

## **APPLYING MONTESSORI METHOD TO IMPROVE EARLY CHILDHOOD ENGLISH SKILL**

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### **Abstract**

*The Montessori method has been gaining more attention in the last five years. Some preschools and kindergarten have been applying the Montessori method in the English learning activity. However, the method is mostly applied by prestigious schools based on several factors: the school's readability related to the budget, the stakeholders and teachers as well as the parents' perceptions, the teacher's competency, etc. This case study is intended to investigate the implementation of English teaching and learning by using the Montessori method in preschool and kindergarten settings. Six teachers participated in the study. The data were collected from interviews and observations. The results indicate that applying the Montessori method in English learning activities can result positively in students' English ability and performance. The findings propose several suggestions related to the issue of English for early childhood education.*

**Keywords:** *English for early childhood, Montessori method*

### **Abstrak**

*Metode Montessori telah mendapatkan perhatian yang lebih selama lima tahun terakhir ini. Banyak playgroup dan Taman Kanak-Kanak telah menerapkan metode Montessori di dalam kegiatan belajar mengajar Bahasa Inggris. Meskipun demikian, metode ini seringkali hanya diterapkan oleh sekolah-sekolah yang prestisius dikarenakan beberapa faktor: kesiapan sekolah berkaitan dengan dana, persepsi para stakeholder, guru dan orang tua, kompetensi guru, dan sebagainya. Penelitian studi kasus ini bertujuan untuk menginvestigasi penerapan kegiatan belajar dan mengajar Bahasa Inggris menggunakan metode Montessori di tingkat playgroup dan Taman Kanak-kanak. Enam guru berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Data berasal dari wawancara dan observasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa menerapkan metode Montessori di dalam kegiatan belajar mengajar Bahasa Inggris dapat berdampak positif terhadap kemampuan dan performa Bahasa Inggris anak-anak. Beberapa saran berkaitan dengan topik Bahasa Inggris untuk anak usia dini juga diberikan.*

**Kata kunci:** *Bahasa Inggris untuk anak usia dini, metode Montessori*

## A. Introduction

Teaching English for early childhood is increasingly receiving very good attention. The awareness of the importance of English taught for children in their golden ages results in various research relating to English materials that should be given to methods that are considered most successful to be applied to early childhood. The differences in cognitive abilities between children of early childhood and elementary schools lead to differences in methods and models to be applied to teach English especially if the given material needs to be specific, for example introducing the form of alphabetical letters and how they sound. In this example, the purpose of learning is that children must be able to recognize the shape of letters, copy them, and then recognize and produce sounds that correspond to the pronunciation of the letters. For this reason, the learning methods provided must be in line with the learning objectives and stages of children's development.

One of the methods most widely discussed by practitioners and academics in Early Childhood Education (herein abbreviated as ECE) context today is the Montessori method. This method is considered the ablest to include learning for all subject matter ranging from Science such as Mathematics to Language. Unfortunately, the Montessori method is mostly applied to teach Science and Mathematics such as numeracy skills, which explicitly looks closer to the children's motoric activity. Various Math and Science practices can be conducted easily using the Montessori method. Therefore, language learning is mostly done conventionally by singing, listening to fairy tales, storytelling, and role-playing. These language teaching methods have many advantages as well as disadvantages. For example, introducing the shape of letters cannot be done by the singing method. Children must also be able to practice writing letters with their own hands, for example by writing them on a board or sand book.

Learning objectives will be more easily achieved if learning activities cover all domains of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Vogel (2017) mentions that in early childhood education, the teacher focuses on those three aspects. This corresponds to the Montessori learning method. The teachers provide experiences for children to develop their cognitive ability by directly inviting them to interact

with the surrounding. They also stimulate children's affective development by providing activities and new input. They also encourage the children to actively participate in provided activities. In this aspect, the children's enthusiasm and emotions are stimulated. The psychomotor aspect can be identified by children's physical abilities to play with toys and objects.

Most preschools and kindergartens that apply the Montessori method come from upper social classes with relatively high tuition fees. Not many lower-middle-class schools in Indonesia apply the Montessori method. This is caused by the lack of information possessed by the teachers and policyholders. For this reason, there is a need for socialization regarding the advantages of this method and how it is applied.

The material used for applying the Montessori program is currently developed mainly in English. Unfortunately, the price is relatively expensive (Rodriguez, Irby, Brown, Lara-Alecia, and Galloway, 2003 ) for children who come from lower-middle-class social families. This condition is not relevant to Maria Montessori's initial idea which establishes this method based on her concern for children who came from poor socio-economic status (Standing in Rodriguez, et al., 2003 ). Therefore, early childhood teachers need to be trained to create items and educational toys to be used as the Montessori material. Through this, limited funds will not impede children's opportunity to obtain a proper education.

Any study program, especially Early Childhood Islamic Education (herein abbreviated as ECIE) should provide information to ECIE students regarding teaching with a variety of approaches, models, methods, and instructional media. The specialty of the ECIE program will become additional credit in the society, students, and teachers of the ECIE school because it is different from other ECIE program. This characteristic will also help the ECIE program to further develop because it is in line with what many research and developments about the unique characteristics of this ECIE program, which in this case is its Montessori method. This Montessori method and teaching can become the basic road map for there search by students, practitioners, and lecturers of the ECIE program.

Based on previous studies, there has been limited research in Indonesia on the implementation of the Montessori method for teaching English. Research on the implementation of the Montessori method is mostly done for Mathematics such as those conducted by Risjayanti (2008), Wahyuningsih (2011), Hidayati (2017), Saputro (2017), and Yani (2017). The Montessori method is also applied to improve children's social skills (Sumitra, 2014), overcome the difficulties of learning to read and write for elementary school children (Kurniastuti and Irine, 2016), reading abilities of elementary school children (Aay, 2016), building children's character (Adisti, 2016), telling fairy tales using audio-visual media (Pratiwi, 2017), and discipline and self-reliance (Nasution, 2017).

In addition to research related to ECIE in Indonesia, most common research is on the implementation of conventional methods such as storytelling using picture series (Wati 2010), storytelling using hand puppet (Harahap, 2017), educational game applications (Noviyanti, 2017), and singing (Ardian, 2017). However, no specific focus on English learning.

Research on the implementation of the Montessori method abroad is conducted by Liliard and Quest (2006). Liliard and Quest evaluate the social and academic impact of Montessori education at several schools located in Wisconsin, USA. The schools chosen were preschool and kindergarten which serve children from marginalized minority groups. The type of research is experimental research. The research result stated that the beneficial output of Montessori education is the social effects that are generally dominated by the neighborhood where the children live.

A literature review study was conducted by Debs and Brown (2017). This study analyzed the experience faced by African-American students who attended Montessori public schools. The results mention that Montessori education offers both opportunities and limitations for black students to study in multi-racial schools. The opportunity referred to is a different learning situation that has a positive impact, while the limitation lies in the lack of multi-racial teaching staff which is a challenge in the learning process.

A study conducted by Cossentino (2016) compared two groups of students who graduated from secondary schools i.e. *Milwaukee Public School* (MPS) over

some time from 1997 to 2001. The subjects of this study were students who had followed the Montessori program since they were in the preschool and kindergarten up to grade 5 elementary school, compared to students who had never participated in the Montessori program. The results of the study indicated that the students who took the Montessori program had significantly higher test scores in Mathematics and Science.

Rodriguez, Irby, Brown, Lara-Alecia, and Galloway (2003) examined public schools that implemented the bilingual Montessori program. This study compared the reading test scores of grade 2 elementary school students who took the Montessori program and those who did not when they were in preschools. The results showed that the readingscores of students who took the Montessori program far exceeded students whose preschools applied traditional teaching methods.

Another study by Kayili and Ari (2011) examined the effect of the Montessori method on the readiness of preschool children to enroll in primary school. The results conclude that the Montessori method positively contributes to the children's readiness mentally to get into primary school. Montessori Method is also considered more efficient than the traditional method.

Research by Liliard (2012) compared the development of preschool and kindergarten students in classical Montessori models (classic Montessori), partial Montessori, and conventional models. The results concluded that the level of discipline in the implementation of the Montessori method in classic Montessoriclass was associated with achieving far better results compared to the lower level of discipline in the implementation of the Montessori method in the other classes.

Adisti (2018) conducted research in Indonesia that was different from the previous studies which wanted to see the effect of the Montessori method on children's learning. She investigated the implementation of Montessori values to the English teaching in a kindergarten in Karanganyar. The research subjects were teachers and students at the school. The results concluded that the implementation of Montessori values in English teaching can increase students' interest and enthusiasm in learning English.

Based on the above studies, the Montessori method is proven to have positive impacts on children's learning and interest as well as enthusiasm. Unfortunately, there is no specific research conducted for English teaching and learning implementation. Most research abroad focuses on Montessori education in general, not specific to language teaching. While research in Indonesia is more inclined to the application of the Montessori method in Mathematics and Science, and the children's interest and enthusiasm. This is the gap of this research. The researcher feels it is important to study teaching English using the Montessori method to see the benefits and contributions of this method for ECIE.

## **B. Theoretical Basis**

The Montessori learning model was coined by Maria Montessori in 1907. This learning model was first applied by an indigent preschool in Rome, Italy. The characteristics of Montessori education are a class with students of varying ages, specific educational materials, students choose their work, there is a collaboration, there are no scores and tests, and there are large and small groups in both academic and social skills (Montessori, 1964). There are two levels of Montessori education: primary education (ages 3-6 years) and basic education (ages 6-12 years) (Liliard and Quest, 2006).

The basic concept of the Montessori method is learning based on *reality*, *play*, and *work* (Piasta, Purpura, and Wagner, 2010) which means that children must be directly related to reality and learning by playing and being active in doing a task or work given by the teacher as a guide. Often children are given the freedom to choose what activities they like and explore them themselves. Children's independence is the main focus. Children are supported to learn on their own (Isaacs in Lunenburg, 2011).

Although children are given the freedom to explore various objects and activities, the Montessori learning model still emphasizes the importance of the position and task of the teacher as a companion who will facilitate and direct the children in learning. As what has been described by Lnenickova (2015), the teacher's task is to show the children how to use the material, then let them choose which ones they will use, and hope they will return the material to its

previous position when they have finished (Lunenburg, 2011). Children also have to correct their work when they feel that something is wrong while being observed by the teacher. The teacher will find out and facilitate what the children need.

Here are the principles of learning the Montessori method:

How and when child concentrate (concentration polarization):

- a. demonstrate the ability to concentrate on a task to which they are interested
- b. at any given moment, focus entirely on an activity or job that interests them, and repeat it again and again
- c. What children choose (often associated dengan sensitive period):
- d. objects or objects that are arranged or sequential (especially for children aged 3.5 years)
- e. have the opportunity to keep their surroundings sequential
- f. practice real daily activities rather than playing (playing goods)
- g. using realia objects used daily rather than toys
- h. do things calmly and often without sound
- i. learn attitudes that show care (*care*) that is still socially acceptable, for example, blowing the nose of a friend

How children learn:

- a. by receiving awards and punishment
- b. by having the opportunity to correct their own mistakes
- c. by having the freedom to choose what work (activity) and what material (goods) to do
- d. by themselves

(Taken from the North American Montessori Center, NAM.

*Classroom Guide*. Canada: Dale Gausman, 2009) in Lnenickova (2015)

From the principles above, the Montessori method emphasizes children's independence. The curriculum is very individual but with a broad scope, sequence, and domain (Edwards, 2002). The Montessori method focuses on the student or named as the child-centered approach. An example of the results of a child-centered approach curriculum (Rodriguez, et al., 2003) is that many children can master reading and writing before the age of 6 years. In learning English, generally listening will be taught first before speaking, reading, and writing.

When children come into the Montessori class for the first time, they have fully absorbed the language used by their parents and their surrounding through listening activities. Children must re-adjust to English, which in this case can be

considered as a second language or a foreign language that children learn besides their mother tongue or the local language. The Montessori method successfully transfers children's language skills from the first language to a foreign language (Rodriguez, 2003). In the Montessori classroom, children should optimally accustom to hear and interact with English because the language quality and quantity that children hear and the consistency of the material reinforcement will affect the success of language learning (Lightbown and Spada, 2013).

Objects (objects) that are used for learning English are authentic objects (realia) because they are more interesting and closer to children, so children will learn languages without them knowing (Sokol, 2015). The way that can be done is to train the coordination between children's cognitive and motoric skills by introducing letters and their sounds, and scratching letters in the writing sand while sounding them. Children are taught to recognize phonemes first (phonemic awareness), which is that every spoken word consists of phoneme arrangements represented by alphabet letters (Rose, 2006). Children do not need to be taught to recognize names of alphabetical letters, but what is more important is how the letters sound because in English the letter can sound differently when spoken separately or when combined into a word.

The Montessori method is a child-centered approach and is based on scientific observation of children. From this understanding, five aspects of Montessori are then known.

1. *Practical Life*; it refers to daily life skill that includes motoric skills which include caring for the environment, self and other activities.
2. *Sensorial*; it refers to a series of materials and methods used to develop all the senses owned by children.
3. *Language*; refers to a communication system related to sound, word formation, and grammar used by a group of people. Montessori has its material to make it easier for children to understand the language through realia around them.
4. *Mathematics*; it is one of the unique curricula in Montessori. It helps children understand mathematical concepts from concrete to abstract.
5. *Culture*; it is learning to invite children to understand the world such as geography, zoology, botany, family, and history.



## **C. Research Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This is a case study research. This study takes the form of an instrumental study (Stake: 1994, 1995). An instrumental case study is chosen to cater to insights into the issue of EC English acquisition mainly related to the Montessori application. This study adopts Yin's (2009) six-stage case study process which comprises planning, designing, preparing, collecting, analyzing, and sharing.

Data for this study were collected by using interviews and observations (Creswell, 2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). A semi-structured interview was utilized as it is more flexible and provides the interviewer with a better understanding of the interviewee's perspectives (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Classroom observation (Wragg, 2013; O'Leary, 2014; Stake, 1994) was applied and target any activities of interest (e.g., meetings) and artifacts (Stake, 2015) such as work schemes and lesson plans (Baskarada, 2014). Three types of artifacts were involved in this study: physical (e.g. pen and paper), symbolic (e.g. language, numbers, and pictures), and cultural (e.g. portfolios, tasks, and the computer) (Lantolf, 2000).

The study was conducted to see the proper application of the Montessori method in a Montessori school. The school chosen was based on several criteria: the teacher's understanding and proficiency regarding the Montessori method, the practice of the Montessori method, and the consistency of the Montessori implementation.

### ***Participants***

This research was carried out in a preschool and kindergarten in Sidokerso(pseudonym). The students' age ranges from 3 to 6 years old. The selection of the school is based on the consideration that the school has implemented partial Montessori in the whole activity from the beginning until the last session every day. The teachers also have the competency of Montessori concept, material, and practices. The teachers are also active in joining professional development events such as workshops and seminars. They also conduct a routine meeting with peer teachers to discuss any strengths and

weaknesses of the practice they have been doing in a week or so. The meeting also serves as a sharing group discussion where any possible insights and suggestions might be of importance.

Another reason for selecting the school is of the assumption that different socio background of parents and students might result differently in their exposure to learning resources. The socio-economic condition of parents whose children attend schools is various. Based on research conducted by Liliard (2012), socio-economic conditions are proven to have a significant impact on students' learning outcomes particularly those who implement the Montessori method. Children who come from upper-middle-class economics have better language skills than children who come from lower-middle economic class. This phenomenon might be caused by the availability of learning resources, supports from parents and family, parents' perceptions of the importance of Montessori, etc.

### ***Data and data analysis technique***

Susanto (2010) mentions that data is any information needed and collected by researchers as a basis for answering research questions. In this study, the data were taken from the results of interviews and observation of teaching and learning activities and then analyzed qualitatively.

The data analysis technique adapts thematic networks by Attride-Stirling (2001) as a tool for thematic analysis, which is defined as 'web-like illustrations (networks) that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text' (p. 386). Thematic networks are chosen because it facilitates the constructing and drawing of the themes from textual data (Attride-Stirling, 2001) in a qualitative study. It clarifies the procedures that might be utilized in interpreting texts.

### **D. Result**

This study adopts Yin's (2009) six-stage case study process which comprises planning, designing, preparing, collecting, analyzing, and sharing. As Yin explains, the planning stage focuses on identifying the problem and reasons to choose the method along with the strengths and weaknesses. The design stage focuses on determining the case to be studied and parts to be analyzed, developing

the theory, identifying the underlying issues, and formulating procedures to exert the quality of the study. The preparation stage focuses on developing the researcher's skill to go to the site and training for a particular case study to choose, developing the procedures, conducting a pilot study, and completing relevant approvals. The collect stage necessitates following the study procedures, employing various sources of evidence, creating a database, and keeping a range of evidence. Analyze stage involve employing analytic techniques, exploring explanation and showing data excluding interpretations. The last stage, sharing, focuses on determining the audience, drawing materials, displaying evidence, drawing conclusions, reviewing, and rewriting until all processes are completed.

Before going to the site, the researchers first identified the strengths and downsides of the current English teaching and learning in the early childhood context from different perspectives and views. Having found the problem, the researcher decided to conduct instrumental case study research. The design stage consists of determining the case study by choosing Raihan School (pseudonym) (herein named RSC) to be the site. Interview with the headmaster and the teachers related to the English teaching and learning that have been conducted, the barriers, the downside, the learning objectives, parent's expectation, etc. during this stage, the procedures of conducting the study was also formulated including the making of the Montessori material. As the preparation, a variety of prototype props/Montessori games were made, including ABC capital letters, ABC alphabet sandpaper, sandpaper numbers, kids aptitude color beads, kids aptitude match images, Edu flashcard animals series, color boards, etc. The materials were first introduced to the teachers. The teachers then were invited to make their teaching materials and games according to their creations and they can also copy the existing model.

The duration of the study was 15 days for the entire data collection process. Before the data collection process, preliminary study and more socialization of the Montessori method were carried out to all teachers who became the participants. This stage was carried out to collect preliminary data and introduce more of the Montessori method to all teachers. The researcher became the observer and helped the teacher when the teacher experienced difficulties.

On the first day of data collection, a pretest was conducted. This pretest aims to find out to what extent the children's English abilities were. The pretest was not in the form of written tests or formative tests like the common tests applied to children of elementary school or above. The pretest was only a game like guessing letters, numbers, and objects in English and was given simultaneously to all students like the daily learning takes place. When the pretest was given by one teacher, the teacher's assistant was in charge of recording which questions the child could answer, and who could answer the questions. The posttest implementation was also carried out similarly.

On day 3, the activities were conducted by providing English teaching using the Montessori method. The material was taught specifically for English material and not other material, skills nor other subjects such as Mathematics or Science. The English skills were *listening* (listening), *speaking* (speaking), *reading* (reading), *writing* (writing), *pronunciation* (pronunciation), and *vocabulary* (vocabulary) and were given simultaneously depending on the students' development and competence. Montessori teaching materials were used as the teaching media. During the teaching, the researcher as the observer recorded what occurred during the learning activities such as students' participation, enthusiasm, responses and initiatives to be involved in learning activities with the teacher and during independent learning. The teachers were also observed related to material delivery, the use of media, enthusiasm, and related matters that occurred during the teaching process. In the end, the posttest was carried out in the same way as the pretest. These processes were repeated until the 15<sup>th</sup> day.

Because of the logistical and convenience issues and several considerations, the observations were conducted for 15 days. The teachers were welcomed whether they would implement the Montessori method or not in the future. It will depend on several factors; the school policy, the teachers' readiness to implement this method, the availability of the funding, and some other factors.

## E. Discussion

The Montessori method has the principles of *the student center* and *follows the children* and his/her wishes because the children know what their needs are. In

the implementation, there is a term called *a prepared environment* where the teacher or parents prepare five Montessori areas. The five areas should be provided in each rack. Then the child is allowed to choose which areas he is interested in. However, if the child just focuses on one area only for a long time, teachers can direct or offer the children to play. This is intended so that children can develop in a balanced way.

Montessori activity is full of meaning, even in small things, for example, how to sit, the sitting position of the teacher against children, and so on. Besides, this method also emphasizes orderliness, neatness, and self-reliance. One of the characteristics of Montessori is that the material is arranged according to the level of difficulty, from the easiest to the most difficult ones. This method is very detailed, starting from the materials, how the teacher treats the child, the teacher's voice's intonation and the volume during the teaching, etc.

In this Montessori method, there is no *reward* nor *punishment*. Praise is obtained when children have done something good only in the form of thanks from the teacher or parents. In this method, there is also no rule that an older child must succumb to a younger child or vice versa. All the children are the same. If a child has chosen one material, then the other child may not play or even seize the material. If other children want to play with the material, then the child must ask permission in advance to play together or wait.

In implementing the Montessori method one rule applies to one child with one material. If a child wants to participate in playing a certain material, he must first ask for permission from the child who is using the material. However, if he is not permitted, then he may not force to use it.

RSC has three grade levels, namely preschool, Kindergarten A and Kindergarten B. In the learning implementation, this school combines the early childhood curriculum in general and the Montessori method, where every class has one hour every day to implement the Montessori activity. The Montessori activity is carried out in turns every day. For example, the first session (one hour) for the preschool class, the second session (one hour) for kindergarten class A and the third is for class B.

Children who come before learning time starts are allowed to play the available Montessori materials. Each child is only allowed to play with one material because in the Montessori method one child can only have one activity with one material. Each material is a series that has one goal so that the child should not take most of the contents of his course. Children are also given a work mattress where they can work in their territory, the working area. Every child must not move beyond the boundaries of his working area. Through this working base, children are invited to understand the meaning of territory or areas of their work and teach them to take responsibility for their territory. One form of children's responsibility towards this territory is to tidy up and return the material and the mattress to their original place.

Through this Montessori method, children are trained to have various good characters such as discipline, patience, orderly, responsible, skilled, and independence. This can be seen when children wait in line to wash their hands, wipe the water they spill, finish activities according to schedule, clean up toys that have been used, etc.

Some interesting events took place, for example, a child spilled water while he was using *practical life* material, then he directly took a rag and wipe the water spilled earlier. There was also a child who was able to use the material by only one presentation by the teacher. Another event was, a group of children play one material, but it started to be not conducive and effective, then a teacher approaches them and reminds them then they willingly fixed the material and returned them to the shelf. Another group of children lined up when queuing to wash their hands, then a child came and overtook the queue. The teacher reminded him to queue up properly and finally, the child stood where he was supposed to be waiting in line. There was also a child who was reluctant to take care of the material, then a teacher waited for him until he took care of the material himself.

In the interview session, the teacher revealed that during applying the Montessori method, she has not found any negative effects. She also revealed that this method is very effective for developing all aspects of children's development. Besides, this method is also able to shape good characters such as patience, neatness, independence, regularity, etc.

The teachers also mentioned that children who were taught to use the Montessori method could obtain good stimulation for their growth and development. They will have sufficient mental readiness to pursue further education. Children will also find interests and talents that they have. This makes it easier for teachers and parents to determine to necessitate education so the children can develop optimally. Some children who were asked by the observers have good language skills. They also have good trust and courage where they are not afraid or embarrassed meeting and being asked by strangers. They enthusiastically answered when asked about their deals and things they like.

## **F. Conclusion**

To conclude, this research aimed to investigate the implementation of the Montessori method to teach English in early childhood. This research is important for several reasons; First, in Indonesia, little is known related to research on the implementation of learning English using the Montessori method. Secondly, many schools in Indonesia apply the Montessori method for teaching other subjects than English. The researchers feel it is important to introduce and provide information to ECIE school teachers on the importance and effectiveness of the Montessori method for learning English. Third, the high cost of teaching tools and toys for the Montessori method makes it is often applied only by elite and expensive schools. If teachers of ECIE schools have the knowledge and creativity to make Montessori materials by themselves, all pre-and kindergarten schools will be able to apply this method. Fourth, it is hoped that the findings of this study will be very useful for the ECIE study program (department) provided that this method can become a unique characteristic of the ECIE study program. Fifth, the findings also suggest future research related to the issue of English for early childhood education.

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