

## Exploring English Literacy Learning at the First Grade of Elementary School

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Keywords:</b> English literacy learning, exploration, young learners</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v9i2.1781">http://dx.doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v9i2.1781</a></p>	<p><i>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, and 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 that 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.</i></p>
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## 1. Introduction

Globalization is going to keep speeding up the strengthening of international social connections that relate remote regions to the point where local events are influenced by events occurring far away and vice versa (Zhang, 2021). The importance of English as a global language has contributed to the increased interest in providing children with the opportunities to develop English communicative skills from an early age through bilingual education at school (Fauziah, et.al. 2021) and multilingual practices within the family (Indriani, et.al. 2021; Sapriati, et.al., 2021; Hafizha, et, al, 2023). Parents invested in their children's English language development often rely on non-formal education as an alternative to formal schooling or as additional learning experience (Farahdina, et.al., 2023).

Over time, the demand for and popularity of the English language grew, leading to changes in the English teaching curriculum. To improve students' ability and mastery of English, the government finally began introducing English lessons at a lower level of education, namely at the basic education level or primary school. In the 2013 curriculum, English in primary schools was considered as local content or additional subject content, as appropriate at the educational unit level; some elementary schools did not even include English as one of their subjects to teach. 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 subjects at the primary school level with a new curriculum called the Merdeka curriculum that will be applied gradually from 2022.

In Indonesia, English was initially only given to higher education levels (Mapiasse & Sihes, 2014). Over time, the demand for and popularity of the English language grew, leading to changes in the English teaching curriculum. To improve students' ability and mastery of English, the government finally began introducing English lessons at a lower level of education, namely at the basic education level or primary school. 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 compulsory subject in this curriculum. In the 2013 curriculum, English in primary schools was considered as local content or additional subject content, as appropriate at the educational unit level; some elementary schools did not even include English as one of their subjects to teach.

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 subjects at the primary school level with a new curriculum called the Merdeka curriculum that will be 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 the 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) states that young learners are children aged five to twelve years old. Moreover, he states that

young language learners are children who learn a language before or during their six years of formal schooling. Scot & Ytreberg (1990) refer to the limit the age of 5 to 11 years as young learners. Slattery & Willis (2001) categorize 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) examines 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 attentional 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. Sukarno (2008) notes that the prime period for teaching and learning English is during childhood, as children can easily absorb new information. Harmer (2007) similarly observes that young learners gain knowledge faster and more efficiently than older individuals. Cameron (2001) refers 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 argue 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 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 in 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 the 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, defined as those who have not reached adulthood, encompass a range of ages and developmental stages from infants to older children. They exhibit significant physical, emotional, psychological, social, and cognitive differences. According to McKay (2005), young learners have limited attention spans, maintaining full focus 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 mention 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 and approaching learning with enthusiasm and a positive attitude. Furthermore, Cameron (2001) noted that young learners tend to be more enthusiastic and energetic compared to adult learners, but they also become bored and lose interest more easily. This can make it challenging for teachers to keep them motivated, especially when the tasks seem too difficult. 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) emphasizes 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.

One of the major challenges faced by teachers in this scenario is building a strong foundation in the student's 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. Teachers 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, this bridge is missing for non-literate students. 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. Teachers 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. Teachers 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 done completely. 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.

Therefore, educators working with young learners must be inventive. Harmer (2007) emphasizes that when teaching young learners, teachers should utilize engaging media that can capture students' attention and spark their interest in the topic being taught. It's important for teachers to take into account their students' characteristics and needs when teaching the language (Cameron, 2001). Since young children often experience frequent mood changes and struggle to stay seated for extended periods, they can quickly become bored. Brumfit et al. (2003) recommend that teachers allow students to switch activities every 10-15 minutes during the lesson.

To effectively teach English, a teacher should wisely choose engaging materials, activities, and media, offering a wide range of options. Brumfit et al. (2003) suggest that because young learners enjoy repetition and are naturally active, using expressive and purposeful media and activities can capture their interest 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.

Some studies on young learners have been conducted by Indonesian students and lecturers, for example Kusnanik et al. (2017) from University of Malang, Puspitasari et al. (2020) from University of Ganesha, Nufus (2018) from Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah, Syifa (2019) from Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang, Sudrajat (2015) from University of Kutai Kartanegara, Lestari et al. (2019) from University of Sebelas Maret, Aufa (2018) from State Islamic University of Walisongo, Nasution (2019) from State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh and Kurniati et al. (2021) from State University of Padang. These investigations had the same subject of study: elementary school students.

Meanwhile, some studies have been conducted outside of Indonesia. For example, Coplan et al. (2014) from England 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. Ilmuddinovich (2020), from 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-bilingualism, Presentation-Practice-Production, The Communicative Approach, Task-Based Learning (TBL), Total Physical Response (TPR), The Natural Approach, Songs, Chants, Puppets, Flashcards, Cartoons, Proverbs, and Games.

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 setting. 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 objectives of the studies were related to the English learning process in the class, investigations into the implementation of 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 the 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 focuses on the challenges that occur when English literacy learning is conducted and what actions can be taken to overcome the challenges students and teachers experience in the class.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood education plays a key role in individuals' lives, starting when a child turns two, establishing the basis for the child's learning journey. Early childhood education refers to the period of a child's development from birth to approximately age 8, which includes the early years of preschool and the primary grades of elementary school. This stage is crucial for laying the foundation for future learning and development across various domains, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The primary goal is to supply students with continuous learning throughout their lives. According to Kapur (2018), the major purpose of early childhood education is to bring effective progression to the students. It generates the foundation for learning among the students so that they have the ability to develop their skills efficiently from an early age. Early care and education for students also provide information

and knowledge to the students' families and communities, targeting to support their effective progression and development. Learning launches with play in pre-schools, when students initiate to enjoy playing activities, after that, they are guided to drawing and coloring activities, which enables them to grow interest in art. Then, in the following stage, students learn academic concepts, such as the alphabet, numbers, and so on.

Education encompasses a broad spectrum, including competencies, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, communication, cognitive abilities, intellectual prowess, insight, integrity, and ethical conduct. These elements are essential for forming students' mindsets and fostering their advancement. Adequate preparation is necessary for students entering formal education systems, requiring a solid grasp of academic principles to assimilate teaching methodologies and enhance academic performance. Early childhood education significantly aids in facilitating effective learning and educational development. There are five critical domains in a child's development that will be discussed, namely physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and language.

The physical domain encompasses the changes related to growth, such as increases in size and strength and the development of both gross and fine motor skills (U.S. National Library of Medicine). It also involves the maturation of the senses and their usage.

Piaget identified four stages of cognitive development in children: the sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages. Badakar et al. (2017) noted that Piaget's theory not only explores how children acquire knowledge but also seeks to understand the nature of intelligence. The first stage, the sensorimotor stage, occurs from birth to 2 years old. According to Meyer, as cited in Badakar et al. (2017), infants in this stage think through their senses and motor activities, learning about their environment by touching, looking, listening, and biting objects. The second stage, the preoperational stage, spans from ages 2 to 7. As described by Badakar et al. (2017), cognitive development during this period includes transductive reasoning, animism, artificialism, egocentrism, symbolic thinking, centration, irreversibility, curiosity, and the ability to understand sequences. Thirdly is the concrete operational stage. It is from 7 to 11 years old. At this point in their development, children utilize logical reasoning. Piaget in Badakar et al. (2017), during this stage of cognitive development, there's a focus on logical reasoning, the ability to consider multiple perspectives (decentration), understanding reversibility, grasping cause-and-effect relationships, sorting items into categories (classification), recognizing logical relationships between objects (transitivity), and overcoming egocentric thinking. Fourthly is the formal operational stage. It is from age 11 and beyond. According to Wilks et al. (2010), during this phase of development, cognitive growth entails abstract thinking, deductive reasoning, problem-solving, hypothetical thinking, adolescent egocentrism, the concept of an imaginary audience, and the personal fable.

Social development is the journey through which a child learns to engage with those in their environment. According to Sundram (2020), social development in children is a process of learning and forming a human personality. It is the task of educators at school and parents at home to ensure that children are adequately nurtured in their social interactions, including their ability to resolve conflicts with peers. Furthermore, Sundram stated that this illustrates not just progress and advancement in physical, mental, and emotional dimensions but also in the social realm.

Emotional development is the process by which individuals learn to identify, comprehend, and control their own emotions and those of others. Pan and Zhang (2023) explained that emotional development, encompassing emotion recognition, expression, and regulation, is closely linked to cognitive and social development. It plays a crucial role in the academic learning, prosocial abilities, and overall well-being of school-aged children.

Language development is the process by which people learn to comprehend, generate, and utilize language for communication. This process includes different elements like phonology (the sounds of language), morphology (the structure of words), syntax (the arrangement of sentences), semantics (the meaning of words and sentences), and pragmatics (the social aspects of language use). It usually starts in early infancy, when babies begin to babble and mimic the sounds around them. Some theories underlying language development are nativism, behaviouristic, and cognitivism.

## **2.2 Literacy**

Literacy is the capability to recognize, comprehend, interpret, produce, convey, and calculate using printed and written materials in different contexts (Montoya, 2018). It is a basic skill that extends beyond mere reading and writing (Marohn, 2023). It involves effectively utilizing language to communicate, comprehend, and navigate our surroundings (National Literacy Trust). While traditional literacy emphasizes decoding written words and articulating thoughts in writing, the concept has evolved to encompass a broader range of skills in today's information-rich society (Durriyah et.al.; Meyers et al., 2013). The Scottish Government (2019) also defines literacy as the set of skills that enable individuals to actively engage in society and education by employing diverse forms of language and utilizing texts that hold value and benefit for society.

The term "literacy" emerged relatively recently. By the late 1800s, it denoted the attainment and possession of a skill considered essential. It primarily emphasized individuals' capacity to understand and produce written language (Gurak, 2001). The term "literacy" didn't gain significant attention in educational discussions until the 1970s, as noted by Lankshear & Knobel in 2003. During this time, the understanding of literacy evolved beyond simply decoding printed words to encompassing reading and writing as activities of meaning-making. This perspective acknowledges that various texts demand diverse backgrounds and skills for accurate comprehension.

As with 'English,' 'literacy' or 'being literate' is defined in various ways. The term 'literacy' sometimes refers only to reading, sometimes to both reading and writing, and occasionally, though less commonly, to reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Inglis & Aers (2008) observed that while many children acquire speech effortlessly, mastering reading and writing presents challenges. Proficiency in reading and writing, which constitutes literacy, varies in fluency among individuals. The National Literacy Trust expands its definition to include speaking and listening: 'We believe literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, and listen effectively. A literate person can communicate effectively with others and comprehend written information' (Keefe & Copeland, 2011)." UNESCO broadens the definition of literacy beyond traditional skills like reading, writing, and counting. It now encompasses the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, and communicate in today's digital, information-driven, and rapidly evolving world. Literacy now encompasses a broader range of abilities.



We need to be able to interpret information from a variety of sources, from digital text to visual media. We must be able to analyze, question, and form our own conclusions.

Literacy today embraces not just reading and writing but also a broad spectrum of knowledge across various subjects, many of which hold equal or greater importance. This broader understanding of literacy has evolved over time, driven by factors such as the increased application of the term, advancements in information and technology, and shifts in how we draw comparisons (Abidin et al., 2021).

Beyond the Blueprint: Literacy in Elementary School and Across Content, published by the Connecticut State Department of Education (2007), presents 26 literacy strategies organized into four groups: understanding, word knowledge, reading fluency, and spelling.

Table 1. The Literacy Strategy

No.	The Purpose of Literacy Strategies	Literacy Strategies	The Instructional strategies	Use
1.	Comprehension	The directed reading-thinking activity Question-answer relationship Know-what learning chart Comparison matrix Response notebook Anticipation guide Chapter tour Classification chart Visualizing Thinking aloud/metacognitive process Semantic map Graphic thinking organizer Obstacle course Walking this way-talk this way-look this way.	These strategies intend to emphasize some procedures like: Prediction, inference Setting reading purpose Questioning Synthesize the text Recognizing similarities and differences in the text to lead student's comprehension Monitoring for Meaning Making connections Activating background knowledge Organizing information Determining importance Evaluating	All Content Area All Grade Levels Before and During Reading
2.	Vocabulary	Concept of definition map Context clues for determining word meaning List-group-label, possible sentence Possible sentences Semantic feature analysis Vocabulary by analogy with word walls Knowledge rating scale	These strategies intend to emphasize some procedures like: 1. Context clues Thinking aloud and reading aloud Use synonyms and antonyms Group discussion	All Content Area All Grade Levels Before and During Reading

3.	Fluency	Repeated reading Reading theatre	These strategies intend to emphasize some procedures like: Teacher models reading Reading aloud	All Content Area All Grade Levels Before and During Reading
4.	Spelling	Spelling self-correction Clues to spelling from word relationships Word sorts	These strategies intend to emphasize some procedures like: Teacher explains how to recognizing and correct the miss spelling Use dictionary Write words Spelling	All Content Area All Grade Levels Before and During Reading

### 2.3 Young Learners

Nunan (2011) proposes that young learners range from around three to fifteen years of age. Similarly, Phillips (2003) defines young learners as children who begin formal education, usually at five or six years old, up to eleven or twelve years old. Linse (2006) also describes young learners as typically being schoolchildren between the ages of 5 and 12. This age range is based on the elementary or primary school years in many countries, but it varies depending on the education system. Some researchers believe that being young is advantageous for language learning. Children learn differently from adults, with unique ways of thinking, acting, and acquiring language. This necessitates special teaching methods to keep them engaged and learning effectively. Understanding these differences is essential for teachers to create enjoyable and successful English learning experiences for their young students. Without this understanding, teaching can become challenging for both teachers and students.

Nunan (2011) outlines several characteristics of young learners, which are (a) they are typically preschool-aged or in the early years of primary school, (b) they approach language holistically, focusing on understanding meaningful messages rather than analyzing language structures, (c) they possess limited awareness of the learning process, (d) their reading and writing skills, even in their native language, are limited, (e) they are generally more self-focused than concerned about others, (f) they have limited knowledge of the world, (g) they enjoy activities involving fantasy, imagination, and physical movement. Shin (2006) suggested 10 ideas to incorporate into the teaching English to young learners classroom, for instance, employing activities with visual media, realia, and movement, involving students in making visuals and realia, moving from activity to activity that takes around 5 to 10 minutes for each, teaching in themes, using stories and contexts to familiarize to students, establishing classroom routines in English, and using first language as a resource when necessary.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach, namely descriptive qualitative research, which is a method used to guide research in exploring or capturing a social situation to be

studied thoroughly. The aim is to obtain descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and behaviors of the observed individuals in a broad and in-depth manner. Williams (2007) suggested that the descriptive research approach is essential for analyzing a situation as it currently exists. This means that the outcome of such research is a depiction of the data as it is at that specific point in time. He also theorized that the qualitative research method examines social phenomena from the perspective of the participants involved (Williams, 2007).

### **3.2 Participants**

This study was conducted at Muhammadiyah 06 Palembang elementary school. The participants of this study were children in the first grade, their English teacher, and their class teacher. A purposive sampling technique was employed, which, according to Kriyantono (2014), permitted the researcher to select any accessible and well-informed members of the population. There are five classes of first-grade students: 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, and 1E. However, there is only 1 English teacher for the first-grade students. Therefore, the researcher could only obtain the main data from one source. To support the information, the researcher also interviewed the classroom teacher of 1D class. Firstly, the researcher aimed to interview 2 classroom teachers; however, there was only 1 teacher available due to personal reasons. The author chose the classroom teachers based on the recommendation from the English teacher whose classes are favorable and have quite a long waiting list for students. Besides, the students of the chosen class are said to follow the instructions better.

### **3.3 Instruments for Collecting Data**

This study's data provision was carried out by doing observation, interviews, and documentation. In terms of recording, this study used edited transcription. The researcher conducted non-participant observation by attending the class to observe and record without engaging in the teaching and learning process. The observation included video recording and field notes. This observation was carried out twice in the EFL teacher's classroom, once in 1B class and once in 1D class. Each observation lasted approximately 50 minutes.

A semi-structured interview was utilized as the data collection tool in this study. The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, using Bahasa Indonesia. Additionally, the entire interview process was recorded in audio format.

### **3.4 Data Analysis Procedures**

The research will conduct data analysis concurrently with data collection, interpretation, and report writing. The researcher will employ exploratory data analysis to examine the collected data objectively, without evaluation. The study utilizes the data analysis approach outlined by Miles et al. (2014), encompassing data condensation, presentation, and drawing conclusions.

#### 4. Results

The research results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. The Research Results

Researched Aspect	The Research Result
English Literacy Implementation Students' Activity in Learning English	There are some activities designed for English literacy learning, such as songs, the drill method, reading aloud, translation games, lectures, direct thinking activities, question-answer sessions, and flashcard activities.
Methods	The methods used in learning English literacy are recitations, reading aloud, question and answer with objects and, guided reading and writing, recitation, memorization.
Media	In the English literacy classroom, various types of media are employed: text-based media, such as textbooks and student books; interactive media, such as engaging in question-and-answer sessions; manipulative media, such as using items like bottles or pencil cases for activities like color review; and visual media, such as printed pictures used by teachers. For independent learning at home, students utilize CDs, online audio resources, and YouTube links for songs, pronunciation, and vocabulary.
Teaching Materials	A students' book named Big Show 1, printed pictures, online audio, flashcards, lesson plan, and teacher guidebook.
Assessment	Practice and written tests are employed. The forms of written tests are multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, reading comprehension, translating, and matching pairs.
Challenges in Implementing English Literacy	The primary challenge lies in the diverse backgrounds of the children. While some are proactive, others are not. Additionally, a few students are not yet fluent in reading their first language. Furthermore, students show reluctance in writing and completing assignments, and many are often shy when performing in the language.
Actions to Overcome the Challenges	Games can help manage active children by channeling their energy positively. An individual approach is provided to guide students in learning. Encouragement is also done to push the students to follow the rules and instructions given.

Interview and observation methods were employed to gain data related to the objectives of the study. Findings from the interview and observations are presented below:

##### 4.1 English Literacy Implementation

Students' Activity in Learning English and Teaching Method. There are some activities and teaching methods employed in English literacy learning. The first one is a song.

"... kita untuk openingnya sih kita ajak bernyanyi gitu." (English Subject teacher (FH)).

When being observed on May 7, the teacher also used a song entitled 'Good Morning to You' for the closing activity. The next activity was the drill method.

"... kita juga menerapkan metode yang lain seperti metode drill method; itu tentang mengucapkan/melafalkan kosakata tentang topik suatu tertentu pada buku". (English Subject teacher (FH)).

In the observation, students were asked to mention the color of certain things pointed out by the teacher, for instance, green drink bottle, blue pencil case, red pencil case, and purple drink bottle. Then, reading aloud was also done when students read the text.

*"... kalau membacanya reading aloud; guru membacakan bacaan pada topik tertentu kepada siswa kemudian siswa menirukan dengan suara yang keras. Menirukan itu, maju ke depan kelas kita kasih contoh baca yang ini simpelnya gitu nanti siswa akan membacakan depan kelas, di depan teman temannya."* (English Subject teacher (FH)).

The researcher witnesses the students being asked to read the text entitled 'Art Class' on students' book page 54 by themselves. Next, the memorization method was also utilized in teaching vocabulary.

*"... Kayak simpelnya CAKE, itu tulisannya, tapi bacanya /keɪk/ kan? Jadi kita kasih tau dulu ke anak-anak gini tulisannya. Tulisannya CAKE tapi bacanya tidak seperti itu. Kita kasih tahu bagaimana cara baca yang baik dan benar dalam bahasa Inggris".* (English Subject teacher (FH)).

During the observations, the researcher noted several methods employed. For instance, translation games where students were asked to match colors mentioned by the teacher to objects, lectures where the teacher explained concepts directly, direct thinking activities where the teacher pointed to students and stated colors in Bahasa while students responded in English, question-answer sessions where the teacher allowed students to ask questions after giving instructions, recitations where both the teacher and students recited colors in both Bahasa Indonesia and English, and guided reading and writing sessions where the teacher closely guided students in completing writing assignments.

Media and Teaching Materials. In the English literacy classroom, various types of media are employed. The first media is text-based media, such as textbooks and student books.

*"...Ada. Pegangan guru, pegangan murid; students' book, teachers' book sama buku PR-nya."* (English Subject teacher (FH)).

The next media is interactive media, such as engaging in a question-and-answer session. Then, manipulative media, such as using items like bottles or pencil cases for activities like color review. From the observation, the researcher saw that the teacher utilized those media in the class. After that, there was visual media, such as printed pictures, used by teachers.

*"...Suka kasih print-an itu misal vocab apa gitu dikasih gambar itu di print di kasihankan ke anak-anak. Misalkan tentang hewan, jadi gambar-gambar hewan itu di print, di kertas selebar itu, ditunjukkan ke anak-anak."* (English Subject teacher (FH)).

For independent learning at home, students utilize CDs, online audio resources, and YouTube links for songs, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

*"... dari buku Cambridge ini sudah ada CD-nya. CD-nya masing-masing, jadi terlepas dari orang tuanya mau memakai atau enggak, itu pribadi masing-masing. Balik ke individualnya. Jadi di buku ini sudah lengkap. Sudah ada link youtube-nya, jadi tinggal scan. Ketika sudah scan barco-nya, sudah masuk. Itu (bisa) ngikutin nyanyiannya, pelafalannya, kosakatanya."* (English Subject teacher (FH)).

Assessment. Practice and written tests are employed. The forms of written tests are multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, reading comprehension, translating, and matching pairs.

*"... Kalau evaluasinya ada praktek ada tertulis. Praktek itu pelajaran sebelumnya (yang) sudah dipelajari; kami panggil satu persatu gitu. Kami aja tanya jawab tentang materi yang ada."* (English Subject teacher (FH)).

#### 4.2 Challenges in Implementing English Literacy

The English teacher claimed that the primary challenge lies in the diverse backgrounds of the children. While some are proactive, others are not.

*"...tantangan Bahasa Inggris itu lebih ke anak-anak yang proaktif yang sukanya main."  
"Jadi keseringan ditegur, takutnya memecah konsentrasi yang lain juga."*

Additionally, a few students are not yet fluent in reading their first language, and they have difficulty in learning.

*"...Ada sih, sedikit tapi dari 100% mungkin 5% yang belum lancar baca." "...beberapa anak yang pertama tadi belum lancar membaca, jadi kesulitan untuk menerima materi".*

Furthermore, students show reluctance to write and complete assignments.

*"...memang ada beberapa mungkin mereka tidak menyukai bahasa asing atau tidak menyukai bahasa Inggris. Ketika mereka disuruh nulis dan juga ketika mereka dikasih tugas."*

And many are often shy when performing in the language.

*"...mereka itu bisa ketika kita nanya duduk di bangkunya. Bisa jawab. Bisa berbicara bahasa Inggris. Ketika sudah 'Ayo nak maju ke depan, kita baca, kita belajar sama anak-anak yang lain' 'Gak bisa'. merasa masih belum PD percaya diri ya."*

However, the researcher observed additional issues. For example, students had a limited English vocabulary, leading to minimal use of the language. Additionally, classroom rules and routines were not well established; students frequently went to the toilet and spoke out of turn during English lessons. This disruption affected the flow of the class and potentially hindered the achievement of learning objectives.

#### 4.3 Actions to Overcome the Challenges

According to the teacher, games can help manage active children by channeling their energy positively.

*"... karakter anak yang gak bisa diam di tempat. Jadi, bisa ditanggapi dengan game. Game yang berhubungan dengan fisik. Jadi kayak dibuat capek dulu anak. Ketika dia udah asyik main game, energinya terkuras, jadi otomatis secara tidak langsung dia itu duduk. Mantep gitu ya dengerin materi kita jelasin."*

To overcome the problem arising from the slow learners, the teachers used individual approaches to guide students in learning.

*"...dibimbing dulu. Lebih pendekatan ke anaknya. Dan untuk anak yang (maaf) yang belum paham, kita deketin. Kita tanya 'Bagian apa yang bingungnya?'"*

Meanwhile, to make reluctant students follow the instructions, the teacher employed encouragement strategies.

*"...dikasih pengertian. Kalau nggak dapet nilai nanti gimana raportnya? Ya udah kasih dua pilihan nih. Ya udah kamu mau nilai atau ngga? Kalau nggak mau nulis nanti nggak dapat nilai."*

And to shy students, the teacher claimed to support them by wordings.

*"...terkadang saya itu setelah belajar di dekat closing juga saya sempatkan (memberikan dorongan) kepada anak-anak belajar nggak apa-apa jangan takut yang namanya proses belajar itu pasti ada salahnya tapi di mana letak salahnya kita perbaiki nak. Untuk pertamanya kita harus PD dulu ketika kita sudah PD lama-kelamaan akan timbul rasa ingin berbicara dalam bahasa Inggris, jadi ketika udah timbul langsung semangat belajarnya itu semakin tinggi gitu".*

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 English Literacy Implementation**

The government is reintroducing the English subject at the primary school level through a new curriculum known as the Merdeka curriculum, which is being phased in starting in 2022. Students are strongly encouraged to learn basic English from elementary school, as it will become a compulsory subject in Junior High School. Some schools are gradually implementing the Merdeka curriculum. At Muhammadiyah 06 Palembang Elementary School, the Merdeka curriculum has been introduced in certain classes, including first grade, where students begin learning English. Corresponding to this, Oktavia et al. (2023) also found that the teacher and the management person of an elementary school in Bungo Dani, Jambi province, also feel enthusiastic about applying the Merdeka curriculum for elementary school.

There are five groups of first-grade students: 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, and 1E, all taught by one teacher. According to findings from observations and interviews, students have English lessons once a week, each session lasting approximately 50 minutes. The teacher employs various methods such as recitations, reading aloud, question-and-answer activities with objects, guided reading and writing, and memorization, and often uses songs to start the class. These methods allowed the teacher to engage the students in learning. This is in line with the research result of Kurniliawati (2016), which states that the use of various teaching techniques can make students interested in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, it can improve students' ability.

During lessons, the teacher employs interactive techniques, such as reviewing colors learned in previous lessons by asking students to name colors and engage in activities like identifying the colors of objects such as pencil cases, bottles, and books. In other parts of the lesson, students are asked to recite passages from the textbook, and guided writing is used for assignments, where the teacher demonstrates how to answer questions and provides additional support as needed. This supports the research result of Sharipovna (2023), who claimed that various teaching techniques, such as the communicative teaching method, enable students to develop their potential effectively. Moreover, Ilmuddinovich (2020) also found that the most effective teaching strategies for young learners are audio-lingualism, songs, total physical response, flashcards, games, and task-based learning.

The classroom environment for learning English was generally conducive. Some students occasionally left their seats to use the restroom or talk to their peers, but they returned promptly when encouraged by the teacher. Many students remained seated throughout the class, with some completing assignments independently and others reading the textbook without much assistance. One of the activities included a recitation-translation exercise where the teacher mentioned colors in the first language (e.g., biru, hijau, merah, ungu), and students responded with the corresponding English color (blue, green, red, purple). The use of the recitation method was effective in making students participate and join the learning activity. The students participated enthusiastically, as evidenced by their loud responses. Wibowo et al. (2018), in their quasi-experimental study, also discovered that recitation-based learning methods have a significant impact on students' interest and learning outcomes concerning the material on citizens' equal status.

The students participated enthusiastically, as evidenced by their loud responses. Following this, the teacher instructed students to complete assignments in their books, though some appeared confused about the task. At the end of the class, when invited to sing the song "Good Morning," all students enthusiastically participated. The use of songs, especially for young learners, could have a variety of positive effects on students' education experience, for instance, enhancing memory and recall, boosting motivation and engagement, and improving language skills. Ma'rifat (2017) stated that using songs makes students feel more relaxed and enjoy the teaching and learning process more. Additionally, songs help students learn English vocabulary more effectively compared to traditional methods. Songs can enhance young learners' listening, pronunciation, and speaking abilities, as well as their understanding of grammar (Murphey, 1992). The teacher managed the class smoothly, noting during an interview that she also employed reading aloud and games as instructional strategies. Ilmuddinovich (2020) also stated that songs are a potent and nearly unlimited source of English vocabulary. Furthermore, Ilmuddinovich mentioned that songs are more effective than standard drills because they are easier for children to remember and tend to stick in their minds for a long time. Teachers frequently use icebreakers like games, songs, body movements, jokes, and shouts. These activities are crucial for teaching and learning English due to their numerous benefits, including capturing students' attention and focus, energizing them to create a lively atmosphere, and aiding in better comprehension of the lesson material (Duhuria, 2020).

In education, media encompasses a range of tools and materials employed by educators to support learning and enrich the educational process. Various types of media are utilized to teach and learn English in the classroom. These include text-based media such as textbooks, workbooks, handouts, and printed materials; audio media such as recordings and songs; visual media like slides and photographs; audio-visual media including videos; interactive media such as simulations, games, and quizzes; and manipulative media, which consists of physical objects like bottles and school-related items that students can manipulate to enhance their understanding of concepts.

The incorporation of these media in education is intended to involve students actively, accommodate various learning preferences, clarify abstract ideas, and offer multiple approaches for presenting information and evaluating comprehension. A primary instructional resource utilized is a textbook called "Big Show" by Compass Publishing, which includes songs, YouTube videos, and games. Additionally, the teacher mentioned using a companion teacher's guide alongside this book. Using a variety of teaching media in the classroom can have numerous positive



effects on the teaching and learning process. Vebrianto & Osman (2011) also found that their students improved their skill and achievement taught using various constructive teaching media.

The students were assessed through daily classroom practice, as well as formative and summative tests. The summative test comprised various formats including multiple-choice, fill in the blank, reading comprehension, translation, and matching pairs. The test duration was approximately 50 minutes, consisting of 31 questions: 10 multiple-choice, 15 fill in the blank, and 4 matching pairs. During the test, students appeared capable of completing it within the allotted time, with some finishing early. The classroom teacher oversaw the test administration. Test results indicated that students achieved a passing grade of 75.

## **5.2 Challenges in Implementing English Literacy**

The primary challenge lies in the diverse backgrounds of the children. According to the interview and observations, the main issue faced by the teacher is students who are highly active. These students frequently leave their seats to interact with peers, engage with materials on their desks, and disrupt others when seeking permission, such as to use the restroom. Their loud voices also disrupt the learning environment, often requiring the teacher to restore order repeatedly. These interruptions cause delays in the learning process, necessitating the teacher to repeat explanations to regain focus. This reining-in process consumes valuable instructional time. Additionally, some students struggle to maintain focus on a single activity, like flipping through pages or daydreaming, even if they do not disturb others. This is in line with Copland et al. (2013), who state that the students have to be motivated many times by the teacher to learn English. Students were believed to not understand yet the purpose of learning English.

Basic literacy skills in the first language are crucial. Some students who are not yet fluent readers in their first language struggled with the material. Understanding instructions, stories, and content in English becomes more challenging when students cannot rely on their first language reading skills for comprehension. For example, they became confused with the instructions and appeared to be inactive. Here, they require additional support. This aligns with research by Rosmayasari (2021), who observed that first-grade elementary school students often face difficulties, particularly in reading and understanding conceptual topics. Without prior experience in reading and phonetics in their first language, students may also struggle with English pronunciation. Furthermore, students tend to approach assignments slowly and exhibit reluctance in writing. According to the teacher, these behaviors reflect habits carried over from kindergarten. Therefore, these students need understanding and patient guidance from their teachers.

The next challenge identified is that students have a limited English vocabulary, leading the teacher to frequently use Bahasa Indonesia during English teaching and learning sessions. Consequently, the English learning environment in the classroom was not optimal. Meanwhile, creating an English-speaking classroom environment has been emphasized in English education (Soma, 2018). The less exposure students have to English, the fewer opportunities they have to practice the language. The students also showed lacking vocabulary when answering the semester test, especially on writing parts. They mostly misspelled the words both in Bahasa Indonesia and English. In line with this, Ork et al. (2024) claimed that the primary reason for poor English-speaking performance is that interaction involves several steps before one can speak. Effective speaking demands a range of skills, such as listening, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Another challenge is low confidence and motivation. Students often feel shy when asked to speak English in front of the class, and they tend to avoid practicing English, especially when others are

watching. In line with this, Ork et al. (2024) also mentioned that Many students feel emotionally shy when asked to speak during English classes. This indicates that shyness might hinder their learning, especially in speaking activities. To help students perform their best in speaking tasks, it's important to address this issue. Furthermore, Ork, et al. also said that a major issue for learners is a lack of confidence in English. It's commonly understood that students become discouraged when their conversation partners don't understand them or when they struggle to understand others. As a result, they may choose to stay silent rather than attempt to communicate, highlighting their lack of confidence. Nunan (1999) noted that students who are unsure of their communication skills in English often experience communication anxiety. This highlights the importance of teachers focusing on boosting students' self-confidence.

### 5.3 Actions to Overcome the Challenges

Games can help manage active children by channeling their energy positively. The teacher often used games and songs that allowed the students to move and transfer their energy before class. Incorporating physical activity into the academic classroom not only boosts overall physical activity levels but also brings specific advantages to schools, including enhanced motivation, increased enjoyment of learning, reduced behavior issues, and improvements in attention, focus, and academic performance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Merriman et al., 2020). Ilmuddinovich (2020) mentioned that games are the most enjoyable technique among those previously discussed. This makes them particularly effective because students become so engaged in having fun and trying to win that they don't realize they are learning. Essentially, games create a positive classroom atmosphere and foster an effective learning environment.

Individual attention is provided to guide students in learning reading and writing in their first language. The students are guided to read the text, and the classroom teacher also assists in this process. Every day, the classroom teacher dedicates time to facilitating students' reading practice. Over time, the students improve in recognizing letter sounds, and by the end of the semester, they will be able to read proficiently. The classroom teacher emphasizes strengthening students' basic literacy skills, namely reading, writing, and counting. Simultaneously, the English teacher encourages students to practice English by reading textbooks aloud and encourages them to memorize English word spellings and pronunciations.

Encouragement is also provided by the teacher after class. She urges the students to practice English by inviting them to participate one by one. The teacher always tries to reach out to all students, especially those who need extra support. She repeats her explanations and guides the students individually and patiently. Additionally, she strives to create a supportive and encouraging classroom environment by reuniting the students by using a soft tone of voice, offering physical touch, lowering her body when speaking to them and smiling. She also helps students understand the importance of following rules, such as completing assignments to achieve good grades, and how this impacts their report cards. Providing choices and explaining consequences are helpful. Setting limits is an effective intervention strategy for addressing unwillingness to complete tasks or cooperate, and it can also prevent initial upset (West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, 2016).

The teachers reprimanded students when the class started to get crowded. Positive remarks may not always have the same instant effect on students' behavior as verbal reprimands, threats, or nagging from teachers. In other words, even brief reprimands like "Stop talking—now!" might cause students to behave better (Alber & Heward, 2000; Gable et al., 2009).

The results presented above show that there is a relationship between young students' characteristics and their second language literacy learning. These findings support Prihatin et al. (2021), who identified challenges from the student's perspective. These challenges include cognitive development affecting students' ability to grasp knowledge quickly and follow instructions. Additionally, student motivation is noted as an issue in the classroom. Discipline and difficulties in speaking and writing were also observed during the learning process. Similarly, Laila et al. (2023) found that students exhibit a negative attitude towards English. Interview results indicated that not all students are enthusiastic about learning English, with some finding it challenging. Another significant challenge noted is students' reluctance, often due to shyness, which impacts their willingness to participate in speaking activities. This lack of engagement during class affects their ability to achieve learning goals. The focus of this study's results differs somewhat from Hulu's (2024) study, which primarily discusses challenges faced by teachers without addressing the issues arising from students' diversity and characteristics. Widodo & Dewi (2018) have proposed several teaching solutions to address challenges, such as using the Class Dojo application, offering preparatory classes, receiving support from teachers and peers, and engaging in hands-on learning activities.

Based on these study results, teaching English to young learners differs significantly from teaching higher-level students. Teachers need to understand young learners' characteristics, especially their physical movement needs, and provide clear instructions. Teaching methods should incorporate hands-on activities to enhance student engagement. A continuous supply of teaching materials is essential to maximize the learning aids' effectiveness. Additionally, parental support plays a crucial role in developing students' skills and progress.

## **6. Conclusion**

First-grade teachers play a pivotal role. They implement strategies tailored to diverse student backgrounds, such as incorporating physical activities to channel energy, using engaging songs for learning, and providing individualized support for struggling learners. Collaborating with classroom teachers, they focus on enhancing fluency and supporting English learning.

To further engage students, teachers employ a variety of activities, including Total Physical Response, Show and Tell, quiet/noisy exercises, individual/pair/group activities, and teacher-student/student-student interactions. Interactive games like Simon Says, Alphabet Hunt, and board games are also beneficial. Visual aids play a crucial role in comprehension, as students often learn best through hands-on, visual, and auditory experiences.

Effective classroom management includes setting positive rules that emphasize desired behaviors rather than restrictions. Communication with parents is vital, fostering collaboration to support students both academically and at home. This partnership alleviates the teacher's workload and enhances student progress. Ultimately, successful English literacy education thrives on cohesive teamwork among educators, students, and parents alike.

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