

IS CURRENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM AND ITS PRACTICE DESIGNED TO DEVELOP YOUNG LEARNERS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Tri Achmad Efendi¹, Apsari fajar Prihantini², Olivia Elsa Miranda³
^{1,2,3}STKIP Bina Insan Mandiri Surabaya

[1triachmad@stkipbim.ac.id](mailto:triachmad@stkipbim.ac.id), apsarifp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the alignment of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia with the goal of fostering young learners' communicative competence in English. A qualitative approach was utilized, including document analysis, interviews and classroom observations. The study involved three English teachers (one from a private elementary and two from public schools), and three classes were to be observed. Findings reveal that while the curriculum is conceptually designed to develop communicative skills progressively, from oral to written language, its implementation often falls short. Observed teaching practices largely remain teacher-centered, relying on traditional methods such as the Grammar-Translation Method, and provide limited opportunities for meaningful, interactive communication. Textbook analysis indicates that while the resources align with communicative principles, their use in classrooms is often inconsistent with the curriculum's objectives. Assessment practices focus heavily on written skills and vocabulary, neglecting oral communication. The study concludes that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum hinges on equipping teachers with the training and tools necessary to adopt student-centered, communicative approaches, thus bridging the gap between curriculum design and classroom practice. Recommendations include targeted professional development and systemic evaluation mechanisms to ensure alignment with 21st-century educational goals.

Keywords: *TEYL, Kurikulum Merdeka, Communicative Competence*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi apakah implementasi pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di Kurikulum Merdeka di Indonesia sudah selaras dengan tujuan menumbuhkan kompetensi komunikatif siswa sekolah dasar. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan, termasuk analisis dokumen, wawancara dan observasi kelas. Studi ini melibatkan tiga guru bahasa Inggris (satu dari sekolah dasar swasta dan dua dari sekolah umum), dan tiga kelas harus diamati. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun kurikulum dirancang secara konseptual untuk mengembangkan keterampilan komunikatif secara progresif, dari bahasa lisan ke tertulis, implementasinya sering gagal. Praktik pengajaran yang diamati sebagian besar tetap berpusat pada guru, mengandalkan metode tradisional seperti Metode Tata Bahasa-Terjemahan, dan memberikan kesempatan terbatas untuk komunikasi interaktif yang bermakna. Analisis buku teks menunjukkan bahwa meskipun sumber daya selaras dengan

prinsip-prinsip komunikatif, penggunaannya di ruang kelas seringkali tidak konsisten dengan tujuan kurikulum. Praktik penilaian sangat berfokus pada keterampilan tertulis dan kosakata, mengabaikan komunikasi lisan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa keberhasilan Kurikulum Merdeka bergantung pada pemberian guru dengan pelatihan dan alat yang diperlukan untuk mengadopsi pendekatan komunikatif yang berpusat pada siswa, sehingga menjembatani kesenjangan antara desain kurikulum dan praktik kelas. Rekomendasi termasuk pengembangan profesional yang ditargetkan dan mekanisme evaluasi sistemik untuk memastikan keselarasan dengan tujuan pendidikan abad ke-21.

Kata Kunci: TEYL, Kurikulum Merdeka, Kompetensi Komunikatif

A. Introduction

Proficiency in English is considered a key to a promising future owing to English is an international language, allowing anyone proficient in it to engage in a worldwide community. As it is stated that English is a widely use worldwide, and acquiring it at a young age allows individuals to engage with individuals from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. According to Jia (2022), early exposure to English offers various advantages for young learners and aids in the development of their communication skills, both spoken and written forms. Accordingly, English language teaching has become mandatory in many countries, including in Indonesia.

There are some benefits in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners. First, it helps to enhance a child's cognitive functions, including memory, focus, and problem-solving capabilities (Guo

& Yao, 2022). Additionally, starting to learn English at an early age is better in terms of listening and pronunciation in the long term (Kuhl, 2010; Prayatni, 2019; Suryantari, 2018; Susanty et al., 2021). Furthermore, it can also aid young learners in enhancing their comprehension of the world, as English is the predominant language in academic and informational materials (Aziza, 2020; Nishanthi, 2018).

Owing to the importance of English, the government has already made decision to include English as a mandatory subject in primary school in 2024 under Merdeka curriculum, as before it was in the previous curriculum only as an extracurricular subject. The government's special attention to providing space for English lessons in elementary schools reflects the recognition of English as a global necessity for communication in today's world.

Basically, even before Merdeka curriculum, English has been taught in many schools since elementary, even in kindergarten, but ironically their English proficiency remains unsatisfactory (Sandra Rahmawati et al., 2020). Furthermore, based on EF (2024) survey in 2024, Indonesian English proficiency is categorized very low. It's even below Thailand and Vietnam which back then Indonesian was ahead of them.

Therefore, the objectives of English Language Teaching (ELT) in elementary level is supposed to be carefully selected and designed to help them confident and gain their language performance and competence. Elementary school is a good start to teach the students fundamental English, and sharpen their skills through communicative activities. Subsequently, they should be exposed to rich-communicative activities rather than grammar-based activities. Building their confidence and likeness of English through communicative-based could be a bridge for students in their language development.

Young learners, typically in the age of 6-12, are still in their developing

stages. They are active, curious, and learn best through concrete experiences, visuals, movement, songs, and play-based (Hijriati, 2023; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Prayatni, 2019; Wahyuningsih, 2022). For those reasons, teaching strategies for young learners should encompass a wide range of instructional approaches and techniques tailored to the developmental needs and characteristics of children to promote active engagement, meaningful learning, and holistic development, setting a strong foundation for their educational journey (Pratiwi et al., 2021; Surayatika, 2022). Additionally, the characteristics above should address how English is taught such as instruction must highlight multi-sensory activities, simple language, and contextual learning that relates to their daily lives.

The current curriculum reform, known as Merdeka Curriculum, pursues to promote twenty-first century skills such as learner autonomy and 4C's skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication). As its claim, the Merdeka curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning and gives

teachers more rooms in designing and implementing their own curricula based on what happens in their class to suit learners' needs and local contexts. To add, ELT at the elementary school level based on Merdeka curriculum, emphasizes on building students communicative competence through fun and engaging activities as well as more exposure (Efendi et al., 2024).

Speaking of communicative competence, there are four competences need to encompass as defined by Canale and Swain; grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This communicative competence do not only focus on grammatical accuracy but also emphasizing students' ability to convey messages effectively and appropriately in different situation. For young learners, this competence also means the use of the target language for social interaction, express needs and feelings, and engage in age-appropriate conversations and storytelling. Therefore, English language teaching curricula should aim to equip learners with the skills to use English naturally and confidently

in everyday contexts. Young learners have unique characteristics, they are different from teenagers and adult learners. In that case, developing communicative competence in classrooms for young learners can be achieved by providing opportunities for interaction through activities such as storytelling, role-playing, singing, and games.

Although the latest curriculum documents emphasize the importance of communicative skills, classroom practices often prioritize grammatical accuracy and exam preparation instead of genuine language use. Teachers may struggle to fully implement communicative language teaching (CLT) due to limited training, inadequate resources, large class sizes, and the wide range of language proficiency levels among students. Consequently, opportunities for engaging and meaningful communication are often restricted. Therefore, there is ongoing debate about how effective the Merdeka curriculum is in enhancing students' communicative competence.

There are several studies that explored ELT curriculum and its practice in Indonesia. The first study

conducted by (Wahyuningsih, 2022b). Her study entitled "TEYL in Indonesian Elementary Schools: Why, Who, What, and How?". She examined the implementation of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in Indonesian elementary schools under the 2013 and Merdeka Curriculums. Using a mixed-method approach with online surveys distributed to 112 teachers from 74 schools across 13 districts, she found that 89% of schools continue to include English in their curriculum to prepare students for the future and stay competitive. Furthermore, the teaching was emphasized on vocabulary (68%), followed by grammar (16%) and writing (7%), while listening, speaking, and reading were given less priority. This approach contradicts the curriculum's emphasis on developing communicative competence. Also, it was found that mostly the participants were taught using songs (68%), games (60%), and lectures (57%), but dialogue and conversation practices were limited (12%). Additionally, Bahasa Indonesia is mainly used as the language of instruction in 60% of classes, compared to only 19% in English and 21% in a mix of languages.

In the same year, (Dzulkifli Isadaud et al., 2022) conducted a literature study that found pointed out that while English is part of the curriculum, instruction often emphasizes theoretical knowledge over practical communication skills. It impacted on the students' communicative skill.

Another researcher conducted by Laila et al. (2023) on various challenges and strategies in teaching English speaking skills to young learners, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study approach, they revealed that speaking or communication skill was the most challenging skill in teaching young learners due to inhibition, negative attitudes toward learning English, and low participation rates. To overcome the challenges, the teachers employed various strategies, including individualized instruction, the use of translation, repetition techniques, and integrating games into the learning process.

Based on the literature and previous studies above, the researcher conducted a study that focused on figuring out whether the

current English language curriculum, Merdeka curriculum, and its practices in the classroom are adequately designed to develop young learners' communicative competence in Indonesia. Specifically, this study explored the alignment between curriculum objectives and classroom practices. This study hopefully contributes to the ongoing discourse on ELT curriculum development in Indonesia through its findings how well current practices align with the goal of promoting communicative competence. Additionally, this study could give context-based suggestions for improving implementation and making sure that English is meaningful, engaging, and effective for young learner through communicative language practice as well as student-centered activities.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative design to explore whether the current English language curriculum is designed to develop young learners' communicative competence. The main focus of this study is on the curriculum's objectives and implementation. In order to collect the data, the research will employ

three main instruments; document analysis, interviews, and classroom observations.

Participants and context

There were three teachers who were observed in this study. They came from different state schools and taught different grade. Based on the information gathered in the field, the schools under this study only had one English teacher, consequently they taught all grades one up to six. In total mostly they taught 24 classes. Meanwhile, The student were at the age of ten-twelve years old from various socio-economic backgrounds. Two teachers graduated from English department and one did not.

Document Analysis

Document analysis served as the fundamental foundation for understanding the curriculum's structure and intention. Key documents, such as curriculum frameworks, and textbooks are analysed to identify how communicative competence is addressed. The documents on curriculum frameworks were taken from the government website meanwhile the textbook written by the

govenment entitled Bahasa Inggris BS Kelas V was analysed.

The analysis of those documents were emphasized on three categories; objectives, teaching methods, and assessment.

Classroom Observations

The next instrument was classroom observations. It was meant to examine how the curriculum is enacted in practice. A total of 6 classroom sessions (2 per teachers) were observed. Using an observation checklist focusing on; a) teaching methods, b) classroom interaction, c) curriculum alignment, d) communicative activities, and e) teacher language instruction.

Interviews

To gain deeper understanding, semi-structured interviews were done with three English teachers after the observations. The interviews covered the teachers' teaching strategies and the issues or challenges they faced. The interviews were done in Bahasa Indonesia, recorded with consent, and transcribed

C. Results and Discussion

Result

As it mentioned that this study was aimed to examine whether the current curriculum and its implementation has been designed to develop young learners' communicative competence by analyzing its objectives, implementation, and assessment. The following is displayed the findings and discussion taken from curriculum framework analysis, textbook analysis, and observations.

Curriculum Framework Analysis

As the govenment claimed that there are three characteristics of the Merdeka curriculum: developing soft skills and characters, focusing on essential materials, and flexibility in learning. Based on the Merdeka Curriculum Framework, English language teaching in elementary school is divided into three phases; phase A, phase B, and phase C as shown in the table 3. Phase A corresponds to grades one and two, while phase B corresponds to grades three and four. Grade 5 and 6 correspond to phase C, grades seven to nine correspond to phase D, grade ten corresponds to phase E, and grades eleven and twelve correspond to the last phase (<https://guru.kemdikbud.go.id/kurikulu>

m/referensi-penerapan/capaian-pembelajaran/sd-sma/bahasa-
inggris/).

Phase A Grade 1-2	Focused on introducing English and spoken English language skills.
Phase B Grade 3-4	Focused on spoken English skills. On the other side, students are introduced to the written form.
Phase C Grade 5-6	Focused on written and spoken language skills. It is the end of the Elementary level.

Based on the table above, it is clear that the curriculum mandates to sharpen students' English proficiency step by step starting from their spoken or communicative skill. It can be inferred that the governments would like to introduce and build the targeted language through listening and speaking in the students' early encounter with English. It is also meant that this curriculum recognises the significance of teaching English to children in order to build a strong language foundation through spoken skills. Thus, the teaching and learning process should be maximized oral production activities and minimize written form in early phase. Later, when they have acquired or get used to English, written form is introduced.

This staged progression echoes the curriculum's intention to promote

communicative competence gradually, stressing on giving students adequate oral exposure in the early years before shifting to literacy-based outcomes.

Textbook Analysis

The *Bahasa Inggris BS Kelas V* textbook was examined to ensure that the curricula's intention is well-interpreted. This textbook was chosen because it was issued by the government. The researchers used three categories of analysis namely objectives, teaching methods, and assessment strategies. In a nut shell, the analysis reveals that the textbook is conceptually accommodated the communicative principles as mandated by the Merdeka Curriculum. However, several limitations regarding differentiation and assessment are still found.

First of all, the textbook's learning objectives mirrors a clear effort to promote interactive and contextual language use. it can be found that many lessons are linked to real-life situations such as going to the market, giving directions, and describing daily routines. This contextual design is then supported by the series of skills where speaking and listening activities become prioritize.

The tasks also encourage functional and meaningful communication, it can be seen through expressions like “how much is it?”, which direct learners toward practical language use.

Meanwhile the teaching method that is reflected in this book is Task-based learning (TBL) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Activities such as role-plays, pair work, and discussions are used to enhance students’ language practice.

The activities support CLT principles in promoting fluency, meaningful interaction, and engagement. However, teachers need ample pedagogical skill to gain effective implementation. Effective classroom teaching in TBL and CLT require familiarity with open-ended questioning, scaffolding, and classroom management strategies and not all teachers poses with such skills yet.

Assessment

In relation to assessment, this textbook incorporates both formative and summative components, stressing on real communicative performance. Listening is assessed through response-based comprehension questions, speaking is assessed through role-play, dialogue

practice and tasks requiring the use of personal expression. However, this book does not entail with assessment guidance detail especially in communicative performance. The absence of clear rubrics makes it difficult for teachers to evaluate the speaking proficiency consistently.

Classroom Observation and Interview

To portray how the teaching practice is implemented, the observations were done in the schools and interviews were conducted to clarify what happened during the observations as well as to deepen and enrich the data. The following is displayed the summary of the findings from the observations. The data are put into teaching strategies, classroom interaction, skill shown, language instruction, teaching media and curriculum alignment.

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In Ms. A's class, choral repetition and visual-based learning seem effective in helping them with pronunciation and vocabulary recall, mainly when it was combined with media like flashcards or songs (e.g., Pink Fong's time-related song used by the teacher); students followed the teacher's instruction very well. However, the students became less confident when it came into grammar (e.g., future tense), they gave incomplete or incorrect responses unless the teacher helped them. For instance, when the teacher called out to answer the question in future form, they remained silent until one of them raised his hand and answered even though his answer was incorrect.

Meanwhile, Ms. B used miming strategy to explain difficult word in the text. For instance, it was portrayed during observations that she read a reading text and after that she selected words such as jump. Then, she asked the student to jump together. However, Ms. C tried to incorporate student-centered

approach such as question and answer. She tried to elicit students in the reading activities but still the teacher dominated the classroom since the students were seen confused and did not understand with the questions and reading text. Consequently, Ms. C assisted them with translation.

In all cases translation was extensively used as a means of scaffolding, the teachers helped the students through translation and gave some translation activities. It was noted that during the lesson the teacher always paused and translated key vocabulary and instructions. Teacher B said that the translation made her students more understand. They always asked for translation every time she spoke in English. Teacher A also had the same experience, she added that many of her students felt that English was difficult subject and she thought it was ok to translate what she spoke to them. Teacher C claimed that she ever used English all the time during the teaching but the class became noisy and many of her students could not understand. That experience made her choose to translate the

instruction. Above all, all of them agreed that a factor that made them 'give up' on speaking in the classroom was the different English proficiency. They somehow felt speaking in English only made them confused. One of the teachers expressed this:

"Although actually English is already popular, for them it is more comfortable to use Javanese than English. So, they are not used to using full English. Several times I tried it (using English), but they were confused and didn't understand so yes I translated or I mix with Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese."

The teaching mainly focussed on developing students' vocabulary and grammar as well as reading and writing. It was confessed by Ms. B that she rarely had speaking activity. She added that she honestly got difficulty in crafting speaking or communicative activities because the class was big and rarely had a training on how to teach speaking. Additionally, she taught more than 20 classes. She reported the following expressions:

"I feel that vocabulary is important and they are lacking for vocabulary so they are difficult to speak, that is why I

do a lot of vocabulary and reading to improve their vocabulary. I teach more than 20 classes and each class consists of more than 20 students, so I get difficulty in designing speaking activities."

To add, teacher A said that she mostly taught her students reading and writing because those two were easier to prepare and taught for her big classes. Meanwhile, teacher B mentioned that vocabulary, reading and writing were mostly taught. She explained that she taught listening and speaking through singing a song. She thought teaching speaking could be done through singing since it was related. The following is the excerpt of Ms. A's expression:

"To be honest, I teach based on the textbooks. For speaking, I usually invite my children to sing. I think it's fun for them"

The challenges revealed during the interviews that the teachers felt exhausted with their teaching hours. They didn't have time to prepare the lesson. Additionally, the student body is too big for them so somehow, they couldn't manage it. In that case,

traditional approach seems more convenient to do. One of the participants said:

“I actually want to implement student-centered activities, but yes, the number of students was too large, the English teacher was only one, so it was difficult for me to manage time to maximize learning. Then if I invite you to discuss in English, they will say they don't understand and I get tired myself. So, yes, I focus on the important thing that children understand the lesson. Not to mention that they meet in English only once a week with a very short time.”

Additionally, even though this Merdeka curriculum is designed to give teachers flexibility to adapt their classroom situation and condition as well as students' interests through various teaching tools and techniques, it was found that there are still many teachers who keep using monotonous teaching techniques and teaching tools. Many of them still use textbooks as a single means of teaching. One of the participants added:

“For the technology itself, we have a projector. As you can see, I used it to play videos for children so that they are more interested in it. However, they are also prohibited from bringing cellphones to school and not all children have cellphones. Therefore, textbook is the easiest resource we can use.”

Discussion

Although the current curriculum highlights a firm emphasis on the development of communicative competence and student-centered learning, the findings reveal that implementations remain inconsistent between practice and the mandated curriculum. It can be seen that at the policy level, the curriculum value the development of communicative competence through gradual progression from oral to written skills.

In addition, teachers have already been supported with textbook as one of prominent teaching aids in Indonesia (Efendi et al., 2023; Kodriyah et al., 2018). This textbook issued by the government has accommodated three important principles in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); real-life

context, task-based activities and integration of language skills.

Unfortunately, the implementation in the classroom does not support the intended goals of the current curriculum. Based on what was portrayed in the observations, teacher-centered approach was dominated. Teachers used a traditional method called Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) in their teaching practices. It can be reflected thorough activities such as choral repetition, translation, vocabulary and reading activities. That kind of classroom practice hinder students to use their target language. Teacher-centered approach effectively when it comes to deliver the content but provenly ineffective to boost students' language productive skills.

This shows that teachers are still hesitant to move from teacher-centered to student-centered. Even though this Merdeka curriculum is designed to give teachers flexibility to adapt their classroom situation and condition as well as students' interests through various teaching tools and techniques, it was found that there are still many teachers who keep using monotonous teaching techniques and

teaching tools (Puspitarini & Hanif, 2019). Many of them still use textbooks as a single means of teaching (Rustiyani et al., 2021).

As we live in the 21st century which technology has emerged in our daily lives, the teaching and learning could be designed through the use of it. The increasing of educational technology such as simple storybooks apps, animated vocabulary games could benefit young learners get more exposure. Technology could help elementary school students develop their cognitive development, since they are in the concrete operational stage meaning that they still have difficulty to comprehend abstract objects; therefore, they rely on media to help them picture them concretely (Qoirunnisa, 2021; Zahiroh et al., 2022).

This mismatch implementation happens because of several reasons; limited time, large class size, teachers' heavy workload. On the other hand, communicative activities cannot be maximized because students lack confidence and linguistic readiness to involve in English-rich interactions. English teachers still emphasize their teaching approach traditionally. In

addition, as it can be found in the findings above, the lesson was not meant to sharpen students' communication skill, the teachers gave more exposure on vocabulary and grammar. It could be understood that teaching grammar and vocabulary are essential as it forms the foundation of a language. However, it should be taught as a practical or communicative grammar. So, the students will perceive it not solely as knowledge or memorisable patterns unless teachers utilize it for communicative purposes.

Communicative classroom activities highlight on meaningful interaction, stressing on fluency over accuracy to assist students use target language in real-world context. It often involves tasks such as problem solving, role-playing, collaboration, as well as integrate multiple skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). To add, the use of authentic language is prioritized. In this case, teachers work as a facilitator, guiding students as they work on tasks, manage errors naturally and build confidence in communication through engaging methods such as games, storytelling, and discussion (Dos

Santos, 2020; Kakhramonovich, 2021; Savignon, 2018; Thamarana, 2015).

Also, overuse of the mother tongue seems to be one of the factors that leads to our students not gaining much in their English skills. Teachers who often use their mother tongue to teach English, which makes them lose the opportunity to get exposure of English (Giang, 2022; Rosales & Gonzalez, 2020; Tosuncuoglu, 2012). The exposure plays important role in young learners' language development. Students who have more English exposure will gain benefits to get inputs and make use it to produce the target language (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). As we can learn from baby learns to listen first before they start to speak.

This gap between policy and implementation is due to the lack of teacher training on communicative pedagogy. They reported that they got professional development but mostly focused on administrative training rather than classroom application. This makes teachers have adequate knowledge on the curriculum goals but they lack of understanding on how to implement communicative approach in the classroom.

E. Conclusion

This study is aimed to figure out the development of English language teaching curriculum in elementary schools in Indonesia, especially the Merdeka curriculum. The findings indicate that the objectives of language teaching in Merdeka curriculum through phases A-F have been designed to develop students' communicative competence. It is developed gradually from oral skill to written skills. However, the implementation is still not in line with its spirit since the teachers still use a conventional teaching strategy and the teaching and learning is not reflected in communicative activities. Additionally, the assessment is dominantly done in a written form and focused on vocabulary. The speaking seems neglected. It is suggested for the stakeholders to initiate evaluation and teacher training.

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