

Teaching English to Young Learners: Professional Development Trainings for Primary School Teachers in Implementing Kurikulum Merdeka

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Abstract

Kurikulum Merdeka, which is the latest educational curriculum, includes English as one of the subjects given at the elementary school level. This community service initiative was conducted in response to the challenges faced by elementary schools in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly concerning English language instruction. At SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2, English is currently offered only once a week as an extracurricular activity, which has been deemed insufficient and ineffective in achieving the curriculum's goals. Several issues were identified through initial observations and focus group discussions with school principals and teachers, including the limited teaching techniques employed by homeroom teachers, the lack of appropriate English learning resources in classrooms, and the need to enhance the overall quality of English instruction for young learners. The objectives of this community service are addressing these issues by providing professional development training and creating a guidebook for teachers regarding teaching techniques for teaching English to young learners. The study implied a notable improvement in teachers' knowledge of techniques for teaching English to Young Learners. Thus, after the PD series, several objectives were achieved based on the evaluation including: 1) Increased teacher competence and knowledge of English language teaching techniques appropriate for young learners, 2) Enhanced teaching confidence; many teachers reported greater confidence in planning and delivering English lessons, and the use of teaching EYL manual book, and 3) The specially developed teacher guidebook was effectively utilized as a practical reference.

Keywords: English for Young Learners; Kurikulum Merdeka; Teacher professional development.

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Introduction

As a foreign language, English in Indonesia is essential to be learned starting from the very beginning level such as primary school. However, challenges exist in terms of curriculum readiness, teacher preparedness, and student engagement. The Merdeka Curriculum, which is the latest educational curriculum, includes English as one of the subjects given at the elementary school level. However, several challenges have emerged in its implementation, such as the need for home-room teachers to enhance teaching techniques, the insufficient availability of English learning resources in classrooms, and the necessity to improve the overall quality of English instruction (Butler, 2007; Chella et al., 2023).

This was evident in a community service project conducted by a project team of English Language Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang. As one of school partners, SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2 is one of state schools located in Malang which are targeted to evolve and enhance their teaching and learning process for the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. The result of observation and preliminary analysis with teachers and the school principal at this school revealed that most of the teachers are basically home-room teachers and they need to have more trainings in preparing their English classes as it is mandated by the newest curriculum, Kurikulum Merdeka. In fact, English is taught only once a week as an extracurricular activity, which was considered ineffective. This limitation was attributed to insufficient opportunities for professional development in teaching English and the shortage of suitable teaching materials and resources aligned with students' needs. As a result, to create an English atmosphere in the teaching and learning process, the school along with its school principal and teachers are demanded to have professional development training series in teaching English for primary school students.

Furthermore, teachers need to enhance their professional development since teaching English to young learners presents unique challenges, particularly for teachers who lack sufficient knowledge of effective techniques. This gap often leads to ineffective teaching practices. The pedagogical competencies such as providing feedback, selecting and adapting materials, planning lessons, managing classrooms, and engaging students (Damar, 2013; Husein, 2015; Suharno, 2017) are significant to be developed. Moreover, teachers need to be continuously creative and innovative in refining their teaching practices through various ways and situations (Liu, 2015; Rohqim, 2020). In Indonesian EFL primary school setting, creating an English atmosphere involves integrating English into various school subjects such as science, maths, and social studies (Khoiriyah, et al., 2024; Setyaningrum & Khoiriyah, 2022). Utilizing English language media, like videos, songs, and news also helps students build vocabulary and expose various accents. Moreover, this approach supports teachers in enhancing their professional competencies in teaching and developing strategies for effectively incorporating English into the teaching and learning process.

Furthermore, effective teaching practices might rely on a solid understanding of both content knowledge and learner knowledge. Content knowledge refers to mastery of English subjects, while learner knowledge encompasses understanding children's learning styles and psychologies. In other words, teachers need to consider the principles of teaching English to young learners (Celce-Murcia et al., 2014; Ellis, 2020; Nunan, 2018). Additionally, to teach effectively, teachers must deeply understand children's social and cognitive developmental stages, as well as second language acquisition theories (Cahyati & Madya, 2019; Salim & Hanif, 2021). Therefore, teachers have a responsibility to provide meaningful language exposure and interactive classroom activities (Carter & Nunan, 2001; Rayhona, 2024; Saha, 2023). Additionally, teachers also require a comprehensive guidebook that provides diverse techniques and strategies for teaching English to young learners. The teaching resources are important for supporting teachers in fostering student engagement, accommodating diverse learning styles, and managing classroom dynamics effectively (Özen & Yildirim, 2022; Shinde & Bamber, 2023). Teaching resources also play a crucial role in making learning process more interactive and engaging, which is essential for maintaining student motivation and encouraging active participation (Daif-Allah & Aljumah, 2020; Rohqim, 2020; Sabgini & Khoiriyah, 2020).

Before conducting the community service, the project team conducted a systematic literature review to the available previous studies. Several professional development programs have been implemented in various programs to enhance the skills of primary school teachers in teaching English. First, In Indonesia, a *mentoring program* was implemented to help new teachers improve their English language skills and teaching methodologies (Rohmah, 2018). The program involved experienced mentors guiding novice teachers, which resulted in increased self-confidence and professional growth among the participants. Meanwhile, *peer mentoring* has also been used to support novice ESL teachers in public primary schools (Hamdan et al., 2024; Puspawati et al., 2024). This approach facilitated enhanced instructional practices, a shift in mindset, and collaborative interactions within the professional learning community. Second, in Turkey, In-Service Training and Workshop were focused on establishing a materials bank for English language teachers. This program aimed to improve teachers' knowledge and skills in materials design and curriculum-related issues,

leading to overall quality improvement in instruction (Daloglu, 2004; Yücel & Arslan, 2025). In the same vein, in Hong Kong, a professional development program on teaching English through Process Drama was conducted to enhance second language acquisition by incorporating creativity and authentic classroom discourse, which encouraged more student participation (To et al., 2011). Last, *Continuing Professional Development (CPD) methods*, such as attending professional forums and pursuing further education, have been used to improve English teaching skills. However, these methods often lack opportunities for teachers to take control of their own learning (Hamdan et al., 2024; Puspawati et al., 2024). To this community service, the program in PD series has been considered as distinctive approach compared to the previous research due to several reasons including this PD is conducted in Indonesia EFL setting, the participants were not only English teachers but also content or home-room teachers in primary schools, and it was objected for implementing Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesia.

Based on the aforementioned issues, the purpose of this community service is to provide solutions to the problems that exist in school partner by conducting professional development training on teaching techniques for Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) and creating guidebook for teachers. Training on professional development provides teachers with opportunities to enhance and update their teaching skills, knowledge, and characteristics (Tanveer et al., 2021; Zeng, 2023). This initiative was pursued because a series of professional development programs in teaching English at the primary school level were considered essential to meet the evolving teachers' needs (Rifky et al., 2024; Zein, 2016). Moreover, equipping teachers with a well-designed guidebook serves valuable resource as comprehensive guidance to deliver effective and engaging instruction for maintaining a well-organized and productive classroom environment.

Method

This study was conducted at a partnership school, SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2, Malang City. The community service was carried out in three months starting from August 15, 2024 to November 15, 2024. This study was preceded by observations and focus group discussions on determining the problems encountered by the school principal and teachers of SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2 in teaching English to young learners. Based on the results of the need analysis, a series of professional development training activities and a teachers' guidebook were designed. The methods of training activities are lectures, demonstrations, peer teaching, and participant assistance. This study involved several stages as follows:

Preliminary Need Analysis

At this stage, observations and focus group discussions were conducted to map the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English to primary school students. Moreover, all preparations including preparing training materials to designing guidebook for teachers were carried out at this stage.

Training on Teaching Techniques for Teaching English to Young Learners

The aim of this training was to equip and enhance teachers' professional development on teaching techniques for teaching English to young learners. The participants of this training were the subject and classroom teachers of SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2. The participants consisted of eight home-room teachers, three content teachers and two English teachers. At this stage, an expert in English for Young Learners (EYL) was invited to present materials on teaching EYL, including the characteristics of primary school students, classroom management, teaching techniques utilizing multimedia, opening-classroom password, song and rhyme, game, art, and craft. The teachers are also allowed to practice and demonstrate with their peers (peer-teaching) the teaching techniques that have been presented. Furthermore, the teachers were facilitated to evaluate together their peer teaching.

Evaluation and Monitoring Program

The evaluation and monitoring program was carried out through periodical surveys to control its application in the teaching and learning process. The teachers were invited to fill out the questionnaire and attend focus group discussions to obtain information related to the implementation of training on professional development. The aspects evaluated were the strengths and weaknesses of the implemented training, shared guidebook for teachers, and a follow-up plan.

Result and Discussion

A series of training on professional development for teachers at SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2 was conducted on 31 October until 8 November 2024. The participants in the training were 18 teachers. The training began at 9 o'clock and was followed by a welcoming speech by the school principal and the

representative of the English Language Education Department University of Muhammadiyah Malang. The invited speaker delivered the materials regarding teaching techniques for teaching English to young learners. At the first meeting, the speaker introduced the characteristics of young learners, the characteristics of teachers, and the appropriate teaching English to young learners strategies. Moreover, the participants learned about classroom management and the strategies for selecting teaching materials and resources at the second meeting of training. The strategies for integrating thematic units into teaching English to young learners were delivered as well.



Figure 1. Presentation of Integrating Thematic Units into TEYL

At the third meeting, the participants were facilitated to explore the teaching techniques by utilizing multimedia, song, game, art, and craft. Furthermore, a series of training ended with peer teaching and evaluation sessions. In the demonstration and peer teaching session, the teachers had intensive assistance from the community services team and were supervised by an EYL expert. The participants filled out the survey questionnaires and closed the activity by taking a group photo session.



Figure 2. Group Photo Session with Invited Speaker

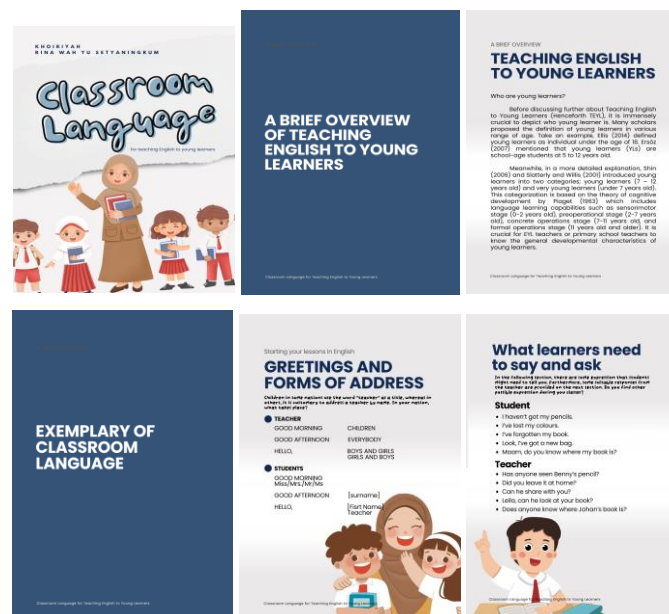


Figure 3. An exemplary of handbook for teachers and students “Classroom Language” for teaching English to Young Learners

The designed guidebook was also shared with teachers at the school partner. The guidebook for teachers provides a structured framework to ensure the lessons are well organized and cover essential language skills. In other words, the guidebook maintains consistency and coherence in teaching (Didion et al., 2020; Nurhayati & Novianti, 2024) g. The guidebook for teachers offers a variety of teaching methods and strategies related to teaching English to young learners in order to engage students, address different learning styles, and manage the dynamic classroom effectively. Moreover, the guidebook for teachers provides some guidance on classroom language instruction. Additionally, the guidebook for teachers includes a variety of activities, games, and materials to capture the interest of young learners. These resources allow the teachers to make the lessons more interactive and fun, which is essential for maintaining motivation and participation. Furthermore, the guidebook for teachers provides insights and strategies for incorporating cultural sensitivity into lessons (Kanoksilapatham, 2015; Ratri et al., 2024).

The project team provided some digital teaching sources. One of which is “Classroom Language” compiled by the project team. This e-book is currently designed to help both teachers and students effectively communicate and manage classroom interactions in some possible classroom situation in day-to-day teaching activities in primary schools such as starting the lessons, checking attendance list, organizing the classroom, playing cards during the class time, dividing students into groups, asking students’ comprehension and closing the lessons. Thus, this book provides essential phrases, vocabulary, and expressions used in day-to-day classroom routines and instruction. Its purpose is to facilitate clear communication, promote a positive learning environment, and support language learners in acquiring the necessary language skills for classroom participation.

Finally, the results of the evaluation implied that a series of training on professional development enhanced teachers’ knowledge and competencies in teaching English to young learners. The details are presented as follows:

Table 1. The result of evaluation, taken from the questionnaire

No.	Statement	Responses	
1	Overall, PD series is beneficial for me in enhancing my understanding to Teaching English for Young Learners.	Strongly agree	14 (87.5%)
		Agree	2 (12.5 %)
		Neutral	-
		Disagree	-
		Strongly disagree	-
2	Overall, the given guidebook is beneficial for me in preparing my English classes.	Strongly agree	13 (81.25%)
		Agree	2 (12.5 %)
		Neutral	1 (6.25 %)
		Disagree	-
		Strongly disagree	-
3	I think that the PD series enhance my understanding to characteristics of young learners and its challenges.	Strongly agree	14 (87.5 %)
		Agree	1 (6.25 %)
		Neutral	1 (6.25 %)
		Disagree	-
		Strongly disagree	-
4	I think that the PD series enhance my understanding to approach, methods and technique in teaching English to young learners.	Strongly agree	12 (75 %)
		Agree	3 (11.5 %)
		Neutral	1 (6.25 %)
		Disagree	-
		Strongly disagree	-
5	I think that the PD series enhance my understanding to lesson planning for teaching English for young learners.	Strongly agree	12 (75 %)
		Agree	4 (25%)
		Neutral	-
		Disagree	-
		Strongly disagree	-
6	Overall, I will learn more about Teaching English for Young Learners in future.	Strongly agree	11 (68.75%)
		Agree	5 (31.25 %)
		Neutral	-
		Disagree	-
		Strongly disagree	-

From table 1, it can be depicted that the implementation of Professional Development series in school partner regarding “Teaching English to Young Learners” is generally beneficial and crucial for improving the teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and skills related to preparing teaching English in their day-to-day teaching activities. To begin with, with the regards of the *overall Benefit of PD Series for understanding teaching English to young learners*, 87.5% of respondents strongly agree, and 12.5% agree with the statement. This result means that overwhelming majority of participants found the PD series to be very beneficial in enhancing their understanding of teaching English to young learners. This indicates that the PD series is well-received and valued for its contribution to their professional development. The findings were corroborated with the work of previous research (Eun & Heining-Boynton, 2007; Trifiro, 2017), highlighting that PD programs help teachers improve their pedagogical practices by building on their existing knowledge and understanding of teaching English learners.

Next, in terms of *the usefulness of the guidebook in preparing English Classes*, the responses includes 81.25% agree or strongly agree, with 6.25% neutral, and 12.5% disagree or strongly disagree. Most respondents find the guidebook useful for preparing English classes. However, the 6.25% neutral and 12.5% disagreement responses suggest that for a small portion of participants, the guidebook may not be fully aligned with their needs or expectations. This could point to room for improvement or tailoring the guidebook content more closely to specific contexts or teaching styles.

Furthermore, related to the *enhancement of understanding characteristics and challenges of young learners*, 87.5% of respondents strongly agree, and 6.25% agree, while 6.25% remain neutral, meaning that significant number of respondents feel that the PD series has successfully enhanced their understanding of the characteristics and challenges of young learners. This suggests that the content was effective in addressing the unique aspects of teaching children, which is a crucial area for any educator in this field (Banegas, 2020; Ellison, 2015; Hidalgo & Villarreal, 2024; Sakurai, 2015; Suhandoko, 2019). The small neutral response may indicate that a few educators did not feel this was adequately covered for their specific teaching context. In terms of the *enhancement of understanding approaches, methods, and techniques for teaching English*, a clear majority of respondents (75%) feel that the PD series helped them improve their understanding of various approaches, methods, and techniques for teaching English to young learners. This is a positive outcome, as it shows that the PD series effectively covered pedagogical strategies. However, the 6.25% neutral and 11.5% agreement responses suggest that some teachers might not have felt fully immersed or convinced by the approaches discussed, possibly due to personal teaching styles or differing educational contexts. It is justifiable as it was explained by Bantwini, (2012; Lasekan et al., 2024; Nabhani et al., 2012), teachers' perceptions of PD programs can significantly impact their engagement and the effectiveness of these programs. Negative perceptions, often due to a lack of support or relevance to their specific needs, can lead to minimal implementation of new practices. This fact also contradicted to the beneficial aspects voiced by some previous studies, echoing that PD series help teachers to adopt innovative teaching methods (Imran et al., 2024; Miller & Otcu-Grillman, 2023)

Surprisingly, with the regards to *the enhancement of understanding lesson planning for teaching young learners*, the majority (75%) found the PD series helpful in enhancing their lesson planning skills for young learners. Lesson planning is a critical aspect of teaching, so this suggests that the PD series is having a positive impact in this area. However, 25% agreeing and no one being neutral or disagreeing might indicate that while the series is generally helpful, there may be some areas where more in-depth guidance on lesson planning is needed, or the strategies might need to be more specific to individual contexts. In addition, the teachers in school partner also provoked their interest in further training related to the same topics, teaching English to young learners as 68.75% strongly agree, and 31.25% agree with the statement. It can be worth-mentioned that a significant majority (almost 70%) are motivated to continue learning about teaching English to young learners in the future. This shows that the PD series not only provided immediate benefits but also sparked a desire for further professional growth and development in the field as it was pointed out by Alruqi & Alharbi (2022), Koşar et al. (2022); Mouza (2009), teachers who participate in PD often continue to seek out further learning opportunities, driven by the initial positive experiences and the desire to continually improve their teaching practices.

To conclude, the teachers at SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2 became more confident in teaching English using various techniques after having training in professional development (Tanveer et al., 2021; Zein, 2016; Zeng, 2023). Gaining knowledge on teaching English to young learners and understanding the needs and characteristics of young learners enabled the teachers to manage their classes and select suitable teaching materials (Cahyati & Madya, 2019; Celce-Murcia et al., 2014; Ellis, 2020; Nunan, 2018). Actively participated in professional development training, teachers were also challenged to be more creative and innovative in developing their teaching competencies (Liu, 2015; Rohqim, 2020). The designed guidebook for teachers was also useful as a teachers’ guide in delivering the materials. Thus, the guidebook for teachers plays an essential role in creating an interactive English classroom atmosphere. In other words, the

Professional Development (PD) series on Teaching English to Young Learners at SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2 effectively enhanced teachers' pedagogical knowledge and classroom practices. The training improved their understanding of young learners' characteristics, suitable teaching methods, lesson planning, and class management. Most participants responded positively, acknowledging the PD's relevance and value. The guidebook provided was also helpful, though some felt it could be better tailored to individual teaching contexts. In addition to immediate benefits, the PD series sparked teachers' motivation for continued professional growth, indicating its potential for long-term impact in supporting the Kurikulum Merdeka. Overall, the program strengthened teachers' confidence, creativity, and competence in teaching English to young learners.

Conclusion

The community services program implied that a series of training on professional development at SD Negeri Tunggulwulung 2 improved teachers' competencies in teaching English to young learners. The findings highlighted that the teaching techniques for teaching English to young learners were successfully mastered by the teachers. This success was supported by the suitability of the training material to the needs of the participants and a positive response from the participants.

In addition to that, this report also highlighted the practical and academic implications in related to teaching and learning English using Kurikulum Merdeka. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to be flexible and adaptive to local needs. Practically, this PD series programs emphasize the importance of innovation and provide teachers with the skills to adapt the curriculum to their specific contexts, especially in integrating English to their day-to-day teaching activities. With regards to academic implication, this PD series were expected to improve teachers' understanding and skills in related to curriculum understanding (understand the theoretical underpinnings of the Kurikulum Merdeka and teaching English to young learners) along with its innovation and adaptation (provide teachers with the skills to adapt the curriculum to their specific contexts).

Despite the positive outcomes, this report has several limitations. First, the scope of implementation was limited to a single partner school, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other school settings. Second, the duration of the PD series was relatively short, limiting the opportunity to observe long-term changes in teaching practice and student learning outcomes. Additionally, feedback from a small number of participants indicated that the guidebook content could be better tailored to meet diverse classroom needs and individual teaching styles. Future programs should consider extending the training duration, involving a larger number of schools, and incorporating ongoing mentorship or classroom observations to ensure sustained impact and continuous improvement.

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