

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the introduction of the research study, which covers (1) background of the study, (2) problem identification, (3) research limitation, (4) research question, (5) research objectives, and (6) significant of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

Inclusive education is an approach that aims to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, including children with special needs (Salimova, 2025). Indonesia has demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusive education through national conventions and the 2004 Bandung Declaration (Siswiyanti and Astuti, 2022). In line with global support from UNESCO and other international organizations (Sari et al., 2022). Educational institutions also continue to strive to provide a learning environment that supports students' diverse needs (Putriani et al., 2023).

In inclusive education, students continue to learn in regular classrooms and have the opportunity to grow and develop alongside their peers (Balık and Ozgun, 2024; Nurfadhilah et al., 2022). Early involvement in an inclusive environment has been shown to improve academic, social, emotional, and cultural abilities (Balık and Ozgun, 2024). However, teachers still often face challenges in conducting assessments because each child has a different developmental profile (Siswiyanti and Astuti, 2022). Therefore, teachers need training in assessment and learning design that are appropriate to the needs of all students (Balık and Ozgun, 2024).

Teachers must have adequate assessment competencies to create a comfortable, responsive, and inclusive environment (Woodcock and Anderson, 2025). They are not only tasked with encouraging student creativity but also with developing each child's unique potential (Berikkhanova et al., 2021). In special education, teachers must identify each student's abilities, obstacles, and support needs as a preliminary step before teaching (M. Sari et al., 2024). Assessment for

children with special needs is a systematic, in-depth process for understanding their strengths (Binarani et al., 2021).

One approach that is considered relevant to supporting inclusive learning is the Montessori approach. The Montessori philosophy emphasises freedom, independence, and development according to each student's individual rhythm, with teachers acting as facilitators who facilitate their needs so that children can understand concepts through direct experience (Montessori, 2004; Saputra, 2025). This approach has been shown to improve focus, independence, and self-regulation while offering a more humanistic education than traditional education (Frierson, 2021). In Indonesia, the application of Montessori is growing day by day (Farih and Fardana, 2023).

Based on preliminary results, Singaraja Montessori School manages inclusive classes, including the "OPT" class, which has the highest number of children with special needs. This class consists of students with various special needs, ranging from Autism Speech Disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), who study in the same class as other students without special needs. This diverse composition requires differentiated instruction and assessment, which in practice creates a heavy pedagogical burden. English teachers explicitly describe this situation as "overwhelming," which has led them to implement a time-splitting strategy: 30 minutes for regular students and 30 minutes for intensive one-on-one support for students with special needs.

This complexity is further complicated by the gap between national curriculum standards and the reality of student development. On the one hand, the Merdeka curriculum sets specific learning outcomes (CP). For example, second graders should master multiplication and numbers in the hundreds, but in reality, inclusive classrooms show something very different. Preliminary findings indicate that some inclusive students, especially those in second grade, are still struggling with basic numeracy skills, such as thickening numbers, so they are not written upside down. This creates a critical dilemma for teachers: whether to assess students against national learning outcome standards or to prioritize individual developmental stages, which are central to the Montessori philosophy.

In English language learning, classes at this school are bilingual. Teachers don't assess students' abilities through written tests, but rather through how students respond to language in daily activities. Teachers pay attention to whether students understand simple instructions, how the students try out the vocabulary they have learned, and how they act on material containing simple instructions in English. For students with special needs, language development often occurs in a non-linear manner, so observation-based assessment provides a more complete picture and does not put pressure on students like formal tests do.

Furthermore, the dynamics of assessment at Singaraja Montessori School (SMS) are highly dependent on teachers' subjective interpretations. Schools use an internal assessment tool known as NA-C (*Not Applied, Sometimes, Frequently, and Consistent*), which is entirely observation-based and does not use numerical scores. In practice, determining whether students with speech impairments or a short attention span of around 15 minutes have reached the '*consistent*' level or are still at the '*Sometimes*' level requires in-depth and consistent interpretation by teachers.

Various previous studies have examined assessment in inclusive classrooms from different perspectives. Padmadewi et al. (2024) found that although most teachers have a positive attitude toward inclusive education, many still lack adequate training in differentiated assessment strategies. Mirnawati and Jaleha (2024) also revealed that teachers in inclusive elementary schools still face limitations in their understanding of comprehensive assessment procedures, while Hutapea (2024) found that teachers tend to focus on minimum competency standards without differentiating based on students' individual needs. Ratnadi and Adnyani (2023) also note that although EFL teachers strive to modify assessments for students with special needs, barriers persist due to a lack of formal training. These studies were generally conducted in schools with a single curriculum, and there are still few that specifically examine how teachers navigate the Montessori observation-based assessment system and the Merdeka Curriculum simultaneously within a single inclusive classroom. This is the research gap that this study aims to fill.

These internal and external pressures (administrative accountability for Merdeka Curriculum versus the flexible, observation-based nature of Montessori assessment) create unique complexities. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how teachers navigate these challenges. This study aims to explore the ‘*bridge*’ between the two frameworks by analyzing teachers’ perceptions and the specific challenges they face in translating and applying the principles of dual assessment in an inclusive learning environment.

1.2 Problem Identification

Based on the background above, this study identifies several significant problems in assessment practices in inclusive classrooms at SMS. The first major challenge for teachers is the operational gap between national curriculum targets and the realities of student development. Although a Merdeka curriculum has been implemented, teachers often struggle to align general achievement standards, such as the multiplication math in grade 2, with the needs of students with special needs who are still struggling with basic motor skills, such as tracing numbers. In English class, some students in grade 1 and 2 are often still in the pre-writing stage, such as tracing letters of the alphabet. This imbalance forces teachers to rack their brains to manage time through time-splitting strategies, which often leave them feeling overwhelmed in maintaining the quality of assessment for all students.

This study identifies gaps in teachers’ subjectivity in interpreting the Montessori assessment system (NA-C). Although schools have their own assessment systems, the absence of numerical indicators means that assessment validity depends entirely on teachers’ interpretations and perceptions. This is crucial to examine because teachers must account for these personal observations in the government’s formal reporting system. A professional dilemma arises where teachers must navigate between Montessori flexibility and Merdeka curriculum accountability. Without understanding how teachers perceive and interpret these challenges, there is a risk of bias in student assessment. Therefore, exploring teachers’ perceptions is urgent to reveal how these different assessment standards are integrated into practice in inclusive classrooms.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on the explanation above, this study aims to analyse English teachers' perceptions of the interpretation of the Montessori assessment system in inclusive classroom practice, as well as the problems they encounter when combining both approaches. The researcher formulated the following research questions:

1. How do English teachers perceive assessment in a Montessori-based inclusive classroom under the Merdeka Curriculum at Singaraja Montessori School?
2. What challenges do English teachers face in implementing assessment in a Montessori-based inclusive classroom under the Merdeka Curriculum at Singaraja Montessori School?

1.4 Research Objectives

Based on the research questions above, the objectives of this research are:

1. To analyse how English teachers perceive assessment in a Montessori-based inclusive classroom under the Merdeka Curriculum at Singaraja Montessori School.
2. To explore the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing assessment in a Montessori-based inclusive classroom under the Merdeka Curriculum at Singaraja Montessori School

1.5 Research Limitation

Based on the background description and problem identification above, several issues have been identified. This study focuses on two main aspects that are relevant and significant. This study is limited and focused on analyzing the perceptions of English teachers at Singaraja Montessori School (SMS) regarding how they perceive and implement assessment in a Montessori-based inclusive classroom under the Merdeka Curriculum to meet the diverse assessment needs of students with special needs (Down Syndrome, ASD, and ADHD) within the framework of

the Merdeka curriculum. In addition, this study focuses on the challenges teachers face in balancing and integrating the flexible Montessori assessment philosophy with accountability and inclusive assessment reporting requirements. It should be emphasized that this study focuses on teachers' perceptions of assessment and the challenges they face in that context, as expressed directly by the teachers during the interviews. This study does not evaluate the success or effectiveness of the implementation of assessment directly in the field. Concrete recommendations regarding that implementation are presented as suggestions for curriculum development in Chapter V.

1.6 Research Significance

This study offers several benefits expected to contribute both theoretically and in real-world practice, especially to teachers' interpretation and analysis of assessment in inclusive classrooms that combine the Merdeka curriculum with the Montessori approach.

This study is expected to enrich scientific research in English education, particularly regarding assessment in inclusive classrooms implementing the Merdeka Curriculum with a Montessori approach. By analysing English teachers' interpretations of assessment practices and the challenges of combining these approaches, which are the main focus of Research Question 1 and Research Question 2 in this study, this study is expected to make a positive contribution to the development of theories related to alternative assessments, such as the NA-C rubric, inclusive education, and holistic learning approaches. The findings of this research are also expected to fill gaps in the local literature on the implementation of evaluation in Montessori-based inclusive elementary schools throughout Indonesia.

For Teacher

This research can help teachers gain a deeper understanding of how to implement an adaptive non-numerical assessment system (NA-C) for both regular and special-needs students. In addition, the results of this study can help them

reflect on and develop assessment interpretation strategies that are fairer, more valid, and more effective in a classroom that combines two approaches (Merdeka Curriculum and Montessori) as identified in Research Question 2 of this study.

For School

Schools and related parties can utilise this research to develop effective teacher training programs, create more flexible assessment policies, and design assessment systems that accommodate the diversity of students in inclusive classrooms.

For Future Research

This research can serve as a reference for further research on assessment practices in inclusive classrooms, the challenges teachers face in implementing hybrid curricula, and the development of more adaptive assessment designs and strategies for students with diverse learning needs.

