

Managing Classroom Interaction Through Pragmatic Strategies in Indonesian Bilingual Primary Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how primary school teachers employ pragmatic strategies to manage classroom interaction in bilingual educational settings. Drawing on pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive design involving classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with three bilingual primary school teachers in Indonesia. Approximately 420 minutes of classroom interaction were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a pragmatic coding framework focusing on code-switching, politeness strategies, and register variation. The findings reveal that these strategies function as integrated interactional resources rather than isolated linguistic choices: code-switching supports instructional clarity and interactional flow, politeness strategies mitigate face-threatening acts during feedback and classroom management, and flexible register shifts balance pedagogical authority with relational closeness. The study contributes to classroom discourse research by demonstrating how pragmatic strategies operate collectively to manage interaction in bilingual primary classrooms and underscores the importance of developing teachers' pragmatic competence in linguistically diverse educational contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental medium through which teaching and learning take place, particularly in primary education where interaction between teachers and students plays a central role in shaping learning experiences. Classroom interaction not only facilitates the transmission of knowledge but also supports students' social and emotional development. For young learners, the ways teachers use language significantly influence participation, engagement, and understanding during classroom activities.

In bilingual primary education, classroom interaction becomes more complex due to the presence of more than one language in daily instructional practices. Students may draw on their home or local languages while also being exposed to the national language and English as part of formal schooling. This linguistic diversity creates both opportunities and challenges, as teachers must ensure that instructional communication remains accessible while maintaining classroom order and learning objectives.

In the Indonesian primary school context, bilingual practices are commonly observed in classroom interaction. Teachers often alternate between languages to explain concepts, give instructions, or respond to students' questions. Such practices reflect teachers' efforts to bridge students' linguistic resources with curricular demands. However, without careful management, bilingual interaction may also lead to misunderstandings or reduced student participation, highlighting the need for strategic language use (Berutu, 2023).

From a pragmatic perspective, classroom interaction involves more than the literal meanings of utterances. Pragmatics focuses on how language is used in context to achieve communicative purposes while maintaining social relationships (Yule, 1996). In classroom discourse, teachers rely on pragmatic strategies to manage authority, guide interaction, and create a supportive learning environment.

Teachers' pragmatic strategies may include code-switching, the use of politeness strategies, indirect directives, and shifts between formal and informal language registers. These strategies enable teachers to clarify meaning, mitigate face-threatening acts, and encourage students' participation during interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Walsh, 2011). Through such strategic language use, teachers can balance instructional goals with students' affective needs.

The roles of teachers and educational practices in effective classroom interaction and student engagement (We'u & Pali, 2024; Risianto et al., 2024). Recent research highlights that teacher-student dialogic opportunities can significantly shape classroom interaction patterns in language classrooms (Sybing, 2021). Moreover, teachers' pragmatic awareness in multilingual settings affects how they navigate communicative challenges and instructional decisions (Deniz, 2025).

Recent research has increasingly emphasized the importance of teachers' interactional and pragmatic competence in shaping effective classroom communication, particularly in multilingual and bilingual educational settings. Studies in classroom discourse and applied pragmatics demonstrate that teachers' strategic use of language influences student engagement, participation, and the overall management of classroom interaction (Walsh, 201, Taguchi, 2015). Despite this growing body of research, empirical studies have predominantly focused on secondary and tertiary educational contexts, where learners' linguistic and cognitive capacities differ substantially from those of young learners in primary schools. Consequently, bilingual primary classrooms remain comparatively underexplored in pragmatics research. In addition, existing studies often examine pragmatic strategies such as code switching or politeness in isolation, rather than investigating how multiple pragmatic resources function collectively in managing classroom interaction (Seedhouse, 2004, García & Wei, 2014). Research that specifically addresses bilingual primary education in the Indonesian context is particularly limited, even though bilingual instructional practices are widely implemented. This gap is significant because primary school teachers serve as central linguistic models, and the interactional patterns established at this stage play a formative role in shaping students' long term communicative development and classroom participation norms (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Walsh, 2006).

Given the importance of interaction in early educational settings, there is a need to investigate how teachers employ pragmatic strategies to manage classroom interaction in bilingual primary education. Understanding these strategies is essential, as primary school teachers serve as key linguistic models for young learners. Therefore, this study aims to examine the pragmatic strategies used by teachers to manage classroom interaction in bilingual primary education.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate teachers' pragmatic strategies for managing classroom interaction in bilingual primary education. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study aimed to explore naturally occurring classroom interaction and to interpret teachers' language use within its interactional and contextual settings.

The study was conducted in a bilingual primary school where more than one language was used during classroom instruction. The participants were three primary school teachers ($n = 3$) teaching Grades 4–6, selected through purposive sampling based on their frequent use of bilingual instructional practices. All participants had more than two years of teaching experience. To ensure ethical considerations, the identities of the participants and the institution were anonymized.

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations were carried out across six instructional sessions (two sessions per teacher), each lasting approximately 70 minutes, yielding around 420 minutes of audio-recorded classroom interaction, supported by field notes. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to obtain teachers' perspectives on their language use and the reasons underlying their pragmatic choices during classroom interaction.

The data were analyzed qualitatively using a pragmatic and sociolinguistic framework. Classroom interaction data were transcribed and examined to identify teachers' pragmatic strategies, including code-switching, politeness strategies, and shifts between formal and informal language registers. The identified strategies were then categorized based on their interactional functions in managing classroom interaction. Interview data were used to support and triangulate the findings from classroom

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings further reveal that teachers demonstrated flexibility in shifting between formal and informal language registers during classroom interaction. Register variation was observed across different stages of classroom activities, indicating that teachers adjusted their language use according to the interactional context and instructional purpose.

Formal language registers were predominantly used during lesson explanation, task instruction, and content-focused interaction. In these situations, teachers employed structured and instructional language to ensure clarity and maintain classroom control. In contrast, informal language registers emerged during casual interaction, humor, and rapport-building moments, particularly when teachers aimed to engage students or create a relaxed classroom atmosphere.

Shifts between formal and informal registers often occurred within the same lesson. Teachers commonly used formal language to explain academic content and then switched to informal expressions to regain students' attention or reduce classroom tension. This pattern suggests that register variation played a role in managing classroom dynamics by allowing teachers to balance authority with approachability. The findings indicate that flexible register use supported smooth classroom interaction and sustained student engagement.

Table 4. Observed Register Variation in Classroom Interaction

Interaction Type	Teacher's Utterance (Excerpt)	Register	Observed Function
Explaining lesson	"Today we will learn about fractions."	Formal	Delivering content
Encouraging participation	"Okay, let's try this together."	Informal	Engagement
Classroom control	"Please pay attention to the board."	Formal	Managing interaction

The table above illustrates teachers' use of register variation across different classroom interaction types. During lesson explanation, teachers tended to employ a more formal register, as reflected in complete sentence structures and instructional tone, such as "Today we will learn about fractions." This formal register functioned to clearly introduce lesson content and establish an instructional focus at the beginning of activities.

In moments aimed at encouraging student participation, teachers shifted to a more informal register. Utterances such as "Okay, let's try this together" were used to reduce interactional distance and invite students to engage actively in classroom tasks. The informal tone supported a more collaborative atmosphere and lowered students' hesitation to respond.

For classroom control purposes, teachers reverted to a formal register, as seen in directives like "Please pay attention to the board." This register shift signaled authority and helped manage students' attention without the need for explicit reprimands. Overall, these patterns indicate that teachers strategically adjusted their register in response to classroom interactional demands to support content delivery, participation, and classroom management.

Formal registers were primarily associated with lesson explanation and task instruction. In these moments, teachers used structured and instructional language to ensure clarity and maintain control of classroom activities. Conversely, informal registers were more frequently used during moments of casual interaction, humor, or rapport-building, particularly when teachers aimed to re-engage students.

The findings also reveal that shifts between registers often occurred within the same instructional sequence. Teachers moved from formal to informal language to ease classroom tension or regain students' attention, and then returned to a more formal register to continue instruction. This pattern suggests that register variation supported smooth classroom interaction and allowed teachers to balance instructional authority with approachability.

This study set out to examine the pragmatic strategies employed by teachers to manage classroom interaction in bilingual primary education. Rather than merely identifying the presence of code-switching, politeness strategies, and register shifts, the discussion below interprets why these strategies are dominant, how they function interactionally, and what pedagogical implications they carry within the specific context of bilingual primary classrooms.

The frequent use of code-switching observed in the findings suggests that language alternation plays a central role in facilitating comprehension in bilingual classrooms. Teachers' shifts between languages were often responsive to students' needs, particularly when students showed hesitation or difficulty understanding instructional content. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that code-switching can function as a pedagogical and interactional tool rather than a sign of linguistic deficiency (García & Wei, 2014; Walsh, 2011). In this context, code-switching supported the continuity of interaction and helped maintain instructional flow.

Politeness strategies were also found to be integral to teachers' classroom interaction. Teachers consistently employed mitigated feedback, indirect corrections, and polite requests when addressing students' responses or managing classroom behavior. Such strategies appeared to reduce the potential face-threatening nature of correction and control, thereby sustaining a supportive classroom atmosphere. This finding is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion that politeness strategies help manage interpersonal relations and maintain social harmony in communicative interaction.

The findings further indicate that politeness strategies contributed to students' willingness to participate in classroom interaction. When teachers used encouraging and polite forms, students appeared more comfortable responding and engaging in activities. This supports earlier studies suggesting that teachers'

pragmatic competence influences students' affective engagement and participation, particularly in primary education where learners are still developing confidence in using language (Walsh, 2011).

In addition to code-switching and politeness strategies, teachers demonstrated flexibility in shifting between formal and informal language registers. Formal registers were primarily associated with instructional delivery and classroom control, while informal registers were used to build rapport and ease interactional tension. This flexible register use allowed teachers to balance authority with approachability, which is crucial in managing young learners' attention and behavior in the classroom.

The ability to shift registers within a single lesson highlights teachers' sensitivity to classroom dynamics and interactional demands. Rather than adhering rigidly to one language style, teachers adjusted their language use in response to students' reactions and engagement levels. This finding supports the view that educational contexts suggest that pragmatic teaching barriers and classroom interaction strategies are shaped by school and teacher practices (Berutu & Daulay, 2023; Esmati, 2024).

These findings align with broader evidence that bilingual classroom spaces involve strategic language choices such as translanguaging and code-switching to mediate comprehension and engagement (Deniz & Kayır, 2025; System editorial, 2024) and align with recent discussions on flexible educational practices, which emphasize the importance of adaptive instructional strategies in responding to classroom dynamics and learners' needs (We'u & Pali, 2024).

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers' pragmatic strategies play a significant role in managing classroom interaction in bilingual primary education. These strategies enable teachers to address linguistic diversity while maintaining effective instructional communication and positive classroom relationships. The study underscores the importance of developing teachers' pragmatic awareness and competence, particularly in bilingual educational contexts where interactional challenges are more complex.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored teachers' pragmatic strategies for managing classroom interaction in bilingual primary education. The findings reveal that teachers employed a range of pragmatic strategies, including code-switching, politeness strategies, and flexible shifts between formal and informal language registers. These strategies functioned as important interactional resources that supported instructional clarity, classroom management, and student engagement in a linguistically diverse classroom context. The study highlights that teachers' language choices were not random but responsive to classroom dynamics and students' needs. Through strategic code-switching, teachers facilitated comprehension and maintained interactional flow. Politeness strategies helped sustain positive teacher-student relationships, while flexible register use allowed teachers to balance instructional authority with relational closeness. Together, these pragmatic strategies contributed to effective and supportive classroom interaction. These findings suggest that teachers' pragmatic competence plays a crucial role in bilingual primary education. Greater awareness of pragmatic strategies may support teachers in managing classroom interaction more effectively and inclusively. Future research may further explore pragmatic strategies across different educational levels or institutional contexts to deepen understanding of teacher-student interaction in bilingual settings.

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