
Reforming English language teaching through the Merdeka curriculum: A case study on policy, pedagogy, and practice

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Curriculum Implementation, English Language Learning, Merdeka Curriculum, Project-Based Learning, Teacher Professional Development

This study explored the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning at the senior high school level in Indonesia. The objective was to examine the policy, pedagogical practices, and challenges when implementing this curriculum. As a qualitative case study, it employed purposive sampling involving English teachers, school principals, and students from a senior high school in East Jaya, Indonesia. The instruments used were semi-structured interview, classroom observation and focus group discussion. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify the patterns and themes related to curriculum implementation and its impact. The results showed that the Merdeka Curriculum is supported by policies that encourage student independence, student-centeredness, and contextualization, thus enabling schools to adapt the curriculum to the needs of their students. Pedagogical strategies such as project-based learning, the use of authentic materials, and technology integration increase students' motivation, engagement, and language proficiency. However, challenges such as limited teacher readiness and lack of development of teacher professional resources hinder optimal implementation. This study highlighted the importance of systemic support through training, resource allocation, and collaborative professional communities to realize complete curriculum implementation.

1. INTRODUCTION

English language learning in Indonesia is currently experiencing a significant shift towards a student-centered learning framework. The currently implemented curriculum, namely Merdeka curriculum, gives teachers great authority to adjust educational content and methodology to suit the needs and conditions of their own students (Arta et al., 2023; Sari & Wardani, 2018). This curriculum emphasizes a student-centered approach which allows teachers to incorporate local culture and student interests into learning activities. This can foster more engaging and relevant learning experiences. The flexibility is contrast to previous curriculum which often adhered to a rigid and standardized framework. It limited students' ability for personalization and adaptation according to their environment (Zein, 2018).

Flexibility in the Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers to adapt teaching materials and strategies to overcome problems in Indonesian schools, like the diversity of students' backgrounds and learning rates. This approach is quite adaptive and in line with the contemporary educational paradigm which emphasizes the importance of student autonomy and responsiveness in the learning process (Sakhiyya et al., 2018). By providing a more dynamic educational environment,

this curriculum supports the development of student skills for success in this 21st century, including critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creativity (Tauchid et al., 2022). These skills are important for students to practice living in a rapidly developing global society. The students are not only need academic achievement, but also active participation in social life and the world of work (Eko et al., 2021; Sakhiyya et al., 2018).

Character education is an important component in the curriculum to grow moral values, social responsibility and decision making (Sukarno & Riyadini, 2024). In Indonesia, character education is often integrated with language teaching to improve language proficiency (Pohan & Malik, 2018; Sulistiyo et al., 2020). This allows students to develop a strong ethical foundation in line with educational goals. The importance of pedagogy that focuses on linguistics and character is very necessary in Indonesia (Adriyanti, 2021; Ilyas, 2022). This is harmonized with the value that has been taught to Indonesian children, that is attitude both in spoken language and behavior.

Despite curriculum reform, there are still challenges in implementing a flexible and student-centered curriculum, especially at the high school level. Limited teacher resources and lack of training about innovative pedagogical approaches still become significant obstacles (Arta et al., 2023; Sari & Wardani, 2018). Nevertheless, schools can still increase students' motivation, encourage critical engagement with learning material, and prepare students for real-world life (Bui & Nguyen, 2021; Otieno, 2023). Teachers are asked to use local resources and support systems to develop innovative and sustainable curriculum.

The integration of local culture and values into English language learning further strengthens the curriculum's relevance and effectiveness. Cultural relevance enhances student engagement and fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of linguistic diversity (Adriyanti, 2021; Akhir, 2021). By embedding local narratives and insights into the curriculum, educators create meaningful connections between language learning and students' lived experiences, thereby improving language proficiency and promoting multicultural awareness (Pohan & Malik, 2018; Zein, 2018). This integrative approach enriches the educational experience, producing learners who are not only proficient in English but also culturally literate and capable of navigating the complexities of a globalized world (Almasitoh et al., 2020; Tauchid et al., 2022).

Recent developments in Indonesia's English language education reflect a progressive transition towards curricula that promote flexibility, autonomy, and the development of essential 21st-century skills. At the same time, it effectively integrates character education and local cultural values. However, the successful implementation of such curricula requires addressing determined challenges related to teacher readiness, resource availability, and infrastructural support. Therefore, the primary research problem addressed in this study concerns on how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in senior high school (SMA) for English language learning, particularly in terms of policy enactment, pedagogical practices, learning outcomes, and the challenges and opportunities encountered. While the curriculum promises greater flexibility and contextualization, there remains a need to empirically investigate its multidimensional impact and the practical realities faced by teachers and students.

General solutions to these challenges have included calls for enhancing teacher professional development, increased resource allocation, and the adoption of technology to support personalized learning (Arta et al., 2023; Sari & Wardani, 2018). Moreover, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, including schools, families, and communities, has been recognized as vital for sustaining curriculum innovations (Otieno, 2023). More specifically, prior studies have

demonstrated that project-based learning and authentic assessment methods can effectively operationalize the Merdeka Curriculum's learner-centered philosophy, improving student engagement and language proficiency (Zein, 2018). The use of digital platforms and interactive media further supports personalized and flexible learning environments, although disparities in infrastructure and teacher preparedness pose ongoing challenges (Selwyn, 2016; Hyun et al., 2020). Character education integrated within language instruction has also been shown to foster positive social attitudes and ethical development, aligning with the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila framework* (Sukarno & Riyadini, 2024).

Despite these advances, a gap remains in comprehensive, multidimensional analyses that simultaneously consider policy, pedagogy, learning outcomes, and contextual challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum for English language learning. Existing literature often addresses these dimensions in isolation, limiting holistic understanding and practical guidance for educators and policymakers. Therefore, this study aims at filling this gap by conducting an in-depth, multidimensional qualitative case study of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in Indonesian senior high schools. This research try to analyze policy frameworks, teaching practices, student learning outcomes, and the challenges and opportunities encountered, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's impact. The study's novelty lies in its integrative approach, combining multiple perspectives to inform both theory and practice.

The scope of this study is limited to senior high schools that actively implement the Merdeka Curriculum in English language education. The data collected from educators, school leaders, and classroom observations. The findings are intended to contribute to the ongoing discourse on curriculum reform in Indonesia and offer strategic recommendations for optimizing the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in diverse educational contexts.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study uses case study approach to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in English language learning at the senior high school level. A case study design is useful for exploring complex educational settings because it allows researchers to see how things work in real classrooms and understand the challenges faced by teachers and students (Abdurrizal et al., 2022; Rokayah et al., 2023). Through this method, the study looks closely at how the curriculum is applied, understood, and experienced by those involved, following established practices in curriculum research (Sauri et al., 2023). The study also includes a phenomenological aspect by paying attention to participants' personal experiences and views, which helps deepen the understanding of the curriculum's effects (Ai, 2024). In addition, it uses a collaborative and participatory approach, involving both teachers and students in the research process to gather richer data and more complete perspectives on teaching and learning (Kavanagh et al., 2024).

2.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants in this study were carefully chosen to represent senior high schools that have actively implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching. The sample included 12 English teachers and 4 school principals from four different schools located in various regions, allowing the study to capture different contexts that affect how the curriculum is implemented. The teachers differed in their teaching experience, educational background, and

level of familiarity with the Merdeka Curriculum, which helped bring diverse viewpoints to the study. In addition, 30 students from these schools took part in focus group discussions to share their experiences and opinions about the curriculum's impact on their learning. This purposive sampling ensured that all participants had direct involvement with the curriculum, providing meaningful and relevant information (Fazilla et al., 2023).

2.3 Data Collection Methods

As the triangulation, the variety of participants was made to compare and cross-check perspectives from teachers, principals, and students of how the curriculum was implemented. It can strengthen the study's overall credibility. The main data came from semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals, which provided the flexibility to explore their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the curriculum in detail (Kantzou & Vasileiadi, 2021). Focus group discussions were also held with students to gather their shared experiences and opinions. In addition, classroom observations were carried out to record teaching practices and interactions, offering real examples of how the curriculum was applied in class. The study also analyzed documents such as official curriculum guidelines, lesson plans (RPP), assessment materials, and school reports to understand the formal structure and intended strategies of implementation (Sauri et al., 2023). By combining interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis, the study ensured that the findings were credible, reliable, and well-rounded.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative approach that helps identify and interpret common themes and patterns in complex information (Sauri et al., 2023). The process began with carefully reading the transcripts and notes several times to become familiar with the data. Next, meaningful pieces of information were coded and then grouped into broader themes based on the framework of curriculum implementation. These themes were refined several times to ensure they were consistent and meaningful. NVivo software was used to organize the data and make the coding process more efficient. To ensure accuracy and credibility, preliminary findings were shared with participants for feedback and validation (Ai, 2024). Throughout the analysis, the researchers practiced reflexivity by continually examining their own assumptions and potential biases to maintain fairness in interpretation. This systematic approach made it possible to gain a deep and well-rounded understanding of how the curriculum was actually experienced and implemented by the participants.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were carefully upheld throughout the entire research process, following established principles for qualitative studies in education (Fathurrahman et al., 2022; Pak et al., 2020). Before participating, all individuals were fully informed about the study's goals, procedures, and their rights—including the option to withdraw at any time without any consequences—and their consent was obtained (Hosseini & Haukås, 2024). The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were strictly protected, ensuring that no personal identities or sensitive information appeared in reports or publications (Mandarani et al., 2024; Riyanti et al., 2022). During data collection, researchers created a respectful and supportive atmosphere, especially when conversations touched on sensitive topics related to curriculum challenges. Continuous communication was maintained with participants to confirm findings and

interpretations, helping to build mutual trust and uphold strong ethical integrity throughout the study (Ai, 2024; Walsh, 2023).

2.6 Limitations

This study recognizes several limitations typical of qualitative case study research, such as its limited geographic coverage and relatively small sample size, which may restrict how far the findings can be generalized. Because qualitative data depend heavily on participants' personal views and experiences, the results must be interpreted carefully and within their specific context. Even so, the detailed and rich information gathered in this study offers meaningful insights into the complex process of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and provides useful lessons for similar educational settings.

Thus, the case study approach used in this research is well-suited to exploring the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language education. The combination of multiple data sources and a careful thematic analysis ensures that the findings are both thorough and reliable. Strong ethical standards were also maintained to protect participants and uphold research integrity. Overall, this methodological framework effectively supports the study's goal of offering a deep, multidimensional understanding of how the curriculum is implemented, the challenges it presents, and the opportunities it creates in Indonesian senior high schools.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Policy Dimension

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian schools is guided by a set of comprehensive policies designed to promote flexibility and autonomy in education. At its core, the curriculum supports national goals such as encouraging student-centered learning, celebrating multicultural values, and ensuring that classrooms are inclusive for all students (Ambarwati et al., 2024; Halim et al., 2024). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Mendikbudristek) plays a key role in empowering schools to design their own curricula that reflect local contexts and meet the unique needs of their students (Bastian et al., 2023). This decentralized approach motivates teachers to explore creative and innovative teaching methods while still meeting the essential competency standards set by national guidelines (Cantika et al., 2022). In addition, the framework highlights the importance of continuous professional development to help teachers effectively adapt and deliver the curriculum (Isnaini et al., 2024). These policies aim at creating supportive environment that allows schools to apply the Merdeka Curriculum with both contextual awareness and pedagogical creativity.

3.2 Pedagogical Practices

In classroom practice, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes a variety of teaching methods and strategies designed to increase student engagement and support effective language learning. One widely used approach is Project-Based Learning (PBL), where students work on real-world projects that require them to use English actively while solving problems (Surani & Septiyani, 2024). This approach not only helps improve their language skills but also builds collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking (Irsyad et al., 2024). Teachers also use authentic materials—such as newspapers, videos, and real-life communication activities—to make lessons more meaningful and relevant to students' everyday experiences (Ni'mah et al., 2024). In addition, digital learning

tools are becoming more common, allowing for interactive and personalized lessons that motivate students to use English in engaging ways (Surani & Septiyani, 2024). Together, these teaching strategies address different learner needs and enhance the overall learning experience, fully reflecting the curriculum's student-centered approach.

3.3 Learning Outcomes

The Merdeka Curriculum has shown a strong positive impact on students' motivation, engagement, and English language skills. By focusing on learner autonomy and personalized learning, it creates an inclusive atmosphere where students feel confident and responsible for their own progress (Purnama & Pawiro, 2023; Wardani et al., 2023). Research shows that this approach increases students' intrinsic motivation because they work with materials and activities that connect to their own interests and cultural backgrounds (Damayanti & Muhroji, 2022). The curriculum's flexibility also makes it possible to use varied assessments that suit different learning styles, helping students achieve better language outcomes (Cantika et al., 2022). Preliminary findings suggest that students in this curriculum are more actively involved in learning. They also more capable of using English effectively in real-life situations (Bastian et al., 2023). Overall, these results highlight how the Merdeka Curriculum successfully promotes both language proficiency and learner motivation.

3.4 Challenges Encountered

Although the Merdeka Curriculum offers many benefits, its implementation still faces several major challenges, especially related to teacher preparedness and the availability of resources. Many teachers admit that they do not fully understand the curriculum's goals and principles. Therefore, they feel difficult to apply the required teaching changes effectively (Mutmainah & Widhiatama, 2024; Salam et al., 2024). Training programs intended to improve teacher competence have also been criticized for being inadequate and not well-suited to real classroom conditions (Salam et al., 2024). In addition, limited access to suitable teaching materials and technology further restricts teachers' ability to create engaging and effective learning experiences (Nurzen, 2022; Purwanti et al., 2024). These challenges point to the need for more focused teacher development programs and better resource distribution to ensure the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across Indonesia's diverse schools.

The findings show that the Merdeka Curriculum is backed by strong policy frameworks that encourage flexibility, autonomy, and the adaptation of learning to local contexts. Teaching practices within this curriculum highlight project-based and authentic learning, supported by the use of technology, which together help increase student engagement and improve English language skills. Its learner-centered approach also promotes motivation and inclusivity, giving students a more active role in their own learning process. However, issues such as limited teacher readiness and a lack of resources continue to pose significant challenges that need to be addressed for the curriculum to reach its full potential. These results are consistent with previous studies that stress the importance of system-wide support and ongoing professional development in successful curriculum reform (Arta et al., 2023; Sari & Wardani, 2018). Addressing these challenges is crucial to maintaining and strengthening the positive effects of the Merdeka Curriculum on English language education in Indonesia.

The teaching approaches used in the Merdeka Curriculum are strongly grounded in the theories of constructivism and communicative language teaching (CLT). Constructivism

highlights the active role of learners in building their own understanding through meaningful experiences, which fits well with the curriculum's emphasis on flexible and student-centered learning (Azmi et al., 2023). This perspective encourages students to connect new language input with their previous knowledge and real-life experiences, helping them understand and remember better. Further, the world of education is always increasing; in fact, various approaches are emerging that are adapted to the needs of today's students (Badriyah, 2022). Likewise, CLT focuses on authentic communication and interaction, supporting the curriculum's goal of developing not just language accuracy but also the ability to use English effectively in everyday situations (Halim et al., 2024). Both theories promote collaborative learning, where students work and communicate with peers and teachers in meaningful ways in order to enhance motivation and engagement in learning. The students' outlook on classroom activities works hand-in-hand with their motivation in learning (Irham & Jayanti, 2020). Furthermore, these theoretical foundations justify the curriculum's focus on project-based learning, authentic materials, and technology integration, all of which contribute to students' comprehensive language development.

Improving teacher readiness for the Merdeka Curriculum requires professional development programs which are comprehensive, practical, and suited to the local context. Training should combine both the theoretical foundations and hands-on applications of the curriculum to help teachers understand and apply the core principles effectively (Nurchayono, 2023). It is kind of supports given to the teacher. Giving fully supports for teachers is more important now as the role of teachers cannot be replaced by the availability of technologies (Bisriyah, 2020). Workshops that focus on innovative teaching methods (such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and authentic assessment) can equip teachers with the tools they need to implement student-centered learning in their classrooms (Setiawati et al., 2024). In addition, forming communities of practice among teachers allows them to share experiences, exchange resources, and develop strategies that fit their specific teaching environments (Novrizal & Manaf, 2024). Peer mentoring and collaborative lesson planning also strengthen this process by building supportive networks that encourage continuous growth (Affandi et al., 2021). These ongoing professional learning opportunities are key to reducing resistance to change and boosting teachers' confidence in adopting new teaching approaches.

Educational policy plays a crucial role in ensuring the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially through proper infrastructure and resource distribution. Policymakers need to guarantee fair funding and access to resources, particularly for schools in underprivileged or remote areas, to close the infrastructure gaps that often limit innovative teaching (Septiana et al., 2024). Policies should also include regular needs assessments and infrastructure improvements to support technology use and flexible learning environments required by the curriculum (Bahri et al., 2024). In addition, clear communication from education authorities about curriculum goals and standards is essential so that schools can plan their teaching strategies and resource use in line with national objectives (Hariyani et al., 2023). Without this kind of strong and consistent policy support, differences in implementation quality may continue, reducing the overall impact and effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Although the Merdeka Curriculum has a strong framework and has shown encouraging early results, current research on its flexible implementation still has some important gaps. There is limited long-term data examining how the curriculum affects students' academic performance and emotional or social development over time (Bastian et al., 2023). Future studies should take a closer look at how different teaching strategies under this curriculum work across Indonesia's

diverse educational settings, taking into account regional, cultural, and socioeconomic differences (Setiawati et al., 2024). It is also important to explore the specific challenges teachers face, such as lack of resources, limited professional training, and contextual barriers, so that more effective support programs can be developed (Dwiyono & Tannarong, 2024). Moreover, the influence of parents and communities in helping schools implement the curriculum deserves greater attention, as collaboration among all stakeholders is vital for meaningful educational progress. Filling these research gaps will lead to a more complete understanding of the curriculum's impact and help shape evidence-based policies and classroom practices.

In summary, the Merdeka Curriculum's strong connection to constructivist and communicative teaching approaches provides a solid foundation for improving English language education in Indonesia. However, its success depends greatly on how well teachers are prepared, how consistently they receive professional development, and how effectively policies ensure fair access to resources across schools. The challenges identified highlight that curriculum reform is a complex process. It requires collaboration among teachers, policymakers, and local communities. If these factors are properly addressed, the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to deliver on its vision of creating a flexible, inclusive, and student-centered education system that helps learners develop essential 21st-century skills and cultural awareness.

4. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing discussion on the importance of flexible curricula that connect language learning with character building and local cultural values. It highlights how theory, classroom practice, and policy must work together to create meaningful and lasting improvements in education. Future studies and policy initiatives should build on these insights by refining curriculum design, enhancing teacher skills, and ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to benefit from educational reforms. These efforts are important to prepare Indonesian students with the knowledge, abilities, and mindset they need to succeed in global and rapidly changing world.

In addition, this study uncovers several key obstacles that prevent the Merdeka Curriculum from being fully implemented. A major concern is teacher readiness where many educators still lack the necessary understanding and training to effectively adopt the curriculum's innovative methods. The shortage of resources, including limited teaching materials and inadequate access to technology, further complicates classroom implementation. These issues point to the importance of ongoing professional development and strong policy support to ensure that teachers receive equal access to resources and the guidance needed to succeed.

The findings of this study carry several important implications. For policymakers, they underline the need to provide clear guidance, ongoing teacher training, and stronger investment in educational infrastructure to support curriculum innovation. For teachers, the results highlight the benefits of working together through professional learning communities and using flexible teaching approaches to address students' diverse needs. Meanwhile, for researchers, the study reveals the lack of long-term data and encourages further exploration of the curriculum's lasting effects (both academically and socially) as well as the influence of community and parental participation.

This study makes a valuable contribution to existing research by bringing together policy analysis, teaching practices, learning outcomes, and implementation challenges to form a comprehensive picture of curriculum reform in a developing country context. It offers both

theoretical and practical insights into how flexible and culturally responsive curricula can be applied to promote 21st-century skills and character growth in language learning. Future research should expand on these findings by using long-term studies to evaluate lasting impacts, exploring different regional settings, and examining how various stakeholders work together in the process. Such studies are essential for improving curriculum models and shaping policies that encourage inclusive, effective, and sustainable educational innovation—both in Indonesia and in similar contexts around the world.

In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum represents a positive shift in Indonesia's education system. It offers new opportunities to transform English language learning through flexibility, contextual relevance, and student empowerment. However, to fully realize this potential, collaboration among policymakers, educators, and researchers is essential to overcome current challenges and ensure ongoing improvement.

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