

## Challenges in Teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum at Elementary Schools

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### Abstract

The Emancipated Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) was introduced at the beginning of 2022 by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Nadiem Anwar Makarim. The curriculum introduces several differences from the previous curriculum, one of which pertains to Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). English lessons have been reintroduced in elementary schools after being absent for some time. However, this change poses challenges for teachers. The absence of specialized English teachers in elementary schools demands that classroom teachers assume the responsibility of teaching English subjects. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by elementary school teachers in teaching English under the emancipated curriculum. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with two classroom teachers as participants. The obtained data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover the findings. The research was conducted in an elementary school in Ciamis, West Java, Indonesia. The results reveal that elementary school teachers face four main challenges in teaching English under the curriculum. These challenges include a lack of professional development for teachers, teachers' pedagogical competencies, the characteristics of young learners, and the lack of educational resources. It is recommended that educational authorities implement comprehensive professional development programs to enhance teachers' pedagogical competencies, with a focus on innovative and student-centered approaches that are suitable for young learners. Additionally, increasing the availability of educational resources and providing continuous support for teachers in adapting to the emancipated curriculum will address the identified challenges and improve the quality of English teaching.

**Keywords:** Emancipated Curriculum, English young learners, Teaching English for Young Learners,

### INTRODUCTION

The curriculum is a fundamental component of the educational process, serving as a guide for both teachers and students in achieving learning objectives. It outlines the knowledge, skills, and values that learners are expected to develop, ensuring that teaching activities are structured and purposeful. The curriculum is a fundamental component of the education system as it

dictates the methods of teaching and learning (Hidayah et al., 2022). Tyler (1949) defined the curriculum as the comprehensive planning aimed at setting goals, organizing content, implementing strategies, and evaluating outcomes. Kamila & RM (2023) emphasized that with the latest advancements in science, technology, and development, teaching and learning must remain innovative and adaptable. Consequently, curriculum

development has emerged as a critical process. The objective of curriculum development is to effectively meet all student needs, thereby ensuring that learning objectives are achieved to their fullest extent (Sanjaya et al., 2022). In response to the learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian government introduced a new curriculum known as *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Ndari et al., 2023).

The Emancipated Curriculum was introduced at the beginning of 2022 by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Nadiem Anwar Makarim (Asrifan et al., 2023). The Emancipated Curriculum provides schools and teachers with the flexibility to adapt and explore curricula based on the specific needs of both the school and its students (Ndari et al., 2023). This approach allows for the design of operational curricula and teaching modules tailored to students' competency levels (Lubis & Priyadi, 2022). The content of the Emancipated Curriculum is more streamlined and straightforward, focusing on essential materials to develop student competencies at each phase (Nurani et al., 2022). According to Kemendikbudristek Decree No. 033/H/KR/2022 (2022), the curriculum is structured into phases A to F, covering education from elementary to senior high school. The trial implementation of the curriculum was conducted in 2022. Currently, thousands of schools have adopted the *Emancipated Curriculum* (Kemendikbudristek, 2024).

Compared to the previous curriculum, the Emancipated Curriculum differs significantly, particularly in its approach to Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) has been taught for a very long time in Indonesia. The government determined that English should be one of the local

content subjects in the elementary education curriculum through a survey that was done in 1989 (Primary et al., 2023). According to Zein et al. (2020), English has been a required subject in the primary school curriculum since the fourth grade in 1993.

Then, in the 2006 curriculum, the government permitted schools to offer English as early as grade one due to parents' desire to enroll their kids in English from the lower grades. The 2013 Curriculum brought about significant changes. This curriculum removed English language education from elementary schools and continued until the 2013 Curriculum was revised in 2017. This occurred because the 2013 Curriculum prioritized character education, so students focused more on their mother tongue or regional language. In this new curriculum, English has been reintroduced as an elementary school subject after being removed from the 2013 Curriculum (Sulaiman, 2022). Currently, approximately 130,648 elementary schools have implemented the Emancipated Curriculum (Kemendikbudristek, 2024).

According to Kemendikbudristek Decree 2774/H.H1/KR.00.01/2022 (2022), the Emancipated Curriculum is introduced in elementary schools for grades 1 and 4. However, this implementation presents several challenges for teachers who teach English. The majority of elementary schools in Indonesia still delegate the responsibility of teaching English to classroom teachers, who typically have a background in Primary School Education (PGSD) rather than English education. Teachers are forced to grapple with a subject outside their expertise and are required to use the latest curriculum, which necessitates significant adjustments. Additionally, teaching English to young learners (TEYL) brings unique challenges, making the teacher's task more complex.

Teaching English to young learners can present unexpected challenges due to the impact of their traits on their learning process (Pertwi et al., 2020).

Teaching English to young learners contrasts significantly with teaching adult learners (Oktavia et al., 2022). Teachers must utilize appropriate strategies to keep young students engaged and motivated during the teaching and learning process (Wulandari et al., 2020). Shin and Crandall (2013) identified several characteristics of young learners: they are energetic and physically active, spontaneous and unafraid to speak out or participate, curious and receptive to new ideas, imaginative and fond of make-believe, social and learning to relate to others, easily distracted with short attention spans, and egocentric, relating new ideas to themselves. These characteristics often influence the learning process. Additionally, there are several principles that teachers need to consider when teaching English to young learners. Shin and Crandall (2013) noted that young learners need a learning environment similar to first language acquisition, they learn through meaningful exposure and practice, and do not learn effectively through explicit grammatical explanations. Understanding and applying these principles can help teachers create more effective and engaging English language learning experiences for young students.

English for young learners under the Emancipated Curriculum is positioned as an optional subject and is not required to be taught. According to Kemendikbudristek Decree No. 262/M/2022 (2022), English lessons in elementary schools can be implemented based on school readiness, with schools having the discretion to offer English for a maximum of two hours per week or 72 hours per year. In practice, however, many elementary schools are already teaching

English. The subject can be taught by competent classroom teachers, available English teachers, or students enrolled in the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka Program. The learning outcomes for English instruction are outlined in Kemendikbudristek Decree No. 7 of 2022 (2022). To support this, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology provides textbooks for English classes via the official Emancipated Curriculum website. These resources are accessible to educators and students across all grades, with the elementary textbook titled "My Next Word."

Previous research has indicated that the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum in elementary schools has several positive and negative impacts (Wardani et al., 2023 & Ndari et al., 2023). Wardani et al. (2023) highlight the positive impact of the Emancipated Curriculum as preparation for producing a golden generation in 2045, asserting that the Pancasila student profile promoted by the curriculum fosters adaptive intelligence that AI cannot replace. Additionally, the curriculum's flexibility, which allows educators to tailor learning according to students' needs, is seen as an advantage for developing student potential. However, the implementation also has negative impacts due to policy discrepancies, necessitating considerable effort from school policymakers to prepare, implement, monitor, and evaluate effectively.

Ndari et al. (2023) identify several challenges faced by schools, including difficulties in learning models, teacher readiness, student behavior, student readiness, and costs. The curriculum requires learning models that align with student potential, compelling teachers to develop learning objectives that reference both student potential and the curriculum's goals. Some teachers are still

unprepared for this system, needing to develop suitable teaching modules. Furthermore, controlling student behavior has become challenging due to the influence of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected student focus. The curriculum's emphasis on student interests presents another challenge, as many students are not yet ready to set their own goals and instead follow their peers. Additionally, the requirement for teachers to carry out projects as direct illustrations of the material often incurs costs, posing financial obstacles since schools frequently lack the necessary funds, resulting in students having to cover project expenses themselves. These studies collectively describe the complexity of implementing the Emancipated Curriculum in elementary schools in general.

Previous research indicates that the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum presents several challenges, including those faced by teachers. However, there has been no specific research on the implementation of English language teaching under the Emancipated Curriculum. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges elementary school teachers encounter in teaching English within the framework of the Emancipated Curriculum. This research examines teacher readiness, the teaching process (including objectives, modules, and assessment), student behavior, student readiness, and associated costs (Ndari et al., 2023).

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, a case study was chosen as the qualitative research method design. Yin (2018) explains that a case study is an empirical investigation that explores a specific case to answer how and why questions about the phenomenon of interest. This method aligns with the research objective exploring the phenomenon of the

implementation of English teaching in elementary schools under the Emancipated Curriculum. This research was conducted at one of the elementary public schools in Ciamis, West Java.

Following Kemendikbudristek decree 2774/H.H1/KR.00.01/2022 (2022), the Emancipated Curriculum for elementary school can be implemented in grades 1 and 4. Therefore, this research involved two classroom teachers from grades 1 and 4 as participants. They are class teachers (non-English background) with 11 years of experience teaching in elementary schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain data for this study because they are flexible but still structured, allowing researchers to obtain in-depth information and evidence (Ruslin et al., 2022). The questions for the interview included teacher readiness, the teaching process (objectives, modules, and assessment), student behavior, student readiness, and costs (Ndari et al., 2023). The data obtained were then analyzed using thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2012).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The interview results identified four challenges elementary school teachers face when teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum. These challenges are: (1) lack of professional development, (2) teachers' pedagogical competencies, (3) characteristics of young learners, and (4) lack of educational resources. A detailed explanation of these challenges is provided below.

### Lack of Professional Development

Interview data showed that the participants experienced a lack of training regarding implementing the Emancipated Curriculum. Additionally, they mentioned that they had not received training to develop their teaching skills, either in knowledge or

practical skills in English teaching. The training attended by teachers had been limited to the Teachers' Working Group (KKG/ *Kelompok Kerja Guru*), which covered only general aspects of the Emancipated Curriculum. KKG is a forum under the auspices of a school cluster (one sub-district) and this forum must be managed and developed sustainably by addressing field-specific needs and challenges (Affandi et al., 2022). There was no specific training on teaching English during these sessions. The KKG is scheduled once a month, but is not consistently implemented. As a result, teachers felt their knowledge was inadequate for teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum, making them unprepared to effectively teach within this framework.

There has been no training in English teaching at all. The Teachers' Working Group (KKG/ *Kelompok Kerja Guru*) only discusses the Emancipated Curriculum in general terms and does not address English teaching specifically. Therefore, I have learned it independently. From what I have found online, English language teaching in elementary schools focuses on developing contextual English language skills tailored to the students' environment.” **(Excerpt of Teacher 1)**

The training on the Emancipated Curriculum that I attended was solely at the Teachers' Working Group (KKG/ *Kelompok Kerja Guru*) level. The schedule was supposed to be monthly, but in reality, it was occasionally irregular. Apart from the KKG, my knowledge of the Emancipated Curriculum primarily stems from the Merdeka Mengajar application. However, I have had to study independently, which has been time-

consuming due to the abundance of videos.” **(Teacher 2)**

The data indicate a lack of professional development among teachers. Professional development is a continuous process that encompasses activities designed to enhance teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes to improve student learning outcomes (Sancar et al., 2021). Supriatna et al. (2023) emphasize that professional development is crucial for successful curriculum implementation. This development can take various forms, including structured and unstructured learning opportunities, workshops, consulting and coaching sessions, reflective supervision, and collaborative group activities involving educators (Jensen & Rasmussen, 2018). However, the development received by teachers has predominantly been through consulting and coaching sessions during PPG activities and is often not conducted according to schedule. The lack of professional development negatively impacts teachers, as they do not gain the new knowledge and skills necessary for effective teaching, resulting in suboptimal achievement of learning objectives. Razali (2020) supports this view, noting that teachers' skills and knowledge are often problematic in curriculum implementation, especially when others design the curriculum, and teachers lack resources to deepen their understanding. Therefore, the development of professional development programs for teachers to teach English under the Emancipated Curriculum is crucial.

### **Teachers' Pedagogical Competencies**

The interview highlighted that there are additional challenges elementary school teachers faced when teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum. These challenges were related to teachers' pedagogical competencies. Participants revealed that they encountered difficulties

with their competency in teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum. Teachers found it challenging to manage their classes according to the Emancipated Curriculum. They felt they lacked sufficient knowledge of teaching English within this curriculum, which led to apprehension in their teaching practices. These challenges stemmed from difficulties applying the methods suggested by the Emancipated Curriculum, managing time to cover all available materials, implementing teaching modules, integrating the Pancasila Student Profile, and achieving the learning outcomes outlined in the Emancipated Curriculum.

To be honest, sometimes it's too complicated. There are too many things to prepare and organize. Not to mention preparing the learning media. In the Emancipated Curriculum, we have to use a lot of different tools and methods, so everything needs to be brought along. **(Teacher 1)**

Yes, the level of the material is already high, and teachers are required to teach the material found in books. In this case, the material is already provided, but the students do not even have the basics. **(Teacher 2)**

Based on the excerpts provided, teachers face challenges with their pedagogical competencies in teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum. Teachers' pedagogical competencies are the ability to manage the learning process (Sudargini & Purwanto, 2020). This competency requires acquiring, internalizing, and mastering knowledge, skills, and behaviours to educate, teach, guide, direct, train, assess, and evaluate students in the learning process (Tanjung, 2022). It is a crucial skill in the teaching process that differentiates teachers' professionalism from other professions

(Gultom & Sidabalok, 2021). It is vital for creating a conducive learning environment and preventing monotonous learning activities that can lead to student disinterest and lack of focus (Channa & Sahito, 2022).

Teachers are pivotal in ensuring the successful teaching of English under the Emancipated Curriculum, as underscored by the discussion on teachers' pedagogical competencies. Tonga et al., (2019) emphasize that teachers play a crucial role in education, influencing the quality of teaching, which in turn impacts learning achievements, as consistently shown in educational research. If teachers do not possess adequate pedagogical competencies in teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum, it significantly affects the teaching-learning process. This study highlights that teachers lack competencies directly related to their pedagogical competencies in teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum. This deficiency can impact both the teaching process and the resulting outcomes.

### **Characteristics of Young Learners**

Interview findings reveal that elementary school teachers face challenges related to the characteristics displayed by students when learning English under the Emancipated Curriculum. In elementary school, students are still considered young learners. Therefore, this is seen as a challenge for teachers to face the characteristics of young learners. Many students show negative characteristics when learning English under the Emancipated Curriculum. These challenges include unpredictable students' behavior, lack of student abilities, and the dominant influence of their mother tongue. These are some of the characteristics of young learners when studying a foreign language. Participants highlighted these issues as challenges when teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum.

The students are not yet independent, so they need a lot of guidance. They also get bored easily, so various methods are often used to keep them engaged. **(Teacher 1)**

But there are still some students who, if they don't want to do something, simply won't do it. If they're in a bad mood, I can't force them. Even if I try to engage them with games or other activities, if they don't want to participate, they just won't. It's probably their personality and is difficult to change. It's not every day, but it happens maybe about once a week. **(Teacher 2)**

Participants noted that students' characteristics often hinder the teaching process. Elementary school students, who are still considered young learners, are particularly challenging to manage, especially in learning foreign languages. Teaching English to young learners differs significantly from teaching adults. According to Pertiwi et al. (2020), teaching young learners can present unexpected challenges due to their unique characteristics, which can impact the learning process. The younger the students are in learning a language, especially English, the more difficult it is to convey the material to them (Kharimah et al., 2023). Young learners typically exhibit traits such as the need to be physically active, a wide range of emotional needs, developing conceptual understanding, early-stage schooling, still developing literacy in their first language, learn more slowly, forgetting things quickly, being self-oriented, getting bored easily, and being easily distracted (Brewster & Ellis, 2002). These challenges are also evident in teaching English to elementary students under the Emancipated Curriculum. Teachers report that students' behavior, lack of abilities, and the dominant

influence of their mother tongue present significant challenges. Teachers need to exert more effort when teaching English to young learners. They must be creative and innovative to make classes more engaging (Oktavia et al., 2022). Engaging classes encourage students to participate actively in the learning process. Pertiwi et al. (2020) argue that activities such as art projects, games, and audio-visual activities are particularly appealing to young learners. Additionally, teachers can boost students' motivation by offering rewards like stars or stickers at the end of the class.

### **Lack of Educational Resources**

The final challenge identified as a challenge for elementary school teachers in teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum is the lack of educational resources. Interview participants revealed that the lack of learning media at the school, school facilities such as electricity are also inadequate, and there are no experts who understand English language teaching at the school. These issues significantly hinder teachers and affect the teaching process.

Because we are in a remote area, purchasing items requires traveling a long distance. Teaching materials at the school are also limited. Furthermore, when we want to use the projector, the electricity often goes out because we use the lowest electricity package. **(Teacher 1)**

Because there is no English teacher here, it's difficult to share opinions or exchange ideas. **(Teacher 1)**

For books, we currently only have four. So, sometimes, when working on exercises or presenting media images, we have to use an infocus or print them

first before handing them out to students. **(Teacher 2)**

Educational resources are a crucial component in the teaching and learning process. Yansah et al. (2023) stated that the lack of resources, such as books and technological devices, can affect the quality of education and student engagement in the learning process. Findings by Rohmah et al. (2024) reveal that the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum still faces challenges related to the unavailability of sourcebooks and the limited presence of internet networks and IT infrastructure. This is consistent with the opinions of the participants, who found challenges in teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum due to the scarcity of books, electricity, and Wi-Fi. The Emancipated Curriculum, which is heavily reliant on technology, requires the readiness of facilities and infrastructure for electricity and internet access, as these factors determine the feasibility of implementing the Emancipated Curriculum (Sutaris, 2022).

Furthermore, in addition to resources such as books and internet access, professional expertise in specific subjects is also necessary. A subject-specific instructor or mentor should be available to facilitate teachers in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum (Rohmah et al., 2024). This indicates that subject teachers also require instructors or mentors, especially elementary school teachers who are generally not proficient in English. The study found that teachers face challenges due to the absence of professional English language teachers. In other words, there are no English teachers at the school. This aligns with the findings of Etiyasningsih and Bariroh (2024) who stated that qualified and skilled human resources (teachers) in applying the Emancipated Curriculum, particularly in teaching methods, and innovative and creative teaching behavior, are significant barriers.

## CONCLUSION

This study explores the challenges faced by elementary school teachers in English teaching under the Emancipated Curriculum. Interviews revealed four main challenges: lack of professional development, teachers' pedagogical competencies, characteristics of young learners, and lack of educational resources. Teachers receive minimal professional development through the Teachers' Working Group (KKG), resulting in a lack of knowledge and skills necessary for effective English instruction. Consequently, their limited pedagogical competencies hinder the implementation of Emancipated Curriculum methods, classroom management, and achieving learning outcomes.

Additionally, young learners' behaviors or characteristics, influenced by their mother tongue and developmental stage, further complicate teaching, as students often display selfishness, boredom, and reluctance to participate. This situation is exacerbated by the scarcity of educational resources, such as books, electricity, and Wi-Fi, and the absence of professional English teachers, all of which significantly hamper effective teaching.

Based on this research, the researchers suggest that the government or school authorities should focus on enhancing English language teaching at the elementary level. Continuous professional development programs are recommended to improve teachers' skills and knowledge in teaching English under the Emancipated Curriculum. Ideally, English should be taught by teachers with an English education background to avoid issues related to proficiency. Additionally, the government should ensure that schools are equipped with adequate learning facilities, including internet access



and electricity, which are crucial for effective teaching. The study acknowledges its limitations, including a narrow focus on teachers' challenges and a small sample size. Future research could address solutions to these challenges or explore issues faced by other stakeholders, such as principals or students, with a larger participant pool and additional data collection methods. Implementing these recommendations could lead to more effective English instruction and better outcomes for students.

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