

Bilingual Advantage in Reading Comprehension: Strategic Reading Behaviors among Indonesian Pre-Service Teachers

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Submission Track:

Received: Jan 20, 2026
Final Revision: Feb 10, 2026
Available Online: Feb 15, 2026

Keywords:

Bilingual Learners; Monolingual Learners; Pre-Service Teachers; Reading Comprehension; Strategic Reading

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Abstract: This study investigates differences in English reading comprehension and strategic reading behavior between monolingual and bilingual Indonesian pre-service teachers. Situated in a multilingual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, the study addresses how students' language backgrounds may shape their ability to process English texts, use comprehension strategies, and respond to higher-order reading tasks. A qualitative comparative design was employed with 12 six-semester undergraduate students from a department at one state Islamic university in Banten. Participants were purposively grouped into six monolingual and six bilingual students based on their self-reported language-use profiles. Data were collected through a language-background questionnaire, TOEFL-based reading tasks, and semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed thematically by comparing participants' strategies, reading difficulties, and comprehension performance. Findings indicated that bilingual students demonstrated stronger strategic flexibility than monolingual students, particularly in skimming, scanning, vocabulary inference, and prior knowledge activation. Bilingual participants also tended to be better able to connect information across languages and use their linguistic repertoire to support comprehension. Monolingual participants tended to rely on linear reading and word-by-word translation, which often slows comprehension. However, both groups had difficulty answering questions about main ideas and conclusions, indicating the need for explicit instruction in higher-order comprehension strategies. The study concluded that bilingualism can provide cognitive and strategic resources that support second-language reading, but these benefits require pedagogical support to translate into effective academic reading skills.



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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language and introduced at various levels of formal education. However, students' use of English outside the classroom remains limited because daily communication is largely conducted in the national language, Indonesian, and regional languages such as Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, or Batak. This multilingual reality creates a unique context for English language learning. Some students develop bilingual competence through the routine use of Indonesian and regional languages, while others use Indonesian in academic and social interactions. These differing language backgrounds can influence how students approach English texts and construct meaning during reading.

Among the four language skills, reading has a central role in academic development because it provides access to information, disciplinary knowledge, and independent learning. Contemporary reading research views comprehension as an active process that involves decoding, linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, inference, vocabulary, working memory, motivation, and strategic self-regulation (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Grabe & Yamashita, 2022). Reading in a second or foreign language is therefore not a passive activity but a complex interaction between text, reader, task, and context.

In multilingual contexts, reading comprehension is also shaped by the linguistic resources that learners bring to the classroom. Bilingual learners may draw on more than one language system when interpreting vocabulary, predicting meaning, and monitoring comprehension. Recent research suggests that bilingual language experience can be associated with metalinguistic awareness and flexible language control, although the effects of bilingualism are not automatic and may vary according to proficiency, language-use patterns, and learning context (Lehtonen et al., 2023; Taboada Barber et al., 2021). This means that bilingualism should be understood as a continuum of language experience rather than a fixed category.

Despite growing interest in bilingualism and reading, relatively limited attention has been given to Indonesian pre-service teachers, particularly those preparing to teach at the elementary level. This group is important because their reading competence and awareness of reading strategies may influence their future instructional practice. If pre-service teachers understand how language background affects comprehension, they can design more inclusive reading instruction for learners with diverse linguistic profiles.

This study aims to examine how monolingual and bilingual Indonesian pre-service teachers differ in their English reading comprehension and strategic reading behaviors. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do monolingual and bilingual pre-service teachers differ in their use of English reading strategies? and (2) What reading difficulties are experienced by both groups when completing English reading comprehension tasks? By answering these questions, the study contributes to discussions on bilingualism, reading pedagogy, and EFL teacher education in multilingual Indonesian classrooms.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

Reading comprehension is widely understood as an interactive and strategic process in which readers construct meaning by integrating textual information with prior knowledge, vocabulary, linguistic awareness, and cognitive regulation. Duke and Cartwright (2021) argue that reading comprehension extends beyond the simple combination of decoding and language comprehension because readers also depend on bridging processes and active self-regulation. In second-language reading, Grabe and Yamashita (2022) similarly emphasize that comprehension requires efficient word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic processing, discourse awareness, and strategic monitoring.

Strategic reading is crucial for EFL learners because limited exposure to English often requires them to compensate for vocabulary deficiencies and unfamiliar text structures. Strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, identifying main ideas, making inferences, and using contextual clues help learners overcome comprehension challenges. Research on EFL reading has shown that explicit strategy instruction can improve learners' ability to approach texts purposefully and monitor their comprehension (Al-Qahtani, 2020; Friesen & Frid, 2021). Therefore, reading success depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on learners' ability to select and apply appropriate strategies.

Bilingualism can impact reading comprehension because bilingual readers have access to more than one linguistic system and can develop a heightened awareness of how language works. However, recent research has moved away from treating bilingualism as a simple advantage-disadvantage category. Lehtonen et al. (2023) explain that bilingual language use interacts with executive functions in complex ways, depending on factors such as switching demands, proficiency, and context of use. For reading, this implies that bilingual learners may benefit from flexible attention and cross-language awareness, but these benefits are shaped by the quality and frequency of language experiences.

Studies of typically developing bilingual learners further suggest that executive function, language comprehension, and cognitive flexibility may contribute to reading comprehension. Taboada Barber et al. (2021) found that executive function skills helped explain reading comprehension among typically developing bilingual and monolingual readers. These findings support the view that reading comprehension is not solely a linguistic process; it also involves attentional control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. For bilingual learners, these processes may support the ability to shift between meanings, infer unfamiliar vocabulary, and connect prior knowledge to new textual information.

In Indonesian EFL classrooms, students' bilingual experiences are often shaped by the use of both Indonesian and regional languages. This linguistic diversity should be seen as a pedagogical resource, not a barrier. When learners are encouraged to activate their linguistic repertoire, they can use prior language knowledge to support English reading. Nevertheless, bilingual resources do not automatically lead to strong comprehension. Teachers need to provide explicit instruction in vocabulary development, inference-making, text-structure awareness, and metacognitive monitoring. This study builds on these perspectives by comparing monolingual and bilingual pre-service teachers' reading behaviors in an Indonesian EFL teacher-education context.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative comparative design within an interpretivist paradigm. The design was selected because the study aimed to understand how students describe, experience, and apply reading strategies rather than to generalize statistically to a wider population. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for exploring participants' meaning-making processes in specific educational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, comparison between monolingual and bilingual participants was used to identify patterns of similarity and difference in reading behaviors.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at one of departments, a state Islamic university in Banten. The participants were 12 six-semester undergraduate students who were taking English-related coursework. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that participants represented two language-background profiles: six monolingual students and six bilingual students. Monolingual participants were those who reported using Bahasa Indonesia as their dominant language in most daily and academic interactions. Bilingual participants were those who reported regular use of Bahasa Indonesia and at least one regional language in daily communication.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected using three instruments. First, a language-background questionnaire was used to identify participants' language-use profiles, including dominant

language, regional language use, and self-perceived English proficiency. Second, TOEFL-based reading tasks were used to observe participants' comprehension performance across literal comprehension, vocabulary-in-context, main-idea recognition, and inference items. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' reading processes, strategy use, and perceived difficulties. The use of multiple instruments strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing comparison between self-reported strategies and task-based performance (Nowell et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Questionnaire responses, reading task results, and interview transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring patterns. Coding focused on reading strategies, comprehension challenges, the influence of language background, and differences between monolingual and bilingual participants. Analysis followed the stages of familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, and report writing as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021). Trustworthiness was supported through member checking, peer discussions, and careful comparison across data sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized around three themes: strategic flexibility among bilingual students, linear reading among monolingual students, and shared difficulty in higher-order comprehension. Because the manuscript data did not provide complete numerical scores for each participant, the findings are reported as comparative qualitative patterns rather than statistical claims.

Table 1. Summary of Main Comparative Findings

Aspect	Monolingual participants	Bilingual participants
Dominant reading approach	Linear reading and frequent word-by-word translation	Flexible strategy use and selective use of linguistic repertoire
Common strategies	Translation, repeated reading, identifying familiar words	Skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, prior-knowledge activation
Main strength	Literal comprehension when vocabulary was familiar	Global comprehension and vocabulary inference
Main difficulty	Vocabulary gaps, main idea, inference	Main idea and inference in complex texts
Pedagogical implication	Needs explicit strategy instruction and vocabulary scaffolding	Needs higher-order comprehension practice and guided transfer of bilingual resources

Bilingual Students Demonstrated Greater Strategic Flexibility

Bilingual participants demonstrated a greater variety of strategies when reading English texts. They reported using skimming to identify general meaning, scanning to find specific information, and context clues to infer unfamiliar vocabulary. They also activated prior knowledge of Indonesian and regional languages to predict meaning and connect

ideas across sentences. This pattern suggests that bilingual students are more comfortable using their broader linguistic repertoire to support comprehension.

Monolingual Students Relied More on Linear Reading

Participants who were monolingual tended to read text sequentially and focused heavily on individual words. Some participants reported trying to translate unfamiliar words before moving on to the next sentence. This word-by-word approach helped them understand some literal information, but often slowed their reading process and made it difficult to identify the overall meaning. Their responses suggest that limited strategic flexibility can reduce reading efficiency when texts contain unfamiliar vocabulary or complex sentence structures.

Both Groups Struggled with Main-Idea and Inference Questions

Although bilingual students demonstrated stronger strategic behavior, both groups struggled with main idea and inference items. Participants often identified details correctly but struggled to synthesize information across paragraphs. These findings suggest that both monolingual and bilingual students need explicit instruction in higher-order comprehension skills, particularly identifying implied meaning, distinguishing main ideas from supporting details, and evaluating relationships between ideas.

These findings suggest that bilingual students may possess cognitive and strategic resources that support English reading comprehension. Their ability to use skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, and prior knowledge demonstrates greater metacognitive awareness during reading. This aligns with recent reading research that positions comprehension as an active and independent process involving language knowledge, background knowledge, and strategic control (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Grabe & Yamashita, 2022).

Bilingual participants' use of more than one language as a resource also reflects the view that bilingualism can support metalinguistic awareness and flexible language processing. However, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence that bilingualism automatically results in superior reading skills. Recent research emphasizes that the relationship between bilingualism and executive function is complex and shaped by language proficiency, frequency of use, and contextual demands (Lehtonen et al., 2023). In this study, bilingual students appeared to benefit from their language experiences because they actively used them as part of their reading strategies.

Monolingual participants' reliance on linear reading and translation suggests the need for more explicit strategy instruction. While translation may help learners access literal meaning, excessive dependence on word-by-word translation can limit comprehension of main ideas and implied meanings. EFL learners need guided practice in predicting, identifying text structure, summarizing, making inferences, and monitoring comprehension. Strategy instruction should not be treated as a supplementary activity but as an integral part of reading pedagogy.

The shared difficulty with main-idea and inference questions is especially important for teacher education. Pre-service teachers need to master not only basic comprehension but also higher-order reading skills that enable them to evaluate, synthesize, and teach texts effectively. If future teachers struggle with inference and main-idea identification, they may also find it difficult to design reading tasks that develop these skills in elementary learners. Therefore, teacher education programs should include systematic training in strategic reading and reflective reading instruction.

Pedagogically, the study implies that multilingual students' language backgrounds should be acknowledged in EFL reading classrooms. Teachers can encourage learners to use their first and additional languages to activate prior knowledge, compare meanings, and build vocabulary awareness. At the same time, teachers should guide students toward direct engagement with English texts so that cross-linguistic support strengthens rather than replaces English comprehension. A balanced approach can help both monolingual and bilingual learners become more independent strategic readers.

CONCLUSION

This study examined differences in English reading comprehension and strategic reading behaviors between monolingual and bilingual Indonesian pre-service teachers. The findings show that bilingual students demonstrated greater strategic flexibility, especially in skimming, scanning, vocabulary inference, and activation of prior knowledge. Monolingual students tended to rely more on linear reading and word-by-word translation. Nevertheless, both groups struggled with higher-order comprehension, particularly main-idea and inference questions.

The study concludes that bilingualism can provide useful cognitive and linguistic resources for second-language reading, but these resources need to be supported through explicit instruction. Teacher education programs should therefore strengthen students' reading strategy awareness, vocabulary development, inference-making skills, and ability to teach reading in linguistically diverse classrooms.

This study has limitations such as the number of participants were small, and reading task scores were not reported in detailed numerical form. Future research should involve a larger sample, provide detailed score distributions, and combine interviews with classroom observations or think-aloud protocols. Longitudinal studies would also help clarify how bilingual and monolingual teacher candidates develop strategic reading competencies over time.

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