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Investigating Bilingual Practices in Iraqi Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find out bilingual practices in Iraqi Secondary Schools, which focus on how bilaterality is applied and considered by teachers and students. A qualitative case study design was employed to collect rich data through semi-structured interviews, class observations and school policies. The participants included 6 teachers, 30 students and 3 administrators from three public schools. Conclusions revealed frequent code-switching between Arabic and English, especially in science classes, where teachers look at bilingualism as an essential tool to clarify complex concepts despite formal training and lack of institutional support. The students appreciated the use of Arabic for understanding, expressing a strong desire to improve their English efficiency. The study identified the absence of a clear official policy on bilingual instructions, causing incompatible practices in schools. This study contributes to better understanding of bilingual education in the Iraqi context and provides practical suggestions for its improvement.

Keywords: Bilingual Instructions, Code-switching, Iraqi Schools, Qualitative Research.

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دراسة لممارسات ثنائية اللغة (ازدواجية اللغة) في المدارس الثانوية العراقية

المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى دراسة الممارسات الثنائية اللغوية (ازدواجية اللغة) في فصول المدارس الثانوية العراقية، والتي تركز على كيفية تطبيق ازدواجية اللغة ومراعاتها من قبل المعلمين والطلاب. تم استخدام تصميم دراسة حالة نوعية لجمع بيانات غنية من خلال مقابلات شبه موجهة، وملاحظات صفية، ودورات وسياسات مدرسية. شمل المشاركون 6 معلمين و30 طالبا و3 إداريين من ثلاث مدارس حكومية. كشفت الاستنتاجات عن كثرة التبدل بين اللغتين العربية والانكليزية، وخاصة في فصول العلوم، حيث ينظر المعلمون الى ازدواجية اللغة كأداة اساسية لتوضيح المفاهيم المعقدة على الرغم من التدريب الرسمي ونقص الدعم المؤسسي. أعرب الطلاب عن تقديرهم لاستخدام اللغة العربية للفهم، معربين عن رغبة قوية في تحسين كفاءتهم في اللغة الانكليزية. حددت الدراسة غياب سياسة رسمية واضحة بشأن تعليم ثنائي اللغة، مما يتسبب في ممارسات غير متوافقة في المدارس. تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهم أفضل لتعليم ازدواجية اللغة في السياق العراقي وتقدم اقتراحات علمية لتحسينه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التبادل بين اللغات، التعليم الثنائي اللغة، المدارس العراقية، البحث النوعي.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, bilingual education has become an important subject worldwide due to globalization and increasing need of effective communication in languages. In Iraq, the educational system faces unique challenges and opportunities related to bilingual practices, especially in secondary schools where English is taught as a foreign language with Arabic, mother tongue. The purpose of this study is to find out how bilingual practices are applied in Iraqi secondary school classes and understand their effects on teaching and learning processes. Iraq is characterized by a rich linguistic landscape with Arabic as an official and major language, while English is considered an important foreign language, especially in academic subjects such as science and technology. Over the years, educational policies have emphasized learning English language, which reflects global trends and local demands for international capacity (Yaseen and Sankar, 2016).

Despite the official promotion of English, Iraqi secondary schools usually use bilingual practices, such as code-switching and transjigating students to support understanding and engagement. These practices often emerge informally because teachers and students navigate between Arabic and English within classes, to remove

language obstacles (Keong et al., 2016). However, how bilingualism is applied by formal bilateral instructional policies and lack of teacher training, it creates variability, affecting students' language development and educational achievement.

Although bilingual practices are prevalent in Iraqi secondary classrooms, there is limited systematic research examining how these practices are utilized, perceived, and managed by teachers and students. Moreover, the impact of bilingual strategies on students' learning outcomes remains underexplored. This gap makes it difficult to develop effective educational policies and teacher training programs that can enhance bilingual education in Iraq.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the common bilingual practices used in Iraqi secondary school classrooms?
2. How do teachers and students perceive the use of bilingual practices in learning?
3. What challenges do teachers face when implementing bilingual strategies?
4. How do existing policies and curricula influence bilingual practices?

The objectives of this research are:

- To identify the types of bilingual practices employed in secondary school classrooms in Iraq.
- To explore teachers' and students' attitudes towards bilingualism in education.
- To examine the challenges related to bilingual teaching and learning.
- To provide recommendations for improving bilingual education policies and instructional practices.

This study contributes to understanding bilingual education in the Iraqi context, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. It aims to support better language teaching approaches that can enhance both English language proficiency and subject matter comprehension, ultimately improving academic success and future opportunities for Iraqi students.

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Bilingualism refers to the ability of individuals or groups to use two languages effectively. In Iraq, societal bilingualism is shaped by coexistence of Arabic (the official language) and increasingly English as a foreign or second language in educational and professional settings. Bilingual education has been widely discussed in educational linguistics as a crucial approach for teaching in multilingual societies. It involves the use of two languages to enhance comprehension and cognitive development (Al-Maadheed, 2012). In the context of Iraq, bilingualism is deeply rooted in the sociolinguistic reality

where Arabic is the mother tongue and English is taught as a foreign language, particularly in secondary schools (Yaseen & Shakir, 2016).

To understand bilingual classroom behavior more historically, translanguaging theory offers a dynamic view of language use. According to Garcia(2009), translanguaging refers to the process by which bilingual individuals make use of their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning, communicate, and learn. Theories of bilingual education emphasize the importance of code-switching and translanguaging as natural and effective pedagogical tools that support learners in acquiring academic content and language proficiency simultaneously (Allafi, 2023). Translanguaging, in particular, allows students to use their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning and negotiate understanding, which is essential in environments where learners' English proficiency is still developing (Allard, Apt & Sacks, 2019).

Moreover, language policy plays a significant role in shaping classroom practices. In Iraq, the official education policies promote English as the medium of instruction in science and English classes, yet they often lack explicit guidelines for bilingual instruction, which results in varied classroom implementations (Altufaili, 2016; Barzinji, 2024). The absence of clear policy creates challenges for teachers who must balance curriculum demands with students' linguistic needs (Hasan & Hussein, 2022).

2.1 Bilingual Practices in Iraqi Education

Research indicates that bilingual practices in Iraqi secondary schools often involve code-switching between Arabic and English, serving as a scaffolding tool to aid comprehension (Keong et al., 2016). Teachers switch languages to explain difficult concepts, clarify vocabulary, or manage classroom interaction (Surrey). This aligns with the practical realities of Iraqi classrooms, where students' English proficiency varies widely (Al Hamdany, 2018).

Teachers' attitudes towards the use of the first language (L1) are generally positive, especially as a means to facilitate learning rather than replace English instruction (Ali, 2022). However, the lack of formal training in bilingual teaching methods limits teachers' ability to apply bilingual strategies effectively and consistently (Yaseen & Shakir, 2016).

2.2 Previous Studies on Bilingual Education in Iraq and Similar Contexts

Many studies have detected bilingual contexts in Iraq and similar multilingual societies. Yaseen and Shakir (2016) examined Iraq's bilingual education policies, exposed a difference between policy and practice, and recommended extended teacher training and clear guidelines.

Barzinji (2024) reviewed the English language teaching research in Iraqi Kurdistan and found that bilingual practices such as code-switching reflect conclusions in other Iraqi regions. Similarly, Wufulla Vasava and D'Kunha (2021) demonstrated practical use of Kurdish as well as English in early classes in Erbil, supporting students' understanding and engagement.

Studies on teacher code-switching in Iraqi primary schools have shown that teachers use bilingual strategies to create a more inclusive and sensible learning environment (Keong et al., 2016). These strategies help the bridge interval in the English language skills of the students, although challenges remain due to inconsistent application and inadequate policy support.

In a comprehensive Middle Eastern and North African contexts, research has emphasized the effectiveness of translation teaching to empower learners and balance the use of language in classrooms (Alfi, 2023; Al-Madhhed, 2012).

Reviewed literature confirms that bilingual education practices, especially code-switching and translation, are essential for effective teaching in secondary schools of Iraq. While official policies promote English, the realities of the classroom require flexible bilingual approaches to support learning. However, there is a clear need for strong policy structure and teacher training programs to increase bilingual education, ensure stability and improve student results.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopts a qualitative research design to explore the nature and dynamics of bilingual practices in Iraqi secondary schools. It includes a detailed explanation of the participants, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, procedures, and methods of data analysis. It also discusses strategies for ensuring the validity and reliability of the study. Two main research tools were used: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews carried out with teachers, students, and administrators to investigate their perspectives on bilingual practices. The classroom observations over the course of four weeks, non-participant observations were conducted to document actual bilingual interactions.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design, aiming to gain in-depth insights into how bilingualism is practiced and perceived in real classroom settings. The qualitative approach is suitable for capturing the complexities of language use, teacher-student interactions, and the socio-cultural dynamics of bilingual education in Iraq.

3.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following central questions:

1. How is bilingualism practiced in Iraqi secondary school classrooms?
2. What are the attitudes of teachers and students towards the use of both Arabic and English in instruction?
3. What challenges and opportunities are associated with bilingual practices in these educational settings?

3.3 Setting of the Study

The research was conducted in three government secondary schools in Baghdad, Iraq, where both Arabic and English are used in varying degrees across different subjects, especially in science and mathematics.

3.4 Participants and Sampling

The sample consisted of:

- **6 English and science teachers** (2 from each school)
- **30 students** (10 from each school)
- **3 school administrators** (one from each school)

Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate and their experience in bilingual classroom environments.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

To gather multiple views and data, the study used three qualitative data collection methods:

1. **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with teachers, students, and administrators to explore their experiences and attitudes regarding bilingual practices.
2. **Classroom observations:** Non-participant observations were carried out over a period of four weeks to document actual bilingual interactions.
3. **Document analysis:** Curriculum guides, lesson plans, and school policy documents were reviewed to understand the institutional approach to bilingualism.

3.6 Instruments

- **Interview guides** were developed with open-ended questions to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences.
- **Observation checklists** were used to record instances of language switching, teacher prompts, and student responses.
- **A document review protocol** helped assess alignment between official language policy and classroom practice.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software. The interview, observation notes, and documents were coded manually and then categorized into emerging themes

such as "language preference," "code-switching patterns," and "pedagogical implications." A comparative analysis was also conducted across different schools.

4.1 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, the following strategies were adopted:

- **Member checking:** Key participants reviewed transcriptions and preliminary findings.
- **Triangulation:** Multiple sources and methods enhanced the reliability of the data.
- **Audit trail:** All decisions, procedures, and changes were documented.
- **Thick description:** Detailed accounts of classroom settings and interactions enable readers to understand the context fully.

4.2 Limitations of the Methodology

The qualitative case study method offers deep insights, but because of the small sample size, the results might not apply to all Iraqi schools. Moreover, the presence of the researcher during observations might have influenced participant behavior.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Results and Analysis

The findings of the study based on data collected from interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. The results are organized thematically to reflect the bilingual practices observed and reported in Iraqi secondary school classrooms. Tables are used to summarize key data, followed by detailed interpretations and reflections.

5.2 Classroom Observations

Table 1: Frequency of Code-Switching in Science and English Classes (Over 4 Weeks)

| School | Class Subject | Number of Lessons Observed | Avg. Teacher Code-Switches per Lesson | Avg. Student Code-Switches per Lesson |
|---------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| A | Science | 5 | 18 | 12 |
| A | English | 5 | 10 | 8 |

| | | | | |
|----------|---------|---|----|----|
| B | Science | 5 | 22 | 15 |
| C | English | 5 | 9 | 7 |

Teachers frequently switched between Arabic and English, especially in science classes, to clarify complex concepts. School B exhibited the highest average code-switching, possibly due to students' lower English proficiency. Student code-switching often mirrored teachers' patterns, suggesting that teacher language use heavily influences students' responses and classroom discourse.

5.3 Interview Results

Table 2: Key Themes from Teacher Interviews (N = 6)

| Theme | Frequency Mentioned | Sample Quote |
|---|---------------------|--|
| Clarification through Arabic | 6 | "If I explain fully in English, they get lost. I must repeat in Arabic." |
| Bilingualism as a necessity | 5 | "Our reality forces us to mix both languages." |
| Lack of training in bilingual teaching | 4 | "We were never trained to teach bilingually." |

All teachers viewed bilingual practices as essential to ensuring understanding. Teachers consciously used Arabic as a support mechanism, not as a replacement for English. However, the lack of institutional support or training in bilingual methodologies was a recurring concern, limiting their pedagogical confidence and consistency.

Table 3: Key Themes from Student Interviews (N = 30)

| Theme | Frequency | Sample Response |
|---|-----------|--|
| Preference for explanation in Arabic | 24 | "I understand better when the teacher explains in Arabic." |
| Motivation to improve English | 18 | "We want to speak English well, but we need help." |
| Frustration with language switching | 8 | "Sometimes it becomes confusing when teachers mix too much." |

A majority of students showed appreciation for Arabic explanations, which helped reduce learning anxiety. However, many also expressed a desire to strengthen their English

skills. A minority expressed confusion when code-switching was excessive or inconsistent, indicating a need for more structured bilingual strategies.

5.4 Document Analysis

Table 4: Language Use in Curriculum and Policy Documents

| Document Type | Language Dominance | Bilingual Instruction Mentioned | Notes |
|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Science curriculum | English | Yes | Emphasizes English but allows Arabic for clarification. |
| English curriculum | English | No | Focus is on immersive English learning. |
| School language policy | Arabic | No clear bilingual policy | Practices seem informal and teacher-dependent. |

The curriculum documents generally promote English as the medium of instruction, particularly in science and English subjects. However, there is no formal bilingual framework, leaving implementation to the discretion of teachers. This institutional gap reinforces the inconsistent bilingual practices observed.

5.5 Cross-School Comparison

Table 5: Summary Comparison of Bilingual Practices by School

| School | Teacher Flexibility in Language Use | Student Comfort Level | Policy Support | Level of Code-Switching |
|--------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| A | Medium | High | Low | Moderate |
| B | High | Medium | Low | High |
| C | Low | Medium | Low | Low |

Interpretation:

School B demonstrated the most adaptive use of bilingual strategies, although this came with challenges in student comprehension. School A balanced code-switching and policy adherence well, whereas School C showed lower engagement in bilingual methods, possibly due to stricter adherence to monolingual instruction.

Across all data sources, **bilingualism emerged not as a deliberate strategy but as a practical necessity**. Teachers and students alike acknowledged its importance, but also highlighted the **lack of formal guidance, training, and policy clarity**. The results show

that while **code-switching can enhance comprehension**, overuse or random use can lead to confusion, especially when not aligned with pedagogical goals.

6. FINDINGS

Based on the data collected from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, the following key findings have emerged regarding bilingual practices in Iraqi secondary schools:

1. Teachers and students frequently engage in code-switching between Arabic and English, particularly in science classes where English terminology is dominant but comprehension requires Arabic explanations.
2. Teachers view bilingualism as a necessary pedagogical tool to facilitate understanding. However, many feel inadequately trained in bilingual teaching strategies and lack institutional support.
3. Students generally appreciate the use of Arabic for clarifying complex ideas but express a strong desire to improve their English proficiency. Some students reported confusion when switching between languages occurred without clear structure.
4. Official courses are in English, especially in science and English subjects, but no formal bilateral instructional policy. It leads to incompatible bilingual practices dependent on individual teacher preferences.
5. There are differences between schools about bilingual practice intensity, teacher flexibility and student comfort, some schools have more code-switching than others.

7. CONCLUSION

Studies show that bilingual practices in Iraqi secondary schools mainly arise from the realities of practical classes rather than policy-led structure. While such practices support understanding and students' engagement, they require formal recognition and support to maximize their benefits. By adopting recommended measures, educational stakeholders can promote more effective bilingual teaching environment that increases the results of language proficiency and subject learning. The lack of consistent frameworks and support for bilingual education underlines the urgent need for systematic teacher training and policy development. To strengthen bilingual practices in Iraq, educational stakeholders must prioritize evidence-based strategies that support both linguistic development and academic achievement. This research provides a foundation for such efforts and highlights the importance of further investigations to inform future educational reforms.

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