



The Challenges of English Teachers in Teaching English at Primary Schools

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Abstract

The transformation of the education curriculum is inevitable since the quality of teaching and learning should be improved. As a part of the curriculum structure, the status of English at the primary level remains the same. It is an optional subject that can be taught based on school readiness and the availability of English teachers. However, given the new look of the curriculum that emphasizes students' interest and needs in learning, it is worth investigating on what challenges that faced by the teachers in its implementation. In addition, the study on the challenges of the Merdeka Curriculum Implementation particularly in teaching English has not been voiced loudly by other researchers. Therefore, this study is aimed at figuring out the challenges faced by English teachers. The research employs an exploratory case study research design. The participants of the study were Six English teachers (two males and four females) who teach English in the first and fourth grades of elementary schools. The data of this study was collected through interviews. The result of the study showed that dealing with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum English teachers had the challenges related to internal and external aspects. Internal aspects including teachers' qualification, students' vocabulary and motivation. While, external aspects cover limited time allotment, Limited opportunity in joining Merdeka curriculum Campaign, limited school facilities, and Lack of professional development programs. These findings should be concerned, not only by the teachers but also it is the responsibility of schools and government to solve those issues. Therefore, the quality of teaching English at the primary level could be better in the future.

Keywords: English, primary school, Merdeka, curriculum, challenges

Introduction

English, particularly in elementary schools in Indonesia, has been introduced and become one of the subjects in the national curriculum structure (Musthafa & Hamied, 2018; Alwasilah, 2013; Zein, 2018). However, the status of English is not

compulsory, but as an additional or local content subject (Sulistiyo et al., 2019; Primary et al., 2023). That is, schools have the authority over whether to teach it or not (Musthafa, 2010; Artini, 2017). In addition, this policy cannot be separated from various considerations, for example, the availability of teachers who can teach English and also supporting facilities that can be used so that the learning process can be maximized (Musthafa, 2010). In the implementation of the new curriculum, or what is known as *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the status of English has not changed significantly (Putu et al., 2021), and this subject has become an elective subject in elementary schools (Kemendikbudristek, 2022a). Despite its status as an elective subject, the needs for the students to master the English language keep raising particularly from parents (Zein, 2012; 2018; Sulistiyo et al., 2019) who want their kids to master English. Therefore, it is the right momentum to be more serious in teaching children in primary school (Musthafa & Hamied, 2018).

Learning English at primary schools under the *Kurikulum Merdeka* emphasizes several important aspects of language, including aspects of listening, speaking, reading, writing, speaking, presenting, and also supervising (Kemendikbudristek, 2022a). These aspects are based on communicative competence which is the main goal of learning English in primary school. In addition, the spirit of *Merdeka Belajar* that is promoted in the new curriculum is also very supportive of achieving learning objectives where the learning carried out is based on the students' needs and proficiency (Angga et al., 2022; Jannah & Harun, 2023). This means that their English development will be maximized because the starting point used is the initial ability they have.

In the implementation, learning English in the new curriculum is taught in two grades -the first and fourth grades (Kemendikbudristek, 2022b; Putu et al., 2021). This is a preparatory step that students must go through where first and fourth grades are two representations of two different categories where grades 1,2, and 3 are part of the lower class, meanwhile, 4,5 and 6 are the upper class so they are better prepared to take part in the learning process. Teaching English at the elementary school level is not an easy task to do. Zein (2018) and Cahyati and Madya (2019) have indicated that many challenges must be faced by both teachers and students. Given the new look of the National Curriculum, called *Kurikulum Merdeka*, this study was guided by a research question "what are the challenges faced during its implementation? Moreover, the implementation of teaching English at primary

schools in Indonesia, particularly under *Merdeka kurikulum* has not been voiced loudly and worth investigating. Therefore, this study was aimed at describing what challenges that faced by the teachers during its implementation. Therefore, clearer pictures of how it is applied can be drawn.

Research Methodology

This current study employed an exploratory case study research design as proposed by Creswell (2013). It was conducted in six primary schools in Kuningan, West Java, consisting of four public schools and two private schools. Based on early study, these schools have implemented the *Merdeka curriculum* (IKM) since 2022 and have a strong commitment to introduce English as one of the subjects taught. In these schools, English is taught two hours per week (2 x 35 min), but additional time outside the school time is also available, particularly in two private schools. Six English teachers ranging from 26-35 years old were selected as the participants of this study. In terms of educational background, most of them graduated from an English education study program (3), English language and literature (1), and from primary school teacher of education (2). In addition, they have been teaching English at schools for almost 3 – 10 years. The data of this study was collected through multiple interviews. It is in line with Bannan-Ritland (2003) who suggested that to gather richer data, exploratory interviews could be employed. The aspect of interview covered several aspects including the objectives of teaching English, how English has been implemented, the challenges that teachers face, and what supports were provided to improve the teaching process. Each interview lasted for approximately 60 minutes. All the interview sessions were audio-recorded whether so that the researcher could replay them many times to comprehend the contents.

Table 1. The profile of the participants

Participant	Gender/ Age	Teaching Experiences	Proficiency Level	Educational Background	School Name / Status
Teacher A	Female / 26 Years	3 Years	Intermediate	English Education	SD IT DA
Teacher B	Female / 34 Years	10 years	Lower Intermediate	Primary school education	SDN KA
Teacher C	Male / 35 Years	7 years	Intermediate	English Education	SDN SKM
Teacher D	Female / 35 years	10 years	Lower Intermediate	Primary School Education	SDN MRJ

Teacher E	Male / 27 years	3 years	Intermediate	English Literature	SD IT LM
Teacher F	Female / 30 years	5 years	Intermediate	English Education	SD A

The findings that resulted were then analyzed by using thematic analysis which concerns identification, analysis, and reporting pattern within the data (Lochmiller, 2021). Further, they recommend the six steps of the procedure in analyzing the data which consisted of familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. In this study, the thematic analysis can be described: first, transcribing the interview data, dealing with Merdeka curriculum implementation. After that, the data was coded based on the interesting features and then arranged into potential themes regarding the issues that were raised in the study. Finally, the report of the study was written up. Since the design of the current study employed a case study which is one of the qualitative methods, member checking was used to validate the findings (Creswell, 2013). Every participant was asked to review his or her response to the question during the interview.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The current study was aimed at describing the challenges of teaching English at a primary level under the Merdeka curriculum faced by the teachers. Based on the interviews that were conducted, the challenges were categorized into two-internal and external- challenges as presented in table 2.

Table 2. Challenges faced by teachers in Teaching English at a primary level

Categorization	Code
Internal challenges	English teachers' qualification
	Students' lack of vocabulary
	Students' lack of motivation
External challenges	Time allotment in Teaching English
	Limited opportunity in joining Merdeka curriculum Campaign
	Limited school facilities
	Lack of professional development programs

Table 2 shows the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching English at primary level under the Merdeka Curriculum. The challenges are categorized into

two aspects namely Internal and external challenges. Two aspects are described as follows:

1. Internal Aspect

1.1 English teachers' qualification

Teachers' quality in teaching English at the primary level has been a concern of many scholars. The fact that English is taught by teachers who have limited English backgrounds is undeniable. Unsurprisingly, the majority of participants in the current study have also voiced this concern. It can be reflected in the following excerpts:

"Teaching English in primary school is treated differently from another level such as secondary level. In most primary schools, based on what I know, English is taught by classroom teachers. It is not a big deal when they know pedagogically. But when they do not have it, English learning will be insufficient"

(Teacher A)

"The students in primary schools are categorized as young learners, therefore, the teacher needs to know not only about teaching the language but to deal with the student's way of learning as well. Given I graduated primary school education and have been teaching English for more than 10 years, I'm still struggling to do effective teaching"

(Teacher B)

"In our school, English is prioritized along with Arabic. Thus, not every teacher can conduct this subject. It should be by the teacher who has proper knowledge about it."

(Teacher C)

Another notable finding that was raised during the interview regarding teachers' qualifications is the phenomenon of teachers taking the linearity program. The teachers who graduated from English education decided to take the further study of linearity to be primary school teachers allowed to be appointed civil servants or PPPK is wide open.

"I have been teaching English in this school for seven years, and I do enjoy myself teaching here. But the opportunity to be appointed civil servant or now *Pegawai Pemerintah dengan Perjanjian Kerja (PPPK)* is very limited, therefore I decided to take my further study by joining the linearity program (*Rekognisi Pembelajaran Lampau- henceforth RPL*) in the major of a primary school teacher."

(Teacher C)

"I was thinking about resigning from this job and moving to another level of school like SMP or SMA. I don't see my future as safe here, since I'm the only non-civil servant. Some of my colleagues have recommended I take the linearity program, so I can enroll in the PPPK selection. But I'm still considering it."

(Teacher F)

1.2 Students' lack of vocabulary

Vocabulary is a basic foundation in learning a language, especially a foreign language. Based on the interviews conducted, the majority of teachers in the current study admitted that vocabulary is one of the issues in their classrooms. Many students only knew numbers and colors. Meanwhile, they did not familiar with the family, the name of animals, and other topics that is taught. Only students who have additional courses outside class know better. It can be seen from the excerpts below:

"What challenged me is the students' English vocabularies. Most of them have no idea what to learn at the beginning of the class, not even a word. And that's the reality of teaching in rural areas."

(Teacher A)

"During the class, many of my students just listened passively due to limited vocabulary. They are familiar with numbers and colors, but they do not know about other things like animals, days, and family."

(Teacher C)

"Some of my students who have additional English courses outside class are more active and engaged. They know words properly. But for students who rely on the classroom activity, they struggle to get into learning."

(Teacher D)

However, in the new curriculum, the textbooks are more colorful where pictures dominate the content. Some of the teachers in the current study were positive about that and acknowledged it would help them in the teaching process.

"The textbook provided in the new curriculum is quite different. It has many pictures and is colorful. Not too many passages but only pictures and vocabulary which is good for the students to learn about it."

(Teacher B)

"I like the display of the textbook that is used in this curriculum. It is light and has many pictures inside. The students are interested in that."

(Teacher E)

From what has been said by teachers 2 and 5, the students in primary school can be encouraged to learn vocabulary from pictures that are available in the textbooks. It will help the teacher to explain what is taught since pictures are context related. Thus, the students will be more understanding.

1.3 Students' lack of motivation

Apart from limited vocabulary, the students in the current study were lack of motivation as well. It can be seen from the classroom observation where the researchers were allowed to witness how the teacher was conducting the class, particularly in the teacher's 6 class. The researchers found that the students participated passively. They only listened to the teacher's explanation and after that, they were busy with their stuff like drawing and making some noises during the learning. This finding is strengthened by teacher 3 who stated that some of his students were lazy of joining his English class. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

"When the bell is rung, some of my students went to the class late. And when I asked them, they have a similar answer that they don't like English class"

(Teacher C)

However, the researchers found more interesting facts from teacher E due to his double roles as English and classroom teacher. He acknowledged that some of his students were active in the other subjects but not involved in his English class.

"Some of my students were active in Math and Science. But when it comes to English class, they looked so bored. There must be something wrong with the way I teach."

(Teacher E)

Students' attitude toward learning English as a foreign language is contributed to several factors. One of them is motivation. When they have lower motivation, it will be hard for both teacher and student to achieve the goals proposed.

2. External Aspect

2.1 Time allotment in Teaching English

In terms of time allotment, it is no difference between the previous curriculum (K-13) and the current one (*Merdeka Kurikulum*). Teaching English is allocated two

hours (2 x 35 minutes) a week in public schools. Meanwhile, in private schools, they provide more but it depends on the school's policy. However, in general, time allotment in teaching English is viewed as very limited by the teachers in the current study. As stated in the following excerpt:

"Time allocation has always been an issue for me in teaching English. 70 minutes in a week is not enough"

(Teacher D)

"We have limited time in teaching English in primary school"

(Teacher E)

"I provide extra time for my English class since class time is limited due to the school's policy"

(Teacher A)

"It should be more than 70 minutes of learning"

(Teacher B)

Time allocation in teaching and learning a foreign language is crucial since they only learn in school. Therefore, the students should be allocated more time of learning English, which is better for their language development.

2.2 Limited opportunity in joining Merdeka Kurikulum Campaign

The other challenge faced by the teacher is on spreading information about the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Two teachers admitted they understand its concept, particularly in teaching English. Meanwhile, the rest were not sure about it since they did not have a proper explanation or socialization from the body in charge like the central or regional office of education. Their honesty was reflected in the following excerpts:

"The spread of information about the Merdeka curriculum has been done through workshops and seminars. However, how to teach English in primary school, in specific, has not been discussed and gets less attention. That's why I browse some websites and digital platforms like Youtube that provide its content myself. But not too deep."

(Teacher A)

"I have difficulty joining the Merdeka curriculum socialization given it should be delegated from the school. The classroom teacher is prioritized."

(Teacher C)

Meanwhile, teacher E and Teacher F shared different views since they live in other regencies that are close to the province.

"The campaign of the Merdeka curriculum has been done by both the Ministry of Education and Culture, Research, and Technology (MoECRT) and the regional office of Education (Dinas Pendidikan)"

(Teacher E)

"I get the information of Merdeka curriculum from the socialization and also from the supervisor who comes to the school."

(Teacher F)

It can be seen from the excerpts above, the spreading of Kurikulum merdeka information is not for everyone. Therefore, continual socialization should be the priority of the government.

2.3 Limited school facilities

As an elective or optional subject, English in primary school seems to have lesser support from the school compared to compulsory subjects. This is reflected in the excerpts below:

"I need to be more creative in teaching English to my class since learning media is hard to find in my school!"

(Teacher C)

"As both an English teacher and classroom teacher, I find it easier to teach Math and Science given what is available in the school. But it is not when I teach English."

(Teacher E)

"The textbook is good, but it is limited here in the school."

(Teacher A)

"The classroom is too small. it is hard to have a moving class"

(Teacher F)

The findings above show that the schools are not ready yet to conduct proper teaching and learning. Those points mentioned above are important and should be available, thus, the learning process could be maximum.

2.4 Lack of professional development programs

Professional development (PD) is significant to the teacher in every subject. It will improve not only the quality of the teacher but also influences the teaching that

is conducted. However, in reality, English teachers in primary schools do not have a proper opportunity to do so. It is reflected in several excerpts below:

English workshops and seminars are rare

(Teacher A)

Unlike in junior or senior high, a teacher's learning community does not exist in primary school That's why I need to find it by myself to improve my teaching

(Teacher B)

Workshop or seminars on English lessons organized by the regional office is limited. It is only for classroom teachers.

(Teacher C)

I need training and workshop to improve my teaching. but I need to pay more since it is done by a third party like a university or NGO.

(Teacher D)

Based on the excerpts above, it can be assumed that professional development has not been the priority for English teachers in primary school. Teachers need to be more creative given workshops and seminars are limited.

Discussion

Based on the findings above displayed, there are several points needed to be discussed in this section regarding the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching English at primary school under the Merdeka Curriculum. *First*, the teachers' qualifications which dilemmatic. On the one hand, the students in primary school, have every right to learn English. But on the other hand, the availability of English teachers in primary schools is limited (Asriyanti et al., 2013). Musthafa (2010) viewed that English in primary schools can be taught by the classroom teachers which is in line with *Kurikulum Merdeka's* document. However, he required that the teacher must know basic English teaching which was gained from their experience in university or additional courses. Meanwhile, Zein (2018), Sulistiyo et al. (2019), and Cahyati and Madya (2019) urged that English in primary school should be taught by those who can teach language as well as teaching young learners. The one who graduated from English education will fit in this job, given teaching English to children is not that easy as they have various characteristics, limited span of attention, and get bored easily.

In addition, still regarding the teachers' qualifications, Zein (2012) highlighted a decade ago that the issue of appointed civil servants would have influenced the process of teaching English at primary schools. He suggested the government include English as a compulsory subject, thus the English teacher would have a wider opportunity to be appointed civil servants. Making English compulsory has also been recommended by many scholars (Musthafa & Hamied, 2018) since most of the members of ASEAN are getting serious about that. However, given its status as local or additional content, it seems hard for the government to pay attention to the English teachers at the primary level since the school has a full decision on whether to teach it or not. For a private school that has more freedom to manage its curriculum and balanced financial support, appointing English teachers with proper salaries will not be a problem (Zein et al., 2020). But, on the other side, for public schools, since its financial are supported by the government, there will be a lot of consideration to do so. This should also be the main concern for the government, especially in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* implementation. Therefore, an initiative policy to solve teachers' qualification issues is needed.

Second, both vocabulary and students' motivation are important factors in learning a foreign language (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). In Indonesia, given the students are not exposed to English in everyday life, it seems hard to expect the students to have the numbers of vocabulary that are needed in communication (Falah et al., 2023). Further, the lack of vocabulary they have contributes to their motivation in learning English. When students' vocabulary is limited, they have nothing to say which forces them to passive and unmotivated in the classroom. Given the students in primary school are unique characteristically, and have a short span of attention (Musthafa, 2010), the English teachers are demanded to be all out in employing appropriate methods and learning media in their teaching (Apsari et al., 2020). Indeed, there is no single method or media that fits all of the characteristics of the students, but when teachers use various methods, it will benefit the students, particularly in their vocabulary mastery. In addition, the use of the variation method will enhance students' motivation in learning a language as well.

Third, in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, teaching English for only 70 minutes is insufficient. The students need to be allocated longer time, given, for the majority of the students, only learn English in the class. There is no guarantee

they will learn or take additional courses outside the class. Given the school has the freedom to organize the subject in *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the teacher can add extra time to teaching English as long as it is relevant to the needs of the students (Putu et al., 2021). It is in line with Artini (2017) who believe that allocating more time to English will benefit the students since they are exposed more to it.

Fourth, regarding the spreading of information about *Kurikulum Merdeka*, continual socialization is needed since not all teachers have the opportunity to be involved, particularly English teachers. Those have little chance of joining the socialization held by the regional office since the target of socialization places the classroom teachers at first. Even, some English teachers need to find out by themselves through digital platforms and websites to get information about the *Merdeka* curriculum. It is no wonder, its implementation has not been maximum yet. Since it is a new thing, the spreading of information could be the first step taken to provide understanding to the implementor and to minimize the constraint that might occur during its implementation. In addition, as a vital step, it needs to be held not only once but continually in all regions (Mantra et al., 2022). Therefore, its continuity, in other words, will provide more opportunities for the teachers in comprehending its principles and procedures.

Finally, the findings reveal that teaching English in primary school has lesser support from the institution in particular, and the government in general (Zein, 2016a). The lack of teaching media, textbooks, as well as teachers' professional development, have been the main issues related to support (Supriatna, 2011). The availability of teaching media and textbooks is needed to provide students with meaningful learning (Sulistyo et al., 2019). Further, Zein (2016b) argued that it is not the school's responsibility alone, but the government should also take part to deal with this, in terms of policy. This finding is also relevant to (Hawanti, 2014) who reported that many primary schools in Indonesia do not have proper resources and learning media for English lessons. It means that this has been an ongoing problem that needs to be solved. Thus, the teacher can teach English better to the pupils. In addition, teacher professional development programs organized by the central or regional office of education never existed for teachers who teach English. Even in local communities such as in KKG, the program is very limited. Further, to improve and upgrade their knowledge, the teacher needs to pay more to join the seminars and workshops organized by universities and NGOs. Teacher professional

development is important. By having so, the teacher can broaden their personal as well as professional knowledge that is needed (Hamied & Musthafa, 2019) as the answer to the demand for the new curriculum.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Teaching English at primary school is interesting. Teachers should handle it with care since the students have various characteristics and backgrounds. In the newly implemented curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*), teaching English is not getting easier. It raises several challenges that need to be faced by the teachers including teachers' qualifications, students' lack of vocabulary as well as motivation, time allotment, and support from both institution and government. However, the findings that resulted in the current study cannot be generalized given it was conducted with limited scopes. The limitation of this study can also be seen from participant that involve in this study. Therefore, Further research should address a broader context and more participants, thus, the result will be more comprehensive.

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