

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN IMPLEMENTING MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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Abstract: The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum has made English to be included as local content at the primary school level. However, what has been designed on the national curriculum only sometimes goes by school implementation. This study focuses on teaching English in SDN Kidul Dalem 2 Malang, where English is taught as local content for grade 1 and 4 students, and highlights the hindrances. The researcher found that many students need more English exposure at home, do not have encouragement from their surroundings to learn English, and the materials in Merdeka Curriculum are sometimes too hard for the students.

Keywords: *Merdeka curriculum, Challenges, Young learners*

There has been a strong desire among individuals to incorporate English into the basic curriculum. There are proponents of the viewpoint that the introduction of a second language during the early stages of a child's education could potentially impose excessive stress and impede their overall educational development. There is an opposing viewpoint that argues against the expectation for pupils to acquire a second language until they have achieved complete proficiency in their first language (Diniyah, 2017). The act of instructing the English language in primary educational institutions entails the dissemination of knowledge to individuals between the ages of 6 and 12, sometimes referred to as young learners. Due to their young age, the students are of various levels of proficiency in the English language. Some individuals may possess great English skills, while others may have no knowledge of the English language. This phenomenon engenders a discrepancy in students' motivation towards the acquisition of English language skills. There exists a divergence of opinions among individuals, with a portion perceiving English as a subject that is both uncomplicated and pleasurable, while others hold the belief that English is a challenging and monotonous pursuit. In addition, it is imperative to provide suitable English lessons to students who possess a strong interest in the subject, while those who lack enthusiasm for studying English should be encouraged and supported through the demonstration of the exciting and enjoyable aspects of the language.

On 2021, the government made the decision to incorporate English as a local subject within the primary school level as part of the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum. The implementation of the program commenced in the academic year 2022, targeting students in grades 1 and 4. This development might be considered a significant advancement, given English has been excluded from the elementary school curriculum since 2013. The Merdeka Curriculum is an educational framework that incorporates a range of intra-curricular learning opportunities. This approach aims to enhance the effectiveness of the curriculum by providing students with ample time to delve into subjects and develop their competencies. According to the Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education (2021), educators possess the autonomy to select from a range of instructional resources in order to tailor the learning experience to the unique requirements and interests of their pupils. Teachers has the prerogative to exercise flexibility in organizing instructional materials, hence enhancing the alignment of these resources with the unique requirements of their pupils. However, it is imperative that such adaptations remain grounded on the content prescribed within the designated textbook. Nevertheless, not all circumstances align with predetermined plans. This research aims to investigate the issues associated with teaching English in SDN Kidul Dalem 2 Malang, specifically in relation to the implementation of the merdeka curriculum. This paper aims to explore the obstacles encountered by the researcher during her teaching engagement at SDN Kidul Dalem 2 Malang. The researcher is affiliated with SDN Kidul Dalem 2 Malang, an educational institution situated in close proximity to Malang's town government. Upon the implementation of the 2013 curriculum, this educational institution made the decision to exclude English from its instructional offerings. In 2021, the educational institution recognized the necessity of incorporating English as an extracurricular activity. The principal's choice to incorporate English instruction is justified, as several graduates have expressed that learning English at the junior high school level poses difficulties in the absence of prior English language proficiency. Moreover, the majority of the students are currently staying in a renowned tourist destination and frequently receive visits from international visitors. Possessing proficiency in the English language affords pupils a broad range of opportunities for engaging in meaningful interactions. The acquisition of information and different abilities is essential for pupils to navigate and thrive in a culturally diverse global society.

Acquiring proficiency in the English language provides individuals with the opportunity to get access to a wealth of knowledge about the world and to develop a broader understanding of many perspectives. The enhancement of critical thinking skills can be facilitated through students' acquisition of socio-cultural and

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intercultural information. The revised curriculum places emphasis on enhancing proficiency in six language abilities within the domain of English learning. These skills encompass listening, speaking, reading, watching, writing, and presenting across many textual formats. The concept of learning achievement pertains to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). The CEFR framework encompasses criteria that are observable in students' abilities, including: (1) the capacity to sustain interaction and effectively convey desired messages across diverse contexts with clarity, (2) the ability to express main ideas comprehensively, and (3) the capability to maintain communication despite occasional gaps (Dewi, et al., 2021). Significantly, despite the absence of external pressure from foreign visitors to their homes, it is of considerable importance to acquire proficiency in the English language during early childhood. According to Lightbown and Spada (1999;29), the process of instructing English to young learners is facilitated by the fact that youngsters possess a critical phase in their cognitive development, commonly referred to as the "golden age." The findings indicate that the acquisition of English by young learners holds significant importance. The acquisition of English at an early age is believed to establish a solid foundation in English language proficiency for youngsters. Within this particular setting, it is anticipated that the students would acquire a proficient understanding of fundamental principles and structures of the English language, specifically in relation to grammar. This acquisition is deemed valuable as it will serve as a foundation for their future pursuit of advanced education. The acquisition of English language skills at the elementary school level is deemed essential, despite the presence of certain challenges. Slattery and Willis (2001) assert that primary students encompass individuals between the age range of seven (7) to twelve (12) years old. There are variations in the approach to English instruction across primary school, junior high school, and senior high school. Teaching in primary school poses a significant challenge for educators. Young learners possess distinct traits and exhibit specific demands. Young learners possess a vivid imagination, exhibit high levels of physical activity, are prone to boredom, and encounter challenges in distinguishing between various stimuli. Individuals exhibit a diminished capacity for sustained focus and demonstrate a preference for gamified educational activities. According to Cahyati and Madya (2019), students engage in independent study within the classroom setting. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum took place in July 2022. Following a series of preparatory sessions, she was assigned the responsibility of instructing students in the first, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. The initial implementation of the most recent curriculum involved the introduction of Grade 1 and Grade 4, necessitating the utilization of appropriate instructional materials. The following topics are to be learned in grades 1 and 4.

Grade	Topics
1	Semester 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Greetings - Self-introduction - Possessive pronouns: my and your - Numbers 1 to 10 - Plural and singular: Things in the classroom - Colors, shapes, sizes
	Semester 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have (possessive) - He and she - Family members - Fruits - Using 'like and likes' for favorite fruits
4	Semester 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Activities using v-ing - Numbers 50-100 - Prepositions - Activities at home - Things in the house - The use of 'can'
	Semester 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Telling the time - Daily schedule - Vehicles - Activities with vehicles - Fruits

Table 1. Topics discussed in grade 1 and 4

METHOD

The present study utilises a descriptive qualitative approach. The objective of descriptive research is to provide a comprehensive depiction of a phenomena and its associated attributes. This study places greater emphasis on the identification of what has occurred, rather than the exploration of how or why it has transpired. Hence, data collection methods such as observation and surveys are frequently employed (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This study examines the researcher's own reflections on her professional experience at SDN Kidul Dalem 2, focusing on the students' reception of instructional materials. The researcher made the decision to compile a comprehensive list of the various challenges encountered when teaching English at SDN Kidul Dalem 2 Malang, with a particular focus on grade 1 and 4. This decision was prompted by the fact that this was the researcher's initial attempt at implementing a new curriculum.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

During the initial year of employment, the researcher was assigned the responsibility of teaching students in grades 4, 5, and 6, with English being designated as an extracurricular activity. The teacher independently created the materials for instruction, taking into consideration the fact that the pupils possess no prior knowledge or experience in the English language. The learning process commences with introduction to alphabets and numbers, followed by the development of vocabulary proficiency and learning basic expressions. The researcher independently generated all of the materials, including the test items for both the mid-term and final examinations. The researcher took into consideration the impending graduation of grade 6 pupils and provided them with more advanced materials. This was done in order to provide them with the necessary skills to interact with new peers who possess varying levels of English proficiency at the Junior High School level. During this specific timeframe, the researcher did not experience any external demands to meet certain learning objectives, as she was not bound by any governmental rules. Additionally, the principal granted her the autonomy to utilise any resources she saw necessary.

Since its implementation in 2022, the Merdeka curriculum has been under to scrutiny by researchers. Initially, their focus was on examining the contents included in the government's official textbook, *My Next Words*. The researchers aimed to determine which resources were suitable for classroom implementation in order to achieve the desired learning objectives.

Teaching English to first-grade students entails providing them with a new beginning, and fortunately, the instructional tools available are straightforward and well-suited to their developmental stage. From the outset, the instructor may develop a strong affinity for the English language. Nevertheless, there exist several challenges in this context. Firstly, a significant number of students lack the necessary literacy skills to read and write proficiently. Secondly, a considerable amount of time is often dedicated to managing disruptive behaviour and addressing unrelated issues, detracting from valuable instructional time. Thirdly, multiple meetings are typically required to fully grasp a particular topic, indicating the need for additional support and reinforcement. Lastly, it is worth noting that not all parents possess an awareness of their children's requirement for English language learning support. The materials presented in the textbook, although straightforward and suitable, do not include any provision for introducing alphabets and numerals to first-grade students. Consequently, it is necessary for the researcher to modify the lesson plan by allocating a few minutes to the introduction of alphabets and numbers before proceeding to the initial chapter in the textbook.

In contrast, grade 4 presents distinct challenges in comparison to those encountered in grade 1. Based on the provided textbook contents, a substantial disparity exists between the existing knowledge of pupils and the anticipated outcome. The fourth-grade pupils were introduced to the English language for the first time coinciding with the debut of the Merdeka curriculum. However, it should be noted that the curricular materials provided were already at an advanced level. The individuals in question have not had prior instruction on the concepts of alphabets and numbers, nonetheless, they are anticipated to possess knowledge of numerical values ranging from 50 to 100. The individuals are anticipated to comprehend the usage of the present continuous tense, despite lacking prior familiarity with subject pronouns and the verb "to be." Teaching topics related to time might provide challenges due to the fact that fourth-grade pupils are still in the process of acquiring a more comprehensive understanding of numerical concepts. Based on the researcher's empirical observations, it is evident that additional time is required to facilitate the alignment between students' proficiency and their capacity to effectively engage with the educational resources provided by the government. In preparation for commencing instruction on the initial chapter of the book, the individual scheduled a series of two to three appointments, with the objective of establishing a solid groundwork via the comprehension of alphabets and numbers.

In order to enhance student comprehension, the researcher revisited key topics several times, for more than three meetings. However, this approach may inadvertently lead to insufficient time to cover all intended topics before the end of the semester. In addition to the obstacles associated with the availability of learning materials, another external issue that hinders English language acquisition is the lack of parental and familial encouragement to engage in English learning activities at home, such as prolonged viewing of educational content on platforms like YouTube, which might potentially enhance their language skills. Although they receive

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visits from foreigners to their village to admire the all-blue decorations of Kampung Biru Arema, they do not feel motivated to become self-sufficient in learning the English language. There is just one parent from the fourth grade who demonstrates a willingness to engage in English conversation with the researcher in the parents' WhatsApp group. However, this effort does not appear to significantly enhance the child's motivation

to acquire English skills beyond what is already being taught in the classroom.

In his study, Musthafa (2010) provides a detailed analysis of the necessary components for successful instruction in English language acquisition among young learners. The following items are as follows: The consistent utilization of the English language is vital in order to provide students with a substantial amount of exposure to English. It is imperative to establish a print-rich environment in the English classroom, encompassing the surrounding space. In the context of Early Years Language (EYL) education, it is recommended that teachers employ activity-based teaching-learning approaches, including Total Physical Response (TPR), games, and projects. By utilizing a variety of techniques in short intervals, teachers can effectively sustain the children's interest and engagement in English lessons. Teachers should prioritize the instruction of functional English in order to enhance vocabulary development and meet the immediate communicative needs of the learners. It is crucial for teachers to consistently reinforce the learning process to ensure the acquisition of English expressions and vocabulary items. Additionally, teachers should employ effective and beneficial routines that facilitate language acquisition. It is compulsory that educators possess a proficient mastery of the English language and possess the capacity to serve as exemplary figures for the students.

The first obstacle encountered by the researcher in teaching English to students in elementary schools is the absence of a supportive learning environment at home. The practice of parents instructing English as a foreign language (EFL) within the confines of their own homes has emerged as a viable option. This is due to the potential for parental involvement to cultivate increased engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy in their children's English language acquisition (Sumanti & Muljani, 2021). However, this presents a significant difficulty as the informal nature of home learning necessitates careful planning and a regular curriculum, as well as parents who possess a strong command of the English language (Ratnadewi & Wijaya, 2021).

Self-directed English as a Foreign Language (EFL) study undertaken by parents within the confines of their own homes presents a viable and auspicious alternative approach. There is a little body of study on this subject; yet, several papers warrant our consideration. One notable study conducted by Brito (2017) emphasized the significance of the language environment within a child's family during their early developmental years. The research highlighted the crucial role of this environment in shaping language perception and providing favorable circumstances for effective intervention. The study conducted by Helton et al (2018) revealed that engaging in regular home routine activities has a beneficial effect on children's psychological well-being and contributes to their proficiency in the English language (Susanty et al., 2021). Additionally, incorporating activities such as watching animated films as a means of introducing English as a foreign language (EFL) has proven successful in promoting spontaneous English-speaking abilities among children (Scheffler, 2015). According to Butler and Le (2017), providing home support, similar to an open parenting style, has been found to have a beneficial influence on children's English language performance. Additionally, Ratnadewi and Wijaya (2021) suggest that implementing routine activities at home, which are structured, guided, and consistent, can serve as an effective means of input and interaction for non-English speaking children residing in a non-English speaking country.

To overcome this challenge, the researcher regularly assigns a homework through quizziz, and also send some children English songs to the parents' whatsapp group to be played at home and they have to learn the lyrics. By doing so, the parents realize that learning English can be incorporated at home and they daily life can totally relate with the learning materials. When the topic is about family members, the students are given a task to interview their parents about the names of their relatives. That can make the parents understand that actually their own family members can be an authentic source of learning materials.

The second challenge is to the materials utilized. Fourth-grade students are required to generate active phrases utilizing the present continuous tense. Indeed, the teaching of grammar in the classroom of young learners is not advisable. Brown contends that prioritizing the teaching of grammar in the classroom of young learners may impede the development of fluency acquisition. Some students may find it challenging to freely express their thoughts when they become overly fixated on grammar rules while producing words. Accordingly, Pinter proposes the avoidance of explicit grammar instruction, as he contends that teaching grammar in isolation might result in a monotonous and unengaging educational experience. When grammar is deliberately taught, pupils acquire knowledge of grammar through dedicated instructional sessions. The alternative approach is the implicit way of teaching grammar. According to Brown (year), implicit learning is characterized by the acquisition of knowledge or skills without deliberate conscious attention or awareness. In order to overcome this challenge, the researcher made the decision to employ an implicit approach to teaching grammar. Rather than explicitly instructing students to identify the purpose of the verb "to be" in relation to specific subject pronouns, the researcher instead guided students to identify activities based on visual illustrations. The present continuous tense is introduced at the commencement of fourth grade, and it is worth

noting that there is a lack of preparatory activities preceding the initial topic that could facilitate the students' comprehension of fundamental English concepts. The ability to recognize the phonetic value of letters in English is a fundamental skill that pupils must acquire in order to effectively comprehend written English materials. The acquisition of letter recognition and pronunciation skills has been shown to positively impact children's communication abilities, hence facilitating improved academic performance. Consequently, the researcher made the decision to allocate a whole session to instruct fourth-grade kids on the fundamentals of alphabets. The objective was to enhance the students' ability to identify words during dictation or spelling test

CONCLUSION

On facing the challenges to teach English as a part of merdeka curriculum, there are some obstacles faced by the researcher as the teacher herself. The obstacles are regarding the lack of supportive environment at home, and also the topic discussed on the 4th grade textbook is somehow hard to be grasped easily by grade 4 students who learn English for the first time. To solve the first problem, the researcher bridges the classroom learning into daily life at home by giving them extensive viewing materials and some tasks that relate to their life. Thus, the parents can be involved also. To solve the second challenge, the researcher decided to adapt the materials by allocating one meeting in the beginning to teach alphabets and numbers, and simplify the content into picture-observing.

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