International Journal of Education, Vocational and Social Science
https://e-journal.citakonsultindo.or.id/index.php/IJEVSS
E-ISSN : 2963 4954
IJEVSS

Cost-Benefit Analysis of Thai-Malay Bilingual Programs in Islamic Private Schools in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

This study analyzes the economic efficiency of a Thai-Malay bilingual education program in private Islamic schools in Southern Thailand using a cost-benefit analysis approach. Bilingual programs in this region were developed in response to academic needs, Patani-Malay cultural identity, and the demand for national language competency. This study employed qualitative methods using desk research techniques, utilizing data available in academic publications, Thai government reports, and international organization documents. The analysis revealed that the program's primary costs include recruiting bilingual teachers, professional training, curriculum development, and providing bilingual materials. Meanwhile, identified benefits include improving students' language competency, increasing the competitiveness of private Islamic schools, expanding access to further education, and strengthening socio-cultural integration. Overall, the benefit-to-cost ratio indicates that the Thai-Malay bilingual program provides positive and sustainable economic value for both schools and the community. However, long-term success depends on policy support, budget stability, and strengthening the quality of bilingual teachers. This study contributes theoretically to the study of educational economics and offers practical recommendations for school administrators and policymakers in Southern Thailand.

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Keywords: Economics of education; Cost-benefit analysis; Islamic private schools; Thai-Malay bilingual; Southern Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual education is often adopted as a strategy to address the needs of ethnic and linguistic minority communities in many multicultural countries. In Southern Thailand, particularly in the former Patani Sultanate (including the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat), the Malay-Patani community has a strong tradition of using Malay (the Patani/Yawi dialect) in everyday life and cultural contexts. Bilingual education, which involves the use of Malay alongside Thai in the formal education system, is one way to maintain cultural identity and local languages, while also providing access to the national language for integration and social mobility (Rahmat & Mamah, 2020).

Since the 2000s, programs such as the Patani Malay-Thai Bilingual/Multilingual Education (PMT MLE) have emerged, initiated by local educational institutions and communities with national and international support. This program is designed to allow students to pursue education in Malay and Thai simultaneously, with the hope of strengthening local literacy while still meeting national standards (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2024). However, in practice, bilingual implementation faces significant challenges. The national education system in Thailand generally emphasizes the use of Thai as the sole language of instruction, resulting in Malay being often marginalized in the official curriculum (Jehwae, 2014). Due to the dominance of Thai in formal education, many Patani Malay students show a decline in Malay language proficiency, particularly in formal vocabulary and Malay literacy. Consequently, Malay's presence in the academic realm is limited or even exclusively confined to religious studies in Islamic boarding schools (Jehwae, 2016).

This situation presents a dilemma for private Islamic schools in southern Thailand: despite community encouragement to preserve cultural heritage through bilingualism, the additional costs of bilingual teachers, dual-language learning materials, and curriculum adjustments impose financial and operational burdens. Without thorough evaluation, bilingual programs risk becoming unsustainable.

In this context, economic analysis using the cost-benefit method becomes crucial. Cost-benefit analysis (CBA) allows us to systematically assess whether the long-term benefits of bilingual programs in academic, socio-cultural, identity, and integration aspects outweigh or outweigh the costs. CBA provides an empirical basis for decision-makers in schools and public

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policy to determine the feasibility and sustainability of a program.

Several previous studies have discussed the status and evolution of Malay in Patani: Tracing the history of Malay language education in Patani shows that this language was once the main language in the pondok and community education system, before the assimilation policy and the emphasis on Thai led to the decline of Malay's position (Jehwae, 2019).

A study of the dilemma of Malay language use in Islamic boarding schools in Patani noted that although Malay continues to be taught, the dominance of Thai in academic instruction leads students to use Thai more frequently in school activities (Jehwae, 2014). Sociolinguistic research indicates a language shift in Patani society, with Patani Malay experiencing erosion in vocabulary, phonology, and everyday use due to social interaction, migration, and economic and educational pressures (Bachoh & Candra, 2022).

Linguistic research on students shows that mastery of standard Malay vocabulary in Islamic boarding schools decreases over time, especially in academic contexts, which indicates that Malay is starting to lose its functional position in formal education (Jehwae, 2016).

While the above literature is rich in sociolinguistic, historical, and educational aspects, there is a gap in studies evaluating bilingual programs from an economic perspective to determine whether the investment in bilingualism is truly worth it in terms of costs and long-term benefits. This makes this cost-benefit study of Thai-Malay bilingualism in private Islamic schools in southern Thailand an important contribution to the literature and policy.

However, previous studies have focused more on linguistic, social, and historical aspects. Almost no research has comprehensively assessed bilingual education from an economic perspective. This gap represents a major research gap and underlies the urgency of CBA-based research. This article aims to apply a cost-benefit analysis to a Thai-Malay bilingual program in a private Islamic school in Southern Thailand, to assess the extent to which investment in the program is economically, socially, and educationally justified. Theoretically, this study enriches the study of the economics of education in the context of a multilingual society. Practically, the research findings are expected to provide a more measurable policy basis for schools, educational foundations, and local governments in developing sustainable and effective bilingual programs. Against this backdrop, this article aims to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of a Thai-Malay bilingual program in a private Islamic school in Southern Thailand. Theoretically, this research will enrich the literature on the economics of education in a multilingual and ethnic minority context. Practically, the analysis is expected to provide empirical input for school administrators, local communities, and policymakers on whether bilingual programs are feasible to continue, and how

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to design financing and strategies to make bilingualism more efficient, inclusive, and sustainable.

LITERATURE OF REVIEW

The theoretical study in this research is based on an integration of the perspectives of educational economics, bilingual education, and sociolinguistics within a multicultural society. This approach is used to understand that the Thai–Malay bilingual program is not only a pedagogical practice but also a social, economic, and cultural investment.

From an educational economics perspective, education is understood as an investment in human capital development. This theory emphasizes that education increases individual productivity through the acquisition of skills and knowledge, which in turn leads to increased income and social mobility (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). In this context, the Thai–Malay bilingual program can be seen as a long-term investment that generates benefits not only economically but also in the form of increased linguistic and social capacity for students. Therefore, evaluation of educational programs cannot be separated from the analysis of cost efficiency and resulting benefits.

The *cost-benefit analysis* (CBA) approach is used as the primary framework in assessing the feasibility of educational programs. This analysis allows for a comprehensive assessment of the balance between costs incurred and benefits gained, both in the short and long term (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). In its implementation in bilingual education, costs include not only financial expenditures such as the procurement of teaching staff and teaching materials, but also opportunity costs and social costs resulting from the pressures of national language policies. Meanwhile, the resulting benefits are multidimensional, encompassing academic, social, and cultural aspects.

From a bilingual education perspective, the use of two languages in the learning process is an effective strategy for improving students' cognitive and literacy skills. Bilingual learning models, such as two-way immersion, emphasize the importance of using the mother tongue as the basis for learning, which is then combined with a second language to expand academic and social access (Sari et al., 2025). UNESCO (2024) also emphasized that mother tongue-based education has a significant contribution to improving learning outcomes, particularly in linguistic minority communities. Thus, the Thai–Malay bilingual program serves as a pedagogical approach that is adaptive to both local needs and national demands.

Furthermore, from a sociolinguistic perspective, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of cultural and social identity. In the context of the Malay-

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Patani community, Malay plays a crucial role in maintaining ethnic and religious identity (Rahmat & Mamah, 2020). However, the dominance of Thai in the national education system has led to a language shift, resulting in a decline in the use of Malay in academic settings (Bachoh & Candra, 2022; Jehwae, 2016). Therefore, bilingual education can be viewed as a strategy to maintain the sustainability of local languages while adapting to the demands of the national system.

Furthermore, cultural capital theory is also relevant in explaining this phenomenon. Language, as part of cultural capital, plays a role in determining an individual's social position within society. Mastery of Thai provides access to national social structures, while mastery of Malay maintains legitimacy within the local community (Aini, 2024). Thus, bilingual education serves as a means of distributing cultural capital, enabling individuals to adapt to two different social contexts.

In the context of Islamic education, this approach is also related to the concept of values-based education, where the educational process is oriented not only toward academic achievement but also toward the formation of religious and moral identity. Private Islamic schools in Southern Thailand integrate the national curriculum with Islamic values and local culture, making bilingual education part of a strategy for preserving community identity (Maduerawa, 2021; Salaeh, 2023).

Overall, this theoretical study demonstrates that the Thai–Malay bilingual program is a multidimensional investment that cannot be assessed solely from an economic perspective. It also significantly contributes to maintaining cultural identity, enhancing social cohesion, and expanding access to education for minority communities. Therefore, evaluation of this program must take into account a balance between economic, social, and cultural aspects.

METHODS

The research approach uses a qualitative-descriptive design supported by simple quantitative analysis when cost or budget data are available, allowing researchers to comprehensively describe the structure of the Thai–Malay bilingual program and estimate its economic value. The type of analysis used is a cost–benefit analysis, following the educational economic evaluation framework as recommended in the education policy literature (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018) to assess the balance between operational, social, and opportunity costs with academic, cultural, and identity benefits.

The data sources were academic publications related to Islamic education and multilingualism in Southern Thailand, Thailand's national education report containing language

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policies and private school management, school budget data from public reports of relevant institutions, Islamic private school curriculum documents, and reports from international organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF on minority education and language policies. The data collection techniques in this study used literature and documentation to explore regulations, school reports, scientific publications, and international organization data.

Data analysis was conducted through cost and benefit mapping, comparison of findings across sources, and thematic synthesis to integrate economic, cultural identity, and managerial aspects into a comprehensive picture of the efficiency and relevance of Thai–Malay bilingual programs in the context of minority education in Southern Thailand.

DISCUSSION

Overview of Islamic Private Schools in Southern Thailand

Southern Thailand, particularly the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, is known for its predominantly Malay-Muslim population, which historically has a strong Islamic educational tradition (Munip & Djafar, 2019). Private Islamic schools in this region are generally formed through the transformation of traditional Islamic boarding schools (pesantren)/madrasahs (Islamic boarding schools) into modern private schools, integrating religious curricula with national or semi-national curricula (Saah, 2017).

Socio-economically, many Malay-Muslim communities in southern Thailand live in agrarian or local trading conditions; private Islamic education is a primary option because it is considered capable of preserving cultural and religious identity amidst the dominance of Thai-based national culture (Maduerawa, 2021). In this context, private Islamic schools function not only as formal educational institutions but also as centers for the preservation of Malay-Patani culture, the Malay (Patani) language, Islamic values, and community identity (Salaeh, 2023).

Malay (Patani), along with Thai and sometimes Arabic in religious contexts, plays a crucial role in the learning process. Although state policy emphasizes Thai as the national language, Malay remains a medium of instruction in many private Islamic schools and Islamic boarding schools (pesantren/madrasah), particularly for religious studies, culture, and local identity (Jehwae, 2014). Thus, private Islamic schools in Southern Thailand serve a dual purpose: providing formal education while preserving the cultural heritage and identity of the Malay-Muslim community.

Institutions of Islamic Private Schools and the Rationality of Bilingual Programs

Private Islamic schools in Southern Thailand (Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat) emerged from

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the transformation of traditional madrasahs/pondoks into modern institutions. Socio-culturally, these schools play a dual role: Providers of Formal Education: Integrating the national curriculum with religious curricula; and Centers for Identity Preservation: Maintaining the Malay-Patani cultural heritage, Malay language, and Islamic values amidst the dominance of Thai national culture (Maduerawa, 2021; Salaeh, 2023).

The languages of instruction used include Thai (as the national language), Malay (as the local/identity language), and sometimes Arabic (for religious studies). The school's vision often focuses on multilingualism (Arabic, Malay, and English) in addition to national academic achievement (Yaekaji, 2017).

The research findings show that private Islamic schools in Southern Thailand developed within a unique socio-cultural context, namely the Malay-Muslim community as a minority group within the Thai national education system. These schools function not only as formal educational institutions but also as spaces for the reproduction of cultural identity, language, and Islamic values. This fact explains why Malay (Patani) is maintained as the language of instruction, particularly in religious and cultural studies, despite Thai being mandated as the national language.

From an educational economics perspective, these findings demonstrate that school and community decisions to implement bilingual education are not based solely on cost considerations, but rather on the rationality of social and cultural investment. Thai–Malay bilingual education is positioned as a strategy to maintain the continuity of community identity while ensuring students' access to the national education system. Thus, the benefits expected from the outset are not only academic, but also social and symbolic.

Implementation of the Thai–Malay Bilingual Program and its Implications for the Cost Structure

The bilingual program in these schools is an adaptive strategy. The simultaneous use of Thai and Malay/Patani is similar to the Two-Way Immersion or Language Immersion Model within a bilingual education framework, where academic instruction takes place in two languages, or the target language is used intensively (Sari et al., 2025).

Curriculum: Combines Islamic religious studies, Malay/Arabic language, and general subjects (science, mathematics, Thai). Human Resources: Teachers are recruited with the requirements of multilingualism (Malay, Arabic, Thai), religious knowledge, and academic competence, making them guardians of cultural-religious identity (Rasid et al., 2019). Facilities: Schools are equipped with Malay/Arabic language books (often in Jawi script) and a community

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environment that supports Malay traditions and Islamic practices (Fauziah, 2012).

Empirically, the implementation of bilingual programs in private Islamic schools demonstrates a contextual pattern of language use. Thai is primarily used in general subjects oriented toward national standards, while Malay/Patani dominates in religious education and daily school life. This pattern requires teachers with multilingual competence and a strong cultural-religious understanding.

This situation directly impacts the program's cost structure. Research reveals that the school's operational costs are relatively high, particularly for remuneration of multilingual teachers, procurement of teaching materials in Malay and Arabic, and ongoing pedagogical development. As a private school, the funding burden is largely borne by the community through fees and donations. From a cost-benefit perspective, these costs can be categorized as a significant upfront investment, but they are deemed necessary to ensure program quality and alignment with community values.

In addition to direct costs, the study also found opportunity and social costs. Parents and students had to forgo cheaper educational alternatives, while teachers faced additional workloads due to their dual roles as academic educators and guardians of cultural identity. Social costs emerged in the form of linguistic and cultural assimilation pressures resulting from national policies that prioritize Thai as the dominant language. These findings strengthen the argument that evaluating the costs of education in minority areas must consider social and political dimensions, not just financial ones.

Multidimensional Benefits of Bilingual Programs for Students and Communities

Although the costs of private bilingual and Islamic education programs in the Patani area are relatively high, the benefits are multidimensional, encompassing long-term academic, social, cultural, and economic aspects for students, communities, and schools:

1. Improved student language competency: Students acquire proficiency in Malay (Patani), Thai, and often Arabic, strengthening multilingual competency, which is important academically, socially, and for identity. This supports the continuity of local culture and enables students to take on roles in both local and national contexts (Yaekaji, 2017).
2. Increasing the school's appeal to the community: because it offers religious education, cultural identity, and multilingualism, private Islamic schools have become the primary

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choice for the Malay-Muslim community, strengthening parents' trust in education that aligns with their values and identity (Maduerawa, 2021).

3. Social mobility and access to further education: students graduating from bilingual private Islamic schools tend to have a religious, academic, and linguistic foundation that allows access to higher education institutions both in Thailand and abroad as well as opportunities for socio-economic integration (Salaeh, 2023).
4. Benefits of Malay-Patani cultural identity: schools play a role in preserving the traditions, language, Islamic values, and cultural heritage of the community; this is important as a buffer of identity amidst pressures of national assimilation (Aini, 2024).
5. Managerial benefits for schools: Private schools offering bilingual programs and religious education can attract community interest, increase enrollment, community support, donations, and become a center of attraction for the local Malay-Muainislim community (Yaekaji, 2017). Thus, the benefits of bilingual programs and private Islamic education include academic, socio-cultural, and identity aspects, as well as long-term potential for communities and individuals.

On the other hand, research results indicate that the benefits of the Thai-Malay bilingual program are broad and multifaceted. At the individual level, students demonstrated increased multilingual competence, particularly in Malay (Patani) and Thai, as well as Arabic for religious contexts. This competence not only contributed to academic achievement but also strengthened students' identity and self-confidence as part of the Malay-Muslim community.

These benefits align with human capital theory, which positions language skills as a crucial asset in developing individual capacity. However, unlike a purely economic approach, language benefits in this context also serve as cultural and symbolic capital. Mastery of Malay serves as a means of maintaining identity, while mastery of Thai opens access to further education and social mobility within Thailand's national structure.

At the institutional level, bilingual programs enhance the appeal of private Islamic schools to the community. Schools are perceived as institutions capable of bridging the demands of the state and the cultural aspirations of the community. The impact is evident in the stability of student enrollment, parental loyalty, and community support for the school's sustainability. From a managerial perspective, these benefits contribute to strengthening the school's position within the local education ecosystem.

This program is considered socio-culturally and strategically sound (not merely economically viable). The return on investment lies in the development of culturally and

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religiously integrated human capital, which ultimately increases the potential for future productivity, earnings, and cultural resilience. The program's sustainability depends heavily on community commitment and the adaptation of national policies to plurality (tolerance).

Interpretation of Cost–Benefit Ratio in Long-Term Perspective

When costs and benefits are comprehensively compared, research findings suggest that the cost-benefit ratio of Thai-Malay bilingual programs tends to be positive, particularly when assessed over the long term. Although the per-student cost is relatively higher than that of public schools, the benefits extend beyond short-term academic outcomes. Strengthening cultural identity, multilingual competence, and social cohesion represent returns that cannot be fully measured using conventional economic indicators

However, from a formal economic efficiency perspective, there are potential doubts about the sustainability of funding if community support weakens or national policies become more restrictive toward the use of minority languages. These findings suggest that program viability is highly dependent on external factors, particularly tolerance of language policies and structural support for educational plurality.

The program's sustainability depends heavily on community commitment, school managerial capacity, and national policy tolerance for linguistic and identity plurality. With continued support from within the community and national policy, the program has significant potential for development, including curriculum diversification, technology integration, and networking between schools and the Patani Malay diaspora community.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

From the perspective of educational economics theory, this analysis supports the view that education, particularly that which focuses on human capital and cultural identity, should be understood as a long-term investment, not simply a short-term consumption. The combination of academic, religious, and local language curricula provides complex added value: academic, social, and cultural.

From a socio-political perspective, the existence of bilingual Islamic private schools in southern Thailand also represents a form of cultural and identity resistance against the pressures of state assimilation. Education serves as a platform for preserving Malay-Patani cultural heritage and Islamizing community identity—something that, for many local communities, means cultural survival, not just formal education (Aini, 2024).

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From a school management perspective, the results suggest that offering bilingual programs and religious education can be an adaptive strategy in minority contexts: attracting community loyalty, maintaining enrollment continuity, and building a reputation as a culturally and spiritually relevant educational institution. However, the success of these programs depends heavily on teacher quality, particularly their multilingual skills, religious understanding, pedagogical competence, and school resources and materials.

Although there has been some research on Islamic education in Southern Thailand and the role of private schools in preserving Patani Malay culture, literature explicitly combining economic cost-benefit analysis, multilingualism (Thai-Malay bilingualism), and socio-cultural and identity benefits is relatively limited. Many studies focus on historical, cultural, or political conflict aspects, but few quantitatively or qualitatively evaluate the cost-efficiency, long-term benefits, and sustainability of bilingual programs. Therefore, new research using a cost-benefit framework that also considers cultural and social identity benefits could make important contributions to both academic and educational policy in minority conflict areas like Patani.

Theoretically, these results and discussion expand the application of cost-benefit analysis in education by incorporating socio-cultural and identity benefits as essential components. Bilingual education in private Islamic schools in Southern Thailand demonstrates that cost efficiency cannot be separated from the social and political context in which education takes place.

From a policy perspective, these findings indicate that supporting bilingual programs in minority areas not only improves educational quality but also contributes to social stability and national integration. Without recognizing these non-economic benefits, education policy risks neglecting long-term investments that are crucial to the sustainability of communities and the education system itself.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the Thai–Malay bilingual program in private Islamic schools in Southern Thailand is a form of educational investment that provides overall benefits greater than the costs incurred, especially when assessed from a long-term perspective. The implementation of the bilingual program has been proven to support the simultaneous mastery of Thai and Malay, strengthen Malay–Muslim religious and cultural identities, and increase students' readiness to participate in the national education system without losing their cultural roots. Although this program requires relatively high operational, opportunity, and social costs, the resulting benefits

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are multidimensional and sustainable, encompassing academic, social, cultural, and institutional aspects.

In practical terms, these findings indicate that a community-based bilingual education model can be a strategic alternative for education delivery in cultural and linguistic minority areas, particularly when schools serve as a bridge between state policy demands and local identity needs. The policy implications of this research are the importance of structural and regulatory support for private Islamic schools to ensure the sustainability of bilingual programs and improve cost efficiency without sacrificing quality or cultural values. Speculatively, strengthening school managerial capacity, developing multilingual teacher training, and integrating learning technology have the potential to improve the program's cost-benefit ratio in the future. For future research, more quantitative measurements of the long-term impact of bilingual programs on academic achievement, graduate social mobility, and cost efficiency per student are recommended to enrich the evidence base for educational policymaking in minority areas.

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