

Students' Perceptions of English as the Medium of Instruction in Indonesian Language for Foreign Speakers Classes

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ABSTRACT

English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) has been widely implemented in higher education as part of internationalization efforts; however, its pedagogical role in BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) classrooms remains underexplored. Most previous studies on BIPA primarily focus on instructional materials and linguistic achievement, leaving limited attention to how EMI functions in actual classroom practice and how learners perceive its use. This study investigates students' perceptions of EMI in Level 1 BIPA listening and speaking classes at a university in Surabaya. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 13 foreign students and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students generally perceive EMI as helpful for improving comprehension, confidence, and classroom engagement, particularly at the beginner level, while still emphasizing the importance of Indonesian immersion for developing communicative competence. The study concludes that EMI can function effectively as instructional scaffolding to support beginner learners when applied strategically and progressively reduced as proficiency increases.

Keywords: *English as Medium of Instruction, Bipa, Students' Perception, Qualitative Case Study, Language Learning.*

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INTRODUCTION

English has developed into a global lingua franca and expanded rapidly across countries worldwide. Its role now extends beyond everyday communication to education, academic mobility, and international collaboration (Zhu, 2022). In educational contexts, this expansion has contributed to the growing adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), in which English is used to teach academic content rather than taught solely as a subject. EMI has become increasingly prominent in higher education systems worldwide, including in Indonesia, where universities adopt it to enhance institutional reputation, global competitiveness, and international partnerships (Bolton et al., 2023; Garwe & Thondhlana, 2022). Consequently, many universities, including those in Surabaya, have begun integrating EMI into various programs and courses as part of their internationalization strategies.

From a theoretical perspective, EMI is commonly defined as the use of English to teach non-language subjects in contexts where English is not the majority's first language. According to Ernesto Macaro (2018), EMI involves delivering academic content through English with the primary goal of learning subject matter rather than explicitly teaching the language itself. Pedagogically, EMI emphasizes content mastery while allowing language development to occur incidentally through exposure and interaction. However, its effectiveness depends on several factors, including teacher talk, classroom interaction patterns, scaffolding strategies, and learners' language proficiency. Without careful planning, EMI may reduce participation, create misunderstandings, and limit learning opportunities. Therefore, effective EMI requires balanced language use and pedagogical sensitivity.

Alongside EMI, immersion has long been recognized as an important principle in second language learning. Immersion approaches prioritize extensive exposure to the target language to promote natural acquisition and communicative competence. In many foreign language classrooms, maximizing target-language use is considered beneficial because it increases meaningful input and authentic practice. Nevertheless, for beginner learners, exclusive immersion may lead to cognitive overload and anxiety when comprehension is limited. In such cases, the strategic use of a familiar language can serve as temporary scaffolding to support understanding before learners gradually transition toward fuller immersion.

Within this broader discussion, English is also used in BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) classes, programs designed to teach Indonesian to non-native speakers for academic, professional, and daily communication purposes. For international readers, BIPA can be understood as Indonesian for Speakers of Other Languages (ISOL), similar to ESL or EFL programs. BIPA classrooms are typically multilingual and culturally diverse, and many learners have little or no prior exposure to Indonesian. In such contexts, English often functions as a practical bridge language to facilitate explanations, instructions, and classroom interaction. Although immersion in Indonesian remains the ultimate goal, selective use of English may help beginner learners understand new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and task requirements more effectively.

The pedagogical use of English can therefore be viewed as instructional scaffolding. Harmer (1984) argues that selective English use can clarify complex concepts and instructions, while Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of scaffolding and social interaction in supporting learners within their Zone of Proximal Development. Similarly, Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis highlights the importance of comprehensible input slightly above learners' current proficiency level. In beginner BIPA classrooms, strategic use of English may make Indonesian input more accessible, lower affective barriers, and foster confidence, thereby facilitating more effective learning.

Despite these theoretical considerations, the pedagogical role of English in BIPA classrooms remains underexplored empirically. Most previous BIPA studies primarily focus on instructional materials and linguistic achievement rather than examining instructional language choice and learners' perceptions. Meanwhile, EMI research in Indonesia has largely concentrated on mainstream higher education and international programs, leaving limited insight into how EMI operates in beginner-level BIPA settings. This gap highlights the need to investigate how English functions pedagogically in BIPA classrooms and how students perceive its role in their learning process.

This study addresses the following research question: How do Level 1 BIPA students perceive the use of English as the Medium of Instruction in listening and speaking classes? To answer this question, the study explores students' experiences and perceptions of EMI implementation in a Level 1 BIPA class at a university in Surabaya.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the implementation of English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) and students' perceptions in Level 1 BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) classes at a university in Surabaya. A case study approach was selected because it allows an in-depth investigation of EMI practices within a real classroom context and enables the researcher to capture participants' experiences and perceptions holistically (Gerring, 2006). The study emphasized understanding and interpreting students' perceptions rather than producing statistical generalizations.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in an offline Level 1 BIPA class at a university in Surabaya from September 1 to September 30, 2025. The participants consisted of 13 foreign students enrolled in the program. They were selected through purposive sampling because they were

beginner learners of Bahasa Indonesia and frequently experienced difficulties understanding spoken Indonesian during classroom activities. These characteristics made them suitable participants for examining the pedagogical role of English as instructional support.

Data Collection Techniques

To obtain comprehensive qualitative data, this study employed two data collection techniques: questionnaires and interviews.

First, an open-ended questionnaire consisting of eight questions was administered to all 13 students after the observation phase. The questions elicited students' perceptions of the use of English in terms of comprehension, motivation, confidence, dependency, and its appropriate role in BIPA classrooms.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two purposively selected students to gain deeper insights into their learning experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes and was conducted in English to ensure that participants could express their ideas clearly. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Data sources included questionnaire responses and interview transcripts. The analysis followed three main stages: data preparation, coding, and theme development.

First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and questionnaire responses were compiled into textual form to ensure consistency across data sources. Second, the researcher conducted open coding to identify meaningful units related to EMI usage and students' perceptions, such as comprehension, confidence, and motivation. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories and themes through constant comparison across the data. These themes were then interpreted to explain how EMI functioned pedagogically as instructional scaffolding in the BIPA classroom.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

The Use of English as the Medium of Instruction in BIPA Classes

This section presents students' perceptions of using English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Level 1 BIPA listening and speaking classes. The findings were derived from open-ended questionnaires (Q3–Q8) and supported by semi-structured interviews. The analysis generated five major themes: (1) understanding, (2) motivation and confidence, (3) dependency on English, (4) preferred language of instruction, and (5) appropriate use of English.

EMI as a Tool for Comprehension Support

Most students perceived English as an important support for understanding Indonesian, particularly because they were beginners with limited prior exposure to the language. English functioned as a reference language that helped clarify vocabulary, grammar, and instructions.

Several students explicitly stated that English was necessary at the initial stage:

"Yes, it is needed as we are just beginning the journey to learning Bahasa Indonesian." (S1)

"Yes, it helps a lot because if they use 100% Indonesian, we will be struggling a lot." (S3)

"The teacher explaining Indonesian in English helps me learn Indonesian better." (S5)

"You need a language you know to start learning a new language as base and reference." (S9)

These responses indicate that English served as instructional scaffolding that facilitated comprehension of Indonesian grammar and vocabulary.

However, students also emphasized that English alone was insufficient for deeper mastery. Some participants commented:

"I understand, but I think it is still not enough." (S6)

"No real depth." (S12)

"At first English is very helpful, but if we use too much, we still need more Indonesian practice." (I1)

This suggests that EMI supported initial comprehension but should gradually decrease to allow greater immersion in Indonesian.

EMI and Confidence Development

The majority of students reported that EMI positively affected their motivation and confidence. English reduced confusion and helped them feel more secure during listening and speaking tasks.

Students explained:

"Translation helps understand and learn easily." (S4)

"Using English makes me more motivated because my Indonesian listening comprehension is poor." (S5)

"I can express well and propose my questions through English." (S8)

"It can help me understand Indonesian exactly." (S13)

Interview data reinforced this perception:

"If the teacher uses English, I feel more confident to answer, because I understand what she asks." (I2)

Nevertheless, not all students viewed EMI as inherently motivating. Some believed motivation was personal or that English might create additional difficulty:

"Motivation and commitment is more intrinsic." (S1)

"It's discouraging for people who don't understand English." (S12)

These mixed responses suggest that while EMI often lowers anxiety and increases engagement, its benefits depend on students' English proficiency and individual characteristics.

EMI and Classroom Management

Students expressed varied perspectives regarding reliance on English. Some admitted that frequent English explanations reduced opportunities to practice Indonesian:

"We depend on English which doesn't help in the long run." (S1)

"I can only learn Indonesian by relying on English." (S5)

"I chose to use English because it is faster, but I lost chances to make sentences in Bahasa Indonesia." (S8)

These responses indicate that overuse of EMI may limit communicative practice. Conversely, other students reported consciously reducing their dependency:

"No." (S2)

"I push myself to use Indonesian." (S9)

"Even if it is difficult, I try to answer in Indonesian, not English." (I1)

This suggests that reliance on English is transitional and tends to decrease as learners gain confidence and proficiency.

Preferred Language of Instruction

Most participants preferred a balanced combination of English and Indonesian, especially at the beginner level. Bilingual instruction was perceived as helping them learn faster and understand lessons more clearly:

"Mix of Indonesian and English. It helps me learn faster." (S3)

"I prefer a mix because I am a beginner in Indonesian." (S5)

"A mix is a must especially in the first levels." (S9)

"Mix. I know nothing about Indonesian before." (S13)

However, some students preferred full immersion:

"I prefer full Indonesian one." (S10)

"I would prefer classes taught only in Indonesian." (S12)

These differences show that students have diverse readiness levels and learning preferences.

The Importance of Indonesian Immersion

Students generally agreed that English should be used selectively and reduced progressively. They suggested that English is appropriate for explaining vocabulary, grammar, and complex concepts but should be minimized during communicative practice:

"Explain contrasts in grammar and cultural logic." (S1)

"Use it in elaborating difficult vocabularies." (S7)

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"Using English to explain concrete words and grammar." (S13)

"When we can't understand the exact meaning." (S11)

Some students also proposed reducing English after the beginner level:

"After mastering Bahasa, no need to use English anymore." (S7)

"Maybe in BIPA 2 we should get used to speaking Bahasa." (S4)

Overall, these findings demonstrate that students view EMI as contextual and supportive rather than permanent. English functions as instructional scaffolding that facilitates comprehension and confidence while Indonesian remains the primary target language.

Discussion

The use of English as the Medium of Instruction in BIPA Class

The results show that in BIPA Level 1 classrooms, English was not the primary language of teaching. Instead, when pupils struggled to understand vocabulary, task instructions, or lesson explanations, teachers would switch to English from Bahasa Indonesia. English was mostly utilized in speaking classes during clarifying moments and during explanation stages, especially in listening classes. This implies that rather than providing comprehensive English teaching, EMI served as instructional assistance. According to Rose et al. (2023), EMI does not necessarily mean the sole use of English; rather, it refers to the use of English to teach academic content where multilingual practices frequently coexist. This conclusion is in line with their definition of EMI. The bilingual strategy used by teachers in this study is a realistic EMI model tailored to the demands of beginning students.

Teaching was mostly teacher-centered, as seen by the preponderance of instructor talking time, particularly in listening sessions. Instructors emphasized word clarification, listening task explanations, and comprehension assessments. This scenario is consistent with Fitria's (2023) assertion that beginning BIPA instruction frequently necessitates intensive instructor supervision because of students' weak vocabulary and grammatical skills. In a same vein, Kurniasih (2021) clarify that in order for novice BIPA learners to successfully comprehend learning materials, they require clear explanations and organized training.

Students had greater opportunities to produce language in speaking sessions, but when they were unable to articulate their thoughts in Indonesian, English was still employed. Before assisting students in creating Indonesian sentences, teachers permitted a limited amount of English use. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding procedures, which give students short-term support to enable them to complete tasks that fall within their Zone of Proximal Development. Ortega (2014) supports this approach as well, highlighting the advantages of directed support for learners as they go from comprehension to production in second language acquisition.

Peer engagement, however, was scarce in speaking and listening classes. When faced with challenges, students tended to turn to the teacher instead of talking to their peers. This result is consistent with that of Febrianto & Priyana (2024), who found that language insecurity and a fear of making mistakes frequently cause overseas students studying BIPA to be reluctant to engage with classmates. Peer engagement was lacking, indicating that teacher-dominated communication was still prevalent in the classroom. This could limit opportunities for meaningful communicative practice.

Furthermore, the study's selective use of EMI is indicative of larger patterns in the internationalization of Indonesian higher education. According to Simbolon (2021) and Bolton et al. (2023), EMI is frequently applied loosely rather than rigorously at Indonesian colleges, particularly when students' English proficiency differs. Teachers modify their language use to guarantee understanding while preserving the efficacy of their lessons. Internationalization-related institutional goals are also in line with the use of EMI. EMI is frequently implemented to encourage global participation and draw in international students, but its execution needs to be considerate of the linguistic preparedness of the students, according to Garwe & Thondhlana (2022). When Indonesian is the learning aim in BIPA programs, EMI must serve as support rather than dominance.

Additionally, EMI procedures are influenced by both the material and digital components of BIPA education. According to Zamzamy (2021), multilingual explanations are

frequently included in multimodal and digital educational resources to aid with comprehension. The increasing integration of digital content and cultural explanation in BIPA education may need the occasional use of English to explain Indonesian cultural contexts to international learners, according to Aini et al. (2025). In general, EMI was used as a teaching technique to promote comprehension and learning advancement in BIPA Level 1 classrooms. In accordance with suggested procedures for BIPA teaching and EMI implementation in multilingual situations, English was strategically used while Indonesian remained the primary instructional language.

Students' Perceptions of EMI in BIPA Classes

The data indicate that the majority of students held a favorable view of English usage, particularly in enhancing comprehension and alleviating learning challenges. Students indicated that English facilitated their comprehension of vocabulary definitions, sentence structures, and instructional directives, especially in listening and grammatical elucidations. This research corroborates Alam et al. (2021), who discovered that employing familiar languages in second language acquisition can enhance learners' self-confidence and diminish fear, hence positively influencing learning engagement. When students comprehend the material being presented, they experience increased comfort and confidence in engaging in class activities.

Despitasari (2021) similarly discovered that students enrolled in EMI courses in Indonesia often have a favorable view of English usage when it aids in elucidating challenging subject. In the current study, students indicated that English Medium Instruction (EMI) enhanced learning accessibility and diminished confusion, hence facilitating improved classroom engagement. Motivation was additionally affected by EMI. A multitude of students said that comprehending courses in English enhanced their motivation to learn Indonesian. This corresponds with Fortuna (2025), who underscores that affirmative dispositions and diminished emotional barriers are crucial in language acquisition. When pupils experience emotional ease, their learning process becomes more efficient.

Nonetheless, certain pupils indicated apprehension regarding excessive reliance on English. They believed that the frequent use of English diminished their chances to practice speaking Indonesian. This issue mirrors difficulties identified in EMI studies by Soruç et al. (2024), who discovered that both linguistic and non-linguistic elements affect academic achievement in EMI environments. Overdependence on English may restrict exposure to the target language, which is essential in language-oriented programs such as BIPA. Students' inclination towards mixed instruction aligns with the findings of Tiawati et al. (2023), who indicated that international students studying Indonesian favor culturally and linguistically friendly settings that facilitate the connection of meaning with context through explanations. Nonetheless, they anticipate a growing utilization of Indonesian as their proficiency advances.

Moreover, students proposed that English should be excluded from communication activities, including presentations. This demonstrates recognition of the need of utilizing Indonesian actively. This study corroborates Zhu (2022), who underscores the significance of the linguistic environment in language development; regular exposure to and utilization of the target language are essential for cultivating communicative competence. Students' perceptions are also connected to the greater issues encountered by international students in Indonesian colleges. Simek & Stewart (2024) assert that international students necessitate both academic and linguistic assistance for successful adaptation. EMI may serve as a preliminary support system; nevertheless, sustained success relies on substantial interaction with the target language and academic context.

Consequently, students saw English Medium Instruction (EMI) as beneficial in first phases but inappropriate as a long-term pedagogical approach. They anticipated a progressive reduction in EMI as their proficiency in Indonesian improved, illustrating the scaffolding principle articulated by Vygotsky (1978). Based on the findings of this study, Students would probably face significant comprehension difficulties if English were not utilized at all in basic BIPA classes, especially when it came to learning new vocabulary, abstract ideas, classroom instructions, and grammatical explanations. Particularly for students with little prior exposure

to Indonesian, this could worsen learning anxiety, decrease involvement, and slow down language acquisition. According to the study's findings, EMI is a crucial instructional scaffolding tool that helps students retain their drive to learn, improve comprehension, and connect new Indonesian input with their existing linguistic expertise. As long as they have sufficient proficiency in Indonesian language structure, BIPA pedagogy, and intercultural communication, as well as the ability to strategically control English usage without controlling classroom dynamics, graduates of English education programs may be employed in this capacity as BIPA instructors.

Strong pedagogical abilities, classroom communication proficiency, and the capacity to effectively facilitate bilingual explanation are among these instructors' advantages; if instructional balance is not carefully maintained, there is a chance that they will overuse English, limit their students' exposure to Indonesian, and foster dependency. In order to maintain Indonesian as the major target language and English as a supplementary learning aid, EMI and instructor background must be carefully regulated. This study, through the integration of classroom observations, questionnaire data, and interview findings, establishes that EMI in BIPA Level 1 classrooms significantly aids in enhancing comprehension, boosting confidence, and encouraging learners. These findings align with recent BIPA and EMI studies that underscore the significance of adaptable bilingual practices, a gradual shift to complete target-language utilization, and learner-centered scaffolding. English Medium Instruction (EMI) should be employed strategically to enhance comprehension while maintaining a focus on Indonesian exposure and communication.

Limitation of the Study

This study offers significant insights into the application of English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) in BIPA Level 1 classes; nonetheless, certain limitations must be recognized. This study was limited to a single university and focused exclusively on Level 1 BIPA lessons. The educational atmosphere, student attributes, and pedagogical approaches in different institutions or advanced BIPA levels may vary. Consequently, the results of this study cannot be extrapolated to all BIPA programs or to students with higher proficiency levels.

The interview sample consisted of only two students. While the interview data yielded comprehensive insights into students' experiences, a greater number of participants might have enhanced the diversity of perspectives and bolstered the representation of students' voices. The classroom observation lasted for four sessions, comprising two listening courses and two speaking classes. This restricted meeting period may not comprehensively encompass all pedagogical techniques or fluctuations in EMI utilization that may transpire during an entire school semester.

This study mostly utilized qualitative data derived from observations, questionnaires, and interviews. Although these measures yielded extensive descriptive data, the lack of quantitative assessment of students' language advancement precludes the study from establishing the direct influence of EMI on students' success in acquiring Indonesian. Ultimately, students' responses to the questionnaire and interviews may have been shaped by their personal emotions, linguistic competence, or cultural context, thereby impacting their interpretation and replies to the inquiries. Consequently, their views may not accurately reflect objective classroom situations. Notwithstanding these constraints, this study provides significant insights into the implementation and perception of EMI in beginner-level BIPA classrooms, serving as a reference for future research aimed at exploring EMI practices in more extensive and diverse educational environments.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) plays a supportive pedagogical role in Level 1 BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) classrooms. The findings demonstrate that English functions primarily as instructional scaffolding to clarify vocabulary, explain grammatical structures, and provide task instructions, particularly for beginner learners with limited exposure to Indonesian. Students

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generally perceived EMI as beneficial for enhancing comprehension, reducing learning anxiety, and increasing confidence in listening and speaking activities. Although a small number of participants expressed concerns about potential overdependence on English, most preferred a balanced bilingual approach in which English supports understanding without replacing Indonesian as the primary language of communication. Overall, EMI contributes positively to beginner-level BIPA instruction when applied strategically and progressively reduced as learners' proficiency develops. These findings carry several practical implications. First, BIPA teachers should use English strategically and selectively, especially when explaining complex concepts, giving instructions, or checking comprehension. Second, English use should decrease gradually as students' Indonesian proficiency improves to encourage greater immersion and communicative practice. Third, teachers are encouraged to prioritize Indonesian during interactive activities such as discussions, role-plays, and presentations to maximize target-language exposure. At the institutional level, clear pedagogical guidelines and professional development programs should be provided to support effective EMI practices and help instructors balance English scaffolding with Indonesian immersion. Future research may involve larger participant groups, longitudinal designs, and comparative instructional models to examine the long-term impact of EMI on learners' linguistic development and classroom engagement across different BIPA proficiency levels.

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