"It's Exciting and Motivating": Pre-Service Teachers in Teaching English to Young Learners in *Kurikulum Merdeka* Implementation

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Abstract: Caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, rapid shifts in teaching strategies have exposed pre-service teachers to novel difficulties and opportunities. Because of these shifts, pre-service teachers now face new challenges in teaching English, especially to young learners in the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. The purposes of this study were to explore how pre-service teachers prepared themselves in teaching English to young learners and what made them excited and motivated in teaching English to young learners at the Islamic elementary level. Joining teaching practice at the Islamic elementary level directly made pre-service teachers challenged in doing such kinds of teaching and learning processes in handling the learners in the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. To overcome these problems, the pre-service teachers employed such kinds of strategies by utilizing inventive pedagogical tools like the "Snake and Ladder" and "Beberan" Game Board, as well as teaching strategies like project-based learning and cooperative learning. This study suggested that future pre-service teachers needed more appropriate strategies and media, especially in teaching English to young learners at the Islamic elementary level. Finally, pre-service teachers needed to find ways to get the young learners involved and working together in the classroom and they culled the best strategies and media in the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Pre-Service Teachers, Teaching Strategies, TEYL, Islamic Elementary Students, Kurikulum Merdeka.

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide health crisis caused by the pandemic extends beyond being solely a public health emergency, encompassing political, economic, social, and educational challenges. The COVID-19 outbreak highlights the significance of childcare as a vital economic element and emphasizes the value of early childhood educators' often overlooked and underestimated contributions to education (Shin & Puig, 2021). In the future, researchers from various fields will conduct studies to explore the medical, political, economic, social, and educational factors that shape the current situation. Many of these issues will be of interest to strategies in teaching and learning, media, and technology readers (Scully et al., 2021). It is believed that the transition to online and digital education formats, as well as the rise of remote forms of teaching and learning as a result of mass closures of schools, colleges, and universities, can and should make a more direct contribution to knowledge and practice during the COVID-19 pandemic (Williamson et al., 2020). It is anticipated that there will be a continuous increase in demand for online learning in the coming and the uncertain impact of COVID-19 may, at least temporarily, replace land-based learning with online learning (Lei & So, 2021).

In addition, because of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, schools all over the world had to close, which forced educators to turn to online education or virtual learning environments in order to continue teaching and educating students during the pandemic

(Ortogero & Ray, 2021). In other instances, parents who have not been adequately educated or taught in education and pedagogy are standing in for their children's teachers and attempting to teach their children ideas with which they may be unfamiliar. The parents are trying to educate their children at a time when their children should be receiving instruction from professionals (Gerber & Leong, 2021). Online education is frequently not a suitable replacement for in-person instruction. Both teaching and learning are examples of embodied and socially irreducible activities. Even when using a dependable and fully operational internet connection, face-to-face conversations are significantly more complex, nuanced, and multi-dimensional than their online counterparts. Rather than a dialogue-based approach, this is more of a semaphore teaching style (Yandell, 2020).

The authorities ordered a lockdown during online classes, disrupting the educational process. The lockdown has exposed a very nuanced, social vision of the role of schools, which is about much more than just teaching facts and information. This does not mean that schools are not significant places for social interaction (Yandell, 2020). Nonetheless, when classes resume, teachers will confront the additional task of resocializing large groups of students. What this means is that the educational experience is a set of interactions in which learning and growth take place. Given the potential of online education, especially in the classroom, it is crucial to get insight into the experiences and perspectives of present users (i.e., educators and learners). Despite the fact that online education has been the focus of a great deal of study, the realities of online teaching and learning differ from field to field (Lei & So, 2021).

There are several obstacles that educators must overcome in order to carry out their profession. Examples include deciding which techniques, tools, and resources to use in the classroom. One of the challenges is that pre-service educators can visit the school right after a pandemic hits. Students are regularly involved in meaningful and collaborative activities with pre-service teachers (Jones, 2017). Improving teaching practices and teacher education programs require an understanding of teachers' beliefs (Nafissi & Shafiee, 2020).

Numerous international studies on pre-service teachers who are currently enrolled in university programs have been carried out. These studies have covered a wide range of topics related to pre-service teachers. A study by (Tour & Barnes, 2022) for instance, they said that although the future educators agreed that digital multimodal composing may help students improve their language skills, they had trouble pinpointing the precise literacy benefits. This study agreed that getting students to use digital interfaces was the biggest hurdle when it came to teaching digital multimodal writing. Another study also found by Dressler et al., (2021) showed that pre-service teachers often found themselves gaining first-hand knowledge of the perks and pitfalls of studying a foreign language. They utilized weblogs to think critically about their own language teaching knowledge, abilities, and dispositions. These results demonstrate how studying abroad can improve one's ability to educate students from a variety of backgrounds. (Ma & Luo, 2021) findings of their research that although there are some misconceptions, Chinese pre-service teachers understand the concept of critical thinking and are willing to incorporate it into TEFL despite the many challenges.

By contrast, in the Indonesian context, studies on pre-service teachers, for example (Triastuti, 2020) the findings revealed that, despite the pre-service teachers' overall good test score average and generally positive self-rating perceptions, the pre-service teachers' limited and descriptive reflections did not adequately depict their actual implementation of the teacher knowledge based of teaching in their microteaching practices. (Maharani et al., 2022) discovered that positioning oneself could influence preservice teachers' identity development. However, the unexpected circumstance that forced them to teach online made them feel less than a teacher and forced them to try to establish an identity in the school context by positioning themselves. Multimedia learning involves the formation of mental representations through the

use of words and images (Mayer, 2014); the depth of learning increases with the use of words and images as opposed to words alone. A learner-centered approach should be used in multimedia learning.

Based on the problem stated above, some studies of pre-service teachers' challenges on the changing of curriculum are still limited. Pre-service teachers have a challenge in teaching English to young learners in the classroom after the pandemic and also the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* which demanded the students to adapt with the new regulation. The most serious thing in teaching English to young learners after the pandemic era and in the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* was engaging the students in the classroom. By implementing various teaching strategies, utilize media even multimedia learning are suggested to achieved the teaching and learning objectives. Multimedia learning involves the formation of mental representations through the use of words and images (Mayer, 2014). The depth of learning increases with the use of words and images as opposed to words alone. A learner-centered approach should be used in multimedia learning (Ortogero & Ray, 2021). It is believed the students are going to engage joining in the classroom. When the students enjoy their classroom, it is believed that the teaching and learning process will run as well as the teacher expected. Besides, teaching English to young learners in the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* after the pandemic also has serious problems when the students are in their own home longer. Making the students active in the classroom is hard enough as if it is the starting point to teach the students. The challenges of pre-service teacher are highly tended to increase. Building student involvement in the teaching and learning process in the classroom requires a significant amount of creativity on the part of pre-service teachers when teaching English to young learners in the following of the epidemic era and while implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* curriculum. Based on the problems above, this study tended to explore, what made the pre-service teachers excited and motivated in teaching English to young learners at the Islamic elementary level? how did Pre-service teachers prepare themselves in teaching English to young learnersin the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* at elementary level?

1. Teaching English to Young Learners

The topic of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) focuses on the unique challenges of working with young students of the language (Nafissi & Shafiee, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2022). Numerous studies highlight the value of introducing the English language to young children. Academic achievement, linguistic fluency, mental agility, and cultural sensitivity are just a few of the areas that benefit from TEYL's nurturing environment (Nguyen, 2021). Studies have shown that exposing children to a second language at a young age improves their language skills and lays the groundwork for later language acquisition (Schauer, 2022). Several theories of language acquisition serve as the basis for TEYL, the input-processing model, sociocultural theory, constructivism, and behaviorism are all examples (Chien, 2019; Chik, 2014). Educators benefit from a deeper understanding of these theories because it allows them to better develop engaging lessons for their students. For instance, play-based approaches, recognize that play is both essential to young children's healthy development and an efficient means of imparting knowledge to them (Korkmaz, 2021; Nafissi & Shafiee, 2020). Total Physical Response (TPR) and other play-based approaches provide interactive learning environments for young learners (Sharma, 2019).

Effective classroom management and a stimulating learning environment are of the utmost importance in teaching English to young learners (TEYL). Setting clear objectives, establishing routines, making use of visual aids, and cultivating a happy and inclusive environment all contribute to young students' interest, motivation, and language growth (Chien, 2019; Rachmawati, 2022). TEYL is a great way to encourage young learners to broaden their horizons and develop an appreciation for other cultures. Incorporating culturally varied

resources, honoring holidays and traditions from many cultures, and promoting dialogue and collaboration with peers from all backgrounds all aid in the growth of cultural sensitivity and open-mindedness (Nafissi & Shafiee, 2020). Evaluating the growth of young learners and guiding teaching decisions both depend critically on the use of valid and reliable assessment procedures (Güngör & Önder, 2023). Teachers can learn a lot about their students' linguistic growth and specific needs through authentic and formative assessment strategies like observations, portfolios, and self-evaluations (Li, 2016).

There must be a comprehensive strategy for teaching English to young learners that takes into account the specific characteristics and needs of this age group. the pre-service teachers may help young earners develop strong language skills and a lifelong interest in education by implementing these research-based practices in their English language classrooms (Al Malihi, 2015; Restuningrum, 2018). The use of technological aids in TEYL, including smart boards, applications, and online materials, is on the rise. Technology enables students to have access to authentic resources and worldwide communication, as well as to participate in more active and engaging learning activities. In order to teach TEYL effectively, one must acquire a unique set of skills. Young learners require instruction in theories of language acquisition, methods suitable for their developmental stage, classroom management approaches, and evaluation methods (Restuningrum, 2018; Zein, 2016a). Teachers must engage in ongoing professional development in order to stay abreast of new findings and methods. Problems exist in the fields of TEYL and curriculum development, evaluation, teacher education, and the inclusion of students from different backgrounds. New technologies, pedagogical innovations, and the creation of inclusive practices to meet the needs of all young students are all areas that need further investigation (Al Malihi, 2015; Chik, 2014). It takes a blend of theory, practice, and innovation to succeed in the ever-changing field of teaching English to Young Learners.

2. Pre-Service Teachers' Challenges in TEYL

Pre-service teachers entering the field of English language instruction have special hurdles when preparing to teach English to Young Learners (TEYL). Pre-service teachers face a significant barrier in their own language skills. It's possible that many aspiring educators have had limited opportunities to study the English language themselves, or that they are not native speakers (Madalińska-Michalak & Bavli, 2018). Their capacity to serve as role models and provide support for their young charges' language development may suffer as a result. When it comes to teaching English to young learners, many pre-service teachers lack of the necessary pedagogical understanding and practical abilities (Syamdianita & Cahyono, 2021; Zein, 2016b). They may lack experience in teaching young children or with TEYL-appropriate classroom management measures and evaluation procedures (Gu & Hsieh, 2019; Yastibaş, 2021). Pre-service educators can't feel prepared to teach English to young learners if they lack pedagogical understanding. In order to effectively instruct young learners, one must have a comprehensive understanding of how young learners development influences linguistic acquisition (Nguyen, 2019; Vieira et al., 2022). There is a wide range of linguistic competence, cognitive ability, and learning style among the young students in TEYL courses (Waddington, 2022). It might be difficult for aspiring pre-service teachers to successfully differentiate education to fit the requirements of the learners.

Pre-service teachers face onerous responsibilities, such as modifying lessons for diverse students' needs, helping those who are failing, and stretching those who are proficient (Maijala, 2020). It might be especially difficult for aspiring educators to maintain order and control student behavior in a TEYL setting. They may struggle to develop routines, handle classroom transitions, and actively engage their young students in learning (Xu et al., 2020; Yalcin Arslan,

2019). Pre-service teachers preparation programs should place a premium on teaching students how to effectively manage classrooms in TEYL settings. Pre-service teachers who have had limited experience with educational technologies may find it difficult to incorporate them into TEYL lessons (Suherman, 2022). It's possible that future educators aren't well prepared to help young people acquire a second language by making use of digital tools and resources. When it comes to preparing to teach English to young learners, a lack of practical experience in TEYL settings might negatively affect a pre-service teacher's confidence and competence (Pusparini et al., 2021). They may lack the self-assurance to put their theoretical knowledge into practice if they aren't given enough opportunities to do so in a realistic classroom setting. Pre-service teachers can be better prepared for the difficulties of TEYL classrooms if they have more opportunities to get experience in TEYL settings during their practicums.

Teaching English to young learners presents a number of difficulties for pre-service teachers. Inadequate language skills, a lack of pedagogical expertise, an inability to comprehend child development, difficulties in differentiating instruction, managing a classroom, incorporating technology, and a lack of practicum experience are all factors. To meet these issues, teacher preparation programs must offer in-depth instruction in TEYL pedagogies, child development theories, classroom management techniques and strategies, and the incorporation of media and technology (Widiati et al., 2018; Yusuf & Novita, 2020). Providing future educators with a solid foundation in TEYL enables them to better serve the needs of their future students and deliver high-quality English language education in a variety of TEYL settings.

3. Teaching Strategies in the Impelementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*

In Indonesia, they have adopted a new method of teaching called *Kurikulum Merdeka*, or the Independent Curriculum. It analyses the foundational aspects of *Kurikulum Merdeka* and identifies successful pedagogical practices that advance the curriculum's aims (Asrifan et al., 2023). Active Students Participation and Engagement in *Kurikulum Merdeka* places a premium on student participation and engagement in the learning process (Ariga, 2022; Nugraha, 2022). The goal of using methods like project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and problem-based learning is to encourage students to think critically, creatively, and independently.

Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes the importance of providing students with meaningful and applicable lessons. Teachers work to make connections between what students learn in the classroom and their own lives and communities (Nugraha, 2022; Supraptono et al., 2022). Students gain a deeper grasp and appreciation for a topic when they have the opportunity to apply what they have learned in real-world situations through methods like field excursions and community-based projects (Ariga, 2022; Pratikno et al., 2022). *Kurikulum Merdeka* relies heavily on the use of cooperative learning techniques. Peer cooperation, cooperative learning activities, and group projects are used to get students working together and talking to one another. When students work together to complete a project, they create a welcoming and supportive classroom setting in which everyone may grow as learners. *Kurikulum Merdeka* places an emphasis on differentiated instruction as a means of meeting the range of students' academic demands and skills (Asrifan et al., 2023; Nugraha, 2022). Teachers use methods like flexible grouping, tiered assignments, and learning stations to give students a more tailored education that takes into account their unique interests, aptitudes, and weaknesses. All students will be able to contribute and achieve academic progress with the help of differentiated education (Fathurrahman et al., 2022). *Kurikulum Merdeka's* implementation features increased emphasis on the use of technology in the classroom. Digital tools, multimedia resources, and online platforms are all part of today's instructional methodologies. To better

educate learners for the digital age, schools are increasingly incorporating technology into their curricula.

Kurikulum Merdeka encourages the use of formative assessment in the classroom as a means of keeping tabs on student development and offering constructive suggestions for improvement (Pratikno et al., 2022). Information about students' learning is gathered and used to guide instruction through methods like self-assessment, peer evaluation, and continuous classroom assessments. Students benefit from formative evaluation practices because they encourage introspection, self-control, and growth through time (Yuliana A. Noning, Tans Felix, 2021). Teachers in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* system are more like guides or mentors to students than traditional lecturers. In order to help students along their educational paths, teachers employ methods that foster an encouraging and safe classroom setting (Pratikno et al., 2022). Teachers use methods like questioning, active listening, and coaching to help students develop their knowledge, reasoning, and ability to solve problems.

In summary, the student-centered, contextualized, and collaborative nature of *Kurikulum Merdeka* is reflected in the pedagogical practices that are employed in its implementation. *Kurikulum Merdeka* uses techniques including student-centered learning, contextualized and relevant learning, collaborative learning, differentiated instruction, technological integration, formative assessment, and teacher facilitation to achieve its aims. The educators can better foster student agency, critical thinking, and holistic growth within the framework of *Kurikulum Merdeka* by adopting and applying these practices.

METHODS

This research utilized a descriptive qualitative approach. The primary objective of this qualitative research was to analyze and describe a phenomenon that took place in an actual-life environment (Sa'adah, 2019). Heidi Dulay et al. Issac and Michael (1997:46) stated that the goal of a descriptive study is to precisely and accurately characterize the facts as well as the features of the specific population or geographical area of interest. Furthermore, McMillan & Schumacher, (2014) stated that the objective of the descriptive study was to investigate events or phenomena. Because of this, it was extremely essential to collect the most accurate data possible, as this would decide the overall quality of the study. Observation, interviews, and documentations all played a part in the research process (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, 2017). Five undergraduated students who were in the process of becoming pre-service teachers and were participating in teacher teaching practice at school especially when they were teaching English to young learners at school.

RESULTS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

The data collected during the course of the study came from three different sources: interviews, observations, and documentation. The researchers were able to deduce a great deal from this information. The researcher was able to learn about the condition of the subjects of the study through the use of observation. The subjects of this study were seven pre-service teachers who taught English to young students at the elementary level of Islamic education. In light of the findings, the researchers partitioned the fieldwork into two distinct areas, namely, the application of teaching methodologies and the use of various forms of media in teaching English to young learners at elementary levels. The researchers discovered that the pre-service teachers' teaching practices were effective at formulating learning objectives according to the supplied content.

Because the students were joining the class through an offline class, the pre-service teachers were extremely adapt at presenting the curriculum according to the conditions and development of students. However, following the pandemic of covid-19, the teachers had issues making the classroom attractive. The pre-service instructors did a very good job of identifying the type of educational approach that captures the interest of the students. The future educators did a fantastic job of utilizing a variety of educational media. The learning media that was designed by pre-service teachers was of a high quality, had a wide variety of applications, and was effective in its use. It had the ability to get students engaged and active during the instruction.Pre-service teachers were excited and motivated in doing such kinds of teaching strategies in handling the students in the classroom. To overcome these problems, the pre-service teachers employed such kinds of teaching strategies for instance project-based learning and cooperative learning in their teaching and learning process

According to the findings, the researchers discovered that when it came to the usage of media in the process of teaching and learning, it revealed that the relevancy of the learning media employed with teaching materials was extremely good. The capacity of future educators to make effective use of various forms of media in the classroom was quite high. The ease with which pre-service teachers and students could incorporate media into their educational experiences was beneficial. The accessibility of various forms of media in the classroom for the purposes of instruction and education was satisfactory. The benefits of employing media in teaching and learning for the purpose of improving the learning process were very good, and utilizing the "Snake and Ladder" Game Board as well as constructing the "Beberan" Game Board as creative media to cope with the problem in the teaching and learning process after the pandemic was a highly effective way to improve the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Based on the results of the interview with the pre-service teachers in teaching strategies and utilizing of media used in the teaching and learning process in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* Implementation, it indicated that in teaching strategies most of the pre-service teachers formulated the learning objective according to the materials given in the teaching and learning process. They presented the material according to the conditions and development of the students in the classroom, it depended on the class they taught. The pre-service teachers determined the learning method that attracted students' attention in the classroom. They used various learning resources during a teaching in the classroom. They design varied and effective learning media.

In utilizing media used in the teaching and learning process, the pre-service teachers used media in the teaching and learning process in the classroom were relevant based on the conditions of the students. Their ability to design and use media in learning was very good because they could design some media based on the students' needs. The use of media in the teaching and learning process made the teaching and learning process easier for pre-service teachers and students during the lesson. The availability of media used in teaching and learning in the classroom was relatively easy because they prepared to design the media to utilize things around them. The usefulness of media in the teaching and learning process was to improve the students' involvement during the lesson. Using the media in the classroom in teaching young learners at the elementary level made the students active and involve during the lesson. By activating and involving them directly in the classroom, it was believed that the learning outcomes would be achieved very well.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it could be stated that to overcome these problems, the pre-service teachers employed such kinds of strategies for instance project-based learning and cooperative learning in their teaching and learning process, and utilizing the "Snake and Ladder" game and also "Beberan" Game Board as creative media in their teaching and learning process in the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Those strategies and media were use by the pre-service teachers in their classroom. The implication of this study was as pre-service teachers needed to develop an awareness of the teaching strategies for teaching English to young learners at the Islamic elementary level or primary school. Culling the appropriate strategies and media were needed in teaching the students at the primary level to engage the students and to activate them joining in the classroom.

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