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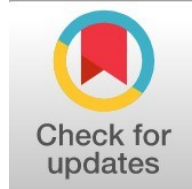
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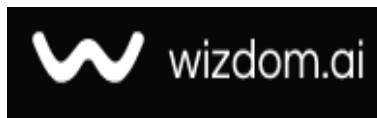
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EFL Teachers' Challenges at Senior High School

Retno Nurlilawati, nurlilawatiretno@gmail.com (*)

SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo, Indonesia

Kani Sulam Taufik, nurlilawatiretno@gmail.com

Faculty Education, University of PGRI DELTA Sidoarjo, Indonesia

Laili Hibatin Wafiroh, nurlilawatiretno@gmail.com

Faculty Education, University of PGRI DELTA Sidoarjo, Indonesia

(*) Corresponding author

Abstract

General Background: English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Indonesian secondary schools requires teachers to implement communicative and student-centered learning approaches under the Merdeka Curriculum. **Specific Background:** However, EFL teachers in Islamic-based private schools continue to encounter pedagogical and institutional challenges that affect classroom interaction and language learning outcomes. **Knowledge Gap:** Previous studies have mainly discussed EFL teaching challenges in general educational settings, while limited research has explored how these challenges emerge within Muhammadiyah schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. **Aims:** This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by EFL teachers in teaching English at Muhammadiyah 2 Senior High School. **Results:** Using a qualitative case study design involving semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis with three English teachers, the study identified several major challenges, including students' low motivation, limited vocabulary mastery, large class sizes, heterogeneous language proficiency, and limited instructional resources. Students' fear of making mistakes reduced classroom participation, while insufficient vocabulary hindered reading comprehension and oral communication. Large classes also limited teachers' ability to manage communicative learning activities effectively. **Novelty:** The study offers a contextualized perspective on the interaction between student-related factors, institutional constraints, and communicative learning implementation in a Muhammadiyah senior high school environment. **Implications:** The findings suggest the importance of interactive learning strategies, vocabulary-focused instruction, collaborative classroom activities, and institutional support to improve English language teaching practices in similar EFL contexts.

Highlights:

- ♦ Fear of making errors reduced classroom participation during speaking activities.
- ♦ Insufficient lexical knowledge interrupted reading comprehension and oral communication.
- ♦ Overcrowded classrooms limited interaction and individualized instructional feedback.

Keywords: EFL Teachers, Teaching Challenges, English Language Teaching, Secondary Education

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Introduction

English is used as an international language in communication, education, science, and technology. As globalization continues to expand, the ability to communicate in English has become increasingly important for individuals seeking academic and professional opportunities. Many countries have incorporated English into their national education systems as a compulsory subject. Similarly, in Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language at the secondary school level with the primary goal of developing students' communicative competence and preparing them to participate in global communication.

According to international assessments, Indonesia has a modest degree of English proficiency compared to other Asian nations, indicating that English proficiency is still a major challenge in the Indonesian context. These findings underscore the necessity for improved methods of teaching English in classrooms.

In spite of its importance, teaching English in an EFL context presents various challenges. Unlike learners in English-speaking environments, students in EFL contexts typically have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. As a result, teachers must play a central role in providing meaningful language input and facilitating opportunities for students to practice the language.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) describes situations where English is learned in environments where it is not commonly used for daily communication. In such contexts, students mostly learn English through formal instruction at schools. Because students primarily rely on classroom input for language exposure, teachers play an important role in facilitating language learning. In modern language teaching, the goal is to enable learners to communicate effectively in real-life situations. This ability involves not only understanding grammar but also knowing how to use language appropriately in different social contexts. Since students need practical language abilities rather than merely theoretical knowledge, communicative competence is highly emphasized [1], [2].

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become one of the most widely adopted approaches in EFL instruction. This approach emphasizes meaningful interaction, authentic language use, and the integration of language skills. However, implementing CLT in EFL contexts often presents challenges due to limited exposure to English and varying student proficiency levels.

In Indonesian schools, English teachers are expected to implement student-centered and communicative learning approaches as emphasized in the national curriculum. In line with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, English teaching emphasizes student-centered learning, communicative competence, and the development of critical thinking skills. These approaches encourage students to actively participate in learning activities, interact with peers, and use English in meaningful communication. However, the implementation of such approaches is not always easy due to several contextual constraints.

One of the most frequently reported challenges in EFL classrooms is students' low motivation to learn English. Motivation is essential to language acquisition because it affects students' willingness to participate in learning activities and persevere in overcoming challenges. According to Dornyei (2001), motivated students are more likely to actively engage in language learning activities and achieve greater competence levels.

Another significant challenge faced by EFL teachers in Indonesian classrooms is the limited exposure to English outside the school environment. Unlike in countries where English is used as a second language, Indonesian students generally encounter English only during classroom instruction. This lack of authentic exposure reduces opportunities for meaningful practice and reinforcement of language skills. As a result, students may struggle to develop fluency and confidence in using English in real-life contexts. Krashen (1985) highlights the importance of sufficient language input, emphasizing that acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible and meaningful input in natural settings. Therefore, limited exposure can slow down students' language development and make it more difficult for teachers to achieve communicative learning objectives [3], [4], [5].

Another challenge faced by EFL teachers is students' limited vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language learning because it supports the development of other language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Nation (2013) emphasizes that insufficient vocabulary knowledge can significantly hinder students' ability to comprehend texts and express their ideas in the target language [6], [7]. Limited vocabulary often prevents learners from understanding texts and participating effectively in communication. Consequently, students may become frustrated and less motivated to engage in language learning activities [6], [8], [9].

Challenges in EFL teaching may arise from various sources, including student-related factors, teacher competence, and institutional limitations such as class size and availability of learning resources. Student-related factors often include low motivation, limited prior exposure to English, and interference from the first language (L1), which may hinder students from internalizing new language patterns and building confidence in using English. Teacher-related challenges further compound these issues, as some EFL instructors in Indonesia may lack sufficient training in communicative approaches and technology integration, often relying on traditional lecture-based methods [10], [11], [12], [13].

Large class sizes are also a major challenge in many secondary schools. With many students in one classroom, teachers often struggle to manage classroom activities effectively, monitor students' progress, and provide individualized feedback.

Harmer (2007) notes that large classes often limit opportunities for interactive learning and reduce students' participation in communicative activities [7], [14]. In addition, teachers may encounter institutional constraints such as limited teaching facilities, insufficient learning resources, and restricted access to educational technology, which hinder the implementation of innovative teaching methods.

Previous studies have investigated various challenges faced by EFL teachers. Songbatumis (2017), for example, identified several difficulties encountered by English teachers in Indonesian schools, including students' low motivation, limited vocabulary mastery, and classroom management issues. Other studies also report that teachers often struggle to develop interactive teaching materials due to limited technological skills and insufficient institutional support [1], [15].

Although many studies have examined challenges in EFL teaching, most of them focus on general educational contexts rather than specific institutional settings. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how these challenges manifest in schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum within Islamic-based private educational institutions such as Muhammadiyah schools. This gap indicates the need for context-specific studies that can provide a more comprehensive understanding of EFL teaching realities in such environments.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus on the interaction between student-related factors, institutional constraints, and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within a Muhammadiyah senior high school context. Unlike previous studies that generally discuss EFL challenges in broader educational settings, this study examines how Islamic-based school culture, communicative learning expectations, and contextual institutional conditions simultaneously shape the challenges faced by EFL teachers. Therefore, this research offers a more contextualized and practical perspective that may contribute to the development of more effective teaching strategies for similar EFL environments.

Muhammadiyah 2 Senior High School is one of the private secondary schools in Indonesia where English is taught as a compulsory subject. Similar to many other EFL contexts, teachers at this school face various challenges when teaching English to students with different backgrounds and language abilities. These challenges not only affect the effectiveness of classroom instruction but also influence students' overall language achievement. If these factors remain unaddressed, they may limit students' ability to compete in academic and professional environments where English proficiency is essential [22].

This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, by providing insights from a particular institutional context, it enriches the existing body of knowledge on EFL teaching challenges. Practically, the results may help English teachers recognize common classroom problems and implement more effective teaching strategies.

To achieve this purpose, the following research question is proposed: What challenges are faced by EFL teachers in teaching English at Muhammadiyah 2 Senior High School? Moreover, the findings of this study are expected to provide practical insights for English teachers and school administrators in improving the quality of English language teaching in similar EFL contexts.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges faced by EFL teachers in teaching English at Muhammadiyah 2 Senior High School. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it allows researchers to gain in-depth insights into teachers' experiences and perceptions.

The participants consisted of three English teachers who teach at Muhammadiyah 2 Senior High School of Sidoarjo. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had relevant teaching experience. All participants had more than five years of teaching experience.

Data were collected using three methods: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) classroom observations, and (3) document analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using several indicators related to teachers' experiences in implementing English teaching, including challenges in classroom management, students' motivation, vocabulary mastery, teaching strategies, and institutional support. Meanwhile, classroom observations were guided by observation checklists focusing on teacher-student interaction, the implementation of communicative learning activities, students' participation, and the use of teaching media in the classroom. Document analysis was also conducted on lesson plans and teaching materials to support and enrich the data findings. These multiple data sources allowed the researcher to triangulate the findings and increase the credibility of the study.

To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the data, the researcher applied triangulation and member checking procedures. Triangulation was conducted by comparing findings obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to identify consistent patterns and strengthen data credibility. In addition, member checking was carried out by confirming the interview results and interpretations with the participants to ensure that the findings accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved coding the data, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to existing literature [23], [24], [25].

Result and Discussion

A. Result

Based on the results of interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, this study identified three major of challenges that faced by EFL teachers in the English learning process at SMA Muhammadiyah 2. These themes include low student motivation, limited vocabulary mastery/ limited understanding and large class sizes.

1. Students' Low Motivation

Students' learning motivation is one of the biggest challenges teachers face. Students show low interest and participation in learning English, particularly in speaking activities because of fear of making mistake.

One teacher stated:

"Many students feel that English is a difficult subject, so they are reluctant to participate in speaking activities. They are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by their classmates." (Ms. Tiwi).

Classroom observations also showed that only a few students actively responded to the teacher's questions, while the majority tended to be passive. This suggests that psychological factors such as language anxiety and lack of self-confidence influence students' motivation to learn English.

This finding aligns with research by Dornyei, which states that motivation plays a crucial role in determining the success of language learning. Students with low motivation tend to demonstrate limited learning engagement[26].

2. Limited Vocabulary Mastery/ Limited Understanding

The second challenge identified in this study was students' limited vocabulary mastery or limited understanding. Teachers reported that many students had difficulty comprehending English texts due to their limited vocabulary.

One teacher explained:

"Students often stop reading because they don't understand many words in the text. This makes it difficult for them to grasp the overall meaning. Furthermore, they sometimes stop speaking because they do not know the English words." (Ms. Nisrin)

In writing and speaking, students also often use very limited vocabulary. As a result, they have difficulty expressing their ideas clearly. According to Nation (2013), vocabulary mastery is a crucial component of language learning because it is directly related to the ability to understand and produce language

3. Large Class Size

Large class sizes also pose a challenge to the learning process. Based on observations, a class can consist of more than 30 students. This situation makes it difficult for teachers to provide individual attention to each student.

One teacher stated:

"When the class is too large, it is difficult to monitor every student's participation. Some students remain passive and do not engage in learning activities." (Mr. Umam).

Furthermore, large classes also make it difficult for teachers to implement communicative learning methods such as group discussions or role-plays because they require intensive supervision. Harmer (2007) explains that large classes often hinder interaction between teachers and students and limit students' opportunities to use language actively[14], [27], [28].

Based on the results of the interviews, a number of findings can be identified, which are then summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Summarized of Findings

Theme	Description	Evidence	Interpretation
Low Student Motivation	Students show limited participation and confidence in using English	"Many students are reluctant to participate in speaking activities because of their frightened of making mistakes." (Ms Tiwi)	The students have less confidence in order to make the classroom participation reduce and limits opportunities for language practice.
Limited Vocabulary Mastery	Students struggle to understand texts and express ideas	"Students often stop reading because they don't understand many words in the text. This makes it difficult for them to grasp the overall meaning.	Limited vocabulary mastery hinders students' reading comprehension because unfamiliar words stop their understanding of the text and reduce their ability to

Theme	Description	Evidence	Interpretation
Large Class Sizes	Teachers find it difficult to manage classroom interaction	Furthermore, they sometimes stop speaking because they do not know the English words."(Ms Nisrin) "When the class is too large, it is difficult to monitor every student's participation. Some students remain passive and do not engage in learning activities."9(Mr Umam)	identify the main idea. Besides, the students who do not know enough vocabulary find difficult to speak in English. The large number of students impact the effectiveness of teaching techniques or strategies.

4. Students' Motivation as a Critical Factor in EFL Learning

Students' low motivation emerged as one of the most significant challenges identified in this study. this is particularly important because motivation determines the level of students' engagement, effort and persistence in language learning activities. Without sufficient motivation, students are less likely to participate actively, which limits their opportunities to practice and improve their language skills. motivation is one of the most powerful predictors of language learning success[16], [17], [29].

The teachers in this study observed that many students were reluctant to participate in English-speaking activities due to fear of making mistakes. The findings show that many students are reluctant to participate in speaking activities due to fear of making mistake. This occurs because students experience language anxiety and lack-confidence, especially in environment where peer judgement is perceived as threatening. This phenomenon is closely related to language anxiety, which is commonly experienced by learners in foreign language classrooms. Language anxiety can significantly reduce students' willingness to communicate in the target language[30], [31].

In addition, students' perception that English is a difficult subject contributes to their low motivation. Similar findings were reported by Lamb (2017), who found that students in Indonesian schools often perceive English as a challenging subject due to limited exposure to the language in daily life. To address this issue, teachers need to adopt teaching strategies that increase student engagement and create a supportive classroom environment. Interactive learning activities, collaborative tasks, and the integration of authentic materials can help enhance students' motivation to learn English[29], [32], [33], [34].

5. Vocabulary Limitations and Language Proficiency

Another major challenge identified in this study is students' limited vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in language learning because it supports the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

Nation (2013) emphasizes that learners need a substantial vocabulary base to understand texts and communicate effectively. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, students may struggle to comprehend reading materials or express their ideas clearly in English[6], [35], [36].

The findings of this study indicate that many students encounter difficulties when reading English texts due to unfamiliar vocabulary. This difficulty occurs because students do not have enough lexical resources to decode meaning, which interrupts their comprehension process. When students frequently encounter unknown words, they may become frustrated and lose interest in reading activities.

Previous studies have also highlighted the importance of vocabulary instruction in EFL classrooms. Schmitt (2019) suggests that systematic vocabulary teaching strategies, such as contextual learning and repeated exposure to new words, can significantly improve students' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, teachers should incorporate explicit vocabulary instruction into their teaching practices and provide students with opportunities to practice new words in meaningful contexts[8], [37].

Moreover, limited vocabulary also affects students' ability to express their ideas. This happens because of the students' inability to retrieve the appropriate words needed to communicate their thought, resulting in simplified or in complete expressions. Over time, this limitation reduces their confidence and willingness to participate classroom interaction.

6. Large Class Sizes and Classroom Management

Large class sizes were also identified as a major challenge in this study. This issue is significant due to the number of students, the quality of interaction and individual attention in the classroom is directly affected. In large classes, teachers often struggle to monitor students' participation and provide personalized feedback.

Managing a classroom with a large number of students can make it difficult for teachers to monitor individual progress and provide personalized feedback. Harmer (2007) explains that large classes often limit opportunities for interaction and reduce the effectiveness of communicative activities. In such situations, teachers may struggle to implement student-centered teaching approaches because classroom management becomes more demanding. The teachers in this study reported that some students remained passive during classroom activities because it was difficult to ensure that every

student actively participated. Teachers in large classes need to adopt alternative strategies, such as group work, peer learning, and structured classroom activities, to maintain student engagement [14], [38], [39], [40].

7. Implications for English Language Teaching

The findings of this study have several implications for improving English language teaching in Indonesian secondary schools. First, teachers should adopt teaching strategies that increase students' motivation and participation in the classroom. Creating a supportive and interactive learning environment can encourage students to use English more confidently.

Second, vocabulary instruction should be integrated into various classroom activities to support students' language development. This is important because many students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, resulting in insufficient vocabulary mastery and low familiarity with English texts. Consequently, students often rely heavily on word-by-word translation strategies when reading, which interrupt or stop their reading flow and make it difficult to comprehend the overall meaning of the text. In addition, low confidence and afraid to make some mistake in understanding the text may reduce students' motivation to continue reading. These conditions indicate that vocabulary limitations not only affect students' linguistic competence but also influence their engagement and comprehension and communication skills during English learning activities.

Third, teachers in large classes should use collaborative learning strategies to increase student participation and reduce classroom management challenges. Group discussions, pair work, and cooperative learning activities can help teachers manage classroom interaction more effectively

Conclusions

This study explored the challenges faced by EFL teachers in teaching English at Muhammadiyah 2 Senior High School. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research identified four major challenges encountered by teachers: students' low motivation, limited vocabulary mastery, large class sizes, and limited teaching resources. Among these challenges, students' low motivation and limited vocabulary knowledge were identified as the most significant barriers to effective language learning. These factors affect students' participation in classroom activities and limit their ability to communicate in English. Large class sizes also create difficulties for teachers in managing classroom interaction and providing individual feedback to students. In addition, limited access to technological resources restricts the implementation of innovative teaching strategies.

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed for teachers and schools. Teachers are encouraged to implement more interactive and student-centered learning activities such as group discussions, role plays, collaborative learning, and vocabulary-based games to increase students' motivation and participation in English learning. Teachers may also integrate simple digital media and authentic learning materials to create more engaging classroom environments. In addition, providing regular vocabulary practice and encouraging students to use English in daily classroom communication can help improve students' language proficiency and confidence.

For schools, institutional support is essential to enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching. Schools are recommended to provide better access to teaching facilities, technological resources, and professional development programs that help teachers improve their pedagogical and technological skills. Furthermore, schools may create supportive English learning environments through extracurricular activities such as English clubs, speech competitions, and language practice programs that allow students to use English more actively outside the classroom.

Future research may focus on identifying effective teaching strategies that help teachers overcome these challenges and enhance students' English proficiency in similar EFL contexts.

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