



Discontinuity in Prior English Learning and Its Impact on Seventh Graders' Motivation

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Abstract

The removal of English as a compulsory subject at the elementary level under the Kurikulum Merdeka has created discontinuities in students' prior English learning, leaving many seventh graders unevenly prepared as they transition to junior high school. This study investigates how such discontinuity affects students' motivation to learn English. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the research was conducted in four public junior high schools in East Bintan. Participants included 8–16 seventh-grade students and 4–8 English teachers, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model to identify recurring themes and patterns. Findings reveal that students with prior exposure to English exhibited greater emotional confidence, cognitive persistence, and behavioral participation, while those without such experience reported anxiety, low self-efficacy, and reluctance to engage. Teachers also observed that motivational disparities disrupted lesson flow and demanded additional scaffolding to sustain participation. This study contributes to the understanding that discontinuity undermines students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral motivation, creating unequal starting points in English learning at junior high school. It further emphasizes the need for bridging strategies, such as differentiated instruction, remedial support, peer-assisted learning, and teacher professional development, while also stressing the role of systemic policy support in sustaining motivation and ensuring equitable opportunities in English language education.

Keywords: Kurikulum Merdeka, discontinuity, English learning, motivation, engagement

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INTRODUCTION

The introduction of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia has reshaped English language instruction, particularly at the elementary level. While the policy aims to reduce early academic pressure by making English optional until 2027 (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia., 2022), it has unintentionally created discontinuity in students' early language exposure. Many students enter junior high school with a minimal or no prior foundation in English, resulting in significant disparities in readiness and motivation (Ridwanulloh et al., 2024; Wilson & Nurkhamidah, 2023).

Motivation plays a vital role in successful language learning, influencing persistence, resilience, and willingness to participate in classroom activities Umpung et al. (2023). However, when students encounter English for the first time in Grade 7, they often perceive it as a difficult subject, which lowers their emotional and cognitive engagement. Studies have shown that learners lacking early exposure to English tend to experience decreased self-confidence, leading to lower academic achievement and disengagement from classroom activities Julianti et al. (2025). In this context, teachers are expected to design innovative strategies to close learning gaps and sustain motivation Anisah and Qamariah (2023). Yet, uneven student readiness and limited teacher training Tohamba & Ansyar (2025) make it difficult to achieve equitable learning outcomes.

Research on discontinuity in English learning emphasizes that interruptions in instruction can affect not only cognitive development but also affective domains, including motivation and self-efficacy ((Mulyani, 2022); (Sianturi, 2025)). In the case of East Bintan, these challenges are further complicated by socioeconomic disparities, which amplify the effects of discontinuity. While earlier studies have examined the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* broadly ((Mulyani R et al., 2023); (Hikmawati et al., 2024); (Telaumbanua, 2024), few have specifically investigated how discontinuity in English instruction impacts student motivation in junior high school classrooms. This study addresses this gap by focusing on how limited prior exposure shapes emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of motivation.

The novelty of this study lies in its examination of motivation as a multidimensional construct. Rather than treating motivation as a single factor, it highlights how discontinuity disrupts students' emotional confidence, cognitive persistence, and behavioral participation. The East Bintan context adds further originality, as the intersection of curriculum policy and socioeconomic disparities has received limited scholarly attention.

Student engagement provides an important theoretical lens for this study. Engagement is understood in three dimensions: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral, each of which is highly vulnerable when students begin English without prior exposure. Classroom practices further mediate these dynamics, as teachers' strategies and interactions can either bridge motivational gaps or inadvertently widen them. The variation in classroom practices in East Bintan thus becomes central to understanding how discontinuity translates into differences in student motivation.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate how discontinuity in prior English instruction impacts the motivation of seventh graders in East Bintan, with specific attention to how limited exposure influences their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement in English learning. By addressing this issue, the study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on motivation in second language learning by situating it in a context of policy-driven discontinuity. Practically, it offers insights for teachers, schools, and policymakers to design bridging strategies such as differentiated instruction, remedial programs, peer-assisted learning, and teacher professional development that can sustain student motivation. Moreover, it underscores the need for systemic policy support to ensure equitable opportunities in English education.

II METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how discontinuity in prior English instruction shapes the motivation of seventh-grade students in East Bintan. A case study approach was selected to capture students' lived experiences, providing in-depth insights into how policy-driven discontinuities affect their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. This design aligns with the constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2022).

The research was conducted in four public junior high schools in East Bintan District, Riau Islands Province: SMPN 1 Bintan, SMPN 2 Bintan, SMPN 3 Bintan, and SMPN 4 Bintan. These schools were selected because they represent diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and implement the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, where English is introduced as a compulsory subject only at the junior high level. Participants consisted of seventh grade students and English teachers selected through purposive sampling. A total of 8–16 students and 4–8 teachers participated, ensuring varied perspectives based on different levels of prior English exposure. Students without any English instruction in elementary school were included to represent the most significant discontinuity, while those with limited extracurricular exposure provided comparative insights. Teachers were selected based on their direct involvement in teaching Grade 7 English.

Data were collected using three instruments: classroom observations, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations focused on students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement during lessons, using checklists with indicators such as persistence, participation, and enthusiasm. Questionnaires for both students and teachers captured perceptions of motivation, confidence, and the impact of prior English exposure. Interviews were conducted with selected students and teachers to explore deeper insights into how discontinuity shaped confidence, self-efficacy, and willingness to participate.

The procedure was carried out in three stages. First, classroom observations were conducted across multiple English lessons in each school, documenting student behavior and teacher strategies. Second, questionnaires were distributed to all participating students and teachers to triangulate observational findings. Finally, interviews were conducted in a flexible, conversational style, allowing participants to share their experiences freely and provide nuanced accounts of motivational dynamics. Classroom observations were conducted over several weeks to capture consistent patterns rather than isolated incidents, while interviews were scheduled at different times to accommodate participants' availability.

Triangulation was applied at several levels to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Method triangulation was achieved by combining three different instruments: classroom observation, questionnaire, and interview, so that data could be cross-verified. Data triangulation was ensured by collecting perspectives from both students and teachers, enabling a more balanced understanding of classroom dynamics. Time triangulation was also applied by extending classroom observations over several weeks, allowing the researcher to identify consistent patterns rather than isolated events. This multi-layered triangulation minimized bias and ensured that the interpretations reflected authentic classroom realities.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from both teachers and students, and all identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Protecting privacy was particularly important because motivation and engagement involve sensitive issues related to students' self-perceptions and teachers' professional practices.

Data analysis followed Miles et al. (2014) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Codes and themes were developed around three

key categories: motivation (confidence, anxiety, persistence, self-efficacy), engagement (emotional, cognitive, behavioral indicators), and classroom practices (teacher strategies, scaffolding, classroom management). Triangulation across instruments, participants, and time strengthened the validity of interpretations and ensured that the findings remained grounded in the study's theoretical framework.

This methodological design enabled the study to capture not only what students did in the classroom but also how they felt about learning English and how teachers navigated the challenges of discontinuity. By combining multiple sources of data and aligning analysis with the theoretical framework, the study provides a credible and nuanced account of how curriculum discontinuity shapes motivation and engagement in junior high English classrooms.

III RESULT

The findings revealed that discontinuity in prior English learning shaped students' motivation and engagement in East Bintan. Students with some exposure to English before junior high school generally demonstrated higher confidence, persistence, and willingness to participate, while those encountering English for the first time displayed anxiety, low self-efficacy, and reluctance to engage. These patterns are presented in three interrelated themes: students' motivation, emotional and cognitive engagement, and behavioral engagement, alongside teachers' practices.

3.1 Student Motivation in the Context of Discontinuity

Motivational differences were most apparent at the beginning of Grade 7, when students without prior exposure expressed uncertainty and nervousness in facing English lessons. They often preferred to remain silent rather than risk embarrassment. One student explained, *"I am afraid of making mistakes, so I prefer to stay quiet."* Such fear reduced their willingness to engage, leading them to view English as a difficult and intimidating subject.

In contrast, students with some prior exposure, whether through private courses, tutoring, or informal family support, showed higher levels of curiosity and readiness. They were more comfortable answering teachers' questions and demonstrated a stronger desire to participate, even when unsure of the correct answer. A student with prior exposure shared, *"It is okay to make mistakes, because I can learn again later."* This attitude illustrates how early learning experiences created a motivational advantage that enabled students to see challenges as opportunities rather than threats.

Teachers frequently emphasized that prior exposure was a strong predictor of motivation. One teacher remarked, *"Students who learned English before, even just a little, are more enthusiastic and brave. Those without any background feel lost at the beginning."* These contrasting experiences underline how discontinuity shaped students' confidence and willingness to engage in English learning.

3.2 Emotional and Cognitive Engagement

Emotional engagement was significantly affected by discontinuity. Students without an English background often looked tense, especially during speaking activities, avoiding eye contact and relying on peers to answer. Their discomfort reduced the enjoyment of the lessons. In contrast, students with prior learning smiled, laughed with peers during group tasks, and showed enthusiasm in interacting with teachers, indicating greater emotional investment in learning.

Cognitive engagement also differed between groups. Students lacking exposure struggled with basic vocabulary and sentence structures, frequently giving up before completing tasks. As one explained, *"When I do not understand the words, I just stop because it is too difficult."* Such behavior indicated low persistence and a tendency to withdraw. By contrast, students with prior

experience employed active strategies such as guessing meaning from context, asking clarifying questions, and linking new information to their existing knowledge. One student expressed, *“If I don’t know the answer, I try to guess or ask the teacher.”*

Teachers confirmed these differences, explaining that inexperienced students often waited for direct answers, while others engaged more actively. This uneven readiness produced a visible gap in cognitive participation and shaped the classroom dynamic.

3.3 Behavioral Engagement and Classroom Participation

Behavioral patterns provided further evidence of the impact of discontinuity. Students with prior English learning participated actively in pair and group work, volunteered answers, and consistently submitted assignments on time. Their active involvement reflected both higher motivation and stronger readiness.

By contrast, students without prior exposure often required repeated encouragement to participate. Teachers described them as passive and hesitant. One teacher explained, *“Students who never learned English before tend to be passive; they always wait for instructions.”* Classroom observations confirmed this: during a vocabulary-matching activity, inexperienced students sat silently until prompted multiple times, while their peers quickly volunteered answers. Such passivity reduced practice opportunities and created long-term disadvantages. Teachers observed that students who withdrew from activities often made slower progress, reinforcing the motivational gap between groups.

These contrasts across emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and motivational dimensions are summarized in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Comparison of Motivation and Engagement between Students with and without Prior English Learning

Aspect	With Prior Exposure	Without Exposure
Emotional	More confident, enthusiastic, and willing to take risks	Anxious, hesitant, low confidence
Cognitive	Persistent, uses simple strategies, connects with prior knowledge	Easily frustrated, lacks foundation, gives up quickly
Behavioral	Active participation, collaborative, volunteer answers	Passive, needs prompting, avoids tasks
Overall Motivation	Stable, positive, relatively independent	Fragile, inconsistent, highly dependent on teacher support

3.4 Teachers’ Observations of Motivation

Teachers consistently identified motivational differences as the most pressing classroom challenge. To address this, they often slowed the pace of lessons, repeated basic material, and provided additional scaffolding for students without prior experience. One teacher remarked, *“I have to repeat basic material many times so that they are willing to try.”* Another observed, *“Students who took courses are usually braver and more curious.”*

While these strategies were necessary, they also disrupted lesson flow and increased teachers’ workload. Balancing the needs of two very different groups required continuous adaptation and creativity. Teachers acknowledged that differentiated instruction and extra

encouragement were vital to sustaining participation, but they also recognized the limitations of such approaches when faced with large motivational gaps.

IV DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the discontinuity of English instruction at the elementary level exerts a profound influence on the motivation and engagement of seventh-grade students in East Bintan. The evidence shows that students with some prior exposure to English entered junior high school with greater confidence, persistence, and willingness to take part in classroom activities, while those encountering the subject for the first time reported feelings of anxiety, reluctance, and low self-efficacy. These patterns confirm that curriculum decisions at the policy level translate directly into students' lived classroom experiences. In the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the removal of English as a compulsory subject until junior high school has unintentionally generated disparities in learning readiness that extend beyond academic performance and into the affective domains of student motivation.

The motivational differences observed between students with and without prior English learning can be understood through the constructivist lens of Merriam and Tisdell (2022), which emphasizes that learning is constructed through the interaction between previous knowledge, new experiences, and the social environment. Students who had engaged with English earlier, even in limited forms such as private courses or family support, arrived with schemas that enabled them to make connections with new content. This prior knowledge created a sense of readiness and reduced the fear of making mistakes, allowing them to participate more actively. In contrast, those without any foundation struggled to situate new knowledge within an existing framework, which heightened anxiety and reduced their willingness to engage. These findings highlight how discontinuity undermines the co-construction of knowledge, limiting the potential for meaningful interaction between learners, peers, and teachers.

The affective dimension of learning emerged as particularly vulnerable to discontinuity. Emotional engagement was noticeably lower among students without prior exposure, who often appeared tense, avoided eye contact, and hesitated to respond to teachers' questions. Such behaviors reflect not only linguistic challenges but also psychological barriers rooted in fear of failure and lack of confidence. Conversely, students with early exposure displayed enthusiasm, laughter, and curiosity, indicating positive emotions that support persistence in the face of challenges. This contrast demonstrates how early experiences shape students' emotional orientation toward learning, with prior exposure serving as a protective factor that buffers against anxiety. These findings align with Mulyani (2022) and Sianturi (2025), who argue that disruptions in instructional continuity affect not only cognitive growth but also motivational and emotional domains that are central to successful learning.

Cognitive engagement followed a similar pattern. Students without prior English instruction struggled with basic vocabulary and sentence structures, frequently abandoning tasks when they became difficult. Their reliance on translation and teacher assistance revealed a lack of independent strategies for problem-solving. On the other hand, students with some background knowledge demonstrated greater persistence, attempting to guess meanings, ask clarifying questions, and relate new information to what they already knew. These behaviors illustrate how prior exposure equips learners not only with knowledge but also with strategies that sustain engagement. In the constructivist framework, such behaviors represent active meaning-making processes, while their absence reveals the vulnerability of learners who begin without any foundation. The study thus adds to existing evidence that discontinuity does not simply delay linguistic development but also limits the acquisition of cognitive strategies necessary for autonomous learning.

Behavioral engagement further illustrates how discontinuity shapes classroom dynamics. Students with prior learning experiences volunteered answers, collaborated in group work, and completed assignments on time, reflecting both motivation and readiness. By contrast, inexperienced students often required repeated prompting, hesitated to participate, and withdrew from tasks they perceived as too challenging. Teachers consistently described these students as passive and dependent, noting that such behaviors reduced practice opportunities and slowed overall progress. The persistence of passivity also created visible divisions within classrooms, where active students advanced more quickly while their peers fell behind. This pattern

demonstrates that discontinuity fosters unequal opportunities for participation, which in turn reinforces differences in learning outcomes.

Teachers' perspectives provided further insight into how discontinuity affects classroom practices. They frequently reported slowing lesson pacing, repeating basic material, and providing additional scaffolding to encourage participation from inexperienced learners. While such strategies were necessary, they disrupted the flow of lessons and increased workload, leaving teachers with the constant challenge of balancing the needs of two very different groups. This finding resonates with Hikmawati et al. (2024) and Telaumbanua (2024), who emphasized that while the *Kurikulum Merdeka* offers flexibility, it also risks creating inequities if teachers are not adequately supported. The current study illustrates this tension vividly: teachers are expected to bridge systemic gaps through classroom strategies alone, but without policy-level support, their efforts are often insufficient to equalize motivational differences.

These findings highlight the close relationship between curriculum design, student motivation, and classroom practice. By making English optional at the elementary level, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* inadvertently created a motivational gap that teachers must manage in junior high school. Students with prior exposure arrived prepared to engage, while those without struggled to find confidence, persistence, and enjoyment in learning. The role of teachers in mediating these dynamics is central but also limited, as they cannot fully compensate for years of absent exposure. This suggests that policy-level decisions about curriculum continuity are not merely administrative but have real consequences for student psychology and classroom dynamics. Merriam and Tisdell (2022) constructivist view supports this interpretation, as it underscores the interdependence of learner readiness, instructional practices, and social context in shaping learning outcomes.

In addition to reinforcing previous research, the study contributes a new perspective by situating motivation and engagement as central mechanisms through which discontinuity operates. Earlier studies have focused primarily on cognitive or achievement outcomes, but the present findings demonstrate that emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement are equally disrupted. The motivational disadvantage of inexperienced learners was visible not only in their test performance but in their hesitation to speak, reluctance to persist, and tendency to withdraw from group activities. These behaviors reflect the broader impact of discontinuity on the affective life of classrooms, suggesting that any attempt to address achievement gaps must also consider the psychological readiness of learners.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate context of East Bintan. If students continue to experience motivational disadvantages due to lack of prior exposure, the effects are likely to persist into higher grades, limiting long-term language development. This trajectory risks creating cumulative disadvantages, where students who begin behind remain behind, regardless of subsequent instruction. Addressing this issue requires systemic solutions that bridge the gap between elementary and junior high school. Differentiated instruction, peer-assisted learning, and remedial programs can provide short-term support, but without continuity in the curriculum, such strategies remain limited in scope. The reintroduction of English at the elementary level, as suggested by several policymakers, may therefore be essential for ensuring equitable learning opportunities.

Ultimately, the study highlights the interconnectedness of curriculum policy, student motivation, and classroom practice. Discontinuity in prior English learning reduces students' confidence, persistence, and participation, while simultaneously increasing the burden on teachers to provide individualized support. These dynamics underscore the importance of considering both cognitive and affective domains in evaluating the effects of educational reform. By applying a constructivist framework, the study demonstrates that meaningful learning requires continuity of exposure, opportunities for co-construction, and equitable access to foundational experiences. The contribution of this research lies in showing that discontinuity affects not only knowledge acquisition but also the very willingness of students to engage in the process of learning, making it a critical issue for both theory and practice in language education.

V CONCLUSION

This study has shown that discontinuity in prior English learning under Kurikulum Merdeka significantly influences seventh graders' motivation and engagement in East Bintan. Students with prior exposure demonstrated greater confidence, persistence, and willingness to participate, while those without such experience experienced anxiety, low self-efficacy, and hesitation. These differences disrupted emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement, creating unequal learning experiences within the same classrooms.

The findings further indicate that teachers play a pivotal role in mediating these motivational disparities. While they employed scaffolding, repetition, and differentiated strategies to support unprepared students, such practices often disrupted the lesson flow and increased workload. This suggests that discontinuity functions not only as an individual student challenge but also as a systemic issue that constrains teaching effectiveness and classroom dynamics.

Based on these insights, several recommendations can be made. At the classroom level, teachers should integrate differentiated instruction, remedial programs, and structured peer-assisted learning to foster confidence and reduce passivity among less-prepared students. Schools can also develop bridging activities at the start of Grade 7 to equalize student readiness and sustain engagement. At the policy level, professional development for teachers and stronger curriculum alignment between elementary and junior high schools are essential to minimize motivational gaps. Such efforts will not only enhance student engagement but also promote more equitable outcomes in English language learning under Kurikulum Merdeka.

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