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Language Choice and Participation in Online EMI: Bilingual Practices and Perceptions at a Private Indonesian University

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Abstract

English-medium instruction (EMI) is expanding in Indonesia through International Credit Transfer (ICT) initiatives, yet its online functioning during early internationalization remains underexplored. This study mapped lecturers' classroom language practices and examined the attitudes of both lecturers and students toward those practices in online EMI. Using an explanatory case study, we analyzed 30 recorded lessons (five per lecturer), classroom observations, a 5-point Likert survey, and a lecturer focus group, applying content, descriptive, and thematic analyses. Lesson transcripts were coded into five language categories: English only; English–Bahasa Indonesia; English–Bahasa Indonesia–Tagalog; Bahasa Indonesia only; and Bahasa Indonesia–English. Participants included six lecturers and 141 undergraduates across six online courses (Primary Education, Biology, Accounting, Information Systems, Law) at a private Indonesian university implementing ICT in 2023–2024. Overall, English predominated: three lecturers delivered ≥95% English (L1 95.70%; L2 99.88%; L5 98.16%), while two used English–Indonesian code-mixing in about one-fifth to one-quarter of utterances (L4 21.11%; L6 22.80%). One lecturer occasionally incorporated Tagalog alongside English and Indonesian in mixed cohorts. Bilingual strategies clarified key terms and checked comprehension; however, heavy reliance on slides, with limited verbal elaboration, coincided with lower participation. About 50% of students rated EMI positively, 75% needed additional processing to understand the content, and roughly 50% reported difficulty participating in discussions. Findings support a move from English-only to intentionally designed bilingual pedagogy: targeted language-for-teaching professional development (explicit vocabulary scaffolding, multimodal explanations, interaction design, pacing, and turn-taking) and meso-level policies that legitimize judicious use of L1 in online EMI.

Keywords: English-medium instruction (EMI), code-switching, translanguaging.

INTRODUCTION

Under the Emancipated Curriculum (Merdeka Belajar), English-medium instruction (EMI) has expanded across Indonesian higher education in step with the Freedom of Learning–Independent Campus agenda and the International Credit Transfer (ICT) program (Santoso et al., 2024; Bolton et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2019; Anggara, 2023; Suardi et al., 2024). EMI refers to the teaching of disciplinary content through English to predominantly non-native speakers. These policies aim to internationalize curricula, enable student mobility, and build globally connected programs while allowing students to study outside their home major for extended periods (Sukmariningsih et al., 2022; Suardi et al., 2024). In practice, universities operationalize internationalization by offering international classes and piloting EMI in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, often within dual- or single-degree tracks and student exchange schemes (Isnaini et al., 2024). As EMI moves online, the central issue is no longer whether English can deliver content but how classroom language is managed to support comprehension, participation, and learning in digitally mediated settings.

A persistent tension in the current policy landscape is the drift from EMI toward English-only despite varied local rules and uneven readiness. Adoption remains discretionary and locally driven. Some universities require proficiency thresholds for lecturers and students, such as TOEFL scores, yet many do not, and a substantial share report no formal requirement (Simbolon, 2021). The literature shows that EMI is not a single model and practice varies across programs and disciplines (Macaro, 2018; Milligan & Tikly, 2016; Humphreys, 2017). Students in partial and complete EMI also report different perceived professional benefits (Şahan & Şahan, 2021). In real classrooms, language use often departs from native-speaker norms to meet learner needs and disciplinary demands. These pressures are sharper online, where pacing, turn-taking, and cognitive load constrain participation and understanding (Kuteeva, 2020). As a result, a de jure English-only ideology often contrasts with the de facto bilingual practices through which teachers and students negotiate meaning in real time.

This study treats the gap as a design space. Bilingual pedagogy in EMI is framed as the purposeful use of the first language alongside English to scaffold meaning, participation, and disciplinary thinking while maintaining English as the primary medium (Peng & Xie, 2021; Anggraini, 2023; Santoso et al., 2024). Within this frame, code-switching or code-mixing refers to alternation of languages at the clause or intra-sentential level (Novianti & Said, 2021; Sari, 2022), whereas translanguaging denotes the flexible orchestration of learners' full repertoires to support understanding and engagement (Rajendram, 2021). The lens of language-for-teaching highlights the pedagogical language resources required to explain, question, probe reasoning, manage pace and interaction, and build shared technical vocabulary (Kohler, 2015; Buckingham & Aktuğ-Ekinci, 2017). Together, these concepts reposition classroom language moves as intentional instructional design choices that can be specified, taught, and evaluated.

EMI in Indonesia is promoted to signal international competitiveness, yet its design and support are uneven and underdocumented, with policy rationales often assumed rather than examined (Simbolon, 2021; Coleman et al., 2023). Evidence shows EMI is not a single model: teacher talk and student tasks vary by context and discipline, vocabulary knowledge is uneven, keyword focus in lectures can mislead, and judicious L1 use is warranted when

pedagogically justified, provided teachers understand how L2 vocabulary is processed and acquired and have resources to act on that understanding (Macaro, 2019). Program architecture also matters: students in complete EMI report stronger professional expectations and different beliefs and proficiencies than peers in partial EMI; therefore, support should be calibrated to the program type (Şahan & Şahan, 2021).

Language support within EMI is most effective when it targets disciplinary vocabulary and legitimizes code-switching as a strategy; gains appear in disciplinary and academic vocabulary, but general academic growth is modest without explicit language work and collaboration between content and language specialists (Huang, 2023). Indonesian studies echo these patterns: students value EMI for employability and English development and accept limited L1 use, yet EAP-style services rarely meet disciplinary needs, motivating the embedding of ESAP in curricula and a context-sensitive reconceptualization of EMI (Santoso et al., 2024). Broader schooling trends show socioeconomic and ideological pressures favor EMI while raising equity and multilingualism concerns, reinforcing the need for needs-based, bilingual, discipline-aware design (Maharani et al., 2024).

Despite recent advances, evidence on online EMI in early-internationalizing Indonesian universities remains limited because most studies rely on self-report and rarely quantify what happens in class; observation-based profiles that show the relative prevalence of English, English–L1 combinations, and L1-only stretches across complete lessons are scarce, and they are seldom interpreted alongside both lecturer and student perspectives on the value and limits of bilingual moves. This study addresses these gaps in one ICT-participating university by quantifying language choice from complete online lesson transcripts across disciplines and aligning the patterns with stakeholder views from a student survey and a lecturer focus group, thereby operationalizing bilingual pedagogy as measurable classroom moves linked to comprehension, participation, and pacing.

The novelty lies in combining fine-grained classroom evidence with paired stakeholder interpretations and translating the results into design-ready levers for ESAP-oriented support and language-for-teaching professional development. Therefore, the study aims to map lecturers' language-use practices in online EMI and to examine lecturers' and students' attitudes toward these practices, and accordingly asks RQ1: What language-use practices do lecturers employ in online EMI classes, and RQ2: What are lecturers' and students' attitudes toward these practices, where "practices" are observable language choices and code modifications during live instruction and "attitudes" are stakeholders' evaluative stances with respect to comprehension, engagement, and learning.

METHOD

An explanatory case study design was adopted to investigate how and why language is used in online EMI classes and how stakeholders evaluate those uses, drawing on case-study logic for pattern matching, explanation building, and linkage of propositions to units of analysis (Tight, 2022). A case approach is well-suited to "how/why" questions in naturalistic settings and supports explicit alignment among research questions, sampling, instruments, and analytic procedures in applied linguistics and education research (Duff, 2014; Mackey & Gass, 2015). The case site was a private Indonesian university that participated in an International Credit Transfer program in 2023–2024, with focal courses delivered entirely online as short-term international classes across several departments, with English as the

medium of instruction. The participants comprised six lecturers and 141 undergraduates drawn from six online EMI classes in Primary Education, Biology, Accounting, Information Systems, and Law. Because only six EMI classes were conducted during the study period, a complete enumeration (census sampling) was used to maximise disciplinary coverage and to avoid selection bias typical of ad hoc recruitment (Lohr, 2008). Including students from each class provided learner perspectives alongside the lecturer's evidence.

Multiple convergent data sources were collected to enable method triangulation and strengthen construct validity (Turner et al., 2015). Five recorded lessons per lecturer (30 recordings; approximately 45–200 minutes each) and observation notes captured naturally occurring classroom language. Language use was coded with a scheme adapted from prior EMI work that distinguishes English only (E), English with Bahasa Indonesia (EdBI), English with Bahasa Indonesia and Tagalog (EdBIPh), Bahasa Indonesia only (BI), and Bahasa Indonesia with English (BIdE); pauses were also marked, with utterance-level coding consistent with qualitative content-analysis practice (Schreier, 2012). Student attitudes toward language use and challenges were measured with a 5-point Likert-type questionnaire, with items adapted from Puspitasari and Ishak (2023) validated instruments for the Indonesian context and guided by scale-development principles for adaptation and clarity. To probe the rationales for observed choices, a semi-structured focus group discussion with the six lecturers was conducted in accordance with best practices in question routing, group management, and moderation.

Procedures and measures were standardised across classes in line with qualitative reporting standards. Sessions were recorded on the institutional platform and transcribed verbatim to preserve lexical and interactional details (Seibert, 2021). Utterance-level coding using predefined categories—E, EdBI, EdBIPh, BI, BIdE—was applied in accordance with content-analysis protocols that fix units and rules a priori. The student questionnaire was administered after classroom observations to reduce priming and common-method bias through temporal separation (Podsakoff et al., 2023). A lecturer focus group (~2 hours) was conducted using a piloted guide in Indonesian language and was audio-recorded and transcribed in accordance with focus group best practices. Measures aligned to the research questions: for RQ1, the primary outcomes were proportions of coded utterances per category by lecturer and course, aggregated to profile English and L1 use; for RQ2, questionnaire items were grouped into comprehension, participation, pacing, and perceived usefulness of L1 and summarised descriptively following scale-adaptation guidance. Convergence across observations, surveys, and focus groups provided method triangulation and strengthened credibility and confirmability (Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

Data analysis proceeded in parallel strands with subsequent integration consistent with case-study explanation building and pattern matching (Yin, 2018) and mixed-evidence integration principles (Miles et al., 2014). In the quantitative strand (RQ1), the percentage of utterances in each language category was computed for every lecturer and course, and profiles were compared across the six classes; two trained coders piloted the scheme on a subsample, refined decision rules, resolved disagreements through discussion, and intercoder agreement was calculated to document coding consistency. In the qualitative strand (RQ2), reflexive thematic analysis of FGD transcripts was conducted in NVivo 12 by combining deductive codes derived from the research questions and instrument domains with inductive codes emerging from the data, and by recording theme generation, review,

and definition to maintain analytic transparency (Kogen, 2024). Furthermore, Rigor and ethics were addressed through method triangulation across recordings, survey, and FGD, coder calibration and an audit trail of coding decisions (Miles et al., 2014), peer debriefing, and selective member checking to clarify FGD summaries (White et al., 2012); ethical approval was granted by the host university's research ethics committee, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study drew primarily on classroom video recordings, with researchers' field notes as supplementary evidence. The corpus comprised 30 recorded lessons (approximately 60–140 minutes each) with corresponding field notes, and all recordings were transcribed verbatim. Analysis combined descriptive content coding of language choice with interpretive examination of pedagogic rationales for non-English use. Classroom observations were used to identify the languages employed, their usage patterns, and the reasons lecturers shifted into languages other than English during instruction. For each lecturer (L1–L6), five sessions were coded and aggregated to compute the average proportion of English and languages other than English (LOTE). The quantitative profiles and illustrative excerpts are presented below in sequence from L1 to L6.

Table 1. Quantitative overview of language use in EMI by lecturers L1–L6

Lecturer	The use of Languages (%)						
	E	EdBI	EdBIPh	BI	BidE	Pause	Total
L1	95.70	3.27	0,35	0.14	0.54	0	100%
L2	99.88	0	0	0.12	0	0	100%
L3	74.78	0.92	2.18	0.3	0	21.82	100%
L4	60,95	21,11	0.91	7,15	6.14	3.74	100%
L5	98.16	0.77	0	1.07	0	0	100%
L6	64,97	22.8	0	2.74	7.05	2.44	100%

Three lecturers delivered almost entirely in English—L2 (99.88%), L5 (98.16%), and L1 (95.70%)—with only marginal Indonesian insertions and, for L1, rare Tagalog (0.35%). Two lecturers adopted a more bilingual profile—L4 and L6—using English for about two-thirds of talk (60.95% and 64.97%) and drawing frequently on English-Indonesian mixing (EdBI 21.11% and 22.80%); they also produced notable stretches in Indonesian, either as complete utterances (BI 7.15% and 2.74%) or Indonesian frames with embedded English terms (BIdE 6.14% and 7.05%). L3 sat between these groups with substantial English (74.78%) but the highest proportion of pauses (21.82%), which likely reflects transitions, task time, or technical gaps rather than active explanation. Tagalog appeared only in mixed cohorts (L1 0.35%; L3 2.18%). Averaged across lecturers, English accounted for about 82.41% of utterances, with English–Indonesian mixing at 8.15%, Indonesian-framed talk with English terms at 2.29%, Indonesian-only at 1.92%, Tagalog mixing at 0.57%, and silent intervals at 4.67%. Overall, the table indicates two delivery styles in these online EMI classes:

near-monolingual English delivery and a deliberately bilingual approach that strategically uses Indonesian for clarification and emphasis.

Furthermore, L1 00:31:10–00:31:26: "These plants are called endemic species… [short pause – 3 seconds] *… artinya tanaman asli daerah itu or in Tagalog we say katutubo*." This shows a planned pause, followed by a multilingual gloss so that both groups can track the key term. FGD S4 Philippines: "When she used katutubo, I understood it fast because it's in our language." This indicates immediate access for Filipino students. FGD S7 Indonesia: "I like when she used both English and Indonesian. It's easier to connect." This signals better anchoring for Indonesian students. FGD S18 on L3: "waiting for the lecturer to share another screen" and "technical waiting time." This describes task management pauses typical of online delivery. L1 00:14:36–00:14:48: "But what really is peatland degradation and where do the emissions come from… [pause – 15 seconds] … okay, can anyone explain." This pause provides time for reflection and cues student uptake. FGD S3 L2: "Sometimes we just keep silent because we're not sure of the meaning. The lecturer uses only English, so we wait until the slide appears." This indicates that English-only delivery can limit access and reduce responses. L5 classroom: "*Apakah ada pertanyaan next we have to learn about linked list kita juga punya link list dalam Bahasa Indonesianya yaitu tautan daftar*." This uses Indonesian to secure the technical label before moving on. L6 interview: "I used Bahasa Indonesia because I have difficulty in explaining of my material using English sometimes I translated my statements to ensure my home university students understood." This reveals a comprehension motive for switching rather than a shift away from EMI.

S1 L2: "I got many experiences after joining this class." This reflects perceived exposure benefits. S2 L4: "By joining this class I can improve my English skill especially adding vocabulary." This points to vocabulary growth. S5 L5: "The lecturer often asked us to present in English so it made me more confident to speak." This links task design to confidence. S4 L3: "The class was not effective because the lecturers mostly used English and less interactive." This ties low interactivity to weak comprehension. S9 L6: "The class was quite boring most of us did not understand the material PPT was not interesting." This shows that slide-heavy talks can depress engagement. S15 L3: "I understood what lecturer explained but I sometimes did not understand Philippines students said because they talked fastly." This points to pacing and cross-national speech rate as barriers. S3 L3: "I tried to always following the courses even though I need more effort especially in discussion." This captures effortful participation without structured turns. Together, the excerpts show English as the primary medium, with Indonesian used to clarify dense points, and pauses used either to manage online transitions or to support thinking. Comprehension and participation depend primarily on pacing, opportunities for interaction, and brief bilingual scaffolds rather than on language choice alone.

DISCUSSION

This study identifies two delivery profiles in online EMI—near-monolingual English and bilingual English–Indonesian—and finds that students generally valued EMI for exposure and vocabulary development. Consistent with Wei and Macaro (2024) and Reynolds et al. (2023), anticipated gains in academic English through sustained exposure were evident in students' self-reports. Nevertheless, comprehension and participation depended more on pacing and interactional design than on language choice; brief, judicious

use of L1 supported access at cognitively dense points without displacing English as the principal medium (Jinghui, 2023; Barrios et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2020). Quantitatively, English dominated theoretical exposition and slide-based segments, whereas Indonesian was inserted to anchor key terms, clarify abstract comparisons, and check understanding; in mixed cohorts, occasional Tagalog served the same anchoring role. Taken together, these multilingual moves operated as local scaffolds rather than departures from EMI, aligning with evidence that students hold favourable attitudes toward EMI when strategic code-switching supports content learning (Yuan et al., 2023; Smit, 2018; Kaur, 2020).

On the attitudinal side, students credited EMI with gains in confidence and vocabulary; however, they also pointed to fast, lecture-centred delivery and text-heavy slides as barriers to processing and turn-taking. This echoes Phuong and Nguyen's (2019) observation that difficulties in comprehending lectures are among the most commonly reported issues among EMI students whose native language is not English. When English was used without regular comprehension checks or adequate wait time, participation declined even when materials were explicit (Chien & Valcke, 2020; Fung & Lo, 2023; Siegel, 2020), whereas alternating languages to secure key ideas tended to increase participation but could also increase reliance on Indonesian. These patterns are consistent with cognitive and interactional mechanisms: faster pacing, longer monologic stretches, and shorter wait times increase processing load in a second language, whereas brief L1 inserts reduce that load at critical junctures (Sato, 2016; Jensen & Thøgersen, 2017). Moreover, the language-for-teaching demands of explanation, probing reasoning, pacing, and building shared technical vocabulary differ from those of general English proficiency and therefore require explicit planning (Richards & Pun, 2022; Yaprak and Kaya, 2020; Mrah, 2017; Gustafsson, 2018). Yet without structured turns and routine checks for understanding, language choice alone cannot sustain discussion.

Accordingly, several classroom implications follow for online EMI. Explanations are best delivered in short segments. Key terms can be introduced with brief L1 glosses, after which the lesson can return to English. Routine checks for understanding with adequate wait time should be embedded. Consistent with EFL listening design, short prerecorded segments with a limited, predictable topical structure can reduce processing load (Zhou et al., 2023). Visuals and worked examples should replace text heavy slides where possible. Small and regular speaking opportunities should be built into each lesson so participation does not rely on volunteers (Ting, 2022; Hill, 2023; Kao & Tsou, 2017). Together these moves preserve English as the primary medium while maintaining access. Moreover, the programs can provide course glossaries and ESAP support for discipline-specific vocabulary and configure online platforms to scaffold turn-taking through prompts, polls, and chat routines. Clear guidance that validates the purpose of L1 scaffolding will help align practice with students' needs in early-stage EMI contexts (Othman, 2024; Prabjandee & Nilpirom, 2022).

Nevertheless, this study has limits. It covers six online classes at one university and does not link language profiles to assessed learning outcomes. Transfers to other institutions or to face-to-face delivery should therefore be undertaken cautiously. Future research should test whether training in language for teaching and ESAP integration improves comprehension and participation across courses. It should also examine whether pacing and turn-taking routines reduce reliance on L1 over time and across disciplines. Pairing quantified classroom language profiles with stakeholder perspectives reframes multilingual

moves in online EMI as design choices. A small set of interactional levers can support access and participation without displacing English as the primary medium. These include paced input, explicit vocabulary staging, routine checks for understanding, and judicious use of L1. Programs at early stages of internationalization can apply these steps to strengthen online EMI delivery.

CONCLUSION

This case study examined how lecturers' language choices in online EMI shape student comprehension and participation at a private Indonesian university. Lecturers used English as the primary medium and provided brief L1 support at difficult points and pauses, which served as thinking time or for online transitions. Students valued exposure and vocabulary growth, yet pacing and interaction design, rather than language choice, determined comprehension and participation. Taken together, the findings reposition bilingual moves as designable resources in EMI rather than deviations from policy. Teachers can chunk explanations, pre-teach key terms with brief L1 glosses, and embed short checks and opportunities to speak. Programs should develop language for teaching capabilities, provide ESAP support and glossaries, and set clear guidance that validates purposeful L1 use online. The study covers six online classes at a single institution and does not link language profiles to achievement; comparative and intervention studies are needed. Well-designed pacing, vocabulary staging, routine checks, and judicious use of L1 can increase access and participation while keeping English as the primary medium.

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