

**TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: A CASE STUDY OF TADIKA MUJAHEDDEEN KINDERGARTEN, SOUTHERN THAILAND**

*Munawarrah<sup>1</sup>, Faizatul Husna<sup>2</sup>, Rena Juliana<sup>3</sup>, Chantana Muhammad<sup>4</sup>*

*STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh, Indonesia<sup>1,2,3</sup>*

*Tadika Darul Mujaheedin Padang Besar, Thailand<sup>4</sup>*

*warah4353@gmail.com, faizatulhusna@staindirundeng.ac.id., renajuliana@staindirundeng.ac.id, chantanamuhammad02@gmail.com*

Submitted: 2026-03-13

Accepted: 2026-04-23

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**Abstract:** Southern Thailand has a rich plurilingual background in the context of early childhood education. At home, children generally speak Patani Malay, while Thai serves as the national language and medium of instruction, Arabic is used in religious activities, and English is taught as a foreign language. This study aims to explore educators' perspectives on plurilingual education at Tadika Mujaheddeen, as well as to identify various challenges and opportunities that arise in daily learning practices. The research design employed was descriptive qualitative, involving three educators and one parent as participants, who were selected through purposive sampling. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to examine language use, learning approaches, and their impact on child development. Research findings show that Thai serves as the primary language in the learning process, whereas Patani Malay, English, and Arabic are introduced contextually through child-centered activities such as singing, storytelling, and playing. Educators report challenges related to the linguistic diversity of learners and their limited proficiency in certain languages. Nevertheless, adaptive strategies and cooperation with parents have proven effective in supporting plurilingual learning. Plurilingual education is seen as capable of increasing children's confidence, communication skills, and positive attitudes toward language learning. Overall, this study reveals how plurilingual practices are naturally integrated into daily classroom interactions in Islamic-based early childhood education settings in Southern Thailand.

**Keywords:** Multilingual Education, Early Childhood, Teacher's Perspectives, Language Challenge and Opportunities, Southern Thailand

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Southern Thailand is known for its complex linguistic and cultural diversity, particularly in the border provinces, which are predominantly inhabited by Muslim Malay communities. In this environment, children grow up in a multilingual setting that exposes them to various languages from a young age. Patani Malay serves as the primary language in family and community interactions, while Thai functions as the official state language and the main language in formal education. Arabic is introduced through religious instruction, while English is taught as a foreign language to support global communication and social mobility (Burarungrot & Premsrirat, 2021; Hemchayart, 2024)

From a theoretical perspective, early childhood is considered a crucial phase in the language acquisition process, during which children demonstrate high cognitive plasticity, enabling them to acquire more than one language simultaneously (Bialystok, 2024).

Multilingual exposure during this period supports the development of metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, and social adaptability.

Empirical research findings indicate that children in multilingual environments typically exhibit superior problem-solving skills and cognitive control compared to monolingual children (Bialystok, 2024). Other studies also emphasize that classroom language management strategies, such as the one teacher–one language (OTOL) approach, can help children distinguish between language systems in a more structured manner (Andari et al., 2024).

However, in the context of Southern Thailand, several studies have revealed challenges in implementing multilingual education. Children often begin formal education with limited proficiency in Thai because it is not the dominant language at home. This can potentially lead to comprehension gaps, low engagement in learning, and obstacles in the development of early literacy (Premrirat, S., Person, 2018)

As noted, mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is considered an effective solution to address this gap. Theoretically, Cummins (2017) asserts that the mother tongue is an essential foundation for the development of additional languages. Empirical findings support this by showing that the use of the mother tongue in teaching can improve conceptual understanding, student participation, and overall learning achievement (Hult, 2023).

Nevertheless, studies on multilingual education in Southern Thailand have predominantly adopted a macro-level approach focusing on language policies and curricula (Etd & Chotchaipong, 2019; Burarungrot & Premrirat, 2021). These studies provide a general overview of the implementation of multilingual education but do not sufficiently explore language use practices in daily classroom interactions, particularly at the early childhood education level.

Furthermore, some studies view language as a separate and static system, whereas in the classroom setting, language use is dynamic and context-dependent. Teachers and students spontaneously switch and mix languages as a strategy for communication and learning (Kartika-Ningsih & Rose, 2018). However, empirical research specifically documenting this practice—particularly within the context of an Islamic-based early childhood education institution involving four languages Thai, Patani Malay, Arabic, and English remains very limited.

In light of this context, this study is based on two main research questions: (1) how do teachers at Tadika Mujahedeen Kindergarten implement multilingual education through the use of Thai, English, Arabic, and Patani Malay in daily classroom activities? and (2) what challenges and opportunities do teachers perceive in implementing multilingual education in early childhood education?

The limitations of previous studies indicate a research gap, particularly regarding the exploration of multilingual practices at the micro level in the classroom and an understanding of the teacher's role as a pedagogical decision-maker within complex multilingual contexts.

Based on this, this study offers a new contribution by focusing the analysis on actual multilingual practices at the classroom level and teachers' perspectives on managing linguistic complexity contextually within early childhood education settings.

## **METHOD**

This study applies a descriptive qualitative design with the aim of investigating and gaining an in-depth understanding of the perspectives, experiences, and views of teachers in implementing multilingual education at Tadika Mujahedeen, Southern Thailand. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore social phenomena in their original context and interpret the meanings formed by participants based on their actual experiences, rather than through quantitative measurements (Johnson, 2019). A descriptive qualitative design is considered suitable for educational research that emphasizes detailed and contextual descriptions of learning practices, particularly in understanding how multilingual education is implemented in daily learning activities in early childhood education classrooms (A.Maolani, 2010).

Participants in this study included three teachers teaching at Tadika Mujahedeen and one parent who was involved as an additional informant. The teachers were selected using purposive sampling, as they were directly involved in implementing multilingual learning and had relevant experience in managing the use of Thai, English, Arabic, and Patani Malay in classroom activities. Purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who are considered to have rich and in-depth information related to the phenomenon being studied (Etikan, 2016). The involvement of a parent as an additional informant aimed to obtain a supporting perspective on how multilingual education practices at school are perceived and how they influence children's learning experiences and language use at home.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were used to explore in depth how teachers implement multilingual education in learning activities, how they manage the use of different languages in the classroom, and the challenges and opportunities they encounter in implementing multilingual education in early childhood education. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide flexibility for researchers to develop questions during the interview process, while also giving participants space to express their views and experiences more broadly and deeply. The validity and reliability of the data were maintained through a consistent data recording process, careful

transcription of interviews, and systematic data organization during the research. These steps were taken to ensure that the data obtained accurately reflected the perspectives and experiences of participants regarding the implementation of multilingual education at Tadika Mujahedeen (Sugiyono, 2016).

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively by following systematic and repetitive steps. Interview data was transcribed and read in its entirety to gain an initial understanding. Next, the data was reduced by identifying and grouping information relevant to the research objectives and questions. The reduced data was then presented in the form of descriptive narratives to reveal the main themes and patterns that emerged regarding the implementation of multilingual education at Tadika Mujahedeen. The final stage of the analysis was carried out by drawing interpretive conclusions to explain how multilingual education was implemented by teachers and the challenges and opportunities they faced. This analysis procedure is in line with the qualitative data analysis framework proposed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, (2023), which emphasizes a systematic, transparent, and reflective analysis process.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

The Finding show based on interviews with three educators revealed that the implementation of multilingual education at Tadika Mujahedeen has been carried out in a structured and integrated manner within daily learning activities. Teachers utilize various languages simultaneously: Thai as the primary language of instruction, Malay to support comprehension, English to introduce basic vocabulary, and Arabic for religious activities. Instructions are typically repeated in two to three languages to help students grasp the lesson material.

Thai is maintained as the primary language because it is the one student are most proficient in, with adjustments made according to each individual's needs. Malay is used when students encounter difficulties, while English is introduced gradually through engaging activities such as songs, games, and storytelling. This approach is natural and does not focus on rote memorization.

The challenges encountered include the diversity of students' linguistic backgrounds and teachers' limited proficiency in certain languages, particularly Malay. However, these challenges were addressed through the use of simple vocabulary, body language, and cross-linguistic translation techniques. In fact, this linguistic diversity was leveraged as a key component of the learning strategy.

The implementation of multilingual education has had a positive impact on students' linguistic and social development. Children have shown increased confidence in speaking, the

ability to use vocabulary from various languages, and greater engagement in interactions. Additionally, students have become accustomed to valuing linguistic and cultural differences, fostering an inclusive and enjoyable learning environment.

The use of the mother tongue as a foundation for learning has proven effective in improving students' comprehension. The transition between languages is carried out gradually to avoid overburdening the children. Although students often mix languages when communicating, this phenomenon is viewed as a natural process that does not hinder their progress.

To enhance the program's success, it is necessary to strengthen teachers' competencies, provide multilingual learning resources, and foster closer collaboration with parents. Overall, multilingual education at Tadika Mujahedeen offers significant benefits for the language, social, and self-confidence development of young children.

This discussion section aims to address two research questions, namely: (1) how do teachers implement multilingual education in their daily teaching practices at Tadika Mujahedeen Kindergarten?, and (2) what challenges and opportunities do teachers perceive regarding the implementation of multilingual education in early childhood education?.

The implementation of multilingual education in the learning process reveals that the flexible use of various languages holds essential pedagogical value for supporting early childhood understanding. These findings indicate that language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a strategy to enhance learning effectiveness. This flexibility emphasizes that teaching success does not rely on a single primary language, but rather on the teacher's ability to adapt language use to students' needs and comprehension levels.

The use of the mother tongue as the foundation for learning also highlights the crucial role of a familiar language in shaping children's foundational understanding. A gradual approach to introducing additional languages suggests that natural processes can reduce cognitive load while boosting students' self-confidence. Therefore, optimal multilingual education requires a sustained approach tailored to children's developmental stages, rather than a quick-fix method.

Furthermore, flexibility in language use reflects the dynamics of interlingual boundaries in teaching. Language mixing by students can be viewed as part of the natural evolution of language. This demonstrates that a space for language exploration is actually more effective in fostering communication skills than rigid, segmented methods.

Meanwhile, the challenges of implementing multilingual education underscore that teachers' readiness and competence are key determinants of success. The diversity of students' linguistic backgrounds and limitations in their proficiency in certain languages highlight the

need for educators to be highly adaptable. These conditions underscore that successful implementation depends not only on policy but also on teachers' ability to manage linguistic diversity in the classroom.

Nevertheless, these challenges also present significant opportunities in teaching. Linguistic diversity can serve as a rich learning resource that enhances students' experiences and fosters more diverse and contextual teaching strategies. In other words, a multilingual environment not only demands adaptation but also facilitates innovation in educational practice.

Beyond the academic realm, multilingual education also contributes to students' social-emotional development. A classroom environment that accommodates multiple languages fosters mutual respect, strengthens social interactions, and builds children's self-confidence. Thus, multilingual education not only develops language skills but also shapes character and social skills.

Overall, these findings illustrate that the challenges and opportunities in multilingual education are inherently intertwined. Properly managing these challenges can lead to learning that is more inclusive, adaptive, and tailored to the needs of young children.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study reveals that the implementation of multilingual education at Tadika Mujahedeen is carried out through the use of four languages, each of which has a specific function in daily learning activities. Thai is used as the main language for delivering curricular material and organizing classroom activities, while Patani Malay serves as a supporting language to facilitate understanding when students encounter difficulties in grasping the material. English is often introduced as an introduction to international communication through songs, greetings, and simple games, and Arabic is used in religious contexts such as prayers and worship activities. The use of these languages is carried out in a gradual, structured manner and adapted to the context of the situation so that children can understand the meaning through direct experience, not just memorizing grammatical structures. The methods of repeating instructions, utilizing body movements and visual media, and role-playing activities greatly help children in following the learning process even though they come from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In reality, educators face various obstacles such as differences in language proficiency among students, the need to adapt communication styles, and teachers' limited mastery of certain languages. In the early stages, some children have not yet mastered the language of instruction, so the learning process requires a period of adaptation. Children also often mix several languages when speaking, but this is a normal part of language development and does

not significantly interfere with the learning process. Teachers handle this situation by simplifying vocabulary, repeating instructions, and using language that is more familiar to students, so that learning activities can take place effectively and inclusively.

On the other hand, multilingual education offers various opportunities for children's development. Students become more confident in speaking, more actively participate in class activities, and are able to understand instructions more quickly after receiving explanations in a language they recognize. Exposure to various languages from an early age also fosters flexibility in thinking, social communication skills, and academic readiness for the next level of education. In addition, a classroom environment that uses a variety of languages helps children learn to respect differences and interact with friends from various cultural backgrounds.

Overall, the implementation of multilingual education at Tadika Mujahedeen is natural, contextual, and understanding-centered. Language diversity is not an obstacle, but rather a source of learning that supports children's linguistic, social, and cognitive development. Although there are communication challenges in the early stages, a flexible and sensitive approach to child development can create more inclusive and meaningful learning. Thus, multilingual education in early childhood has the potential to increase children's confidence, communication skills, and readiness to learn in facing diverse educational environments in the future.

The success of multilingual education implementation greatly depends on the availability of a conducive learning environment. Learning needs to be designed in such a way that students can actively participate in the communication process. Language acquisition does not only occur through instruction from teachers, but also through direct social interaction between students. Relationships with peers provide opportunities for children to imitate, adapt, and practice language use spontaneously. This process takes place contextually, where children understand meaning through situations, nonverbal expressions, and responses from their friends. Thus, language learning is not limited to formal settings in the classroom, but also develops through social experiences in everyday life.

In the context of multilingual education, the role of teachers is not limited to the transfer of knowledge, but also as mediators in the communication process. Teachers are required to have linguistic sensitivity to determine the most appropriate language to use in certain conditions, as well as being able to switch between languages appropriately without causing confusion among students. Code-switching techniques are applied in a planned manner to facilitate understanding, not as a form of inconsistency in teaching methods. This approach allows children to relate new concepts to their prior knowledge, making the learning process more meaningful and sustainable in the long term.

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in supporting the success of multilingual education. Children who receive language support at home demonstrate better adaptability at school. Parents who continue to preserve the use of their mother tongue play an important role in maintaining their children's linguistic identity, while educational institutions expand communication skills through the mastery of additional languages. Harmonious collaboration between the home and school environments creates a stable bilingual or multilingual situation, allowing children's language development to proceed proportionally without neglecting the first language they have mastered.

Through contextual learning strategies, intensive social interaction, and support from the family environment, multilingual education contributes significantly not only to improving language skills, but also to strengthening children's self-identity. Children realize that linguistic diversity is not a barrier to communication, but rather a bridge to understanding others. This principle is a very important foundation in shaping tolerant, empathetic, and open characters towards cultural plurality from an early age.

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