EXPLORING ENGLISH LITERACY LEARNING AT THE FIRST GRADE OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A THESIS

By

RIZKA RAZIMONA

06012682125029

Magister **Program of Language Education**

FACULTY OF TEACHER TRAINING AND EDUCATION

UNIVERSITAS SRIWIJAYA

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06012682125029

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Approved by:

Advisor 1,   Advisor 2,

Sary Silvhiany, M.Pd., M.A., Ph.D.   Machdalena Vianty, M.Ed., M.Pd., Ed.D

NIP. 197708112002122003   NIP. 197411242000122001

Certified by:

Dean,   Head of Magister Program of
                               Language Education,

Dr. Hartono, M.A.   Sary Silvhiany, M.Pd., M.A., Ph.D.

NIP. 196710171993011001   NIP. 197708112002122003

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RIZKA RAZIMONA
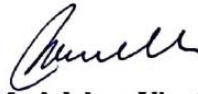06012682125029

Magister Program in Language Education

Approved by:

Advisor I

Sary Silvhiany, M.Pd., M.A., Ph.D
NIP. 197708112002122003

Advisor II,

Machdalena Vianty, M.Ed., M.Pd., Ed.D
NIP. 197411242000122001

Certified by:
Head of Master Program of Language Education

Sary Silvhiany, M.Pd., M.A., Ph.D
NIP. 197708112002122003

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by

RIZKA RAZIMONA
06012682125029

Magister Program of Language Education

Had examined and passed on:

Day : Friday
Date : July 19, 2024

EXAMINATION COMMITTEE

1. Chairperson   : Sary Silvhiany, M.Pd., M.A., Ph.D
2. Secretary   : Machdalena Vianty, M.Ed., M.Pd., Ed.D
3. Member   : Eryansyah, M.A., Ph.D.
4. Member   : Amrullah, M.Ed., Ph.D.

Palembang, July 22, 2024
Approved by,
Head of Study Program

Sary Silvhiany, M.Pd., M.A., Ph.D
NIP. 197708112002122003

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned:

Name : Rizka Razimona

Student's Number : 06012682125029

Study Program : *Magister* Program in Language Education

Academic Major : English Language Education

certify that data thesis entitled "Exploring English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School" is my own work and I did not do any plagiarism or inappropriate quotation against the ethic and rules commended by the Ministry of Education Republic Indonesia Number 17, 2010 regarding plagiarism in higher education.

Therefore, I deserve to face the court if I am found to have plagiarized this work.

Palembang, July 22, 2024

The Undersigned,

Rizka Razimona

NIM 06012682125029

MOTTO:

"It's your road, and yours alone, others may
walk it with you, but no one can walk it for you"

-Jalaluddin Rumi-

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to:

My handsome husband, my precious parents and parent in-law, my precious daughters and son, my brothers and sisters. Thank you for being a part of my life, supporting and praying for me continuously.

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Exploring English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School

ABSTRACT

Teaching English to first grade elementary school children presents its own challenges for teachers. This is because children at this age have characteristics such as having a short attention span, enjoying playing, learning more effectively when they are having fun. On the other hand, children in this group are still learning to read and write in the national language. The purpose of this research is to explore how English literacy learning is implemented, to find out the inhibiting and encouraging factors in implementing English literacy learning in first grade elementary schools and to find out strategies that can be used to overcome the factors that hinder the implementation of English literacy learning in the classroom. one elementary school. The design of this research is descriptive qualitative. The data sources in this research are first grade elementary school English teachers, school students, and learning documents. The data collection techniques used were observation, interviews and documentation. Some of the results of this research are: teachers apply various methods in teaching such as songs, drills, lectures, reading aloud, memorizing and games. Among these learning strategies, songs are the most effective strategy for introducing English to children. The challenges faced are that children are very active, get bored quickly, and a small number of children do not read fluently. Factors that can support English literacy learning are adequate learning aids such as the use of pictures and parental involvement at home to repeat English lessons and practice them at home.

Keywords: Exploration, English Literacy Learning, Young Learners, Elementary School

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Name : Rizka Razimona
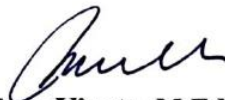Student's Number : 06012682125029

Approved by

Advisor I

Sary Silvhiany, M.Pd., M.A.,Ph.D.
NIP. 197708112002122003

Advisor II

Machdalena Vianty, M.Ed., M.Pd., Ed.D
NIP. 197411242000122001

Certified by:
The Head of Magister Program of Language Education

Sary Silvhiany, M.Pd., M.A., Ph.D.
NIP. 197708112002122003

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents (1) background, (2) problems of the study, (3) the objectives of the study, and (4) the significance of the study.

1.1   Background of the Study

Globalization is going to keep speeding up the strengthening of international social connections that relate remote regions to the point where distant events affect local happenings, and local events, in turn, impact distant ones (Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, Zhang mentioned that since language is both influenced by and acts as a connector for exchanges between people and places, it is crucial to the globalization process. As a result, learning a new language to connect with people in other nations and places is becoming increasingly popular as a way to engage into the globalization process. There are many benefits for people to be bilingual or multilingual, for instance transitioning between different languages can be seen as a type of cognitive exercise. Managing two or more languages mentally provides the brain with cognitive advantages and enhances metalinguistic awareness to a greater extent (Bialystok et al., 2012). Next, Acquiring a new language has the potential to enhance your personal growth. Social studies suggest that language learning can boost empathy, enabling individuals to understand different perspectives. Mastering a new language goes beyond acquiring words and sounds; it involves assimilating new ways of thinking. Essentially, it's like gaining diverse lenses through which you perceive the world (Jones, 2018). In addition, Proficiency in languages can enhance your employment prospects and open up opportunities for international trade. In today's diverse and multilingual work environment, language skills are a crucial component of the 21st-century skill set (Corradini et al., 2016). With so many advantages, learning a second language has become a popular option for many people and families.

English is currently the most commonly spoken language around the world, with approximately 1.456 million people using it globally. (Statista, 2023). Mutiah et al. (2020) stated that English signifies the advancement, variety, and global presence of the language. Moreover, it is utilized in various aspects of society, including political, social, and educational domains. Therefore, it is important to introduce it to our generation from a very young age. In the realm of education, English holds a significant role for the next generation, particularly for young learners, as teaching it to them requires additional emphasis compared to instructing adults. English has become a lingua franca or an international language, including for people in Southeast Asia who have different mother tongues and official languages. Therefore, knowing how to speak English is a basic need that every Indonesian child must have.

In Indonesia, English was originally taught exclusively at higher education levels (Mapiasse & Sihes, 2014). As the demand and popularity of English increased, the English teaching curriculum underwent changes. To enhance students' proficiency in English, the government eventually started incorporating English lessons at the basic education level, including primary schools. In Indonesia, English was introduced as part of the basic education curriculum in 1994. In this curriculum, English is a regional content lesson taught to students in grades IV through VI. In 2006, the applied curriculum was named the Education Unit Level Curriculum (KTSP). English is a mandatory subject in this curriculum. In the 2013 curriculum, English in primary schools was regarded as a local or supplementary subject, depending on the educational unit. Some elementary schools did not even offer English as one of their subjects. However, the 2013 curriculum guidelines have caused confusion about the skills that junior high school students should acquire. Without English instruction at the elementary school level, students are expected to reach an intermediate level of English proficiency without a solid establishment. To close this skills gap, the government is reintroducing English subject at primary school level with a new curriculum called the Merdeka curriculum that is applied gradually from 2022. In the

2022/2023 academic year, the government provides opportunities for all educational units to implement the curriculum based on their respective readiness starting from Kindergarten-B grades I, IV, VII, and X. In Merdeka curriculum English becomes an optional subject taught in elementary school. Realizing how important English is, it is highly recommended to start teaching it to young learners. McKay (2005) identified young learners as children between the ages of five and twelve. Additionally, he noted that young language learners are those who begin learning a language before or during their first six years of formal education. Scot and Ytreberg (1990) referred to the limit the age of 5 to 11 years as young learners. Slattery and Willis (2001) categorized learners into two groups: very young learners (under 7 years old) and young learners (over 7 years old). In the context of educational systems, young learners include students in preschool, kindergarten, primary school, and middle school.

Teaching English from an early age with careful planning will encourage strengthening the foundations of English. Acquiring English at a young age is highly effective for achieving proficiency. Some linguists suggest that the sooner a child begins learning a foreign or second language, the more easily they will master it (Peacock, 2001). Chanifa, et.al (2020) mentioned some reasons why youngsters are required to acquire proficiency in a second language during childhood. The first one is due to the practical needs. Currently, the geographical boundaries separating regions or nations are gradually diminishing, falling one by one to the forces of globalization. The evolution of communication and information technology appears to play a crucial role in fostering more open connections among individuals in this contemporary global era (Walsham, 2017). Mastering foreign languages is a crucial and essential factor in global competitiveness, serving as a significant communication tool (Ahmad, 2016; Dörnyei & Al-Horiee, 2017). Hence, it is essential to equip the early development of Indonesian human resources. The next influential element in the language learning process is the emotional and feeling aspects. Henter (2014) examined various aspects associated with emotional factors in language learning. These

elements include self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy, extroversion, and motivation. Children generally exhibit more favorable values in these aspects compared to adult learners. As an illustration, youngsters face a relatively light cognitive load when acquiring a new language, exhibit minimal anxiety about making errors, and express a better enthusiasm for acquiring knowledge through the medium of a foreign language. Moreover, Zhang (2021) noted that learning a second language not only enhances at tentional control abilities but also boosts children's memory, creativity, and overall cognitive performance. Unlike the blend of a native language and a second language, children are capable of distinguishing between two distinct languages within the initial weeks of their lives. Furthermore, he says that children who learn a second language outperform their classmates in elementary school when it comes to fundamental skills. The College Entrance Examination Board reports that they also achieve higher scores on SATs. Early exposure to a foreign language elevates children's problem-solving skills, spatial awareness, and creativity.

Moreover, Sukarno (2008) noted that the prime period for teaching and learning English is during childhood, as children can easily absorb new information. Harmer (2007) similarly observed that young learners gain knowledge faster and more efficiently than older individuals. Cameron (2001) referred to this optimal learning period as the critical period hypothesis, suggesting that young children are more adept at learning a second or foreign language compared to adults. This implies that young learners can acquire a new language with ease and minimal difficulty. Many experts argued that children up to the age of 10 can master a second language almost as competently as their first language, often without an accent. They tend to exhibit greater mental flexibility, better understanding of natural phenomena, and a wider range of cognitive abilities, making language learning a natural and effortless process for them. Children do not need to bother learning it. Children naturally obtain language from their surroundings effortlessly (Deng & Zhou, 2016). This implies that learning a foreign language quickly allows children to gain a broader

comprehension of the world and progress the ability to make meaning of their environment through language. Early exposure to language learning positively impacts the development of logical thinking. Additionally, understanding language as a social construct benefits children by enhancing their comprehension of their native language. This benefit alleviates anxiety that learning a foreign language might harm a child's proficiency in their native tongue.

However, teaching young learners is challenging due to their unique characteristics. Young learners, referring to individuals who have not yet become adults, span various ages and developmental phases from infancy to late childhood. They display notable differences in their physical, emotional, psychological, social, and cognitive development. McKay (2005) noted that these young learners have short attention spans, remaining fully attentive for only 10 to 15 minutes. They are easily distracted by others. They are learning through hands-on activities, using objects and visual aids to enhance their understanding. Scoot and Ytreberg (1995) also mentioned the characteristics young learners have, they can talk about what they are doing, they can tell you about what they have done or heard, they are capable of planning activities, articulating their thoughts and reasoning, and presenting logical arguments. They are highly logical, though their attention spans are short. They enjoy playing and learn best when they are having fun, approaching learning with enthusiasm and a positive attitude. Cameron (2001) noted that young learners tend to be more enthusiastic and energetic compared to adult learners, but they also get bored and lose interest quickly. This makes it challenging for teachers to keep them motivated, especially when the tasks seem too difficult for them.

Children between the ages of 3 and 6 typically cannot read or write, presenting a clear challenge for English teachers. Additionally, there are no standardized teaching materials for this age group. Most English learning textbooks are intended for more advanced stages and start with the alphabet and basic reading skills. Moreover, Setiaryni (2011) emphasized the distinction

between teaching English to young children and teaching it to teenagers or adults. This dissimilarity arises from the fact that young children not only lack reading and writing skills but also possess distinct cognitive levels, interests, needs, and environments. Consequently, educators are encouraged to incorporate child-friendly and pleasurable activities into English lessons tailored for young learners due to these variations.

Thus, educators of young students must be innovative. Harmer (2007) suggested that, in teaching young learners, teachers should employ engaging media to capture the students' attention and stimulate interest in the topic being discussed. Additionally, teachers should take into account their students' characteristics and needs when teaching the language (Cameron, 2001). Young children often have rapidly shifting moods and find it very challenging to remain seated for long periods. Since young learners tend to get bored easily, Brumfit et al. (2003) recommended that teachers change activities every 10-15 minutes during lessons. To teach English effectively, teachers need to wisely choose engaging materials, activities, and media, ensuring a wide variety. As young learners enjoy repetition and are very active, Brumfit et al. (2003) suggested that using dynamic and purposeful media and activities can capture their attention and boost their motivation. Young children are not only curious but also eager to acquire new knowledge, often learning at a faster pace compared to adults. To capture the attention of young learners, it is essential to make learning enjoyable. Therefore, English teachers should use songs, videos, realia, games, cartoons, ICT, and other engaging tools.

After conducting informal interviews with the English teacher of Muhammadiyah 06 elementary school, especially grade 1 where most of the students are aged between 6 to 7 years old, the writer uncovered several variables to consider. First, the teacher mentioned that the school has just been applying the Merdeka curriculum for about a year for grade 1 students. According to the teacher, this thing is challenging because it was not completely understood how to

teach English with this new curriculum. Second, many students are not fluent in reading and writing yet. She said that most of them do not know how to read comprehensively even in their national language, Bahasa Indonesia, yet. Some students struggle to comprehend the written text. The teacher has to ask the student to reread the text again and again to get the meaning of the text. Meanwhile, at the same time the students have to learn a foreign language, in this case English. Teaching English as a foreign language to students who don't know how to read and write in their first language presents a unique set of challenges for teacher. This situation limits the teacher in deciding the techniques used to teach the students. The teacher said that she mostly emphasizes teaching listening and speaking skills and not reading and writing because the students are not fluent in reading and writing yet. The students also do not yet know how to write the words in English. These challenges require innovative approaches and a deep understanding of language acquisition and pedagogy.

One of the major challenges faced by teacher in this scenario is building a strong foundation in the students' native language. Literacy skills, such as reading and writing, are important for language development. Without these skills, students may find it difficult to grasp basic English concepts. Teacher must spare time to develop these foundational skills before introducing English. Another challenge is the lack of a reference point. When students are already fluent in their native language, they can often draw parallels between their language and English. However, with non-literate students, this bridge is missing. Moreover, the students in the first grade do not always speak the national language. Some of them even speak the local language, for example, Baso Palembang. This condition makes the English learning and teaching process slower. Teacher must employ creative methods to make English comprehensible, using visual aids, gestures, and real-life examples. The absence of literacy skills in the first language also means that students may have difficulty understanding grammar rules and sentence structure, which can be abstract concepts. Teacher must break down these complex ideas into simpler, more tangible forms and encourage practical application to help

students internalize them. Moreover, fostering a positive learning environment is crucial, as non-literate students may feel frustrated or inadequate. Teacher must be patient and provide ample opportunities for oral communication and listening comprehension to help build students' confidence and communication skills. Next, the students' short attention span also becomes an objection for the teacher. She has to grab the students' attention over and over. Meanwhile, the time allocation for teaching and learning English is only 50 minutes. In consequence, the activities or the lesson plan of the class sometimes could not be completely done. Hence, the objectives of the teaching and learning process may be disrupted. In conclusion, teaching English as a foreign language to students who lack literacy skills in their first language is undoubtedly challenging. It demands a teacher's patience, creativity, and adaptability to ensure that these students receive a meaningful language education and the opportunity to communicate effectively in English.

Some studies on young learners have been conducted by Indonesian students and lecturers, For instance, a study by Elhaj from the College of Sciences and Arts at Taif University, Saudi Arabia, parallels this research. His study highlights the significance of teaching English to young learners. Elhaj used questionnaires distributed to 50 EFL Saudi teachers working at basic schools in Raniah-Taif during the academic year 1436-1437 to assess the effectiveness of new teaching methods and techniques. The findings indicate that EFL teachers employed a diverse range of activities in their classrooms. In teaching young learners, these teachers prepared lessons, tests, supplementary materials, and homework, and also graded these assignments. They tackled classroom challenges by implementing strategies to manage behavior (Elhaj, 2016).

The second study is by Coplan et al. (2014) from England. They conducted a mixed-method research approach, featuring a survey completed by 4,459 teachers globally and case studies involving observations and interviews with teachers at five primary schools across different countries. The research aimed to explore the challenges encountered by teachers of English to young

learners amidst the growing global prominence of the English language. Several significant challenges have been identified as impacting many teachers across various educational settings. These include teaching speaking, maintaining motivation, differentiating learning, managing large classes, maintaining discipline, teaching writing, and teaching grammar. Notably, some of these challenges have not been extensively covered in existing literature on young learner education. Additionally, some challenges are more specific to certain contexts, such as improving teachers' English proficiency. The article suggests that teacher education should shift its focus from broad English language teaching methods to providing targeted support to help teachers address these specific challenges.

The third study, conducted by Ilmiddinovich (2020), a teacher from Fergana Polytechnic Institute in Fergana, Uzbekistan, explored strategies for teaching foreign languages. The research aimed to address challenges in language instruction and improve outcomes by considering the unique needs of young learners. There were 14 methods discussed namely; Audio-lingualism, Presentation-Practice-Production, The Communicative Approach, Task-Based Learning (TBL), Total Physical Response (TPR), The Natural Approach, Songs, Chants, Puppets, Flaschcards, Cartoons, Prpverbs, and Games.

The fourth study, conducted by Ork et al. (2024) from Cambodia, is titled "Factors Causing Students' Challenges in Learning English Speaking Skills: A Review of Empirical Works." This research sought to gain a deeper understanding of the fundamental issues affecting effective foreign language learning and communication. By examining these problems and their contexts, the study aimed to gather the necessary information to tackle challenges related to oral communication in English as a foreign language settings. Some challenging factors of students speaking were discussed for instance fear of making mistakes, shyness, mother tongue interference, anxiety, lack of confidence and motivation, the linguistics factor, lack of practice, and not favorable learning environment.

The fifth research was done by Kusnanik et al. (2017) from University of Malang. The purpose of this study was to examine the analysis of the learning process in young children in Malang City and Malang Regency, ages four to five. The difference between this study and the author's is that the subject of the study. Kusnanik et al. (2017) made the kindergarten students as the subjects, meanwhile the author is focusing on the first grade students.

Next is study conducted by Puspitasari et al. (2020) from University of Ganesha. On their study, English literacy activities in elementary schools were investigated. The subjects were three English teachers who teach in the first, second and third class of elementary school. This study differs from the author's current study which focuses only on the first grade English literacy learning.

The seventh study, conducted by Lestari et al. (2019) from the University of Sebelas Maret, examined the English teaching strategies used at an international primary school in Surakarta. This research focused on various aspects such as teaching planning, implementation, assessment, and students' reactions to these strategies. The participants included a homeroom teacher and 24 male students from grade five. Once again, the study selected fifth-grade students as its subjects.

The eighth study, conducted by Kurniati et al. (2021) from the State University of Padang, aimed to assess the implementation of Local Content English in the 2013 curriculum for grades four and five at several state elementary schools in Jambi. The study involved English teachers as participants. The author's current research will focus on the implementation of English literacy learning at a single school using the Merdeka curriculum.

These investigations had the same subject of study: elementary school students. The objectives of the studies were related to the English learning process in the class, investigations to the implementation of the English learning, need analysis of the learning process, and the exploration of the learning itself.

However, only a few of these studies took the first grade students as the object of the study. Most of them took the fifth grade students and Kindergarten students as the object of the study. It is because English is newly taught in the first grade of elementary school due to the change of curriculum.

This means that there are still limited studies conducted in the first grade of elementary school applying Merdeka curriculum in Indonesia generally and in Palembang specifically. Therefore, this research aims to explore and comprehend the implementation of English literacy learning at the first grade of elementary school. Overall with the previous studies, this research focus on the challenges occurs when English literacy learning is conducted and what actions can be taken to overcome the challenges students and teacher experience in the class through research entitled "*Exploring English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School*"

1.2   Problems of the Study

Based on the background of the study, the problems of the study are formulated into the following questions:

1. How is the implementation of English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School?

2. What are the discouraging and encouraging factors in implementing English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School?

3. What strategies can be employed to overcome the discouraging factors in implementing English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School?

1.3   Objectives of the Study

In accordance with the problems of the study, the objectives of this study are:

1. To comprehend the implementation of English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School.

2. To find out the discouraging and encouraging factors in implementing English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School.

3. To find out the strategies that can be employed to overcome the discouraging factors in implementing English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School.

1.4   Significance of the Study

The results of the study are expected to be used theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the finding of the study will be able to make scientific contributions of effort in the process for promoting English literacy learning at the first grade students. Practically, the finding will benefit the researcher herself. It is hoped to increase knowledge about English literacy learning condition of young learners and use it in the future. The education overall and elementary schools could also consider the finding of the research in making curriculum development and instructional strategies tailored to the developmental needs of first-grade students. The teachers of first grade students also can identify methods that are most effective for first-grade learners. This includes strategies for phonics instruction, vocabulary development, comprehension skills, and writing proficiency. This could also be used by those working on educational materials as a source of information and inspiration.

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