

## Teaching English at primary school under Merdeka Curriculum: Students' voices

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### Abstract

The transformation of the education curriculum is inevitable since the quality of teaching and learning should be improved. In Indonesia for instance, it has experienced more than 10 changes since the independence up to now where the Merdeka curriculum is implemented. As a part of the curriculum, the status of English at the primary level remains the same. It is an elective subject that can be taught based on school readiness which is no different compared to the previous curriculum (K-13 Curriculum). However, given the new look of the curriculum that emphasizes students' interest and needs in learning, it is worth identifying how students at primary schools perceive learning. In addition, the students' voices particularly in teaching English have not been given priority. The participants of the study were 147 primary school students (N-147, 80 males and 67 females) who learn English in the first and fourth grades. In this study, the researchers used several techniques for collecting data including a questionnaire that cover four aspects; students' interests; methods; media, and students' comprehension activities. In addition, the researchers use also focus group discussions that were held on the site. The results show that several issues are still there to be solved sooner rather than later. Therefore, the quality of teaching English at the primary level could be better in the future.

*Keywords: English, Primary school, reality, Merdeka curriculum*

### INTRODUCTION

The introduction of English in elementary schools in Indonesia has been going on for the last few decades (Hamied & Musthafa, 2019; Sulistiyo et al., 2019). This is done so that students can be more familiar with English and it is hoped that it will be useful for their future. In line with what was found by (Johnstone, 2009) who sees that the introduction of English from an early age is one of the biggest forms of investment in a country. How could it not be, in this modern era like today, English is widely used and found in everyday life such as in the economic, health, tourism, and education sectors. By having adequate English skills, the future generation will be more competitive in a global society (S. Zein, 2016a).

Learning English in elementary schools in Indonesia is developing. It can be seen from the inclusion of English into the structure of the national curriculum (Hamied & Musthafa, 2019). Even so, in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (independent curriculum) that was implemented in late 2022 (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), English is placed as one of the elective subjects that can be taught to students when schools have qualified resources and also the availability of representative facilities and infrastructure. Regardless of its status as an elective subject, teaching English in primary schools will be very profitable (Falah et al., 2023).

However, in reality, the practice of teaching English is not easy to implement, both in the previous curriculum (K-13) and the current curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*). There are many challenges faced by teachers such as the low qualifications of teachers who teach English (Pertiwi et al., 2022) since most Indonesian schools are mandating this course to be taught by classroom teachers who have no background in English. In addition, there is a lack of available professional development programs (S. Zein, 2016b), so it is difficult for teachers to update their knowledge regarding effective English teaching techniques and methods which will certainly affect the learning outcomes carried out. Many schools are less supportive of teaching English in elementary schools (Primary et al., 2023; Zein, 2012).

From a student's point of view, it's not much different. Several constraints are still there to overcome. Many students consider English a difficult subject (Hawanti, 2014). In addition, students' motivation to study also tends to be low, where students' enthusiasm, compared to other subjects, is poor and they participate passively and are afraid of saying any words in English (Cahyati & Madya, 2019). Last but not least is the lack of exposure to the language which results in students being less familiar with English (Putu et al., 2021).

In this regard, the positive efforts made by the government through the *Merdeka Kurikulum* is started to grow. For example, the freedom given to teachers to compile learning modules based on the needs and abilities of students is what makes this curriculum different from the previous one. Indeed, with these efforts, the hope to improve the quality of learning English is bigger. Therefore, it is important to investigate how it is implemented in practice, especially about how students perceive learning English in this *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Moreover, this kind of study has not been widely carried out and reported. In fact, by knowing the practice in the field, the opportunity to improve the process of learning English in elementary schools will be greater.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study. It was employed due to information obtained was related to perceptions, values, and also phenomena, which in this case about teaching English in elementary schools (Creswell, 2013). The participants involved in this study were grade 4 students from six elementary schools (four public and two private elementary schools) in Kuningan District, West Java (n-147, 80 males and 67 females). The reason behind the selection of fourth-grade students is based on the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* which is carried out in stages in grades one and four. Even so, it doesn't mean that English is not taught in other classes such as second, third, fifth, and sixth grades. It is still taught by using a different framework (K-13). In collecting data, researchers used two techniques, namely questionnaires and interviews. The distribution of the questionnaire was carried out conventionally since they did not allow to bring smartphones to schools. The questionnaire consists of 20 items covering the 4 aspects that you want to know about in this study, namely personal interests, methods, media, and also assessments carried out in learning English in elementary schools. For the interview itself, the researcher did not conduct it with all students, but only involved several students who were considered to be representative of the total number of participants. As for analysis techniques, researchers used descriptive analysis related to the findings obtained.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Students' interest

Teaching English to young learners is not an easy task to do since they have many unique characteristics that should be taken into consideration by the teacher in teaching English. Children are egocentric and tend to talk about themselves (Suyanto, 2013) including personal interests. Learning English, it is no different. Their interest in learning English as a foreign language should also be based on exploring their language ability. The following table shows what the students in the current study like to do regarding learning English.

Table 1. Students' interest in learning English

Aspek	Criteria								Total
	Always	%	Often	%	Seldom	%	Never	%	
Personal Interest									
I like learning English	23	15,6	87	59,2	24	16,3	13	8,8	100
I listen to English songs at home	10	6,8	15	10,2	70	47,6	52	35,4	100
I watch an English TV program	3	2,0	10	6,8	15	10,2	119	81,0	100
My parents talk in English at home	0	0,0	7	4,8	5	3,4	135	91,8	100
I take English additional courses	20	13,6	0	0,0	5	3,4	122	83,0	100

Based on Table 1, the student's interest in learning English was relatively low. Only 15.6% like English and take it as their favorite subject. Meanwhile, 59.2%, acknowledged that they sometimes like English depending on the material discussed in the classroom. It is in line with the information obtained from the interview.

*Sometimes I like English. But when the material is hard, I don't like it (Student 3)*

*I like English, because the teacher is good (Student 7)*

*I wanted to take an additional course, but my parents cannot afford it for me (Student 8)*

For students who don't like English, it is seen as a hard and boring subject, but for those who like English, learning a new language is interesting. Several reasons contribute to students' interest in learning a foreign language. The first factor appears from the students' exposure outside the class (Al Zoubi, 2018; Palermo et al., 2014). In a foreign language context such as in Indonesia, English exposure is often limited. Several studies show that when young learners have proper exposure to English whether inside or outside the classroom, they exhibit greater English expressions (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011). It can be seen as well from the result of items no 2, 3, and 4 in Table 1 where they rarely listen to English songs, English movies, and students' environment at their home where the percentages are similar. In addition, the role of exposure not only influences students' English proficiency but also their learning styles (English, 2021). Therefore, since the students are not exposed to English at their homes, to stimulate them to like English by providing a rich English environment at school. (Artini, 2017) suggested that creating a rich learning English environment such as displaying the work of the students in the classroom will benefit the students to familiar with the English words needed.

Another factor that contributes to students' interest in learning English is motivation. (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) asserted that it is a crucial factor in learning a foreign language. There are two types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Students who do not have both often struggle in learning. In the context of the current study, motivation can be seen from the percentage of students who take additional English courses. The table shows that only 13.6% of students take it, compared to 83% who don't take it. However, it is not the only main indicator, given taking additional English courses relates to financial issues. Some students in the current study have expressed their willingness to take additional courses outside school, but somehow it is not enough since their parents cannot afford it.

### The method used in learning English

Learning English in elementary schools must be designed in a fun way. This is because students have a limited span of study time (Musthafa, 2010; Suyanto, 2013). Therefore, the role of the teacher in managing the class is something to pay attention to. The use of methods, for example, the teacher does not only rely on one method but must use various methods and techniques so that students do not feel bored when learning.

Table 2. The result of the method used in learning English

Aspects	Criteria								Total
	Always	%	Often	%	Seldom	%	Never	%	
English class is interesting at school	40	27,2	56	38,1	12	8,2	39	26,5	100
The teacher uses songs in learning	35	23,8	70	47,6	30	20,4	12	8,2	100
The teacher asks about dancing in learning	5	3,4	14	9,5	50	34,0	78	53,1	100
The teacher explains the material well	46	31,3	50	34,0	43	29,3	8	5,4	100
The teacher speaks English in the classroom	30	20,4	53	36,1	60	40,8	4	2,7	100
The teacher helps the students when in difficulty	79	53,7	45	30,6	15	10,2	8	5,4	100
We learn in small group	80	54,4	40	27,2	12	8,2	15	10,2	100

Based on Table 2, 27.2% of students admitted that the learning conducted in the classroom was interesting. It is almost the same percentage of the student who acknowledges it as not interesting 26.5%. to create effective and interesting learning, teachers need to use appropriate methods of teaching. However, since there is no single method that fits all, students should be taught by using multi-methods to accommodate their learning styles and their interests as well. Young learners like to move their bodies through singing or dancing. A study by Falah (2017) reported that teaching English by using songs assists the students in being familiar with English words through listening and singing, which are important in learning vocabulary. In addition, Wulandari and Apriani (2014) stated that in primary school, dancing is probably less popular compared to singing. However, when it collaborates with other activities, it works well. The function of dancing might not directly influence students'

language skills. However, it affects the students' emotions to create joy and happiness for young learners. In addition, Temple et al., (2020) believed that both song and dance provide the opportunity for the students to enhance their spatial awareness that relates to total physical response (TPR). Several studies have reported the effectiveness of using both singing and dancing particularly for students in lower levels of primary school (Wulandari & Apriani, 2014; Falah, 2017; Pacheco et al., 2022). Studies show that they acquire vocabulary better when the teacher shows them with this method.

In terms of delivering the materials, 31.3% of students said that the teacher was doing well in explaining the material in the classroom. Even when explaining in English, they knew what and where it leads. Similar information was obtained from focus group discussions with the students.

*I can guess what the teacher says in English, but I cannot reply to it directly (Excerpt student 1)*

*When the teacher says, I understand it since her gestures were obvious (Excerpt student 5)*

*The teacher explained the material in Bahasa, but sometimes in English. (Excerpt student 6)*

To teach English fully, half, or even in the native language is still in debate. Some are pro the only way to teach English (Rossel, 2004; Richards, 2017; Burns, 2019) but some others argue that in terms of concepts or explaining grammar, teachers are encouraged to use their or their mother tongue (Timor, 2012; Ngoc & Yen, 2018) thus, the students can comprehend it. However, in this study, given the situation is not ideal, mixing between English and Bahasa or code-switch is preferred, but the proportion should not be the same all the time. This is in line with Ngoc and Yen's (2018) suggestion where English teacher can increase the intensity of using English as the learning process go through. It is seen as an opportunity to familiarize the students with the English sound that they lack outside the school.

The other point that was obtained regarding the method is the teacher's scaffolding. Scaffolding is important to help students when they are in difficulty. 50.3% of students admitted that the teacher always helped them when they did not understand the material, whereas 30.6% of the student stated that the teacher often come and assure them about the material given whether they understood it or not. Besides scaffolding, the teacher can also group the students during learning. Therefore, they can work together with peers, collaborate, and help other students when in a group consisting of students with different levels. By working together in a group, not only they will have more space to interact with others, but they can compete in smaller areas.

### Learning media usage

The role of media in learning cannot be put aside. It visualizes the material delivered not only for other subjects but for English learning particularly. Richards (2017) urged that it is the main part of learning for young learners. The way of students think is different from adults, thus learning media can be very useful in constructing knowledge.

Table 3. Usage of learning media

Aspects	Criteria								Total
	Always	%	Often	%	Seldom	%	Never	%	
Teacher uses video	30	20,4	52	35,4	59	40,1	6	4,1	100
Teacher uses songs	56	38,1	72	49,0	9	6,1	10	6,8	100
Teacher uses picture	56	38,1	51	34,7	28	19,0	12	8,2	100
The teacher uses teaching aids	30	20,4	40	27,2	40	27,2	37	25,2	100

The table above shows the use of learning media has not been applied maximally by the teacher to teach English in primary school. 20.4% of students were honest that teachers always use media such as video, 38.1% use songs which is the same number as using pictures, and only 20.4% use learning kit. Meanwhile, the rest admitted that teachers rarely use learning media. In the Indonesian context, many teachers considered good learning media as expensive things ((Sari & Aminatun, 2021) and it contributes to its utilization during classroom implementation. On the other side, many scholars admit that learning media can be developed by teachers based on learning needs. Anggrarini and Faturokhman (2021) suggested that in dealing with children, an English teacher can use available learning media such as Youtube and other online platforms that are free. Barrot (2021) asserted that learning media helps in clarifying, facilitating, and making interesting learning messages that will be conveyed by the teacher to students so that they can motivate learning and the learning process

becomes more efficient. Therefore, in facilitating students to learn effectively, teachers need to explore their creativity in utilizing learning media.

### Students' comprehension activities

Another component that is considered important in learning is students' comprehension. It is used to measure how deeply students understand the content delivered in learning. There are several ways to assess the student's comprehension of learning. The following table shows what type of activities during the learning relates to students' comprehension measurements.

Table 4. Students' comprehension activities

Aspects	Criteria								
	Always	%	Often	%	Seldom	%	Never	%	Total
The teacher gives home works	78	53,1	53	36,1	16	10,9	0	0,0	100
Teacher asks questions	56	38,1	71	48,3	20	13,6	0	0,0	100
Teacher gives assignment	59	40,1	51	34,7	37	25,2	0	0,0	100
Teacher gives examination	87	59,2	40	27,2	20	13,6	0	0,0	100

Based on Table 4, 53.1% of students admitted that the teacher always gives homework, while only 10.9% acknowledges that the teacher rarely gives them homework. Muhlenbruck et al., (2000) once stated that homework relates deeply to students' achievement. Many believed that homework allows the students to relearn and practice the concept introduced in the classroom. On the other side, it gives a burden for the students as well since children's time at home will be limited. In this study, the researchers agree that giving young learners homework will benefit the students to expose them more to English than is taught previously. However, to make it effective, there should be cooperation with parents because they will be in the first hand of their children's homework. In addition, to measure the students understanding, the teacher can ask them questions or come forward and present what they have. It is said by 38.1% of the students in the current study. It is seen as an effective way due to fresh material given in school. But, as stated by Li et al., (2016) that asking them questions will improve their understanding. It is in line as well with the next point from the table where the teacher asks the students to do the assignment during the learning. The percentage was high about 40.1%.

### CONCLUSION

All in all, introducing English at the elementary school level is not an easy job. Many parties must be involved, not only students and teachers but also parents, schools, and even policymakers whose role is of course very central. This research shows that the real problems that occur in schools must be a starting point for the development of learning English in a better direction so that the hope of having future generations who have adequate English skills can be realized. Even so, there are some weaknesses in this research. First, this research was conducted on a small scale, so the findings cannot be generalized to other places. Future research should take this into account to research on a bigger scale, thus, the results will be more comprehensive. Second, the findings of the current study did not involve the teacher's perspective. therefore, it needs to be clarified in future research.

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