



Tantangan Siswa Sekolah Dasar dalam Belajar Bahasa Inggris: Sebuah Refleksi Untuk Kurikulum Merdeka dari Daerah Pedesaan di Kalimantan Barat

Elementary School Students' Challenges in Learning English: A Reflection For Merdeka Curriculum from A Rural Area in West Kalimantan

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Abstract

English is a foreign language taught in educational units throughout Indonesia. Therefore, in learning English, of course, students face a variety of challenges. This study aims to discover the challenges students of SDN 14 Sungai Ambawang face in learning English and to identify any factors that influence the challenges students face in learning English. The research method used is qualitative, with a case study research design. Data collection is done through observation, questionnaires, and interviews. Data analysis techniques applied interactive models, including data collection, condensation, display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. This study found that several challenges and factors cause elementary school students to learn English as a foreign language, namely difficulty in understanding, writing, listening, and pronouncing words. The causes include a lack of self-confidence, a lack of support from the neighborhood school, a lack of home support, and a lack of learning facilities. Future research could expand the broader context of English teaching as a compulsory subject.

Keywords: Students Challenges, Learning English, Elementary School

Abstrak

Bahasa Inggris merupakan bahasa asing yang diajarkan di satuan pendidikan di seluruh Indonesia. Oleh karena itu, dalam mempelajari bahasa Inggris, tentu saja siswa menghadapi berbagai macam tantangan. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui tantangan yang dihadapi siswa SDN 14 Sungai Ambawang dalam mempelajari bahasa Inggris dan untuk mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor apa saja yang mempengaruhi tantangan yang dihadapi siswa dalam mempelajari bahasa Inggris. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif, dengan desain penelitian studi kasus. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan observasi, kuesioner, dan wawancara. Teknik analisis data yang digunakan adalah model interaktif yang meliputi pengumpulan data, kondensasi data, display data, dan penarikan serta verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian ini menemukan bahwa ada beberapa tantangan dan faktor yang menyebabkan siswa sekolah dasar kesulitan belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing, yaitu kesulitan dalam memahami kata, kesulitan dalam menulis kata, kesulitan dalam menyimak kata dan kesulitan dalam pengucapan kata. Penyebabnya antara lain kurangnya rasa percaya diri, kurangnya dukungan dari lingkungan sekolah, kurangnya dukungan dari rumah, dan kurangnya fasilitas belajar. Penelitian selanjutnya dapat memperluas konteks yang lebih luas di bidang pengajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai mata pelajaran wajib.

Kata Kunci: Tantangan Siswa, Belajar Bahasa Inggris, Sekolah Dasar .

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INTRODUCTION

English is known as a foreign language in Indonesia. The first foreign language was also designed to be included in the school curriculum based on the Minister of Education and Culture decree No.096/1967 dated December 12, 1967 (Kartono, 1980 in Uzer, 2020). This foreign language has a position changed with its role as the international language to be learned and used in the era of globalization recently and in the years to come as a means of global communication in the world of business, economy, society, tourism, and technology (Yulizar & Hasibuan, 2022). Due to its importance in communication, English has been included as a compulsory subject taught in junior high school and university.

However, the recent curriculum, namely the Merdeka Curriculum, brings a new paradigm for advancing English instruction in Indonesia. The curriculum exists to continue and complete the weaknesses of the previous curriculum. One of the significant changes is that English language subjects are taught in elementary school (Sekolah Dasar, henceforth SD) starting from grade 1. As it has since the previous curriculum, School-based Curriculum 2006, English has been increasingly recommended to be taught since Elementary School, which is driven by three things: (1) English is the need of the entire Indonesian child, (2) the harmonization of the English curriculum, and (3) the quality of learning (Anggraena et al., 2021). The capability to speak English is an essential requirement that all Indonesian children need to have so that they can talk with others across cultures, even among nations, and play an active role in the world community (Anggraena et al., 2021). Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum's English subject indicates the government's commitment to developing every dimension of Pancasila's student profile, including global autonomy.

For the past few decades, studies have indicated that the ideal window of time to start teaching children a new language is between birth and ten years old (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011). However, recent studies have proved that a young child can learn and process up to five languages (Asher & García, 1969; Jia, 2022; Husaj, 2021). On his research, Pamungkas (2021) states that English is ideal for teaching starting from the early age of 7 because this is the Golden Age for children in optimal condition. It can be said that the earlier English is taught to children, the more practical language acquisition is. Young learners acquire the language more quickly, retain it better, and typically pronounce it almost perfectly.

However, in the Indonesian context, young learners face challenges when learning English as a second language. The initial difficulty in learning English is pronouncing (Putri & Febriani, 2023) Their findings revealed that students faced difficulty pronouncing English vocabulary or sentences because the sounds were pretty different from their mother tongue and the first language's written form. Second, the students lack vocabulary. To be able to use English, the students have to master the vocabulary. Third, students have different language structures that influence their learning because they previously learned their mother tongue (ibid). Some of these signatures can hinder the purpose of the lesson.

State Elementary School 14 Sungai Ambawang (SDN 14 Sungai Ambawang) is located in Korek, Sungai Ambawang Subdistrict, Kubu Raya district, West Kalimantan. The distance is about 24 km from Pontianak (the capital city of West Kalimantan). It is far from downtown, so the school has limited facilities and access. The learning source is also limited, so the teachers used the previous teaching materials from the former curriculum. The English teacher's qualification is from another English education background such as teacher class, science, etc. The social background of students' parents is primarily private, such as working for a company. However, teachers and students are committed to running the instruction and learning process amidst the limitations. In light of pre-research observations, the researchers found that the sixth-grade students at SDN 14 Sungai Ambawang carried out English courses after school. When the researchers joined the course, they found that students were enthusiastic about learning English. They always came on time and were active. However, the researchers also found some students' barriers, such as mispronouncing, lack of vocabulary mastery, and errors in written English words. It was understandable since this was their first moment learning English.

Several studies have found that students face difficulties in a foreign language (Marbun & Vega, 2023) discovered that students in SMPN 7 Tarakan faced difficulty studying English, mainly speaking. The problems were in fluency and misspelling vocabulary. Those language barriers influence their motivation to learn English. Moreover, studies have shown that students' difficulties are due to internal and external factors. The internal factors, namely the absence of drive and enthusiasm in the face of English lessons, while external factors include lack of support from the environment, less use of teaching tools, less varied and noninnovative teaching methods used by teachers (Rezeki & Sagala, 2021; Wulandari et al., 2020; Sultra & Baharudin, 2020; Muhtarom & Maghfiroh, 2022; Elvinda & Syahrul, 2022). Moreover, Sintadewi et al. (2020) revealed that elementary schools faced boredom and difficulty learning

English as a foreign language. As stated by Hossain (2018), pupils in high school who were born in Bangladesh's northern Thakur Gun district are facing difficulty learning English due to a lack of English teachers, English language clubs, economic constraints, a shortfall in multimedia projectors, and a lack of highway communications.

Previous research has shown that students are challenged to learn English. According to Suputra et al. (2021), at the time of the enforcement of restrictions on community activities in Bali in English lessons, elementary school students in the village faced challenges, among others, in understanding the material and tasks and participating. This challenge arose as a result of differences in the level of English proficiency among individuals. Various responses are seen in the classroom related to student attitudes in every step of studying, academic performance of students, and participation in group activities (Suputra et al., 2021). From the results of the research (Sakkir et al., 2023; Weda et al., 2022) in the context of English at the time of current curriculum change, among other things, before the pandemic, during, and post-pandemic of COVID-19, obstacles that high school pupils and students in learners of English encounter include the condition of students, teachers, schools, environments, materials, learning processes, and the application of technology. Komang et al., (2021) show that not all teachers can operate computers or devices in online learning activities. The difficulty controlling every activity and the student's response to the material is also an obstacle. Meanwhile, the problems faced by students in learning English online are lack of access to the Internet, lack of learning media, a lack of understanding of the material, academic fraud, laziness, and differences in the level of English proficiency among individuals, this finding has been confirmed by (To & Sari, 2022; Susanto et al., 2020; Agung et al., 2020). Thus, most students said that fear and anxiety are the most challenging factors they encounter when learning English (Al-khalidi, 2020). Previous research has revealed that the challenge of learning English is extensively studied with subjects of high school students, small and medium-sized businesses, and lectures in an online learning context.

Despite numerous findings on students' challenges in studying English, the elementary students' challenges in learning English as a foreign language are less exposed. Young learners, especially in non-English speaking countries, put more effort into learning foreign languages than those in English-speaking countries. Moreover, the context of the school's location, situation, and culture, one of which is the lack of learning sources, contributes to their challenges. Given those problems, the present study attempts to fill the gap of children in primary school who are challenged in studying English. Thus, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What are the students' challenges in learning English?
2. What do the factors influence students' challenges in learning English?

Regarding the recent curriculum, the study's findings are expected to present new reflections and insights into implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly English subjects for elementary school students.

English for young learners

According to Islahuddin (2023), English for young learners refers to the English language instruction of children in pre-primary or primary school (SD). Suhasri et al. (2023) divided the age group of young learners into two: the younger group of 6-7 years old and the older age group of 9-12 years. In their grades, they can be called 1,2,3,4,5 and 6. There are differences between teaching English to adult learners and younger learners. According to Larasaty et al. (2022), fun learning activities are a suitable solution for early childhood, and teaching learning activities should be designed as entertaining as possible for students. Learning while playing has many effects on children, ranging from cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Moreover, games also arouse great fantasies in the child and increase their interest in such toys. This aligns with Anggrarini (2019) stating that students will be more active when learning activities occur because they are not stuck in one static activity.

Challenges in learning a foreign language

Learning a foreign language in and out of school introduces one to a new culture. Maintaining foreign language learning in Indonesia is an effort by the nation to absorb and follow the progress of science. English is one of the official foreign languages taught in schools as a compulsory subject in Indonesia. Regarding the issue of learning English as a foreign language, there are many challenges to face and pay attention to. Harlina & Yusuf (2020) found that they explored barriers to learning English in rural schools and found that several factors caused the challenges faced by younger generations in learning English: students' low motivation in English, lack of support, such as support from parents and the surroundings, and poor quality of English teachers. In achieving the maximum learning goals, the role of teachers is crucial in applying several variations of learning techniques. It approaches that correspond to the curriculum and the needs of the pupils to create a practical learning situation. Besides, a good teacher must be able to make a learning program. In line with the findings of Qori Fatima et al. (2019) in Putri & Febriani, (2023) which states that to teach English to a child, a teacher must understand the child's characteristics, that is, to design learning appropriate to the child's level, materially, and in the learning style. Therefore, this research aims to understand the challenges students face in learning English and identify any factors that influence these challenges.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present study uses a qualitative approach to research with a case study research design to portray students' challenges in learning English. The qualitative research methodology, according to Creswell & Creswell (2018) is research that explores and understands the significance of individuals or collectives derived from social or human problems. Qualitative research is commonly used to investigate the lives of societies, their histories, the behavior of concepts or phenomena, social issues, and others aimed at describing and analyzing them. A case study is a research design found in many fields, especially evaluation, in a field where researchers develop an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Twelve SDN 14 Sungai Ambawang grade 6 elementary school students were investigated through observation, questionnaire, and focus group discussion. The researchers perform observations to see and observe the object of the study so that they can record and compile the data necessary to reveal the research results. In this phase of observation, the researchers looked at and observed the environmental conditions of the school, both from the facilities, learning media and learning processes done in the classroom at the time of class and in the English course after school. Then, the scientists distributed a paper questionnaire containing several questions about the challenges of learning English and its causative factors to young learners or elementary school students in an English course class, accompanied by their teachers. After that, for more details, after answering the questionnaires, the researchers divided the students into groups to find a problem with a group of people through discussion and, in interviews, discussing more in-depth what they had written and recorded using a recorder. The data analysis technique in the present study used triangulation; according to Miles et al., (2018), has three stages that co-occur and must be worked through, i.e., (1) data reduction, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing and verification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Students' challenges in learning English

The extracurricular English lessons in SDN 14 Sungai Ambawang are conducted thrice a week on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays at 3 p.m. The materials covered vocabulary learning based on themes such as a healthy life, tourism destinations, expressing feelings, etc. After the meeting, the researchers conducted interviews with the students. The interview was carried out through grouping the

students into 5 groups. Each group consisted of four students. The interview results revealed that the students faced some of the following challenges.

Challenges in understanding multiple meanings of English vocabulary

Based on the interview, vocabulary became the top difficulty faced by the students. The following is the excerpt from the interview.

Excerpt 1.

Student A : “The teacher wrote the word “live” on the whiteboard. However, there are some meanings of that word, such as *tempat* or *langsung*. It is confusing because I have to identify it in another sentence”.

The problems faced by students focused on difficulties in understanding the meaning of English words with multiple or varied meanings in Indonesian. This difficulty arises when "live" has varied meanings in a particular situation, and foreign words such as "accommodation" are difficult to define. Besides, technical terms such as "hygiene" also pose difficulties because they have special meanings that may not be equivalent to young learners' or elementary school students' understanding of the Indonesian language. It is in line with Akmalia et al., (2022), revealing that elementary school students of Pondok Bahar had difficulty understanding the word's meaning. This is because students are not familiar with the use of English dictionaries, they are less familiar with English vocabulary in the material taught by teachers, and they are also unfamiliar with using English in everyday life (Sucandra et al., 2022).

Challenges in writing English words

The students also expressed that they had difficulty writing excellent and correct words. Several students said there is a significant difference between English and Indonesian writing, which became their barrier in writing English words.

Excerpt 2.

Student B : “When I wrote English words, I felt unconfident enough to write them. I am afraid of making mistakes. For instance, I wrote a self-introduction like “Hello, my name is Fabio, I live in the Ambawang River, I am from Pontianak, at the age of eleven, and I attend school. However, I frequently watch English learning videos on TikTok and think my writing is probably right.”

Most of them are worried about making errors. There was uncertainty in the composition of sentences, difficulties with newly-known foreign words, and concerns about writing brief introductory sentences using English. The students also noted the difference between their writing and what they saw on platforms like TikTok. The findings are consistent with the findings of Akmalia et al. (2022) suggesting that third-grade students have difficulty writing while learning English. This is due to several factors, such as difficulty concentrating attention, learning difficulties, difficulty mentoring teachers, their eye contact being often unfocused, and their interests being limited to others around them.

Challenges in understanding English words in a listening activity

Besides, students also experience difficulties in listening, sound, and writing, according to the results of interviews with three groups of students.

Excerpt 3.

Student C : “When I heard the teacher say “white,” I thought that it was “wait.” Yet, I was wrong. She wrote on the whiteboard “white.” I still cannot differentiate between the sound, meaning, and writing.”

Excerpt 3 indicates that students have difficulty listening to one where the writing differs from what is heard. This result is consistent with Lena et al., (2023) revealed that elementary school students had difficulties listening; this difficulty occurred given that many English vocabulary words were difficult to remember and had words resembling names with different meanings.

Challenges in pronouncing the English words

The last challenge faced by the students is pronunciation. Based on the interview, students have difficulty pronouncing or spelling English words.

Excerpt 4.

Student D : "I still bring Bahasa Indonesia pronunciation way in English. For instance, I often pronounce the " cat " with /cat/ like in Bahasa Indonesia. However, the teacher corrected me with the correct one /ket/. Thus, I have to practice more about this"

According to the students, there is a difference between the sound and the writing, in which the words seen on the board or in the video differ from what the students heard. The finding corresponds to Febriani (2023) It is stated that elementary school students consider pronunciation very confusing and difficult to learn due to the differences between English and Indonesian pronunciation.

2. Factors influencing the learning challenges

Generally, two factors influence students' learning challenges: internal and external. Those factors influence the student's learning achievement in learning the four skills of English. Based on the interview, the internal factor affecting the students' challenges is a lack of confidence. Meanwhile, the external factors include a lack of support from the school environment, a lack of family support, and a lack of learning facilities.

Lack of self-confidence

First, students A, B, and C said he was less confident when speaking English in front of the classroom. Feeling incapable and treating others better than himself Musriani (2023). It was revealed from interviews with three groups of students. Here is the question form from the researcher to the student.

Excerpt 5.

Question : "Are you confident in using English in front of your friends and teacher?"
Student E : "No, I am not. Because I still lack mastery of vocabulary, let alone the words I am new to know, I am afraid friends will mock me if I misread and speak English."

According to the students, the main thing that affects their lack of self-confidence when asked to speak English before the classroom is fear or anxiety. This is in line with Purandina (2022) that the main factor that makes elementary school students less confident in speaking English as a foreign language in front of the classroom is that students have anxiety.

Lack of support from the school community

The study's first external factor is the school community support system. The school environment should be where all knowledge is received by providing the necessary stimuli for learning experiences that affect the behavior of subjects involved in learning, especially teachers and students, who are the spearheads of the learning process at school (Latief, 2023). The factor is described in excerpt 6.

Excerpt 6.

Question : "Did your teacher ask you to use English in school?"

Student F : "No, they did not. It is because we do not have English subjects at school, miss. Fortunately, we have this extracurricular held by the school. I can learn English in this class."

Based on excerpt 6, the student explained that they did not have English lessons during school hours. They also said that they have known English since joining the extracurricular. From the students' statement, it seems the school should consider English a compulsory subject in the curriculum. This is in line with the findings from Sari (2018) that the factor that school is the closest support system for the student's learning language.

Lack of support from the home environment

The second external factor is family support. The home environment is the first and primary pillar of the three educational centers, as described by Hulukati (2015) The role of the family is crucial in shaping the child's behavior and influencing his ethical, moral, and intellectual development. Interviews with three groups of students revealed they lacked support from their families. Here are the questions that researchers ask students.

Excerpt 7.

Question : "Do you guys speak English at home?"

Student G : "No, I do not, miss. I used Bahasa Indonesia at home."

Question : "Do you learn English at home?"

Student G : "No, I do not miss it. Because my family cannot speak and write English. I learn from this extracurricular".

Excerpt 7 shows that the students explained that they did not use English at home because their parents did not understand the language. The students also said they did not learn English at home because no one taught them, and no one accompanied them to learn English because their parents were not good at speaking English. Thus, the lack of support from the family environment became a significant factor in the student's difficulty learning English. The findings correspond to Herlina and Yusuf (2020), who state that elementary school students do not get support from their families. The parents do not give any guidance or help in learning.

Lack of learning facilities

The third external factor is the lack of educational facilities. The students explained that schools' lack of learning facilities is mainly for learning English. The facilities are the learning equipment that must be available in the school to support the needs of the students (Habsyi, 2020).

Excerpt 8.

Question : "Do you learn English also from learning resources available at school, e.g., books?"

Student H : "No, I do not. Some English books are in our school library, but the translation is unavailable. Perhaps I would be thrilled if there were a dictionary or vocabulary book."

The student explained that the lack of facilities in the school made it difficult for them to learn English. The findings are in line with Lena's (2023) statement that elementary school students are less likely to receive support from learning facilities. The lack of such facilities will make it harder for learners to understand the foreign language they have just acquired. The difficulties included the students' incomprehension of

the difference between English writing and the way in which it was pronounced, which eventually confused them.

CONCLUSION

The study found that SDN 14 Sungai Ambawang students faced challenges in learning English. These challenges are difficulty understanding vocabulary, writing, listening, and pronouncing English words. Factors affecting these challenges include a lack of self-confidence, minimal support from the school environment and the family, and a shortage of adequate learning facilities in schools. It shows a gap between need and support in learning English in SDN 14 Sungai Ambawang. Therefore, the study also highlights the importance of understanding and supporting the environment in which elementary school students learn English. Lack of self-confidence, lack of support from the school and family environment, and lack of learning facilities in schools are factors that need to be taken into account in efforts to improve students' English learning. Thus, the findings of this study are expected to provide a better understanding of the challenges elementary school students face in learning English and provide new insights into implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, especially English language subjects for elementary school students.

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