



## Language Use in Multilingual Class: A Case of the English Department Students

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### ABSTRACT

In an Indonesian context, in which linguistic diversity occurs with high intensity, this study examined the use and preferences of languages by multilingual students in an English Department. Based on the definition of multilingualism, this study aims to characterize the languages employed by students in various contexts and explore their preferences for embedded languages within a classroom interaction. Using purposive sampling, 25 sixth-semester students were enrolled in a descriptive survey design. A structured questionnaire was used as a data collection tool, and data were analyzed using percentage-based descriptive statistics. The findings show that, though all participants were multilingual, their use of those languages depended on context. Javanese is used the most at home and in social environments, while Bahasa Indonesia is mainly spoken on campus. Most students would mix up both English and Bahasa Indonesia in classroom context instead of using it fully. The findings also suggest that, based on their perceived limited English proficiency, students favor bilingual ones. They choose foreign languages based on several factors such as language anxiety, willingness to communicate and international posture. This suggests that English departments need to make greater efforts to increase exposure to English and also create environments in which students can use the language more consistently in an academic context.

**Keywords:** classroom interaction, language preference, language use, multilingualism, EFL students

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## Introduction

Indonesia is a large nation in terms of both geography and population, and a very large number of languages are spoken within its territory. Historically, multilingualism was and is the norm in many parts of the archipelago, and common even in areas where one language dominates. Indonesia is a country of linguistic richness and diversity. Other than Bahasa Indonesia over 700 other languages coexist, ranging in size from Javanese with over 84 million speakers to many critically endangered languages with few or no living speakers. Eighteen languages have over one million speakers. Seventy years of policies promoting the spread of Bahasa Indonesia have been successful in ensuring that the vast majority of Indonesians have high levels of competency in spoken Bahasa Indonesia on leaving formal education (Sadiq, 2022).

Bahasa Indonesia is the compulsory language of educational instruction at all levels of education. But according to research result as cited by Nugraheni & Hasan (2026), while Bahasa Indonesia is used widely as a language of wider communication, over 80% of the Indonesian population speak languages other than Bahasa Indonesia as their mother tongue. As these languages and not Bahasa Indonesia are spoken in the home, in effect, this means that eight out of 10 students entering primary school will be taught in a language which they are not most or not at all familiar with (Perfecto, 2022; Wibowo, 2025). This finding needs clarification since as far as I concern, students at the kindergarten are now taught using Bahasa Indonesia too, not the mother tongue. Maybe it happened long time ago when teachers at kindergarten used vernacular language.

The growing need of English makes it important to be taught in schools in Indonesia, beginning from the Junior High level to tertiary levels. English has become a compulsory subject in the school curriculum since 1967 (Serraj & Noordin, 2013). That makes Indonesian people multicultural and multilingual society. English, its status, and its role or function in the functioning of the nation and in education in particular is seen as one of the three main categories of important and dominant language: Bahasa Indonesia, the regional vernaculars, and foreign languages (Liando et al., 2023).

The choice of Indonesian to become the national language has been something of a success story. It now is understood and spoken by the majority of Indonesians. Javanese is a regional vernacular with the greatest number of native speakers. For people who were born in Java Island, especially in East Java and Central Java, Javanese is the main mother tongue. That's why it can be said that Javanese people who have got their education at schools can be categorized multilingualism. Multilingualism can be defined in different ways but basically it refers to the ability to use more than two languages (Alisoy, 2025; Titone & Tiv, 2023). A basic distinction when discussing bilingualism and multilingualism is between the individual and societal level. At the individual level, bilingualism and multilingualism refer to the speaker's competence to use two or more languages (Feng et al., 2025; Song, 2024). At the societal level the terms bilingualism and multilingualism refer to the use of two or more

languages in a speech community and it does not necessary imply that all the speakers in that community are competent in more than one language (Dewaele et al., 2024).

Being not equally competent in all languages makes people choose a certain language for certain purposes. A Javanese student at senior high school in Semarang, for example, may use different languages for different purposes and reasons. He may speak using regional vernacular, Javanese, when he speaks with a friend in a canteen at the break time; but he speaks using Bahasa Indonesia when asked by his teacher to get something. He, at another occasion, has to use English when his English teacher asks him to retell his favorite television program, for example. Or, he may code switch the language, English and bahasa Indonesia, when he feels he finds difficulties in using English all the time. So, he avoids using English at the time he faces obstacles in expressing something using that foreign language.

This mini research taking the survey method was done to find out the type of language choice or language use of the English department students of PGRI Semarang University. The students were supposed to have used more English in their study time, but because of their insufficient English competence, they sometimes prefer using other languages for some reasons. Besides that, the fact that not all subjects listed in the curriculum of the English Department PGRI Semarang University are English core makes the classes delivered in national language as medium of instruction. This is of course, not a good model in teaching and training prospective English teachers, so a follow -up implication should be done by the department to make a renewal step for better result of education.

This study was intended to find out the language use among the multilingual students of English Department at PGRI Semarang University. Besides that, this study was also aimed at identifying the students' preference of the language use in the classroom. Finally, the result of the study is expected to give benefits especially to the department to be a valuable input in preparing the subjects to teach.

## **Methodology**

A total of 25 subjects participated in this research, consisting Male (N=9) and Female (N=16). The students were the Sixth Semester students joining Language Testing 2 Course which the researcher is teaching at this semester. The purposive cluster sampling technique was chosen on the basis of judgmental sampling process. In this study, the researcher selected a type of survey to collect information from a sample that was drawn from a predetermined population.

The questionnaire was designed on the structured and closed pattern in order to obtain useful and precise information on specified issues related to this study. The questionnaire consists of 8 items to be filled out by the respondents. Students' responses were selected as relevant tool to be used in getting the required data.

The responses of the subjects were analyzed to determine the language use and the language preference of the students during the class sessions. The percentage calculation was applied to capture the two purposes of the study. The degree of percentage was then interpreted using descriptive method. A descriptive survey attempts to picture or document current conditions or attitudes, that is, to describe what exists at the moment (Hinkel, 2011).

## Findings

### *Students' Mother Tongue Language*

It seems that most of students who study at PGRI Semarang University come from Central Java and the area nearby. It is proved that of the 25 students as respondents, 24 students (96%) have Javanese as their mother tongue. It also indicates that they are Javanese people, at least ones whose parents originally come from either Central Jave or East Java. People come from West Java will speak Sundanese instead of Javanese.

Table 1. Mother Tongue Language Used by Students

Answers	Number	Percentage
Javanese	24	96%
Indonesian	1	4%
Other	-	-

### *Number of Languages Students Can Speak (including mother tongue)*

It has been stated in the previous part that multilingualism is 'the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives. Seen from this definition then it can be said that all participants are multilingual because all 25 respondents are found to have three languages. Actually, this condition is good for learning. A large number of convincing studies have shown that children learn best, and develop true bi- and multilingualism, when they first study in a language with which they are familiar (ideally their mother tongue), when they develop literacy first in their mother tongue, and when second and additional languages are gradually phased in before they become a language of instruction. As education experts including the World Bank have concluded, second and additional languages are learnt best when the first language has been learnt well; the majority of Indonesian children have this opportunity. We can infer that their multilingualism proceeded from Javanese as the mother tongue, then the Bahasa Indonesia as the language of instruction in schools, then English as a foreign language.

Table 2. Language Spoken by Students

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Two Languages	-	-
Three Languages	25	100%
Four Languages	-	-

More	-	-
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***The Language Use at Home Mostly***

Even though Semarang belongs to the 5 biggest city in the country, majority of the residents are Javanese, meaning that they speak Javanese. Javanese are commonly used in homes of Javanese people. There are three main dialects in the modern language: Central Javanese, Eastern Javanese, and Western Javanese. There is a dialect continuum from Banten in the extreme west of Java to Banyuwangi in the eastern corner of the island. All Javanese dialects are more or less mutually intelligible (Lestari, 2022). For example, the dialect of Javanese spoken by people who live in Cirebon will be understood by Javanese people who live in Ketapang Banyuwangi East Java. The difference usually lies few in the lexis. The following table shows that only 3 participants (12 %) speak Bahasa Indonesia. Maybe, they live in a dormitory where the inhabitants are not Javanese people so that they use the shared language which is mutually understood by one to another.

Table 3. Language Use at Home

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Javanese	22	88%
Indonesia	3	12%
English	-	-
Other	-	-

***The Language Used with Friends in Society***

The language used by students in social environment is almost similar to that used in home. However, there is an increasing number of Bahasa Indonesia use. There are 8 students (32%) speak Bahasa Indonesia in social communication outside the campus. Surprisingly, one student s (she) speaks English in society. However, it needs clarification in what event someone speaks English in non-English community like in Semarang. More than that still found that majority of the students speak Javanese in social events as can be seen in Table 5 below.

Table 4. Language Used with Friends

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Javanese	23	92%
Indonesia	8	32%
English	1	4 %

Other	-	-
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***The Language Used at Campus***

Campus is an academic environment. Campus here refers to the locations of the buildings, not necessarily the classrooms. It can be library, isles, canteen, etc. From the students’ response it can be found that there were students using mother tongue as a means of communication among themselves. 3 students said that they used Javanese in campus for some reasons. Usually, the use of mother tongue is felt more familiar and closer one to another as compared to the use of Bahasa Indonesia which sounds formal. For some reasons, of course, using the formal language sounds “academically” accepted than vernacular language. At the isle of the building which separates classrooms, a slogan of “Let’s speak English” is put in an eye-catching position so that every student of the English department can see it. But, it seems that it does not work well. Most students speak Bahasa Indonesia instead of English. Only 2 of 25 students from the English department spoke English. The following table shows the frequency of students’ language use in campus.

Table 5. Language Used at Campus

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Javanese	3	12%
Indonesia	23	92%
English	2	8 %
Other	-	-

***The Language Used in the Classroom***

The participants are all from the English department which means that they have to be active in using the English language particularly when they are in the classroom. However, from the table we can see that not all students used English. Only 22 participants replied that they spoke English in the classroom while 8 (32%) said they used Bahasa Indonesia. Surprisingly, 1 participant said that he (she) used Javanese in the classroom. I think it was just a matter of misunderstanding in responding to this item of questionnaire. It is impossible to communicate with peers or lecturers using mother tongue in the teaching session, even when the subject is non-English skill like religion studies, Pancasila or the like. At least the lecturer will use the formal language for instruction.

Table 6. Language Used in the Classroom

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Javanese	1	4%

Indonesia	8	32%
English	22	88 %
Other	-	-

*Self-judgment of English rate*

Students were asked to rate themselves their language proficiency. The self judgment falls into 3 categories: poor, fairly good, and very good. 2 students said that their English was poor, and 2 others said that their English was very good. Majority of students replied that they had fairly good English proficiency.

Table 7. Self-judgment of English rate

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Poor	2	8%
Fairly Good	23	92%
Very Good	2	8 %

*The Reasons for English Use*

The respondents were asked for reasons of their English use. They could choose more than one option from the given alternatives. 19 respondents said that they used English for improving skill. 7 stated that it was because the regulation from the lecturer, while 17 admitted that their English use was a must from the department.3 claimed that their English use was to practice more. I can conclude that the students' English use was affected by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. As stated by Fishbach and Woolley (2022) that intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual. Thus, a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better. Extrinsic motivation is caused by a number of outside factors, for example the need to pass the exam, the regulation from the teacher or the school, etc. Intrinsic motivation is generally agreed to be more important to encourage success in learning rather than the extrinsic one.

Table 8. Reason for English Use

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Improve Skill	19	76%
Rules from the Lecturer	7	28%
A Must in English Department	17	68%

Practice More	3	12%
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***The Language Preference to Deliver the Subjects***

As mentioned before that not all subjects listed in the curriculum of the English Department must be delivered in English. Only subjects or courses which are English specific should be delivered by the lecturers in English. Subjects such as Education foundation, Religion studies, Pancasila, because of their characteristics, can be delivered using the national language as the medium of instruction. When asked about their preference, 4 students (16%) said that they liked subjects delivered all in English. Majority of students preferred they subjects to be delivered partly in English and Indonesian. This can be understood in the sense that some courses are university core, not program core so the content does not require English use. However, it is ideal when all subjects for English students are delivered in English too, just to facilitate their learning, both the content and the language. From the respondents' reply it can be concluded that majority of them felt convenient when the subjects are delivered using national language and English.

Table 9. Language Preference to Deliver the Subjects

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
All in English	4	16%
Mostly in English	1	4%
Partly in English and Indonesian	19	76%
Mostly in Indonesia	-	-
Other Answer	1	4%

**Discussion**

From the data presented above it seems that the term multilingual should be redefined because though the participants are multilingual, their mastery on each language are not equal. Probably their preference for not using English in every occasion and environment was caused by their insufficient competence in English. In L2 or FL learning process in a multilingual context, when someone prefers to use one language rather than the other, it is influenced by 3 possibilities: anxiety, willingness to communicate, international posture (Feng et al., 2025). The following is the description of each factor affecting language use.

The first factor is anxiety. Anxiety is frequently discussed in the literature in terms of its connection to language learning. Foreign language anxiety has been related to difficulties and deficits in listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, word production, and reduced test performance (Marnani & Cuocci, 2022; Sadeghi Ordoubadi et al., 2023), and foreign

language classes are perceived to be among the most anxiety-provoking subjects. One of the more recent conceptualizations of language learning anxiety is a situation-specific personality trait having two psychological components: emotional arousal and negative self-related cognition. Yu (2022) define anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors, related to classroom language learning, arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. Foreign language anxiety is characterized by the following dimensions:

1. Communication apprehension: fear and avoidance of interaction
2. Fear of negative evaluation: distress about other people's opinion and evaluation, and a constant expectation of negative evaluation
3. Test anxiety: Because of their obvious connection to the matters this study is concerned with, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation will be discussed here. According to Isma (2022) communication apprehension (CA) is defined as a person's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. CA results in communication avoidance or withdrawal. Discomfort in interacting with others in an L2 is caused by the mismatch between foreign language students' mature thoughts and their immature second/foreign language proficiency.

Fear of negative evaluation is a characteristic feature of people who are very concerned about the impression they leave on others, so they are very concerned about the appearance of their proficiency or their attempts at interaction. A study of CA and its relationship to self-perceived competence in English showed that the subjects reported low self-ratings of proficiency and higher levels of communication apprehension.

A high level of anxiety usually results in students' avoidance of interaction, which deprives them of the chance to improve their language abilities in communication, and of the opportunity to assess their competence in authentic communication. As what happened to the students of the English department, they felt that their English mastery was not perfect yet, so if they were not forced to use the EL, they avoided making communication in English. Their language learning anxiety causes the EFL process.

In addition to anxiety, willingness to communicate is another factor affecting learners to avoid communication. Willingness to communicate (WTC) is defined as the probability of engaging in communication, when an individual is free to choose to do so (Wang et al., 2022). In the context of participants in PGRI Semarang University, it revealed that motivation influenced WTC in English, which resulted in an increased frequency of communication. The findings of that study were in line with Isma (2022), who found that WTC and motivation predict frequency of interaction, self-confidence, intergroup climate, intergroup attitudes, etc., some of which are trait-like, others which are contextually specific. The two strongest predictors of WTC, communication anxiety and perceived English communication competence, are integrated in the model as the single construct of L2 self-confidence, which is considered the single strongest influence on WTC.

The third factor affecting the preference of certain language use is called "international posture". It is a notion corresponding to a certain extent to which contact with native speakers (NSs) is limited, attitudes are being formed on the basis of information acquired from indirect sources (e.g. media), and therefore learners are not likely to have a clear affective reaction to

the specific L2 or FL language group (Burner & Carlsen, 2023; Kanno et al., 2024). English is, for the Indonesian learners, more a symbol of the surrounding world, and a means to communicate with foreigners, rather than an indicator for belonging to a specific TL community.

There is no community of English speaking in Semarang so students feel free to choose the language they want without any negative consequences. This orientation was labeled as intercultural friendship orientation, 'which together with instrumental orientation predicted motivation, which accounted for proficiency. In relation to this, Šifrar Kalan et al. (2025) presented two studies conducted with Japanese learners of English. The conclusion was that individuals who are more willing to communicate, are also more willing to initiate interaction, and that self-confidence is of crucial importance to WTC. Also, the students with high international posture (expressed in the desire to be involved in international vocation, and interest in international affairs) were more willing to interact in the TL, and were also more motivated to study (Sadeghi Ordoubadi et al., 2023; Titone & Tiv, 2023). Students of the English department should have had high international posture too, because they were supposed to be a language model who provides comprehensible input for their students. Ability to make communication with native speakers of English is required for English students (Yulianto et al., 2023). In summary, self-confidence (as a combination of perceived L2 competence and FL communication anxiety) is the strongest predictor of WTC which, in turn, is the factor of immediate influence on FL language use.

## Conclusion

Based on the research findings and the discussion above, two conclusions could be made as the followings:

1. The language used by the students of the English Department varies, depending on the place of communication and the purpose. However, the dominant language used in home and students' societal environment is Javanese, while the language used mostly in campus is Bahasa Indonesia, and language mostly used in the classroom is the mixing between English and Bahasa Indonesia.
2. The students prefer to use English and Bahasa Indonesia during the lecturing sessions in the classroom. This might be due to their insufficient understanding if all the content of the subject was delivered in English all the time. Sometimes further elaboration was needed with clear examples, and this can be given in the mother tongue language of in Bahasa Indonesia

The university core subjects are basically can be delivered in English. Usually the problem is that not many teachers if not saying no teacher is competent both for the subject and the English language. Commonly the university core subjects are taught by lecturers of non-English department. However, it will be relevant too when the subjects are delivered in English for two fold benefit: it will activate the students' language and it will facilitate the students ESP learning. At least the reference books should be both in English and in Bahasa Indonesia.

## Declaration of AI and AI assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used GRAMMARLY in order to check the grammar mistakes. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## Authorship Contribution Statement

**Ariana Nur Rohmah:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Project administration. **Oluwakemi Dorcas LAWAL:** Validation, Analysis, and Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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