

## MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN SOUTHWEST SUMBA: CURRENT PRACTICE, TEACHERS' ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

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### Abstract

This study investigates the current multilingual practice situation at Southwest Sumba schools, as well as the beliefs and attitudes of the teachers on a multitude of issues related to multilingualism and multilingual education. The methodology used was a questionnaire on issues related to (i) the need of multilingual education, (ii) students' mother tongues, and (iii) literacy. The data was collected from four primary schools in Southwest Sumba, two of which are located in Kodhi speaking areas, while the other two are located in Wewewa speaking areas. Results from the data analysis revealed that the Indonesian centered curriculum, lessons, materials and assessment system have a negative impact on students' academic achievement. However, teachers and schools are currently not equipped to respond to the students' needs of a multilingual education program. Despite that, the surveyed teachers have very positive attitudes and beliefs towards multilingual education not only as a way to improve students' academic performance, but also as a means to preserve the students' local language.

**Keywords:** Multilingual education; multilingual practice; Southwest Sumba; teachers' attitudes; teachers' belief

### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini menyoroti praktik multibahasa saat ini di sekolah-sekolah Sumba Barat Daya, keyakinan, dan sikap guru terhadap berbagai isu terkait multibahasa dan pendidikan multibahasa. Penelitian ini menggunakan kuesioner yang mencakup isu-isu terkait (i) kebutuhan pendidikan multibahasa, (ii) bahasa ibu peserta didik, dan (iii) literasi. Data diambil dari empat sekolah dasar di Sumba Barat Daya, dengan dua sekolah berlokasi di wilayah yang berbahasa Kodhi dan dua lainnya di wilayah yang berbahasa Wewewa. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa kurikulum, pembelajaran, materi, dan sistem penilaian yang berfokus hanya pada bahasa Indonesia memberikan dampak negatif terhadap prestasi akademik peserta didik. Namun, guru dan sekolah belum memiliki sumber daya atau fasilitas yang memadai untuk memenuhi kebutuhan peserta didik terhadap program pendidikan multibahasa. Meskipun demikian, para guru menunjukkan sikap dan keyakinan yang sangat positif terhadap pendidikan multibahasa. Mereka melihat pendidikan multibahasa tidak hanya sebagai cara untuk meningkatkan prestasi akademik siswa, tetapi juga sebagai upaya untuk melestarikan bahasa lokal siswa.*

**Kata kunci:** Pendidikan multibahasa; praktik multibahasa; Sumba Barat Daya; sikap guru; keyakinan guru

## INTRODUCTION

The Southwestern areas of Sumba are included in the government's list of areas categorized as frontier, outermost, and least developed regions, known as 3T (*Terdepan, Terluar, Tertinggal*). Fadhillah, Muchtar and Sihombing (2023) claim that the quality of education in 3T areas is falling behind other areas in Indonesia. This is concerning as education is one of the key driving factors of economic development. One of the most prominent projects currently running on educational needs and academic achievements covering 3T areas is managed by the INOVASI program, a collaborative project between the Australian and Indonesian government that aims to increase human capacity through improvements in education and education policies. Their 2019 report indicated a few key weaknesses in the quality of education in Sumba, including in the areas where the researchers of this current project conducted their research. INOVASI reported that the biggest challenges for education in Sumba are: (i) the quality of teachers, and (ii) access to learning materials. Many teachers in Sumba are reported to lack training and qualifications, leading to ineffective learning in schools. Many schools in Sumba are also not yet equipped with libraries, making access to learning resources difficult for students (INOVASI, 2019). Members of this team have also previously conducted a community outreach program in 2023 in which a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with teachers in the Southwestern Sumba area. During this FGD, the researchers uncovered that teachers are most worried about the students' literacy and health (Kaisar et al., 2023). Related to literacy, teachers believe that students' literacy would be best supported by increasing teachers' competence, a finding that is in line with the INOVASI finding regarding the quality of local teachers. Furthermore, during the FGD, teachers expressed that they specifically need to improve on their competence relating to new and innovative teaching methods. In addition, students in schools also have problems with Standard Indonesian, the official language that is used for classroom teaching and resources because most of them use a different home language outside of the classrooms; placement of teachers from outside the area who might not be familiar with the local language often complicates this problem.

This challenge related to students' proficiency in Indonesian is the focus of this article. Research by Rahmi and Syukur (2023), among others, have also shown that many students in the Sumba area still have trouble with the acquisition of Indonesian, and that local languages are still favored. Because the national curriculum used in schools is generally based on Indonesian as the sole language of instruction, learning resources, and assessments, it is not surprising that many students in Sumba are academically underperforming in schools. Moreover, a monolingual education system that emphasizes only the standard national language has the potential of driving local languages extinct. Cohn and Ravindranath (2014), for example, reiterate Steinhauer (1994) and Collins' (2004) observation that the increasing use of Indonesian is causing local languages to be used in fewer domains. Husna (2018) even claims that the success of Indonesian as a political tool of unity in the country is causing the marginalization of local languages. As such, a multilingual education system that takes into account both students' local home language and standard Indonesian has the potential to address two pressing issues: (i) increasing the academic achievement of students from minority groups; and (ii) preserving local languages.

The government is cognizant of this fact, as demonstrated in the passing of the Indonesian Law number 20, year 2003 on the national education system; part of this law clearly

states that local languages may be used (as needed) in early level education for the purpose of supporting the teaching of class materials. However, the actual implementation of local language-based education is still very limited. For example, the government has worked with the Analytical and Capacity Development Partnership (ACDP, 2014) to try out implementing the mother tongue based, multilingual education (also known as the *Pembelajaran multibahasa berbasis bahasa ibu* (PMB-BBI)), but this has only been done in limited areas in Sumba and Papua. Moreover, the encouraged utilization of the mother tongue is generally limited only to the first two years of primary school education, as outlined in the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 37/2018 (although a more recent program by INOVASI has tried this implementation until grade III). In addition, the same regulation indicates that the goal of using students' mother tongue is specifically to gain competence and proficiency in the Indonesian language (and indirectly to understand class materials in other classes better). This is in contrast to comparable programs in neighboring countries like the Philippines whereby mother tongue based education lists competence and proficiency of the mother tongue language itself as one of the learning outcomes (Listiawati and Arsendy, 2021). As such, it can be seen that Indonesian government rules and their implementation of mother tongue based education are still limited in reach and scope; at the same time, it is not tapping on to the full potential of the program as a way to preserve local culture and languages.

The strategy undertaken in the PMB-BBI involves using the local language as the medium of instruction in the early years before Indonesian is introduced; then there is a short period of time whereby both the local language L1 and the Indonesian L2 co-exist as medium of instruction before students finally transition to using predominantly the L2 Indonesian language as the medium of instruction. Ball (2011) mentioned that there are many competing approaches for mother tongue-based multilingual education, listed below.

**Table 1. Different Multilingual Education Approaches**

Approach	Definition
Mother tongue-based instructions	Curriculum fully conducted in students' L1
Bilingual education	Use of two languages as the medium of instruction for all students
Mother tongue-based bilingual education	L1 is the primary medium of instruction at the primary school level to prepare students for transition to some subjects in L2.
Transitional bi/multilingual education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum developed in L1 to prepare students for a full L2 curriculum</li> <li>• Transition may happen early after the first two or three years or later.</li> </ul>
Maintenance bi/multilingual education	Both the L1 and L2 are used as media of instruction even after students become proficient in the L2.
Immersion or foreign language instruction	The entire curriculum is provided in a foreign language.
Submersion	Students are required to learn fully in the dominant language.

The traditional approach still used in most schools is the submersion approach, whereby the official language (Indonesian) is used as the medium of instruction and all students have to learn using this language; this is a subtractive system that imposes the L2 to students at the expense of their L1. The PMB-BBI, as currently implemented, can be considered a transitional bi/multilingual education approach with its emphasis on the students' L1 as a bridge to eventually deliver the learning in L2. The Analytical and Capacity Development Partnership Indonesia's (2014) report suggests that implementing the later transition model of this transitional bi/multilingual approach would be ideal, although there are many practical hurdles.

Aside from the previously mentioned missed opportunity to use formal education as a way to preserve the local language, this view of sequential language learning also ignores the potential cognitive benefits that a truly multilingual classroom would offer to students. By introducing the local language and Indonesian sequentially, before weaning students off their local language, the program encourages the view that different languages are separate entities that exist in the speakers' minds. However, recent studies in translanguaging have questioned the notion of language as separate and bounded systems, favoring instead a view that they are practices in a specific social and cultural context (Palmer et al., 2014). As such, a learning environment that encourages the mixing of all the students' linguistic repertoire is more conducive to achieving maximal results in education (Bonacina-Pugh, 2020).

Furthermore, Cenoz and Gorter (2015) claim that focusing on multilingualism can facilitate in integrating and utilizing students' metalinguistic and communicative skills so that their learning process can be maximized. Students who are used to a multilingual environment are also more critical and flexible, so that they are able to take on different perspectives and be cognitively flexible (Haukås, Storto & Tiurikova, 2022). This means that students can benefit from having both their local language and Indonesian as a side-by-side medium in the classroom for a longer period of time than what is currently promoted in the PMB-BBI and INOVASI programs, possibly even continuously throughout all school grades including high school, in the form of translanguaging practice - i.e. mixing multiple languages - in the teaching and learning environment. This would have the advantage of: (i) preserving and lifting the status of the students' own local language and identity; as well as (ii) promoting lifelong translanguaging practice that are beneficial to the students' cognitive processing and development.

This project is guided by the objectives of:

- (1) Learning about the current multilingual practice situation in schools around the Southwestern Sumba area and
- (2) Uncovering the attitudes and beliefs of primary school teachers in the Southwestern Sumba area on the following issues:
  - a. the benefits of multilingual education for their students' academic success and literacy.
  - b. the benefits of multilingual education for the preservation of their students' local language, culture and identity.
  - c. language learning and acquisition.

By understanding primary school teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards this issue, the researchers hope to assess the current needs and gaps in multilingual education in Southeastern Sumba.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This research employed a quantitative descriptive design which enables the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data. The focus in this research was on measuring the frequency and percentage of the responses obtained through a survey. Gravetter and Forzano (2018) mentioned that survey is included as one of descriptive research.

### Research Participants

The data were collected in two schools in West Wewewa district and two schools in North Kodi district of the Southwest Sumba Regency, an area categorized as frontier, outermost, and least developed regions, known as 3T (*Terdepan, Terluar, Tertinggal*). This area has been reported to have challenges in literacy and numeracy (Syafii, 2018). Given this is a preliminary study, the four schools were conveniently selected to represent the area. A total of 25 teachers (six males and nineteen females) from the four schools participated in this study. Nine of these teachers had fewer than five years of teaching experience, while sixteen teachers had 5 to 24 years of experience. The teachers mostly speak their local languages as their first language and 11% of them report delivering the learning materials exclusively using the Indonesian language.



Picture 1. Data Collection in Sumba

### Instruments

The data for this research were collected using a questionnaire adapted and translated from the Multilingual Classroom Questionnaire (Mifsud and Petrova, 2017). This questionnaire aims to obtain information about teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and practice regarding multilingualism. The questionnaire consists of five parts, with the first two parts containing open-ended questions. The first part gathers information about teachers' personal, language, and professional backgrounds. The second section collects information about the language practices in and outside classrooms, the challenges faced by teachers and students, and strategies

employed by the teachers and schools to address these challenges. The remaining sections contain four-point Likert scale items, aiming to assess teachers' perception of (i) the need of multilingual education, (ii) students' mother tongues, and (iii) literacy.

### **Data Analysis**

After data collection, frequency counts were used to analyze quantitative responses, while open-ended responses were analyzed qualitatively to identify the key themes and insights. After that, generalizations and trends found were compared and contrasted with results from other similar studies in different contexts. The team found that some findings from this study offer a different outlook on teachers' beliefs and attitudes on multilingualism and multilingual education from other previous studies. This is discussed and explained in detail in the following section. Finally, findings were also used to suggest some recommendations that may be explored further in future work.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Current Multilingual Practice and Situation in Schools**

The questionnaire reveals that most students in the surveyed schools are more dominant in their respective home languages: Wewewa and Kodhi. These students mostly use Wewewa or Kodhi at home and with friends outside of the classroom; the use of Indonesian, on the other hand, is contained in the classroom. Below is a selection of the respondents' comments on their students' language use. Comments are quoted directly from what was written in the responses, sometimes reflecting the alternative spelling of Kodhi as Kodi.

- (1) "Kebanyakan siswa menggunakan bahasa Kodi dan hanya beberapa siswa yang menggunakan bahasa Indonesia, maupun saat berbicara dengan teman mereka selalu menggunakan bahasa Kodi"

(Most students use Kodhi and only a few students use Indonesian; especially when speaking with friends, they always use Kodhi)

(Respondent 11)

- (2) "Dalam kelas berbahasa Indonesia sedangkan di luar kelas bahasa daerah, berbahasa Wewewa, dan berbahasa daerah"

([They] use Indonesian in the classroom, but use the local language outside the classroom, Wewewa, and the local language)

(Respondent 16)

- (3) "Sebagian besar siswa menggunakan bahasa daerah di keluarganya masing-masing"

(Most of the students use the local language in their families)

(Respondent 12)

As a result, many students have difficulties understanding class materials that are only available in Indonesian. Out of the 25 teachers surveyed, 15 indicated that most of their students have this problem, two indicated that several of their students have the problem and only eight indicated that this is not a problem for their students.

(4) “Mengalami kesulitan karena masih ada siswa yang belum bisa berbahasa Indonesia”  
([They] have problems [when the medium of instruction is in Indonesian] because we have students who cannot speak Indonesian)

(Respondent 3)

(5) “Ya, karna banyak siswa yang belum fasih menggunakan bahasa Indonesia”  
(Yes, because many students are not fluent in speaking Indonesian).

(Respondent 6)

(6) “Iya, karena keseharian siswa menggunakan bahasa Kodi”  
(Yes, because students use Kodhi on daily basis)

(Respondent 4)

However, teachers are not well-equipped to handle this challenge as only two out of 25 of them have some experience with training programs addressing the specific needs of teaching multilingual students. Despite that, individual teachers reported using a mix of strategies in the classroom including code-switching and doing translations (asking for help from other students when the teacher does not speak the students’ home language).

According to the teachers, the biggest challenges they face while teaching their multilingual students are the students’ lack of interest in reading (60%). Additionally, some teachers (28%) also point to the teachers’ lack of proficiency in the students’ home language as a challenge. Some others also feel that the gap in expectations and reality, as well as increased demands for teachers to work together might contribute to their difficulties with teaching in multilingual classrooms.

### **Teachers’ Attitudes and Beliefs on Multilingualism and Multilingual Education**

Understanding the difficulties faced by their students, teachers identified Indonesian-only classroom instruction as the biggest hurdle to improving students’ academic achievement (44%). Teachers also feel that the Indonesian-exclusive curriculum (40%) and assessments that do not consider multilingual students (40%) are contributing to students’ difficulties in class. Interestingly, a number of teachers (9%) indicated that the lack of training they have received is also one of the main reasons hindering their students from achieving greater success in school. This is a mismatch from the most used strategy undertaken by schools to tackle this challenge, namely to develop multilingual class materials (52%), with no real attempt to integrate such materials in the existing curriculum and assessments. Moreover, only 28% of the correspondents are aware of specialized training programs for multilingual education at their school. Teachers also expressed that they think multilingual students would best benefit from additional help with their home language in the classroom (80%) and outside the classroom (44%). Additionally, teachers brought up the importance of the parents’ involvement both academically and socially in the students’ learning process.

Aside from the needs and problems faced by teachers related to teaching multilingual students, participants were also surveyed on their opinions related to the following issues: (i) Multilingual education, (ii) The students’ local languages, and (iii) Multilingualism and literacy.

Relating directly to multilingual education and teaching, the teachers who participated in this survey generally have positive attitudes towards multilingual education, with 64% disagreeing that teaching should only be done in Indonesian. On the other hand, 96% agree that

schools should conduct classes in more than just one language; 96% also agree that students should be trained to learn in multiple languages. Moreover, 92% even take it as granted that Indonesians should be fluent in Standard Indonesian and their own home language anyway. As such, multilingualism should be integrated in the education system.

Moreover, most of the teachers surveyed see multilingual education as an important element in improving students' academic performance, not just in the Indonesian language, but in all subjects. All teachers even agreed that being fluent in two languages is beneficial in learning additional languages; all of them also agree specifically that learning materials in the students' home language would help students understand the lessons better. Interestingly, teachers connect a strong multilingual education with maintenance of the students' local languages, culture and heritage. This is clearly shown with 96% of the respondents thinking that the students' home language should be preserved. All teachers also believe that it is their duty to promote the importance of multilingual education to their students, as well as to understand the students' multilingual culture and heritage. Additionally, 92% of those surveyed think that teachers should understand their students' local language, and 76% of the teachers feel that it is their responsibility to help students preserve their local language. A high number of teachers realize that they need to allow the use of local languages even in the classroom to accommodate their multilingual students (84%). Accordingly, 88% of the survey participants strongly agree that the school should play an active role in promoting students' local identity through various cultural events. However, 84% of them lament that parents are not sufficiently involved as partners in their children's multilingual education.

When presented with negative statements about multilingualism and the students' local languages, most teachers disagree with them. A total of 80% of teachers disagree that multilingualism inhibits successful communication with classmates, 92% disagree that teaching in both Indonesian and the local language would confuse students, 84% disagree that they should not bring in local culture into the lessons, and 76% even disagree that local language use is hindering the acquisition of Standard Indonesian. Compared to other statements, the level of disagreement with the last one is a little lower at 76%, signaling that while most teachers see multilingualism in the classroom as a supportive tool for learning other subjects, many are still skeptical about multilingualism in language teaching. This is further supported by the teachers' general agreement that students should learn languages one by one (96%), and that local language use should be minimized specifically when learning Indonesian (76%).

The teachers' positive opinion on multilingual teaching extends to its effects on the students' literacy performance. An overwhelming 96% of the teachers agree that increasing literacy in both Indonesian and the students' home language would increase students' understanding of all class materials, as well as their cognitive abilities in general. Many agree that increased literacy in the students' home language would facilitate literacy in Indonesian (92%), and 80% believe that students who are currently not doing well with Indonesian materials would benefit from learning to read and write in their home language.

## **Discussion**

This study has shown that primary school teachers in Southwest Sumba value multilingual education as a program that has the potential to increase their students' academic capacity and literacy. This is significant because previous studies done on teacher's beliefs and attitudes



towards multilingual education have had more varied conclusions. For example, De Angelis (2011) found in their study that more than sixty percent of the teachers from Austria who participated in the study think that students should not be allowed to speak their home language in class, and a large proportion of the participants in the study also held the belief that multilingual teaching could lead to confusion, as well as delayed learning of the target language. Similarly, a study by Lundberg (2019) revealed that participants can be divided into three different groups: one that hold positive views multilingual education, one with a negative view of multilingual education and one with a positive view of multilingual education, but who do not think that they need to change their current teaching practice to accommodate multilingualism.

The unique situation in the Southwest Sumba region might be contributing to the general positive views teachers have towards multilingual education, namely the uniform home language background of their students. While previous studies have stated that the biggest obstacle to multilingual education is often the lack of teaching materials (Akello et al., 2016), or testing materials (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2016), many studies have also identified that teachers might simply be unfamiliar with all the languages that their students speak as their L1, and thus, only able accommodate students whose languages they are familiar with (Haukås, 2016). Unlike the multilingual situation in Europe where many of these studies were conducted, the language situation in the schools surveyed in this research is very different. While teachers in European countries have to cater to an immigrant population whose L1 are diverse and might not be familiar to them, the schools included in this study largely cater to students from the same L1: two schools have mostly students who speak Kodhi as their mother tongue, and two other schools have mostly students who speak Wewewa as their home language. Not only does this simplify the planning of a multilingual curriculum due to the focus on just one specific local language in addition to Indonesian, but this situation also means that switching to a more multilingual curriculum would benefit most of the students, not just a minority within the student population. This is further supported by the fact that most teachers who teach at these schools are local and speak the students' L1; which means that there is minimal language barrier to implementing a multilingual curriculum.

This shared language, culture and identity with their students also influence the teachers' positive attitudes and beliefs towards the potential of multilingual education in preserving the local language. Cunningham (2019) found that the teachers included in their study did not see preserving their students' L1 as their responsibility; a finding that is contradictory to this current study, where teachers show a great sense of responsibility in wanting to preserve their students' home language, culture and identity. As such, current existing programs addressing local language use in the curriculum like the PMB-BBI that treat students' home language simply as a means towards achieving other educational goals are obviously not aligned with the teachers' strong attitudes and beliefs towards preservation of the local language through multilingual education in their classrooms.

On the other hand, teachers surveyed share the government's approach to multiple language acquisition as separate entities. For example, they seem to agree that languages should be learned in sequential order, as currently done in the PMB-BBI and INOVASI programs. Additionally, while teachers overwhelmingly do not think students should be disallowed from using their home language in the classroom, a majority of them draw the line at learning Indonesian; they believe that home language use should be minimized while learning

specifically Indonesian. Similarly, while they think that multilingualism is not a source of confusion or hindrance for communication, there is a tendency amongst some to view the local language as a hindrance to specifically the acquisition of Indonesian. In addition, even though all the teachers are already using some sort of language mixing strategies like code-switching or translation in their classes, 64% of them indicated that Indonesian (or predominantly Indonesian) is the language of instruction they use. In contrast, only 28% acknowledge that they are using a mix of Indonesian and the local language in their classroom. This shows a reluctance to recognize and accept their translanguaging practice in the classroom. In summary, while teachers seem to be ready to embrace multilingual teaching as a way to increase students' academic capacity, and local language preservation, there are still some misconceptions surrounding the relationship between multilingualism and language acquisition, as well as perceptions surrounding "mixing" different languages in the classroom.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has uncovered that the multilingual education practice in Indonesia, particularly in Southwest Sumba Regency, is indeed still limited as the teachers surveyed in the schools included here indicated that most of them have never even had training specifically in multilingual teaching. However, these teachers have very positive attitudes and beliefs towards multilingual education, showing that they are ready to learn and be trained for a potential expansion of a mother tongue-based curriculum. The teachers even show great interest in utilizing multilingualism in the school learning environment as a way to preserve the local language, something that is not yet integrated into the learning outcomes and goals of current mother tongue-based programs that are currently being implemented in limited areas. One of the biggest challenges in implementing an expanded mother-tongue-based education like the PMB-BBI program, according to ACDP (2014), is the lack of human resources. There are not enough teachers who can accommodate all the local languages spoken by the diverse student population in Indonesia. However, even in this study, several teachers indicated that they are not speakers of their students' L1. Despite this, they still have positive attitudes and beliefs towards multilingual education and the benefits that it brings to the students. Some have even found ad-hoc solutions in their classrooms; for example, by asking classmates to translate for each other. This shows that teachers are ready and willing to work together towards building better multilingual practice in their schools. This means that an expansion of something like the PMB-BBI program needs to be done (i) to cover more schools in the 3T regions, (ii) to cover more school grades to build a stronger mother tongue foundation, and (iii) to include the preservation of local languages as a target goal, so that the local language can be promoted as being equal to Indonesian. At the same time, there is a need to educate teachers on the importance, pedagogical strategies and interaction practices of translanguaging in the classroom; something that has been done, for example, for bilingual schools in Wales (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017).

## **NOTE**

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