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Impact of bilingual education on university toward employability in Indonesia

Setiawan, Luke Philip
Adiputro, David Antonio
Tanujaya, Bryan Carl
Winson
Wijaya, Wilson Ciputra
Poe, Ching-Ming
National Chengchi University, Taiwan

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of bilingual education on the employability rate of university graduates in Indonesia. As globalization increases the demand for multilingual professionals, the ability to communicate in more than one language has become a valuable asset in the job market. This study investigates how bilingual proficiency, particularly in English and Bahasa Indonesia, enhances graduates' employment opportunities and career readiness. By analyzing how bilingual education influences employability, this research contributes to the ongoing conversation about preparing Indonesia's graduates for success in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: bilingual, employability rate, education, university, Indonesia

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1. Introduction and problem statement

Related Work - As bilingual education becomes more prevalent, particularly at the university level, questions arise regarding its impact on graduates' employability. This research aims to investigate the employability rate of graduates from bilingual universities in Indonesia, with a focus on how English proficiency affects their career opportunities and workplace experiences. By examining the perceptions of university graduates, the study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical discourse on the global role of English and the practical realities faced by individuals entering the workforce. Ultimately, this study offers valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and employers.

The Role of English in Indonesia's Globalization: Language as Capital in Education and Society - In recent years, English has become one of the most widely used languages in Indonesia, not only as a compulsory subject in schools but also as a crucial medium for daily communication, business dealings, and social interactions. This rise in English usage aligns with Indonesia's response to globalization and the industrial revolution 4.0, where English proficiency is increasingly seen as a key driver of competitiveness in the global economy. The Indonesian government's focus on enhancing the nation's global standing has made English fluency an essential skill, particularly in education and the professional workforce. Educational institutions across the country have responded to this demand by adopting international curricula and implementing bilingual programs, with English often used as the primary language of instruction. Many schools and universities now aim to prepare students for international communication and global job markets. This shift is reflected in Indonesia's ranking of 39th out of 80 countries in the 2017 English Proficiency Index (EPI) conducted by EF, highlighting both the progress and challenges in improving national language skills (Fudiyartanto, 2024). Globalisation and neoliberalism have profoundly reshaped the landscape of higher education worldwide, including in Indonesia. These global forces, manifesting through a globalised knowledge economy and an increasingly corporatised university sector, continue to influence how English is taught and perceived in Indonesian higher education – a field referred to here as English Studies. Within this framework, English should be understood not merely as a foreign language, but as a form of linguistic capital — a crucial component of cultural capital. This capital can be accrued through education and later transformed into symbolic recognition, social mobility, or access to prestigious opportunities both locally and globally.

Challenges and Perceptions of English Medium Instruction in Indonesian Education - In Indonesia, English is officially designated as a foreign language (EFL) and is primarily taught in secondary schools. However, outside of formal education, students predominantly use Indonesian or regional vernaculars for daily communication, limiting their exposure to English. The implementation of the 2013 national curriculum has further exacerbated this limitation by allocating only two lesson hours per week (2 x 45 minutes) for English instruction. This insufficient instructional time hinders students' opportunities to gain meaningful proficiency in English, leading to a prioritisation of curriculum coverage over comprehension in many classrooms. Consequently, English teachers are often compelled to sacrifice depth of understanding for breadth of material, with some turning to technology as a coping mechanism to address the lack of instructional time (Agustina, 2017). Perceptions of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Indonesian higher education in response to the government's plan to make English interaction compulsory among university students. Using a mixed-methods approach with a focus on qualitative data, the study includes participants from public and private universities of both secular and religious orientations. It examines three key themes: perceptions of EMI, the role of English in shaping national identity, and attitudes toward English as a language associated with the West. Findings indicate that perceptions of EMI are complex and extend beyond language, encompassing cultural and ideological concerns within the academic context (Dewi, 2017).

English, Employability, and the Indonesian Graduate: Insights from the Classroom to the Workplace - In an increasingly globalized economy, the ability to communicate in English is no longer a luxury; it's a necessity, especially for young professionals entering Indonesia's competitive job market. While economic growth continues across the country, many graduates still struggle to find employment that matches their qualifications. Recent research, especially a 2024 qualitative study involving 30 graduates from an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) university in Jakarta, reveals just how critical English proficiency has become not only for securing a job but also for thriving in the workplace.

Lessons from 30 Graduates: English as a Professional Advantage - In a 2024 study by Hidayat, 30 graduates reflected on their educational experiences and how English shaped their careers. These individuals studied at an EMI university in Jakarta, where nearly all instruction was delivered in English. What they shared was powerful and consistent: English had not only helped them land jobs, but it also gave them the skills and confidence to succeed once hired (Hidayat, 2024). Graduates spoke about feeling prepared to engage in professional environments where English was a working language, whether it was writing reports, leading meetings, or communicating with international clients. One participant noted, "I didn't just learn English, I learned how to work in English," emphasizing that fluency was deeply tied to job effectiveness, not just academic performance. This study lines up with findings from Santoso, Hamied, and Muslim (2024), who explored Indonesian university students' attitudes toward EMI. While many students welcomed EMI for its career benefits, they also stressed the importance of academic language support, indicating that English alone isn't enough unless it's supported by clear, structured instruction. The 30-graduate case study shows what happens when EMI is implemented well: students leave not just bilingual, but professionally capable.

What the Workplace Is Demanding - Outside the university, the importance of English is just as pronounced. A 2022 survey of Indonesian polytechnic alumni showed that more than 80% considered English essential for job applications and upward mobility in the workplace. Many respondents described job interviews conducted partially or fully in English, and noted that fluency was often linked to faster promotions and higher salaries. In the customer service sector, a 2024 study focused on railway employees found that English communication, especially speaking and listening, is crucial for professionalism and customer interaction. Workers wanted vocational training to improve these skills, suggesting that employers and training institutions alike need to step up their language support efforts. These findings are echoed by Muniroh et al. (2022), who explored the management of bilingual schools in Indonesia. They emphasized that successful bilingual education depends not only on language instruction but also on leadership, infrastructure, and long-term support. Whether in schools or on the job, structured English learning must be backed by strong systems.

University-Level Gaps and Opportunities - Despite the promising cases, implementing EMI in Indonesian universities is far from easy. Abduh (2018) found that lecturers often struggle with delivering content in English due to limited training, institutional support, or personal language confidence. Even when universities launch EMI programs, success depends on whether instructors are prepared and students are supported. Still, there are strong signs that EMI is worth the investment. Universities that offer more English-taught programs like Universitas Indonesia (UI) and Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB), also tend to rank higher on employability indexes such as QS. A moderate correlation has been found between the number of EMI programs a university offers and its graduate employability ranking ($\rho = 0.567$), showing that these programs may help prepare students for the demands of international and modern Indonesian workplaces.

Bringing It All Together - The story across all these studies is consistent: English proficiency plays a major role in employability. But more importantly, it's not just about passing a test or learning vocabulary. What matters most is functional fluency, the ability to communicate confidently and professionally in real-world settings. From Hidayat's 30 EMI graduates to railway employees and polytechnic alumni, the message is clear: English unlocks opportunity. It helps young Indonesians not just get jobs, but grow in them. And it positions Indonesia's workforce to compete and collaborate internationally.

Policy and Practice: What Needs to Happen Next - Given the evidence, here are some steps policymakers and educators should consider:

- Expand EMI Programs: More Indonesian universities, especially those outside the top tier, should pilot and scale EMI courses, with training and resources for instructors.
- Boost English in Vocational Training: Sectors like hospitality, transportation, and retail need English-for-specific-purposes training that matches daily job demands.
- Invest in Support Systems: Academic language support, mentorship, and faculty development are essential for making EMI effective, as emphasized by Santoso et al. (2024).
- Listen to Graduates: Use student and alumni feedback, like the testimonials from Hidayat' s study, to shape programs that meet real-world needs.

English is not a silver bullet, but it's undeniably a career catalyst. The stories of those 30 graduates show what happens when language education is relevant, immersive, and connected to real goals. For Indonesia to maximize its potential in the global economy, investing in meaningful English instruction from vocational centers to EMI universities may be one of the smartest, most inclusive moves it can make.

2. Global studies overview

2.1 Bilingual Education and Employability: A Global Comparative Review

As globalization continues to shape labor market expectations, English language proficiency has emerged as a key determinant of graduate employability in non-native English-speaking countries. Regions such as Afghanistan, Malaysia, and the Middle East provide critical insights into how English-medium instruction (EMI) and bilingual education systems contribute to career readiness and labor mobility. This section synthesizes findings from recent studies to highlight global trends in bilingualism and employability.

Afghanistan: English as a Career Catalyst - A 2024 study conducted by scholars at Takhar University examined how English proficiency influences job outcomes among Afghan graduates (Takhar University, 2024). The research found that graduates with strong English communication skills experienced significantly higher employment rates, better salaries, and quicker promotions. In Afghanistan's post-conflict job market, where international NGOs and multinational organizations are major employers, English serves both practical and symbolic roles—signaling modern competencies and facilitating integration into international networks. Employers emphasized the importance of confidence, fluency, and the ability to articulate complex ideas in English, not merely grammatical accuracy. The study concluded that English proficiency was among the top three skills valued by employers, placing it above even technical expertise in some sectors.

Malaysia: EMI's Practical Impact on Graduate Outcomes - A 2018 case study published by Routledge explored how a public Malaysian university implemented EMI and how it influenced student employability (Public University in Malaysia, 2018). The study showed that while many students initially faced language barriers, most later acknowledged that EMI played a vital role in preparing them for interviews, cross-border collaboration, and professional communication. Employers in sectors such as IT, education, and logistics confirmed a hiring bias toward EMI graduates. Importantly, the study emphasized that EMI worked best when combined with practical experiences such as internships, case-based learning, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) modules. In other words, EMI's value lies not just in linguistic skill, but in its embeddedness in career-aligned education.

Middle East: English as a Baseline for Competitiveness - In the MENA region, English has become a baseline requirement for many professional fields. A detailed British Council study by a University of Graz

researcher, Dr. Elizabeth J. Erling, mapped how English proficiency impacts graduate employability across Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco (University of Graz / British Council, 2020). Employers overwhelmingly preferred candidates from EMI institutions or those with a strong command of workplace English. The study emphasized that English not only facilitates job entry but also supports long-term career progression in finance, hospitality, and engineering sectors. Moreover, multilingual graduates were more likely to gain access to international job postings, client-facing roles, and leadership training. Erling's findings strongly reinforce the idea that English functions as a "gateway language" in multilingual labor environments.

2.2 Global Citizenship & Intercultural Competence

Beyond employment metrics, bilingual education plays a crucial role in developing intercultural communication, and increasingly valued skill in globally connected economies. A 2024 study by scholars examined how multilingual education contributes to global citizenship and workforce inclusion. The researchers argued that language is more than a functional skill—it's a vehicle for empathy, intercultural understanding, and global readiness. Their study found that students exposed to multilingual environments were more adaptable, collaborative, and better prepared to navigate culturally diverse workplaces. These qualities are highly sought after by employers, especially in multinational companies and NGOs. This reinforces the idea that EMI and bilingual education have intrinsic value beyond employability; they also shape globally competent citizens. For countries like Indonesia, where diversity is a national characteristic, this perspective may be especially relevant as the government considers language education reform.

2.3 Global Insights for Indonesian Policy

Taken together, these global cases show that EMI and bilingual education enhance not only direct employability outcomes but also broader workforce competencies such as communication, intercultural agility, and professional confidence. While contextual differences exist, the strategic use of English education appears to correlate strongly with labor market success. Indonesia can draw from these models to shape its own approach, especially as Section 2B will explore how such dynamics are unfolding domestically.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative statistical analysis with qualitative synthesis to investigate the impact of English-taught (bilingual) programs on graduate employability in Indonesia. The goal is to explore whether universities that offer more English-Medium Instruction (EMI) programs are more likely to be recognized in global employability rankings and whether graduates from such programs perform better in the job market.

Research Design - The study is structured around two core components: (1) Quantitative Analysis – examining the statistical correlation between the number of EMI programs offered and QS employability rankings. (2) Qualitative Analysis – integrating findings from previous studies and surveys on English proficiency and graduate outcomes.

Data Sources and Sample - The research draws on data from the top 10 Indonesian universities listed by UniRank, cross-referenced with the QS Graduate Employability Rankings 2022. Data on EMI program offerings were collected from official university websites and fact sheets.

University	EMI Programs	QS Employability Listed
Universitas Brawijaya (UB)	174.0	Yes
Universitas Indonesia (UI)	167.0	Yes
Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB)	130.0	Yes
Universitas Airlangga (UNAIR)	74.0	Yes
Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM)	51.0	Yes
Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember (ITS)	42.0	Yes

Universitas Diponegoro (UNDIP)	38.0	Yes
IPB University	14.0	No
Universitas Hasanuddin (UNHAS)	11.0	No
BINUS University	11.0	Yes
Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS)	nan	No

Quantitative Analysis - To determine the relationship between the number of English-taught programs and employability rankings, the study employed Spearman's rank-order correlation. The analysis yielded a Spearman's ρ value of 0.567 and a p-value of 0.087, suggesting a moderate positive correlation between EMI programs and employability recognition. While not statistically significant, this trend remains suggestive in the context of higher education research.

Qualitative Data and Integration - Additional context is provided by studies conducted between 2022 and 2024, which include findings from Indonesian graduates, vocational employees, and EMI university alumni. These studies highlight the real-world impact of English proficiency on career advancement.

Limitations - Limitations include incomplete data for certain universities, reliance on EMI program counts as proxies for English exposure, a cross-sectional research design, and the absence of direct employer input. Despite these, the combined methodology offers a balanced analysis of the link between bilingual education and employability. The mixed-methods approach validates the importance of English-taught programs in Indonesian higher education. The data suggests that EMI contributes positively to global recognition and employability, reinforcing the need for expanded bilingual education initiatives.

4. Result and analysis

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

A research analysis regarding graduate employability data in Indonesia reveals a **strong** correlation between bilingual education programs and improved employment outcomes. Based on data, 8 out of 11 universities that offer EMI classes are ranked among the top 8 in Indonesia's graduate employment ratings. This highlights a connection between EMI and students' readiness for the job market. These universities equip students with English ability that opens opportunities for the students, qualities that align with employer demands, especially in international or corporate settings. However, **BINUS University** stands out as an outlier in this research. Even having only 11 EMI course programs, it didn't mean that BINUS students' abilities couldn't be compared with another campus in Indonesia. BINUS still consistently produces valuable graduate students to enter the workforce. This indicates that while bilingual instruction may be a big factor for employment, other elements such as campus culture, campus curriculum, and networks also play crucial roles in preparing graduates for the workforce.

This research finding aligns with trends observed in international research. Kirkpatrick (2012) emphasizes that EMI programs across Southeast Asia are often associated with higher employability due to the rising importance of English in regional and global labor markets. Similarly, Hamid (2013) also argues that EMI improves not only language skills but also students' opportunities for global knowledge and academic resources, which are advantageous in competitive job sectors. In the Indonesian context, a British Council (2018) report notes that employers consistently rate English proficiency as a key hiring criterion, particularly in sectors such as finance, technology, and international business. However, the case of BINUS University demonstrates that EMI alone may not fully determine graduate success; institutional focus on practical skills, innovation, and employer engagement can also be highly influential. This suggests that while bilingual education enhances employability, it operates most effectively when combined with a broader strategy of career-oriented education.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

In the qualitative aspect, we found out that many students who graduate from the EMI program report that they are confident in using English for daily communication aspects or also in professional settings (interviews, Presentations, etc). Meanwhile, from the employers' perspectives, employers often see students who graduate from EMI programs as more “work-ready”, and even some employers specifically seek out candidates from universities with EMI instruction. Despite Bahasa Indonesia still becoming the main language in Indonesia, some multinational companies like accounting firms start to conduct their interviews for new candidates using English, indicating that companies already assume that English is a necessary skill.

Some research findings also found that having sufficient English can enhance their career prospects. Especially in metropolitan cities such as Jakarta, for example, English is considered to be a core skill to secure highly competitive jobs. It also becomes a necessity for promotion in international enterprises that normally offer higher salaries than local ones.

4.3 Contrast Finding

While both qualitative and quantitative aspects strongly showed that EMI programs had a big impact on employment, the statistical association observed through Spearman's correlation is only moderate. This can happen because of a lot of factors, but the main factor is probably that the main language in the corporate field is still Bahasa Indonesia. Some of the big or multinational companies in Indonesia already conduct their interviews using English; however, in daily use (meetings, presentations), almost all employees still use Bahasa Indonesia. Unlike the Philippines, where they have their own language (Tagalog), in the education and corporate fields, they use English to communicate daily (presentations, meetings). This contrast between the strong qualitative findings and the moderate statistical correlation suggests that while EMI programs are perceived to enhance employability, their measurable impact may be influenced by contextual factors like language use in the workplace. Therefore, the effectiveness of EMI might not be fully captured through statistical analysis alone in environments where English is not the dominant professional language.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study confirms that English Medium Instruction (EMI) contributes positively to graduate employability in Indonesia, although its impact is part of a wider network of contributing factors. The moderate correlation identified through quantitative analysis (Spearman’s $\rho = 0.567$) supports the idea that EMI is linked with better recognition in global employability rankings. However, findings from interviews and previous studies show even more compelling evidence that graduates of EMI programs often feel better equipped to enter professional environments, particularly those involving international communication or multinational companies.

In urban centers like Jakarta, where job competition is high and international firms are more active, English proficiency increasingly serves as a differentiating factor for applicants. Graduates from EMI backgrounds are frequently perceived by employers as more prepared for interviews, team-based communication, and leadership development. Some companies even conduct recruitment processes in English, indicating a shift toward higher expectations for language competence. However, institutional context still matters. BINUS University, despite offering a smaller number of EMI programs compared to other top-ranked institutions, remains highly regarded for producing work-ready graduates. This reflects the importance of institutional approaches such as updated curricula, hands-on learning opportunities, and career services. EMI may enhance employability, but its effectiveness is amplified when integrated with broader academic and industry-focused strategies.

This conclusion is consistent with international perspectives. Kirkpatrick (2012) noted that in Southeast Asia,

EMI supports global competitiveness not just through language acquisition but by providing access to global academic resources. Hamid (2013) similarly emphasized that EMI should be viewed as part of a larger framework for internationalization, offering both symbolic and practical value for students navigating increasingly global job markets.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on these findings, several policy directions are proposed to enhance the impact of EMI across Indonesian higher education. These are especially relevant not only for institutions already implementing EMI programs but also for universities still developing their bilingual education infrastructure.

Develop and Implement National EMI Guidelines - A standardized national framework for EMI can help align objectives, quality assurance, and evaluation practices across institutions. These guidelines should include benchmarks for English proficiency, lecturer readiness, content delivery methods, and student support systems. Uniform standards will ensure EMI programs are not only widespread but also effective across diverse educational settings (Sudana et al., 2023).

Broaden EMI Investment and Support Structures - While top-tier universities already benefit from EMI adoption, institutions outside major cities often lack sufficient resources. Targeted funding—particularly for faculty development, instructional materials, and blended learning technologies—can reduce the performance gap and make EMI more accessible nationwide. Simbolon (2021) emphasized that lecturer preparedness is just as critical as student proficiency in ensuring successful EMI delivery.

Enhance University Collaboration with Industry Sectors - Embedding EMI into work-based learning is essential for it to be more than a linguistic exercise. Universities should actively collaborate with industry to co-develop curriculum, offer practical internships, and ensure graduates are equipped with both language fluency and job-specific competencies. In sectors like IT, logistics, and international business, EMI has been shown to directly improve job placement outcomes (Talaue & Kim, 2020).

Establish On-Campus EMI Resource Centers - To sustain student and faculty engagement with EMI, universities should create dedicated support centers. These centers can offer workshops, peer tutoring, professional writing labs, and speaking clinics, especially for students who may struggle with academic English. In addition, faculty can use these hubs to exchange EMI teaching strategies and access ongoing training (Setiawan, 2022). Such institutional support plays a major role in improving the depth and reach of EMI impact beyond just the classroom.

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