

Empathy-Based Pedagogy in Indonesian Bilingual Education: A Qualitative Case Study of Freedom Writers-Inspired Teaching Practices in Surakarta

Damar Jati Pamungkas^{1*}, Abdillah Nugroho², M. Thoyibi³

^{1,2,3} Faculty of English Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

Bilingual education in Indonesia increasingly emphasizes both linguistic competence and character development, yet limited research examines how international pedagogical models can be adapted to local contexts. This qualitative case study investigates the implementation of empathy-based teaching approaches inspired by the film *Freedom Writers* (2007) in three bilingual schools in Surakarta, Indonesia. Data were collected over 2 months (October - November 2025) through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student reflections. Thematic analysis revealed five key outcomes: transformed classroom atmospheres fostering student voice, enhanced language proficiency through reflective writing, strengthened critical thinking via culturally relevant curriculum, and improved socio-emotional competencies. Despite challenges including time constraints and cultural adaptation needs, findings demonstrate that empathetic, student-centered pedagogy significantly enhances both academic and character outcomes in bilingual settings. This study contributes empirical evidence for integrating transformative pedagogical approaches within Indonesian educational contexts while respecting local values and bilingual learning objectives.

Keywords: bilingual education, *Freedom Writers*, empathy in teaching, Surakarta, character education, inclusive pedagogy

Introduction

The landscape of education in Indonesia has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, particularly with the emergence of bilingual schools that aim to prepare students for global competitiveness while maintaining cultural identity (Lamb & Coleman, 2008). Surakarta, historically known as a cultural and educational hub in Central Java, has witnessed a notable increase in bilingual educational institutions that employ both Indonesian and English as languages of instruction (Zein, 2017). However, the implementation of bilingual education extends beyond linguistic competency; it encompasses the development of critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and emotional intelligence (García & Wei, 2014). The film *Freedom Writers* (2007), based on the true story of teacher Erin Gruwell, offers profound insights into transformative education. Gruwell's approach with her diverse, at-risk students in Long Beach, California, demonstrated that education rooted in empathy, respect, and personal connection can overcome barriers of discrimination, violence, and educational inequity (Gruwell, 1999). Her methodology centered on providing students with a voice through reflective writing, creating safe learning spaces, and acknowledging their lived experiences as valuable components of the educational process. These principles resonate strongly with contemporary educational challenges in Indonesia, where bilingual schools must address not only language acquisition but also the emotional and social needs of diverse student populations. Despite the growing body of research on bilingual education in Indonesia (Lengkanawati, 2005; Jazadi, 2000), three critical gaps remain unaddressed. First, geographical and contextual gaps exist as most studies on transformative pedagogy emerge from Western contexts, leaving questions about applicability in Indonesian educational settings. Second, methodological gaps persist as limited qualitative research explores the lived experiences of teachers and students implementing socio-emotionally focused approaches in bilingual classrooms. Third, integrative gaps remain between character education mandates (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter) and bilingual instruction practices, with few empirical studies examining how these domains can be effectively merged.

Previous research has documented challenges in Indonesian bilingual education including teacher preparedness, curriculum development, and assessment methods (Zein, 2017), while studies on character education have focused primarily on monolingual contexts (Setiawan, 2019). However, no research has systematically investigated how international pedagogical models emphasizing empathy and student-centeredness can be adapted to Indonesian bilingual settings. This study addresses these gaps by examining: How can empathy-based teaching approaches inspired by *Freedom Writers* be implemented in Indonesian bilingual education? What are the outcomes, challenges, and implications of such implementation?

* Corresponding author: s400250004@student.ums.ac.id

Literature Review

Bilingual Education in Indonesia: Evolution and Challenges

Bilingual education in Indonesia has evolved from elite international schools to more accessible institutions serving middle-class families seeking quality education with global perspectives (Lengkanawati, 2005). The implementation of bilingual programs reflects Indonesia's commitment to developing human resources capable of competing in international arenas while preserving national identity (Lauder, 2008). Research indicates that effective bilingual education requires more than simultaneous instruction in two languages; it demands culturally responsive pedagogy that acknowledges students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Cummins, 2000). Studies on Indonesian bilingual schools reveal persistent challenges including inadequate teacher preparation, inconsistent curriculum standards, pressure-driven assessment systems, and imbalanced emphasis on language proficiency over holistic development (Zein, 2017; Jazadi, 2000). This excessive focus on linguistic outcomes sometimes overshadows emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of learning. Such limitations highlight the need for pedagogical frameworks that integrate language acquisition with character education and socio-emotional competencies a gap this study addresses through examination of empathy-based approaches.

Empathetic and Student-Centered Pedagogy

Empathy in educational contexts involves teachers' capacity to understand and respond to students' emotional states, life experiences, and individual needs (Warren, 2018). Research demonstrates that empathetic teaching enhances student motivation, strengthens teacher-student relationships, and improves academic performance (Cornelius-White, 2007). Student-centered pedagogy, which positions learners' experiences and voices at the core of educational practice, aligns closely with empathetic approaches (Weimer, 2013). This orientation contrasts with traditional teacher-centered models by encouraging active participation, critical reflection, and collaborative learning. Studies show that student-centered classrooms foster deeper learning, enhanced critical thinking, and greater autonomy (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). In diverse settings, these approaches become particularly important as they enable teachers to incorporate students' varied cultural backgrounds into learning processes. However, critical perspectives note potential tensions between progressive Western pedagogical models and local educational cultures (Schweisfurth, 2011), necessitating careful contextual adaptation a central consideration in this study.

The Freedom Writers Methodology and Its Applicability

Erin Gruwell's methodology, documented in *The Freedom Writers Diary* (Gruwell, 1999), provides a model for transformative teaching in diverse contexts. Her approach incorporated establishing safe, judgment-free environments; using reflective writing for self-expression and healing; connecting curriculum to students' lived experiences; and fostering intercultural dialogue (Codell, 2009). Gruwell's emphasis on literature reflecting students' realities enabled them to situate personal struggles within broader historical and human contexts. Research examining the Freedom Writers methodology highlights its cross-cultural potential. Smith (2010) argues that Gruwell's success stemmed from challenging institutional barriers and continuously adapting teaching to students' evolving needs. Mitchell (2013) emphasizes reflective writing's role in developing voice, agency, and critical consciousness. These studies suggest that the approach offers valuable insights for educators in multicultural, multilingual, or underserved contexts. However, critical examination reveals that direct transplantation without contextual adaptation may fail, successful implementation requires negotiation between progressive principles and local educational values, a process this study documents systematically.

Character Education in Indonesian Bilingual Contexts

Character education, which develops students' ethical, social, and emotional competencies, has gained policy attention in Indonesia through the Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter program, emphasizing religious values, nationalism, independence, cooperation, and integrity (Setiawan, 2019). Integrating character education within bilingual contexts presents unique opportunities and challenges. Bilingual education naturally provides opportunities for developing intercultural competence, empathy, and global citizenship when teachers intentionally design experiences promoting these values (Byram, 2008). Yet pressures to meet academic standards and language proficiency benchmarks sometimes lead schools to deprioritize character development (Lin, 2015). Research by Agustin (2020) found that Indonesian schools often treat character education as separate from academic instruction rather than integrated within it. This study explores how bilingual schools in Surakarta can integrate character education principles inspired by Freedom Writers without compromising language learning objectives, thereby addressing the documented separation between these educational domains.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design using an interpretive approach to explore the implementation of Freedom Writers-inspired educational values in bilingual schools in Surakarta. Case study methodology was chosen because it allows an in-depth and contextual investigation of real-life educational practices (Yin, 2014). The research was conducted over two months in three purposively selected bilingual schools representing different institutional types: a private Islamic school, a private secular school, and a semi-international school. Participants included twelve teachers (eight female and four male) with at least two years of teaching experience in bilingual classrooms, as well as 20 students from grades 10–12 with diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers attended a two-day professional development workshop involving film viewing and discussion, analysis of Gruwell's pedagogical strategies, examination of empathetic and student-centered teaching theories, and collaborative lesson planning. They then implemented three main components creating safe classrooms, reflective writing activities, and intercultural dialogue supported by monthly collaborative meetings. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured teacher interviews, student reflection journals, and teacher reflection logs to ensure triangulation and enhance credibility. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, conducted manually through repeated reading, coding, grouping codes into themes, refining themes, and selecting supporting evidence. Throughout the process, the research team held regular discussions to reach agreement on coding and interpretation. Trustworthiness was strengthened through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, thick description, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical approval was obtained from the Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #UMS-REC-2024-015). Informed consent was secured from all teachers and students, with additional parental consent and student assent for minors, and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data handling.

Research and Finding Discussion

Transformation of Classroom Atmosphere

The implementation of Freedom Writers-inspired approaches resulted in notable shifts in classroom dynamics across all three participating schools. Teachers reported that consciously practicing empathy and creating judgment-free spaces led to increased student openness and participation. One English teacher observed that students who previously remained silent began sharing personal experiences when they felt their voices were genuinely valued. Classroom observations confirmed this pattern, showing increased voluntary participation and more authentic student contributions during discussions. Students in focus groups consistently mentioned feeling more respected and understood by their teachers, with one student stating that their classroom had become "like a second home where we can be ourselves." The creation of safe learning spaces proved particularly significant in bilingual contexts, where students often experience anxiety about making linguistic errors. When teachers emphasized that mistakes were valuable learning opportunities rather than failures, students demonstrated greater willingness to use English in classroom interactions. Analysis of student journals revealed that many had previously felt pressured by expectations of perfection in language use, leading to reluctance to speak. However, as classroom environments became more supportive, students reported feeling liberated to experiment with language and express complex ideas despite linguistic limitations. This finding aligns with research by Horwitz (2001) on reducing language anxiety through empathetic teaching.

Voice and Identity Development Through Reflective Writing

Reflective writing emerged as a powerful tool for helping bilingual students develop voice, process experiences, and strengthen both linguistic and emotional competencies. Teachers integrated regular journal writing assignments where students could choose to write in Indonesian, English, or mix both languages, removing linguistic barriers to self-expression. Analysis of student journals revealed diverse topics including family relationships, cultural identity, future aspirations, social challenges, and personal growth. Many students wrote about navigating between traditional Indonesian values and modern global influences, expressing tensions and insights that rarely surfaced in conventional academic assignments. The practice of sharing selected journal entries (voluntarily and with author permission) fostered classroom community and intercultural understanding. Students discovered shared experiences despite different backgrounds, developing empathy for peers they previously perceived as different. Teachers noted that students became more sophisticated writers in both languages as they found personally meaningful reasons to communicate effectively. One teacher observed that students who struggled with formal essay writing excelled in reflective journals because they wrote from authentic motivation rather than obligation. This finding supports research by Boud (2001) on reflective writing's role in deepening learning and personal development. Interestingly, bilingual students often code-switched in their journals, using Indonesian for expressing emotional nuances and English for discussing academic concepts or global issues. This pattern reveals how bilingualism provides diverse linguistic resources for meaning-making and self-expression. Teachers learned to view code-switching not as linguistic deficiency but as strategic communication, aligning with translanguaging

theory (García & Wei, 2014). By validating students' full linguistic repertoires, teachers helped them develop more confident and flexible language use.

Connecting Curriculum to Lived Experience

Teachers successfully adapted the Freedom Writers approach of connecting curriculum content to students' lived experiences, making learning more relevant and engaging. English teachers selected literature that reflected students' realities or addressed universal human experiences, including texts about identity formation, family dynamics, social justice, and cultural diversity. For example, one teacher used excerpts from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's works alongside international young adult literature, facilitating discussions about colonialism, resistance, and human dignity that resonated with students' understanding of Indonesian history and contemporary social issues. This curricular approach transformed classroom discourse from teacher-centered information transmission to collaborative meaning-making. Students actively connected literary themes to their own lives, current events, and broader social patterns. Classroom observations revealed higher levels of critical thinking as students analyzed how power, privilege, and injustice operated in texts and their own communities. Several students wrote journal entries exploring how bilingual education positioned them as privileged compared to peers in non-bilingual schools, demonstrating emerging critical consciousness about educational inequality in Indonesia. Teachers also incorporated project-based learning where students investigated local social issues, interviewed community members, and presented findings in both languages. These projects allowed students to apply language skills to meaningful purposes while developing research capabilities and civic awareness. One notable project involved students documenting oral histories from their grandparents about life during different historical periods, creating bilingual digital archives that honored family stories while practicing interviewing, translation, and multimedia composition skills. Such projects embodied the Freedom Writers principle of valuing student experiences and community connections as legitimate educational content.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite positive outcomes, teachers encountered several challenges in implementing Freedom Writers-inspired approaches. Time constraints emerged as a significant obstacle, as teachers struggled to balance reflective activities with mandated curriculum coverage and standardized testing preparation. Some teachers felt pressure from administrators or parents who prioritized measurable academic outcomes over socio-emotional development. One teacher noted the tension between wanting to spend time processing student journal entries deeply and needing to cover grammatical structures required for upcoming examinations. This finding highlights ongoing tensions in Indonesian education between traditional assessment-focused approaches and progressive pedagogies. Teachers also grappled with varying levels of student readiness for reflective practices. Some students initially resisted journal writing, viewing it as unnecessary or uncomfortable, particularly those from educational backgrounds emphasizing memorization over self-expression. Teachers needed considerable patience and flexibility to help these students develop comfort with reflective practices. Additionally, teachers recognized the need for appropriate boundaries when students shared traumatic experiences or serious personal problems, requiring collaboration with school counselors and parents. Several teachers expressed feeling unprepared to handle sensitive disclosures, indicating the need for professional development on trauma-informed teaching and appropriate referral protocols. Cultural considerations also shaped implementation. Indonesian cultural norms emphasizing collective harmony and respect for authority sometimes conflicted with encouraging individual voice and critical questioning. Teachers had to thoughtfully navigate these cultural dynamics, helping students develop critical thinking while maintaining cultural respect. Some students were initially reluctant to express opinions differing from teachers or critique social issues, requiring teachers to explicitly model and encourage respectful disagreement. This cultural negotiation demonstrates the complexity of adapting Western pedagogical models to Indonesian contexts, requiring contextual sensitivity rather than direct replication.

Impact on Student Outcomes

Multiple forms of evidence indicated positive impacts on student outcomes across linguistic, academic, and socio-emotional domains. Language teachers reported observable improvements in students' written and oral communication skills, particularly in expressing complex ideas and personal perspectives. Students demonstrated greater willingness to take linguistic risks and communicate despite imperfect grammar, leading to increased fluency development. Assessment data showed that students in participating classrooms maintained or improved standardized test scores while also developing enhanced writing quality, particularly in persuasive and narrative genres. Beyond academic measures, teachers and students reported significant socio-emotional growth. Students demonstrated increased self-awareness, empathy for others, and confidence in expressing their identities. Focus group participants described feeling more connected to classmates, more confident in their abilities, and more optimistic about their futures. Several students who had previously struggled with motivation or behavioral issues showed marked improvement in engagement and classroom conduct. Teachers attributed these changes to students feeling genuinely cared for and recognized as complete individuals rather

than merely academic performers. The development of critical consciousness emerged as an unexpected but significant outcome. Students began questioning educational inequities, social injustices, and power dynamics in their communities and society. While this sometimes created discomfort for teachers and administrators, it also indicated that students were developing the critical thinking skills essential for engaged citizenship. Several students initiated service-learning projects addressing local community needs, demonstrating that their education was extending beyond personal growth to social responsibility. This outcome aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization, suggesting that empathetic, student-centered education naturally leads to critical awareness and social engagement.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that educational values exemplified in Freedom Writers can be meaningfully adapted and implemented within bilingual education contexts in Surakarta, yielding positive outcomes for student learning and development. When teachers practice empathy, create inclusive environments, validate student experiences, and integrate reflective practices, students develop not only language proficiency but also emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and intercultural competence. These findings contribute to growing evidence that effective bilingual education requires attention to both linguistic and socio-emotional dimensions of learning. The research reveals that successful implementation requires more than adopting specific techniques; it demands fundamental shifts in teacher beliefs, institutional cultures, and educational priorities. Teachers must view students as whole persons whose experiences, emotions, and identities are integral to learning rather than separate from academic content. Schools must create structures supporting pedagogical innovation, including professional development, reasonable workload expectations, and assessment systems valuing diverse learning outcomes. The challenges encountered in this study underscore the importance of culturally responsive adaptation rather than wholesale importation of Western pedagogical models, requiring thoughtful negotiation between progressive teaching approaches and Indonesian cultural values.

The study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the relatively short two month implementation period limits understanding of long-term impacts and sustainability. Longitudinal research tracking students over multiple years could reveal whether observed benefits persist and how they influence students' educational trajectories and life outcomes. Second, the study focused on schools already committed to progressive education, raising questions about transferability to more traditional institutional contexts. Future research should examine implementation challenges and strategies in diverse school settings. Third, while the study documented positive outcomes, it did not include control groups for systematic comparison, limiting causal claims about the specific impact of Freedom Writers-inspired approaches versus other factors.

Despite these limitations, the research offers practical implications for bilingual educators and school leaders in Indonesia and similar contexts. Professional development should emphasize not only pedagogical techniques but also self-reflection on teachers' beliefs about students, learning, and their professional roles. Schools should create collaborative structures where teachers can share experiences, problem-solve challenges, and support each other in implementing student-centered approaches. Curriculum frameworks should provide sufficient flexibility for teachers to connect content to student experiences while meeting educational standards. Assessment systems should value diverse forms of student growth, including socio-emotional competencies and critical thinking alongside standardized measures. Ultimately, this study affirms that education, whether monolingual or bilingual, succeeds when it recognizes and nurtures the full humanity of learners. The Freedom Writers story resonates across cultural contexts because it speaks to universal human needs for recognition, respect, and hope. By integrating empathetic, student-centered values into bilingual education, schools in Surakarta and beyond can prepare students not only for global economic participation but also for meaningful, engaged, and compassionate lives. As Indonesia continues developing its educational system, the integration of language learning with character education and socio-emotional development offers a promising path toward more holistic and humanizing education.

Acknowledgement

The authors express sincere gratitude to the participating schools, teachers, and students in Surakarta who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights for this research. Special thanks to the school administrators who supported pedagogical innovation and created space for this collaborative inquiry. We also acknowledge the valuable feedback from colleagues who reviewed earlier drafts of this manuscript. This research was conducted independently without external funding.

References

- Berkowitz, M. W., & Bier, M. C. (2005). *What works in character education: A research-driven guide for educators*. Character Education Partnership.
- Boud, D. (2001). Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90, 9-18.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Byram, M. (2008). From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship. *Multilingual Matters*.
- Codell, E. R. (2009). *Educating Esmé: Diary of a teacher's first year*. Algonquin Books.
- Cooper, B. (2011). *Empathy in education: Engagement, values and achievement*. Continuum.
- Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-centered teacher-student relationships are effective: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 113-143.
- Cummins, J. (2000). Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire. *Multilingual Matters*.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gruwell, E. (1999). *The Freedom Writers diary: How a teacher and 150 teens used writing to change themselves and the world around them*. Broadway Books.
- Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 112-126.
- Jazadi, I. (2000). Constraints and resources for applying communicative approaches in Indonesia. *English Australia Journal*, 18(1), 31-40.
- Lamb, M., & Coleman, H. (2008). Literacy in English and the transformation of self and society in post-Soeharto Indonesia. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 11(2), 189-205.
- Lauder, A. (2008). The status and function of English in Indonesia: A review of key factors. *Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia*, 12(1), 9-20.
- Lengkanawati, N. S. (2005). EFL teachers' competence in the context of English curriculum 2004: Implications for EFL teacher education. *TEFLIN Journal*, 16(1), 79-92.
- Lin, A. M. (2015). Conceptualizing the potential role of L1 in content and language integrated learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 28(1), 74-89.
- McCombs, B. L., & Whisler, J. S. (1997). *The learner-centered classroom and school*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mitchell, D. (2013). *What really works in special and inclusive education: Using evidence-based teaching strategies*. Routledge.
- Setiawan, D. (2019). Dampak penguatan pendidikan karakter terhadap perilaku siswa. *Jurnal Pendidikan Karakter*, 9(1), 1-14.
- Smith, J. (2010). The Freedom Writers Diary: A model for teaching tolerance and social justice. *English Journal*, 99(4), 72-77.
- Warren, C. A. (2018). Empathy, teacher dispositions, and preparation for culturally responsive pedagogy. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(2), 169-183.
- Weimer, M. (2013). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Zein, M. S. (2017). Elementary English education in Indonesia: Policy developments, current practices, and future prospects. *English Today*, 33(1), 53-59.