

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

English language learning requires instructional approaches that are not only focused on linguistic competence but also capable of connecting language use with learners' real-life experiences. In many classroom contexts, English is still taught through decontextualized exercises, such as isolated grammar drills or textbook-centered activities, which often limit students' opportunities to meaningfully engage with the language. As a result, students may struggle to understand how English functions effectively beyond the classroom environment; hence, instruction must pivot toward communicative tasks that reflect real-world language use (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). To address this issue, pedagogical approaches that emphasize meaningful learning and real-world relevance have become increasingly important. One such approach is Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), a concept that explicitly assists teachers in relating academic content to real-world situations, thereby enabling students to connect new knowledge with their prior experiences (Johnson, 2002; Muhartini et al., 2023).

CTL is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which views learning as an active process in which learners construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. Muhartini et al. (2023) define CTL as a teaching-learning concept that assists teachers in relating classroom materials to real-world situations, enabling students to connect new knowledge with prior experiences. This perspective positions teachers as facilitators who

design learning experiences that encourage students to actively construct meaning. Similarly, Mailani (2019) explains that CTL promotes student involvement by linking learning materials with personal, social, and cultural contexts. These definitions highlight that CTL is not merely a set of teaching techniques but a pedagogical framework that emphasizes meaningful learning through contextualization.

In the context of English language teaching, CTL is particularly relevant because language learning inherently involves communication in authentic situations. According to communicative language pedagogy, language is acquired most effectively when learners use it to negotiate meaning within genuine, real-life communicative contexts rather than practicing isolated linguistic structures (Harmer, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). When English instruction is contextualized, students are more likely to perceive the relevance of what they are learning and to engage with language as a tool for real communication rather than as an abstract subject. Several studies have reported positive associations between CTL and English learning experiences. For example, Huda (2023) found that students were able to relate reading materials to real-life contexts when CTL principles were applied, Pratama & Sumardi (2022) showed that contextualized materials supported students' comprehension of texts. These studies suggest that CTL facilitates deeper understanding by situating language learning within meaningful contexts. However, such studies often focus on learning outcomes rather than examining the classroom processes through which CTL is enacted.

Beyond cognitive understanding, CTL has also been associated with

non-cognitive aspects of learning, particularly student engagement and motivation. Nababan & Sipayung (2023) argue that students more easily grasp learning concepts when teachers explicitly connect instructional content with real-life experiences. Likewise, Gunawan et al. (2021) report increased student activeness during learning activities when contextual teaching strategies are used. Pardamean et al. (2023) further explain that CTL aligns with indicators of learning motivation because it encourages students to actively participate, ask questions, and relate learning to their daily lives. These findings indicate that CTL has the potential to support not only language comprehension but also meaningful engagement in the learning process. Nevertheless, many of these conclusions are drawn from questionnaire data or experimental designs, which provide limited insight into how engagement and motivation emerge during actual classroom interactions.

The success of CTL depends heavily on how teachers manage their classrooms. Teachers play a key role because they must select contextual materials, design learning activities, and facilitate classroom interactions. This allows students to easily connect language lessons with their own daily experiences. Therefore, instead of just delivering lectures, teachers must act as facilitators who structure the classroom environment to support active, student-centered learning (Berns & Erickson, 2001; Richards, 2017). Previous research shows that teachers can implement CTL through several practical strategies. For instance, Purwantiningsih (2021) highlights experiential learning as a foundational strategy that allows students to learn

English through direct, hands-on experience. However, direct experience alone is not enough. To complement this approach, Simbolon (2014) argues that teachers must use reflection to help students evaluate their experiences and discover the real meaning behind the language. In addition to experiential and reflective learning, teachers can also expand their methods by using inquiry-based techniques. Supporting this idea, Cristilia (2022) demonstrates that combining inquiry strategies with authentic materials, such as recorded everyday conversations, helps students understand real-world language functions rather than just memorizing grammar rules. While these studies describe CTL strategies, they often focus on instructional outcomes rather than closely observing how teachers apply these strategies in everyday classroom practice.

One educational context that has received little attention in CTL research is the Montessori mixed-grade classroom. Montessori education is rooted in constructivist and learner-centered principles, emphasizing independence, experiential learning, and learning through interaction with the environment. To support this active learning style, mixed-grade classrooms, a defining feature of Montessori education, allow students of different ages and abilities to learn together, fostering collaboration, peer learning, and inclusivity. These characteristics align closely with the principles of CTL, particularly the emphasis on learning through real-life contexts and social interaction. Therefore, examining CTL within a Montessori mixed-grade classroom offers a unique opportunity to explore how contextual teaching practices unfold in a learning environment that naturally supports

constructivist learning.

Furthermore, while most previous CTL studies prioritize cognitive outcomes, such as language achievement, this study emphasizes non-cognitive dimensions, including student engagement, intrinsic involvement, and inclusive learning practices. These dimensions are particularly relevant in a Montessori mixed-grade context, where learning is not solely measured by academic outcomes but also by students' participation, interaction, and autonomy. Focusing on non-cognitive aspects allows this study to capture the richness of classroom interaction and to understand how CTL supports meaningful engagement in English language learning.

Despite the large body of literature that proves the benefits of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in English Language Teaching (ELT), there are still some crucial research gaps that have not been widely explored. First, there are very clear methodological and contextual gaps. Most of the literature on CTL that exists today is still dominated by quantitative, experimental, or Classroom Action Research approaches that focus on the statistical effectiveness of CTL in conventional single-grade classrooms. These studies generally evaluated language teaching in a rigidly structured, teacher-centered, and uniform age group. As a result, there is limited qualitative descriptive evidence obtained from direct classroom observation to capture how elements of CTL are naturally applied, adapted, or face challenges in progressive alternative education models.

Second, there is a big gap related to the pedagogical setting and the learning output target. Most empirical research on CTL in ELT prioritizes

cognitive outcomes, such as standardized test scores in reading, writing, or speaking, which are generally studied at the secondary or tertiary education level. Very few studies have examined how CTL intersects with non-cognitive dimensions, such as behavioral engagement, emotional safety, intrinsic motivation, and inclusivity practices, which are the main foundations of early language acquisition. This lack of exploration is increasingly evident in alternative educational settings such as Montessori mixed-grade classrooms (which combine grades 1, 2, and 3), where student heterogeneity is very high, and the instructional process does not rely on performance labeling or traditional ranking systems.

Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in the unique intersection between the context, methodology, and focus of the analysis. Instead of statistically measuring language output in conventional classrooms, this study used in-depth qualitative classroom observations to examine the actual presence of CTL in the Prepared Environment in Montessori multi-age classes. This research shifts the analytical focus from the product to the process, as well as from cognitive test scores to non-cognitive student engagement and tangible field practice. By examining how an educator calibrates contextual teaching strategies for different age groups and different developmental stages simultaneously, this study directly enriches the ELT literature, making new theoretical and practical contributions to constructivist pedagogy in an inclusive and highly heterogeneous alternative learning environment.

Despite the growing body of literature on CTL, several research gaps

can be identified. First, many existing studies emphasize the effectiveness of CTL by measuring learning outcomes, such as test scores or skill improvement, through experimental or quasi-experimental designs (Jubhari et al., 2022; Liunokas, 2023). As a result, there is limited qualitative evidence that captures how CTL is actually present in classroom teaching practices. Second, most CTL studies in English language learning are conducted at the secondary or tertiary education levels, leaving early or alternative educational contexts underexplored. Third, research that employs direct classroom observation to examine CTL in authentic learning environments remains scarce. These gaps indicate a clear need for qualitative studies that focus on classroom processes rather than outcomes. Therefore, by utilizing direct classroom observation in a Montessori mixed-grade environment, this study shifts the analytical focus from cognitive scores to field practices and non-cognitive dimensions, thereby directly addressing these critical gaps in ELT literature.

1.2 Problems identification

Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) has been widely recognized as an instructional approach that promotes meaningful learning by connecting academic content directly with students' real-life experiences. In English language teaching, this approach is highly valuable because it shifts the educational focus from decontextualized grammar drills to authentic communication. By treating language as a functional tool rather than an abstract academic subject, CTL helps young learners construct linguistic understanding naturally within their immediate environment.

In classroom practices, exploring the presence of CTL becomes particularly significant when situated within alternative educational settings, such as a Montessori mixed-grade classroom. At Singaraja Montessori School, the instructional dynamic is unique because students from multiple age groups and grade levels, specifically Grades 1, 2, and 3, are combined into a single learning community known as the Octopus class. This mixed-grade environment naturally exhibits a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of students' cognitive readiness, vocabulary mastery, and individual learning paces. Consequently, examining how contextualized language teaching operates within this specialized framework provides an important pedagogical baseline.

Previous literature on educational practices indicates that implementing CTL in real-world settings involves several documented challenges. Empirical studies have reported that educators frequently face systematic difficulties in consistently aligning external curriculum targets with flexible, learner-centered philosophies. Additionally, researchers have identified operational barriers such as time limitations in selecting authentic instructional resources, variations in teachers' conceptual understanding of CTL components, and the pedagogical complexity of introducing higher-order inquiry tasks to early childhood learners. These challenges in the existing literature indicate that the actual enactment of CTL cannot simply be assumed and requires direct empirical documentation.

Despite the growing body of literature surrounding contextual instruction, a distinct research gap remains. Most previous studies in English

language teaching have primarily focused on measuring the outcomes or statistical effectiveness of CTL through quantitative frameworks, such as experimental designs and questionnaire-based surveys. While these studies provide valuable data on cognitive test scores, they offer limited insight into how CTL is physically enacted during live classroom interactions. There is an evident scarcity of qualitative evidence that captures real-time teacher-student discourse, localized decision-making, and the behavioral or emotional dimensions of student engagement within non-conventional, alternative schooling models.

Therefore, an in-depth qualitative study is explicitly needed to fill these gaps in the literature. Rather than evaluating test scores or assuming predefined pedagogical failures, a direct qualitative investigation is necessary to explore how CTL principles are naturally manifested within the daily routines of a Montessori mixed-grade classroom. By focusing heavily on classroom processes, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive, factual understanding of the specific strategies teachers utilize to facilitate contextual learning, the actual instructional challenges that emerge in a heterogeneous environment, and how student engagement genuinely appears during instruction.

1.3 Problem limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the study is limited to exploring the presence of CTL in English language teaching and does not aim to examine the effectiveness or impact of CTL on students' English achievement. Therefore, the findings of this study are not

intended to make causal claims regarding learning outcomes. Second, this study employs a qualitative classroom observation method. As a result, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalized to other educational settings. The study focuses on providing an in-depth description of teaching practices rather than statistical generalization. Third, the scope of the study is limited to a Montessori mixed-grade classroom. The unique characteristics of this learning environment may influence how CTL is applied in English language teaching. Consequently, the findings may differ from those of studies conducted in conventional classroom settings.

Finally, this study mainly focuses on teachers' classroom practices in applying CTL. Although student engagement is observed as part of the learning process, students are not treated as independent research variables. The observation is conducted within a limited time frame, which may not capture all variations in the application of CTL.

1.4 Research question

1.4.1 What are the teachers' strategies in implementing CTL in the English classroom?

1.4.2 What are the challenges faced by the teacher while implementing CTL in the English classroom?

1.4.3 How are students' engagement and motivation manifested during the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in English language teaching?

1.5 Research objectives

1.5.1 To identify the strategies used by the teachers to implement CTL in

the English classroom.

1.5.2 To identify the challenges faced by the teachers during the implementation of CTL in the English classroom.

1.5.3 To explore how students' engagement and motivation are manifested during the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in English language teaching.

1.6 Benefits of the study

1.6.1 Theoretical benefits

Theoretically, this research makes a significant conceptual contribution to the development of the scientific treasures of language pedagogy, especially in expanding understanding of the application of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) to the early childhood alternative education model. The scientific grounding resulting from this study provides a new specification of Jean Piaget's theory of constructionism and Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), by presenting authentic empirical evidence of how children in grades 1, 2, and 3 actively build English vocabulary through the manipulation of the same three-dimensional object in a cross-age combination class. Through this field practice documentation, this study succeeded in filling the gap in the language pedagogy literature regarding the special adaptation of the relationship of the seven core components of CTL in early childhood. The analytical focus of this study theoretically maps how the components of inquiry and problem-solving are

dynamically modified and adjusted to be in harmony with the cognitive limitations of students who are not yet ready to face abstract linguistic concepts. In addition, this study lays a new theoretical basis for the conceptualization of non-numerical process assessment, by proving that the evaluation of functional life skills can be validly measured without relying on conventional written tests, but through the integration of concrete behavioral indicators in children's daily practical life activities.

1.6.2 Practical benefits

1.6.2.1 For English Educators and Teachers in Alternative Schools.

This study provides tactical guidance in the form of real-world examples of tiered questioning strategies and the application of peer-to-peer modeling. Teachers can use it as a reference to provide the right scaffolding when facing the heterogeneity of students' abilities in heterogeneous inclusion classes.

1.6.2.2 For Teachers and Management of Singaraja Montessori School.

The results of this investigation are a specific empirical evaluation document on how teachers navigate the systemic clash between the flexibility of the Montessori philosophy and the administrative demands of the National Curriculum. This study provides operational recommendations in maintaining a hybrid valuation model using the descriptive scales of Sometimes (S),

Frequently (F), and Consistently (C) without losing external regulatory compliance.

1.6.2.3 For the Development of Environment-Based Teaching Materials (Prepared Environment).

This study provides concrete inspiration for the preparation of English learning plans that utilize the school's physical facilities (such as school grounds and gardens) as well as children's daily routines (such as washing tables or folding clothes) as the main medium of language acquisition that is free from psychological pressure.

1.6.2.4 For Further Researchers.

This study provides a qualitative database and specific field notes on the discourse of teacher-student interaction in the Octopus combination class. This data can be used as a direct comparison for other researchers who want to conduct classroom action research or longitudinal studies related to the non-cognitive impact of CTL on children's intrinsic motivation.