

IMPLEMENTING AN ENGLISH ZONE TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AT SMP IT FATHONA PALEMBANG

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ABSTRACT

Abstract

English proficiency, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing, is essential for addressing the challenges of the 21st century. However, preliminary observations at SMP IT Fathona Palembang revealed that many students lack confidence and have limited ability to use English actively, both orally and in writing, due to the absence of a supportive language environment beyond the classroom. This study aims to (1) describe the implementation process of an English Zone program, (2) measure students' improvement in English proficiency, and (3) evaluate students' perceptions of the program. This research employed School Action Research using a mixed-methods approach. The participants were eleventh-grade students of SMP IT Fathona Palembang. Data were collected through observations, interviews, pre- and post-tests, and student perception questionnaires. The findings indicate that the implementation of the English Zone contributed positively to students' English proficiency and increased their confidence in using English. In conclusion, the English Zone serves as an effective strategy to create a supportive language environment and promote active English use among junior high school students.

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ABSTRAK

Abstrak

Kemampuan berbahasa Inggris yang mencakup listening, reading, speaking, dan writing merupakan kompetensi penting dalam menghadapi tantangan abad ke-21. Namun, hasil observasi awal di SMP IT Fathona Palembang menunjukkan bahwa banyak siswa masih kurang percaya diri dan memiliki keterbatasan dalam menggunakan

Kata Kunci

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bahasa Inggris secara aktif, baik lisan maupun tulisan, yang disebabkan oleh kurangnya lingkungan yang mendukung praktik bahasa di luar kelas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk (1) mendeskripsikan proses implementasi program English Zone, (2) mengukur peningkatan kemampuan bahasa Inggris siswa, dan (3) mengevaluasi persepsi siswa terhadap program tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode Penelitian Tindakan Sekolah dengan pendekatan campuran (mixed methods). Subjek penelitian adalah siswa kelas XI SMP IT Fathona Palembang. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi, wawancara, pre-test dan post-test, serta angket persepsi siswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi English Zone memberikan dampak positif terhadap peningkatan kemampuan bahasa Inggris dan kepercayaan diri siswa. Dengan demikian, English Zone dapat menjadi strategi efektif dalam menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang mendukung penggunaan bahasa Inggris secara aktif.

Introduction

English proficiency, encompassing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, is widely recognized as an essential competence for learners in the 21st century. In the era of globalization and the Industrial Revolution 4.0, English functions as an international language used extensively in education, business, technology, and intercultural communication. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), English proficiency enables learners to participate effectively in global communication and access broader educational and professional opportunities. Likewise, Crystal (2003) argues that English has become a global language due to its dominant role in international interactions and information exchange. Therefore, developing English proficiency is an important objective of language education, particularly at the secondary school level.

Despite the growing importance of English, many students continue to experience difficulties in using the language actively, especially in speaking. Speaking is often regarded as one of the most challenging language skills because it requires learners to simultaneously employ vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and communicative competence (Brown, 2007). Furthermore, Harmer (2007) emphasizes that students frequently encounter anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes when communicating in English. As a result, many learners remain passive and rely heavily on classroom instruction without sufficient opportunities for authentic language use.

The challenge of improving students' English proficiency is closely related to the learning environment. Language acquisition theories suggest that meaningful exposure and interaction play a significant role in language development. Krashen (1985), through the Input Hypothesis, explains that language acquisition occurs when learners receive comprehensible input in meaningful contexts. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) highlights the importance of social interaction in facilitating learning and language development. These perspectives indicate that students need a supportive environment where English is used regularly beyond formal classroom activities.

One approach that seeks to create such an environment is the implementation of an English Zone. An English Zone refers to a designated area, time, or institutional policy in which students and teachers are encouraged to communicate primarily in English. According to Nation and Newton (2009), language learning becomes more effective when learners are exposed to frequent opportunities to use the target language in authentic situations. Through continuous interaction, students can develop greater fluency, confidence, and communicative competence. English Zone programs typically involve activities such as English Day, daily conversations, classroom interactions, language games, public announcements, and English signage throughout the school environment.

Several previous studies have demonstrated the positive effects of creating English-speaking environments in educational institutions. Sari and Wahyuni (2021) found that the implementation of English Day significantly improved students' speaking confidence and vocabulary mastery. Similarly, Putra et al. (2022) reported that a language-area program increased students' willingness to communicate and reduced speaking anxiety. In another study, Rahmawati and Hidayat (2023) revealed that environmental language programs contributed positively to students' speaking performance by increasing opportunities for meaningful interaction. These findings suggest that language-environment strategies can serve as effective complements to classroom instruction.

However, despite the promising findings, several limitations remain evident in the existing literature. Most previous studies have focused primarily on specific activities such as English Day or classroom-based speaking interventions. In addition, many studies have been conducted in senior high schools or higher education settings, while empirical investigations involving junior high school students remain limited. Furthermore, there is

still insufficient research examining the implementation of a comprehensive English Zone program that integrates various language-supporting activities within the broader school environment. Research exploring students' perceptions and experiences regarding such programs is also relatively scarce.

Considering these gaps, further investigation is needed to examine how a structured and sustained English Zone program can influence students' English proficiency in junior high school contexts. Understanding both the implementation process and its impact on students is important for developing effective and contextually appropriate language-learning strategies.

Therefore, this study aims to: (1) describe the implementation process of the English Zone program at SMP IT Fathona Palembang, and (2) examine its impact on students' English proficiency. By employing a mixed-methods School Action Research approach, this study is expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of environment-based language learning and offer practical insights for educators seeking to establish similar programs in comparable educational settings.

Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the English Zone program and its impact on students' English proficiency at SMP IT Fathona Palembang. The quantitative component used a quasi-experimental design, involving pre-test and post-test measurements to examine changes in students' English skills, including speaking, listening, vocabulary, and grammar. Meanwhile, the qualitative component used a descriptive approach to explore students' and teachers' experiences, perceptions, and engagement during the implementation process.

The population of this study consisted of all students of SMP IT Fathona Palembang in the 2024/2025 academic year. Since the English Zone program was implemented to all students, the accessible population included all students enrolled during the study period. The sample was selected using purposive sampling because the participants were chosen based on their involvement in the English Zone program. A total of 25 students participated in the quantitative phase of the study. These students were selected as the

experimental group and participated in all stages of the program, including the pre-test, English Zone activities, and post-test.

For the qualitative phase, participants included the same group of students as well as two English teachers and the school principal. These participants were selected to provide detailed information regarding the implementation process, challenges, and perceived benefits of the English Zone program. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and field notes to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and responses.

The selection of participants was based on their active involvement in the implementation of the English Zone program, enabling the researchers to obtain relevant and comprehensive data regarding its effectiveness in improving students' English proficiency.

The research procedure consisted of several stages. First, a preliminary study and coordination were conducted through classroom observations and interviews with teachers and the school principal to identify initial conditions and prepare program implementation. Second, the English Zone program was designed, including activities such as English Day, Speaking Corner, and interactive English-based tasks, supported by visual materials and designated English-speaking areas within the school environment. Third, a pre-test was administered to measure students' initial English proficiency.

Fourth, the English Zone program was implemented over six weeks through structured daily English activities involving students, teachers, and researchers. The implementation was supported by peer mentoring and motivational strategies to encourage consistent English use. Fifth, ongoing monitoring and observation were conducted to document students' participation and language behavior, along with interviews to capture perceptions from both students and teachers.

After the implementation phase, a post-test was administered using the same instruments as the pre-test to ensure comparability of results. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired sample t-tests to determine the significance of differences between pre-test and post-test scores. Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and contextual insights. Data triangulation was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

Finally, the results were compiled into a research report and prepared for dissemination in the form of a scientific article for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. The findings were also shared with the partner school to support the practical application of the English Zone program.

Results and Discussion

The study was conducted over six weeks at SMP IT Fathona Palembang involving 25 students selected through purposive sampling based on their willingness to participate in the full English Zone program. The research instruments consisted of pre-test and post-test assessments covering speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as observations, interviews, and student motivation questionnaires.

1. Quantitative Results

The comparison between pre-test and post-test results shows a significant improvement in students' English proficiency across all assessed skills. The summary of the results is presented below.

Table 1: Summary of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

Skil	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Gain	Interpretation
Speaking	62,5	78,3	+15,8	Significant improvement
Listening	64,2	80,1	+15,9	Significant improvement
Reading	66,7	81,4	+14,7	Significant improvement
Writing	61,3	76,8	+15,5	Significant improvement
Vocabulary	63,5	79,6	+16,1	Significant improvement
Grammar	62,8	78,9	+16,1	Significant improvement

Overall, all language components improved by approximately 14–16 points. Vocabulary and grammar showed the highest gains (+16.1), indicating that continuous exposure to English through environmental labeling, signage, and daily usage in the English Zone effectively strengthened students' linguistic knowledge. Speaking skills also improved notably, as students demonstrated greater confidence in using English spontaneously outside the classroom.

2. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data from observations, interviews, and questionnaires revealed several important themes.

1) Supportive Learning Environment

The English Zone program, which divided school areas into English-based zones such as Speaking Corner, English Day, and Mini Drama activities, created a more immersive learning atmosphere. Students were consistently exposed to English in daily school interactions, increasing their language exposure significantly.

2) Increased Motivation and Engagement

Questionnaire results indicated that 82% of students reported higher motivation to use English after participating in the program. The main motivational factors included reward systems and peer mentoring, which encouraged active participation.

3) Improved Confidence

Interview data from teachers revealed that previously passive students became more active in group discussions and were able to deliver short presentations in English. Observations also confirmed increasing participation in Speaking Corner activities each week, indicating growing confidence among students.

4) Challenges and Limitations

Despite positive outcomes, several challenges were identified. Some students still struggled to maintain longer conversations due to limited vocabulary. In addition, students tended to revert to Indonesian outside the English Zone area, indicating that language habit formation still requires reinforcement. Teachers also emphasized the need for continuous implementation to sustain the program's positive effects.

3. Motivation Analysis

The motivation questionnaire results showed a significant increase in students' learning motivation. The average motivation score increased from 56.6 (moderate category) before the program to 76.6 (high category) after implementation. This indicates that the English Zone program not only improved linguistic competence but also enhanced students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning English.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the English Zone contributed positively to students' English proficiency and learning motivation at SMP IT Fathona Palembang. The improvement observed in speaking, listening, vocabulary, and grammar indicates that students benefited from increased exposure to English and more frequent opportunities to use the language in meaningful contexts. These findings support Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, which argues that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input in situations where communication is meaningful and relevant. Through the English Zone program, students encountered English not only during classroom instruction but also in various school activities, creating a richer language-learning environment.

The improvement in students' speaking ability is particularly significant because speaking is often considered one of the most challenging language skills for foreign language learners. According to Brown (2007), effective language learning requires learners to actively use the target language rather than merely study its rules. The English Zone provided opportunities for students to engage in daily conversations, participate in interactive activities, and practice English in authentic situations. These experiences helped reduce students' fear of making mistakes and increased their willingness to communicate in English.

The findings also align with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive and language development. During the implementation of the English Zone, students interacted with peers, teachers, and researchers using English in both formal and informal situations. Such interactions created opportunities for collaborative learning and peer support, enabling students to develop their language skills through communication and shared experiences. The presence of peer mentoring and teacher guidance further supported students in overcoming linguistic difficulties and building confidence.

In addition, the increase in students' motivation suggests that the English Zone successfully created a more engaging learning atmosphere. Harmer (2007) states that motivation plays a crucial role in second language learning because motivated learners tend to participate more actively and persist in overcoming learning challenges. The use of English signs, designated speaking areas, and structured English activities encouraged

students to view English as a practical communication tool rather than merely an academic subject. As a result, students became more enthusiastic about participating in language-learning activities.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research highlighting the benefits of environment-based language learning. Nation and Newton (2009) argue that language proficiency develops more effectively when learners have regular opportunities to use the target language for meaningful communication. Similarly, studies on English Day and language-area programs have reported positive effects on students' speaking confidence, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative competence. The findings of the present study extend this body of knowledge by demonstrating that a more comprehensive English Zone program can be successfully implemented in a junior high school context and can positively influence multiple aspects of English proficiency.

However, despite the positive outcomes, some challenges were identified during the implementation process. Observations revealed that some students continued to switch to their native language when outside designated English-speaking areas or when communicating with close friends. This finding suggests that language habits are not easily changed within a short period. According to Ellis (2008), second language acquisition is a gradual process that requires continuous exposure, practice, and reinforcement over time. Therefore, while the six-week implementation period produced encouraging results, a longer and more consistent application of the English Zone may lead to greater improvements in students' language proficiency and language-use habits.

The findings imply that schools can play a crucial role in creating language-rich environments that support English learning beyond the classroom. By integrating English into daily school activities and encouraging authentic communication, schools can provide learners with opportunities that are often unavailable in traditional instructional settings. Such an approach is particularly valuable in EFL contexts, where students have limited exposure to English outside school.

Overall, the findings suggest that the English Zone is an effective strategy for enhancing students' English proficiency, confidence, and motivation. The success of the program demonstrates the importance of combining formal instruction with meaningful language exposure and interaction. Future studies may investigate the long-term impact of

English Zone implementation, compare different models of language-environment programs, and explore their effectiveness across different educational levels and contexts.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the implementation of an English Zone program and its effectiveness in improving students' English proficiency at SMP IT Fathona Palembang. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the English Zone program is an effective strategy for enhancing students' English language skills in a junior high school context.

The program successfully contributes to the improvement of students' English proficiency across various skills, particularly in vocabulary and grammar, while productive skills such as speaking and writing also show notable development. These results indicate that sustained exposure to English in a structured school environment plays an important role in facilitating language acquisition.

In addition, the English Zone program also positively influences students' affective factors, including motivation, confidence, and willingness to use English in daily communication. The supportive and interactive learning environment encourages greater student participation and reduces anxiety in using English.

Overall, the English Zone provides not only academic benefits but also fosters positive psychological and social attitudes toward English learning. It can therefore be considered a viable model for creating an immersive language environment in junior high school settings.

Declarations

I hereby declare that the disclosed information is correct and that no other situation of real, potential or apparent conflict of interest is known to us. I undertake to inform you of any change in these circumstances, including if an issue arises during the course of the meeting or work it (2026).

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