

Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Basic English Literacy in Multicultural and Inclusive Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the challenges faced by teachers in teaching basic English literacy through the Montessori method in multicultural and inclusive classroom. A qualitative approach with a case study design was used in this study. This research was conducted at Singaraja Montessori School and in the Octopus class. Two teachers who teach in the Octopus class were participants in this study. Research data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, which were then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model. Based on data obtained from two purposively selected teachers who were directly responsible for teaching basic English literacy in the Octopus class, the findings of this study indicate three challenges faced by teachers when teaching basic English literacy through the Montessori method. First, the challenge of differences in student literacy levels because the Octopus class consists of grades 1-3 and a diverse student body. Second, the challenge of accommodating students with special needs, especially in providing individual support, simple instructions, and visual aids while maintaining a conducive classroom environment. Third, the difficulty in developing flexible lesson guides to respond to the various differences that exist in students. This research shows that teaching basic English literacy through the Montessori method in multicultural and inclusive classroom requires continuous observation, flexible planning, and balanced support to ensure all students can participate without exception and according to their individual abilities.

Keywords

Montessori Method,
Basic English Literacy,
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Inclusive, Teachers'
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1. INTRODUCTION

English literacy plays an important role in supporting students' academic development, particularly in the early stages of language learning. It encompasses the development of basic skills such as recognizing letters and sounds, understanding vocabulary, reading both words and simple sentences, and writing. Basic literacy is crucial because it helps students understand learning materials, communicate ideas, and participate in classroom activities (Jusmawati et al., 2023; Prawira et al., 2023). In the context of English learning, developing

basic literacy becomes complex, as students need to understand writing, pronunciation, vocabulary meaning, and sentence structure.

English literacy learning becomes more complex when it takes place in multicultural and inclusive classrooms. Banks (2014) explains that multicultural education, in creating a fair and responsive learning environment, requires teachers to recognize and integrate students' cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social backgrounds. Meanwhile, inclusive education also relates to differences in abilities, learning needs, emotional conditions, and special needs of students. Inclusive education emphasizes the importance of providing learning opportunities and equal treatment for all students, including students with special needs (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 2009).

The Montessori method is relevant to basic English literacy learning, because its learning is child-centered, uses concrete materials, and respects the development of each individual. Montessori (1912) emphasized that every child can learn well and optimally in a well-prepared environment. In this method, the teacher has the role of observer and guide who provides support based on the developmental needs of students (Lillard, 1972). However, in a multicultural and inclusive classroom situation, this principle has its own challenges for teachers. This is because teachers need to make adjustments to instructions, materials, task difficulty levels, learning time, and forms of mentoring based on differences in literacy levels and student needs.

Singaraja Montessori School is an appropriate context to examine teachers' challenges in implementing the Montessori method in multicultural and inclusive classrooms. Based on observations, the Octopus class has students from Grades 1 and 2 studying together. Diversity exists in the class, including diverse backgrounds, cultures, languages, abilities, and students with special needs. This diversity makes the process of learning basic English literacy difficult with the same or uniform teaching strategies. Teachers need to understand each student's needs more deeply, provide support, and ensure all students are involved in the learning activities.

Various previous studies have discussed the Montessori method, inclusive education, multicultural education, and basic literacy. Several studies have shown that the Montessori method can support the development of basic literacy through the use of concrete materials and multisensory activities (Darnis, 2018; Nugrahanta et al., 2022). However, no research has examined the challenges teachers face in implementing the Montessori method to teach basic English literacy in multicultural and inclusive classroom. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges teachers face in implementing the Montessori method in teaching basic English literacy in multicultural and inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Montessori-based literacy instruction can be adapted to address students' diverse literacy levels, cultural backgrounds, and special educational needs, thereby providing practical insights for teachers in designing more flexible and inclusive learning practices.

The Montessori method emphasizes that children learn naturally through experience when given freedom within limits and in an environment that supports their development (Montessori, 1912). In this method, the teacher's role is that of an observer and guide, observing the development, interests, readiness, and needs of each individual (Lillard, 1972). The learning environment must always be child-centered and encourage children to explore whatever resources they choose freely (Adhikari & Saha, 2021). With a prepared

environment, various materials can be available to assist in the development of students' English literacy.

Multicultural education is a transformation of education that prioritizes the recognition and integration of children's cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social backgrounds into the learning process to create an inclusive, fair, and culturally appropriate learning environment (Banks, 2014). The concept of multicultural education has five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure. All these dimensions form a conceptual framework that not only supports the transmission of knowledge but also the development of attitudes, values, and an educational system that optimizes all students without discrimination.

Inclusive education is a concept that supports equal educational rights for all children, as education is a fundamental human right. This aims to strengthen diversity and equalize access to quality education in regular schools for all children (Ainscow, 2005). Inclusive education is also defined as a step to enhance the potential of the educational structure to accommodate all students, through changes in schools and learning centers to serve all students, including those with special needs, while eliminating discrimination stemming from negative attitudes and inappropriate responses to diversity (UNESCO, 2009). In practice, inclusive schools are concrete evidence of education without exclusion, where students with special needs and regular students have access to equal education through a flexible learning environment, methods, and curriculum, so that each student can develop their potential to the fullest (Latunussa & Airlanda, 2022).

Basic literacy focuses more on skills in mastering and using basic language, such as being able to read simple words, write short sentences, understand and use basic vocabulary, and speak and listen in simple language. Basic literacy encompasses various skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, writing, and counting, which are related to analytical skills for calculating, perceiving information, communicating, and describing information based on understanding and drawing conclusions (Puspitasari et al., 2021; Suragangga, 2017; Teguh, 2017). Furthermore, according to Clay's concept of emergent literacy, basic literacy is the foundation of reading and writing skills, which are formed through various oral and written experiences and continue to develop over time (Doyle, 2013).

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach. A case study is a research approach used to analyze phenomena that are occurring in depth in a real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomena and their context are unclear. In a case study, researcher use various types of data that are compared and verified with each other through triangulation, and follow the design steps, data collection techniques, and analysis procedures that are characteristic of case studies (Yin, 2018). This research was conducted at Singaraja Montessori School, especially in the Octopus class.

The participants of this study were two teachers in the Octopus class who were purposively selected because they were directly responsible for teaching basic English literacy using the Montessori method in a multicultural and inclusive classroom. The research focused on the challenges encountered by teachers in implementing the

Montessori method in teaching basic English literacy. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted to examine the implementation of Montessori-based English literacy instruction and teachers' interactions with students in multicultural and inclusive learning settings. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with both participants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in implementing the Montessori method. Document analysis included lesson guides and other relevant instructional documents used during the learning process.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles & Huberman (2014), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. During the data reduction stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded to identify meaningful units of information. Similar codes were then grouped into categories based on recurring patterns. These categories were subsequently synthesized into broader themes through an iterative comparison across the three data sources. The analysis resulted in three major themes representing the teachers' challenges in implementing the Montessori method for teaching basic English literacy in a multicultural and inclusive classroom. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied the criteria proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discusses the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Montessori method to teach basic English literacy in multicultural and inclusive classrooms. Based on the data, three major challenges were identified: (1) differences in student literacy levels, (2) challenges in accommodating students with special needs, (3) challenges in developing flexible lesson guides.

Based on observations, interviews, and document analysis, several challenges faced by teachers were identified. These challenges relate to the diversity within the classroom, including grade level, literacy skills, backgrounds, and students with special needs. Therefore, teachers must be able to adapt learning activities so that all students can participate according to their respective abilities.

3.1. Differences in Students' Literacy Levels

The first challenge lies in the differences in students' literacy levels. In the Octopus class, students are from grades 1, 2, and 3. This results in varying literacy abilities. Some are still at the stage of recognizing the alphabet, numbers, phonics, and simple vocabulary. Meanwhile, others are already able to read short texts, construct simple sentences, and complete assignments that include comprehension activities.

T1 stated:

"Saya menghadapi tantangan dikarenakan adanya berbagai keberagaman level literasi yang ada di kelas. Dalam pelajaran literasi bahasa Inggris dasar, beberapa siswa masih membutuhkan penguatan materi dasar seperti alfabet, angka, dan kosakata sederhana. Sementara itu, siswa lain sudah mampu beralih ke materi yang lebih lanjut seperti pemahaman bacaan, penyusunan kalimat, dan latihan menulis. Karena hal ini, saya perlu melakukan penyesuaian terhadap isi, tingkat kesulitan tugas, dan bentuk dukungan yang sesuai."

"I face challenges due to the wide range of literacy levels in the class. In basic English literacy lessons, some students still needed reinforcement on foundational material such as the alphabet, numbers, and simple vocabulary. Meanwhile, other students are already able to move on to more advanced material such as reading comprehension, sentence construction, and writing exercises. Because of this, I need to adjust the content, the difficulty level of the assignments, and the appropriate form of support."

T2 added:

"Tantangan di kelas yang beragam yang saya hadapi adalah bahwa setiap anak memiliki kemampuan dan kesiapan belajar yang berbeda. Beberapa anak membutuhkan waktu lebih lama untuk memahami fonetik, membaca, dan menulis. Dari hal inilah guru perlu menyiapkan kegiatan yang sesuai dengan berbagai tingkatan agar siswa dapat belajar sesuai dengan kecepatan mereka sendiri."

"The challenge I face in a diverse classroom is that each child has different abilities and readiness to learn. Some children take longer to understand phonics, reading, and writing. This requires teachers to prepare activities that are appropriate for different levels so that students can learn at their own pace."

This indicates that teachers cannot use the same activity but must vary it. Teachers need to adjust the level of the material and the difficulty of the task. Based on these findings, it is in line with the Montessori method, which states that each child has their own developmental rhythm and requires appropriate learning activities (Montessori, 1912). Given the various levels of literacy, teachers are required to provide concrete, gradual, and developmentally appropriate activities for students. It is known that the Montessori method emphasizes the use of real and multisensory materials to help students understand something. The Montessori method in literacy learning emphasizes the use of real materials that can help students read and write gradually (Darnis, 2018; Mulyani & Anugrahana, 2023). Therefore, differences in literacy levels place demands on teachers to provide concrete and developmentally appropriate activities for students.

The multiage composition of the Octopus class further reinforces this challenge. While the Montessori approach naturally supports mixed-age learning through individualized instruction and peer learning opportunities, teachers are still required to carefully balance different literacy needs within the same classroom. Consequently, the implementation of Montessori-based English literacy instruction becomes more demanding because teachers must simultaneously facilitate beginning readers and students who are already capable of more advanced literacy tasks. This finding highlights that multiage classrooms require greater instructional flexibility than is generally described in conventional Montessori settings.

3.2. Accommodating Students with Special Needs

In this challenge, teachers must ensure that students with special needs participate in learning activities tailored to their abilities. However, some students with special needs are not always ready to participate in group activities and teacher instructions. Furthermore, these students may need time to calm down before resuming learning activities.

T1 stated:

"Untuk siswa berkebutuhan khusus, biasanya tidak selalu siap dalam kegiatan pembelajarannya, sehingga kami memberikan waktu kepada siswa untuk menenangkan pikiran, tidak langsung memaksa mereka untuk segera bergabung dalam kelas atau kegiatan pembelajaran."

"For students with special needs, they are usually not always ready for learning activities, so we give them time to calm their minds, not immediately forcing them to join the class or learning activities."

This statement indicates that students with special needs require individualized support to participate effectively in learning activities. Although the specific types of special educational needs are not disclosed due to ethical considerations and participant confidentiality, the findings indicate that teachers adapted their instruction based on students' learning needs observed during classroom activities. This support can take the form of simple instructions, repetition, visual aids, extra time, and individual mentoring. Challenges arise when teachers need to provide individual support to students with special needs while maintaining a conducive classroom environment and ensuring that no student feels isolated. Teachers also need to adjust students' forms of participation so that they can remain actively involved in learning according to their abilities.

These findings are consistent with the Montessori method, which emphasizes the teacher's role as an observer and guide who responds to each child's developmental needs (Lillard, 1972; Montessori, 1912). Similarly, literacy instruction in inclusive classrooms should be designed contextually to accommodate students' diverse needs (Alahmari et al., 2025; Nugrahanta et al., 2022). Therefore, accommodating students with special needs presents a significant challenge for teachers, as the success of literacy learning depends on their ability to balance individualized support with the active participation of all learners. These findings not only confirm the Montessori principle of individualized guidance but also extend its application to inclusive classrooms by demonstrating that effective Montessori practice requires continuous adaptation of instructional strategies, classroom participation, and learning support to meet diverse learner characteristics.

3.3. The Difficulty of Developing Flexible Lesson Guides

This challenge arises because the class contains students of various levels and diverse backgrounds. Therefore, a single lesson guide cannot be applied optimally and equally to all students. Teachers need to consider the learning objectives, material, and student abilities. Furthermore, teachers need to conduct in-depth observations of student interests, abilities, and needs to create a lesson guide that aligns with each student's learning objectives.

T1 stated:

"Menurut saya, penyusunan lesson guide merupakan tantangan yang cukup besar. Hal ini diakibatkan oleh kebutuhan siswa yang sangat beragam."

"I think developing a lesson guide is quite a challenge. This is due to the very diverse needs of students."

T2 added:

"Pada penyusunan lesson guide, kami mempertimbangkan tujuan pembelajaran, kemampuan siswa, material Montessori, dan bagaimana aktivitasnya agar semua anak bisa terlibat."

"When developing lesson guides, we consider learning objectives, student abilities, Montessori materials, and how activities can be involved for all children."

This indicates that planning learning in multicultural and inclusive classrooms using the Montessori method must be structured yet flexible. In basic English literacy learning, this flexibility is very helpful because it can determine the students' developmental stage so that they can determine a learning plan that is appropriate to their diversity. This is in line with inclusive education which emphasizes a flexible curriculum to ensure all students receive equal treatment and learning opportunities (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 2009).

The preparation of flexible lesson guides is a challenge in teaching basic English literacy using the Montessori method, where teachers are required to design learning that accommodates students' diverse needs and learning styles. These findings not only support the Montessori principle of individualized learning but also extend its application within multicultural and inclusive classrooms. Rather than relying solely on individualized learning materials, teachers were required to continuously revise lesson guides to accommodate differences in students' literacy levels, cultural backgrounds, and learning needs. This finding suggests that flexibility in lesson planning should be regarded as an essential component of Montessori practice in inclusive educational settings, thereby extending the practical application of Montessori theory beyond its traditional implementation.

Overall, the three challenges identified in this study are closely interconnected. Differences in students' literacy levels require teachers to provide differentiated learning activities, while the presence of students with diverse educational needs demands additional instructional adjustments and individual support. These conditions ultimately influence the preparation of flexible lesson guides that can accommodate the diversity of learners within a multicultural and inclusive classroom. Therefore, this study suggests that the successful implementation of the Montessori method depends not only on the use of Montessori materials but also on teachers' ability to continuously observe students, adapt instructional strategies, and design responsive learning experiences that address diverse learner characteristics.

4. CONCLUSION

This study indicates that Montessori teachers face several challenges in teaching basic English literacy in multicultural and inclusive classrooms. The findings reveal three main challenges: differences in students' literacy levels, the need to accommodate students with special needs, and difficulties in developing flexible lesson guides. These challenges arise from the diversity of students' abilities, learning readiness, cultural backgrounds, and educational needs. Therefore, successful implementation of the Montessori method requires teachers to continuously adapt learning materials, instructional support, and classroom activities to ensure that all students can participate and develop their literacy skills according to their individual characteristics.

This study contributes to the understanding of Montessori-based literacy instruction by demonstrating that effective implementation of the Montessori method in multicultural and inclusive classrooms depends not only on individualized learning materials but also on teachers' ability to design flexible lesson guides and responsive instructional strategies that accommodate learner diversity. These findings extend the practical application of Montessori principles within inclusive educational settings by emphasizing the importance of adaptive lesson planning and continuous classroom observation. Future research is recommended to investigate the implementation of Montessori-based English literacy instruction across different educational levels and school contexts, as well as involving a larger number of participants and schools to enhance the transferability of the findings.

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