


Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum English Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

Studi ini menganalisis konstruksi ideologis wacana COVID-19 dalam buku teks Bahasa Inggris Kelas XI di bawah Kurikulum Merdeka Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) berdasarkan model Norman Fairclough, penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana buku teks tersebut merepresentasikan aktor sosial (pemerintah, tenaga kesehatan, warga negara), tindakan, dan nilai-nilai yang terkait dengan pandemi. Analisis teks berjudul "Manfaat Vaksinasi COVID-19" mengungkap strategi linguistik persuasif, seperti penggunaan modalitas, pertanyaan retorik, dan metafora, yang secara halus mendorong kepatuhan dan tanggung jawab sosial terhadap vaksinasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa teks tersebut tidak hanya informatif tetapi juga bermuatan ideologis, memperkuat narasi kesehatan masyarakat, tanggung jawab sosial, dan legitimasi otoritas negara. Studi ini menyoroti peran buku teks sebagai alat reproduksi ideologis, yang menunjukkan bagaimana bahasa dapat digunakan untuk menyelaraskan kesadaran siswa dengan pandangan yang didukung negara, mengabaikan pemikiran kritis demi kewajiban moral dan kepatuhan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih luas tentang bagaimana bahasa dan ideologi saling berinteraksi untuk membentuk pengalaman pendidikan dan nilai-nilai sosial di era pascapandemi.

This study analyzes the ideological construction of COVID-19 discourse within Grade XI English textbooks under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Norman Fairclough's model, this research investigates how the textbooks represent social actors (government, health workers, citizens), actions, and values related to the pandemic. Analysis of a text titled "Benefits of COVID-19 Vaccination" reveals persuasive linguistic strategies, such as the use of modality, rhetorical questions, and metaphors, subtly encouraging compliance and social responsibility towards vaccination. Findings indicate that the text is not merely informative but also ideologically charged, reinforcing public health narratives, social responsibility, and the legitimacy of state authority. This study highlights the role of textbooks as tools of ideological reproduction, demonstrating how language can be used to align students' awareness with state-supported views, neglecting critical thinking in favor of moral obligation and compliance. This research contributes to a broader understanding of how language and ideology intersect to shape educational experiences and social values in the post-pandemic era.



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unparalleled disruption to education systems around the world. At the height of the crisis in April 2020, UNESCO reported that school closures affected

over 1.6 billion learners across more than 200 countries, accounting for approximately 94% of the global student population. These closures were not temporary; many lasted for months, and in some countries for nearly a year, resulting in learning losses that widened existing educational disparities. Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds were particularly affected due to limited access to technology and digital infrastructure. The pandemic not only exacerbated the global learning crisis but also reversed progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

This global educational upheaval highlighted several systemic issues that had long been discussed but were largely unaddressed before the pandemic. One of these is the persistent digital divide, where access to quality remote learning is determined by income level, geographic location, and infrastructure. Students in rural or marginalized communities often lacked internet access, electronic devices, and adequate learning support at home. Furthermore, emotional well-being and mental health emerged as critical concerns. Learners of all ages reported heightened anxiety, decreased motivation, and feelings of isolation due to prolonged periods of online learning. In many regions, schools provided not just academic learning but also essential social services, such as meals and protection, particularly for vulnerable children. The loss of these support systems further compounded the impact of school closures.

Research conducted in several countries further underscores the extent of the pandemic's impact on education. A study in the Netherlands found significant declines in literacy and math skills during school closures, with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds suffering the most. In South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, reports indicated increased dropout rates, early marriages, and child labor as indirect consequences of the education disruption. Similarly, in countries like the United Kingdom and Italy, the lack of face-to-face interaction and diminished peer relationships hindered social development among young learners. These findings echo calls from UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank for urgent remedial actions, not only to recover academic losses but also to reimagine educational delivery in the post-pandemic world.

Amidst this backdrop, the COVID-19 crisis also provided an opportunity to rethink education systems more broadly. Scholars such as Yong Zhao have argued that the pandemic opened a window to break free from outdated models of teaching and to embrace more personalized, student-centered, and context-sensitive approaches. In response, many governments revised curricula to incorporate elements of flexibility, digital competency, and social-emotional learning. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education and Culture introduced the "Kurikulum Merdeka" (Independent Curriculum), which grants teachers and schools greater autonomy in designing learning experiences that are responsive to their students' needs and local contexts. This curriculum also introduced new learning materials, including textbooks that reflect contemporary issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, while the inclusion of COVID-19 content in textbooks may appear to be a neutral and timely update, it also raises important questions about how the pandemic is represented discursively. Language is not a neutral medium; it is a vehicle for conveying ideologies, shaping identities, and maintaining social hierarchies. As Fairclough (1995) asserts, texts are not just linguistic artifacts—they are part of larger discursive and social practices. In educational contexts, textbooks play a crucial role in shaping how young people understand the world. They do not merely transmit information but also promote certain ways of seeing, thinking, and acting. This makes them powerful tools for ideological construction.

In this regard, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a valuable framework for examining how language in textbooks can reflect and reproduce dominant ideologies. CDA, particularly as developed by Norman Fairclough, emphasizes the interconnection between language, power, and ideology. According to Fairclough's three-dimensional model, discourse can be analyzed at three levels: the textual level (how language is used), the discursive practice level (how texts are produced and interpreted), and the social practice level (how discourse is shaped by and shapes social structures). Applying this model to COVID-19 discourse in textbooks allows us to uncover how the pandemic is framed, what roles are assigned to different social actors, and what ideological messages are embedded in the text.

In the Indonesian context, few studies have applied CDA to analyze how COVID-19 is represented in educational materials. This is a significant gap, considering that textbooks are state-

sanctioned instruments that often reflect broader national ideologies. For example, a textbook may frame the government as a heroic agent managing the crisis, while individuals are portrayed as passive recipients of public health directives. Alternatively, it may emphasize collective responsibility and civic engagement, encouraging students to take an active role in promoting health and safety. These choices are not accidental; they reflect ideological positions about the role of the state, the citizen, and science in managing a public health emergency.

Previous studies in other countries provide insights into the ideological dimensions of COVID-19 discourse in textbooks. Lee and Kim (2023) found that East Asian textbooks often align closely with state narratives, portraying the government as a benevolent protector. Similarly, Khan and Ali (2023) observed that Pakistani textbooks frame the pandemic in a way that reinforces state authority while downplaying individual agency. In Iran, Rahimi and Riasati (2023) noted how English language textbooks incorporated pandemic-related texts that subtly promoted obedience and discipline. These studies demonstrate that even seemingly objective or scientific content can carry ideological implications, especially when presented to young learners in a formal educational setting.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to analyze how COVID-19 is ideologically constructed in the “Advanced English” textbook for Grade XI, which is part of Indonesia’s Kurikulum Merdeka. The textbook includes several texts and exercises related to the pandemic, ranging from public service announcements to personal narratives. These materials provide a rich dataset for critical discourse analysis, as they contain both linguistic and visual elements that contribute to the construction of meaning. By examining these texts, we can explore how social actors (e.g., the government, health workers, students, citizens) are represented, what types of actions are attributed to them, and what values and assumptions are embedded in the discourse.

The analysis will be guided by the following research questions: (1) How is agency distributed among social actors in the COVID-19-related texts? (2) What discursive strategies are used to frame the pandemic and the responses to it? (3) What ideological messages are conveyed through these representations? These questions will be addressed using Fairclough’s CDA model, with a focus on transitivity, modality, lexical choices, and intertextuality. The goal is not only to describe the linguistic features of the texts but also to interpret their social and ideological significance.

This research is important for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on discourse and education in Indonesia by focusing on a current and globally relevant issue. Second, it provides a methodological model for applying CDA to textbook analysis, which can be replicated in other contexts and subjects. Third, it promotes critical media and language literacy by encouraging educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to reflect on the messages conveyed through educational materials. Finally, it empowers students to become critical readers who can question and interpret the texts they encounter, rather than passively accepting them as neutral or authoritative.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on education, not only in terms of access and learning outcomes but also in shaping how knowledge is constructed and transmitted. Textbooks, as key instruments of formal education, play a crucial role in this process. By analyzing the ideological construction of COVID-19 discourse in the “Advanced English” textbook for Grade XI, this study aims to uncover the underlying messages about power, responsibility, and citizenship that are embedded in educational materials. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how language and ideology intersect in shaping educational experiences and societal values in the post-pandemic era.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework. Specifically, the analysis follows Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of discourse, which views discourse as a form of social practice and emphasizes the relationship between language, ideology, and power. The model comprises three interrelated levels: (1) textual analysis, which examines linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion; (2) discursive practice, which explores how the texts are produced, distributed, and consumed; and (3) social practice, which interprets how the discourse relates to broader social, cultural, and ideological structures. This framework is appropriate for uncovering how the COVID-19

pandemic is represented in the English textbook and what ideological messages are constructed through linguistic and visual elements.

The primary data source for this research is the *Advanced* English textbook for Grade XI, which is part of Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka curriculum. The textbook includes multiple texts related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as public service announcements, informational passages, and reading comprehension texts. These texts were purposively selected based on their relevance to the pandemic theme. The analysis focused on identifying how social actors (e.g., the government, health authorities, individuals) are represented, what kinds of actions are emphasized or backgrounded, and how linguistic choices (e.g., transitivity, modality, nominalization) contribute to constructing particular ideologies. Supplementary attention was also given to visual images and layout design where applicable, to understand how multimodal elements reinforce or challenge the textual messages. The findings are interpreted not only through linguistic analysis but also in relation to the socio-political context of education and public health communication in Indonesia during and after the pandemic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the critical discourse analysis of the text titled "Benefits of Getting a Covid-19 Vaccine" taken from the Grade XI English textbook of the Kurikulum Merdeka. The analysis is structured according to Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, covering textual features, discursive practices, and social practices. The overall findings indicate that the text is not merely informative but ideologically laden, promoting discourses on public health, social responsibility, and the legitimization of state authority.

Textual Analysis

At the textual level, the analysis reveals that the text employs a range of linguistic strategies to subtly persuade and morally position the reader. Modal verbs such as "can" and "will" are used to convey certainty and optimism about the benefits of vaccination, reinforcing the notion that vaccination is both effective and necessary. Additionally, the use of soft imperatives and indirect directives—e.g., "you need to know," "you don't need to worry"—function as subtle persuasive tools, encouraging compliance without sounding coercive. Rhetorical questions like "Are you one of the saviours?" act as a form of interpellation, morally framing the reader as someone with the duty to contribute to public health. The text also makes use of metaphors such as "breaking the chain of the pandemic" and "protect future generations," which frame vaccination as an ethical, almost heroic action. These linguistic choices are ideologically loaded and position vaccination not only as a medical necessity but also as a moral imperative and social duty.

From a more detailed linguistic standpoint, the text features interrogative constructions like "Have you received your vaccine?" which serve as personalized appeals to the reader, inviting reflection and action. Indirect imperatives like "You don't need to worry" help to construct trust and emotional reassurance, reducing resistance. Modalities in sentences like "Vaccines can protect you from severe illness" emphasize the reliability and effectiveness of vaccination. Parallel structures such as "Not only yourself but also your family" reinforce a sense of collective solidarity, suggesting that vaccination is not only a personal choice but a communal obligation.

Discursive Practice Analysis

At the level of discursive practice, the text must be understood within the broader context of public health campaigns and educational policy. It is produced under the framework of formal schooling and reflects the influence of governmental and global health authorities, particularly during the pandemic. As a product of institutional discourse, the textbook channels official narratives into educational materials that are widely disseminated to students across Indonesia. The distribution of this text through the national curriculum ensures that the ideological content reaches a large and impressionable audience—school-aged learners—thereby embedding the discourse of health compliance and collective responsibility within a pedagogical setting.

The consumption of the text is mediated by the institutional roles of students and teachers. Students are positioned not as neutral readers but as agents who are expected to internalize and reproduce the values embedded in the text. Teachers, on the other hand, act as facilitators of this discourse, interpreting the material through the lens of curriculum mandates and public health

messaging. Consequently, the reading and interpretation of the text are not passive activities but socially structured practices that reproduce dominant ideologies under the guise of education and information.

Social Practice Analysis

At the social practice level, the discourse within the text aligns with and supports dominant power structures. The vaccination narrative is framed in overwhelmingly positive and heroic terms, leaving little room for alternative perspectives or critical reflection. This framing serves to reinforce state health policies and the authority of international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), effectively constructing an unquestionable consensus around vaccination. The text implicitly constructs a binary of responsible versus irresponsible citizens: those who get vaccinated are celebrated as socially aware and morally upright, while those who hesitate are subtly marginalized as a threat to public well-being.

In this way, the textbook does not simply convey medical facts—it operates as a discursive mechanism that supports ideological reproduction within the education system. By framing health behavior as a form of civic duty, the text contributes to the normalization of compliance and the depoliticization of public health. This reinforces a culture in which obedience to authority is naturalized and where ideological messages are masked as neutral scientific information. The representation of the state as protector and the individual as cooperative citizen echoes broader narratives of state legitimacy and social order during crisis.

The linguistic coding process highlighted several features that illustrate the ideological function of language in the text. Interrogative phrases such as "Have you received...?" work as direct personal appeals, prompting students to reflect on their own behavior in relation to public health. Indirect imperatives like "You don't need to worry..." foster emotional alignment with the message by building trust and alleviating fear. Modal verbs such as "can" in "Vaccines can protect..." communicate a sense of certainty and authority, establishing confidence in the vaccine's effectiveness. The parallel structure in "Not only yourself but also your family..." fosters a collectivist ideology, emphasizing shared responsibility and communal care.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the role of educational texts as powerful instruments for disseminating ideologies, particularly during times of global crisis. The use of persuasive linguistic strategies—such as modality, rhetorical questions, and metaphoric framing—demonstrates how language can function ideologically, as theorized by Fairclough (1995) in his three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis. Fairclough emphasizes that texts are never neutral; they are embedded within networks of power and ideology, often serving to maintain or reproduce dominant discourses. In the case of the analyzed text, the discourse of vaccination is constructed as morally righteous, socially expected, and institutionally endorsed.

From a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective, as proposed by Halliday (1978), the text leverages ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions to construct meaning that supports hegemonic public health narratives. The ideational metafunction is seen in how the text represents vaccination as an act of heroism (e.g., "protect future generations"), while the interpersonal metafunction is evident in the positioning of the reader through directives and modal verbs (e.g., "you need to know", "vaccines can protect..."). These choices are not merely grammatical—they construct relationships and obligations between writer and reader, where the latter is positioned as a cooperative subject.

The text also aligns with Althusser's (1971) concept of interpellation, where individuals are 'hailed' into specific subject positions by ideological apparatuses. In this case, students are interpellated as responsible citizens who must comply with national health campaigns. The rhetorical question "Are you one of the saviours?" is a clear example of this ideological strategy—it does not only ask a question, but assigns a moral identity to the reader, pushing them to adopt a subject position aligned with the state and health authorities. This is consistent with the role of education as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), as Althusser argued, whereby schools become sites for the reproduction of dominant ideologies.

Empirical studies support these interpretations. For example, Hodges and Nilep (2007) in their exploration of discourse, war, and ideology, note that metaphors such as 'war on disease' or 'heroic

citizen' often serve to mobilize populations toward compliance with state agendas. In a similar vein, van Dijk (1998) argues that media and educational texts are crucial sites for the construction of shared beliefs and ideologies, particularly during health crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, state and media discourses frequently invoked collectivism, responsibility, and sacrifice—discursive patterns also reflected in the textbook being analyzed.

Furthermore, Breeze (2011) in her study of public health leaflets found that linguistic choices such as deontic modality (must, need to) and prescriptive structures often construct the reader as subordinate to institutional authority. This mirrors the findings in this study, where students are indirectly told what to think and how to act, through what appears to be neutral information. The emotional appeal embedded in “Not only yourself but also your family” reflects what Chouliaraki (2006) calls the politics of pity, where affective appeals are used to motivate public action in line with institutional goals.

In terms of social practice, the textbook reflects the reproduction of neoliberal health discourse, where the responsibility for health is placed on the individual. As Rose (2007) argues in his work on biopolitics, modern governance increasingly works through the responsabilization of subjects—individuals are expected to regulate their own behaviors in the interest of public health. This is evident in the way the textbook subtly implies that vaccination is a matter of personal ethics and social duty, rather than a complex policy issue with room for debate.

What is striking in the analysis is not merely the presence of pro-vaccine messaging—which is expected in a pandemic—but the total absence of critical space. The text does not acknowledge the existence of vaccine hesitancy, alternative viewpoints, or any form of dialogic engagement. This is what Bakhtin (1981) would describe as monologic discourse—a discourse that allows only one voice, one truth, and excludes heteroglossia. In the educational context, such one-dimensional discourse risks turning learning into indoctrination, especially when targeted at young, impressionable learners.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the analysis supports the view that curriculum materials—particularly those developed during crisis periods—function as tools of ideological reproduction. The case of the COVID-19 vaccine text illustrates how language can be deployed to align student consciousness with state-endorsed views, bypassing critical thinking in favor of moral obligation and compliance. While the intent—to promote public health—is socially beneficial, the implications for discourse diversity and student agency in meaning-making require critical reflection.

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