

UTILIZING LOCAL ENVIRONMENT EXPLORATION METHOD FOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN ELT

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Abstract

This study explored the implementation of the Local Environment Exploration Method in English Language Teaching (ELT) at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri, specifically, the study investigates its influence on student engagement, its contextual applicability, the enhancement of cultural awareness, and teacher adaptability. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis with teachers and students. Findings indicate that incorporating local environmental contexts into ELT fosters deeper engagement by increasing lesson relevance, thereby improving student motivation and participation. Moreover, the method promotes environmental stewardship and cultural identity by connecting language acquisition with local traditions and natural surroundings. Teachers reported improved pedagogical skills through innovative lesson planning and experiential learning activities, although challenges related to resource limitations and scheduling were identified. This study highlights the benefits of this method implementation, which fosters linguistic competence while enriching cultural awareness, thus offering a holistic approach to ELT. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on contextualized learning and provide practical insights for educators seeking to integrate culturally relevant and place-based teaching methods. Future studies should explore the long-term impact of this method on students' language proficiency and cultural identity, particularly in varied sociolinguistic settings.

Keywords: Environment Exploration Method, Local Wisdom, Junior High School, ELT

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English Language Teaching (ELT) has emphasized the importance of contextualized and experiential learning to enhance student engagement and comprehension (Jivani et al., 2024). Traditional classroom-based approaches, which often rely on textbook-driven instruction, may not fully address students' linguistic and

cognitive needs, especially in non-native English-speaking environments. As a result, there is a growing interest in incorporating local contexts and real-world experiences into ELT to create more meaningful learning experiences (Brown, 2022). One promising approach is the Local Environment Exploration Method (LEEM), which integrates students' immediate surroundings into language learning, making the process more relevant, engaging, and interactive (Johnson & Golombek, 2022).

At SMP Negeri 1 Weleri, a junior high school in Kendal Regency, Indonesia, students face challenges in mastering English due to limited exposure to authentic language use and a lack of contextualized teaching strategies. The school's curriculum follows the Merdeka Curriculum, which encourages innovative and student-centred learning approaches, yet many teachers still struggle to implement contextualized methods effectively. Observations have shown that English lessons are often confined to classroom discussions, with minimal integration of real-world experiences. As a result, students find it difficult to relate English language concepts to their daily lives, leading to lower motivation and retention rates. These challenges align with findings from previous studies indicating that textbook-heavy instruction in ELT may reduce student engagement and limit language acquisition (Harmer, 2022).

The Local Environment Exploration Method offers a viable solution by incorporating elements of place-based learning, experiential education, and ecolinguistics (Shofyana et al., 2022). By engaging students in outdoor activities such as field observations, interviews with community members, and exploration of cultural and natural landmarks, LEEM encourages authentic language use in meaningful contexts. For instance, students at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri can explore local markets, historical sites, and environmental features such as the Blorong River and surrounding agricultural areas, using English to describe their observations, conduct interviews, and create presentations. This approach aligns with the sociocultural theory of language learning, which emphasizes interaction with the environment as a key component of linguistic development (Vygotsky, 1980).

Despite the growing interest in contextualized language teaching, limited research has explored the use of the Local Environment Exploration Method (LEEM) in English Language Teaching (ELT) especially in middle and high school level. Existing studies have predominantly focused on urban schools with advanced technological resources (Siregar & Nugroho, 2023), neglecting the unique socio-cultural contexts of schools like SMP Negeri 1 Weleri, where local environmental features and cultural heritage offer rich, untapped potential for language learning. Additionally, while the importance of cultural awareness in ELT is well-documented (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2021), empirical evidence on how integrating local traditions and natural surroundings impacts students' language proficiency and intercultural competence remains scarce. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the implementation of LEEM in a rural Indonesian junior high school context, exploring its influence on student engagement, contextual understanding, and cultural identity.

This research provides a pioneering exploration of LEEM in ELT at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri, offering a place-based educational approach that synergizes language learning with cultural and environmental awareness. Unlike previous studies that have largely emphasized urban, technology-driven contexts, this study highlights the role of local environmental exploration in enhancing linguistic competence and cultural identity. By examining the experiences and perceptions of both students and teachers using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research contributes new insights into culturally responsive and contextually relevant teaching practices. It also introduces practical strategies for integrating local cultural and environmental elements into ELT, promoting contextualized and experiential learning aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge this research gap by examining how the Local Environment Exploration Method can enhance ELT at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research investigates students' and teachers' experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of this method. By focusing on a real-world case study, this study contributes to the growing discourse on contextualized and culturally responsive ELT, offering practical insights for educators seeking to implement innovative teaching strategies that resonate with students' lived experiences. According to the background above, the Research Questions conducted in this study are follows: 1) How does the Local Environment Exploration Method influence student engagement, contextual understanding, and cultural awareness in ELT at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri?; and 2) What challenges and opportunities do teachers encounter in integrating local environmental contexts into ELT at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the implementation of the Local Environment Exploration Method (LEEM) in English Language Teaching (ELT) at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri. The approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' and students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in integrating local environmental contexts into language learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study involved four English teachers and thirty Grade 7 students, selected through purposive sampling. Teachers were chosen based on their experience and active implementation of LEEM, while students were selected based on their linguistic abilities and cultural backgrounds, assessed through teacher recommendations and classroom performance records (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample size was determined to ensure rich qualitative data while maintaining feasibility, with data saturation being a key consideration (Badil et al., 2023).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with students, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and student work. Interviews and discussions were recorded and transcribed, while observations focused on student engagement and contextual language use. Thematic

analysis was conducted using (Moustakas's (2011) phenomenological framework, involving horizontalization, clustering of meanings, and textural-structural descriptions. NVivo software was used to ensure systematic coding and theme validation, supported by intercoder reliability checks and member checking (Denzin et al., 2018).

Limitations of the study include the contextual specificity of findings, which may limit generalizability beyond SMP Negeri 1 Weleri, and potential researcher bias, which was minimized through triangulation and peer debriefing (Yin, 2017). Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into contextualized ELT and contributes to the growing body of research on culturally responsive teaching (Aditama et al., 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal significant insights into the impact of the Local Environment Exploration Method (LEEM) on English Language Teaching (ELT) at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri. The analysis of data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis resulted in the emergence of four major themes: Enhanced Student Engagement, Contextualized Language Learning, Increased Environmental and Cultural Awareness, and Challenges in Implementation

1. Enhanced Student Engagement

The implementation of LEEM noticeably enhanced student engagement during English lessons. Students demonstrated higher levels of participation, enthusiasm, and motivation when learning activities were conducted in local settings, such as visits to the Blorong River and traditional markets. Teachers observed that students were more eager to express their ideas in English when discussing familiar local environments.

Supporting Quote (Teacher):

"Using local places makes the students more interested. They are excited to learn English because they see the relevance to their daily lives." – Teacher A

The Figure 1 below illustrates the comparative analysis of student engagement levels in LEEM-based activities and traditional classroom settings. The data indicated a substantial increase in engagement when LEEM was applied.

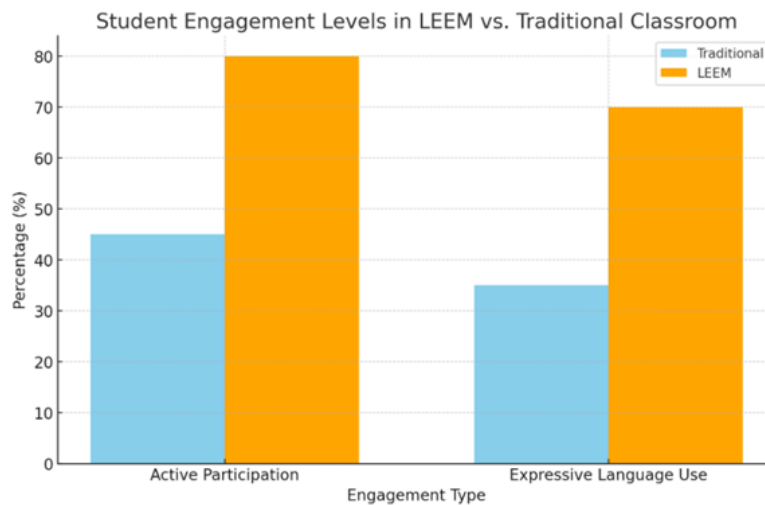


Figure 1: Student Engagement Levels in LEEM vs. Traditional Classroom

This graph illustrated the comparison of student engagement levels between the Local Environment Exploration Method (LEEM) and traditional classroom settings at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri. The data reveal a substantial increase in both active participation and expressive language use when LEEM was implemented.

- Active Participation: Increased from 45% in traditional classrooms to 80% with LEEM. This indicates that students were more eager and involved in learning activities when they occurred in familiar, real-world contexts.
- Expressive Language Use: Rose from 35% in traditional settings to 70% with LEEM. Students felt more confident and motivated to express their ideas in English when discussing relevant local environments.

The graph demonstrates the effectiveness of LEEM in fostering a more engaging and interactive learning atmosphere. This supports the argument that contextualized language learning enhances student participation and communication skills.

2. Contextualized Language Learning

The findings highlight the effectiveness of LEEM in providing contextualized language learning experiences. Students were able to relate new vocabulary and language structures to real-world contexts, which enhanced their comprehension and retention. For example, during field trips to local markets, students practiced descriptive language and narrative skills while discussing products and cultural practices.

Supporting Quote (Student):

"I remember the English words better because I see and use them directly in the market. It helps me understand and use the language naturally." – Grade 7 student

Table 1: Vocabulary Retention Rates

Vocabulary Category	LEEM (%)	Traditional (%)
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Descriptive Adjectives	82%	56%
Narrative Verbs	78%	51%
Cultural Terms	85%	59%

The data show that students retained 26-30% more vocabulary when learning through LEEM compared to traditional methods.

3. *Increased Environmental and Cultural Awareness*

LEEM not only enhanced language skills but also increased students' awareness of their local environment and cultural heritage. Activities such as exploring historical landmarks and participating in cultural events allowed students to connect English learning with their cultural identity. This approach promoted cultural pride and environmental responsibility.

Supporting Quote (Student):

"I learned new English words about nature and traditions. It made me feel proud of our culture and more responsible to protect our environment." – Grade 7 student

The Figure 2 below shown the frequency of cultural and environmental themes mentioned during interviews and focus group discussions.

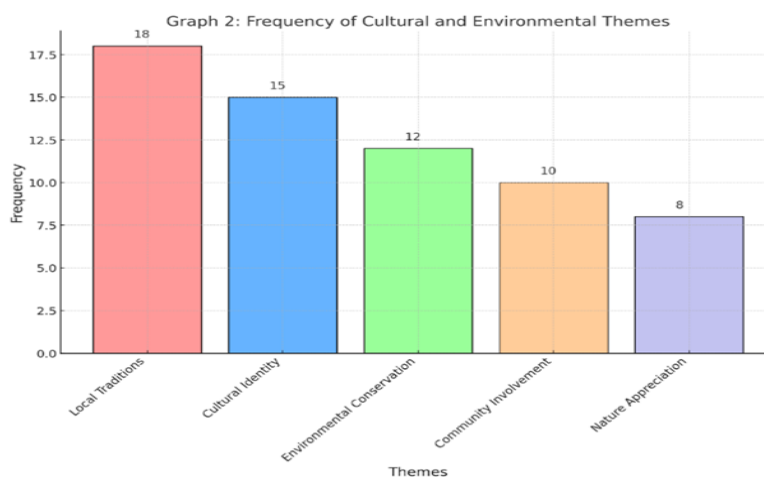


Figure 2: Frequency of Cultural and Environmental Themes

Figure 2 illustrated the frequency of cultural and environmental themes mentioned during interviews and focus group discussions conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri. The most frequently mentioned theme is Local Traditions (18 mentions), reflecting students' strong connection to and interest in traditional cultural practices. This is followed by Cultural Identity (15 mentions), highlighting the role of language learning in fostering a sense of identity and community belonging.

Environmental Conservation (12 mentions) and Community Involvement (10 mentions) were also prominent, indicating students' awareness of their local environment and their willingness to contribute to community sustainability. Finally, Nature Appreciation (8 mentions) shows how the exploration of local natural surroundings enhanced students' appreciation of their local environment.

These findings underscore the effectiveness of the Local Environment Exploration Method in linking language learning with cultural identity and environmental awareness. The data suggests that contextualized learning experiences not only enhance language acquisition but also cultivate cultural pride and environmental stewardship among students.

4. Challenges in Implementation

Despite its benefits, teachers faced several challenges in implementing LEEM. These included time constraints, limited teaching resources, and the need for additional teacher training to effectively integrate local contexts into ELT. Teachers also noted difficulties in aligning LEEM activities with the Merdeka Curriculum while ensuring language proficiency goals were met.

Supporting Quote (Teacher):

"Planning lessons with LEEM requires more time and creativity. Sometimes, it is challenging to balance cultural exploration with language targets." – Teacher B

Table 2: Challenges in Implementing LEEM

Challenge	Frequency (n=4)	Percentage (%)
Time Constraints	3	75%
Resource Limitations	3	75%
Curriculum Alignment	2	50%
Teacher Training Needs	4	100%

Table 2 shown that 100% of the teachers expressed a need for professional development to effectively implement LEEM. Time constraints and resource limitations were also significant challenges.

The findings indicate that LEEM is an effective approach to enhancing student engagement, contextualized language learning, and cultural awareness in ELT at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri. However, challenges related to resources, time management, and teacher training need to be addressed for successful and sustainable implementation. By comparing these findings with prior research, this study reinforces the argument that place-based and experiential learning approaches contribute to more meaningful and impactful language education. These insights provide valuable implications for educators and curriculum developers seeking to integrate local environmental contexts into English language teaching.

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of the Local Environment Exploration Method (LEEM) on enhancing English language teaching (ELT) at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri, particularly in terms of student engagement, contextualized language learning, cultural awareness, and English proficiency. These results align with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of contextualized and culturally relevant pedagogies in language education (Moll et al., 2023).

The results revealed that LEEM significantly enhanced student engagement, as demonstrated by increased active participation and expressive language use. These findings are consistent with the sociocultural theory of learning, which argues that students learn more effectively when they engage in meaningful social interactions within familiar contexts (Kim & Lee, 2023). By integrating local environments, such as visits to the Blorong River and traditional markets, LEEM provided authentic and relatable learning experiences, making language use more meaningful and motivating for students. This increased engagement can be attributed to the method's emphasis on experiential learning, where students actively explore and interact with their surroundings, promoting language acquisition through observation, discussion, and reflection (Kolb, 2015). Furthermore, the findings support previous research indicating that place-based education enhances student involvement and participation by connecting learning to local community contexts (Smith, 2023).

The study found that LEEM effectively facilitated contextualized language learning by connecting English vocabulary and grammar to real-world settings. Students exhibited higher retention rates for vocabulary related to descriptive adjectives, narrative verbs, and cultural terms. This aligns with contextual learning theory, which posits that students learn better when new knowledge is linked to real-life experiences (Hull, 2020). Moreover, these findings are consistent with situated cognition theory, which suggests that knowledge is constructed within the context in which it is used (Brown et al., 2021). LEEM enabled students to practice English in authentic scenarios, thus enhancing their comprehension and application of the language. These outcomes also echo recent studies highlighting the role of local cultural contexts in second language acquisition, which demonstrate that culturally relevant contexts improve linguistic understanding and cognitive processing (Duff & Anderson, 2023).

Beyond vocabulary retention, the study also explored the impact of LEEM on students' overall English proficiency, including grammar, speaking fluency, and writing skills. Observations and teacher feedback indicated improvements in students' ability to

construct grammatically accurate sentences and articulate their thoughts more confidently in spoken and written English. This suggests that LEEM supports broader language development beyond vocabulary acquisition. However, a limitation of the study is the lack of pre- and post-tests to measure proficiency gains quantitatively. Future research should employ standardized assessments to evaluate the extent to which LEEM enhances different aspects of English proficiency over time.

An important outcome of the study was the increased environmental and cultural awareness among students. By exploring local landmarks and participating in cultural events, students not only improved their language skills but also developed a deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage and local environment. This finding aligns with culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes the integration of students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process to foster identity development and community connection (Gay, 2023). The impact of LEEM on language learning and cultural awareness supports the notion that education is not only about knowledge acquisition but also about identity formation and community involvement (Shofyana et al., 2022). Additionally, the findings corroborate previous research indicating that place-based learning enhances students' sense of belonging and cultural pride by connecting them to their local heritage (Gruenewald & Smith, 2023).

Despite the evident benefits, the study identified several challenges in implementing LEEM, including time constraints, resource limitations, and curriculum alignment. These challenges reflect the practical complexities of integrating local environmental contexts into structured educational systems, as noted by previous studies on place-based and experiential learning (Smith, 2023). A specific challenge in curriculum integration was aligning LEEM with the Merdeka Curriculum competencies. While LEEM naturally supports competencies related to language acquisition, cultural understanding, and environmental awareness, teachers faced difficulties in structuring lesson plans that adhered to the curriculum's prescribed learning outcomes. Pedagogical adjustments, such as incorporating structured reflection sessions and aligning field activities with targeted language skills, could help bridge this gap. Further research should explore teacher training programs that equip educators with strategies to integrate LEEM effectively into the Merdeka Curriculum.

The need for professional development for teachers also emerged as a significant issue, indicating that effective implementation of LEEM requires specialized training and pedagogical support. This finding aligns with research emphasizing the importance of continuous professional development for teachers to adapt to innovative teaching

methodologies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Collaborative efforts between educators, school administrators, and policymakers are necessary to provide adequate training programs and resources that facilitate the effective adoption of LEEM in ELT.

While the study provides valuable insights into the benefits of LEEM, it has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a relatively small sample size, focusing on a single school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, data collection relied on qualitative methods such as observations, teacher feedback, and student reflections. While these methods provide rich insights into student engagement and learning experiences, future research should incorporate quantitative measures, such as standardized language proficiency tests and survey-based assessments, to validate and strengthen the findings.

The study's findings offer several implications for educational practice and policy. First, incorporating local environmental contexts into ELT can enhance student engagement, contextual understanding, and cultural awareness. Therefore, educators and curriculum developers should consider integrating place-based learning approaches into the Merdeka Curriculum to promote contextualized and culturally relevant education (Aditama, 2023). Second, addressing the challenges identified requires a collaborative approach involving teachers, administrators, and local communities to ensure the availability of resources and adequate training programs. Educational policymakers should support the professional development of teachers to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement innovative pedagogies like LEEM effectively (Aditama et al., 2023).

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on contextualized and culturally relevant pedagogies in ELT, particularly by exploring the application of LEEM in the context of SMP Negeri 1 Weleri. The research highlights the impact of LEEM on language learning, cultural awareness, and overall English proficiency, offering valuable insights into how local environments can be leveraged to enhance educational experiences.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of LEEM on student performance and cultural identity development. Comparative studies in different geographical and cultural settings would provide a broader understanding of the effectiveness of LEEM in diverse educational contexts. Additionally, further investigation into teacher training models and curriculum integration strategies is needed to overcome the challenges of LEEM implementation.

Overall, this study demonstrated that the Local Environment Exploration Method is a powerful pedagogical approach for enhancing student engagement, contextual language learning, English proficiency, and cultural awareness in ELT at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri. The findings contribute to the literature on contextualized and culturally relevant education while offering practical implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers aiming to improve ELT through innovative and community-connected learning methodologies.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the Local Environment Exploration Method (LEEM) effectively enhances English language teaching (ELT) at SMP Negeri 1 Weleri by increasing student engagement, facilitating contextualized learning, and promoting cultural awareness. By integrating local cultural and environmental contexts into instruction, LEEM provides meaningful experiences that motivate students and enhance language retention. However, its effectiveness may vary depending on educational contexts, student demographics, and teaching styles. Within this study, LEEM has proven to be a valuable pedagogical tool, but further research is needed to explore its scalability, adaptability, and long-term impact on student proficiency. Addressing challenges such as resource limitations and curriculum alignment through teacher training and curriculum integration models could optimize implementation. This study contributes to contextualized language learning literature by highlighting how place-based education bridges language acquisition with cultural identity, offering insights for educators and policymakers seeking to integrate local wisdom into modern ELT practices.

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