Bridging Imagination and Education: How Students Perceive Fantasy Stories within the Merdeka Curriculum

Laila Masrura [a*], Irma Suryani [a], Rustam [a] and Hary Soedarto Harjono [a]

[a] Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia Department, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

The success of the learning process is greatly influenced by students' perceptions. The main question that will be answered in this research is how students perceive learning fantasy stories from the perspective of the Independent Curriculum. The study addressed students' perceptions, which can be crucial when developing or revising curricula. Educators can create more effective teaching methods and materials by understanding how students perceive specific topics or subjects. Also, the discovery that students have no interest in studying fantasy stories but prefer contextual learning based on Jambi regional folklore is a significant one. This finding highlights the importance of context and cultural relevance in curriculum design. Again, the study could have direct implications for the Merdeka curriculum and potentially for other curricula in Indonesia or regions with similar cultural contexts. Including regional folklore might be a more effective way to engage students and promote learning. Thus, the manuscript seems relevant, especially for educators and policymakers in the region or those interested in curriculum design and cultural

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Corresponding author: Email: lailamasrura003@gmail.com;

context in education. However, its broader applicability might be limited due to its specific focus on one city in Jambi. Nevertheless, it serves as a starting point for more extensive research on the topic and offers a valuable perspective on students' preferences in curriculum content.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the important elements of learning Indonesian in the 2013 Curriculum is understanding texts. Thus, in the 2013 curriculum, the presentation of texts in Indonesian language learning at the junior high school level is massive, so Indonesian language learning in the 2013 curriculum is text-based. Text-based learning is an effective formula for supporting learning with a scientific approach [1] and increasing students' communication competence [2]. Text-based learning is also intended to improve understanding of narrative texts [3]. In text-based learning, students learn to understand various kinds of texts and demonstrate the content, structure, and language of these texts.

The urgency of text-based learning in the 2013 curriculum is maintained in the *Merdeka* curriculum. Experts, including Saragih [4] and Trinaldi, explain text-based learning in the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Trinaldi, A., Afriani, M., Budiyono, H., Rustam, R., & Priyanto, P., [5] stated that in the *Merdeka* curriculum, text-based learning is still used. The *Merdeka* curriculum is a form of development of the 2013 curriculum and the emergency curriculum implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Curriculum changes in Indonesia continue to be made. Curriculum changes in Indonesia, apart from being intended to keep up with developments in science and technology, are also intended to evaluate the previous curriculum. This matter was also explained by Sumarsih, Marliyani, T., Hadiyansah, Y., Hernawan, A. H., & Prihantini, P. [6], who stated that there had been changes to the curriculum in Indonesia carried out to improve and evaluate the previous curriculum. Currently, the *Merdeka* Curriculum is being implemented in Indonesia, which prioritizes character education. The *Merdeka* Curriculum adapts meaningful learning by creating small learning groups with the same understanding, or differentiated learning, with its technical implementation in project-based learning.

Evaluation of curriculum changes must be balanced with the situation and conditions of the students. According to Zamili [7], curriculum development anticipates changes in the situation and norms among students. Character education is a way to anticipate these problems by implementing the Pancasila student profile. Sanni, Waruwu, M., Rati, N., Buulolo, D., Laia, F., Zalukhu, T. B., Bety, C. F. [8] stated that character education is an effort to apply religious, moral, and ethical values to children through science assisted by parents, teachers, and the community. Differentiated learning in the independent curriculum is carried out to group students according to how they learn and their ability to understand the subject matter and content used. According to Faiz, A., Pratama, A., & Kurniawaty, I. [9], differentiated learning is learning that creates diverse classes to provide opportunities for students to create content, ideas, and results that suit each student's abilities. Kashdan, T., Disabato, D., Goodman, F., & Naughton, C [10] and Sari, N., Alfiandra, A., & Erlande, R., [11] also stated that learning is differentiated to meet the needs of diverse students.

One of the content in Indonesian language learning at the Junior High School level is fantasy story texts. This text is taught to class VII students. According to Novita & Nursaid [12], a fantasy story text is a fictional story that tells an incident or incident that happened to a character and has the characteristics of fantasy (imagination). Stewig [13] and Alsharab [14] view that fantasy stories have six special characteristics, namely (1) logic and consistency, (2) language, (3) characters, (4) setting, (5) resolution, and (6) complexity.

Three important pieces of information were obtained based on the results of observations made by researchers at several educational institutions in Jambi province. First, students need help understanding the fantasy story text material contained in the textbook. Second, the implementation of the independent curriculum has yet to have a significant effect on the learning process of fantasy story texts. Third, the principles of differentiated learning need to be implemented according to expectations.

Problems that arise in this learning activity require solutions. Teachers use solutions to solve problems that occur to students during learning activities. Therefore, evaluation is needed in learning activities. This activity requires cooperation between teachers and students because teachers and students are involved in classroom learning activities. The important role of teachers in the learning process was conveyed by Makovec [15], Erlia [16], Trinaldi, A., Harjono, H. S., & Rustam, R. [17] that teachers have an important role in implementing learning in the classroom. Students also do not escape attention because, based on the reasons for changing the curriculum itself, the situation and conditions of students influence the occurrence of a modification. This situation is also explained in research by Magdalena, I., Mayanti, H. M., Putri, R. S., & Tangerang, U., [18], which states that students are one of the benchmarks in evaluating learning activities.

The following are some relevant research related to the topic or explanation above. First, Khairunnisa [19] entitled Problems of Learning to Write Narrative Texts in Junior High Schools. This research shows that the problems students face when learning fantasy texts are caused by teachers who do not pay more attention. Students also fear learning to write and prefer to avoid reading, so they have minimal vocabulary. Second, Ginting [20] entitled Application of Image-Based Learning Models to Improve the Ability to Write Fantasy Stories. The results of this research show that pictorial media can improve the ability to write fantasy stories; in cycle I, it has an average score of 72.46, and in cycle II, with pictorial media, it shows an increase in writing skills with an average of 81.76. Third, Sukiman, Khofshoh, Z., & Halim, M., [21] entitled Using Stories about the Bengawan Solo River as Material for Writing Fantasy Stories Containing Characters for Middle School Students. The research results show that regional folklore can generate ideas for writing fantasy stories.

Based on several relevant studies, the researchers focused on students' perceptions of learning fantasy texts. Student perceptions are evaluated in Indonesian language learning activities on fantasy text material. This perception can also be used to develop Indonesian language teaching materials for fantasy texts.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study type of research. Researchers will describe the findings found in the research. According to Creswell [22], qualitative research will display data in descriptive form. Case studies are used in this research to reveal the problems that occur to students during fantasy story learning activities. The validity used in this research is data triangulation. The data for this research are the results of questionnaires, observations, and student interviews.

In contrast, the data sources for this research are students at junior high schools in the city of Jambi. To analyze the data, researchers used the theory from Miles Huberman [23] with the following stages. First, researchers will collect data using questionnaires, observations, and interviews regarding student perceptions of fantasy text learning activities. Second, researchers will reduce the data needed in this research. Third, the researcher displays the research data and concludes the research results, which have been verified for validity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research was conducted at one of the junior high schools in Jambi City, which has implemented *Merdeka* curriculum. The following is the data obtained by researchers when distributing questionnaires to 32 students. Results related to students' perceptions of learning fantasy stories showed that there were no students who were very interested in studying fantasy story material, as many as three students were interested in studying fantasy story material, as many as six students were quite interested in studying fantasy story material, as many as 15 students were not interested in studying fantasy story material, as many as eight students are not very interested in studying fantasy stories. The research data is displayed in the Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of student perceptions

Student Perceptions Category	F	Percentage
very interested	0	0
interested	3	9,37
quite interested	6	18,75
not interested	15	46,88
very disinterested	8	25
Total	32	100

Based on the results of observations made by researchers, each student's choice regarding

interest in studying persuasive text material has different learning characteristics. This data was obtained when Indonesian language lessons were in progress. The following is an explanation shown in the following diagram in Table 2.

The Table 2 shows that five students have the characteristics of learning independently, 11 students have the characteristics of learning while playing, and 16 students learn contextually. The following is the explanation: in the interesting category, students have two students in the independent learning category and one in the learning while playing category. Furthermore, in the quite interesting category, two students have independent learning characteristics, three have learned while playing characteristics, and one has contextual learning characteristics. In the next category, namely not interesting, one student has the characteristic of independent learning, five students have the characteristic of learning while playing, and nine students have the characteristic of learning contextually. In the very disinterested category, as many as two students have the characteristics of learning while playing, and as many as six students have the characteristics of learning contextually.

Table 2. Student learning characteristics

No	Student Perception Categories	Student Learning Characteristics		
		Independent	Play While Learning	Contextual
	Interesting			
1	Student A1	✓		
2	Student A2		✓	
3	Student A3	✓		
	Quite Interesting			
4	Student B1		✓	
5	Student B2		✓	
6	Student B3	✓		
7	Student B4		✓	
8	Student B5			✓
9	Student B6	✓		
	Not Interesting			
10	Student C1		✓	
11	Student C2		✓	
12	Student C3		✓	
13	Student C4		✓	
14	Student C5	✓		
15	Student C6			✓
16	Student C7			✓
17	Student C8			✓
18	Student C9			✓
19	Student C10		✓	
20	Student C11			✓
21	Student C12			✓
22	Student C13			✓
23	Student C14			✓
24	Student C15			✓
	Very disinterested			
25	Student D1			✓
26	Student D2			✓
27	Student D3		✓	
28	Student D4		✓	
29	Student D5			✓
30	Student D6			✓
31	Student D7			✓
32	Student D8			✓

Table 3. Student perception category

Question	Student Perception category	Student Answer Sample
Is the fantasy text material in Indonesian textbooks interesting? Give reasons!	**Interested**	*"If we study fantasy text material, we just like it. We like the story in the textbook, it's like a fantasy. This is the first time we've read this story."*
	Quite Interested	*"If we like it, we can study this fantasy text. Moreover, sometimes playing while learning is like that, it's fun. But we were a little confused when we got into the material. Moreover, the example of the story is difficult, isn't it?"*
	Not Interested	*"We don't like it, Mom. We don't like reading the material. It's difficult, Mom, it's also difficult to give an example, it's nice when you give an example."*
	Very Disinterested	*"It's not interesting, the story examples are strange too. We don't understand, bro. We don't understand the story ma'am. Try telling us a story that we know, we'll understand."*

The research results based on these two data show that students are not interested in learning fantasy story texts in Indonesian language textbooks. Researchers asked whether the fantasy text material in Indonesian textbooks was interesting, along with responses from students.

The results of the interviews showed mixed results. Students in the interesting category received material and examples of fantasy stories for the first time in the textbook, but students could still understand them. In the quite interesting category, students have difficulty understanding the material and examples of fantasy stories, but the students can solve the problems. In the uninteresting category, students have difficulty with the material and examples taught; students prefer the examples given, namely the Putri Tangguk and Muaro Jambi Temple story. In the uninteresting category, students need help understanding the material and examples of fantasy text stories in the Indonesian language package book, Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Students ask the teacher to provide examples of stories that are relevant to students' lives.

4. DISCUSSION

Students need help learning fantasy stories. Research data shows that more than half of students are not interested in studying fantasy stories. The data indicates that there are problems in learning fantasy stories. The total number of data sources is 32 students. If we look at the research data, it shows that no students are very interested in studying fantasy stories. However, it is different from the other way around. Fifteen students were not interested in studying fantasy texts, and eight students were not very interested in studying fantasy texts. This matter is also found in research from Narsa [24]. Researchers found students' problems in writing fantasy stories, and the assessment results showed low scores, so students needed a problem-based learning model to solve these problems. According to the research findings, students need more characteristics of learning activities that make students happy and contextual learning characteristics.

In learning activities, teachers must pay attention to student characteristics. This matter is explained in research from Siddiqui Ahamed [25] and Khairunnisa [19], which explains that the teacher's role is very important in learning activities about fantasy story texts. Teachers have the task of encouraging students who have difficulty understanding fantasy stories. According to Kaur [26], Kizi & Makhmudov [26], and Naimah [27], teachers have an important role if students have a problem. One of them is guiding, directing, and paying attention to students in learning activities in class [28-30]. In the independent curriculum, learning is also considered; the independent learning curriculum shapes students according to their individual needs. Some students are categorized as capable, moderate, and less capable. This division of students is a form of differentiation. Students also share learning methods; examples include independent learning while playing and contextually learning with guidance. According to Nazerian, P., Gigli, C., Pavellini, A., Ermini, F., Pepe, G., Vanni, S., & Grifoni, S [31], Fan, T.,

Song, J., & Guan, Z., [33], and Yani, D., Muhanal, S., & Mashfufah, A., [33], diagnostic assessments are needed to discover each student's learning style, which will then be grouped according to their categories and characteristics.

The research results show that the most differentiated groups occur in the categories of uninterested and very disinterested groups who have difficulty learning fantasy texts. These students think that the material taught is beyond reasoning. These two study groups were unable to study independently. In the study group with the category of not interested in learning, creative ideas are needed in the form of playing while learning; however, students in this category need innovation and creativity in the form of learning activity content; this is proven by student interviews which state that "*Dak suko kami buk.*" We do not like to read the material. It is difficult, for example, it is also difficult, it is nice when you give an example, be." in this answer, it appears that students have difficulty understanding the material available in the Indonesian language package book for the Independent Learning Curriculum. According to Eldianaa Kartikasari [34], learning Indonesian requires something that can attract students' attention, including developing teaching materials. Development is done to maximize available teaching materials and adapt them to students' situations and conditions [35-37]. Even though students in this category are interested in playing while learning, developing teaching materials is still needed to maximize learning activities. Meanwhile, in the very disinterested category, students need contextual learning activities.

Contextual learning provides a real picture for students [38]. The research results show that students need contextual learning activities. According to Surdin [39] and Muharam, A., Mustikaati, W., Wulandari, A., Nurbaiti, N., & Prabowo, S. A., [40], contextual learning provides valuable experiences for students. Contextual learning connects the material taught to students' real-life situations. In line with this view, Zakiah, N. E., Sunaryo, Y., & Amam, A., [41], Murtini, S., Sumarmi, Hari Utomo, D., & Komang Astina, I., [42], and Humana Rahmat [43] state that contextual learning provides real experiences for students. Therefore, teachers must evaluate ongoing learning activities by considering students' perceptions.

The research results show the need for material that can be understood by looking at the

student's world. Based on the interview results, students are more interested in folklore as an example of fantasy story texts. Using Jambi regional folklore as an example of a fantasy story can provide an image of maintaining regional culture by integrating it into learning activities. According to Zipes [44] and Triana, H., Maksum, A., & Nurhasanah, N., [45], including culture in learning activities instills cultural values in the students' environment. Students are more interested in studying folk tales than fantasy stories outside of the student's culture. Apart from that, it also creates cultural awareness.

Folk tales packaged in learning activities have several advantages, as Merdiyatna [46] and Hastuti [47] explain. First, folklore is important in forming character education in students because it is close to students. Second, folklore can improve the ability to provide ideas so that students' writing skills improve using examples of folklore as a learning resource. Third, folklore is very useful for students in improving their ability to learn fantasy stories.

Referring to research results, in general, students are less interested in studying fantasy stories, while on the other hand, this material is found in the Merdeka curriculum or is considered very important. Based on this phenomenon, Indonesian language teachers need to take the following strategic steps: 1) adapting fantasy stories in the Merdeka curriculum with local folklore or in other words learning fantasy stories based on local wisdom, 2) teachers need to provide understanding and motivation to relevant students. the urgency of studying fantasy stories, both from the perspective of Indonesian language knowledge, as well as in order to train thinking skills, 3) teachers need to make several breakthrough learning strategies that are more interesting for students, both related to the content of fantasy stories and learning methods, 4) teachers need to make innovation related to the media used during the fantasy story learning process. Through these strategies, it is hoped that students' perceptions of fantasy stories, especially those in the Merdeka curriculum, will change to be positive and their learning outcomes will be better.

5. CONCLUSION

Fantasy story text material in the independent learning curriculum still encounters obstacles, such as teaching materials outside students' wishes. In learning activities, students prefer

independent learning activities while playing, but still contextual. Contextual learning can be created by integrating culturally based stories such as folk tales as teaching material for fantasy story texts in Indonesian language books in the independent learning curriculum. This research will likely be used to evaluate learning activities by developing teaching materials for fantasy story texts based on local culture.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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