

THE ROLE OF DIGLOSSIA IN EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Diglossia is a phenomenon in sociolinguistics that means the use of two language variants with different social functions, where the two language variants are divided into high language (H) and low language (L). This has a significant impact in education, where initial observations found a comprehension gap in bilingual students. This article aims to explore the role of diglossia in an educational context, focusing on the challenges and opportunities it raises in the teaching and learning process. This research uses a qualitative approach with literature study methods and interviews with educators and students in one of the Islamic boarding schools in Batang Hari who experience the phenomenon of diglossia. The collected data were analyzed descriptively to identify the role of diglossia in understanding teaching materials, as well as strategies that can be applied to minimize communication barriers in the teaching and learning process. The results of the study show that diglossia can function as a language enrichment tool, but it can also lead to gaps in understanding if not managed with the right strategy.

Keywords: Challenges, Diglossia, Education, Opportunity

INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental aspect of human social interaction. In the book *Introduction to Linguistics*, Siminto cites the opinions of several language experts, including Gorys Keraf, who offers two definitions of language. The first definition describes language as a communication tool among members of a community, taking the form of sound symbols produced by the human vocal apparatus. The second definition states that language is a communication system that uses vocal symbols (speech sounds) that are arbitrary. Meanwhile, Owen defines language as “*a socially accepted code or conventional system for conveying concepts through the use of desired symbols and combinations of symbols governed by certain rules*” (Siminto, 2013). Based on these definitions, language has essential characteristics: it is social, systematic, arbitrary, and uses vocal symbols. These characteristics form the basis for understanding the phenomenon of diglossia, which was first introduced by Ferguson.

Diglossia is a linguistic concept referring to the phenomenon of using two different language varieties within a community, each with distinct social functions. According to Holmes, there are two types of diglossia: diglossia with bilingualism and diglossia without bilingualism. Bilingualism can refer to an individual’s ability to use two languages or to a situation where two languages are used in different contexts within a community (Janet Holmes, 2013). In this research, the author focuses on diglossia with bilingualism, which occurs in bilingual or multilingual societies, such as Indonesia. Indonesians often master two or more languages, typically a regional language and Indonesian.

In bilingual communities, language is divided into two varieties: a high variety and a low variety. This concept was first introduced by Charles Ferguson in 1959, who identified two types of language in diglossic societies: the “high” variety and the “low” variety. The high variety is usually used in formal contexts, such as in educational institutions, government, and mass media, while the low variety is more commonly used in everyday communication and informal social life.

In the context of education, the phenomenon of diglossia is highly relevant due to its impact on how students understand instructional material, interact with teachers, and participate in academic activities. Education, as an arena for building knowledge and skills, faces significant challenges when students must deal with the use of two different language varieties. In many countries, especially those with numerous regional languages or dialects, students often have to switch between the formal language used in instruction and the more familiar everyday language used at home and in their communities. Imbalances in mastery of

these two varieties can create difficulties, especially for students who are more accustomed to using the low variety. For example, students who grow up in environments where regional languages or local dialects are widely spoken often face challenges when they must understand instructional material presented in the official or standard language, such as Indonesian or English in countries where these are official languages.

However, besides challenges, diglossia also offers opportunities to enrich the educational experience. The use of two different language varieties can expand students' linguistic and cognitive horizons. By leveraging both languages, educators can create more inclusive learning experiences that not only introduce students to academic language but also acknowledge the importance of everyday language in their social and cultural contexts. In some cases, students accustomed to the low variety can develop broader language skills by learning and using the high variety in appropriate contexts, while students already proficient in the high variety can enhance their language abilities by using the low variety in everyday conversation.

The fact that the author is bilingual is one of the main factors driving the focus of this research. Personal experience as someone who grew up and developed in a bilingual environment not only strengthens the author's understanding of the phenomenon of bilingualism but also fosters a deep interest in how bilingual abilities influence an individual's thinking, communication, and learning.

The phenomenon of diglossia in education raises questions about how the role of diglossia shapes challenges and opportunities in education. In many situations, the high variety is used to teach abstract academic concepts, while the low variety is more often used for practical activities and communication. Therefore, it is important to understand how the role of diglossia in education can be managed to reduce the gap between students with different language backgrounds and to utilize both language varieties as resources for creating more effective and meaningful learning experiences.

This study focuses on the phenomenon of diglossia and bilingualism in the field of education, based on initial observations that reveal numerous cases among students in Batang Hari, particularly within Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*). Research on diglossia is crucial because it reflects the linguistic reality faced by many students, especially in learning environments where more than one language is used in daily life. In an educational context, the functional and alternating use of two languages in both formal and informal settings not only affects how students communicate but also influences their thinking processes, comprehension of academic content, and social interactions in the classroom.

Therefore, this research highlights the importance of deeply understanding how students respond to and navigate diglossic situations, so that teaching strategies can be more adaptive, inclusive, and effective in supporting both academic development and communication between students and teachers throughout the learning process.

The data was collected through the perceptions of two educators and two students from one Islamic boarding school in Batang Hari. This particular school was chosen based on initial observations that identified a significant number of bilingual students experiencing diglossia, largely due to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the student population.

The concept of diglossia was first introduced by Charles A. Ferguson, who defined it as a societal situation where two language varieties coexist, each serving distinct social functions. The high variety is typically used in formal contexts such as education, government, and mass media, while the low variety is used in daily conversations and informal interactions. Ferguson emphasized that this functional distinction creates a clear division of linguistic roles in society, requiring individuals to switch between the two varieties depending on the social context (*Ferguson-Diglossia.Pdf.Crdownload*, n.d.).

Fishman, in his work “Bilingualism with and without diglossia; diglossia with and without bilingualism”, expanded the understanding of diglossia by linking it to bilingualism. He explained that diglossia can occur in both bilingual and monolingual societies, depending on the functions and distribution of the languages or dialects used (Schiffman, 2017). Fishman also highlighted that in educational contexts, the transition from home language to school language often poses challenges for students, particularly when the two languages differ in formality and structure .

In bilingual education, Cummins’ Linguistic Interdependence Theory is highly relevant. Cummins argued that literacy and cognitive skills developed in one language can transfer to another, provided students achieve a certain level of proficiency in both (Cummins et al., 2001). This means that even if students struggle with academic language (high variety), their everyday language skills (low variety) can still serve as a critical asset in learning.

Previous studies indicate that diglossia remains a central concern in sociolinguistics and education in multilingual nations. Research by Aminatun and Oktaviani, for example, highlighted how diglossia in Indonesian primary schools affects learning processes. The study found that the use of regional languages (low variety) at home and Indonesian (high variety) in schools can create barriers to understanding instructional material, especially for students with limited exposure to Indonesian in their family environments. However, the

study also underscored the importance of educators in bridging language gaps through strategies like translanguaging and scaffolding.

Additionally, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in language learning. Vygotsky argued that children's language development is deeply influenced by their social environment and interactions with adults or peers (Gauvain, 2008). In diglossic contexts, teachers can act as mediators, helping students bridge the gap between low and high varieties through inclusive teaching strategies, such as scaffolding or initially using everyday language before transitioning to academic language.

Furthermore, the Translanguaging Theory developed by García and Wei offers a new perspective in bilingual education. Translanguaging is a pedagogical practice that allows students to flexibly use their full linguistic repertoire during learning (Rajendram, 2021). Through translanguaging, diglossia is not merely a challenge but also an opportunity to enrich students' learning experiences and enhance their cognitive and literacy skills.

Meanwhile, Suryati's research on diglossia in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) highlights how the use of Arabic (high variety) in religious instruction and Indonesian or regional languages (low variety) in daily communication can enrich students' linguistic competence. Suryati stresses the importance of flexible pedagogical approaches, where teachers leverage both language varieties to strengthen understanding of religious concepts and improve students' communication skills. However, this study is limited to the pesantren context and does not deeply explore the impact of diglossia on students' general literacy development.

Compared to previous studies, this research offers unique contributions. For instance, Aminatun & Oktaviani's (2019) work focuses on diglossia's challenges from policy and communication barriers but underemphasizes opportunities for linguistic enrichment. Suryati (2015) views diglossia as an opportunity but limits her focus to religious competency. This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring both the challenges and opportunities arising from diglossia and linking them to practical teaching strategies in educational settings, particularly in Batang Hari.

The researcher aims to explore in greater depth the extent to which language-related challenges and opportunities can influence students' motivation and engagement in learning. How do educators respond to these challenges? These are the questions that this article seeks to address. This study employs a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research methods refer to research approaches that produce descriptive data. These descriptive data are derived from observations, whether in the form of written, verbal, or behavioral expressions of the

research subjects. Descriptive or narrative data are generated through the researcher's exploration and interpretation of the social environment under study. Thus, this concept forms the foundation of the definition of the qualitative research approach. (Waruwu, 2024)

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the researcher uses a qualitative approach. According to Moelong as cited in (Mouwn Erland, 2020), qualitative research is defined as a method aimed at understanding phenomena experienced by research subjects such as behaviors, perceptions, motivations, actions, and others holistically and descriptively, using words and language in a natural context, and employing various research methods. This approach aims to describe the main patterns that emerge from the data without re-coding or employing complex data triangulation. The qualitative approach involves data collection through various methods, such as observation, interviews, photography, document analysis, and field notes. This data is compiled by the researcher at the research site and is not presented in numerical form (Syahwani, 2015).

Primary data in this study is obtained through interviews with informants, while secondary data is gathered from literature relevant to the research topic. In qualitative research methodology, there are various data collection methods and sources commonly used. James McMillan and Sally Schumacher, in *Research in Education: A Conceptual Introduction*, mention at least four multi-method data collection strategies in qualitative research: participant observation, in-depth interviews, document and artifact studies, and supplementary techniques (Nilamsari, 2014).

The data collection techniques used by the researcher are literature review and structured interviews conducted directly. According to Creswell in his book *Research Methodology*, a literature review is a written summary of sources such as journal articles, books, and other documents that describe past conditions and current information (Fitrah & Luthfiyah, 2018). First, the literature review is conducted to gain a broader understanding of the concept of diglossia in the context of education. In this stage, the researcher examines various literature sources, including scientific articles and relevant books. This literature helps illustrate how the phenomenon of diglossia affects language use in education, as well as the challenges and opportunities posed by the presence of different language variants.

Next, regarding the interview: According to Stewart & Cash in *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif di Bidang Pendidikan* define an interview as follows: "An interview is interactional because there is an exchanging, or sharing of roles, responsibilities, feelings, beliefs,

motives, and information. If one person does all of the talking and the other all of the listening, a speech to an audience of one, not an interview, is taking place.”(Dr. Umar Sidiq, M.Ag Dr. Moh. Miftachul Choiri, 2019). In this case, the researcher uses structured interviews conducted directly by providing a pre-arranged list of questions to the informants. In a structured interview, the researcher uses a specially scheduled interview to guide who will be interviewed and arranges structured questions to guide the informants during the interview (Puji Rianto, SIP., 2021).

The informants in this study are teachers and students at an Islamic boarding school in Mersam, Batang Hari Regency. These include the teacher A as Indonesia teacher and the teacher B as Social Science teacher both of whom are bilingual (Jambi Malay – Indonesian) as well as two 12th-grade students: Student A, a bilingual speaker with dominant Jambi Malay – Indonesian, and Student B, a bilingual speaker with dominant Indonesian – Jambi Malay. These informants were selected through purposive sampling, where the researcher deliberately chose individuals who were considered to have sufficient knowledge of the study objectives and could address the identified research problems. Purposive sampling is a technique of selecting data sources based on specific considerations. These considerations may include individuals who are believed to have the most insight into the topic or hold key positions, thereby facilitating the researcher in exploring the object/social situation being studied (Ummah, 2019).

This research was conducted over four months, from February to May 2025. The general research location is Darussalam Stano Modern Islamic Boarding School in Mersam. The research aims to verify and describe the role of the diglossia phenomenon in education. This study focuses on the challenges and opportunities presented by diglossia in students' comprehension and classroom learning.

The data collected from interviews with educators and students were analyzed by reading and understanding their narratives related to their experiences in a diglossic environment. From the interview results, key tendencies were identified, such as challenges in understanding high-level language, strategies applied by teachers, and the positive impacts of bilingualism in education.

Furthermore, the interview findings were compared with relevant literature to identify similarities or differences in perspectives. The analysis was conducted descriptively by connecting patterns found in the interviews with theories discussed in the literature review. In this way, the study offers a broader understanding of the role of diglossia in education without relying on complex analysis methods.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of diglossia in education reveals a complex dynamic between two language varieties the high and low varieties used in both social and academic contexts. In many communities, diglossia is nothing new, especially in countries with more than one official language or in regions like Batang Hari, where multiple local languages are spoken. The use of different languages in different contexts has a significant impact on the educational process, affecting both students and educators. As a result, it is important to explore how diglossia influences learning, the challenges that arise, and the opportunities that can be harnessed to enhance the effectiveness of education.

1. The Role of Diglossia in Understanding Instructional Material

Based on literature review and interviews conducted, the researcher can explain the role of diglossia in enhancing students' experiences and understanding during classroom learning. This research reveals both the challenges and opportunities that diglossia presents for students.

According to the interview results, one of the main challenges students face in diglossic communities is difficulty understanding instructional material presented in the high language variety, especially when they are more accustomed to using the low variety in daily life. In educational contexts, the high language variety is often used in textbooks, teaching, and examinations. This variety typically features more formal vocabulary and complex structures, which can be unfamiliar to students who rarely use it outside the classroom.

In this study, the respondents had slightly different bilingual backgrounds. AS, for example, has a background where the regional language is dominant over the formal language, while student B is more fluent and comfortable using the formal language than the regional one. Data from the interviews with selected subjects revealed that the use of the formal (high) language by teachers during instruction can create a gap in students' understanding of the material. In the interview, student A stated, "Sometimes I have trouble understanding lessons when they're explained in formal language, because it's too rigid and uses a lot of terms I rarely hear in everyday life." This is because student A lives in an environment where the regional (low) language is used for daily communication. This aligns with Cummins' theory, which suggests that language skills developed at home can contribute to literacy in academic language. Thus, using the regional (low) language in everyday communication can make it difficult for students to understand instructional material presented in the formal language.

Furthermore, the researcher recognizes that the difference between high and low language varieties often affects students' confidence in participating in class. Students who are more proficient in the low variety may feel marginalized or less competent when required to speak or write in the high variety. This can make them reluctant to interact with teachers or classmates, reducing their engagement in the learning process. Conversely, students who are already comfortable with the high variety may feel more at ease, but this can also lead to unequal access to learning opportunities.

Connecting this to Clement's concept, confidence in using a second language (in this case, formal Indonesian) is a key factor in determining successful communication and language achievement, and is also influenced by supportive social and environmental factors. Student A mentioned feeling uncomfortable when required to use formal language during class discussions, as it made them feel nervous and hesitant to express their opinions. In contrast, student B stated that using formal Indonesian makes them feel more confident, as they do not worry about misunderstandings among classmates during discussions. He attributes this confidence to growing up in an environment where the formal language is dominant. From these two informants, the author concludes that gaps in proficiency with the high language variety can affect students' self-confidence, especially among bilingual students. This can result in unequal opportunities for interaction and a decrease in student engagement during the learning process.

2. The Challenges of Managing Diglossia in Education

Based on literature review and interviews, it was found that, in addition to challenges related to understanding instructional material, managing diglossia in education also presents various difficulties for educators. According to interviews conducted by the researcher, teachers working in diglossic communities must possess the skills to effectively manage differences in language use. One of the biggest challenges is how to integrate both language varieties into the teaching process without causing confusion. Teachers need to ensure that students who are more familiar with the low language variety can still access material presented in the high language. This is supported by interview results, where Educator A stated, "The biggest challenge I face is balancing the use of everyday language, which makes students comfortable, with curriculum requirements that demand the use of formal Indonesian." Educator B added, "One challenge I face is limited classroom time. Integrating two forms of language requires a gradual approach and adjustments that can't be rushed."

In *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Vygotsky says, "What the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently

tomorrow.” From this quote, the researcher understands that teachers help students move through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by providing appropriate and tailored support, so that skills initially achievable only with help can eventually become independent abilities.

Furthermore, in their book *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*, García and Wei explain that translanguaging involves flexibly using students’ full language repertoires to understand and communicate ideas. In the context of bilingual education here, teachers who apply translanguaging allow and encourage students to use their everyday language as a bridge to understanding academic language. This eases comprehension and boosts students’ confidence and motivation. This is consistent with interview results, where Educator A stated that in their teaching methods, they use practice exercises such as converting short stories from the regional language to Indonesian and then understanding the structure of both.

One strategy teachers can use is to explain concepts in simpler or more familiar language before switching to the high variety. For example, from the interview, Educator B said, “When explaining material, I usually start with the regional language so that students understand the basic concept. After that, I repeat it in formal Indonesian so they get used to the terms used in textbooks.”

Teachers can begin by explaining concepts in everyday language and then gradually introduce more technical or formal terms used in the high variety. This strategy aims to bridge the gap between the low language used by students and the high language used in academic contexts. However, these challenges are not always easy to overcome, as many teachers may feel constrained by limited time and resources when trying to consistently apply such approaches.

3. The Opportunities Offered by Diglossia in Education

Based on interview results and non-participant observation, although diglossia presents various challenges, it also offers a number of opportunities that can be used to enrich the learning experience. One of the main advantages of diglossia in education is linguistic enrichment. This is consistent with Fishman’s theory, which shows that the presence of two language varieties can actually become a valuable source of enrichment for students. Students who are used to the low language variety have the opportunity to learn and master the high variety not only improving their language skills but also expanding their cognitive horizons. Mastery of the high language enables students to access a wider range of knowledge resources, including academic texts, scientific literature, and media that typically use formal

language.

According to interviews with the students informan, using two different languages formal language and the regional language is very helpful when interacting with various groups of people. They feel that using everyday or regional language in learning makes the classroom atmosphere more relaxed, friendly, and easier to understand. The language used by teachers feels closer to their own lives, so students grasp the material more quickly.

However, they also recognize the importance of using formal Indonesian, especially in academic discussions and broader communication. Formal language also helps build skills in speaking politely, precisely, and in ways that are understandable to everyone, including peers from different regional backgrounds. Although it may feel difficult at first, students need to keep practicing the use of formal language so they can become comfortable in more official situations.

Overall, the combination of formal and everyday language in learning can enhance the effectiveness of communication. Everyday language helps to create a relaxed atmosphere and clarify material, while formal language trains students to think and speak with good structure. Balancing the use of both supports both material understanding and comprehensive language development.

In addition, diglossia provides students with the opportunity to develop communication skills in various contexts. By mastering both language varieties, students not only learn to adapt to academic environments but also improve their ability to interact in different social situations. This skill is invaluable, given that the professional and social worlds often require individuals to be flexible in using language appropriate to the context. In this sense, diglossia can be seen as an opportunity to develop dual language competence that is useful in many aspects of life.

Education that can make effective use of both language varieties also contributes to the recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity. In this context, educators can use the low language as a way to connect learning material with students' life experiences, while the high language is used to teach academic skills and knowledge. This approach not only increases student engagement in learning but also respects their linguistic identity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the phenomenon of diglossia combined with bilingualism plays a significant role in students' comprehension during the learning process. Differences in language skills and backgrounds present challenges and create gaps in understanding the

learning materials. As a result, students often feel uncomfortable and become passive in class, primarily due to a lack of confidence in expressing their opinions. This is influenced by limited proficiency in using formal or academic language in the classroom. This situation not only shapes students' learning experiences but also requires appropriate intervention to maximize learning outcomes and re-engage students in the learning process.

In addition, the study found that diglossia is not solely a barrier it can also serve as an opportunity to enrich students' language and literacy development. This is evident from the findings that teachers who are aware of the dynamics of diglossia can effectively use everyday language as a bridge to gradually and inclusively introduce academic concepts. Such strategies have been shown to help students better grasp the material and slowly build confidence in using formal or "high" language.

Therefore, the researcher concludes that while diglossia and bilingualism may pose challenges, they can also serve as powerful tools for enhancing student literacy. This potential can be realized through the readiness and creativity of educators in applying adaptive teaching strategies within bilingual environments. By proportionally blending high and low language use and providing adequate social support, the challenges of diglossia can be transformed into meaningful and enriching learning experiences for students in multilingual educational settings.

Moreover, the research also highlights the importance of teachers' preparedness and creativity in navigating language dynamics in the classroom. By integrating both formal and informal language in a balanced way, and by fostering a supportive learning environment, students can experience deeper, more meaningful engagement in their learning journey.

Then again, this study also acknowledges certain limitations, such as the narrow research scope limited to specific contexts, the relatively small sample size that may not represent the broader population, and the reliance on qualitative and subjective data collection methods. Therefore, future research is strongly encouraged to broaden the context to more diverse educational settings, combine both qualitative and quantitative approaches, and continue developing more adaptive teaching strategies. In doing so, the positive impact of this research can be more widely felt across the educational landscape.

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