Current Issues in the Implementation of English Language Subjects in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the English language skills of junior high school students who had recently graduated from elementary school and to explore the challenges in implementing English language education at the elementary level. The research was motivated by interviews with junior high school teachers, who reported significant differences in English language skills among new students. These disparities were seen as obstacles to the English learning process in junior high school and were attributed to issues in the implementation of English language education in elementary schools. Using a mixed-method approach, the study involved 150 students from two junior high schools in Sukabumi City and Sukabumi Regency. The findings revealed that over 50% of students scored below 60 on English proficiency tests, placing them in the "very low" category. Key challenges identified included inconsistencies in the quality of English teaching, gaps in access to qualified English teachers, and limited use of teaching materials, methods, and media. Despite these issues, students demonstrated a high interest in learning English, suggesting that, with adequate support, the implementation of English education at the elementary level could be significantly improved. These findings underscore the importance of addressing systemic disparities, enhancing teacher training, and providing better resources to support more effective English language education in Indonesian elementary schools.

Keywords: Issues, English, Elementary School

INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential tool for human communication, enabling individuals to interact, express ideas, and navigate social environments. Proficiency in language varies widely, with some individuals mastering it as their mother tongue while others acquire it as a second or foreign language. According to Kompas (2021), English is the most widely used foreign language globally, with approximately 1.13 billion speakers. It is followed closely by Mandarin (1.12 billion), Hindi (615 million), Spanish, and French. Unlike many other languages, English is widely used not only in countries where it is the native language but also in regions where it serves as a second or foreign language. As Harmer (Amalia, 2020) noted, the universal appeal of English makes it a language almost everyone aims to learn, albeit for different purposes and contexts. Yunelia (Sya & Helmanto, 2020) emphasized that English has become indispensable in the era of globalization, playing a key role in communication, education, and economic activities. The ability to understand and use English effectively has become an essential skill for Indonesians to engage

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in global discourse. Faturohman and Indihadi (Anastasia et al., 2021) asserted that introducing English during the formative years, particularly between ages 5-12, is critical for effective

language acquisition. This period is considered optimal as young learners demonstrate greater receptivity to language learning, often acquiring pronunciation and syntax more naturally. Despite this, English remains an elective rather than a compulsory subject in Indonesian elementary schools, leading to significant disparities in exposure and proficiency levels among students. Chodidjah (Yulianti, 2024) pointed out that Indonesia's decision not to mandate English at the elementary level contrasts sharply with practices in other Asian countries, highlighting a missed opportunity to leverage early childhood language acquisition.

The importance of English transcends daily communication, influencing fields such as technology, education, politics, and international trade (Nurfitriani et al., 2021). Recognizing its value, the Indonesian government incorporated English as a foreign language in its education system in 1967 (Cesare Ardaya et al., 2022). Under the current Merdeka Curriculum, English is offered as an elective subject, allowing schools to decide its inclusion based on their readiness and available resources (Dewi et al., 2021). However, this flexibility has led to inconsistencies in implementation. Some schools introduce English as early as Grade 1, while others delay it until Grade 4 or exclude it entirely. Such uneven practices have widened the proficiency gap among students (Nurfitriani et al., 2021).

The uneven implementation of English education is a pressing issue, given its profound implications for students' academic and psychological development (Arimbi Pamungkas, 2022). Maili (2018) underscored the importance of early exposure to English, noting that children who begin learning languages before age 12 benefit from enhanced cognitive flexibility and stronger language retention. This aligns with the Critical Age Hypothesis, which posits that children under 12 are uniquely equipped to achieve near-native fluency in second languages (Djardjowidjojo in Nurfitriani et al., 2021). Furthermore, early English instruction aids vocabulary development, a key determinant of success in reading comprehension and overall language proficiency at higher educational levels (Rofi'i & Susilo, 2022). Conversely, students who lack foundational English skills often struggle academically and experience diminished self-confidence, compounding their difficulties.

While informal avenues such as private tutoring or language courses offer additional support, their accessibility remains limited for many students. Linse and Nunan (Amalia, 2020) observed that external learning opportunities, though beneficial, are not widely utilized in Indonesia, leaving schools as the primary venue for English education. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process, but disparities in teacher qualifications and resources between urban and rural areas exacerbate the challenges (Oktavia, et al., 2023).

Interviews with junior high school teachers in Sukabumi Regency revealed that the inconsistent quality of English instruction at the elementary level often results in significant differences in students' abilities upon entering junior high school. Teachers noted that these disparities hinder their ability to deliver effective instruction, as they must accommodate students with widely varying proficiency levels. These findings highlight the urgency of examining and addressing the systemic issues affecting English education in Indonesian elementary schools.

This study aimed to: (1) evaluate the English proficiency of elementary school graduates and (2) identify the challenges associated with implementing English education in elementary schools. By analyzing these factors, the research sought to inform the development of tailored teaching materials and strategies to enhance the quality and consistency of English instruction across diverse educational contexts.

METHODS

Research design

This study employed a mixed-method research design to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. The mixed-method approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem by combining numerical data from English proficiency tests with contextual insights from interviews and questionnaires. This approach ensured the validity, reliability, and objectivity of the findings (Creswell, 2016; Azhari et al., 2023).

The study utilized stratified sampling to select participants, dividing the population into subgroups (strata) based on specific characteristics. The sample consisted of 150 students from two junior high schools: one located in Sukabumi City and the other in Sukabumi Regency. These students were selected as they had recently graduated from elementary school, allowing for an assessment of their foundational English skills.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using three primary techniques:

1. **Interviews**: Interviews with junior high school English teachers provided initial insights into the challenges posed by disparities in students' English proficiency. Teachers shared their observations of students' readiness to engage with junior high school curricula.

2. **English Proficiency Tests**: A performance test comprising 15 multiple-choice questions and 15 fill-in-the-blank questions was administered to evaluate students' basic English skills. The test questions were validated by junior high school English teachers to ensure they were appropriate for newly graduated elementary students.

3. **Questionnaires**: Questionnaires were distributed to students to gather information about their English learning experiences, including when and how they began studying English, as well as the resources and teaching methods used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
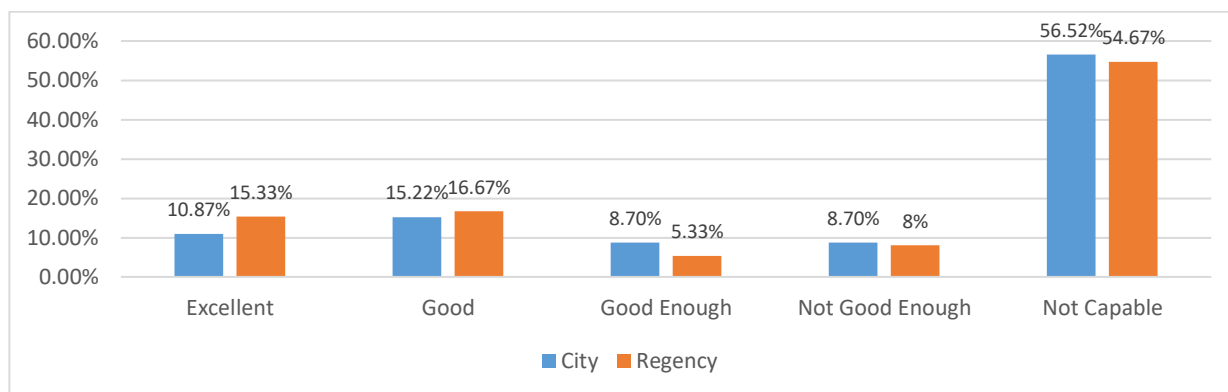
A. Students' English Ability

The results of the English proficiency test revealed significant disparities in students' foundational English skills. More than 50% of the students scored below 60, categorizing them as having "very low" English proficiency. The highest-performing category was "good," with approximately 15% of students achieving scores between 81 and 90. A smaller percentage of students fell into the "excellent" category, scoring above 90. Notably, students in Sukabumi City demonstrated slightly higher average scores compared to their counterparts in Sukabumi Regency.

These findings confirmed the observations of junior high school teachers, who reported difficulties in teaching students with such diverse proficiency levels. While some students had sufficient foundational skills to follow the junior high school curriculum, others struggled significantly, making it challenging for teachers to deliver effective instruction. The range of values used in this test is:

Table 1. English Test Range of Values

Category	Range
Excellent	91-100
Good	81-90
Good Enough	71-80
Not Good Enough	61-70
Not Capable	<60

Here are the results of the students' English ability from English language performance test:

Graph 1. Students' English Ability

The data also highlighted the impact of geographic and systemic disparities. Students from Sukabumi City benefitted from better access to qualified English teachers and resources, which likely contributed to their higher scores. In contrast, students in Sukabumi Regency faced more challenges, including limited access to English specialists and fewer learning materials. This disparity underscores the need for targeted interventions to address resource gaps and support students in rural areas.

Addressing these issues will require efforts to standardize the quality of English education across regions. Providing professional development opportunities for teachers, improving access to resources, and fostering equitable learning environments can help bridge these gaps and enhance students' English proficiency.

B. Issues in the Implementation of English in Elementary Schools

Based on the questionnaire distributed to Sisal, several problems have arisen that underlie students' low English language skills. This is related to the student's English learning experiences, for example, the experience of learning English in elementary school or outside school (such as courses), limited teachers, learning methods and media used, and student interests. Here is the explanation:

1. Students' English learning experiences

English language skills of students are certainly influenced by the experience of learning English, and the experience of learning English in students can be seen from when students start learning English. The following data is obtained related to when students start learning English:
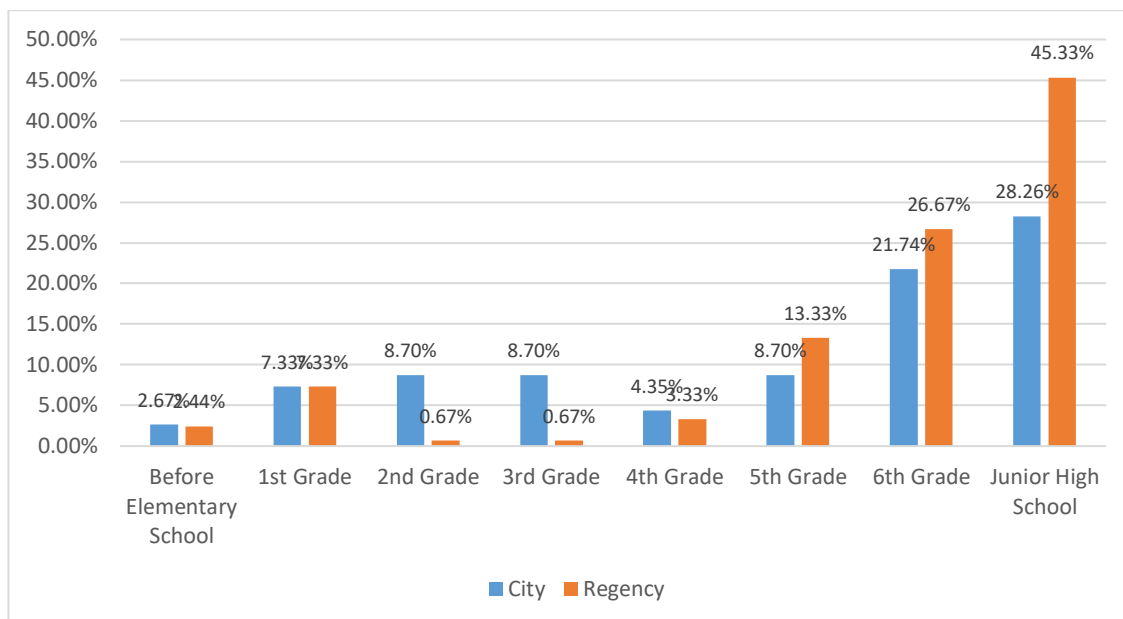
Graph 2. Students's Time when Start Learning English

The study revealed that students' English learning experiences varied significantly, particularly regarding when they began learning the language. Most students reported starting their English education only upon entering junior high school. A smaller proportion indicated that they had been introduced to English during Grades 5 or 6 of elementary school. This inconsistency in the timing of English instruction reflects the variability in how schools implement the curriculum. English education at the elementary level in Indonesia is often treated as local content rather than a compulsory national subject. As a result, its inclusion depends on the school's resources and priorities. In some cases, English is taught as an extracurricular activity rather than a formal subject. Additionally, the study found that few students had opportunities to supplement their learning outside school, such as through private courses. In Sukabumi City, only 15.22% of students reported taking private English lessons, compared to 23.33% in Sukabumi Regency. However, the duration of these courses was often short, lasting less than six months, which limited their effectiveness.

2. English Teacher in Elementary School

Data analysis shows significant differences in English language teaching at the elementary school level between Sukabumi City and Sukabumi Regency, especially in who teaches the subject. Here is the result:
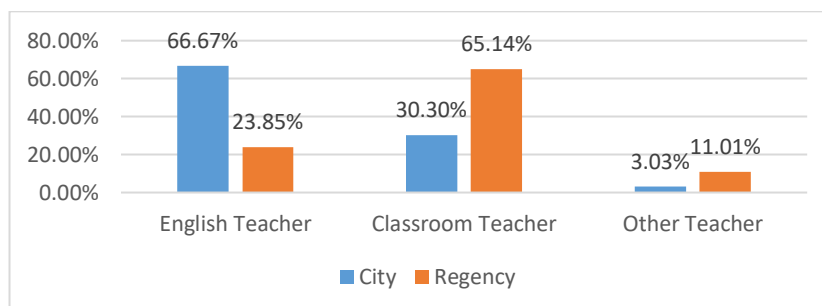
Graph 3. English Teacher in Elementary School

The research highlighted disparities in the qualifications of English teachers between Sukabumi City and Sukabumi Regency. In Sukabumi City, 66.67% of students reported being

taught by specialist English teachers, while only 30.30% were taught by general classroom teachers. Conversely, in Sukabumi Regency, 65.14% of students indicated that their English lessons were delivered by general classroom teachers, and only 23.85% were taught by specialist teachers. This difference underscores the challenges faced by rural schools in recruiting qualified English educators.

The reliance on general classroom teachers, who often lack formal training in English education, affects the quality of instruction. In some cases, other subject teachers were assigned to teach English, further diluting the quality of learning. These findings align with prior studies emphasizing the critical role of teacher qualifications in delivering effective language instruction. Schools in urban areas like Sukabumi City benefit from better access to specialized teaching staff, while rural regions face systemic challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified educators.

Addressing these disparities requires targeted interventions, including teacher training programs and policies that encourage the equitable distribution of qualified educators (Jaidi, Amalia & Uswatun, 2021). Investing in professional development for general classroom teachers can also improve the quality of English instruction in areas where specialist teachers are unavailable.

3. Learning Sources, Media, and Methods

Effective English learning relies heavily on three main elements: learning resources, learning media, and learning methods. Learning resources, such as textbooks, videos, and online materials, provide a clear and relevant material base. Authentic resources, such as songs or films, also help students understand the use of English in real contexts, although their availability is often a problem in areas with limited facilities. Learning media, visual, such as images and videos, and digital, such as applications or online platforms, enrich the learning process by making it more interactive and interesting. Innovative media enables more modern learning but is often underutilized due to limited access to technology and teacher competence. Learning methods play an important role in engaging students. Interactive approaches, such as discussions or games, increase student participation and understanding, while traditional methods, although simpler, tend to be less engaging. The right combination of methods can create an interesting and effective learning experience. Here is the data on students' experience with English learning sources, media, and methods in elementary school:
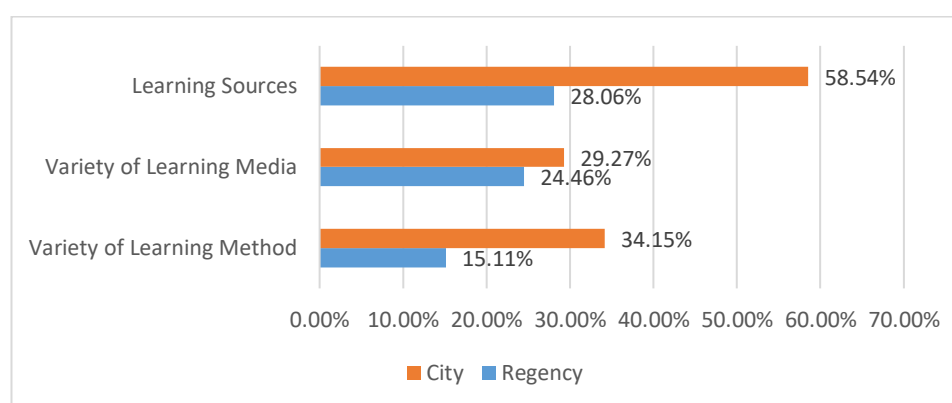
Graph 4. English Learning Sources, Media and Methods

a. Learning Sources
The availability of learning resources for English instruction varied significantly between Sukabumi City and Sukabumi Regency. In Sukabumi City, 58.54% of schools provided English textbooks or student worksheets (LKPD), compared to only 28.06% in Sukabumi Regency. This discrepancy highlights the disparity in resource allocation,

which impacts the quality of English education. Schools in urban areas benefited from more comprehensive resources, while those in rural areas faced limitations due to budget constraints and policy prioritization. These disparities underline the importance of ensuring equitable access to essential learning materials.

b. Learning Media

The use of learning media in teaching English at the elementary school (SD) level has an important role because it makes it easier for students to understand the material, attracts their interest, and creates a more interactive learning atmosphere. Pictures, videos, educational games, or other visual aids can enrich teaching methods, helping students learning English connect abstract concepts with real situations. However, despite its significant benefits, elementary school teachers rarely use learning media. This is shown in the graph above, which shows that 29.27% of schools in Sukabumi City use various English learning media, while in Sukabumi Regency, it is 24.46%. Several factors that cause this include limited resources, such as lack of access to technological devices or additional teaching materials, and minimal training for teachers to use these media effectively. In addition, pressure to complete the curriculum, limited time, and heavy workloads often make teachers prefer conventional methods. Insufficient policy support, such as budgets and teacher competency improvement programs, is also an obstacle. As a result, teaching English in elementary schools often becomes less interesting and effective, thus affecting student motivation and learning outcomes. This issue is related to previous research, which states that using appropriate learning media can increase learning motivation and improve learning outcomes. Therefore, learning media must be considered when carrying out learning activities (Hafizhah, Amalia and Uswatun, 2023)

c. Learning Method

Using various learning methods in teaching English is very important, especially at the elementary school level, because it can help students understand the material more easily, increase learning motivation, and create an interactive learning atmosphere. Methods such as educational games, discussions, simulations, or technology can make the learning process more fun and relevant, encouraging students to participate more actively. However, innovative learning methods are rarely implemented in many elementary schools. This is shown in the graph above, which shows that 34,15% of schools in Sukabumi city use various English learning methods, while in Sukabumi Regency, it is only 15,11%. Teachers rely only on lecture methods and assignments via student worksheets (LKPD). This is caused by several factors, such as time constraints, lack of teacher training or knowledge about alternative learning methods, and pressure to complete the curriculum within a certain time. Apart from that, the availability of supporting resources, such as learning media and adequate facilities, is also often an obstacle.

The use of lecture and assignment methods is simpler and faster but tends to make learning less interactive and limit student involvement in the learning process. As a result, students may feel bored and have difficulty applying English material in real contexts. Therefore, teachers need to receive training and support in adopting more varied learning methods to make students' learning experiences more effective and enjoyable. This is relevant to previous research, which stated that using modified teaching methods can help students learn vocabulary easily, and they can be more active by doing the presentation. It can also help students understand better by

practicing, and it can help students be more creative by creating a product from their learning, which can make them interested in learning English. (Katemba, 2022b)

4. Student's Interests in English

Students' interest in English is one of the important factors that influence their success in learning this subject. This interest reflects students' interest in English, which is usually influenced by learning experiences, teaching methods, and supporting environments. When students have high interest, they tend to be more enthusiastic about learning, more active in participating in learning activities, and absorb the material more easily. Here is the graph of student's interest in English:
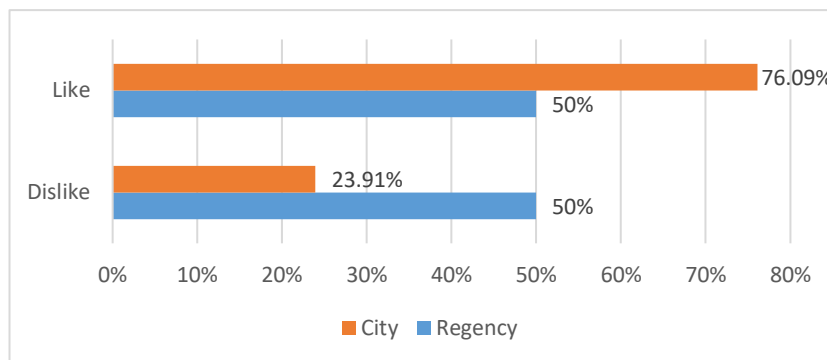
Graph 5. Students Interests in English

This graph shows the proportion of students who like English subjects, comparing students from Sukabumi City and Sukabumi Regency. In Sukabumi City, 76.09% of students said they liked English, while in Sukabumi Regency, 50% said the same thing. Although the percentage in Sukabumi City is slightly higher, with a difference of 26,09%, the number of students who prefer English is greater in Sukabumi Regency because the number of students surveyed is greater. Factors such as the quality of teaching by specialist teachers or the availability of better learning facilities in Sukabumi City may be responsible for the high level of favorability in the area. Even so, the preference level in both regions is quite high, with more than 50% of students liking English. This shows that most students consider this subject interesting, regardless of differences in regional context.

Some students said they liked learning English because teachers in junior high school often used games, whereas, in elementary school, it was very rare for teachers to teach with games. This shows that the game method influences children's interest in learning English. This is relevant to (Katemba, 2022a). As for the students who used the educational games method, they were excited to interact with the words that appeared on the screen and see the outcome. Based on the researcher's observation in the class, students who used this method were enthusiastic about learning and very curious about the upcoming games while playing their current games.

Based on the data above, the challenges in implementing English education in elementary schools highlight systemic and regional disparities. Sukabumi City generally benefits from better resources, trained teachers, and higher student interest than Sukabumi Regency. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies, including policy reforms to ensure equitable teacher distribution, resource allocation, and teacher training. Furthermore, encouraging innovative teaching methods and providing adequate learning media can enhance students' learning experiences and foster greater interest in English. These efforts are crucial to improving the overall quality and accessibility of English education in elementary schools.

CONCLUSION

The English language skills of junior high school students were found to be heavily influenced by their foundational learning in elementary school. Upon entering junior high school, significant variations in students' abilities were observed, creating challenges for teachers in delivering effective English instruction. Some students were adequately prepared to follow the curriculum, while others struggled due to limited foundational knowledge.

This study revealed that English language education in elementary schools faced numerous challenges, including inconsistencies in teaching quality, limited access to qualified English teachers, and insufficient teaching materials, methods, and media. These issues were particularly pronounced in Sukabumi Regency compared to Sukabumi City, reflecting systemic and regional disparities. Despite these obstacles, a high level of interest in learning English was noted among students, indicating the potential for improvement with the right support.

To address these challenges, it is essential to invest in comprehensive teacher training programs, ensure equitable resource allocation, and promote innovative teaching methods. Reducing regional disparities through policy reforms and improved infrastructure will provide fairer learning opportunities for all students. By addressing these issues, elementary school students will be better prepared for English learning at higher levels of education, fostering improved outcomes in junior high school and beyond.

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