**Bilingualism, Academic Achievement and Language Maintenance**

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**ABSTRACT**

Bilingualism is often viewed as a hindrance to children’s academic achievement and their future success in the more dominant language. This trend has caused a language shift toward the more dominant languages in multilingual regions such as Indonesia. Since 1990, the immersion program using local languages as the medium of instruction until the third grade was terminated by the government to boost students’ academic achievement and skills in Indonesian. In this paper, I discuss that bilingualism is beneficial not only to support academic achievement at schools but also to maintain the vitality of the less dominant languages. In doing so, I provide evidences from researches on successful language programs all over the world. I also suggest the reinstatement of the immersion program in Indonesia to maintain the country’s language diversity by providing children an opportunity to use the language actively in an academic context.

**KEYWORDS**: bilingualism, academic achievement, language achievement

Bilingualism is usually viewed negatively especially when it involves a more dominant language which brings more economic and social advantages. As a result, people might shift to the more dominant language and gradually this language shift might progress to a language endangerment. Currently, the world’s living languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. There are currently 7097 living languages in the world (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig, 2016). However, almost half of them are endangered and predicted to be extinct in this century alone because their speakers shift to other languages (Wilford, 2007). The shift can be caused by external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation or internal
forces such as community’s negative attitude towards its own language (The UNESCO, 2016).

The language shift also occurs in Indonesia. Indonesia has 719 languages with 707 are living and 12 are extinct. Of the living languages, 266 are in trouble and 76 are dying (Lewis, Simons and Fennig, 2016). Most parts of Indonesia have been historically multilingual due to the diverse ethnic groups and languages spoken in the country. However, after the declaration of independence in 1945, there was an urgent need to unite the multicultural archipelago with a national language, Indonesian (Musgrave, 2011).

Nowadays, Indonesian is a highly successful language and is used as the only medium instruction at schools and in the government offices. Cohn et al (2013) states that the success of Indonesian is putting pressure on the local languages. Due to the pressure, some parts in Indonesia have experienced a language shift from local languages to Indonesian. There are two major factors that contribute to the shift. The first is the language policy enacted by the Indonesian government in 1990 which regulated the use of Indonesian as the sole medium of instruction at schools (Musgrave, 2011). The second is the negative attitude towards local languages from the parents which results in the lack of effort to pass the languages to their children.

The negative attitude toward local languages is caused by a false belief that bilingualism in Indonesian and local languages will hinder children’s academic achievement in Indonesian (Kurniasih, 2006). However, Cummins, Diaz, Hakuta, Pearl and Lambertas cited in Zhang, 2005) proved in their researches that bilingualism provides more linguistics, cognitive and psychological advantages over monolingualism. Moreover, bilingual programs at schools will benefit the effort of
language maintenance by giving children opportunities to learn and to use the local languages actively with their peers under the guidance of their teachers.

Why should we care about language endangerment and language extinction? The UNESCO explains that every language reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features. The death of a language will result in the loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in the language including historical, spiritual and ecological knowledge that may be essential for the survival of not only its speakers, but also of others (The UNESCO, 2016).

In this paper, I discuss the benefits of bilingualism to support academic achievement and to maintain the vitality of the less dominant languages. In doing so, I provide evidences from researches in successful language programs all over the world, such as those on the Yup’ik community in Alaska and the dual immersion programs at a school in Illinois. Moreover, I also discuss evidences which show that language immersion program yields a better result in language maintenance than teaching the local language as a subject at school. I also suggest the reinstatement of the immersion program in Indonesia to maintain the country’s language diversity by providing children an opportunity to use the language actively in an academic context.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses bilingualism and academic achievement, section 3 discusses bilingualism and language maintenance, and section 4 is for the conclusion of this paper.

**BILINGUALISM AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

There is a traditional view that instruction in the less dominant languages will hinder students’ academic achievement or their skills in the more dominant language. As a result, language policies often favor the more dominant languages by making them the sole language of instruction at schools.
Before the government policy in 1990, Javanese was commonly used as the medium of instruction in the first three grades of primary school in Javanese speaking areas. However, Javanese is only taught now as a subject for two teaching hours per week in Central Java (Kurniasih, 2006). Musgrave (2011) claimed that the language policy had prompted a rapid decline of the number of speakers who speak Javanese as the first language since 1990.

Moreover, parents often abandon their mother tongues for the more dominant language under the assumption that their children would benefit socially and academically from the language. Kurniasih (2006) observed that social class and genders determined the rate of language shift in Yogyakarta. She found that the middle class mothers were responsible for motivating the language shift from Javanese to Indonesian in Yogyakarta. As many as 88% of middle class mothers and 39% of middle class fathers used only Indonesian to speak to their children. The working class parents would use Javanese and occasionally Indonesian to speak to their children at home.

It can be concluded that middle class mothers played a more important role in the language shift from Javanese to Indonesian than middle class fathers or the working class parents. It is not surprising that middle class girls used more Indonesian than any other children. As many as 57% middle class girls used Indonesian exclusively at home while only 9% of middle class boys did the same. In comparison, 70% of working class girl used Javanese and Indonesian while 30% of them only spoke in Javanese at home. On the other hand, 81% of working class boys only spoke Javanese at home while 14 % used Javanese and Indonesian. Moreover, the middle class girls show strong preference towards Indonesian than Javanese and have less positive attitude towards Javanese. They apparently acquired this attitude from their
mothers who often spoke openly about how Javanese would be a disadvantage to their children’s education (Kurniasih, 2006).

Kurniasih (2006) also proposed that working class children had more exposure in Javanese because they usually live in an extended family while the middle class children live in a nuclear family with parents and servants. In contrast, middle class children had more contacts with Indonesian because they were more likely to travel to big cities where Indonesian is mostly used. Moreover, middle class parents invested more on their children’s education and assumed that better command in Indonesian would ensure a better education for them.

It is interesting to note that women played more important role than male in the language shift in Yogyakarta. There is a traditional belief that women should behave better than men and therefore should use a more refined speech (Broadridge, 2003). Research has proven that women speak more carefully than men. Broadridge (2003) did a research on the differences of speech between men and women who worked at an English Language School at Tokyo. He found that men interrupted more than women and that woman listened more during the conversation. In addition, men used more vulgar terms than women.

In sum, the false belief that bilingualism would disturb children’s academic achievement is one of the main reasons of language shift. In contrast to this belief, research has proven that bilingualism provides more linguistics, cognitive and psychological advantages over monolingualism (Cummins, Diaz, Pearl, Lambert, as cited in Zhang, 2005). In fact, bilingualism can improve cognitive skills unrelated to language and protect people from dementia. Being bilingual gives a workout to the mind and results in the strengthening of cognitive muscles, a heightened ability to monitor the environment, and a better function of the brain (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The
study of Ellen Bialystok and Michelle Martin-Rhee (as cited in Bhattacharjee, 2012) proved that bilingual pre-schoolers solved mental puzzles better than their monolingual peers. The bilingual children were quicker to sort items by their shapes and colors.

Bilingualism is also proven to be beneficial from early age to old age. A research by Agnes Kovacs (as cited in Bhattacharjee, 2012) shows that 7 months old babies exposed to two languages from birth had better cognitive skills than those exposed to only one language. The babies were conditioned to look at puppets appearing at one side of a screen when they heard audio cues. When the puppets unexpectedly appeared at the other side of the screen, the bilingual babies were quicker to spot the puppets in that direction than the monolingual babies. On the other hand, Tamar Gollan (as cited in Bhattacharjee, 2012) from the UC San Diego found that high degree of bilingualism can delay the onset of dementia. Gollan performed a research on elderly English-Spanish bilinguals. The findings showed that the higher their degree of bilingualism was, the later the onset of dementia and other symptoms of Alzheimer would appear on them.

Researches on American Indian communities have shown that the use of an endangered language as the core language instruction benefited both children who speak the language before coming to school and those who initially speak English (Wyman, 2010). In Inuktitut community, children who had instruction in Inuktitut had stronger skills in both their language and the dominant language (Wright, Taylor, MacArthur, 2000). Therefore, instead of holding back children’s academic achievement in the more dominant language, the bilingual program can help strengthening student academic achievement in the language.
BILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

Since bilingualism is assumed to be detrimental to children academic progress and their future, language policies are often designed to suppress bilingualism by making the dominant language as the sole language of instruction. As an example, state-sponsored schools in Alaska and the Arctic historically attempted to eradicate indigenous languages in the region by punishing students who spoke the languages at schools (Wyman et al, 2010). In Indonesia, a government policy was created in 1990 to establish Indonesian as the sole medium of instruction from kindergarten to university. The policy has made Indonesian as a highly successful national language with as many as 90% Indonesian speak the language (Kurniasih, 2006). Before the 1990 policy, both Indonesian and Javanese were used as the medium instructions at elementary school in an immersion-type program. Javanese was used as the medium of instruction in the first three grades of primary school in Javanese speaking areas and Indonesian would take after in the following grades. However, by 1994, Javanese simply became a ‘local’ subject taught for two teaching hours per week in Central Java in years 1-9 (Kurniasih, 2006) and the number of speakers who speak Javanese as the first language declined ever since (Musgrave, 2012).

Contrary to the failure of the ‘one subject language policy’, the immersion and dual immersion have proven to be very successful not only to maintain less dominant language, but also to enhance students’ academic achievement. The Yup’ik community in Alaska has implemented an established heritage language program (Wyman et al, 2010). Most schools applied a bilingual immersion program by using the Yup’ik language as the medium of instruction at elementary schools until the third grade. After the third grade, the students are required to take a benchmark test in English before transitioning to classes which use English as the medium of instruction.
The children enrolled in Yup’ik language program were more settled and academically focused when they transition into upper elementary programs in English (Wyman et al, 2010). In fact, the majority of the schools whose students achieving high score in standardized tests in English used Yup’ik as the core language of instruction.

Moreover, after three years using Yup’ik as a medium of instruction, the students can pass standardized benchmark tests in English before transitioning to the grade where English is used as the core medium of instruction. As for now there is no evidence which proves that using English as a medium of instruction will benefit students’ score in standardized tests in English. In reality, a language acquisition research observed that exiting children earlier from the bilingual school program would disrupt their language development in both English and Yup’ik (Cummins as cited in Wyman, 2002).

Beside the one way immersion program as in Yup’ik community, there is also a dual immersion program which combine students speaking both majority and the minority language in the same classroom with instructions in both of the languages (Potowski, 2004). The dual immersion program aims to help students reaching high levels of academic proficiency, bilingualism, self-esteem and develop positive cross-cultural attitudes. The choice of the medium of instruction depends on the types of the subject. The academic subjects were in Spanish (reading, comprehension, vocabulary, and math) and the non-academic classes (music, gym, and computers) were in English.

The immersion program is also proven to be more effective than teaching the minority or the majority language as a subject at schools. Fortune (as cited in Potowski, 2004) mentions that simply providing opportunities to speak French was not sufficient because students need to be motivated to use language accurately, appropriately, and
coherently. In the immersion program, teachers can teach students how interact and support one another’s academic linguistics development (Potowski, 2004).

However, it has to be noted that the success of an immersion program depends on the close cooperation between the whole community members, including the government, the school teachers, the school administrators, the parents and the community. In the Yup’ik community, administrators, local principals, and village school boards held meetings every five year in which community members determined their local plan of service for school based language program (Wyman et al, 2010). In the meetings, participants discussed language scholarships, language programs at schools and research opportunities with the end goal to maintain the vitality of the Yup’ik language.

**CONCLUSION**

Contrary to people’s belief, bilingualism is not a detriment to students’ academic achievement. In fact, it can boost intelligence and even protects people from an early onset of dementia. Moreover, children enrolled in a language immersion program seem to be performing very well academically in the more dominant language, while at the same time using both minority and majority language with ease and confidence.

In addition, the use of bilingual medium of instructions at school in the form of immersion is proven to be more successful in language maintenance than only teaching the less dominant language as a subject at schools. In the immersion program, the children have more opportunities to use the language more naturally with real interaction and real purpose. Therefore, I suggest a reinstatement of the bilingual immersion language program which involves Indonesian and a local language to help maintaining the vitality of the local languages.
REFERENCES


