

Students' Attitudes and Opinions on the Use of Their Mother Tongue in An EFL Classroom

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Abstract. Teaching EFL to EFL learners who have their first experience in learning EFL is challenging for the EFL teachers. To enhance the students' understanding of the materials, the teacher integrates the languages they understand into her teaching. To shape students' positive attitudes toward the teacher's use of their languages, a teacher determines which language should be incorporated into the classroom to suit the students' needs. This research revealed the attitudes of VIIIA students at SMPN 1 Salem toward their teacher's use of their regional and national languages. The data were collected using observation, questionnaires, and interviews. The result showed the students' positive attitudes towards Sundanese and Indonesian, since it helps them learn English. They feel comfortable learning English using the languages they understand.

Keywords: EFL learners, EFL teacher, EFL classroom, attitude

1 Research Background

Indonesia serves as an ideal place for multilingual research as 17,4% of Indonesians speak three or more languages [1]. Comprising 38 provinces with more than 1,340 ethnic groups and 742 local languages [2], Indonesians speak regional languages as their mother tongue or first language derived from their parents, and Bahasa Indonesia as their national language or second language studied at school.

To enable students to master Bahasa Indonesia, the central government officially made public schools teach and use it as a medium of instruction. To support students in preserving their local language, the local government formally instructs public schools in every province to include their local language as local content. To be part of a global society, students learn English as a foreign language at school, as it is not spoken as a first or second language [3].

English was taught in 1914 at junior high school and in 1918 at senior high school [4]. It was taught as an optional subject in elementary schools in the 2004 Competency-Based Curriculum and the 2006 School-Based Curriculum to teach English from an early age [5]. English was excluded from elementary schools in the 2013 Curriculum to enable students to master a national language before learning an international language [6]. The 2023 Merdeka Curriculum puts English as an optional subject in elementary schools [7]. The absence of English in elementary school poses a challenge for English teachers at junior high schools since students learn English for

the first time. Some teachers face this challenge by utilizing the students' mother tongue. This research examines their attitudes and opinions towards it.

2 Methods

Junior high school students who learn English for the first time might feel confused when it is taught in English. Some Indonesian English teachers help them understand the material using their acquired language(s). They usually use Indonesian to re-explain what they have already explained in English by translating English into Indonesian, mixing English and Indonesian, switching to Indonesian, or using English and Indonesian fluidly. When students demand more explanation in a language they understand, a local language can be used to give information that cannot be fully explained in English or Indonesian. Adopting the students' acquired language(s) helps students to absorb the materials while respecting their feelings and perceptions about their lives. It connects them to their world as their acquired languages accommodate what they express.

For EFL students, the ideology of prohibiting their acquired languages can threaten their well-being as non-native speakers [8]. This weak form of bilingualism minimizes the benefit of using students' acquired languages in EFL teaching [9]. The strong form of bilingualism is suitable to reach the government's goal of preserving local languages, mastering the national language, and acquiring an international language [10]. Thus, the third language competence is built, but the first and second language acquisition are not threatened by it. They understand when to exclude part of their linguistic repertoire when they communicate with someone who does not share a similar linguistic repertoire [11].

Within a strong form of bilingualism, students are allowed to use their acquired languages to comprehend the material and develop their competence [10]. Students of junior high school who speak local and national languages are consciously or unconsciously using them during the EFL class. They can exclude particular language they consider improper or inappropriate from being included in the classroom. This commonly occurs in areas where students' acquired languages have different social and political statuses, constructed by the community [12]. When English is used as a foreign language with limited exposure in daily lives, disregarding students' acquired language(s) demotivates them in learning English, and it is detrimental to their literacy [13].

Related to the use of students' acquired languages in an EFL classroom, the teachers' language choice is determined by the students' attitudes and opinions towards the languages. The social and political constructed statuses of those languages by the society might prohibit students from optimizing them in learning English [14]. To understand students' perception of their teachers' language usage, the teacher should figure out their attitudes toward it [12]. Thus, teachers must appropriately select the language to support students' EFL learning.

A language is named based on its social-political background, referring to the entities in a society who name the language [15]. Thus, the language users' perception of the language is influenced by the social-political background, constructed by the society. This study aimed to reveal the students' attitudes and opinions toward their

teacher's language usage. It is done by observing the students' language background and their perception of the languages.

This is a qualitative and quantitative study with a mixed-method procedure to collect data [16]. Two questionnaires, comprising open-ended and closed-ended questions [12], are used as an instrument to collect data. It is distributed to an English teacher to know how and why she used the students' acquired languages in her EFL classroom. It is shared with 27 students of Grade 8 Class A to show how and why they use regional and national languages in their EFL classroom. The respondents are an English teacher and her students at a public junior high school in Salem Sub-District, Brebes District, Central Java Province. They were specifically selected [17] to expose the local language usage by a teacher and her students at school, including in the EFL classroom. The questionnaires' results reveal the teacher's language choice in her EFL teaching and the students' attitudes and opinions toward their teacher's language choice in their EFL learning.

3 Result and Discussion

The first finding, which resulted from the questionnaires to the students, demonstrates the students' language background, language usage in EFL learning, as well as attitudes and opinions toward their acquired language and their teacher's language usage in EFL teaching. Questions 1 to 7 show that out of the whole students, 26 were born in Salem Sub-District, Brebes District, Central Java Province. As part of the local people, they speak Sundanese with Brebes Dialect (SBD) as their mother tongue and Indonesian as their national language (Questions 8 to 16). As part of Central Java Province, Indonesia, the school taught Javanese as a local content (*muatan lokal*) and English as a foreign language.

The students mostly speak SBD at home with families or relatives, in the neighborhood with neighbors or local people, and at school with friends, school staff, or teachers (in different politeness levels) in informal situations. They sometimes speak Indonesian at home and in the neighborhood with people who do not use SBD. The students mostly speak Indonesian at school, as the official language of school affairs. The students rarely speak Javanese, despite being taught at school, since only a limited number of the local people use the language. The students only speak English in the EFL classroom, since nobody speaks the language outside the classroom.

Questions 17 to 30 reveal the students' usage of English, Indonesian, and SBD in their EFL learning, since they have not mastered English, so they need to use Indonesian and SBD to learn English. They feel comfortable knowing that their teacher allows them to integrate those languages to learn English, and are glad that their teacher incorporates those languages into the English teaching.

The second finding, which resulted from the questionnaires for the teacher, demonstrates the teacher's language background, language usage in EFL teaching, and consideration of utilizing Indonesian and SBD in her EFL teaching. Questions 1 to 7 show that the teacher speaks Javanese with Tegal Dialect (JTD) as she was born in Tegal City; Javanese with Brebes Dialect (JBD) as she lived in Brebes District; and SBD as she has been teaching at SMPN 1 Salem for 19 years and living in Salem sub-district for the same years. JTD is spoken to her childhood friends, while JBD is spoken to the local people of Brebes District. Meanwhile, SBD is used at home, in the

neighborhood, and at school with the local people of Salem Sub-District, including the students.

Questions 8 to 17 demonstrate the teacher's usage of English, Indonesian, and SBD in her EFL teaching. English is used to expose her students to the language and to help them become fluent. Indonesian is used to explain materials that are difficult to understand after being delivered in English. SBD is used to ensure students' understanding of the explanation that was given in Indonesian. SBD is also used to express ideas or describe objects that are appropriately delivered in SBD. The students exhibit positive attitudes toward the use of their mother tongue and national language in their EFL learning and their teacher's EFL teaching. The students and the teacher consider the incorporation of their acquired languages to be beneficial for EFL learning and teaching.

As it is located next to the eastern border of West Java Province, the residents of Salem Sub-District have close contact with those of the province, the Sundanese. The residents' contact with Sundanese and the sub-district's remote location causes the residents to speak Sundanese as their mother tongue, with a particular dialect called SBD. They do not consider Javanese as their mother tongue, although Salem belongs to Brebes District, Central Java Province. Despite being the official regional language of Central Java Province, which is taught as local content, the limited usage of Javanese leads to a request for Sundanese to substitute Javanese as local content.

In the classroom, students use English, Indonesian, and SBD, as they automatically utter Indonesian and SBD when facing difficulties in speaking English (Questions 17 to 20). It is easier to mix English with the two languages, switch from English to those languages, translate the two languages into English, vice versa, or translanguaging (utilizing the three languages) when they cannot express ideas or describe objects solely in English. English is particularly used to complete tasks or finish assignments, such as performing role-plays, presenting simple topics, or guiding short discussions. As the students consider it beneficial to discuss the materials, to communicate with the teacher or classmates, and to preserve their mother tongue, the teacher supports the use of the three languages (Question 21).

For students, English is a difficult subject to learn and a language to acquire due to their limited hours of learning and low exposure to English in their daily lives. Nevertheless, only two students improve their English by taking private lessons and joining English courses (Questions 23-25), due to the limited number of private lessons/courses, less affordable fees, and a lack of parental support to pursue them. Having additional lessons does not mean that they want their tutors to use English only, since they prefer them to use Indonesian and SBD to make serious, specific, and detailed explanations of the materials.

Questions 30 to 32 reflect the students' use of English, Indonesian, and SBD to discuss materials and assignments, ask questions to the teacher, and communicate with classmates. The three languages are used when facing difficulties in expressing ideas in English or describing objects related to Indonesian or Salem. When some of their classmates show negative responses toward their language use, by laughing or making them embarrassed, they are not demotivated, as they realize that errors and failures are part of the learning process.

The students feel comfortable when their teacher lets them use Indonesian and SBD to learn English. They feel unhappy if the teacher uses Javanese, as they do not quite understand the language. Indonesian and SBD allow them to express ideas or describe objects bound to their culture and not related to English or British culture. It is also easy for them to produce correct English after it is translated from the two languages. Those languages are sometimes automatically uttered whenever they refer to objects with an Indonesian or Salem background (Questions 33 to 34).

For the teacher, SBD is purposefully selected to help her students understand the lesson (Questions 1 to 9) as she is truly concerned about the difficulties in understanding materials, expressing ideas in English, or correctly pronouncing English words (Questions 10 to 14). The teacher's integration of Indonesian and SBD into her EFL teaching is done to help students whose English competence and vocabulary are limited due to their limited exposure to English as beginners (Questions 15-17). It will help them speak English fluently after their English improves (Questions 26-29).

The students' positive attitudes toward SBD as their mother tongue and the teacher's use of SBD, instead of Javanese, demonstrate their respect for their mother tongue and their teacher's effort in helping them learning English. Although the two languages reduce the amount of English in the EFL classroom, students feel comfortable using them to help them understand the materials. Therefore, they can get a good grade and improve their competence after mastering English using their acquired knowledge.

4 Conclusion

This study reveals the benefits of integrating students' mother tongue in EFL teaching and learning, although it is not included as a school subject. Integrating official local content can create an uncomfortable learning situation, because they do not understand the language. A teacher must observe students' language preferences, perceptions, attitudes, and opinions toward the languages that will be incorporated in the EFL teaching and learning to provide a conducive learning situation.

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