, in one review, the teaching strategies used in elementary bilingual classrooms, the indicators of English language development associated with them, and the challenges of implementation. This article addresses that need by answering the following research questions:

RQ1. How is bilingual learning implemented in elementary schools according to the reviewed literature?

RQ2. Which improvements in students' English language skills are associated with bilingual learning?

RQ3. Which challenges and supporting factors are reported in implementing bilingual learning?

The findings are expected to serve as a reference for schools, teachers, and curriculum developers in designing bilingual learning that is contextual and suited to the needs of elementary education in Indonesia.

Method

This study is a narrative literature review with a qualitative descriptive approach (Snyder, 2019; Sugiyono, 2023). It does not follow a systematic review protocol. The data are secondary data, namely documents produced by other authors, in the form of books and journal articles on bilingual learning and English language skills (Sugiyono, 2023).

Sources were searched through online academic sources and library resources using the keywords "bilingual learning," "bilingual education," "translanguaging," "CLIL," "English language skills," and "elementary school," together with their Indonesian equivalents. The publications reviewed span 1978 to 2025. Sources were included if they (a) discussed bilingual learning or bilingual teaching, (b) addressed English language skills or the theoretical basis of second language learning, (c) concerned the elementary or primary school level or provided the theoretical foundation for it, and (d) were books or scholarly articles. Sources were excluded if the full text was unavailable or if they had no scholarly basis. Relevance was assessed by reading titles, abstracts, and full texts. The final set comprised 23 sources, consisting of books and journal articles, of which six are studies set in or about Indonesia (Andriani, 2025; Hapsari & Lestari, 2022; Mariani & Safitri, 2019; Musthafa, 2010; Setiawan & Nurlaksana, 2021; Yuliana, 2020).

The analysis followed the steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The sources were read repeatedly, recurring ideas were coded, and the codes were grouped into five themes: implementation models, participation and confidence, language skills (vocabulary, listening, and speaking), cognitive development, and challenges and supporting factors. Findings were then compared across sources to identify agreement and differences, and were summarized in a synthesis table (Table 1). Only findings that come from the analyzed sources are reported, and any classroom examples given are illustrative.

Results and Discussion

Results

Table 1 summarizes the main points that emerged from the reviewed literature for each theme. The themes are described in turn below.

Table 1. Synthesis of the Reviewed Literature

Theme	Sources	Main point reported in the literature
Implementation models	Baker (2011); Mehisto et al. (2008); García (2009); García & Wei (2014)	Bilingual instruction ranges from early bilingual education, CLIL, and immersion to translanguaging. In elementary classes the second language is usually introduced gradually, while the first language supports understanding.
Participation and confidence	Krashen (1985); Cameron (2001); Mariani & Safitri (2019)	A comfortable, low-anxiety environment in which the first language may be used when needed, together with interactive activities such as games and songs, is associated with willingness to use English and communicative confidence.
Vocabulary	Yuliana (2020); Hapsari & Lestari (2022); Nation (2013); Webb & Nation (2017); Paivio (2006)	Bilingual approaches are reported to improve vocabulary. Learning is supported by visual media and meaningful contexts that connect words with images (dual coding).
Listening and speaking	Harmer (2007); Thornbury (2005); Vygotsky (1978); Yuliana (2020); Hapsari & Lestari (2022)	Repeated exposure through classroom routines supports listening. Early speaking development emphasizes fluency and confidence over accuracy and benefits from scaffolding by the teacher.
Cognitive development	Bialystok (2011); Cummins (2000); Genesee (2008)	Bilingualism is associated with attention control, shifting, working memory, and conceptual transfer between languages, but the benefits appear to depend on adequate proficiency in both languages.
Challenges and supporting factors	Setiawan & Nurlaksana (2021); Musthafa (2010); Genesee (2008)	Reported challenges include limited teacher competence, a lack of teaching materials, and the absence of a standardized model. A supportive home environment is described as a facilitating factor.

1. Implementation Models and Classroom Practices

The literature describes bilingual learning in elementary schools as a planned and gradual use of two languages. Indonesian is typically used to explain basic ideas so that students understand the learning context, while English is introduced step by step, beginning with simple classroom instructions such as “open your book” or “repeat after me.” This pattern is consistent with the gentle introduction of the second language described by Baker (2011) and with the concept of translanguaging, in which all of students’ language resources are used flexibly to build meaning and knowledge (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014). Mehisto et al. (2008) add that teachers at this level need to design lessons that support understanding of the content while developing English naturally and communicatively. Cummins (2001) argues that the relationship between the first and second languages influences literacy development: the stronger the support for the first language, the easier it is for students to acquire the second.

2. Participation, Motivation, and Confidence

Interactive activities such as games, songs, and pair dialogues are the strategies most often linked to student participation, and young learners are described as responding well to oral, meaningful, and enjoyable activities (Cameron, 2001). Planned language switching, in which the teacher changes language at specific moments to clarify meaning or stress important concepts, is described as a way of integrating meaning and language structure (Baker, 2011). Allowing Indonesian when students face difficulty is associated with psychological comfort and greater willingness to try English, which is consistent with Krashen’s (1985) affective filter hypothesis. Mariani and Safitri (2019) likewise link English-supported learning with students’ speaking confidence.

3. Vocabulary, Listening, and Speaking Skills

For vocabulary, Yuliana (2020) and Hapsari and Lestari (2022) report that bilingual approaches improve young learners' vocabulary and speaking. Nation (2013) notes that vocabulary learning is more successful when words are connected to visual contexts and meaningful activities, and Webb and Nation (2017) emphasize repeated, meaningful encounters with words. The use of pictures, flashcards, and videos is consistent with dual coding theory, which holds that verbal and visual information reinforce each other (Paivio, 2006).

For listening, Harmer (2007) argues that repeated exposure to the target language in everyday activities speeds up listening development, so routines such as "please sit down" or "raise your hand" can gradually be understood without translation. For speaking, Thornbury (2005) explains that in the early stages the main focus is fluency and confidence to communicate, with accuracy improving gradually. Guided speaking, in which the teacher provides model sentences, reflects Vygotsky's (1978) idea of scaffolding, where teacher assistance helps students complete tasks they cannot yet do independently. In bilingual settings, the first language is also said to reduce cognitive load and thereby encourage students to attempt communication in English.

4. Cognitive Development

Bialystok (2011) reports that children accustomed to two languages show advantages in attention control, shifting, and working memory. Genesee (2008) describes bilingual education as supporting conceptual transfer from the first to the second language, which makes it easier for students to connect concepts across two language systems in subjects such as mathematics, science, and thematic learning. These benefits are, however, conditional. Cummins' (2000) threshold hypothesis implies that they depend on students having adequate competence in both languages.

5. Challenges and Supporting Factors

Three challenges recur in the literature. The first is teachers' English proficiency: not all teachers can provide consistent instruction in English, a problem identified by Musthafa (2010) and Setiawan and Nurlaksana (2021). The second is variation in students' abilities, since students with weak literacy in their first language may become confused when instructions are given in two languages and therefore need repetition, additional visual materials, or simpler explanations. The third is the availability of media and learning resources. Teaching in two languages requires engaging aids such as posters, flashcards, and videos, and schools lacking them often force teachers to develop their own materials (Setiawan & Nurlaksana, 2021). As a supporting factor, Genesee (2008) argues that a supportive home environment can accelerate second language learning, which suggests that parents' positive attitudes toward bilingual programs are an important resource.

Discussion

In answer to the first research question, the reviewed sources converge on a model in which both languages are used deliberately rather than randomly. Indonesian provides the foundation for understanding, and English is introduced gradually through simple instructions, routines, and content-based activities. This agrees with the interdependence between first and second language development described by Cummins (2001) and with the view of translanguaging as a resource rather than a problem (García & Wei, 2014). Local studies such as Andriani (2025) show that this topic is being examined in Indonesian elementary school settings, although the reviewed local studies remain few compared with the theoretical literature.

Regarding the second research question, the most consistent finding is that bilingual learning is associated with greater participation, confidence, and development of vocabulary, listening, and speaking. The sources offer complementary explanations for this pattern: a lower affective filter (Krashen, 1985), repeated exposure to comprehensible input (Harmer, 2007), teacher scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978), and the support of visual context (Nation, 2013; Paivio, 2006). Taken together, they suggest that gains are more likely when the use of English is frequent, meaningful, and emotionally safe for students. It is important to note that the early emphasis is on fluency and confidence rather than grammatical accuracy (Thornbury, 2005), so the indicators of English development at this level should include participation, vocabulary, and the ability to follow instructions and express simple ideas, not only formal accuracy.

The strength of these claims should nevertheless be moderated. Many of the sources are theoretical books, and only a limited number are empirical studies conducted in Indonesian elementary schools, so the evidence does not allow strong conclusions about the size of the improvement. The cognitive advantages reported by Bialystok (2011) and Genesee (2008) are also conditional on adequate proficiency in both languages (Cummins, 2000). The literature further shows that outcomes may differ across models such as CLIL, immersion, and translanguaging (Mehisto et al., 2008), which is why findings should be interpreted in relation to the specific model used.

Concerning the third research question, the challenges reported are interrelated. Limited teacher proficiency, uneven student readiness, and scarce materials (Musthafa, 2010; Setiawan & Nurlaksana, 2021) all affect how consistently the two languages can be used. This implies that teacher training, the development of simple and contextual materials, and communication with parents are practical conditions for effective implementation, not optional additions. The article contributes by bringing teaching strategies, indicators of English development, and implementation challenges into one synthesis for the elementary school level, which can serve as a starting point for designing bilingual programs and for empirical studies that test these relationships.

Several practical implications follow from the synthesis. First, teachers can start with Indonesian explanations of the main ideas and then introduce English through short, repeated classroom instructions before moving to longer speaking tasks.

Second, visual media, songs, and games are useful because they make English input meaningful and enjoyable, which fits the principles of young learner pedagogy (Cameron, 2001). Third, the methods and techniques selected, and the way learning is evaluated, should be aligned with the learning objectives and the chosen bilingual model (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Finally, schools need to treat teachers' English proficiency and the availability of materials as part of program planning, since these factors determine whether the strategies above can be applied consistently.

Conclusion

The reviewed literature indicates that bilingual learning in elementary schools is associated with improvements in students' English language skills. It is most often implemented through the gradual introduction of English alongside Indonesian, translanguaging, simple English instructions, visual media, and interactive activities such as games, songs, and paired dialogues. These practices are linked to greater participation and confidence and to development in vocabulary, listening, and speaking. Cognitive benefits are also reported, but they appear to depend on adequate competence in both languages.

The main challenges are uneven teacher English proficiency, differences in students' initial abilities, and limited learning media, while careful planning, teacher competence, learning resources, and family support facilitate implementation. These findings have practical implications for schools and teachers, namely that bilingual programs should be accompanied by teacher training, the provision of contextual materials, and parental involvement.

This review has limitations. The number and type of sources are limited, many are theoretical, contexts and bilingual models vary, and the review followed a narrative rather than a systematic protocol, so the findings cannot be generalized. Future research should use systematic review procedures, examine specific bilingual models in Indonesian elementary schools through empirical studies, measure language development with clear indicators, and include teachers', students', and parents' perspectives.

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