



**BILINGUALISM AND BILINGUAL EXPERIENCES:
A Case of Two Southeast Asian Female Students at
Deakin university**

**BILINGUALISME AND PENGALAMAN BILINGUAL:
Sebuah Studi Kasus Dua Mahasiswa Perempuan Asia Tenggara
di Deakin University**

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Abstract

Bilingualism is inseparable from humans' life. It occurs practically in every country, in all classes of society and in all age groups. Besides, it has many dimensions. This paper is to describe bilingualism dan bilingual experiences from two international students who were studying at Deakin University in 2012. To describe bilingual experiences students two Southeast Asian female students had been interviewed at Deakin University in 2012. To explore their detail experiences that might not be accessed during the interview, two questionnaires had been used. Furthermore, the respondents' life narrative being bilinguals was written based on the result of the interview and the questionnaires. Additionally, this paper contains some discussions. Firstly, it describes the respondents' bilingual experiences: their languages, their countries, their brief history of becoming bilingual, and their family environment in relation to bilingualism. Secondly, it examines bilinguals' responses and then applying them for Baker's (2011a) dimensions of bilingualism and other related theories. Thirdly, it includes a critical analysis of the socio, political, and educational issues discussed by the respondents in relation to being brought up bilingually. Last, it includes an analysis on how bilingual experiences shape their identities and view the world.

Key words: bilingualism, bilingual experience, asian female students

Abstrak

Bilingualisme tidak dapat dipisahkan dari kehidupan manusia. Hal ini terjadi secara praktis di setiap negara, di semua kelas masyarakat dan di semua kelompok usia. Selain itu, bilingualisme juga memiliki banyak dimensi. Makalah ini untuk menjelaskan bilingualisme dan pengalaman bilingualis (dwi bahasa) dua siswa internasional yang sedang belajar di Deakin University pada tahun 2012. Untuk menggambarkan pengalaman dwi bahasa, dua siswa perempuan Asia Tenggara telah diwawancarai di

Deakin University pada tahun 2012. Untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman detail mereka yang mungkin tidak dapat diakses selama wawancara, dua kuesioner juga digunakan. Selanjutnya, narasi hidup responden menjadi bilingualis ditulis berdasarkan hasil wawancara dan kuesioner. Selain itu, makalah ini berisi beberapa diskusi. Pertama, menggambarkan pengalaman dwibahasa responden: bahasa mereka, negara mereka, sejarah singkat mereka menjadi penutur dwi bahasa, dan lingkungan keluarga mereka terkait dengan bilingualisme. Kedua, mengkaji tanggapan bilinguals dan kemudian menerapkannya untuk dimensi bilingualisme Baker (2011a) dan teori terkait lainnya. Ketiga, mencakup analisis kritis tentang isu sosio, politik, dan pendidikan yang didiskusikan oleh responden sehubungan dengan diangkat secara bilingual. Terakhir, mencakup analisis tentang bagaimana pengalaman dwibahasa membentuk identitas mereka dan melihat dunia.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism becomes inseparable from humans' existence in the globalization era. Baker (2011b:66) explains that the bilingual population of the world is growing up as internationalism is spreading out in trade and travel, communications and mass media, immigration and interlinked global economy. Additionally, bilingualism occurs because of the interaction of different linguistic groups; the fluidity of the political and economic conditions in many countries; and the rapid changes of technology and telecommunication (Javier, 2007:1). Equally important, most bilinguals understand English because it is a global language, which can function as an official language or as a priority in a foreign-language teaching in many countries (Crystal, 2003:4-5).

Over half the world's population is bilingual (Riley, 1986:27 and Grosjean, 2011:1). Uniquely, Edward (2004:7) states that everybody in the world is bilingual because no one in the world who does not know at least a few words in other languages. Moreover, Hornby (1977:3) and Gathercole (2010:481) define a bilingual person as someone who speaks and understands two languages. If a person speaks more than two languages, he is called 'multilingual' (Birner, 2011:1). Similarly, a major characteristic of bilingual language use is that the two languages are used in different domains, with different people and in different contexts (Sipra, 2007). Generally speaking, being bilinguals enable people in communicating for two languages and it is needed in humans' interaction.

The term 'bilingualism' is typically used to describe the two languages of an individual (Baker, 2011a:67), but it also can be used for both bilingual and multilingual situations (Birner, 2011:1). Thus, there is no general consensus of what exactly bilingualism is. It can be examined based on any certain study purpose, categorization and approximation (deCapua and Wintergerst 2009:5). For instance, Baker (2011b:5) mentions that the fundamental distinction of being bilingual is

between bilingual ability and bilingual usage. Then, Baker emphasizes that functional bilingualism concerns when, where, and with who people use their languages.

Hamers and Blanc (2000:49) classifies the bilinguality into some dimensions such as competence in both language, age of acquisition, group membership and cultural identity. Correspondingly, Baker (2011a:67) classifies bilinguals into some dimensions such as language ability, language domain and context, language development and culture. Furthermore, bilingualism can occur to both child and adult. De Jong (1986:46-55) classifies the child bilingualism into two categories; from the beginning-bilingualism (0-4 years old) and in the middle-bilingualism (5-11 years old). Meanwhile, Romaine (1995:266) divides bilingualism (both child and adult) into three types based on certain levels. Firstly, additive bilingualism is a high level in both of languages, positive cognitive effects. Secondly, dominant bilingualism is a native-like level in one of the languages, neither positive nor negative cognitive effects. Thirdly, semilingualism is a low level in both languages may be balanced or dominant, negative cognitive effects.

Couple with classifications above, there are three types of bilingualism based on the degrees of individual bilingualism (Ayotunde, 2006:36). First, coordinate bilingualism is a situation where a person is able to speak two different languages with equal competence. Second, compound bilingualism describes a situation in which a person does not have equal competence in his two languages. Third, incipient bilingualism describes a situation in which a person understands and speaks well one of the two languages existing in his community (especially his mother tongue), but understands the second language only partially. To sum up, bilinguals can be classified into many types according to individual experience.

B. DISCUSSION

1. Family as the First Factor Becoming Bilinguals

Namira (respondent 1), 22 years old, is a bilingual Singaporean female who come to Australia for studying Bachelor of Nursing at Deakin University since July 2011. Eva (respondent 2), 41 years old, is a Indonesianfemale who come to Australia for studying postgraduate program at Deakin University since October 2010 (*see Appendix 8. CV of Respondents*). Both of them can use their first language (L1) and second language (L2) in different context and situations. However, they have different experience being bilinguals. As stated by Temple (2006:10) that people experience being bilinguals in different ways. Bilingualism is pervasive throughout the world, but there is variation of conditions under which people become bilingual (Hakuta and August, 1998:12).

The first language Namira heard at home as a baby was Malay, but she was brought up speaking both Malay and English in her family. Her parents are bilingual and they speak both Englishand Malay. Namira feels comfortable speaking both of the languages with them. Having bilingual parents generally influences a child to become a bilingual (De Jong, 1986:7). Namira also lives with her grandmother at home, but her grandmother just speaks Malay and understands *Javanese* (a vernacular from one of ethnic groups in Indonesia), which cannot be understood by any other

family members at Namiras' home. For this reason, Namira allows herself to speak merely Malay with her grandmother.

The first language Eva heard at home as a baby was **Indonesian** and *Minang*. Indonesian is a variety of Malay as lingua franca in southeast archipelago from the sixteenth century onwards (de Mejia, 2002:200). *Minang* is a vernacular from one of ethnic groups in Indonesia. Eva was brought up speaking both Indonesian and English in her family. Her father is multilingual (Indonesian, English and Germany) and her mother is bilingual (Indonesian and Minang). In Indonesia, she often speaks both Indonesian and English at home with her father.

Namira and Eva have grown up with two languages since they were at very young age. Thus, Namira's bilingual experience can be categorized as beginning-bilingualism (De Jong, 1986:46) or infancy bilingualism (Riley, 1986:39) or simultaneous bilingualism (Baker, 2011a:3). The simultaneous acquisition of two or more languages can be characterized as an instance of first language development in each of the child's languages (Harris and Devlin, 1997:103). In addition, the simultaneous acquisition of two languages can be qualified as an instance of multiple first language acquisition (Meisel, 2004:95).

The interesting thing about Namira's language acquisition is that she was born with Malay as her mother tongue but she considered her first language (L1) is English and her second language (L2) is Malay. This occurs because during Namira's childhood, especially since she was less than four years old, she has become simultaneous bilingual in Malay and English. Differently, the interesting thing about Eva's language acquisition is that she was born with *Minang* and Indonesian as her mother tongue but she considered her L1 is Indonesian and her L2 is English. This happens because during Eva's childhood experience, especially since she was less than four years old, she has become simultaneous bilingual most in Indonesian and English. Generally speaking, English can be L1 or L2 for bilinguals.

Namira and Eva enjoy using English for her own both casual and daily activities such writing diary, reading books, and using internet. In addition, they also often use English for correspondence with government or for official communication. In brief, they as bilinguals use their L1 only, or both L1 and L2 in different languages contexts (see *Appendix 9 & 10. Data of Bilingual Experience from Respondents Based on Questionnaires*). Baker (2011a:5) states that "not all bilinguals have the opportunity to use both their languages on a regular basis." In fact, Namira and Eva use both of their languages in a regular basis because they are approximately equally fluent in two languages across different contexts.

Namira usually does activities of thinking, counting and dreaming in her L1. Eva usually does activities of counting in her L1, but she usually does other activities of thinking and dreaming in both her L1 and L2. Both of them can make jokes and humour in both L1 and L2 and their sense of humour depends on the language they interacting in. This is quite different with what has been claimed by Vaid (2006:176) that a bilingual may find it easier to joke about some things in one of their

language because there is less emotional baggage associated with that topic when one talks about it in that language.

Meanwhile Namira as single woman keep speaking most her L1 living in Australia, Eva keeps speaking both of her L1 and L2 to her children in order to raise bilingual children. Eva is just like a growing number of parents in the world who views bilingualism as family goal and strive to provide their children with the opportunity to learn a second language at a young age (King and Fogle, 2006:695). Furthermore, Namira and Eva sometimes switch from L2 into L1 in communication. Code switching functions as a mean to contextualize communication (Nilep, 2006:17). Code switching in social context is a tool for organizing conversational exchange and as a way to make knowledge of the wider context in which conversation takes place relevant to an ongoing interaction (Nilep, 2006:17).

2. Education Strengthens Bilingual Experiences

Educations have greatly influenced Namira and Eva's experience being bilingual. Namira's bilinguality is supported by her educational system, which makes English as compulsory instruction or teaching medium at schools. Eva's bilinguality is supported by her educational system which makes English as compulsory foreign language subject at secondary school and as her major in university.

When Namira was four years old, she studied in nursery school where English and Malay are used as teaching medium. Furthermore, Namira's early bilingual in English and Malay is more strengthened when she studied in kindergarten. This is because the kindergartens at Singapore enable their students to be bilingual (Dixon, 2010:723). All of students in Singapore are also required to reach a L2 level of proficiency in their official mother tongue. This means that every Singaporean citizen has a right to learn both L1 and L2. As stated by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:659) that one of the basic linguistic human rights of persons belonging to minorities is – or should be – to achieve high levels of bi – or multilingualism through education.

Furthermore, Singaporean government encourages citizens to preserve their culture and tradition by learning mother tongue. For instance, Namira took Malay class from basic to advance level at primary and secondary schools. Namira felt that it was harder for the first time having exam in L1 than L2 – when she was at primary school. This condition occurs because bilingualism is one of the experiences capable of influencing humans' cognitive function and, to some extent, cognitive structure (Bialystok, 2009:9).

Eva explained that she had a great interest in English since her childhood at home, but she did not study English when she was studying at kindergarten and primary school. She learned English as one of her foreign language subject for the first time when she was studying at secondary high school. Indonesian as national language was the only one instruction medium in classrooms. Eva said English was taught as foreign language only at her school in Indonesia, but she can learn English by watching English movies or listening English songs at home. This condition is appropriate with what Baker (2011b:84) states that:

In many 'expanding circle' (English as foreign language) countries of the world, English has no official status, and may not be spoken at all by the majority of the population. In these countries, however, English is acknowledged as important and prestigious language, and people may be exposed to it in particular domains. There may be considerable emphasis on the teaching of English as a foreign language in school, business and industries. English language films may be shown with subtitles on television and in the cinema, and English language pop songs may be widespread.

More Indonesian people are interested in learning and using English Nowadays. They do not only study English has their subject, but they also practice it in their daily life. In relation with this, Graddol (1997:4) explains that as the number of people using English grows, so L2 speakers are drawn towards the 'inner circle' of L1 speakers and foreign-language speakers to the 'outer circle' of L2 speakers.

Eva has ever got a scholarship to study and lived in New Zealand with an English family, which greatly shaped her English. Besides, when she studied at university and majored in English for her bachelor and master degree. Finally, she became an English lecturer at a public university in Indonesia. In brief, Eva has got in touch with her L2 before living and studying in Australia. Eva also admitted that she can study postgraduate program at Deakin University because she speaks both English and Indonesian. Thus, being bilingual enables Eva to gain her university education in Australia. As De Mejia (2002:31) states that academic bilingualism enables students to gain access to university education in different parts of the world.

3. Social Perspective of being Bilinguals

Singapore is a multiracial country. Being bilingual is very important for socialising. English is the majority language in Singapore as it allows people from different races to communicate and live harmoniously. In other words, Namira lives in communities that use more than one language. Namira admits she can understand Chinese a little bit, but she cannot communicate in Chinese. Thus, Namira is not a multilingual. This shows that a bilingual who lives within multilingual society does not have to be multilingual, too.

Namira often speaks both English and Malay with Malay neighbours and other relative family. If she wants to talk to the principals and bureaucrats, she will use English only. Thus, Namira uses her L1 for condition, which is formal or multiracial. Differently, she will use Malay only to communicate with her religious leaders and for cultural activities. All in all Namira's L2 society encompasses almost everything she hears and sees in the L2 (Bhela, 1999:22).

Indonesia is characterised by linguistic diversity. Most Indonesians do not completely speak one language (monolingual), but they speak more than one language: the national language (Indonesian) and their vernacular, which can be any one of hundreds of ethnic languages. Those who have gone through secondary school and university will understand English and use it for certain communication, so they sometimes also can be categorized as multilinguals.

Eva explained that English is considered not only important but also a prestige language in Indonesia. This language is always believed as a tool to take her to success in career. Furthermore, Eva admitted that English makes her interaction more easily with different people. Living in Australia enables her to communicate in English with multicultural societies. She said she had to use English in communicating and to engage with her society who came from different backgrounds and languages.

4. Political Perspective of Being Bilinguals

Singapore has an ethnically heterogeneous population of about 3.5 million, which is made up of about 78% Chinese, 14% Malay, 7% of Indian origin, and 1% 'Others' (Lin and Man, 2009:105). Thus, Singapore has four official standard languages of Mandarin Chinese, Standard Malay, Standard Tamil and English; it is called officially multilingual nation (Riley, 1986:30). With four official languages, Singapore promotes English as its 'workinglanguage' for inter-ethnic and international communication (Dixon, 2010:726). Politically, the government as an ethnically 'neutral' language to unify different ethnic groups in Singapore (Rubdy, 2005) uses English. In relation with this, bilingualism is supported by nationalism, particularly in areas where there is a variety of ethnic groups (Baker, 2011:82).

Indonesia is a country, which is situated in crossing position of two big continents - Asia and Australia - two big oceans -Hindia Ocean and Pacific Ocean (*see Appendix 11. Map of Indonesia*). Additionally, Indonesia is well known as the fourteenth largest nation on earth by land area, the fourth largest nation on earth by population, the twenty sixth most linguistically diverse nations in the world (Nababan, 1985:1). Indonesia, with a population of 240 million, is the largest country in Southeast Asia and the most populous Muslim-majority nation in the world (Vaughn, 2011:1). However, the interesting fact about Indonesia is not just for its large-scattered areas and language diversity and population, but how can this country able to unify its citizen in one nation by using one national language - Indonesian. To link internationally, Indonesian government has increased the quality teaching for English as one of foreign languages in many schools in Indonesia.

How English was chosen as the main foreign language taught in secondary schools in Indonesia has a long history. During the period of the country's independence in 1945, education escaped the central government's attention, including foreign language education. In 1950, Indonesia's political situation was relatively more stable and steady and thus the government was also ready to choose a foreign language to be taught in schools (Yuwono, 2005:4). Even though many people were more familiar with Dutch, English was eventually selected as the first foreign language because Dutch was considered as the language of the colonialist and because it did not have the international status of English (Dardjowidjojo, 2000 and Nur, 2003).

5. Being Bilinguals in One Cultural Identity

Namira explained that she has Malay cultural identity. She belongs to Malay and she is proud to be a Malay woman by speaking Malay. Speaking particular language means belonging to a particular speech community and this implies that part of the social context in which one's individual personality is embedded (Edwards, 2004:23). For Namira, being bilingual means she belongs to a specific community where there is a common culture, tradition and customs. Bilingualism in the majority and the minority language may become important in gaining a feeling of rootedness in the locality (Baker, 2011b:82).

Having English as first and dominant language doesn't make her feel as if she practices two cultures or bicultural (in Malay in English culture). Bicultural individual is someone who 'participates, at least in part, in the life of two (majority) cultures in a regular fashion (de Meija, 2002:55). Even though sometimes she feels relatively engaged with both the culture of her L2 and L1, she always claims herself having Malay cultural identity only. As she said "I always feel that I am Malay. I mean, I am a Malay Singaporean" (see Appendix 2. Answer No. 33).

Eva also informed that being bilingual does not mean that she changes her identity as Indonesian. She is proud to be Indonesian from *Minangkabau* ethnic group and she is glad to be able to communicate in three languages: Minang, Indonesian and English. She always feels that she is Minang woman - Indonesian. She identifies herself within Indonesian culture only, but she sometimes engages with both her L1 and L2 culture.

The statements of not being bicultural from Namira and Eva are quite different with what have found by Riley (1986:42) that culture of the society in which humans grow up, influences their habits, customs, values, ideas and feelings. This is also quite different with what have stated by Carlson and Meltzoff (2008:295) that many bilingual children are also bicultural-facile, switching between cultural contexts, such as strikingly different home and school environments. Overall, being bilinguals do not make people to admit directly that they practice two cultures because most aspects of culture are assimilated unconsciously to language in some way.

However, Namira and Eva appreciate different cultures from other parts of the world better because being bilingual allows themselves to understand their own race culture and also respect other people's cultures. Thus, bilingualism can increase mental flexibility and cultural understanding (Lotherton (2000:17). Being bilinguals also means that they get benefits of being included in not only countries where English is the main language, but also where variety of Malay is understood.

6. Benefits of Being Bilinguals in Globalization Era

Namira's bilingual experience shapes her view of the world in certain way. Namira is happy and proud of being bilingual because she thinks she gets two main benefits being bilingual. First, when she visits countries, which have Malay variety such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei; she can understand and communicate easily with people there. Furthermore, she thinks that it will be easy to get jobs by being bilingual because there are more job opportunities in the world for those bilinguals.

As she informed that she has high competence in L1 and L2 in order to have more job access in globalization era.

Additionally, Eva also explained that being able to speak her L2, she has more opportunity for getting prospective jobs because English speaking skill is required in globalization era. Besides, it gives her more opportunity to read more books, therefore more channels to see the world. Since Eva has been living in Australia, she comes to understand more that English is important not only to understand what is being “talked about” but she can also defend and even give counters to any incorrect information about Indonesia as understood by the people in Australia. Last, she said the world is really “a small village” and English helps link people internationally.

C. CONCLUSION

Based on bilingual experiences above, I would like to conclude several points. First, the bilinguals come relatively from bilingual or multilingual family. Second, educational system strengthens people being bilinguals. Third, the bilinguals can have similar experiences, but the ways of experiencing being bilingual is different for every individual. Fourth, adults can be balanced bilinguals in any domain and context of languages if they experience simultaneous bilingualism and their bilinguality is supported enough by their education and society. Fifth, being bilinguals in a variety of Malay and English still makes the speakers belong to one cultural identity. Last, being bilingual gives benefits to the speaker in globalization era such as getting prospective jobs and gaining education in other countries. In brief, the bilinguals may experience differently, but they can get the same benefits.

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