

Is It A Good Move To Release Policy Of Making English Language As Optional Subject In Elementary School?

Nina Afria Damayanti¹, Laila Ramlan², Woro Endah Sitoresmi³, Muhammad Takwin Mahmud⁴

^{1,4}Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Medan

²Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki

³Faculty of Management, ITB Ahmad Dahlan

Corresponding Author: ninaafria@unimed.ac.id

Abstract

Merdeka curriculum or in Indonesian Language known as Kurikulum Merdeka is widely considered as the most popular curriculum applied in many educational institutions in Indonesia. In the context of elementary school, Merdeka curriculum places English Language as an optional subject offered to students. In fact, nowadays students as the future generation live in the digitized and network based community where English plays a critical role to help them adapt to the rapid change of technology and science. Consequently, it is crucial to study this government policy in the Merdeka curriculum on the English language subject for elementary students. This study aims to analyze the government policy on placing the English language as an optional subject in elementary school using the theory of language development and the role of English as *lingua franca* in the 21st century. This study applies a library research method and data are collected from published and unpublished scientific articles, analytical journals, government reports and national scale newspapers that are relevant to the aims of the study.

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INTRODUCTION

Since Covid-19 pandemic hits in Indonesia, the government permits educational institutions from pre-schools to universities to select one of the national curriculums to be implemented in their institution by considering their current condition and their own resource quality. Currently, there are three national curriculums applied, namely 2013 curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*), emergency curriculum (*Kurikulum Darurat*), and Merdeka

curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*). According to data released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, Merdeka curriculum is the most widely used in Primary Educational units (Kemendikbud, 2022).

Merdeka curriculum it self is the newest curriculum and recognized as a true response from the government to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the decreasing of students' learning outcomes, motivation, and character (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022).

For instance, in the context of students' character, the government has released a specific program called *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* that must be implemented in the school to reshape and strengthen students' character in learning and socializing based on the values of Indonesia (Suhandi & Robi'ah, 2022). In fact, this Pancasila profile (*Profil Pelajar Pancasila*) is a distinguished aspect of the Merdeka curriculum from other national curriculums. Besides the character building program through the implementation of Pancasila profile, schools that applied Merdeka curriculum are required to use a project-based learning model, portfolio assessment, and to redefine the roles of school, student, and teachers in the instructional design, and as well as the change of subject nomenclature and weight (Angga et al., 2022). The English language is one of the subjects changed in the context of its status and weight in the new curriculum in elementary school (Kemendikbud, 2022). Currently, English is decided as an optional subject where its weight is only two hours per week. It means that students are provided two hours to learn an English subject in the class. As an optional subject, schools have an option to offer English or not to their students the whole year in the semester going. This implies that schools are required to decide their position according to their capital quality, resources, and facilities that support the implementation of the English subject (Nuriyah, 2021).

English is the most used language in the global context, in a way to communicate with other people from different parts of the world about cultures, science, history, business, health, social and climate issues, technology, and so on (Rao, 2019). Furthermore, as today we are living in the 21st century where the development of technology and science is

rapidly changing and indeed they lately contribute to the lifestyle of modern humanity (Marouli, 2021). For instance, in terms of gaining new knowledge. These days we do not need to spend much time, effort, and money to obtain new knowledge by going to the places where certain sciences are learned. Indeed we only need to have an internet connection to read various kinds of books and articles about those sciences. Therefore, with the existence of technology we are not limited to learn many things in this world (Sima et al., 2020). Generally, quality books, articles, and lecturers are written in English (Ariantini et al., 2021) (Erdoğan, 2019). It can be concluded that English has a huge influence on how we run our life and surely we cannot deny that English helps students to survive and adapt to all the changes happening within the era of society 5.0 (Carayannis & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022) (Maili, 2018).

In addition, English is undoubtedly an important component to actualise the value of Pancasila Profile in building students' character of global diversity (*kebhinekaan global*). The character of global diversity itself consists of several key elements, such as cultural understanding and appreciation, intercultural communication and diversity reflection (Istiningsih & Dharma, 2021). English is an added factor to help students achieve each of these key elements on building the character of global diversity. Consequently, Indonesian students should be able to master English well (Yonata et al., 2022) (Ernawati & Rahmawati, 2022).

Students with that age will find learning English easier as their speech muscles are still in the developmental stage. Also, children at that age are still in the optimum age category which is considered as one of the phases to receive full learning as they have a strong desire psychologically to learn something

new, including foreign language, without fear of risking anything (Nuriyah, 2021).

However, with the fact of a very small amount of lesson hours provided by Merdeka curriculum and its nature as a non-compulsory subject in the primary school education level, the English language can be a challenge to achieve the goals of the Merdeka curriculum itself. Specifically the formation of global diversity character in the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* context. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a policy review on the status of English in Primary School education as a non-compulsory subject. This study aims to analyze this from the theory of children's language development and the role of English in the 21st century.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is conducted using a systematic literature review method or widely known as library research (Linnenluecke et al., 2020). The library research is done by reviewing and analyzing other studies both published or unpublished research articles, Government reports, or trusted and national scale newspapers (Sari & Asmendri, 2020).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Primary School Education in Indonesia

Elementary school is a type of school at the first level of primary education in the educational system in Indonesia. Education in elementary schools has a major contribution in building the basic knowledge, skills, and character of students to be used within the school and community in the future. Because of its vital role, the learning process in elementary schools must be ensured to run optimally supporting student development to become a long-life learner (Kemendikbud, 2022).

Based on Permendikbud No. 51 of 2018, elementary school education in Indonesia can be attended by children aged from 7 years or at least 6 years old on July 1st of the current year. Elementary school students will generally carry out the learning process at school formally for 6 (six) years, starting from grade 1 to grade 6 (Kemendikbud, 2022).

In order to review student success in each learning process, the government through the Merdeka curriculum divides 3 (three) phases of learning outcomes. Phase 1 begins in grade 1 and ends in grade 2. The second phase begins in grade 3 and ends in grade 4. The third phase begins in grade 5 and ends in grade 6 (Angga et al., 2022). Also, in the Merdeka curriculum for elementary school, the subjects studied by students are divided into two different categories, compulsory and optional subjects. Compulsory subjects consist of mathematics, Indonesian Language (*Bahasa Indonesia*), and Natural and Social Sciences, while English is categorized as an optional subject (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022).

The Position of English in Indonesia

English is one of the foreign languages learned in Indonesia, apart from German, Japanese and French. As a foreign language, English has a lower position than Indonesian Language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) which is the national language or the mother tongue of the Indonesian people. Therefore, English is not commonly used to communicate by Indonesian people. It is hard and rare to find people who can speak Zein, (2017) English fluently in the community. Nonetheless, English is a common subject studied in educational institutions from elementary, secondary, to higher education (Dewi et al., 2023).

The objectives of the English Language subject at school are to ensure that every student are able to: (1) develop communication skills in English with a variety of multimodal texts, such as spoken, written, visual, and audiovisual; (2) develop intercultural skills and competencies to understand the perspectives, practices, and cultural products of the Indonesian nation and foreign cultures; (3) develop self-confidence to express themselves as an independent and responsible individual; and (4) develop critical and creative reasoning skills (Kemendikbud, 2022).

The Position of English in Merdeka Curriculum for Elementary School

Prior to the release of the Merdeka Curriculum as the national curriculum, primary education institutions used the 2013 curriculum. In the 2013 curriculum, English subjects were removed from the national education curriculum at the elementary school level (Rintaningrum, 2015). This became the pros and cons in society at that time. Infact, the government did not provide an explicit explanation of the reasons for taking this policy in public. Groups that agree with this policy argue that because English can be a threat to the extinction of nationalism for the younger generation by setting aside Indonesian culture and Indonesian language as the national language (Faridatuunnisa, 2020). Apart from being considered an English Language subject as a threat to the existence of the Indonesian language, English is also considered to affect patriotism, the love of children at the elementary school level for the local language, so that it will create a feeling of confusion in the children about the language that should be used in everyday life. (Rintaningrum, 2015). Until now there has been no found scientific research articles that examine and explain the influence of the use

of a foreign language on the loss of one's nationalism or on the negative things previously mentioned.

Since the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum lately, which places English as an optional subject or local content, can be held again at the elementary school level. This means that each educational unit has the right to teach or otherwise English subjects at its institution. This decision depends on the readiness and availability of the school's resources in learning such as quality English teachers and learning facilities (Kemendikbud, 2022). The arrangement of English subjects in the Merdeka curriculum is obvious and clear from the context of subject weight per week or per year to the expected learning outcomes to be achieved by students after studying English at the elementary school level, namely:

Phase A (Grade 1 and 2 SD/MI/A Level Program)

In this phase, learning is focused on the introduction of various words and sentences in English along with practicing students' oral English skills.

Phase B (Grade 3 and 4 SD/MI/A Level Program)

In this phase, learning is focused on speaking English skills and also taking students to learn about writing English skills. However, it should be noted that in this phase the teachers' task and responsibility becomes way more complex than the previous phase, because they need to help students understand how to pronounce English with different writing shapes.

Phase C (Grade 5 and 6 SD/MI/A Level Program)

In this phase, learning is focused on developing the abilities and skills of spoken and written English. Such as making descriptive texts, stories, and simple

procedures using sentences with certain patterns.

From each of these phases, it invites children to be able to develop several skills and abilities including listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and presenting thoroughly through English lessons held at schools (Kemendikbud, 2022).

Implementation of English in Elementary Schools

In order to be able to achieve the objectives of the English subject contained in the Merdeka curriculum, schools as education providers together with teachers should understand and be responsible for the role they are playing. Having a deep understanding about students who are taught and involved in English class really matters. Creating an innovative process of learning is another skill to perceive and internalize. This needs to be done because teaching English for children between the ages of 3 - 12 years is different from adults.

If teachers as the frontliner in the learning process have not known these children's learning characteristics, there would be problems in the process. One of the problems comes from a real-field observation. Based on the observation conducted by researchers in Jembrana, it was found that English teaching in elementary school is less innovative and boring where students' learning process is dominated by memorization instead of articulating the content of what they learn (Nuriyah, 2021). For instance, the learning materials mostly consist of grammar, vocabulary, and certain short texts that have no relationship with their surroundings, unfamiliar experiences. This leads the young learners to refuse to be connected with the subject and indeed makes them perceive English as a boring and complicated subject (Dewi et al., 2023).

Another issue found in several elementary schools which offer an English language subject to their students. One of the most surprising things is that a teacher who teaches an English language subject was not educated in English education (Mappiasse & Sihes, 2014). They are appointed to be a teacher because they have the ability to speak basic English. In fact, to teach English for young learners, teachers must be well trained and classified as advanced level holders in English skills. The younger the learner, the more complex the learning process must be. Moreover, children have very different characters from adults in their learning process (Zein, 2017).

The young learners have unique characteristics and needs, such as imaginative minds, easily get bored but at the same time they are pleased to do physical activities, and have a low level of attention span. Therefore, teaching English for the elementary school students, teachers must really understand the characteristics of every child in their class prior to planning and making learning materials and learning designs. In addition, since English is a practical subject, teachers must always motivate their students to develop English language skills. For instance, to support students' speaking skills, teachers can use English all the time or as much as possible in the classroom during instructional sessions.

The Role of English in the 21st century era

The era of the industrial revolution 4.0 is characterized by technological developments that are very sophisticated and greatly affect human life in several aspects, such as education, social, health, economics, business, politics, and so on (Kim et al., 2019). One of the impacts of the industrial revolution 4.0 is the emergence of digital-based products. For example, an online health

consultation application. Through this application, we currently have the option to not go to the doctor, instead doing a consultation from home or even from anywhere. Moreover, the types of jobs are also changing recently. Currently there are jobs known as data scientists, robotic engineers, graphic designers, YouTubers, bloggers, and many more (Chalkiadaki, 2018). This indicates that science is experiencing rapid, instant, and technology-based changes (Bedir, 2019). Thus, the current generation must be able to adapt to all these changes. According to Mabuan, (2017) to be able to adapt to the rapid changes in the 4.0 era, today's youth generation must be able to master English. Because the latest technology definitely developed its features using English, quality books are written in English, courses and free classes from various universities are presented in English during the teaching process. Even English language communication skill is perceived as the most treasured asset in many cases by professional workers in top companies (Van Laar et al., 2020). Communication skill refers to someone's ability in explaining what she/he is able to do and further, it is believed that skill is part of 21st century's 4C besides critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration

CONCLUSION

By reviewing and analyzing various studies and reports released by the researchers, academics, and government, it can be concluded that elementary school age is the right age for students to develop their language skills. By learning English, students can develop critical and creative thinking skills as long as they are accompanied by quality materials and teachers who consider the characteristics of children's learning. In addition, learning English from an early age

can also make a strong foundation for young students to be able to form English communication skills which are much needed in the current era of the industrial revolution 4.0.

To develop the results of this study, we got several suggestions, such as (1) it is necessary to develop learning models and tools that support the development of young learners' English skills in elementary schools according to each determined learning outcome in every phases within Merdeka curriculum applied in elementary school education; (2) it is necessary to conduct research related to the impact of learning English from early years on a sense of nationalism and proficiency in Indonesian language (*Bahasa Indonesia*).

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