

Talent Mapping in Fun English for Differentiated Learning at Islamic Schools

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Abstract. This study examines how structured talent mapping can support the implementation of differentiated English learning through Fun English activities at the elementary school level. Although Fun English programs are widely used to create engaging learning environments, their implementation is often conducted uniformly and does not fully consider students' diverse talents and learning characteristics. This study aims to identify teachers' strategies in recognizing students' potential talents through Fun English activities and to analyze how such identification contributes to improving the quality of English learning. The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted in an Islamic elementary school. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with the school principal and English teacher, and analysis of instructional documents. The findings reveal that talent identification is generally carried out informally and is not systematically documented, resulting in relatively homogeneous learning activities. Consequently, students' participation and confidence in using English develop unevenly. These findings highlight the importance of integrating structured talent mapping to promote more differentiated, inclusive, and student-centered English learning in Islamic elementary education.

Keywords: Fun English Program, Talent Mapping, Differentiated Learning, Student Potential, Qualitative Case Study

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menganalisis peran pemetaan bakat terstruktur dalam mendukung pembelajaran bahasa Inggris terdiferensiasi melalui program Fun English di tingkat sekolah dasar. Program Fun English sering digunakan untuk menciptakan suasana belajar yang menyenangkan, namun pelaksanaannya masih cenderung seragam dan belum banyak mempertimbangkan keragaman bakat serta karakteristik belajar siswa. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji strategi identifikasi potensi bakat siswa dalam kegiatan Fun English serta menelaah kontribusinya terhadap peningkatan kualitas pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus yang dilaksanakan di sebuah madrasah ibtidaiyah. Data diperoleh melalui observasi kegiatan pembelajaran, wawancara mendalam dengan kepala madrasah dan guru bahasa Inggris, serta analisis dokumentasi pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa identifikasi bakat siswa umumnya masih dilakukan secara informal dan belum terdokumentasi secara sistematis, sehingga pembelajaran cenderung bersifat homogen. Kondisi ini menyebabkan tingkat keterlibatan dan kepercayaan diri siswa dalam menggunakan bahasa Inggris berkembang secara tidak merata. Temuan penelitian menegaskan pentingnya integrasi pemetaan bakat yang terstruktur untuk mendukung pembelajaran bahasa Inggris yang lebih terdiferensiasi, inklusif, dan berpusat pada siswa di pendidikan dasar Islam.

Kata kunci: Program Fun English, Pemetaan Bakat, Pembelajaran Terdiferensiasi, Potensi Siswa, Studi Kasus Kualitatif

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INTRODUCTION

Education in the twenty-first century increasingly emphasizes the development of learners' holistic potential rather than focusing solely on academic achievement. Students enter classrooms with diverse interests, abilities, learning preferences, and personal characteristics that shape the way they engage with learning activities. Contemporary educational research highlights that learning environments which acknowledge student diversity tend to foster higher motivation, stronger participation, and more meaningful learning experiences. Recognizing these differences has therefore become an important foundation for designing effective and inclusive educational practices (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2021; Hattie, 2020). In the context of English language learning at the elementary level, pedagogical orientations have gradually shifted from traditional teacher-centered instruction toward more communicative, contextual, and student-centered approaches. English learning is no longer viewed merely as the acquisition of linguistic knowledge but also as a process of developing communication skills, creativity, and self-confidence among young learners. Because children are strongly influenced by emotional engagement, enjoyable learning environments are considered essential for facilitating language acquisition and encouraging active participation in classroom interaction (Butler, 2021; Pinter, 2022).

Within this perspective, Fun English programs have gained increasing attention as an instructional strategy designed to create engaging and enjoyable language learning experiences for young learners. Fun English activities typically involve interactive strategies such as games, songs, storytelling, role play, and collaborative tasks that aim to reduce language anxiety and encourage students' willingness to communicate in English. Previous studies indicate that enjoyable and interactive learning activities can significantly improve learners' motivation, classroom engagement, and confidence in using a foreign language (Derakhshan et al., 2022). Despite these pedagogical benefits, the implementation of Fun English programs in many schools often focuses primarily on creating an enjoyable classroom atmosphere without systematically considering students' diverse abilities and talents. Learning activities are frequently conducted in a relatively uniform manner, which may overlook individual differences in learning styles, interests, and potential strengths among students. As a result, while some students actively participate in English learning activities, others may remain less engaged due to the lack of instructional adaptation to their individual characteristics (Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2020).

Recent educational theories emphasize the importance of differentiated learning as an approach that accommodates students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Differentiated instruction encourages teachers to design flexible learning experiences that align instructional strategies with students' unique characteristics. Research has shown that differentiated learning environments can improve both engagement and learning outcomes, particularly in language education where students' communication abilities develop at different rates (Tomlinson & Moon, 2020; Heacox & Cash, 2022). One strategy that can support differentiated learning is the identification and mapping of students' talents and potentials. Talent mapping enables teachers to recognize students' strengths and tendencies, which can then inform the design of learning activities that are more responsive to learners' needs. When instructional activities are aligned with students' strengths, learners tend to demonstrate higher motivation, stronger participation, and greater confidence in learning processes (Kruk et al., 2022).

However, empirical evidence suggests that talent identification in classroom practice is often conducted informally and rarely supported by systematic documentation or structured instructional planning. Teachers frequently rely on personal observations or assumptions rather than using organized strategies to map students' talents and learning characteristics. Consequently, the potential benefits of differentiated learning are not fully realized in many classroom contexts (Pham & Hamid, 2020; Rachmajanti & Musthafa, 2021).

This issue becomes particularly relevant in the context of Islamic elementary schools, where educational practices aim to integrate academic development with character formation and social values. Many Islamic schools have begun to adopt student-centered and enjoyable learning approaches in English instruction. Nevertheless, empirical studies investigating the integration of structured talent mapping within Fun English programs in Islamic elementary school contexts remain limited, particularly in the Indonesian Islamic elementary school context. Existing research has generally examined enjoyable language learning activities or the identification of students' talents as separate areas of inquiry. Few studies have explored how talent mapping can be systematically utilized to guide the design of differentiated Fun English learning activities in classroom practice. This study therefore offers a novel perspective by integrating structured talent mapping with Fun English learning activities as a foundation for differentiated English instruction in Islamic elementary school contexts. Consequently, there is still insufficient empirical evidence explaining how talent mapping can function as a pedagogical basis for implementing differentiated English learning in Islamic elementary education (Lubis & al., 2022; Aziz & Yusoff, 2023).

Despite the growing attention to enjoyable language learning approaches and differentiated instruction, limited research has examined how talent mapping can be systematically integrated into Fun English activities in Islamic elementary school contexts. Most existing studies tend to focus either on fun-based learning strategies or on student talent identification as separate topics. Consequently, there is still insufficient empirical understanding of how talent mapping can function as a pedagogical foundation for designing differentiated English learning activities for young learners.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how students' talents and learning tendencies are identified and mapped within a Fun English program implemented in an Islamic elementary school in Indonesia. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) examine strategies used by teachers to identify students' talents within Fun English activities, and (2) analyze how the results of talent mapping influence the design and implementation of English learning activities. By positioning talent mapping as a pedagogical foundation for Fun English activities, this study contributes to the growing discussion on student-centered language education for young learners. The findings are expected to provide empirical insights into how enjoyable language learning approaches can be systematically integrated with differentiated learning principles, thereby supporting more inclusive, adaptive, and meaningful English learning experiences in Islamic elementary education.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore strategies for mapping students' talent potential and their integration into a Fun English program in an Islamic elementary school. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of educational practices, participant perspectives, and contextual dynamics within natural classroom settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The case study design was considered appropriate as the research focused on a single institutional context, allowing for holistic examination of pedagogical strategies and instructional processes within their real-life setting.

The research was conducted in an Islamic elementary school in Indonesia that had implemented a Fun English program as part of its English language instruction. The site was purposively selected due to its relevance to the research focus, particularly its efforts to create enjoyable English learning experiences despite limited resources. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the planning and implementation of the Fun English program. The primary informants consisted of one school principal and one English teacher who were directly involved in the planning and implementation of the Fun English program, both of whom held strategic roles in instructional decision-making and classroom practice.

The research procedure was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher conducted preliminary observations to understand the general implementation of the Fun English program and the classroom learning environment. Second, classroom observations were carried out during six Fun English sessions over a four-week period to document students' participation and learning interactions. Third, semi-structured interviews with the school principal and the English teacher were conducted to explore their perspectives regarding talent identification and instructional practices. Finally, relevant instructional documents were collected and analyzed to complement the observational and interview data.

Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to ensure rich and contextualized findings. Classroom observations were conducted to capture students' participation, learning responses, and engagement in activities such as language games, songs, role play, storytelling, and creative tasks. Observational data were documented through field notes to record instructional processes and classroom interactions as they naturally occurred. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the school principal and the English teacher to explore their perspectives on talent mapping strategies, instructional planning, and challenges encountered during implementation. Relevant documents, including lesson plans, teaching notes, and records of classroom activities, were analyzed to support and triangulate data obtained from observations and interviews.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2023). Data from multiple sources were systematically organized, coded, and categorized to identify patterns related to talent mapping practices and the implementation of the Fun English program. The analysis process was iterative and continuous, allowing emerging themes to be refined through constant comparison across data sources. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing information from observations, interviews, and documents. Source triangulation was also applied by examining perspectives from different participants. Prolonged engagement in the research setting enabled the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the instructional context and minimize potential bias. These strategies enhanced the credibility and dependability of the study, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected classroom practices and pedagogical realities (Creswell, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Student Engagement in Fun English Activities

Classroom observations indicate that the implementation of the Fun English program at Madrasah Petaling has successfully created an enjoyable and supportive language learning environment. Students generally showed enthusiasm when participating in interactive activities such as language games, singing, storytelling, and role-playing tasks. These activities appeared to reduce students' anxiety and create a more relaxed atmosphere for practicing English communication. Previous studies have demonstrated that enjoyable and interactive language learning environments can significantly increase learners' motivation and participation in English classrooms (Derakhshan et al., 2021). Similarly, research on game-based learning suggests that playful learning strategies encourage students to actively use language and increase their willingness to communicate (Hwang et al., 2022).

Despite these positive outcomes, the observations also revealed variations in students' levels of participation. Some learners actively engaged in classroom activities, while others remained passive and hesitant to participate. These differences indicate that students respond differently to fun-based activities depending on their learning preferences, interests, and individual characteristics. Learner engagement in language classrooms is shaped by a complex interaction of motivation, learning preferences, and learner characteristics (Hiver et al., 2021; Oga-Baldwin, 2021).

Therefore, although fun-based learning strategies can create a positive classroom climate, they do not automatically ensure inclusive participation for all learners.

Informal Practices of Talent Identification

The findings also revealed that teachers recognized differences in students' abilities and interests; however, the identification of students' talents was conducted primarily through informal classroom observations. Based on interview data, both the school principal and the English teacher explained that teachers usually relied on their personal impressions when identifying students' abilities rather than using structured assessment tools or systematic documentation. Teacher observation is widely recognized as an important component of classroom assessment. Nevertheless, research in educational assessment highlights that informal observation alone is often insufficient for identifying students' learning profiles in a systematic manner (Brookhart & Moss, 2021). Without structured documentation, teachers may find it difficult to translate their observations into instructional planning.

Scholars in differentiated instruction emphasize that effective teaching requires systematic identification of students' readiness levels, interests, and learning preferences (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2021; Heacox & Cash, 2022). When such information is not formally documented, learning activities tend to remain general rather than responsive to individual learner characteristics. The findings of this study therefore indicate that although teachers were aware of learner diversity, the absence of structured talent mapping limited the ability of teachers to design instructional activities that effectively accommodated students' strengths.

Limitations of Uniform Fun English Activities

Another important finding of this study relates to the instructional design of Fun English activities. Classroom observations indicate that most activities were implemented in a relatively uniform format, where all students were expected to participate in the same type of task regardless of their different abilities, interests, or learning styles. While this approach helped maintain classroom cohesion, it did not fully support learner diversity. Students who possessed talents aligned with specific activities such as musical ability in singing activities or kinesthetic ability in movement-based games tended to demonstrate higher levels of participation and confidence. Conversely, students whose strengths were less compatible with the activities showed lower levels of engagement.

This pattern supports previous findings suggesting that enjoyable learning activities alone are not sufficient to address the diversity of learners in language classrooms (Hiver et al., 2021). Studies in English language education also highlight that instructional strategies must be adapted to learners' needs in order to maximize learning engagement and participation (Richards, 2021). Therefore, although Fun English activities contributed to creating an enjoyable classroom environment, their uniform implementation limited opportunities for some students to actively participate in learning activities.

Integrating Talent Mapping for Differentiated Learning

The findings of this study highlight the importance of integrating structured talent mapping into Fun English programs. Talent mapping refers to systematic efforts to identify students' abilities, interests, and learning characteristics that can be used as a foundation for instructional design. This concept is closely aligned with the principles of differentiated instruction, which emphasize adapting teaching strategies to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Research in language education has demonstrated that differentiated instructional practices can improve student engagement, learning outcomes, and classroom participation when learning activities are tailored to learner characteristics (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2021).

Within the context of Fun English programs, structured talent mapping can transform enjoyable activities into more inclusive and pedagogically meaningful learning experiences. For example, musical learners may benefit from song-based language activities, kinesthetic learners may engage more actively in movement-based games or role-play tasks, while interpersonal learners may respond positively to collaborative storytelling and group discussions. Integrating talent mapping into Fun English learning can therefore help teachers design instructional activities that accommodate diverse learner characteristics. In the context of Islamic elementary education, this approach may also contribute to more holistic educational practices by recognizing students' individual potential and supporting both language development and personal growth. To provide a concise overview of the key empirical findings, Table 1 presents a summary of the main themes related to talent mapping practices and the implementation of the Fun English program.

Table 1. Summary of Findings on Talent Mapping and the Implementation of the Fun English Program

Findings Aspect	Key Description	Pedagogical Implications
Talent mapping strategy	Student talent mapping was conducted informally based on teachers' observations without structured or written instruments	Students' potential data were not systematically utilized in instructional planning
Diversity of student potential	Students demonstrated diverse tendencies, including linguistic, musical, kinesthetic, and interpersonal abilities	Fun English activities need to be differentiated to accommodate students' characteristics
Design of Fun English activities	Learning activities were mostly uniform and not based on mapped student potential	Some students were not actively engaged in the learning process
Student participation	Levels of student engagement during Fun English activities were uneven	Learning was not yet fully inclusive and participatory
Impact on students' confidence	Improvement in English-speaking confidence was experienced by only some students	Students' language potential was not fully developed through Fun English activities

Source: Researchers' observations, interviews, and documentation

The data summarized in Table 1 reinforce the qualitative findings derived from classroom observations and interviews. Interviews with the school principal and the English teacher confirmed that the primary objective of the Fun English program was to create a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment to reduce students' anxiety toward English. However, both participants acknowledged that differences in students' interests and abilities had not been systematically mapped or documented. As a result, instructional decisions were largely based on general assumptions rather than empirical data obtained from structured talent identification.

This study contributes to the literature on English language teaching for young learners by demonstrating how structured talent mapping can serve as a pedagogical foundation for implementing differentiated Fun English programs in Islamic elementary education. While previous studies have primarily emphasized the motivational benefits of enjoyable language learning activities, this research demonstrates that such activities become more pedagogically effective when supported by systematic identification of students' talents and learning characteristics. By integrating talent mapping with fun-based language instruction, this study proposes a differentiated and more inclusive model of English learning that accommodates learner diversity and enhances student engagement in elementary education contexts.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on English language teaching for young learners by demonstrating that enjoyable learning environments alone are not sufficient to ensure inclusive participation. Instead, fun-based instructional strategies become more pedagogically meaningful when supported by systematic identification of students' talents and learning characteristics. By highlighting the role of talent mapping as a pedagogical basis for differentiated learning, this study extends current discussions on student-centered language education in Islamic elementary school contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the Fun English program at Madrasah Petaling has successfully created an enjoyable learning environment that encourages students to participate in English language activities. Interactive practices such as language games, songs, storytelling, and role-playing contribute to reducing learners' anxiety and fostering a more positive classroom atmosphere. However, the findings also reveal that student engagement remains uneven because learning activities are generally implemented in a uniform format and are not based on a systematic identification of students' abilities and learning preferences.

The study therefore highlights the importance of integrating structured talent mapping into Fun English programs. By identifying students' linguistic, musical, kinesthetic, and interpersonal tendencies, teachers can design more differentiated and inclusive learning activities. Such an approach not only enhances student engagement but also supports more responsive and holistic educational practices in Islamic elementary schools. This study has several limitations. The research was conducted in a single Islamic elementary school with a limited number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study primarily relied on qualitative observations and interviews without the use of formal talent assessment instruments. Future studies are recommended to explore the development of practical instruments for classroom-based talent mapping in language learning contexts. Such efforts may help teachers implement more evidence-based differentiated learning strategies that support students' diverse potentials in early language education. This study contributes to the growing discussion on differentiated language learning by demonstrating how structured talent mapping can support more inclusive and student-centered English instruction in Islamic elementary school contexts.

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