



Challenges and Strategies Used of Thai Students in Indonesian Language Learning in the BIPA Program: A case of EMI

Nuro Sabuela¹, Mauly Halwat Hikmat², Nur Hidayat³

^{1,2,3}English Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Central Java

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Corresponding Author:

Nuro Sabuela
nuro14071@gmail.com
English Education, Universitas
Muhammadiyah Surakarta,
Surakarta, Central Java

Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by Thai students and the strategies they employ in Indonesian language learning in the BIPA program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS), where English is used as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). The increasing use of EMI in multilingual educational settings has created both opportunities and challenges for international students who are learning a new language through another foreign language. The research focuses on analyzing the types of learning difficulties students experience when EMI is used as the instructional language and the factors contributing to these challenges. A qualitative case study research methodology was employed, collecting data through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with five Thai students participating in the BIPA program. The interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions of their learning experiences, while classroom observations were used to examine how students interacted with the lecturer and responded to EMI during classroom activities. The result indicated that students faced language challenges including limited English language proficiency, difficulty processing multiple languages simultaneously, and difficulty understanding explanations from English-speaking instructors. Classroom observations also revealed that students frequently used online translation tools and sought peer assistance to better understand lessons. In several situations, students relied on their classmates to clarify instructions and translate unfamiliar vocabulary into their native language. Despite these challenges, students developed various learning strategies such as using translation applications, collaborating with peers, and self-studying vocabulary. These strategies demonstrate students' ability to adapt to a multilingual learning environment and actively manage their language learning process.

These findings suggest that while EMI may create language barriers in multilingual classrooms, appropriate teaching strategies and peer support can help students cope with these challenges and enhance their learning experiences in the BIPA program.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, language is a crucial factor in education systems, particularly in multilingual contexts where language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a tool for learning (Orellana et al., 2012; Mouboua et al., 2024). In international educational environments, students from diverse linguistic backgrounds often require the use of a shared language to facilitate classroom interaction and knowledge transfer (Macaro et al., 2018; Galloway & Ruegg, 2020). One example of such a context is the BIPA (*Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing*) program, which refers to the teaching of Indonesian to foreign learners. The BIPA program has been widely implemented in several Indonesian universities to promote the Indonesian language and culture among international students (Hesti Widyasari, 2022).

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) is one of the universities that offers the BIPA program for international students. Among the international students enrolled in the BIPA program, Thai students represent the largest group of participants in the BIPA program. In recent years, Indonesian universities have experienced an increase in international student enrollment in BIPA programs, including students from Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, which highlights the growing importance of understanding their learning experiences. In this multilingual learning environment, English is often used as a bridge language between instructors and students, particularly during the initial stages of learning when students have limited Indonesian language skills (Aldianto et al., 2025).

The use of EMI in this context facilitates instructors in explaining lesson contents and encourages students to participate in classroom communication (Jusuf, 2001). This situation reflects the increasing use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in international educational settings (Luchenko et al., 2024; Tai, 2022; Peng & Xie, 2021).

Although the use of English facilitates communication between lecturers and international students, it may also create additional challenges for learners whose native language is neither English nor Indonesian (Pun & Thomas, 2020). Thai students, for instance, must simultaneously process information in English while learning Indonesian as a new target language. This situation may increase the cognitive burden on students' learning process and affect their comprehension during classroom sessions.

This phenomenon can be explained through Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), which suggests that learners have limited working memory capacity, and learning becomes more difficult when they are required to process multiple sources of

information simultaneously. In multilingual learning contexts such as EMI classrooms, students often need to process more than one language at the same time, which may significantly increase cognitive load and hinder comprehension. Therefore, CLT provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the challenges faced by Thai students when learning Indonesian through English as a medium of instruction.

Previous studies have studied the role of English in multilingual educational contexts and the difficulties that non-native English speakers face in EMI contexts (Haryanto, 2021). These studies suggest that students often encounter language barriers, limited vocabulary, and difficulties understanding complex explanations presented in English (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Abdullah et al., 2025).

However, despite the increasing use of EMI in Indonesian higher education institutions, there is limited research examining the experiences of Thai students in BIPA programs, particularly in the context of Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). Most previous researches have focused on the general use of EMI practices or the effectiveness of BIPA programs without exploring into how Thai students navigate the use of EMI while learning Indonesian language.

In particular, previous studies have not sufficiently examined the specific experiences of Thai students in BIPA programs, especially in relation to how they navigate learning Indonesian through English as a medium of instruction and how they develop strategies to cope with the cognitive and linguistic demands of multilingual learning environments. Therefore, there remains a gap in understanding the challenges faced by Thai students, including the strategies they employ to address these challenges in a multilingual learning environment.

Based on this research gap, this study aims to investigate the challenges faced by Thai students when English is used as the medium of instruction (EMI) in the BIPA program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). Furthermore, the study also seeks to explore the strategies employed by Thai students to overcome these challenges while learning Indonesian language in the classroom. This study addresses the following research questions: (1) What challenges do Thai students face when EMI is used in the BIPA classrooms? and (2) What strategies do Thai students use to overcome these challenges? By presenting the experiences of Thai students in the BIPA program, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of language learning processes in multilingual contexts within Indonesian higher education level.

Moreover, the findings of this research are expected to help instructors develop more effective teaching strategies and create an inclusive learning environment for international students with diverse language backgrounds. In addition, this study provides practical implications for BIPA instructors in designing EMI and contributes to the broader discussion of multilingual education research, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the challenges faced by Thai students and the strategies they employ in the BIPA program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS), where English is used as the medium of instruction (EMI). Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for studying the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of participants within a specific social context (Lim, 2025). Through qualitative inquiry, researchers are able to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of participants lived experiences (Ugwu & Eze, 2023; Khan, 2022).

In particular, this study adopted a case study approach in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Thai students within a real-life educational environment. A case study enables researchers to examine contemporary phenomena within real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomena and its context are blurred (Yin, 2018). This approach was considered appropriate as this research aims to explore the complex experiences of Thai students learning Indonesian through English in multilingual classrooms.

This study was conducted in a beginner-level BIPA classroom at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) over a period of one academic year. The program included several subjects, namely listening, speaking, reading, writing, and cultural studies, which were delivered using English as the medium of instruction (EMI).

Research Participants

This study focused on five Thai students enrolled in the BIPA program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). The participants were selected using purposive sampling, which is commonly applied in qualitative research to select individuals who possess relevant experiences related to the research topic (Tajik et al., 2024).

The participants met several criteria. First, participants were selected based on their enrollment in the program for at least one semester. Second, their background as non-native speakers of both English and Indonesian. Third, they were willing to share their experiences through interviews. Selecting participants with these criteria ensured that the data collected were directly relevant to the research objectives.

Although the number of participants was relatively small, qualitative research prioritizes depth of understanding rather than the size of the sample, allowing researchers to explore each participant's experiences in detail (Subedi, 2021). This approach provided a richer understanding of the challenges faced by Thai students and the strategies they used during the learning process.

Data Collection Technique

To ensure data credibility and obtain in-depth information, this study employed two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and classroom observation.

Semi-structured interview

The interviews focused on the challenges faced by Thai students when English is used as the medium of instruction (EMI), the strategies they use to overcome these challenges, and their overall learning experiences in the BIPA program at UMS. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share their experiences in their own words, allowing the researcher to obtain rich qualitative data for analysis (Kallio et al., 2016).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Thai language, and each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable setting. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The interview guide consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed to explore students' perceptions, challenges, and learning strategies in EMI-based classrooms. The questions focused on students' experiences in understanding lessons delivered in English, the difficulties they encountered, and the strategies they used to cope with those challenges. The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives and were aligned with relevant literature on EMI and language learning. For example, participants were asked about the difficulties they experienced when lecturers used English in class and the strategies they used to understand the lesson.

Classroom observation

In addition to semi-structured interviews, classroom observation was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning process in the BIPA classroom (Tiawati et al., 2024). Classroom observation allows researchers to directly examine participants' behaviors and interactions in their natural learning environment (Babchuk, 2017)

The observation was conducted over one academic year, during which the researcher participated in the BIPA classroom as a participant-observer. This role enabled the researcher to engage in classroom activities while observing the use of English as the medium of instruction (EMI), language interaction patterns, and cultural integration practices (Kawulich, 2005). Each classroom session lasted approximately 90 minutes and included various learning activities such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and cultural discussions.

During the observation sessions, the researcher focused on several aspects, including the use of English by lecturers during instruction, the responses of Thai students during the BIPA classroom interaction, and the strategies students used when they encountered difficulties in understanding the lesson. Field notes were taken during the observation to record important events, classroom dynamics, and examples of communication between lecturers and students (Kawulich, 2005).

Data Analysis Technique

The data collected from semi-structured interviews and classroom observation were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method used to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the research questions (Perry, K. & Hill, 2006; Kabir, 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025). This study followed the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

The data analysis process consisted of several steps. First, the researcher transcribed all interviews into written text to ensure accuracy and completeness, and organized the field notes obtained from classroom observations. Second, the researcher reread the data multiple times to familiarize himself/herself with the content and gain a deeper understanding of the information. Next, the researcher conducted data coding, identifying key words, phrases, or texts related to the challenges faced by Thai students, as well as the strategies they used to solve them.

These codes were then grouped into categories based on similar meanings. Subsequently, these categories were combined into themes, reflecting recurring patterns in the data. These themes were then interpreted in relation to the research question and the conceptual framework of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Finally, the researcher reviewed and refined the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiences and supported the overall research findings.

Data Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility of this qualitative case study, two primary strategies were employed: data triangulation and member checking.

Data triangulation was implemented by collecting data through two different sources: semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. These techniques were applied to data collected from five Thai students to capture diverse perspectives on the use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in the BIPA classrooms. By comparing and cross-validating data from these multiple sources, the researcher aimed to reduce bias and enhance the reliability of the

findings (Carter et al., 2014; Adeoye, 2024).

Member checking was conducted during the interview process to confirm the accuracy of participant responses. After each interview session, the researcher summarized key points and asked participants to verify whether their experiences and opinions were correctly interpreted. This technique ensured that the participants' intended meanings were accurately reflected in the data and subsequent analysis (Birt et al., 2016; Kullman & Chudyk, 2025).

In addition, this study ensured trustworthiness by addressing credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through member checking and triangulation, dependability was maintained by applying consistent data collection and analysis procedures, and confirmability was ensured by minimizing researcher bias through systematic data interpretation.

Together, these credibility strategies helped ensure that the research findings authentically represent the lived experiences of students and instructors regarding the role and impact of EMI in the BIPA programs at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS).

3. Result

This section presents the results obtained from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations conducted with five Thai students enrolled in the BIPA program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). The analysis revealed four main themes: (1) language proficiency challenges, (2) cognitive challenges in multilingual processing, (3) lecturer language proficiency, and (4) learning strategies.

Theme 1: Language Proficiency Challenges

The research findings indicated that five Thai students faced several challenges in learning Indonesian in the BIPA program where English is used as the medium of instruction (EMI). One of the main challenges was their limited English language proficiency, which affected their ability to understand classroom instruction.

According to semi-structured interview data, several Thai students reported their limited English language proficiency made it difficult to follow the explanation given by lecturers. One Thai student said that:

"I study the BIPA program because I want to learn more about Indonesian culture, but the classes were taught in English. I know a little English, but sometimes I felt like I couldn't keep up because my English isn't strong enough." (P1)

This finding indicates that limited English proficiency constrained students' comprehension of instructional content. Another Thai student stated that:

"When I ask the professor about lessons I don't understand, such as formal vocabulary or long sentences, the professor explains it in English, but I still don't understand much because English isn't my first language." (P2)

This suggests that the use of English as a non-native language creates additional barriers for students in understanding academic material.

Observation data further supported these findings, as students were often seen hesitating to respond to lecturers' questions and requiring additional time to process explanations delivered in English. Some students appeared uncertain during classroom interaction, indicating difficulties in understanding EMI-based instruction.

Theme 2: Cognitive Challenges in Multilingual Processing

Another challenge identified in this study was the difficulties in processing multiple languages simultaneously during classroom activities. Thai students reported that they needed to translate information across Thai, English, and Indonesian. One participant mentioned:

"When the lessons get more difficult, I have to translate by myself from Thai to English and then from English to Indonesian." (P3)

This finding highlights the cognitive burden involved in multilingual processing, as students must shift between multiple languages, which increases the complexity of understanding the lesson.

Observation data also revealed that Thai students frequently paused during lessons, used translation applications, or took longer time before responding, indicating that they were processing information across multiple languages.

Theme 3: Lecturer Language Proficiency

In addition to students' language limitations, lecturer language proficiency was also identified as a contributing factor to learning difficulties. Some Thai students reported that lecturers' English explanations were sometimes unclear or difficult to understand. One Thai student stated:

"At first, I thought that using English would make learning easier, but sometimes it's still difficult because some professors aren't very proficient in English." (P4)

Another student added:

"I was excited to learn Indonesian, but I was quite surprised because the instructors used English, while my English was still basic." (P5)

These findings suggest that both students' and lecturers' English proficiency influence the effectiveness of EMI in the classroom. When lecturers' explanations are not clear, students experience greater difficulty in understanding the lesson.

This was also supported by observation data, where some students appeared confused and occasionally relied on peers or translation tools to clarify the lecturer's explanations.

Theme 4: Learning Strategies

Despite the challenges, Thai students employed various strategies to aid their understanding of the lessons. These strategies included using online translation tools, seeking assistance from peers, and engaging in independent learning.

Many students stated that they used translation tools such as Google Translate or ChatGPT to help them understand unfamiliar vocabulary and sentences.

"When I don't understand a word or sentence, I use Google Translator or ChatGPT to help me understand faster." (P1)

This indicates that digital tools play an important role in supporting students' comprehension in EMI classrooms. One Thai student explained that he often used a combination of methods to understand the lesson.

"First, I ask the professor. If I still don't understand, I ask my friends. And if I still don't understand, I use Google Translate." (P2)

This suggests that students apply a combination of strategies in a step-by-step manner to overcome difficulties.

Another Thai student said:

"If I don't understand, I translate the word into Thai first, then into English, and finally into Indonesian." (P3)

This reflects how students actively manage multilingual learning by using translation across languages.

Also, another Thai participant explained:

“After class, I usually read the materials again and search for the meaning of difficult words. Sometimes I also watch videos or look for examples online to help me understand the lesson better.” (P4)

This shows that independent learning also plays a significant role in improving understanding.

Furthermore, another Thai student stated:

“Sometimes I will ask my Thai friends who are good at English to help explain the lessons to me.” (P5)

This indicates that peer support is an important strategy in helping students overcome language barriers.

Observation data further confirmed these strategies, as students were frequently seen using translation applications on their mobile phones, discussing materials with peers, and engaging in collaborative learning during classroom activities.

4. Discussion

This study provides deeper insight into how EMI influences learning processes in a multilingual BIPA classroom. . One of the most significant challenges was the students’ limited English language proficiency, which affected their ability to understand lecturers’ explanations in the BIPA program. From the perspective of EMI pedagogy, this reflects a gap between language proficiency and content delivery, where students are expected to understand academic material through a language, they have not yet fully mastered.

Many Thai students stated that although they participated in the BIPA program to learn the Indonesian language and culture, the frequent use of EMI in the classroom made it difficult for them to follow the lessons. This finding aligns with previous EMI research, which indicates that students with limited English language proficiency often struggle to understand academic material taught in English (Macaro et al., 2018; Kamaşak et al., 2021; M. K. Ahmed, 2025). In this sense, the present study supports earlier findings; however, it also offers a new insight by demonstrating that the challenge is more complex in the BIPA context, where students must learn Indonesian while simultaneously relying on English as a medium of instruction.

These findings highlight the challenges faced by students who must learn academic content through a foreign language while simultaneously developing their proficiency in that language. This suggests that EMI implementation in multilingual classrooms requires careful consideration of students’ language

readiness.

Another crucial issue is the cognitive complexity arising from processing multiple languages simultaneously. Many Thai students described needing to translate information between Thai, English, and Indonesian to fully understand the lessons. This multilingual translation process requires significant cognitive effort and can slow down content comprehension. From the perspective of cognitive load theory, learners may experience additional mental effort when they must process and interpret information across multiple linguistic systems at the same time.

This study's findings are consistent with research on EMI which suggest that students often experience difficulties when learning academic material through a second or third language (Rahmadani, 2016; Kamaşak et al., 2021b; Yuksel et al., 2023; S & Rut, 2024). Thus, the present study confirms previous findings while extending them by illustrating how cognitive load increases specifically in trilingual learning situations (Thai–English–Indonesian), particularly at the beginner level.

Furthermore, some Thai students reported that the pronunciation or fluency of some instructors in English affects their understanding of the lessons. Previous research suggests that the effectiveness of EMI in teaching is related to the language abilities of both learners and instructors, as communication problems can arise when instructors lack confidence in using English for instruction and the students' ability in English language (Wang, 2021; Kır, 2024). This indicates that EMI effectiveness is not solely dependent on students' proficiency but also on lecturers' ability to provide clear and comprehensible input. However, despite these challenges, English remains a crucial lingua franca in culturally diverse classrooms, facilitating communication among students with different language backgrounds.

Meanwhile, the research also found that Thai students developed several strategies to improve their learning effectiveness. One of the most common strategies was the use of online translation tools, such as Google Translate, to quickly find the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases. The use of digital technology in language learning is a growing trend, and recent research indicates that digital tools can support self-directed learning and help learners better understand content in a multilingual academic context (Pan et al., 2025; Ram, 2025).

This finding supports previous studies; however, it also highlights a more specific role of digital tools as immediate scaffolding mechanisms that assist learners in real-time comprehension within EMI classrooms. This finding suggests that digital translation tools play an important role in helping learners access linguistic information more efficiently, particularly in classrooms where multiple languages are involved (Vardhini, 2023; Sharma, 2024; Klimova, 2025).

In addition to the use of technology, assistance from classmates also played a crucial role in helping students understand the lessons. Many students stated that they often ask friends when they did not understand the lecturer's explanation. This behavior can be interpreted through language learning strategies theory, particularly as a form of social strategy, where learners rely on interaction with peers to construct meaning and enhance understanding

This behavior can be interpreted as a form of social language learning strategy, in which learners rely on peer interaction to clarify meaning and improve their understanding of the lesson. Peer support allows students to exchange knowledge, confirm interpretations, and reduce misunderstandings that may arise when learning through a second or third language. This finding is consistent with previous research on collaborative and multilingual learning, which emphasizes the importance of peer interaction in facilitating comprehension.

Classroom observations also confirmed that learners often use multiple strategies, such as using translation apps, asking friends, and self-reviewing vocabulary. The use of multiple strategies demonstrates students' active efforts to manage the linguistic challenges that arise in an English-medium learning environment. These findings suggest that learners are not passive recipients of instruction but active agents who strategically adapt to linguistic challenges in EMI contexts.

These findings also have important pedagogical implications. Lecturers should consider reducing linguistic complexity when delivering instruction, particularly for beginner-level students, by simplifying explanations and avoiding overly complex language. In addition, the use of translanguaging practices can support students' understanding by allowing them to use their first language alongside English and Indonesian, thereby reducing cognitive load. Providing bilingual or multilingual explanations when introducing new vocabulary or complex concepts can also serve as effective scaffolding. Furthermore, incorporating vocabulary support, visual aids, and interactive learning activities may enhance students' comprehension and engagement in EMI classrooms.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of EMI research by providing empirical evidence from a Southeast Asian context, particularly within Indonesian BIPA programs. It also contributes to BIPA pedagogy by highlighting the challenges and adaptive strategies of learners in multilingual classrooms. In addition, this study enriches multilingual learning research by demonstrating how cognitive load, language proficiency, and learning strategies interact dynamically in EMI environments, especially at the beginner level.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the challenges faced by Thai students and the strategies they used while learning Indonesian in the BIPA program at UMS, where English is used as the medium of instruction (EMI). The findings revealed that the use of EMI created several linguistic challenges for Thai students, particularly due to students' limited English language proficiency and the need to process information across multiple languages—Thai, English, and Indonesian. These conditions increased the cognitive demands on learners and sometimes affected their comprehension of classroom explanations.

However, the research also found that Thai students actively developed various learning strategies to support to cope with these challenges, including using online translation tools, peer support, and self-study of vocabulary. These strategies helped students adapt to the multilingual learning environment and maintain engagement in the learning process.

The findings highlight the importance of providing appropriate linguistic support for international students in EMI-based BIPA classrooms. Instructors may need to consider students' language backgrounds and implement teaching approaches that facilitate comprehension in multilingual settings. Although this study was limited by the small number of participants and its focus on a single institutional context, future research could involve a larger and more diverse group of international students to further explore the effectiveness of EMI in BIPA learning environments.

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