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INCORPORATING INDIGENEOUS CONTENT TO DEVELOP ENGLISH MATERIALS FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVELS: THE TEACHERS' VOICES

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Abstract: The present research explores primary school teachers' perceptions of the possibility of integrating indigenous content in English instruction in Indonesia. The current curriculum, *Kurikulum Merdeka*, allows teachers to develop materials related to essential content. With that image in mind, this research tried to shed light on the opportunities and challenges of incorporating indigenous content, such as local folktales, songs, games, and traditions, to develop English materials. The research employs a qualitative research method. The participants were five teachers from different subdistricts in Kudus, Central Java, Indonesia. They were purposively selected and voluntarily participated in the research. A focus group discussion was carried out to gain the teachers' insights. The questions address three main points: the

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objectives of English teaching in primary schools, the incorporation of indigenous content into English materials, and the challenges faced when integrating this content into those materials. The triangulation was conducted by collecting the teachers' written responses on the same topic with more detailed questions. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The research findings reveal that teachers have a positive view of the inclusion of indigenous content in English instruction, as it is relevant to students' real-life contexts. The challenges that might emerge are limited resources, insufficient training, and lack of experts and authority support. Practically, teachers can introduce indigenous content into the teaching materials. In wider contexts, curriculum designers are recommended to consider addressing indigenous content in the English curriculum for primary school students.

Keywords: *English material, indigenous content, primary school, teachers' voice*

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, teaching English in primary school has been projected to be compulsory in 2027 based on the regulations of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Higher Education No.12, year 2024 on Curriculum in Early Childhood, Primary, and Secondary Education. Previously, English was compulsory from secondary which are junior and senior high school – while its inclusion at the primary level was treated as a local content, left to the discretion of individual schools and regional authorities.

This shift marks a major milestone in Indonesia's educational landscape. After years of limited attention, English is finally being formally integrated into *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Under the earlier 2013 Curriculum, English instruction at the primary level was largely 'neglected'. Yet, research suggests that introducing English at the early age fosters foundational language skills critical for later development (Antika & Afriyanti, 2021). In addition, the inclusion of English in the

national curriculum is a part of broader educational reform aimed at enhancing Indonesia's competitiveness in the global economy and developing intercultural communication (Sulistiyo et al., 2019).

The current curriculum does not require teachers to follow one single approach for teaching English. The most common approach used for teaching young age students is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which has been used over years focusing on the use of language in real-life context to develop English skills, emphasizing activities to promote communication and interaction such as role play, games, songs, and storytelling (Nggawu & Thao, 2023). At the primary level, English instruction mainly focuses on listening and speaking skills as these form the foundation for further language development. Harmer (2007) notes that children acquire oral language skills more quickly because they are naturally communicative. Similarly, Nation and Newton (2009) highlights the importance of maintaining a balance between listening and speaking to support overall language growth.

Building the choice of teaching approach, the selection of teaching material is equally essential for helping students achieve learning objective. Teachers are encouraged to provide meaningful teaching materials that give students ample exposure to the language. One valuable option is the use of indigenous content, which reflects local wisdoms such as stories, songs, and traditions. In Indonesia, a diverse country rich of indigenous languages and cultures, incorporating indigenous content in English teaching presents both opportunities and challenges. In English language teaching, including indigenous content facilitates students to connect between their own cultural heritage and the new target language which is learnt (Ottu et al., 2024). By integrating local stories, traditions, folklore, and everyday practices into the learning material, students can relate new vocabulary and concepts to their life experiences.

The idea of indigenous content is rooted from the concept of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). CRT in English language learning for young learners is very relevant in this context since it involves recognizing and integrating students' own cultural

backgrounds such as traditional stories, customs, and daily experiences into English lessons, making learning more meaningful, engaging, and effective. When lessons connect to local culture, children understand new language concepts more easily. Additionally, it fosters students' engagement as there is a connection between personal and cultural experiences (Lawrence-Pine, 2015). Research shows that integrating culturally relevant content enhances student motivation, learning outcomes, and a sense of belonging in the classroom (Yuliantari & Huda, 2023; Madkur, 2025).

The inclusion of indigenous content in English teaching can be explored through sociocultural theory, which highlights the role of social interaction, language, cultural tools, and collaborative learning in education (Santosa et al., 2019). This theory suggests that knowledge is constructed through cultural and social experience. Language plays a role in shaping indigenous students' identities and understanding. Providing guided support, scaffolding, is necessary to support for helping students engage with complex cultural knowledge and practices. In addition, cultural artifacts and traditions may serve valuable tools for learning.

Teaching English in primary schools takes place at a foundational stage, where learners are in the crucial period of language acquisition. The instruction emphasizes building fundamental communication skills, strengthening listening and speaking abilities, and gradually incorporating reading and writing. Abundant of research deals with teaching English in primary schools in terms of its nature, best practices, challenges, and factors influencing successful language acquisition. Integrating local content into English learning material is a promising approach to boost learners' engagement, strengthen cultural identity, and improve understanding. Incorporating familiar stories, traditions and daily life experiences into lessons helps students connect more deeply with the material and establish meaningful links between their own culture and the English language.

Indigenous content integration has become a big concern to some scholars. Santosa et al. (2019) reveal that local content-based teaching

materials improves students' creative writing skills. Local values are important to be embedded in the English materials of primary schools (Ratri & Puspitasari, 2019). There are ten topics rooted in local wisdom topics that can be integrated in English materials for primary school students in Toraja Utara as essential components including tourist attractions, thanksgiving traditions, funeral ceremonies, traditional cuisine, local beverages, traditional clothing, social values, folklore, cultural arts, and fairy tales (Tandikombong et al., 2024).

Ratri et al. (2024) provide a systematic review of cultural content insertion into English syllabus for primary school students. They find out that integrating local content into English instruction positively impacts the learning process by fostering constructive attitude, increasing motivation and promoting strong student engagement. Alia & Syihabuddin (2024) reveals that Indonesian primary schools can integrate indigenous content in learning. The recommended materials include local folktales, indigenous music, and cultural tradition, which can be utilized to teach vocabulary, grammar and storytelling. This study supports Taylor (2022) who highlights the positive impact of using indigenous stories in English classes. They use local stories in English lessons and it helps students improve their speaking and listening skills. Moreover, it provides the students to get connected to their cultural roots. For a multicultural country like Indonesia, this practice would develop a sense of pride and cultural identity. Recently, Ratri et al. (2025) reveal that incorporating local culture into English syllabus helps students maintain their cultural identity while providing familiar context that improves their English proficiency. The previous research discusses mostly about the positive impact of incorporating indigenous content into students' language skills and cultural identity. There are still limited studies investigating the teachers voice of the indigenous content integration into teaching materials.

Although *Kurikulum Merdeka* allows flexible implementation, there is limited understanding of how primary teachers perceive and implement the integration of indigenous content in English instruction.

Therefore, this study aims to explore primary school teachers' perceptions of integrating indigenous content to develop English materials for primary school level in terms of the possibilities and the challenges. The significance of the research is that the findings practically might be a reference and a basis for teachers who are interested in incorporating indigenous content into English teaching to start using it. Theoretically this research might enrich the body knowledge of the existing theories, practices, and research that might be of interest for further researchers.

METHOD

Design

The present research belongs to qualitative with phenomenological design, which explores the perception of English teachers on the possibility of using indigenous content for developing English materials for primary school in Indonesia. The participants of the research are English teachers of five primary schools in Kudus, Central Java, Indonesia. The teachers are four civil servants and one novice teacher who is currently taking a compulsory Teacher's Professionalism Program held by the government.

Participant

The data were obtained from focus group discussion and teachers' written responses. In focus group discussion, five participant teachers were purposively chosen among the nine sub districts. Although the number of informants was only five, they could provide rigorous and comprehensive data, which were needed. They were from five different sub-districts in Kudus involved including sub-district Bae, Kota, Mejobo, Jekulo, and Undaan in Kudus, Central Java, Indonesia. The selection is based on years of teaching experience from 3 to 15 years, district representation from 5 sub-districts in Kudus and those who have used indigenous content and those who have not.

Data Collection

In collecting the data, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted to elaborate the teachers' thoughts on the subject. Before joining it, the consent was approved to confirm that the participants were willingly to participate in this research. There are some aspects were included in the questions, they are the perception of teachers, the integration of indigenous content, the challenges, cultural and educational impact, and support and professional development. The FGD was carried out via Zoom and was recorded for about 90 minutes. As triangulation, teachers write responses on 22 open questions and 1 closed question related to topic in English or Bahasa Indonesia based on their preferences. This method was done to avoid researchers over subjectivity on the issue. The questions were in Word form sent via WhatsApp group. All the five teachers sent the filled questions back to the researchers. The transcript of the FGD was checked by two interrater to validate the collected data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. The steps include coding, classifying and drawing conclusion. After the data were obtained from the FGD were recorded and transcribed verbatim, the transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. Inductive coding was applied, allowing codes to emerge directly from the participants' responses rather than from a predetermined framework. The initial codes were then grouped into broader categories, which were refined into overarching themes. Two coders were involved in the process to enhance reliability, and intercoder agreement between the two coders checked through discussion to resolve discrepancies. The themes were further reviewed and verified by comparing them against the original transcripts to ensure they accurately represented the participants' views before final interpretation.

FINDINGS

This present research is aimed at describing the teachers' voices on the integration of indigenous content in developing English materials for primary schools. Trying to answer the question, the data were obtained from focus group discussion and teachers' written responses. In focus group discussion, there are five participant teachers from five different sub districts in Kudus. Teacher E, Teacher A, Teacher M, and Teacher N have been teaching English for more than 10 years; while Teacher L has been teaching English for 2 years.

The detail findings are discussed based on some aspects namely teachers' views on the objectives of teaching English in primary schools, teachers' perception on indigenous content, the challenges on the integration of indigenous content, and the required support and professionalism development.

Teachers' perception on English teaching objective in Primary Schools

Before unveiling the teachers' perception on indigenous content, presenting the learning objectives in English teaching is important to ensure that teachers are aware with their roles. Among the five teachers, the four teachers have similar responses that the objectives of teaching English in primary schools are to prepare students to be able to use English in simple written and spoken for daily purposes.

Teacher M: *"In my humble opinion, the main objectives are the students are able to communicate in English for daily purposes such as how to introduce themselves,"*

While, one teacher states that English teaching objectives is for introducing students with vocabularies and pronunciation. Understanding learning objectives is crucial for it is the basis on how teaching and learning process are designed to achieve the target. When

teachers are not knowledgeable about the teaching objectives, it might cause mislead teaching.

Teachers' perception on Indigenous contents to develop English materials

In the beginning of the FGD, the researchers explained the term 'indigenous content', which was initially not well understood by the teachers. Indigenous content here refers local wisdom, such as folklores, local songs, culinary, and traditional games. When it is explained about the examples of indigenous things can be referred to a local wisdom, they start to make sense of the term. Teacher L has got an experience of making an effort to introduce indigenous content to teach English when teaching about profession. The other four teachers claim that they have not introduced indigenous content in English teaching. The existing problems are limited time allocation and limited resources.

Nevertheless, they claim that indigenous contents are possible to be implemented in *Kurikulum Merdeka* since it focuses on essential materials and one of the topics in Empowerment Project of Pancasila Student Profile is local wisdom. Initially, teacher M stated that the term indigenous was new for her and she had no experience of using indigenous content in learning process. Later, she explained that this idea might be related with context of society based on a training session she has ever joined in a national training. Integrating the contents would help students to relate the materials being learnt with their real-life context. It may foster students' understanding on their own culture and values; provide more interesting and contextual English learning; facilitate students to connect local cultures to global ones. She assumed that the content might be applicable. The contents like traditional fruits can be utilized in the materials. Additionally, she mentioned that the trainings and support from experts are needed.

Teacher L realized that she had integrated the indigenous content in daily life topic by presenting an understanding about the local profession of the local students which is a farmer when she was

teaching about profession. The southern part of Kudus is an agricultural area where the people are mostly working as farmers and breeders. She agreed that indigenous contents would be great to be implemented to help the students learn English and simultaneously learn and be aware with their identities. Yet, the teachers have to find appropriate resources.

Teacher A claimed that in the previous curriculum, the materials include myth and legend from Central Java, such as *Roro Jonggrang* of which the text was included in the uniform worksheet which is used throughout the city and others. Yet, she was not knowledgeable about the term indigenous at the time she was using narrative text of *Roro Jonggrang*. The current worksheet does not include myth because the learning objective is different from the previous one. On the contrary, she explained that indigenous content might be suitable for grade 3 and 4 (phase B) and grade 5 and 6 (Phase C) of *Kurikulum Merdeka* since one of the learning objectives are the students are able to produce simple written or spoken texts. She was convinced that the inclusion of indigenous contents is very possible.

Teacher N claimed that she had already related the English teaching with English cultures but not yet include indigenous contents. She came up with an idea to include Kudus local contents like *Jenang* and *lentog* as Kudus traditional food, local job such as a text about 'My Mom works at a cigarette company' in profession topic, *Kretek* dance, and Kudus traditional house. She argued that indigenous content would be beneficial for students as they learn English meaningfully from the local context.

Teacher E highlighted the inclusion of traditional games into the materials like *engklek*, *gobag sodor*, *delikan* (hide and seek) and other traditional games in toys and games topic. She realized that the children now do not know those traditional games as they prefer playing online game. She agreed that indigenous content is possible to be integrated in English teaching and learning.

The challenges of integrating indigenous content in English materials in primary school

Prior to the possibility on the implementation of indigenous content, teachers present the possible challenges of integrating indigenous content in primary schools are the presence of non-English qualification teacher who are now mostly teach English in primary schools, resources unavailability, lack of expert support, and lack of authority support.

From the FGD and the written responses, it is revealed that the English instructions in primary schools are handled by non-English major teachers. English is taught by the homeroom teachers with different education background since many English teachers are now serving as civil servant and becoming homeroom teachers. The 2013 curriculum has been the starting point of 'uncertainty' for the English teachers in primary schools. During the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum, English teachers mostly went studying and taking primary school teacher education which was more career promising.

Yet, there are still some schools hire non-permanent English major teachers for teaching English in primary schools. The presence of unequal teachers' quality in English instruction, trainings and assistance in integrating indigenous contents are needed. To be more accessible, no budget trainings would be preferable particularly for non-civil servant teachers. Teacher A said that there is lack of English trainings for teachers. She said, "...trainings for English teachers are rarely. As mostly English teachers at primary schools are non-permanent teachers, they need no budget trainings".

Another challenge is that materials unavailability. The teachers claim that it is mandatory to use materials from the local use worksheets. The worksheets are arranged by the authority-assigned teachers, which later they are recommended and used by schools in the entire town. The worksheets were developed based on the curriculum. Teachers depend on the worksheets very much since the summative assessments are based on the materials from the worksheets. Previously, indigenous contents such as folklores are used in the

worksheet in legend and myth topic. Today, since in *Kurikulum Merdeka* the learning objective is communicating in oral/written in a very simple form, the worksheet does not include folklores anymore.

Among the five teachers, one teacher has already introduced indigenous content in teaching English. Teacher L said, *"I was doing it as a part of CRT (Culturally Responsive Teaching)"*. She explicitly mentioned about CRT. This finding corresponds to the concept of CRT, which can improve students' engagement as there is a connection between personal and cultural experiences (Lawrence-Pine, 2015).

The inclusion of indigenous content into English instructions might be possible with the accompanying challenges. Consequently, teachers need trainings. Teacher L claims that teachers need trainings on curriculum and the implementation of indigenous content. While the supporting materials needed are the handout and the guideline of including indigenous content into English teaching. Similarly, teacher A hoped that indigenous content has its space in the future curriculum.

As there are two different levels of teachers' understanding and experiences, the conclusion was drawn into two points. For teachers who were just learning the concept, there is a huge opportunity for them to start the integration of indigenous content into their English instruction. For those who have tried integrated the indigenous content, they can develop relevant indigenous content-based materials.

DISCUSSION

Perception of English teaching objectives in primary schools

In addition to designing culturally relevant materials, setting clear learning objectives is crucial for guiding both teaching and assessment. When local content is integrated, well-defined objectives help teachers identify which aspects of local culture, history, or community life can enhance language development. For instance, using local folktales to teach narrative structures helps students connect personal knowledge with new linguistic concepts (Tomlinson, 2012). Similarly, teaching vocabulary through local festivals makes learning more tangible and memorable, reinforcing Vygotsky (1978)

theory that students learn more effectively when they can link new knowledge to their existing social and cultural contexts. Moreover, establishing clear objectives helps teachers design assessments that measure the impact of indigenous content integration. For example, if students are expected to write a description of a local landmark, assessments can directly evaluate this skill (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Integration of Indigenous content to develop English materials for Primary Schools

In 2017, Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (MoECRT) introduced a slogan, "Prioritize Indonesian, preserve local language, and master foreign languages". It has been seven years up to today that the slogan is still taken into account. This slogan can be seen that the authority has been aware with the urge of preserving local language as one of indigenous stuffs. Related to the discussed issue, other indigenous contents are generally possible to be incorporated in English material as an effort to facilitate students with meaningful and fruitful learning context. In addition, the current Kurikulum Merdeka focuses on essential materials and one of the topics in Empowerment Project of Pancasila Student Profile is local wisdom.

Understanding local contexts is crucial for fostering intercultural dialogue (da Silva et al., 2024). Awareness of a community's social, historical and political dynamics allows educators to propose initiatives that resonate with students, address underlying cultural tension, and create opportunities for meaningful connections. This approach bridges differences, cultivates empathy, and encourages cooperation, ultimately leading sustainable and impactful learning outcomes.

The teachers state that indigenous content might motivate the students to be engaged in learning because the contents are closely connected to them. They claim that contextual topics are easier to

understand for their students. Therefore, indigenous content might foster their engagement. The possible impacts of using indigenous content are the students' awareness on their own identity is raised. The teachers stated that introducing indigenous content such as local stories to young learners may develop their identity. They can respect their own culture. Simultaneously, students might also be aware with others' culture. In addition, as the contents are real-life connected, they might be engaged in learning English.

The inclusion of indigenous content has several potential benefits. According to Gay (2010) such of content allows students feel more engaged and connected to the learning process. In super diverse context of Indonesia, incorporating local stories, traditions, and languages can develop a sense of cultural pride and identity. Harmer (2007) highlights that being exposed to meaningful contexts enhances language learning. Incorporating aspects of students' cultures into English lessons can create a more dynamic and engaging learning environment, encouraging greater participation (Yohanis Romrome & Teda Ena, 2022). This method also connects English as a foreign language to students' daily lives, making language learning feel more relevant. Consequently, integrating indigenous content can make it easier for students to grasp English (Ratri et al., 2024).

Despites the potential benefits, the findings revealed that five teachers have not inserted to incorporate indigenous contents in their classes yet due to the time constraint and resources limitation. However, they perceived that it is possible to integrate local contents into the teaching materials since they are relevant to their lives. When students see their culture and surroundings reflected in learning materials, they feel a deeper connection to the content. According to Tomlinson (2012), materials that are contextually relevant and relatable can significantly boost learners' intrinsic motivation, as students become more interested in texts and activities they can personally relate to. In addition, integrating local content fosters pride in students' cultural heritage while promoting intercultural competence. Cortazzi & Jin (1999) emphasize the importance of teaching materials reflecting learners' cultures, as this validates their identities and helps them

navigate global contexts with a strong sense of self. By exploring their local culture in English, students learn to express their traditions, values, and ways of life to others, enriching both their communicative competence and their sense of self.

The Challenges

Instead of the possibilities in incorporating indigenous content in primary schools, several challenges exist. Pramesti et al. (2022) identifies the lack of trained teachers as one of the principal obstacles. The findings reveal that English instructions in primary schools are mostly handled by non-English major teachers. Teacher A said, *"Homeroom teacher of grade 6 in my school is not an English-major teacher. She consults to me how to pronounce and how to teach particular topics"*.

English teachers in Indonesia may not be familiar with indigenous content and might find it difficult to integrate it effectively into lessons. However, those who teach English in primary schools need to be equipped with a variety of learning materials, effective teaching strategies, and adaptable methods to nurture students' growth and language development (Santosa et al., 2020). The limited resources are another challenge and teachers may struggle to find relevant content that corresponds with the learning objectives. This finding supports the previous research conducted by Daud (2024) which reveals that English instruction in primary schools face challenges including teachers' qualification, the availability of teaching resources and the students' motivation. Regarding the availability of learning materials, teachers need support from experts to provide access or resources of indigenous contents. To date, they depend on the local internal use worksheet developed by the authority-assigned teachers. The presence of the worksheet might offer a space to include indigenous content which are relevant to students' context such as traditional song, traditional games, and folklore based on the respective topics.

Although indigenous content can enrich curriculum, it may conflict with the global competencies like English proficiency, (Khumalo & Moodley, 2023). Furthermore, Newton (2016) states that the pressure of teaching English for international communication

sometimes put local languages and cultural practices aside. In some educational settings, the drive to meet global standards or enhance students' competitiveness in the global job market may lead to a reduced focus on native languages and indigenous knowledge systems. This shift can result in learners becoming disconnected from their cultural roots, as local traditions, storytelling practices, and community values may be sidelined in favor of English-centric curricula. With the presence pressure, teachers' role is very crucial to make the English learning successful.

When integrating local content into English teaching materials, teachers' professional development becomes even more crucial. They need the skills, knowledge, and cultural awareness to design meaningful lessons that balance language learning with cultural relevance. To effectively integrate local content, teachers need a deep understanding of students' cultural backgrounds and how to weave this knowledge into language lessons. Professional development helps teachers become cultural mediators who can thoughtfully select and adapt materials (McCay, 2003). Additionally, teachers need professional training to navigate potential curriculum limitations while advocating for locally relevant materials. Understanding policy frameworks helps teachers align local content with national standards, making a case for culturally grounded teaching (Littlewood, 2007).

Professional development for English teachers in primary schools can take various forms, including structured training programs, interactive seminars, or collaborative sharing sessions. Training programs might focus on enhancing teaching methodologies, incorporating technology in the classroom, or exploring strategies for differentiated instruction. Seminars can provide opportunities to learn from experts, discuss current educational trends, and explore new research in language acquisition. Meanwhile, sharing sessions encourage peer-to-peer learning, where teachers exchange practical experiences, successful lesson plans, and innovative classroom activities. Together, these diverse forms of professional development help teachers continually refine their skills, stay updated with evolving practices, and foster a supportive learning community.

CONCLUSION

From the teachers' perspectives, incorporating indigenous content into English teaching at primary schools is possible but it faces some challenges such as limited resources availability and insufficient support from the experts and the authority. The indigenous contents that are mostly possible to be incorporated are folklores, traditional games, songs, and traditions. Integrating the contents might be beneficial to nurture the students' sense of cultural identity and their awareness toward others' cultures. The impact of the present research is that the teachers may gain insights to introduce indigenous contents in English learning, which can help foster both language acquisition and cultural awareness. For authorities, they could provide teachers with more sources of indigenous contents, such books and online resources. For experts, they could facilitate trainings about curriculum and indigenous content. Since the number of participants is quite small, the further research is suggested to involve many more participants and expand the investigated topics as well.

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DECLARATION OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

The authors declare that in preparing this manuscript, ChatGPT was used for optimizing language and improve its readability.

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