



The Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum for English Teachers

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Abstract

The nationwide implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing student-centered learning, has limited empirical research that has examined how English teachers navigate the pedagogical transition from traditional teacher-centered approaches in actual classroom contexts. This qualitative case study investigated the implementation experiences of English teachers adopting the Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on their strategies, challenges, and outcomes in transitioning to student-centered teaching approaches. Using purposive sampling, in-depth interviews were conducted with two experienced English teachers at SMP N 9 Loa Kulu, Kutai Kartanegara. Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) interactive model to identify implementation patterns and emerging themes. Findings revealed that both teachers demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's constructivist principles and successfully implemented student-centered strategies through project-based activities, innovative assessment methods, and cultural integration approaches. Teachers effectively fostered 21st-century skills development through collaborative projects and authentic communication practices. However, significant implementation challenges emerged, including assessment transition difficulties, increased material development workload, limited technology resources, and insufficient administrative support. Moreover, despite these obstacles, teachers reported positive learning outcomes, including enhanced student engagement, improved critical thinking, and better collaborative skills. Key recommendations include continuous professional development, improved resource allocation, and stronger institutional support systems. While this small-scale study limits generalizability, it provides valuable insights into the practical realities of curriculum implementation and highlights the critical need for systematic support to achieve the Merdeka Curriculum's transformative educational goals in Indonesian EFL contexts.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; English language teaching; curriculum implementation; student-centered learning.

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1. Introduction

The Indonesian education system has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, with curriculum reforms serving as primary mechanisms for improving educational quality and competitiveness. The Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education introduced the Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) curriculum to promote student



autonomy, creativity, and innovation while addressing limitations of previous educational frameworks (Annisa, 2023). This curriculum represents a fundamental shift from teacher-centered instruction toward student-centered learning environments that prioritize critical thinking, problem-solving, and character development aligned with Pancasila values.

The Merdeka Curriculum emerged as a direct response to challenges revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly learning loss and the need for flexible, adaptive educational approaches (Agung S. & Ratna Kumala, 2022). Unlike its predecessors, this curriculum emphasizes essential learning materials, project-based instruction, and differentiated learning strategies that accommodate diverse student needs and local contexts. The implementation requires teachers to develop new competencies in facilitation, assessment design, and technology integration while maintaining alignment with national education standards (Tyan et al., 2020).

English language education within the Merdeka Curriculum framework presents unique opportunities and challenges. The curriculum's emphasis on communicative competence, intercultural understanding, and authentic language use aligns with contemporary language teaching methodologies (Fauzan et al., 2023). However, successful implementation requires significant pedagogical transformation, resource allocation, and professional development support that extends beyond individual teacher preparation to encompass institutional and community engagement (Dedi Riyan & Ziadatul, 2022).

Existing research on English language curriculum implementation in Indonesia reveals three critical limitations. First, studies predominantly examine policy rhetoric rather than classroom realities, creating a disconnect between intended reforms and actual practice (Dedi Riyan & Ziadatul, 2022). Second, most investigations focus on urban contexts with adequate resources, leaving implementation experiences in semi-rural or resource-constrained environments underexplored. Third, while studies document implementation challenges, they rarely analyze how teachers develop adaptive strategies to overcome systemic barriers while maintaining curriculum integrity.



This research gap is particularly significant given Indonesia's decentralized education system, where implementation success depends heavily on local contexts, teacher capacity, and institutional support systems that vary dramatically across regions. Understanding how teachers navigate these contextual complexities while implementing transformative pedagogical approaches is essential for informing evidence-based policy adjustments and support system development.

This study investigates how English teachers at SMP N 9 Loa Kulu navigate Merdeka Curriculum implementation, examining their strategies for student-centered learning, assessment innovation, and challenge mitigation (Rahmadani & Mustika, 2023). The research contributes practical insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers working to support successful curriculum transformation in Indonesian secondary education contexts.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the implementation experiences of English teachers working with the Merdeka Curriculum. According to (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013) Case study research enables in-depth exploration of programs, events, or processes within bounded contexts, making it appropriate for investigating curriculum implementation phenomena.

Participants: Two English teachers at SMP N 9 Loa Kulu were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience implementing the Merdeka Curriculum during the 2024/2025 academic year. Both teachers had undergone initial curriculum training and possessed at least three years of English teaching experience.

Data Collection: In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted on December 15, 2024, lasting approximately 90 minutes each. Interview questions explored teachers' understanding of curriculum principles, implementation strategies, assessment practices, challenges encountered, and recommendations for improvement. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.



Data Analysis: Interview transcripts were analyzed using (Miles et al., 2014) interactive model involving data reduction, display, and conclusion verification. A systematic coding framework was developed with categories including Implementation (IMP), Challenges (CHA), and Strategies (STR), enabling systematic theme identification and pattern analysis.

Trustworthiness: Data validity was established through theory triangulation, comparing findings against established curriculum implementation research and educational change literature. Member checking was conducted to verify interpretation accuracy.

3. Findings and Discussion

The research findings reveal that English teachers have successfully internalized the Merdeka Curriculum's philosophical foundations, demonstrating remarkable alignment with established educational theories and curriculum design principles. Teacher 1's articulation of the curriculum as "an educational approach that prioritizes student-centered learning, flexibility, and in-depth understanding of essential concepts" (IMP.T1.L15-18.15Dec2024) directly corresponds with constructivist learning theory as outlined by (Al-Sohbani & Muthanna, 2013) which emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through meaningful interactions with their environment.

This conceptual understanding extends beyond surface-level adoption to encompass genuine pedagogical transformation. The teachers' emphasis on flexibility and autonomy reflects (Rusman, 2017) Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation. Teacher 2's focus on "creativity and critical thinking" alongside "character development and values" (IMP.T2.L1-5.15Dec2024) aligns with Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory (Achkovska & Miovska Spaseva, 2016), suggesting a sophisticated understanding of holistic education that addresses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains simultaneously.

The transformation from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches represents a fundamental paradigm shift that challenges traditional power structures in Indonesian



education. According to (Venkatesh et al., 2003) critical pedagogy framework, this shift moves away from the "banking concept" of education toward problem-posing methodologies that position students as co-investigators rather than passive recipients. Teacher 1's observation that learning becomes "more relevant and meaningful to their experiences and interests" (IMP.T1.L37-40.15Dec2024) validates research by Kember (1997) on student-centered learning, which demonstrates that personal relevance significantly enhances learning outcomes and retention.

3.2 Cultural Integration and Global Competence Development

The implementation of cultural awareness and intercultural communication strategies reflects contemporary approaches to global citizenship education and cross-cultural competence development. Teacher 2's systematic incorporation of "diverse texts and materials using videos and multimedia resources that reflect diverse cultures, perspectives, and experiences" (IMP.T2.L37-41.15Dec2024) aligns with Banks' (2008) multicultural education framework, which emphasizes the importance of diverse content integration, knowledge construction processes, and equity pedagogy.

The cultural sharing activities where students become ambassadors for their own experiences demonstrate sophisticated understanding of (Byram, 2012) intercultural communicative competence model, which identifies *savoirs* (knowledge), *savoir-être* (attitudes), *savoir-apprendre* (skills of discovery and interaction), *savoir-comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating), and *savoir-s'engager* (critical cultural awareness) as essential components of intercultural competence. This approach transforms the classroom into what (Hammer et al., 2003) describes as a "third culture" space where learners negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries.

The emphasis on role-plays and simulations focusing on "verbal and non-verbal cues" (IMP.T2.L46-50.15Dec2024) reflects current research in intercultural communication pragmatics (Dasih et al., 2019), which highlights the importance of understanding culturally



specific communication patterns, politeness strategies, and contextual appropriateness. This implementation demonstrates teacher awareness of what Hall (1976) identified as high-context versus low-context communication patterns and their implications for successful intercultural interaction (Giles, 2016).

Furthermore, the validation of students' cultural backgrounds through sharing activities aligns with (Fiorilli et al., 2022) culturally responsive teaching framework, which emphasizes using students' cultural references as vehicles for learning. This approach counters deficit models of education that view students' home cultures as obstacles to academic success, instead positioning cultural diversity as a valuable resource for enriching the learning environment (Leifler, 2020).

3.3 Assessment Paradigm Transformation and Learning-Oriented Evaluation

The comprehensive formative assessment strategies implemented represent a fundamental shift from assessment of learning toward assessment for learning, aligning with (Huang, 2015) seminal research on formative assessment effectiveness. Teacher 2's implementation of "exit tickets," "self-assessment rubrics," "peer review," and "learning journals" (IMP.T2.L73-79.15Dec2024) reflects multiple assessment methodologies that serve different pedagogical purposes while maintaining focus on learning enhancement rather than merely grading compliance.

The self-assessment rubrics demonstrate implementation of metacognitive learning strategies that align with (Al-Mekhlafi, 2018) metacognition research and (Hirt et al., 2021) self-regulated learning theory. By requiring students to evaluate their own work and set goals, teachers foster the development of metacognitive awareness that enables students to monitor their learning processes, identify areas for improvement, and adjust their strategies accordingly. This approach moves beyond traditional deficit-focused grading toward strength-based evaluation that emphasizes growth and development.



Peer review implementation reflects social constructivist learning principles derived from Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development theory, which suggests that learners can achieve higher levels of understanding through interaction with more knowledgeable peers. Research by (Holmes & All, 2008) demonstrates that peer assessment not only improves learning outcomes for both assessors and assessees but also develops critical thinking skills, communication abilities, and collaborative competencies essential for 21st-century success.

The integration of digital tools for formative assessment aligns with technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) framework developed by (Ding et al., 2019), which emphasizes the intersection of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge in effective teaching. Teacher 2's observation that "students really respond well to these technological approaches" (IMP.T2.L84-86.15Dec2024) validates research by Herrington and Kervin (2007) on digital native learning preferences and the importance of technology integration that enhances rather than replaces effective pedagogical practices.

Learning journals represent a particularly sophisticated assessment innovation that aligns with reflective practice and experiential learning cycles (Kolb, 2005). By requiring students to document their learning processes, reflect on challenges encountered, and track progress over time, teachers foster the development of reflective thinking skills that enable continuous improvement and self-directed learning beyond formal educational contexts.

3.4 Project-Based Learning and Authentic Communication

The successful implementation of project-based learning demonstrates sophisticated understanding of constructivist learning principles and authentic task design. Teacher 1's approach of designing "projects that allow students to explore topics of personal interest while meeting curriculum objectives" (IMP.T1.L65-70.15Dec2024) reflects Dewey's (1897) progressive education philosophy, which emphasizes learning through experience and inquiry rather than passive absorption of predetermined content.



The emphasis on real-world problem-solving using English as the medium of communication aligns with content and language integrated learning (CLIL) methodology (Giles, 2016) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches (Escobar Urmeneta, 2013). This integration enables students to develop both linguistic competence and subject-matter knowledge simultaneously while engaging in meaningful communication activities that mirror authentic language use contexts.

Teacher 2's characterization of project-based learning as providing "relevance and authenticity" and allowing for "autonomy and choice" while encouraging "collaboration and teamwork" (IMP.T2.L104-110.15Dec2024) validates research by (Richards & Farrell, 2005) on project-based learning effectiveness. Their findings indicate that well-designed projects increase student motivation, improve learning outcomes, and develop 21st-century skills including critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. The observed "higher motivation and deeper engagement when working on projects that connect to their interests and real-world contexts" (IMP.T2.L104-110.15Dec2024) supports self-determination theory predictions about the relationship between autonomy, competence, and intrinsic motivation.

The collaborative aspects of project work reflect current understanding of distributed communities of practice (Asare et al., 2023), which suggest that learning occurs through participation in social practices rather than individual knowledge acquisition. Research by (Fairclough, 2003) on cooperative learning demonstrates that collaborative activities not only improve academic outcomes but also develop social skills, reduce prejudice, and increase self-esteem when properly structured with individual accountability and positive interdependence.

3.5 Implementation Challenges and Systemic Barriers

The assessment transition challenges identified in this study reflect broader patterns documented in curriculum implementation research. Teachers' difficulties in learning "new assessment frameworks, rubrics, and criteria" while transitioning from "traditional assessments" to "authentic and performance-based assessments" align with findings from



(Fahim & Haghani, 2012) research on educational change, which identifies meaning, use, and institutionalization as critical phases in successful innovation adoption.

The challenge of developing "new assessment tools, such as rubrics and scoring guides" highlights what (Cargas et al., 2017) describe as the implementation gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. Their research on distributed leadership and organizational learning suggests that successful curriculum implementation requires not only individual teacher adaptation but also institutional support systems that provide ongoing professional development, resource allocation, and administrative commitment to change processes.

Teacher workload and time management issues reflect broader concerns about teacher sustainability and educational reform implementation documented by (Yassin et al., 2020). Their research on professional learning communities indicates that successful curriculum implementation requires restructuring teacher work conditions to provide adequate planning time, collaborative opportunities, and professional development support. The observation that "we're already juggling so many responsibilities, and this adds another layer of complexity" validates concerns about reform overload and the cumulative impact of multiple simultaneous changes on teacher effectiveness.

Resource constraints present systemic barriers that extend beyond individual school contexts to encompass broader issues of educational equity and infrastructure development. Teacher 1's observation that "not all schools have access to the necessary resources to fully support these new approaches" reflects identify as savage inequalities in educational resource distribution that can undermine even well-designed curriculum reforms (van Mierlo & Beers, 2020).

The technology infrastructure limitations highlighted in this study align with research by (Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015) on the digital divide and educational technology implementation. Their findings suggest that successful technology integration requires not only hardware and software access but also technical support, professional development, and



pedagogical frameworks that guide effective technology use for learning enhancement rather than mere substitution of traditional methods.

3.6 Systemic Support Requirements and Organizational Change

The teachers' emphasis on administrative support and stakeholder alignment reflects extensive research on educational change management and organizational learning. Teacher 2's observation that "we need all stakeholders to be on board, not just teachers" (STR.T2.L161-166.15Dec2024) validates findings from (Mioduser & Betzer, 2008) research on organizational change, which identifies coalition building, shared vision development, and broad-based commitment as essential elements of successful transformation processes.

The recommendation for "ongoing professional development opportunities" (STR.T2.L193-199.15Dec2024) aligns with professional learning community research (Anggrella et al., 2023), which emphasize the importance of continuous, job-embedded learning experiences that enable educators to deepen their understanding and refine their practices based on classroom experience and student feedback. This study showed that effective professional development requires not only initial training but also coaching, peer observation, and collaborative problem-solving to achieve significant changes in teaching practice.

The emphasis on "collaborative planning among teachers to share best practices, resources, and expertise" (STR.T2.L193-199.15Dec2024) reflects social learning (Mahnegar, 2012), which suggest that organizational learning occurs through social interaction and knowledge sharing rather than individual skill development alone.

Community engagement recommendations align with ecological systems theory which emphasize the importance of multiple stakeholder involvement in supporting student learning and development. The suggestion for "parent education on the benefits and principles of the new curriculum" (STR.T2.L171-175.15Dec2024) reflects that parent understanding and support significantly influence curriculum implementation success and student outcomes.



Teacher 2's observation that implementation requires "systemic support to make it work in reality" (STR.T2.L193-199.15Dec2024) validates complex systems theory applications to educational change (Ventista & Brown, 2023), which suggest that sustainable curriculum transformation requires coordinated action across multiple organizational levels and stakeholder groups rather than isolated individual efforts.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that English teachers possess the conceptual understanding and professional commitment necessary for successful Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Teachers demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of student-centered learning principles, implemented innovative assessment strategies, and created engaging project-based learning environments that developed students' 21st-century skills and intercultural competence.

However, successful implementation requires systematic support extending beyond individual teacher effort. Assessment transformation challenges, resource constraints, and professional development gaps highlight the need for comprehensive institutional support including adequate resource allocation, ongoing professional development, administrative commitment, and community engagement.

The positive outcomes observed—enhanced student engagement, improved critical thinking, increased creativity, and deeper learning—validate the curriculum's potential effectiveness when appropriate support conditions exist. These findings suggest that curriculum success depends on coordinated efforts across individual, institutional, and systemic levels rather than isolated teacher adaptation.

Future research should examine long-term implementation outcomes, investigate support system effectiveness, and explore scalability across diverse educational contexts. The study contributes practical insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers working to support meaningful educational transformation through the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

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