

**Research Article**

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**The use of national and regional languages in  
the EFL teaching at SMPN 1 Salem, Brebes District**

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**Abstract**

EFL Teaching is performed by applying various teaching methodologies to suit the characteristics and needs of the students. For the EFL students at public junior high schools who did not experience English learning in public elementary schools and have limited or no prior English language experience, the EFL teacher may incorporate the students' acquired languages to help them understand the materials. The research exposes why an EFL teacher at SMPN 1 Salem, integrates national and regional languages in her EFL classroom. The data were collected by giving questionnaires to 27 students and 1 teacher. The results show that the teacher mostly incorporates Indonesian and Sundanese with English in her classroom. Javanese is not used, as all students speak it as their mother tongue, even though they belong to Salem Sub-District, Brebes District, Central Java Province, whose regional language is Javanese. The three languages are used in the classroom to enable students to master English, as it is quite difficult to acquire when it is fully taught in English. The research reveals how teacher adapts to the classroom conditions.

**Keywords:** EFL classroom; EFL students; EFL teaching; national language; regional language

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**1. Introduction**

English is usually taught, learnt, and spoken as a foreign language in Indonesia. Indonesians do not use English as a first or a second language (Lauder, 2008). Most Indonesians speak a regional language as their mother tongue, Indonesian as their national language, and English as an international language. English is a foreign language spoken in an 'international setting'.

English has been taught to Indonesian junior high school students since 1914 and senior high school students since 1918, when the two levels of education were established in the country (Darmowidjono in Soekamto, 2003). English began to be taught as an optional school subject or local content in public elementary schools in the 2004 KBK (*Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi*) or Competency-Based Curriculum and the 2006 KTSP (*Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan*) or School-Based Curriculum, to enable students to master English as an international language from an early age (Sujana, et.al., 2010).

English was eliminated as a school subject from public elementary schools in the 2013 curriculum based on the Regulation of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Number 67, Year 2013, to enable students to master their national language before learning an international

language (Nisa, 2020). The 2023 Merdeka curriculum puts English to public elementary schools as an optional subject, taught in two sessions, or 70 minutes a week (Kemdikbud, 2023).

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation, Number 12, Year 2024, related to the curriculum of the Early-Age Education, Elementary Education, and Middle Education, stated that in the 2027/2028 academic year English will be taught as an obligatory school subject for public elementary school students from the third grade (Yulianti, 2024).

The temporary absence of English as a subject in public elementary schools creates a problem for EFL learners and teachers in public junior high schools. Public junior high school students, who did not experience English learning in public elementary schools and have limited or no prior English language experience, face difficulties in learning EFL delivered in English. EFL teaching is challenging for teachers at public junior high schools, as they must help their students understand the materials and master English, despite it being the students' first experience with the language.

Most EFL teachers teach English using English to provide a monolingual environment, scaffolding the students' English competence. Some of them teach the language using the students' first language to create a bilingual environment, supporting their bilingual learning. In a certain area where students have specific characteristics, EFL can be taught using the students' acquired language. This research reveals the reasons for integrating the students' regional and national languages in their EFL classroom.

## **2. Methods**

This qualitative and quantitative research employs a mixed-methods procedure to collect data (Cresswell and Cresswell, 2017). The data were gained through questionnaires to show why the teacher incorporates the students' regional and national languages into her EFL teaching. It also exposes the students' opinions toward the teacher's teaching. It serves as a case study of the EFL teaching of an EFL classroom, where some students experience English for the first time and learn it using their acquired languages.

The participants are one English teacher and twenty-seven students of Grade 8 Class A from a public junior high school in Salem Sub-District, Brebes District, Central Java Province. They were purposely selected (Sugiyono, 2010) to expose why the teacher put aside the regional language, taught at school as a local content, as part of the students' acquired languages. The teacher purposefully uses another regional language, as their mother tongue, to provide a similar language and cultural context.

To gain information from the respondents, open-ended and closed-ended questions (Ahmad, 2011) were given to the students and their teacher. From 35 questions for the students, the closed-ended questions reveal their language backgrounds, and the open-ended questions expose their opinions on their teacher's use of their mother tongue and the national languages in the EFL classroom. Meanwhile, 17 questions for the teacher reveal their consideration of integrating the students' acquired language in the EFL teaching. The research results were presented as the interpretation of the questionnaire's results.

## **3. Results**

The answers to the students' closed-ended questions on their questionnaires showed that 26 students came from Salem Sub-District, Brebes District, Central Java Province (questions 1-7). Only one student (R) came from Cilacap District. Questions 8-16 revealed Sundanese with Brebes Dialect (SBD) as their mother tongue and Indonesian as their national language. In addition to the two languages, they learn Javanese as a local content subject and English as a foreign language subject at school.

SBD is mostly used at home to talk to their family, around the house to communicate with neighbors, and at school to chat with schoolmates. Indonesian is sometimes used at home and in the neighborhood when talking to people who cannot speak Sundanese. Indonesian is often used as an

official language in a formal situation at school. Javanese is barely used in their daily activities, while English is used in the EFL classroom.

The answers to the students' closed-ended questions on their questionnaires revealed why they use English, Indonesian, and Sundanese, as well as their opinions towards their teacher's use of those three languages. The answers to questions 17-30 shows that: (1) they use Indonesian and Sundanese along with English in their EFL classroom, (2) they do not fully understand English, so that they need to use the two languages to learn English, and (3) they are glad their teacher allows them to use the three languages to learn English because it is difficult for them to learn English if they are not allowed to use the three languages simultaneously.

On the other hand, the teacher's questionnaire results show that although she came from Tegal City (questions 1-5), her 19 years of experience as an EFL teacher at SMPN 1 Salem (questions 6-7) enabled her to speak SBD in addition to Javanese, Indonesian, and English. Related to the teacher's language usage in the EFL classroom, the reasons why she selects certain languages in teaching EFL, and her opinions toward the students' usage of their acquires languages in learning EFL; the answer to questions 8-17 shows almost similar answers with that of the students', that are: (1) she uses English, Indonesian, and Sundanese, (2) she wants to help the students who do not fully understand English to learn EFL using the languages they understand, and (3) she fully supports the students' effort to learn English using the languages they understand, hoping that it bears positive result for the their English comprehension and competence. The discussion of the questionnaire results is presented below.

#### **4. Discussion**

EFL teaching refers to educating non-native speakers in a non-English-speaking environment (Sulistyo, 2016). Since English is used as an additional language to the existing languages, the exposure of EFL students to the language is limited. English might be used in the EFL classroom or when students encounter foreigners who speak the language. The first English learning experience in public junior high schools, due to the absence of English in public elementary schools, causes students difficulties in understanding materials and mastering the language.

For students with the above characteristics and needs, the teacher helps them by explaining materials using their acquired languages without completely removing English from the EFL classroom, as they must be exposed to English. This can be performed by (1) translating the difficult part of English into the language they understand, vice versa, (2) mixing English with part of the language they understand, (3) switching from English to the language they understand, vice versa, or (4) translanguaging using the languages they understand along with English.

The translation can be done fully or partially (Vermes, 2010) when the students do not understand difficult words or terms in English. Code mixing is performed by incorporating words or phrases from one language into another (Ansar, 2017) to introduce English within the students' acquired language and insert their acquired language into English. Meanwhile, the code switching is executed by alternating between different languages (Ansar, 2017) to explain a whole concept in various languages that the students understand. Finally, translanguaging is practiced when students improve their English by fluidly using the language they acquired in a classroom (Liando, 2023).

The location of Salem Sub-District on the western border of Central Java Province allows its residents to have close contact with those in West Java Province. The daily contact with Sundanese and the remote location from the center of Central Java Province make the residents speak Sundanese instead of Javanese, even though Salem Sub-District belongs to Brebes District, Central Java Province, whose residents speak Javanese as their mother tongue. The situation causes Salem-born students to use Sundanese as their mother tongue. Javanese is not spoken, although it is the official regional language of Central Java Province, which is taught as a local content subject at school. The zero usage of Javanese leads to the school's request for a Sundanese teacher as a substitute for a Javanese teacher at the local educational institution.

The students' language background prevents the teacher from integrating Javanese into her teaching, as most of the students do not speak or master the language that was taught at school. Thus, she utilizes English, Indonesian, and Sundanese in her teaching to enable her students to comprehend the materials and to speak English. It is mostly done by explaining the materials delivered in English using Indonesian or Sundanese. It can also be executed by translating the students' Indonesian or Sundanese into English. To expose students to English, the teacher uses English, mixed with Indonesian or Sundanese. Sometimes, the teacher switched from English to Indonesian or Sundanese to explain difficult notions. When the languages are used simultaneously, the teacher shows a translanguaging practice.

Questions 17 to 20 indicate that students do not always use English to communicate with the teacher during the lesson, as they also use Indonesian and sometimes Sundanese. They said that it happens because: (1) they automatically use the languages when they face difficulties in speaking English since they are not fully master the language and (2) it is easier for them to mix English with the two languages or switch from English to those languages when they cannot express their ideas solely in English. Moreover, they do not always use English to talk to their English teacher outside the classroom because there is no obligation to speak English to an English teacher outside the EFL classroom.

In the classroom, they used English to complete tasks or finish assignments given by their teacher, such as performing play roles, presenting topics, or discussing issues. According to them, it happens because of their limited experience with English before junior high school and their low exposure to the language outside the EFL classroom. It is supported as their teacher allows them to use the languages whenever they need to help them learn English. Question 21 shows that the students consider the use of the two languages is beneficial since: (1) it makes their communication with their teacher and among their classmates runs well, (2) it is helpful to learn English using the languages, (3) it is easier to discuss the materials or the assigned task using the languages, and (4) one of the student (ZA) said that the use of Sundanese help him maintain her mother tongue.

The difficulties in understanding and using English suit the answers from Question 22 related to their English learning backgrounds, as 5 students learn it from kindergarten, 12 from elementary school, and 10 from junior high school. However, Questions 23-25 show that only two students learn English outside school. BANH has a private lesson, while SW joins an English course to improve their English. Other students rely on the school's effort to enable them to acquire the language due to various reasons, such as: (1) the limited number of English lesson or course in the sub district, (2) the less affordable fee, and (3) the lack of parental support to have them. Having extra lessons outside school does not mean that BANH and SW expect their English tutor to use full English to tutor them. BANH and SW prefer the utilization of Indonesian or even Sundanese to make the tutor's explanation of the material more serious, specific, and detailed.

Related to the languages the teacher integrates in the EFL classroom, Questions 26 to 29 indicate that the teacher does not always use English to teach and talk to them. The teacher's use of Indonesian mixed with English does not bother them as it eases their understanding of the materials if it is explained using English, Indonesian, or even Sundanese. They understand that the teacher only tries to make them comprehend the materials and to train them to speak the language well.

Related to the languages the students use in their EFL classroom, Questions 30 to 32 indicate that the students do not always use English to learn the language or to talk to the teacher and classmates. They mix English with Indonesian and Sundanese. The two languages are simultaneously used to: (1) discuss the materials and assignments, (2) ask questions to their teacher, and (3) talk to their classmates. The two languages are used when: (1) they got confused on how to express their ideas in English, (2) they need to talk about things related to Indonesian or Sundanese culture that is difficult to be expressed using English, or (3) they automatically refer to things they do not know in English.

Although their classmates' responses towards their use of Indonesian and Sundanese are considered negative, when they laugh and make them ashamed, they do not feel that it demotivates them from learning English. They realize that errors and failures were part of their learning process.

The use of Indonesian and/or Sundanese by the students and their teacher makes them comfortable in learning English (Questions 33 to 34) because: (1) it is easier for them to use the original language to say things that are not related to English, (2) it is easier to find out what they want to say in English after it is translated from the two languages, and (3) it can be automatically used when they need to talk about something from their cultures. The students' positive attitudes toward the languages involved in the EFL classroom reflect their support for their teacher's integration of their language repertoire in an EFL multilingual classroom.

Although the teacher came from Tegal City and used Javanese as her mother tongue, her 19 years of experience at SMPN 1 Salem enabled her to speak Sundanese (Questions 1 to 9). When she aims to integrate Indonesian into English, her students' language background as Javanese, whose mother tongue is Sundanese, leads her to use Sundanese to help them understand the lesson.

Questions 10 to 14 reflect her concerns about her students' difficulties in: (1) understanding English, (2) expressing their ideas in English, or (3) pronouncing English words properly. The teacher's purpose in incorporating Indonesian and sometimes Sundanese into English is to help students with limited English knowledge and vocabulary due to their limited acquaintance of English to: (1) deliver materials in languages they understand, (2) communicate using the languages they understand, (3) express things which is properly delivered using their languages (Question 15 to 17). This research provides the benefit of integrating students' mother tongue in EFL learning. It should continue to gain more insight into how it is useful for students and teachers.

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