

Choosing EMI Schools: A Case Study of Parental Decisions and Shifting Language Ideologies in Indonesia

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Abstract

The rise of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools reflects a global trend driven by the increasing demand for English proficiency in non-native English-speaking countries. This study investigates the factors driving Indonesian parents' decisions to enrol their children in English Medium Instruction (EMI) schools, focusing on the interplay of socioeconomic status, shifting language ideologies, and cultural preservation. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research captures the nuanced motivations of parents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, uncovering how aspirations for global success and fears of cultural erosion shape educational choices. The findings reveal that parents of high socioeconomic status view EMI schools as strategic investments for international opportunities, while lower socioeconomic groups balance affordability with a commitment to cultural identity. Shifting language ideologies highlight the prioritization of English as a global asset, often at the expense of local languages, generating tensions between economic aspirations and cultural preservation. These insights underline the urgent need for policies integrating multilingual education, equitable access to EMI schools, and promoting linguistic diversity. This study contributes to the discourse on globalization, education, and cultural sustainability in multilingual contexts by addressing these dynamics.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction (EMI), shifting language ideology; Indonesian parents.

INTRODUCTION

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has become a cornerstone of global education, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries. Driven by globalization's influence, the demand for English proficiency as a gateway to international academic and professional opportunities has surged, leading to the rapid expansion of EMI institutions worldwide (Dearden, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2021). In Indonesia, the growth of private EMI schools reflects this global trend, with parents viewing these institutions as superior to public schools in equipping students for global competitiveness (Fitriati & Rata, 2020). While the benefits of EMI, such as enhanced language acquisition and improved career prospects,

are well-documented (Macaro et al., 2018; Simbolon, 2021), the socio-cultural consequences are less explored. Scholars have raised concerns about the marginalization of local languages and potential erosion of cultural identity, highlighting the need for nuanced research into the broader implications of EMI in balancing linguistic diversity and cultural preservation (Ernawati et al., 2021; Sundusiyah & McClure, 2019).

In Indonesia, the rise of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools reflects shifting societal ideologies toward language and education, as parents increasingly regard English proficiency as critical for upward mobility and global competitiveness (Halim & Kurniawan, 2021; Fitriati & Rata, 2020). However, this preference for English often clashes with national efforts to preserve local languages and cultural identities, intensifying concerns about linguistic homogenization and cultural erosion (Sundusiyah & McClure, 2019; Ernawati et al., 2021). These challenges are compounded by socioeconomic disparities, as access to high-quality EMI education remains largely restricted to affluent families who can afford private schooling and additional language support (Nyoni et al., 2023). Such inequities highlight the urgency for inclusive educational policies that balance the benefits of EMI with the preservation of Indonesia's linguistic and cultural diversity, ensuring that the pursuit of global competitiveness does not undermine its rich heritage.

Research on English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) highlights its growing prominence in non-native English-speaking countries as a response to globalization, offering both opportunities and challenges. For example, Macaro et al. (2018) discuss EMI's potential to enhance language proficiency and career prospects while acknowledging disparities in implementation. In Indonesia, studies by Fitriati and Rata (2020) and Halim and Kurniawan (2021) reveal that parents increasingly view EMI as a pathway to securing their children's global competitiveness. However, access to high-quality EMI education is often limited by socioeconomic constraints, as noted by Nyoni et al. (2023). Beyond access, Ernawati et al. (2021) and Sundusiyah and McClure (2019) examine the ideological tensions between prioritizing English and preserving local cultural identities, raising concerns about linguistic homogenization. On a broader scale, Dearden (2014) provides insights into EMI's rapid expansion and its complex implications for language policy and cultural identity. Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of a nuanced understanding of how EMI shapes educational aspirations, socioeconomic mobility, and cultural preservation in diverse contexts.

Despite the growing body of literature on English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), significant gaps remain in understanding the socio-cultural dynamics that shape parental decisions in non-native English-speaking contexts like Indonesia. Much of the existing research highlights EMI's benefits, such as enhanced language proficiency and improved global competitiveness (Macaro et al., 2018; Fitriati & Rata, 2020). However, insufficient attention has been given to how shifting language ideologies influence educational choices, particularly in balancing aspirations for global mobility with concerns over cultural and linguistic preservation. Furthermore, while socioeconomic disparities in access to EMI schools are well-documented (Nyoni et al., 2023), the interplay between these disparities and parental attitudes toward language and education remains underexplored. Addressing these gaps is essential to developing equitable and culturally sensitive policies that navigate the complexities of EMI adoption in rapidly globalizing societies.

This study offers a unique perspective by holistically examining the factors influencing Indonesian parents' preference for private EMI schools, focusing on career aspirations, socioeconomic status, and language ideologies. Employing a qualitative case study approach, it explores parents' lived experiences and perceptions to illuminate the tensions between globalization and cultural identity. By centring on parental decision-making rather than policy or institutional perspectives, the research provides critical insights into the socio-cultural implications of EMI within Indonesia's educational landscape. The findings aim to guide the development of policies that ensure equitable access to quality education while safeguarding linguistic diversity, thereby addressing key gaps in local and global contexts.

Failing to address the socio-cultural complexities of EMI adoption in Indonesia could lead to significant adverse outcomes. Educational policies may prioritize English proficiency at the expense of local languages and cultural identities, accelerating linguistic homogenization and weakening national heritage. Socioeconomic disparities in access to quality EMI education could also widen, marginalizing lower-income families and limiting their social mobility, thus perpetuating systemic inequities. Furthermore, interventions that overlook these disparities risk being ineffective for disadvantaged communities, reinforcing an educational system that disproportionately benefits the privileged. Ignoring the balance between globalization and cultural preservation may result in students who are proficient in English but disconnected from their cultural roots, undermining their ability to navigate local and global contexts. These risks underscore the urgency of implementing inclusive policies that align EMI education with Indonesia's socio-cultural diversity.

By investigating how shifting language ideologies, career aspirations, and access disparities shape parental decisions, this study provides an in-depth understanding of the motivations and challenges parents face. It highlights the interplay between global aspirations, cultural preservation, and socioeconomic status, offering practical implications for policymakers and educators. The research emphasizes the importance of balancing the benefits of EMI with the need to foster linguistic diversity and cultural sustainability. Ultimately, it seeks to inform strategies that promote equitable access to quality EMI education while preserving Indonesia's rich linguistic heritage.

METHOD

Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the socio-cultural and socio-economic factors influencing Indonesian parents' decisions to enrol their children in private EMI schools. The case study approach was chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). The focus was on Surakarta, Central Java, a region with many private EMI schools, allowing the study to capture diverse parental perspectives.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study's objectives. Four parents with children enrolled in third, fifth, and ninth grades at private EMI schools participated, representing varying socio-economic backgrounds. This diverse selection allowed for examining parental motivations across different educational stages and

economic contexts (Etikan, 2016; Patton, 2015). Ethical considerations were rigorously observed, with participants' identities anonymized and informed consent obtained prior to data collection (Nowell et al., 2017).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, lasting 45-60 minutes each, conducted face-to-face in Indonesian to ensure participant comfort and authenticity (Brinkmann, 2014). The interview guide, developed based on a comprehensive literature review, included open-ended questions exploring parental motivations, socio-economic considerations, and perceptions of language ideologies. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. To ensure accuracy, the translation process involved professional cross-checking and comparing the original recordings (Nowell et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework, encompassing familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and refinement. The analysis was conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the data, ensuring emerging themes accurately reflected participants' perspectives. Measures to enhance trustworthiness included peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexivity (Nowell et al., 2017). Peer debriefing involved consultation with a qualitative research expert, while member checking allowed participants to verify the accuracy of data summaries and interpretations.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

This study adhered to established qualitative research standards to ensure rigour and reliability. Credibility was achieved through triangulation of data sources, prolonged engagement with participants, and iterative data analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability was supported by providing detailed contextual information, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail of data collection and analysis processes, ensuring transparency and consistency.

FINDINGS

Factors Influencing Parents' Choice of EMI Schools

Indonesian parents' choice of English Medium Instruction (EMI) schools is driven by three main factors: English proficiency, career benefits and global competitiveness, and socioeconomic status. These findings demonstrate parents' deliberate prioritization of English as a strategic tool for their children's future academic and professional success.

English Proficiency

Parents valued English proficiency highly, recognizing its role in enabling their children to access global opportunities. For instance, one parent shared, *"I always encourage my kids to speak English at home and use resources like YouTube and books to practice."* In contrast, another parent explained, *"Hiring a private tutor is essential because I can't teach English myself."* These efforts illustrate parents' recognition of English as an essential skill

for future opportunities and their commitment to addressing their limitations through external support.

Parental attitudes toward EMI schools are closely tied to their English proficiency levels. Parents with limited English proficiency expressed urgency in ensuring their children surpass their limitations, viewing EMI education as a necessary bridge to avoid disadvantages in global contexts. One parent admitted, *"I don't want my child to struggle like I did because of poor English skills."* Conversely, parents with moderate proficiency valued English fluency. However, they approached the decision less urgently, with one noting, *"EMI feels like a natural step since I can already help them a bit at home."* Regardless of proficiency levels, all parents associated English fluency with access to higher education, career prospects, and global communication.

A heightened fear of missing out (FOMO) was evident among parents with limited proficiency, as they worried that inadequate English skills might hinder their children's success. *"If my child doesn't become fluent, they might miss out on good opportunities,"* a parent remarked. Table 1 summarizes how parental English proficiency influences their attitudes and decisions regarding EMI schools.

Table 1: Influence of Parents' English Proficiency on EMI School Choice

Aspect	Low English Proficiency	Moderate English Proficiency
Attitudes towards English Proficiency	Strongly positive; view their lack of fluency as a gap to fill for their children	Positive but less urgent; see English as a tool for success, not a personal gap
Reason for Choosing EMI Schools	Aspirational: To provide opportunities they lacked	Practical: Recognize English as important for global success
Support for EMI Schools	High; driven by urgency and aspirations	Moderate; supportive but less anxious
Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)	High; worry that lack of English skills may limit opportunities	Moderate; confident due to existing language proficiency

Career Benefits and Global Competitiveness

Parents widely view English proficiency as essential for career advancement and global competitiveness. One parent emphasized, *"English is important because it is an international language, and children must master it actively and passively for future needs."* Parents of higher socioeconomic status (SES) described EMI schools as strategic investments for preparing their children for international education and career opportunities. For instance, a parent highlighted, *"We need to enable the next generation to communicate well in English as it becomes increasingly dominant globally."*

In contrast, parents from lower SES backgrounds, while valuing English, often focused on meeting immediate societal demands. They frequently tied their aspirations for EMI education to practical concerns such as affordability and financial limitations. One parent described, *"English is a demand of the times, and it's necessary for navigating local opportunities."* Financial constraints often influenced their choices, with aspirations for international success frequently dependent on scholarships or external support. *"If my child is to succeed internationally, we rely on scholarships because we cannot afford it otherwise,"* one parent explained. These findings illustrate how SES intersects with educational

aspirations, shaping the degree to which parents prioritize global versus local opportunities. Table 2 compares parental perspectives on career benefits and global competitiveness across socioeconomic groups.

Table 2: Parental Perspectives on Career Benefits and Global Competitiveness by SES

Aspect	High SES Parents	Low SES Parents
Perception of English	Essential for global communication and career growth	Necessary to meet societal demands
Aspirations	Focus on study abroad, scholarships, and global competitiveness	Aspirations tied to scholarships and conditional opportunities
Approach	Strategic investment in education for long-term benefits	Practical focus on affordability and immediate practical needs

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) was a pivotal factor influencing parental decisions regarding EMI schools. High SES parents typically viewed EMI education as a pathway to global competitiveness and prioritized international opportunities such as study abroad and scholarship programs. These parents emphasized the importance of early exposure to English, with one parent explaining, *"We want our children to get accustomed to English early on to prepare for future success."*

In contrast, lower SES parents often faced financial constraints that shaped their educational choices. Although they valued EMI's societal relevance, they relied heavily on school-based instruction and affordable resources. One parent noted, *"We concentrate on what the school offers because that's all we can afford."* Lower SES parents also emphasized balancing English proficiency with cultural preservation, adopting a pragmatic approach to educational aspirations by ensuring their children retained ties to traditional and local languages. *"It's important that my child learns English, but I also want them to stay connected to our culture,"* a parent shared. Table 3 highlights how socioeconomic factors influence parental decisions regarding EMI schools.

Table 3: Socioeconomic Factors Influencing Parental Decisions on EMI Schools

Aspect	High SES Parents	Low SES Parents
Key Motivations	Global aspirations (scholarships, study abroad)	Preparing children for societal and global demands
Challenges	High financial investment for private schools and courses	Financial limitations for private tutoring and courses
Language Priorities	Prioritize English over traditional languages	Balance English, traditional, and Indonesian languages for cultural preservation
Efforts in English Acquisition	Provide private tutoring, international schools, and media exposure	Rely on school-based learning and affordable or free resources

Shifting Language Ideologies

The analysis revealed significant shifts in parental language ideologies, particularly in the context of English Medium Instruction (EMI) schools. Table 4 summarizes how parental language ideologies differ based on socioeconomic status and other contextual factors.

Table 4: Shifting Language Ideologies and Parental Perspectives

Aspect	High SES Parents	Low SES Parents
Preference for English	View English as essential for global success.	Recognize English as important but balance it with local languages.
Language Hierarchies	Prioritize English over local languages for practical use.	Advocate for maintaining local languages alongside English.
Cultural Preservation Concerns	Less focus on local language preservation.	Strong commitment to preserving cultural identity.
Socio-Economic Influences	Associate EMI with status and upward mobility.	Emphasize the affordability and immediate utility of English.
Comparative Perspectives	Focus on older children's readiness for global careers.	Stress foundational skills for younger children.

Preference for English

The increasing preference for EMI schools highlights a broader ideological shift towards valuing English as a critical asset for children's futures. Parents frequently articulated their belief in the necessity of English proficiency for accessing global opportunities. One parent noted, "*In the future, English will be the international language, so children need to be proficient in both active and passive English*" (P2). This perspective underscores the growing perception of English as essential for economic success and global engagement. Parents generally viewed EMI schools as the most effective way to ensure their children's fluency, with English proficiency often prioritized over local languages.

Language Hierarchies and Cultural Tensions

Parents' responses revealed the emergence of a perceived hierarchy in which English often supersedes local languages. One parent stated, "*Actually, English is more important than Javanese*" (P1), reflecting a belief in the superior utility of English for global competitiveness. However, this prioritization created tensions among parents who simultaneously valued cultural and linguistic heritage preservation. Some parents expressed guilt over deprioritizing local languages, with one parent explaining, "*We must keep up with the times, but it is also important not to forget our culture*" (P4). This tension reflects an ongoing conflict between aspirations for global mobility and the desire to maintain cultural identity.

Socioeconomic Influences on Language Ideologies

Socioeconomic status significantly shaped parents' language ideologies and perceptions of EMI schools. High SES parents often associate EMI education with status and upward mobility. For example, one parent remarked, "*If my child can get a scholarship, why not?*" (P2). These parents frequently viewed English as a symbol of progress and global integration, with local languages considered secondary. In contrast, lower SES parents expressed a more pragmatic view, emphasizing the need for English while remaining deeply committed to using local and national languages. One parent noted, "*We focus on English, but we also want them to know our culture and heritage*" (P4).

Concerns about Language Loss

Parents expressed significant concerns about losing local languages and cultural identity due to prioritizing English. These concerns were particularly prominent among parents who viewed local languages as integral to maintaining familial and cultural connections. For instance, one parent remarked, “*We must balance English with Javanese so that children don’t forget their roots*” (P3). Despite the emphasis on English, many parents advocated for a balanced approach, ensuring that their children remained connected to their cultural heritage while acquiring the skills necessary for global success.

Comparative Perspectives

The shifting language ideologies were not uniform and varied based on factors such as socioeconomic status, parental proficiency in English, and the age of the children. Parents of younger children tended to focus more on foundational skills in both English and local languages. Compared, those with older children prioritized EMI education as a pathway to higher education and global careers. This variation indicates that contextual factors, including educational and family circumstances, influence shifting ideologies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the factors influencing parental decisions to enrol their children in English Medium Instruction (EMI) schools and the shifting language ideologies that underpin these choices. By integrating these findings into broader theoretical and practical contexts, this discussion underscores the implications for educational policy and practice.

Factors Influencing Parents’ Choice of EMI Schools

Parents’ prioritization of English proficiency reflects the pervasive view of English as a gateway to global opportunities. This perspective aligns with global research, such as those of [Dearden \(2014\)](#) and [Macaro et al. \(2018\)](#), who identify English as essential for academic and professional advancement. Parents’ efforts, from fostering home-based language practices to investing in private tutoring, underscore a strategic commitment to overcoming limitations and securing their children’s fluency. These actions resonate with [Baker’s \(2011\)](#) assertion that parental involvement is crucial in second language acquisition.

Parental attitudes towards EMI schools are closely tied to their English proficiency levels. Parents with limited proficiency exhibited heightened urgency, driven by aspirations for their children to surpass their limitations and access global opportunities. This urgency aligns with [Shohamy’s \(2006\)](#) concept of ‘language-related social mobility,’ where language acquisition is perceived as a vehicle for upward mobility. Conversely, parents with moderate proficiency displayed less anxiety, viewing EMI as a natural extension of their abilities. These findings emphasize parents’ diverse motivations and expectations for EMI education, reflecting nuanced interpretations of English as a socio-economic asset ([Graddol, 2006](#)).

Socioeconomic status (SES) emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping parental decisions. High SES parents viewed EMI schools as strategic investments, prioritizing long-term benefits such as study abroad opportunities and scholarships. This aligns with [Bourdieu’s \(1986\)](#) concept of cultural capital, wherein families with greater resources leverage education to secure and enhance their social position. In contrast, low SES parents focused

on affordability and immediate utility, echoing findings from [Nyoni et al. \(2023\)](#) on educational inequities. Their pragmatic approach highlights the structural barriers that limit access to high-quality EMI education for economically disadvantaged families ([Piller & Cho, 2013](#)).

Shifting Language Ideologies

The findings reveal significant shifts in language ideologies, with parents increasingly prioritizing English over local languages. This mirrors global trends where English is perceived as a lingua franca of opportunity ([Crystal, 2013](#)). High SES parents, in particular, associated English with status, global integration, and socio-economic mobility, aligning with [Phillipson's \(1992\)](#) notion of linguistic imperialism. However, the devaluation of local languages introduces tensions as parents grapple with balancing global aspirations and cultural preservation.

Parental responses underscored cultural and linguistic tensions, with many expressing guilt over deprioritizing local languages. This conflict reflects the dual pressures of globalization and cultural identity maintenance. [Hornberger and Johnson \(2007\)](#) emphasize the importance of multilingual education policies that respect and promote linguistic diversity. Similarly, [Garcia and Wei \(2014\)](#) advocate for translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy to integrate multiple languages and cultures in education. The findings of this study suggest that while parents value English for its economic utility, they remain deeply concerned about preserving connections to their heritage.

Socioeconomic factors further shaped these ideologies. High SES parents often viewed English as dominant, sometimes at the expense of local languages. In contrast, low SES parents adopted a more balanced approach, advocating for bilingualism or multilingualism to maintain cultural and linguistic ties. This divergence underscores the role of economic resources in shaping language preferences and educational opportunities ([Kibler & Valdes, 2016](#)).

Concerns about Language Loss

Concerns about language loss emerged as a recurring theme, with parents expressing fears that prioritizing English might erode local languages and cultural identity. [Stubbs \(1991\)](#) warns against the consequences of language shift on cultural cohesion, a concern echoed by many parents in this study. Advocates of a balanced approach emphasized the importance of maintaining linguistic and cultural ties while equipping children for global engagement. These findings align with [Baker \(2017\)](#) argument for additive bilingualism, where proficiency in one language supports rather than replaces other languages.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive and equitable educational policies that address the diverse motivations and constraints of parents across socioeconomic strata. Policymakers should consider expanding access to quality EMI education for low-SES families while integrating curricula that support multilingualism and cultural preservation. For instance, initiatives inspired by [Cenoz and Gorter's \(2015\)](#) ecological approach to multilingual education could promote balanced language development.

Additionally, schools must adopt pedagogical strategies that balance English proficiency with the maintenance of local languages. As Garcia and Wei (2014) proposed, Translanguaging practices can help bridge cultural and linguistic divides while fostering a holistic learning environment. Encouraging parental engagement in language preservation efforts alongside EMI education could further mitigate cultural and linguistic tensions.

Promoting awareness of the value of linguistic diversity is essential for fostering an inclusive educational landscape. Educational campaigns and community programs could emphasize the benefits of multilingualism, aligning with parents' aspirations while addressing societal needs. By integrating global and local priorities, such initiatives can support the development of equitable and sustainable educational frameworks.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the factors influencing Indonesian parents' decisions to enrol their children in English Medium Instruction (EMI) schools, including English proficiency, socioeconomic status, and shifting language ideologies. The findings underscore parents' strategic importance on English as a tool for global success while revealing significant tensions between globalization and preserving cultural and linguistic heritage. High socioeconomic status parents tend to view EMI as a pathway to international opportunities and upward mobility. In contrast, lower socioeconomic groups balance their aspirations for English proficiency with cultural preservation and practical constraints. These insights call for inclusive policies and practices prioritizing equitable access to quality EMI education, fostering multilingualism, and addressing cultural preservation. By bridging global and local priorities, policymakers and educators can create a more balanced and inclusive educational landscape that aligns with parental aspirations and societal needs.

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