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Exploring the Implementation of Cambridge Curriculum in Early Elementary English Education: A Case Study

Abstract

This study investigates the application of the Cambridge curriculum in teaching English to young learners, focusing on how it is tailored to their specific needs. The research was conducted at a private Islamic elementary school in Surakarta, Central Java, and centered around the teaching practices of an English teacher at the school. Through structured interviews and observations, the study aimed to gain a thorough understanding of the implementation of the Cambridge curriculum in early English education. The findings show that the teacher primarily used audio-visual and translation methods for instruction. The materials utilized included both printed and electronic books from Cambridge, enhanced with digital resources like videos, Quizizz, and the Spin Wheel application. Additionally, the study explored the assessment methods used, which encompassed daily evaluations and mid-term and final tests. The qualitative analysis of this data provides valuable insights into the effective implementation of the Cambridge curriculum in a real elementary school environment.

Keywords: EFL students, Cambridge curriculum, English for young learners, elementary school

INTRODUCTION

English serves as a lingua franca, a vital communication tool across different languages, a reason many parents encourage their children to learn it (Harmer, 2007). There is a significant benefit in beginning English education before the age of 12 or 13, during the critical period of language development, where learning is more efficient and effective (Shin, 2006). This 'critical period hypothesis' suggests that younger learners absorb language more quickly. In primary school, English instruction is enhanced by teachers using visuals, realia, mime, and gestures, facilitating comprehension without relying on translation into the first language (Brewster et al., 2004). Such education not only fosters language skills but also intercultural competence and global awareness, giving learners insights into various cultures and nations (Moon, 2005; Read, 2003).

For teachers of young English learners, understanding each student's unique characteristics, especially in the context of classroom learning, is crucial (Febyawati et al., 2021). These learners are typically enthusiastic and active, with abundant physical energy and shorter attention spans. They learn through hands-on experiences, visual and auditory stimuli, and frequent repetition of language (Prayatni, 2019). Recognizing and appreciating these traits can motivate and build foundational knowledge of English (Sofian & Anggraeni, 2021). However, challenges such as a tendency to become easily bored or distracted, a focus on meaning rather than form, a preference for concrete activities, and a more egocentric and imaginative approach to learning are also present. Furthermore, obstacles to English proficiency can include limited vocabulary and a lack of engaging material from teachers.

In Indonesia, several schools have adopted the Cambridge curriculum, which is globally implemented in more than 10,000 schools across 160 countries, as reported by Rauf et al. (2022). This curriculum is recognized for fostering creativity and independence in students, along with nurturing a sense of humanity, environmental awareness, and various skills (Keumala, 2013). It is designed to cater to children aged 5 to 19 years, emphasizing subjects that align with each student's strengths and interests (Elisabeth,

2014). Dewi (2019) and Abrar (2021) highlights that the Cambridge curriculum equips students with essential skills to navigate the complexities of globalization. These skills include effective communication, critical thinking, moral reflection, good citizenship, understanding and tolerance of different perspectives, and the ability to function effectively in a globalized society.

Numerous studies have examined the use of the Cambridge curriculum in English language teaching. Islam and Fajaria (2022) focused on its implementation at SMP Madina Islamic School in Jakarta, particularly at the junior high level. They discovered that the curriculum was applied through Cambridge certification exams, student coaching for these exams, and efforts by the school's principal and teacher council to enhance students' character. Besides, Huang (2011) and Mahmudah (2023) investigated the Cambridge curriculum's adaptation in a primary school English bridging program at Afkaaruna Islamic School in Yogyakarta. She identified challenges such as students struggling with concentration in online classes, teachers facing difficulties in managing classroom conditions, and variability in student learning speeds.

In addition, Qomariyah and Khasanah (2023) studied the application of the Cambridge curriculum in teaching English as a second language at a secondary school in Jember. Their findings indicated that the curriculum's adoption was influenced by the ANPS meeting conference in 2011 and encompassed objectives, content, processes, and evaluation, including various teaching methods and assessment types. Lastly, Fitria et al. (2021) and Halim et al. (2023) researched its implementation at MAS Creative Islamic Elementary School in Sidoarjo. They found the curriculum to be structured into planning, implementation, and evaluation stages, noting a significant improvement in students' thinking styles compared to those studying only the national curriculum. However, they also identified weaknesses, such as a lack of understanding of English sentence structures, attributed to limited English communication in the students' family environments.

Furthermore, research on the Cambridge curriculum has been conducted extensively across Indonesia, encompassing a wide range of issues (Widodo, 2016). However, there is a noticeable gap in empirical evidence, specifically concerning its implementation in private Islamic elementary schools. This gap highlights the need for a targeted investigation into how the Cambridge curriculum is applied in these unique educational settings, particularly during the critical first year of elementary schooling. This first year is pivotal as it marks the beginning of formal education for young students. Given the widely recognized principle that earlier exposure to English language learning leads to more effective acquisition, exploring the curriculum's implementation at this early stage becomes even more crucial. This study aims to fill this research gap by providing in-depth insights into the practical application, challenges, and outcomes of the Cambridge curriculum in a private Islamic elementary school context. Understanding these aspects is essential for optimizing English language education strategies and achieving better learning outcomes for young learners in similar educational environments.

METHOD

This study employed a case study design to explore the implementation of the Cambridge curriculum in a private Islamic elementary school in Surakarta. Case study research is highly effective in enhancing our comprehension of intricate issues or subjects. It enriches our knowledge by building upon existing research, offering insights from real-

life scenarios involving actual individuals. A case study involves an in-depth analysis of a single instance, focusing on its unique details and complexities. This approach aims to understand how the case operates within its significant contextual conditions (Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2009). The focal point of this research was an experienced English teacher, referred to as Mr. Fa, who has a decade of teaching experience and holds a Master's degree in English education. His first-grade class, consisting of 24 students (13 boys and 11 girls), served as the primary context for the study.

Data collection was conducted using three main instruments: observation, documentation, and interviews. The observation phase involved six classroom sessions, each lasting thirty minutes. These observations were focused on assessing various aspects of teaching, such as methods, procedures, materials, media, and evaluation techniques. Structured interviews were conducted with Mr. Fa to complement these observations and verify and expand upon the findings. Additionally, relevant documentation, including the teacher's lesson plans and teaching materials, was collected and reviewed. All gathered data were analyzed qualitatively, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the curriculum's application and effectiveness in this specific educational setting. This approach provided a comprehensive view of how the Cambridge curriculum is implemented in the real-world context of a first-grade classroom in a private Islamic elementary school.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Teaching technique used by the teacher

The teaching methods employed by the instructor, as observed, included audio-visual and translation techniques. The audio-visual method integrates multimedia elements—text, images, sound, and video—into a cohesive, multi-sensory interactive experience, enhancing message delivery and information absorption. This approach utilized various tools such as film projectors, radios, televisions, charts, posters, models, and field trips.

Specifically, the Cambridge curriculum's audio component was designed to develop students' listening skills. During classroom observations, it was noted that the listening segment involved playing audio from an E-book, with students attentively listening to identify and understand the words. Each student had a workbook containing exercises for different English skills. The teacher supported this process by repeating words from the audio, aiding students in recognizing and understanding them. The word lists, prepared by Cambridge for first-grade students, featured similarly sounding words, creating a challenging yet engaging listening exercise. The teacher actively monitored and assisted students during this activity.

"For bilingual 1st grade, I try to use the audio-visual method and translation method because bilingual children must be accustomed to using English. The audio-visual method was chosen because it makes it easier for children to understand material that must be explained using pictures or videos." (Interview transcript)

The teacher occasionally employed the translation method, which typically emphasizes the exclusive use of the target language without resorting to translation. However, in this context, translation was employed as a supportive tool to aid young learners in comprehending meanings and facilitating the connection between their native

language and English. Students were encouraged to articulate their thoughts in English, with the teacher providing translations or explanations as needed to clarify meanings.

During the interview segment, Mr. Fa elaborated on his use of the translation method in teaching English to young learners. This approach was further evidenced during classroom observations, where the teacher translated his instructions into the student's native language after initially delivering them in English. This technique served to reinforce understanding and facilitate learning.

"Several times, I have helped with translation methods to convey information that children may not yet understand, but this is rare. Usually, children already understand the meaning of a word through the pictures I show. When we use English in class with clear intonation assisted by appropriate gestures, children will understand and get used to English. "It's just that not all of them are able to respond to conversations using English because they have only been in grade 1 for one semester. The most important thing is the teacher first; later, the students will imitate what the teacher says." (Interview transcript)

"C-L-E-A-R. oke, next please open your book, page 50. After this, if you finish, I'll give you the instructions to do this work, then you can bring it to Mr. will check and give you score." (Observation)

The teacher used translation to help the students get the points of the materials. Delivering English fully was not recommended for non-native English learners. The students would have problems understanding the materials and misinterpreting the concepts. Therefore, the teacher translated his explanations from English to Indonesian when delivering the materials.

Classroom Procedure

In the observed classroom, learning activities were structured into three distinct segments: opening, main activity, and closing. During the opening, Mr. Fa initiated the class with an Islamic greeting and proceeded to check student attendance. Prior to beginning the lesson, students engaged in a prayer, guided by Mr. Fa's instructions, which included a song and accompanying finger gestures. This structured approach set the tone for the lesson and helped in organizing the class activities.

"3, 2,1 one finger on the right, one finger on the left, join to be one, it is like a bridge. 2 fingers on the right, two fingers on the left, join to be one it is like the photo. Three fingers on the right and three fingers on the left join to be one. It is like a rabbit. Four fingers on the right and four fingers on the left join to be one. It is like a tower. Five fingers on the right, five fingers on the left join to be one we ready to pray...." (Observation)

The result from observation related to the way to open the lesson is supported by the interview as the following.

"The correct way to open the lesson is with a greeting, then pray by inviting the children to pray using songs to prepare them to raise their hands. Because grade 1 is the youngest age at the primary school level and the transition period from playgroup to primary school, teachers mostly invite children to do activities by singing, one of which is wheeling. After praying, I always ask about the condition of the students

(greeting). This is mandatory to start learning, check the attendance of the students present, and review the material that was taught at the previous meeting. Usually, I ask about vocabulary so that the children remember and can apply it in their activities" (Interview transcript)

After the opening segment, Mr. Fa conducted an apperception, bridging the gap between previously learned material and the new topic of the day, which was "Lunch Menu." This involved reviewing prior lessons and connecting them to the day's new content, focusing on the grammar concept of "I have/haven't got." He related this grammatical structure to the students' real-life activities, creating a practical and engaging learning experience. This approach was noted in the observation data, highlighting Mr. Fa's method of integrating past learning with new concepts.

We are ready to discuss unit 4. To learn new vocabulary, we have banana, sandwich, cake, pizza, chicken, steak, peas, and carrot. We also discussed what I've got, and I haven't got a banana, sandwich, or apple. It has already been discussed in our previous meeting, right? How do you mention the menu in your lunch box using English? (Observation)

In the main activity of the observed class, the teacher implemented Activity-based Learning, dividing the process into three stages: input, processing, and output. During the input stage, the teacher introduces the topic or concept through diverse methods like lectures, videos, readings, or discussions, aiming to establish a foundational understanding of the subject. For instance, Mr. Fa engaged students in singing together and discussing the lyrics of a song, encouraging them to arrange the lyrics in order. This was evidenced by a transcript from the first observation. This stage also involved prompting students to participate in discussions.

In the processing stage, students actively engaged with the material, applying what they had learned in various ways, including group projects, individual assignments, role-playing, or simulations. This stage was designed to foster critical thinking, questioning, and practical application of knowledge. Finally, in the output stage, students reflected on and demonstrated their learning through presentations, written reports, or creative projects. This stage aimed to consolidate their learning and provide an opportunity to exhibit their understanding in a meaningful manner.

"Time over, thanks for your attention, see you next meeting. Let's close by recite du-a kafarotul majlis. Subhanakallahumma wabihamdika ashadu alaha illaha anta astaghfiruka wa atubuilaik. Thank you, waassalamualaikum" (Observation)

In the study's observed classroom, Mr. Fa's approach to concluding lessons is particularly noteworthy, seamlessly integrating educational and cultural elements. He effectively ends the learning activity by summarizing the day's material and preparing students for the next topic, fostering continuity in their learning journey. Additionally, Mr. Fa incorporates Islamic practices into the closing routine by reciting "Hamdallah" and an Islamic greeting. This practice not only aligns with the student's cultural and religious context but also promotes a sense of community and shared values within the classroom. The blend of a traditional educational closure with religious elements, as exemplified in Mr. Fa's statements and the collective recitation with students, creates a respectful and

inclusive learning environment. This unique integration of academic content with cultural and religious practices offers an interesting avenue for future research, potentially exploring its impact on student engagement, identity formation, and overall classroom dynamics.

Teaching Materials

In the context of primary education, particularly for first graders, teaching materials play a crucial role in facilitating effective learning. These materials include a range of resources designed to aid in the teaching process and enhance students' understanding of the subject matter. The choice of materials is especially important in language learning, as they need to cater to the developmental stage of the students and engage them in a manner that is both educational and enjoyable.

"If asked about the effectiveness of the 'Super Minds English Book' in teaching first-grade students, an educator might respond: 'The Super Minds English Book is an excellent resource for young learners. Its comprehensive structure, which includes nine chapters on diverse and relatable topics, really engages the students. Each chapter, from 'At School' to 'At the Beach,' is designed to introduce vocabulary and concepts in a context that is familiar to the children. This contextual learning is crucial at this age. In summary, the Super Minds English Book, with its multifaceted approach to language learning, is a key tool in our teaching arsenal. It supports our goal of nurturing well-rounded language skills in our young learners.'" (Interview transcript)

Moreover, the inclusion of both printed and E-book formats caters to different learning styles. The E-book, in particular, with its audio and video elements, is very effective in holding the students' attention. The audio components are especially beneficial for developing listening skills, an area often overlooked in traditional teaching methods. We find that the songs, conversations, and short movies make learning more interactive and enjoyable for the students. The curriculum's design, which includes workbooks with chapter-wise exercises, reinforces what is taught in class. It offers the students ample practice, ensuring they grasp the concepts thoroughly. The teacher's guide is also a valuable resource, providing structured lesson plans and teaching strategies that are in line with the curriculum's objectives.

Teaching Media

Teaching media are tools that educators utilize to enhance the learning experience, making it more interactive and engaging for students. In the modern classroom, a variety of digital media, including online platforms and applications, are increasingly being incorporated into teaching strategies. In the observed classroom setting, the teacher employed several types of teaching media to facilitate learning. This included videos from YouTube, which can be an excellent source of visual and auditory learning material. These videos, often encompassing a wide range of topics, can bring real-world context into the classroom, making abstract concepts more tangible and relatable for students.

I've found integrating digital tools like YouTube, Quizizz, and the Spin Wheel app into my lessons to be incredibly effective. YouTube videos help bring complex topics to life, making them more accessible and engaging for my students. Using Quizizz adds an element of fun and competition, which really encourages active participation. The Spin

Wheel app is particularly exciting for the students; it introduces a sense of surprise and keeps the lessons dynamic. Overall, these tools have made my teaching not only more interactive but also more enjoyable for the students. (Interview transcript)

Additionally, the teacher used the Quizizz application, a popular educational tool that allows for the creation of interactive quizzes. This app was particularly used in a novel way, where students were asked to answer questions in a rotation based on their assigned numbers. This method not only encouraged participation from all students but also added an element of fun and unpredictability to the learning process. Another innovative tool used was the Spin Wheel application. The teacher leveraged this app to present questions in a game-like format. By incorporating a spin wheel, the teacher transformed traditional question-and-answer sessions into a more dynamic and engaging activity. This kind of interactive learning can significantly enhance student engagement and motivation.

Assessment

The assessment process is divided into three categories: Daily Test, Mid Test, and Final Test, each serving a distinct purpose in evaluating student progress. Daily Tests are designed to assess students' understanding of the material covered on a day-to-day basis. These tests likely utilize questions from the "Super Minds" workbook, ensuring the assessments are directly related to the material taught. The simplicity of the workbook questions makes them ideal for these frequent assessments, enabling students to demonstrate their immediate grasp of the lessons.

"When assessing my first graders using the 'Super Minds' material, I follow a structured approach with Daily, Mid, and Final Tests. The Daily Tests use questions directly from the 'Super Minds' workbook, which are ideal for gauging the student's grasp of the daily lessons. For the Mid and Final Tests, I personally craft questions that align with the broader learning objectives of 'Super Minds,' ensuring they meet the educational standards for this grade. I find that multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions work exceptionally well for this age group, effectively measuring their understanding. This assessment strategy has been crucial in monitoring and enhancing my students' English learning progress." (Interview transcript)

Besides, the Mid and Final Tests are more comprehensive and are created by the teacher, adhering to the educational standards appropriate for 1st grade. These tests are designed to evaluate the student's cumulative understanding of the material taught over a longer period. Using "Super Minds" as a reference, the teacher can ensure that the tests are aligned with the learning objectives of the material. Moreover, the formats for these assessments typically include multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions, which are well-suited for young learners. These types of questions are straightforward for students to understand and provide a clear indication of their knowledge and comprehension levels.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the teacher predominantly utilized audio-visual and translation methods in their teaching approach. This finding contrasts with [Kusumawati's 2019](#) research, which identified the use of active learning and problem-solving-based learning methods. In [Neo \(2003\)](#) and [Kusumawati's \(2019\)](#) study, these methods actively involved students and encouraged the development of critical thinking through creative

and collaborative activities. Teachers stimulated students' engagement, enabling them to actively participate in determining the course material. Additionally, [Qomariyah and Khasanah \(2023\)](#) reported different teaching methods, including discussion, role-play, and think-pair-share techniques. These varied methodologies from previous studies stand in contrast to the current research, which highlights the use of audio-visual and translation methods in teaching young learners under the Cambridge curriculum.

The teaching procedure involved an opening with an Islamic greeting and song, a main activity using activity-based learning, and a closing that included summarizing the material, announcing the next topic, and a closing prayer. This approach differs from the [Qomariyah and Khasanah \(2023\)](#) study at Pelita Secondary School, which reported a structure of preliminary activities, core activities, and a closing activity. Additionally, [Holandyah's 2022](#) research found that teachers used a Scheme of Work (SOW) to structure English lessons. The current study observed the use of Cambridge primary materials, specifically the "Super Minds" printed and E-book, in teaching English. This finding aligns with [Kusumawati's \(2019\)](#) research, which also utilized the "Super Minds" E-book as a teaching material. However, this is distinct from [Holandyah's \(2022\)](#) study, which identified the use of Cambridge Lower Secondary English materials supplemented by Internet sources. While both are Cambridge curriculum products, the Lower Secondary version is tailored for students aged 11-14 years. Furthermore, this study's findings contrast with [Mahmudah's \(2023\)](#) research, which employed "My First English Adventure," a material licensed from Thailand and used in teaching English within the Cambridge curriculum framework ([Vathanalaoha, 2022](#)).

Furthermore, the teaching media included YouTube videos, the Quizizz application, and the Spin Wheel application, enhancing the learning experience. This contrasts with the findings of [Qomariyah and Khasanah \(2023\)](#), who reported the use of audio, projectors, and whiteboards as teaching media. [Sulasmi \(2022\)](#) and [Mahmudah \(2023\)](#) found that in an online teaching environment, laptops, speakers, and Zoom were the primary media used. These findings differ from [Simanjuntak et al. \(2022\)](#), who identified STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics learning) as the teaching media, with online classes supported by Google Meet and Zoom Meeting applications.

Regarding assessment, this study utilized questions from the "Super Minds" material, conducting Daily, Mid, and Final Tests. This approach is somewhat similar to [Qomariyah and Khasanah \(2023\)](#), who used placement tests for public students before assigning them to class levels, along with feedback, formative, summative, and progression tests in 7th grade. However, unlike their study, this research did not include placement tests for student candidates. [Kusumawati \(2019\)](#) observed similar assessment methods, with evaluations based on students' worksheet results. Additionally, [Kusumawati's \(2019\)](#) study included an attitude assessment, evaluating students on their class participation, honesty, and responsibility. These variations in teaching media and assessment methods across different studies highlight the diverse approaches educators use to engage students and measure their learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how the Cambridge curriculum, when implemented in an Islamic Elementary School setting for teaching English to young learners, effectively utilizes

audio-visual and translation methods. These methods are particularly suitable for first graders, catering to their developmental needs and learning styles (Ahmad & Shah, 2022). The teaching procedure, exemplified by Mr. Fa's approach, incorporates Islamic greetings and prayers, often using songs that are culturally relevant and engaging for the students. The use of apperception aids in bridging previous knowledge with new learning. The main activity revolves around activity-based learning, fostering active participation, critical thinking, and creativity among young learners. The closing of each session involves summarizing the material, announcing forthcoming topics, and concluding with prayer and Islamic greetings, reinforcing a sense of routine and structure.

The materials employed include both printed and E-book formats of "Super Minds," supplemented with student books, worksheets, and a teacher's guide. The adoption of varied teaching media, such as YouTube videos, Quizizz for quizzes, and the Spin Wheel application, adds an interactive and engaging dimension to the learning experience. Assessment is an integral part of this teaching approach, with the teacher customizing questions from "Super Minds" for Daily, Mid, and Final Tests, aligning with Cambridge assessment standards. This structure ensures a comprehensive evaluation of students' learning progression. However, this study has limitations. The focus on a single teacher's methodology may not fully represent the diversity of teaching styles and strategies that could be applied within similar educational contexts. Also, the study primarily examines the efficacy of the teaching methods and materials without a detailed exploration of student feedback or learning outcomes.

For future research, it would be beneficial to expand the study to include multiple teachers and classrooms to gain a broader understanding of the curriculum's implementation. It would also be advantageous to incorporate student perspectives and learning outcome assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of these teaching methods more comprehensively. Further research could also explore the impact of cultural and religious elements in teaching English to young learners in Islamic schools, contributing to the development of more culturally sensitive and effective teaching strategies.

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