

## Immigrants' Experiences of Becoming Bilingual (A Case Study of German and Indonesian bilinguals Living in Australia)

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**Abstract.** *As an immigrant living in Australia, having proficiency in English is a must. With the background of language includes several mother tongues, bilingualism is directly acquired since living in the English country. Dealing with this case, this study aims at investigating diverse Australian immigrants' experiences of becoming bilingual and underlines their implication for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) study. Two participants; German and Indonesian immigrants living in Australia for about 20 years taking apart during this study. Qualitatively, the immigrants were interviewed then the data were analyzed. The results found that both of them have some shared and distinctive multilingual experiences. In addition, it indicated that they were in different phases of their bilingual development.*

**Keywords:** *immigrant, bilingualism, EFL*

**Abstrak.** Sebagai seorang imigran yang tinggal di Australia, memiliki kemampuan berbahasa Inggris adalah suatu keharusan. Dengan latar belakang bahasa mencakup beberapa bahasa ibu, bilingualisme langsung diperoleh sejak tinggal di negara Inggris. Berhubungan dengan kasus ini, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki beragam pengalaman imigran Australia menjadi bilingual dan menggarisbawahi implikasinya terhadap studi EFL (Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing). Dua peserta; Imigran Jerman dan Indonesia yang tinggal di Australia selama kurang lebih 20 tahun berpartisipasi selama studi ini. Secara kualitatif para partisipan diwawancarai kemudian data dianalisis. Hasilnya menemukan bahwa keduanya memiliki pengalaman multibahasa yang sama dan berbeda. Selain itu, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa mereka berada dalam fase perkembangan bilingual yang berbeda..

**Kata kunci:** imigran, bilingual, Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing

### INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is present in almost all human environments; family, neighborhood, education and society in general. It has become a popular trend to be literate in many languages. Some people are bilingual from infancy and many others become bilingual as adults. This study aims to analyze the experiences of bilinguals who live in Australia. Bilingualism is the acquiring of another language - acquiring another language after his or her mother tongue. The process of acquiring a second language has been comprehensively studied by linguists for some time now. Nowadays, English is one of the languages which is learnt by many people. It is regarded as a global language and has reached a prestigious

status. Many Australian citizens, who originally came from other countries, speak other languages instead of monolingual English. Yet, living in Australia, requires them to be skilled in speaking English because it is the official language. Australia is a very multicultural country. It would seem then that bilingualism would be common in Australia. However, firstly bilingualism must be defined.

Bilingualism is complex, thus experts do not have agreement in defining it. Harmers and Blanc (1989) for instance, refer to Webster Dictionary, bilingual is “having or using two languages as spoken with the fluency characteristic of a native speaker” (p.6). The definition is extremely in depth degree which refers to native speaker. It is not easy to gauge who native is. If bilingual sticks to the definition, there are only plenty people who are bilingual. Also, it contradicts with Edward’s definition (2004) who believes that no one in this world is considered as monolingual. The first definition is proposed narrowly while the second one is defined broadly. We can conclude to simple definition that bilingual is the ability in using two languages and with the languages, speakers are able to exchange information. The definition is in line with Blake’s assertion (2007) that information can be delivered and gathered through language. The main important aspect of bilingual is exchanging information.

Bilingualism has compelling relationship with language policy. Because the language policy is one factor which leads people to be bilingual and government is greatly involved in the policy. One of influencing language policies is pursuing national language or official language which has occurred in Australia. There were 1,296,710 people arrived in Australia and an annual increase of 646,180 (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2023). They come from around the world who speak diverse languages, and because of settling in Australia they are expected to use monolingual language; it is English. According to The Foreword to the 1991 Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) (as cited in Ingram, a Professor of Applied Linguistics and Director Centre for Applied Linguistics and Languages, 200) states:

Proficiency in our national language, Australian English, is obviously necessary for an individual to participate as fully as possible in Australian society. But as important as proficiency in Australian English is for us as Australians, we also need to enhance our ability to communicate with the rest of the world... (p. 5).

The policy implicitly obliges Australian inhabitants to be literate in English. Especially for immigrants, to be involved in Australian community, individuals have to master English. Mohamed (2020) found on her study that owing to the policy, the students’ proficiency in Dhivehi falls behind their proficiency in English, and many students feel unqualified and unprepared for the demands of both their languages in the real world. Additionally, Australia

does a good job of creating and planning foreign language education strategy so that it has in turn benefited its social, economic, and diplomatic development (Zhou & Zou, 2017). In the meantime, (Ayan, 2015) indicated that sociocultural and linguistic factors, especially those relating to minorities, may have a significant impact on the loss of a language.

In this case, the policy is ambiguous. On one hand, it espouses people to be monolingual in English, on the other hand it encourage Australian to be competence in other languages. Deciding English as a national language means that government has promoted English as a prestigious language. Encouraging people to increase skills in other languages does not increase the languages to be used widely by Australian people. In Australia, English has been chosen as a lingua franca for bilingual or multilingual society. Hence, referring to the illustrated phenomena, this research aims at investigating diverse Australian immigrants' experiences of becoming bilingual and underlines their implication for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) study.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Bilingualism**

Bilingualism has been a continuous topic to discuss throughout the globe. Experts have come up with many different views about what constitutes bilingualism and who is bilingual. Edwards (2004) claimed that anyone who knows at least two or three sentences in another language is bilingual. Everybody might be bilingual because only a few people do not understand some phrases in another language. (Baker, 2011), on the other hand, categorizes someone as bilingual based on her/his language ability and language use.

Furthermore, (Francis, 2017) defines bilingualism as someone's capability to use two or more languages to satisfy her/his communication. Referring to these experts' opinions, it can be concluded that a bilingual person is someone who can communicate effectively in two or more languages. S/he can understand the messages in both languages and provides satisfactory products in reply to the messages.

### **Language Loss**

The dominance of international languages is believed as one of the sources of language loss (Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh, 2011). They added, "Linguists estimate that of the approximately 6500 languages worldwide, about half are endangered or on the brink of extinction". This vast number of endangered languages requires severe concern, including stakeholders, language practitioners, language educators, and even civil people. We must be conscious that our language would probably be at risk of being lost. Then, the consciousness

should be streamered by actions to lower the risk of those endangered languages. Meanwhile, Hamza Atirnigar et al., (2021) adopted this term as language death to analyze the reasons of it. They believed that language death has been linked to a variety of factors, including culture, bilingualism, migration, and natural disasters. Additionally, they stated that mixed-married people may also have language loss or a lack of language development.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

There are two participants taking a part as the object of this analysis and their experiences support the writer's arguments. In finding the data needed, the participants were interviewed on two days. First interviewee is a female who come from Germany and has been living in Australia approximately seventeen years. She came to Australia in 1995 to do a research for her tertiary project. Unfortunately, she was impressed to Australia and did not return to Germany to accomplish her studies. Now she works at in one of English course in Melbourne. She is able to speak German, as her mother tongue, English and French but only German and English are encountered as her languages because she knows French only few words. By contrast, the second interviewee who is from Indonesia got married to an Australian male. Then they lived in Indonesia for several years. Spending time years in Indonesia, then her husband began working in Australia. In 1998, she decided to move and settle in Australia because of her husband's job. She has one son and one daughter who grew up in Australia. The second interviewee fluently speaks Acehnese language, Bahasa (Indonesian language), English and Arabic. For the second interviewee, Bahasa is her mother tongue while English is considered as her additional language. Bahasa and English are considered as her languages because of several reasons.

In this qualitative study, the interview was the only instrument used in collecting the data for this investigation. Interviews are frequently used to dive into the participants' perceptions. Moreover, they are excellent techniques for gathering relevant data from the participants (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). Through interviews, participants can express and discuss their views, ideas and perception towards an issue (Kajornboon, 2005). Therefore, appointments with the participants were arranged before they were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Melbourne, Australia. During the interviews, it was paid attention to every single response and then took notes carefully. The interview results were analyzed following (Baker, 2011) dimensions of bilingualism: age, use, ability, contexts and elective bilingualism.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In analyzing bilinguals' experiences, there are four dimensions are described in depth. The dimensions are in the following discussion.

### 1. Context Dimension

The first issue which is described by baker (2011) is context which is related to geographical setting. The place where someone lives intensely influences her to be competence in using second language. In practicing English for instance, if a bilingual lives in an English speaking country, her language will be strong because she frequently interacts with monolingual language. By contrast, if a person lives in non English speaking country, her English will be tenuous and might be doom. Substitution first language to the second language is well known as language shift. The term *language shift* commonly found in immigrants in Australia (Holmes, 2008). They will be regarded as a successful assimilation when they are able to speak English perfectly. To be survival living in a new region or place language shift is important. Hornberger (as cited in Baker 2011) asserts that language shift is the decline of language usage which tends to risk first language to be extinct and death. However, the context of language shift here seems to be more linked to "Addictive bilingual situation" (Harmer 2007, p.71). The immigrants gain English without putting their host language aside. Addition second language is one basis to get better future such as finding job easily. Da Silva et al., and Vaish (as cited in Baker, 2011) say that there are number of jobs required employees to be literate in English such as in tourism, hotel, flight and so forth.

Another factor which leads Australian becoming bilingual is education. When children are raised in monolingual language at home, school is the place where they meet English. Baker (2011) labeled the case as *sequential bilingualism*. In Australia, English is predominantly used by students to interact with teachers and their peers as well. Both participants experienced sequential bilingualism when they were in home country. They learn English at schooling. However, they did not use English to communicate outside the classroom. It can be said that their English was passive. After immigrated to Australia, Dina attended an English course. In the schooling, she was expected to interact in English, either inside or outside classrooms. She had no chance to use Bahasa at school since she was the only Indonesian student.

In relation to language context, code-switching is often found in bilinguals' lives. Sometimes code-switching is a strategy that speakers do in order to make communication keep going. For new second language learners, they do not know all words in new

language. Changing few words into first language commonly occurs. Sometimes bilinguals include minority language or national and international language such as in Kenya (McGregor, 2009). Practicing code-switching is part of maintaining minority language and participating in global language. However, if speakers choose to add first language to the second one, the first language will be threatened gradually. The consistent of less using host language lead the language to die. One who provides a model for doing code-switching is parents. Baker (2011) believes that the more parents code switch language the more frequent children imitate them. Thus, family is one factor which shape generation to forget its own language.

## 2. Age

Age is one of prominent factors which influences a person to acquire language. The experts have controversial debates on age and learning language. Some experts argue that young adults tend to learn language quickly compared to young children (Baker, 2011). In addition, Yue (as cited in Harmer, 2007), states that young adult learners seem to be better in several aspects of acquisition. On the other hand, the other experts claim that children easier learn language compared to adults (Baker, 2011 & Harmer, 2007). In this point of view, the younger age a child learns a language, he or she gains the language faster. Cameron (as cited in Harmer, 2007), asserts that children more accurate in pronouncing new words. The argument which is provided by Cameron link to the common belief that children tend to imitate what they see and listen to. Thus, what makes children better than adults is the only relation to pronunciation. My personal experience shows that my little cousin gained new language with remarkable ease when he moved to a city. He did not only achieve good competence in pronunciation but also acquire new language successfully. At home, parents spoke Acehnese to him, while in schooling he interacted with his friends and teachers in Bahasa. At his young age he was bilingual.

Every individual has different experiences of becoming bilingual and parental children raising contributes children to reach bilingual competence from birth. Baker (2011) and Harding and Riley (1986) categorizes it as *simultaneous* bilingualism. Young bilingual commonly occurs in a family where parents speak two languages to their children. Baker adds that “babies appear biologically ready to acquire, store and differentiate two or more languages from birth” (p.95). Children have aptitude to catch two different languages at the same time if their parents practice it.

Dina's family simplifies her children grew up in bilingual experience. Her husband spoke to children in English but she used to communicate in Bahasa. Harding and Riley (1986) states that the dominant language in a community leads children to use the dominance. Although Dina's husband and she speak both languages equally to their children, but the children tend to speak English frequently. Nowadays, Even though Dina still interacts in Bahasa to her son and daughter they respond in English. Sometimes her daughter seems to express Bahasa statement when she is upset such as *Mama jahat*, you are silly. In that situation, her daughter is practicing codeswitching. By contrast, her boy who is twenty years old never express with any Indonesia single word. However, when the family has a chance to visit Indonesia, the boy speaks Bahasa to his friends and other family members. The boy's experiences in shifting the languages called *shifting balance* (Baker, 2011). Adding Bahasa to his host language, enables him to be involved in Indonesian community. Speaking English at that time is useless since Bahasa is the only monolingual language used by the majority of Indonesian people.

The issue of language shift also immerges in both of the interviewees who have shared their experiences. They explain that school is the first place which introduces them to be bilingual. First interviewee began learning English when she was ten years old, while the second one was at age thirteen. Harding and Riley (1986) uses the term "*adolescent bilingualism* to describe people who become bilingual after puberty "(p.42). However, both of interviewees did not practice the language outside school. They spent time approximately four hours per week in English subject. The four hours was the only time they interacted in English. On the other hand, after immigrated to Australia, where English widely spoken, their English becomes stronger. Mostly Australian people use English as a medium to communicate whether in shopping center, public transport, at work and so forth. English was considered as the highest status in society. Thus, the frequent usage of English leads both of interviewees more competence.

### **3. Ability and Balance of Two Languages Dimension**

In relation to competence, there are two basic skills in acquiring a language; those are *receptive skills* and *productive skills* (Harmer, 2007 & Baker, 2011). Receptive skills refer to listening and reading, while productive skills refer to speaking and writing. In productive skills, Some bilingual are able to speak fluently in both languages but they are inadequate knowledge in producing written form. On the other hand, there are bilinguals who are competence in written form but not literate in oral communication. Also, it might be bilinguals who are competence in both spoken and written form. The case

happened to Emily on her first arrival to Australia. She got obstacles in listening to what the people were saying. She said that listening is the most difficult skill in English. Also, she had to look up English-German dictionary to find out the meaning she found in English text. Recently, it has changed as she masters receptive and productive skills. She reads books, articles, magazines and newspaper in English. Also, she is expert in producing essay writing. By contrast, the first interviewee solely seems to be less skill in written form.

In using languages, every bilingual does not have similar opportunity to use mother tongue or second language. Some bilinguals have limited chance in speaking both languages and the others might be use the languages on a regular basis equally. Baker (2011) claims that language choice regularly found in bilinguals. He also asserts that language choice leads bilinguals to use one particular language dominantly. Yip and Mathews (2007) define the term dominance as *proficiency*. Looking to Baker's belief of *language choice* and the definition of *dominance* provided by Yip and Mathews, it seems that proficiency and language choice coincide. People prefer use a language which they are more competence. However, the language choice depends on where they lives and whom they speak with. An example is that there are two people who migrated from Indonesia to Australia. Since have been in Australia, they have not time to meet each other. At that time, both of them are more competence to speak in English. However, when they meet each other Bahasa will be their medium in communication.

In addition, the preference to use whether first or second language, contributes to the imbalance in usage. Harding and Riley (1986) refer the language dominance to *interference*. Using one dominant language causes the other becomes less important. The dominant of one language is extremely influenced by the environment where a bilingual spends time frequently. Also, the dominant language is like reaching high status and value compared to the less popular one and it is really influenced by the context and community. When a bilingual works in a place in which there is only English is used as a medium, she has no other preferences to communicate in another language. In that context, using other languages is useless because there might be no one is being able to speak her language. First interviewee has similar experience when she came to Australia and worked with disabled people. At that time, her proficiency in speaking of English was very poor. Sometimes, she got shortcomings in communication with the people she worked with. However, her job obliged her to communicate with English. Her further explanation convinces that English was the compulsory language in her job place. If she



could not speak English, the disabled people would not get lunch, dinner or drink because she did not understand the language.

Moreover, her current job as an English teacher in an English course, requires her to use only English language. Mostly she spends time with her colleagues and students at the place. She builds the relationship between them by using monolingual language. In that case, the English dominant language appears in her daily life. On the other hand, the second interviewee uses both of her languages equally. She works at a nursing home approximately twelve hours per week. At work place English was dominantly used, whereas at home, Bahasa is the prominent language appears. She speaks Bahasa to her children and husband as well even though they respond in English. Also, she has much opportunity to be with her friends from Indonesia. Every day she establishes good communication through Bahasa by texting messages, visiting them and gathering in Indonesian groups every fortnight. It can be said that the second interviewee has a good balance in using second language and maintaining her first language.

#### **4. Cultural Dimension**

Language and culture is indispensable because language is part of culture. Expert seem to be in similar view on the relationship between language and culture. Harding and Riley (1986) for instance, say that “the way we live, speak, dress, behave and our feelings is culture. Basically one person acts differently from the other. Also, every individual has different attitudes. In Indonesia, it is offensive for students or children to call teachers or older people’s first name. Children have to attach Mr. or Mrs to their names in order to respect them. By contrast, it is quite common to see students in Australia call their first teachers’ names. Thus, Harding and Riley (1986) assert that being amongst different cultures results culture shock.

Baker (2011) emphasizes on the strong relationship between language and culture as culture is transmitted through language. When a language is distinct, it also affects the culture to be disappeared. There is “the last speaker of Kasabe had died taking the language and culture with him” (p. 41). The example which is provided by Harmer convinces that how language lost affect the culture. Fishman (as cited in Baker, 2011), states that there is a relationship between language and culture such as “a language symbolizes culture” (p 59). Speaking English are often referred to the people from advanced country such as America and Britain. Also, English language is frequently linked to colonialism since Great Britain has colonized number of countries such as Malaysia, India, Singapore, Canada, etc (CIA World Factbook, 2023).

Apart from culture, language also expresses identity. Identity can be observed through the people whose language belong to. It can be identified through the way of people dress or religion. When females wear *hijab*, people are able to identify that they are Muslim. Hijab is the identity of Muslim. It is obvious that living in bilingual environment coincides biculturalism. People who live in two communities may display the distinct culture. Dina's experience on her first arrival in Australia has to deal with different culture. In Indonesia, she used to eat using her hand. Yet, Australian people eat using spoon and fork. In one evening she had a dinner in her parents in law's house. She was not able to use knife and fork for cutting lamb. Then, her mother in law realized her obstacle and allowed her to use her hand.

## CONCLUSION

The number of immigrants who have settled in Australia has resulted in the appearance of bilingual and bicultural members in the society. The analysis and discussion of two interviewees above shows that both of them have some similarities and differences in terms of bilingual experiences. Emphasizing on Baker's five dimension theories, it demonstrates two contrast distinctions; the ability and balance of two languages which appear in interviewees. Dina practices two languages equally while Emily speaks only English language in most of her daily life. Meanwhile, they have different ability of using their languages. First interviewee is competence in both receptive skills, speaking and writing whereas the second interviewee is literate in spoken language. Thus, the experiences in which they have shared reveal that they have several stages in the process of becoming bilingual. Also, living in a bilingual environment means understanding new culture as well.

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