

## **A Very Late Partial English Immersion Program: An Alternative Program For Indonesian Universities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper is focused on the establishment and improvement of an immersion program at Indonesian tertiary level of education. Considering internal and external factors such as economy, socio-culture, and politics, it is argued that such a program is needed. Beginning with the rationale of bilingual education program, the discussion will continue on the current situation as the background, the issues and implications, the proposal, and the possible implementation plan of an immersion program.

English is proposed as the target language in the program considering its being, the language of knowledge, the language of global job markets, the language of information and technology dissemination, and the language of politics and socio-culture around the globe. However, due to several contextual reasons, among which are the government policy and resource availability, the application cannot be in the form of a full immersion program. These considerations play important roles in determining the feasibility and the implementation of the program. Adjusting to the situation and local context, the application is proposed to be a **very late partial English immersion program**.

**Key words:** immersion, language

### **A. Introduction**

There are certain types of tertiary education institutions commonly found in Indonesia, namely universities, institutes, colleges, and training centres. Geographically, prestigious educational institutions are centralised in Java. This causes disparate qualities of education across regions in Indonesia. In particular, Yogyakarta, which is located in Central Java, is a very special region with its label as "the city of students". Students come from all over the country to this city, in which hundreds of tertiary education institutions with relatively good quality are currently located.

The facts mentioned above have become the driving forces of this paper. The focus of this paper is on the establishment of a very late immersion program at tertiary level of education in Indonesia. Beginning with the rationale of bilingual education program, the discussion will continue on the current situation as the background, the issues and implications, the proposal, and the possible implementation plan of a very late immersion program.

### **B. Rationale**

Bilingual Education can be categorised into two types: "weak" and "strong" forms (Baker, 2006, pp. 213-257).

Each type or form of bilingual education possesses certain characteristics. The weak form of bilingual education has the characteristics of mainly majority language students, the medium of instruction in the classroom is the majority language, and the language outcome is mostly monolingualism or limited bilingualism. On the other hand, the strong form of bilingual education has the characteristics of mainly majority language students, the medium of instruction in the class is the minority language, and the language outcome is bilingualism and biliteracy. Thus, the weak form of bilingual education is a subtractive bilingual education, whereas the strong form is additive (Baker, 2006, pp. 213-257).

Immersion education is a strong bilingual education. The characteristics of this type of bilingual education are majority language speaking students, being taught in a minority language, and aimed at pluralism and language enrichment. The language outcomes of immersion education are bilingualism and biliteracy. This type of bilingual education is thus considered to be an additive bilingual education. There are some advantages of immersion, such as intercultural competence, self-esteem, self-identity, cognitive development, academic achievement, and broader opportunities for jobs in the future (Baker, 2006, pp. 245-250).

The key study of immersion is the Lambert Montreal Canada Immersion Program back in 1965. The study was conducted in Lambert, which was a mainly English speaking suburb, in Montreal, a mainly French speaking city (Berthold, 1995, p. 4). The success of this study was acknowledged by Krashen as being the most successful study of language learning that had ever been conducted (Krashen, 1984 in Berthold, 1995, p. 3). In a different perspective, Berthold identified the success in terms of the current high proportion of successful immersion students in even low rate of immersion population (Berthold, 1995, p. 5).

The assumption of this type of bilingual education are, among others: the similar backgrounds of students in terms of entry capacity which makes it a homogenous class, the situation in which both first and second languages are allowed to develop, and the use of bilingual teachers. These assumptions become some of the core features of immersion. First language development is supported. Students are allowed to ask questions in first language and are to be answered in second language instead of being ignored. There are also variable features complementing the core features (Baker, 2006, p. 248).

Immersion program can further be divided based on time and extent. In terms of time, immersion can be: "early", which involves early primary students from kindergarten to year 1; "delayed", which starts at year 3 or 4 of primary school; and "late", which is at secondary or tertiary level of education (Baker, 2006, p. 245; Berthold, 1995, p. 2). Furthermore, in terms of extent, immersion program can be full or 100% in target language, and partial or 50% second language and first language (Baker, 2006, p. 245). An example of an immersion program could be the implementation of "Arabic class" in an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia, in which Indonesian students in the particular class are fully taught in Arabic language.

As a method, however, immersion program triggers several issues such as continuity, elitism, and being able but not functional users of the target language in productive skills. The second language is mainly used in the classroom only. In the case of "Arabic class" mentioned in the previous paragraph, the continuity of pattern from primary to secondary and tertiary levels of education is still a big question. Elitism can also occur, like what is happening to students of 'International classes' in some favourite regular high schools in Indonesia. Students, who are taught fully in English, feel themselves as "relatively higher in status" compared with students of regular classes.

### C. Background

At the moment, the conduct of each program at tertiary level institutions in Indonesia has to be in accordance with the national regulation (M. P. N. R. Indonesia, 2000a), thus the subjects taught have to refer to those required by the national curriculum. In addition, there are institutional specific subjects, which refer to the vision and mission of individual universities (M. P. N. R. Indonesia, 2000b).

In current common programs, units taught are categorised into compulsory subjects and elective subjects. English is commonly offered as two units of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In terms of foreign language competence, students are of various levels of English. However, there is no placement test, so that they are put in mixed classes with one-level lecture method. In every subject, one lecturer handles an average of 25-80 students per class, with *Bahasa Indonesia* as the medium of instruction.

The current regular program has the strengths of being cost-effective, easy to handle, and in accordance with lecturers' incentives. Considering the latter issue, current lecturers are provided with salary which relatively fits their efforts in planning and conducting the units. However, there are weaknesses of this program from the perspective of EFL lecturers, students, and also the practice of language learning. From the EFL lecturers' perspective, it is weak in terms of maintaining the competitive power of the university and preparing students in entering the real world. Students' point of view highlights the problematic situation with their readiness for competition in job markets, which are going global and getting tougher. More and more students become aware that this situation requires language competence, unlike the situation today where students passing the language exam for the sake of score, not for gaining language competence. Lack of considerations in the future prospects of the learning process in the university is another pitfall of the current program.

Considering the abovementioned problematic situations, an effort has to be undertaken to improve the programs currently offered. This should be done in order to maintain the competitive power of the university in general and specifically the faculty, and to prepare students in entering the real world with its global and tight competition. As an impact of globalisation, competence in second or foreign language results in competitive advantage for the students.

therefore, an effective and simultaneous language and content teaching method is badly needed. In fact, as suggested by Genesee (1983, in Baker, 2006, p. 273), "late immersion has no detrimental effect on first language skills".

### D. Issues and Implications

The plan to implement an effective and simultaneous language and content teaching method deals with certain issues and implications. The first issue to address is the resources availability. As suggested by Truckenbrodt dan de Courcy (2002, p. 34) "the success of any language program is linked to the quality of its human and physical resources". In terms of human resources, the teachers have to possess certain qualifications and have to be competent in both languages: the current language of instruction, which is *Bahasa Indonesia*, and the target language. In other words, the teachers have to be bilingual (Baker, 2006, p. 248). Another aspect of human resources consists of the students. The fact that the student intake is generally from regular schools, with *Bahasa Indonesia* as the medium of instruction, brings about another problematic issue. Handling students with limited background experience of using foreign language in studying is something distinctive and challenging. The second type of resources is

physical resource, such as materials, facilities, and funds. The limited physical resources available for students also hinder the establishment of an immersion class.

The language chosen to be the linguistic goal of the immersion program is English. So far, English has been taught as a foreign language, which means that students have limited exposure to the language. The choice of English is due to several considerations. First, English is a language of knowledge, in the sense that many aspects of diverse knowledge are delivered through this language, such as science, engineering, social studies, and economics. Moreover, English is also the language of job markets, or in other words this language is chosen for economic reasons. Thirdly, English is also used in disseminating most information and technology around the world, regardless of where the source is. Finally, as an impact of globalisation, English is chosen because of socio-political and cultural reasons. The decision is also taken considering the capability of fulfilling the target curriculum within the time limit, which is 8-14 semesters (M. P. N. R. Indonesia, 2000b). This is in line with Truckenbrodt's argument, that the language choice should fit with "what can be achieved within the given time constraints" (Truckenbrodt & de Courcy, 2002, p. 36).

Another consideration to be taken into account is the policy of the Indonesian government. According to the government and the House of Representative of Indonesia (D. P. R. R. Indonesia, 1989; M. P. N. R. Indonesia, 2000a), all education institutions of all levels in Indonesia have to refer to the national curriculum in their designs. This compulsory nature of the national curriculum restricts the level of flexibility in designing courses around the country.

The next issue is the existence of specific content subjects. Such subjects are either country specific, as specified by the government and the House of Representative (D. P. R. R. Indonesia, 1989; M. P. N. R. Indonesia, 2000a); institution specific, as specified by each institution; or study program specific. According to the National Minister of Education, the competence elements to be elaborated in the national curriculum are Personality Development Units, Working Expertise Units, Skill and Knowledge Units, Working Attitude Units, and Societal Living Units (M. P. N. R. Indonesia, 2002).

Another issue concerns guidance and counselling for the students, since the students come from regular schools instead of immersion high schools. This brings about the need for a student support unit and advisors. The effect of elitism can be caused by the establishment of such an immersion program, which requires a certain way of handling the issue.

Additional considerations based on previous immersion education conducts in various contexts are also taken into account. Such experiences are those of the foreign language immersion programs of Spanish at the University of Minnesota (Klee & Tedick, 1997, pp. 155-159), and of English in Hong Kong (Johnson, 1997), which reflect that the success or failure of such a program does not only depend on the language proficiency. Background knowledge of the course content and pedagogy also play important roles in the program. In the University of Minnesota context, some conclusions drawn are that administrative support, balance of content and target language, coordination of curricula, and entrance level of proficiency are determinants in such a conduct (Klee & Tedick, 1997, p. 159). Meanwhile, in Hong Kong context, the program failed because of problematic teacher training, testing, evaluation, and selection (Johnson, 1997, p. 186).

### **E. Proposed Program Description**

After taking consideration of the matters mentioned above, the proposed program to be implemented is a **very late partial English immersion**. The aim of this immersion program is, similar to other immersion education, for the students to be bilingual and bicultural without putting aside their academic achievement (Baker, 2006, p. 245).

The application at a private university brings about several consequences. The first consequence is that the funding is going to be 'from students, for students'. A similar phenomenon happened to an Australian private school applying immersion education, the Southport school, where it has to be independent both in funding and supplying resources (Davies, 1995, p. 61). In the case of Indonesian private universities, this is also in line with the Indonesian Parliament regulation, which suggests that:

*Biaya penyelenggaraan kegiatan pendidikan di satuan pendidikan yang diselenggarakan oleh masyarakat menjadi tanggung jawab badan/perorangan yang menyelenggarakan satuan pendidikan.*

(translated as: The funding of educational activities in educational units conducted by private parties is the private institutions/parties' responsibility as the conductor)

(D. P. R. Indonesia, 1989)

In the proposed program, the teachers are going to be all Indonesians, with the qualification of master degree, preferably university graduates from abroad. The fact that there are a lot of people with master qualification available will result in no difficulty for faculties of tertiary institutions in finding such educators. However, the quality of these educators has to be assured through an entrance test and a continuous quality monitoring process. Similar ideas were asserted by Truckenbrodt and de Courcy (2002, p. 44). English native speakers are to be employed only as visiting lecturers. There is no full time native English speaking teacher, considering local teachers are more accustomed with local values. This is in line with one of the core principles of immersion education, that the atmosphere of the class should be in the first language or first culture (Baker, 2006, p. 248).

It is expected that prospective students are to be recruited through two types of exams: content and language. The content exam is exactly the same as the exam to be taken by prospective regular students. The language exam, as a specific additional item for prospective immersion students, includes the four macro skills of English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and grammar. According to Truckenbrodt and de Courcy (2002, p. 52), the major reasons of student selection is the limited seats with so many prospective students, and acceptance of certain types of students and rejection of others. This creates a class with homogeneous second language competence level.

The subjects to be taught in the immersion class are in accordance with the national curriculum and specific contents, should there be some, like what are required in certain universities. Certain subjects are to be taught in *Bahasa Indonesia* due to their specific values, causing them to be unreasonable to be taught in English, for example *Agama* and *Pancasila*.

Support for the students is to be provided in order for the program to be successful. This includes counselling, language advisors, and bridging program. The counselling is aimed at helping students with difficulties in coping with any situation or problem encountered in the program. Language advisors are to provide help in the field of language. Meanwhile, the bridging program is to be provided prior to starting the first semester for the new students, considering the students come from regular high schools. The purpose of the bridging program is to facilitate students in adapting to such a new atmosphere that they have never faced in their previous 12 years of study. Such a concept has also been discussed by Burger and Migneron (1997, p. 65) as adjunct courses and sheltered courses in the micro-context of immersion education. This idea is also supported by Krashen (1985, p. 64) with his idea of comprehensible input in immersion education, where the absence of English native speaker in the classroom

makes it possible for the materials to be delivered in homogeneous language level; for the adaptation and modification of materials to happen, and also for the students to use either first or second language in their responses. Another support comes from Lyster (1998, p. 65), who states that "immersion pedagogy has relied extensively on the use of comprehensible input and negotiation of meaning to convey subject matter".

## **F. The Implementation Plan**

The possible implementation of late partial English immersion program is adapted from the idea of Truckenbrodt and de Courcy (2002, pp. 62-65), and Erben's concept (Erben, 2004, p. 332) that "the ideological framework of immersion contains not only educational imperatives but also political, social, and cultural ones as well". Even stronger, this mind frame is supported by Read in her assertion that the application of immersion in tertiary education carries along "organisational obstacles" as well as "lack of acceptance" (Read, 1996). With adjustments to local context in terms of conditions and needs (Erben, 2004, p. 332), the outline of the steps to be taken is set.

The first step is a preliminary, which mainly is the introduction of the program. This step is very vital, since resistance is sometimes encountered. After such an introduction, the program begins by addressing university language centre or English department; the faculty; the staff; and also parents and students. The next step is deciding whether or not the program is to be started. The consideration in this stage is usually about "the minimum number of students required to make the immersion program feasible" (Truckenbrodt & de Courcy, 2002, p. 67). Should the program be decided to continue, the actors are to be determined. This includes the determination of who the teachers, the staff members, and the students are. As stated by Truckenbrodt and de Courcy (2002, p. 67), "the decision makers need to determine if there is going to be an official selection policy in relation to student involvement in the immersion program, and if so, what the criteria will be". Thus, it is in this stage that the selection criteria are to be defined. After the selection is set, the next steps are deciding on the rules and anticipating possible impacts. The following step is the syllabus design and materials development. Since the syllabus involves grammatical areas of the target language, "simplicity and centrality", "frequency", and "learnability" (Richards, 2001, pp. 11-12) need to be taken into account in the language used to deliver the content. The step of syllabus design and materials development is continued by teacher development. Truckenbrodt and de Courcy suggest that the development can be in the form of "postgraduate study, in-country experience, observation of an existing program or self-directed professional reading" (Truckenbrodt & de Courcy, 2002, p. 70).

As the program is conducted, the continuous step of monitoring has to take place. This can be done through the activation of a steering committee and the implementation of a lecturer credit point system, which reflects how each lecturer has employed the concepts of immersion education. The last but important step to be undertaken is working on continuous funding, which in the case of private institutions is the implementation of the 'from student, for student' concept.

Other than the abovementioned steps, the program has to refer to a certain time line in its immersion program conduct. Indonesian study programs mostly employ a student credit point system, as required by the rules and regulations. In this system, each unit is given certain credit weights, according to its relevance to the major or specialty. This means that there are some units with three credit points, two credit points, and even no credit point but merely requirement of statements of satisfaction from the lecturers. Besides the non-credit point units, which require

the lecturers to teach one hour per week, every credit point is worth 50 minute of lecture per week for a semester. Thus, an exact time line of the languages proportion per semester is impossible to set, as the credit point system gives flexibility for students in taking units. It is only in the first semester that the students are required to take 18 credit points of certain units. Later on, students have the opportunity to take up to 24 credit points (8-10 units) per semester, depending on their grades in the previous semester. Besides, not every unit is offered every semester, which also results in fluctuations of language proportion each semester. Overall, however, the curriculum consists of 144 credit points, which is the minimum requirements as defined by the parliament (M. P. N. R. Indonesia, 2000b).

Related to this system and as mentioned in the previous section, there are some subjects required to be taught in *Bahasa Indonesia*. This brings about an implementation of a partial immersion program. The proportion of the language used is basically 80% in English, and 20% in Bahasa Indonesia. However, the exact percentage can be calculated in two ways either as credit points or as the number of units. A difference of percentage in calculations based on credit points and number of units may occur, which is caused by different credit point weights put in each unit.

### G. Conclusion

It is clear from the explanation and description that an immersion program can and need to be implemented at tertiary educational institutions. The choice of English as the target language is based on considerations such as its being the language of knowledge, the language of global job markets, the language of information and technology dissemination, and the language of politics and socio-culture around the globe. However, due to several contextual reasons, among which are the government policy and resource availability, the application cannot be in the form of a full immersion program. These considerations play important roles in determining the feasibility and the implementation of the program. Adjusting to the situation and local context, the application at Indonesian tertiary level of education should be in the form of a **very late partial English immersion program**.

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