



English Teacher's Perspectives and Challenges of Implementation *Merdeka* Curriculum in Rural Setting

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Abstract

The current Merdeka Curriculum is used in educational institutions recently in Indonesia. However, the experience of implementing the curriculum is diverse, including challenges in rural areas. This research was aimed for exploring the experience of an English teacher in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in a rural setting. The research was conducted using case study research design, at one of the rural junior high schools in Seluma, Bengkulu, where the new curriculum was implemented in 2024. The research was conducted by conducting semi-structured interviews with the teacher of English at the research site, who was chosen purposively because she was the only teacher teaching English at the research site. The research revealed that the teacher had positive perspectives on the Merdeka Curriculum, which recognized its flexibility, student-centered learning, and differentiated instruction. The teacher also experienced some challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, including the lack of infrastructure, high preparation requirements, and lack of training, particularly in rural areas with low internet connectivity. The teacher was also creative in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum by working together with other teachers. This study emphasizes the need for teachers in rural areas to receive support and training for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum effectively.

Keywords: *Challenge; Merdeka Curriculum; Rural Setting; Teacher's Perspective*

Introduction

In recent years, the Indonesian government has launched various initiatives to enhance the quality of education in Indonesia. One of these initiatives is a change in the Indonesian national education system. In 2021, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched a new curriculum named Merdeka Curriculum due to the learning disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this pandemic has been significantly impacted education which shifted learning in the classroom to E-learning methods at home (Zaharah, 2020). The teaching learning process during the pandemic was done by using technology devices. Merdeka Curriculum was aimed to promote more flexibility in learning, allowing the teacher to adapt to students' needs (Marlina, 2022). This curriculum reform marks a significant step toward creating a more student-centered and adaptable education system in Indonesia.

Compared to the previous national curriculum, Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, flexibility, and the development of Pancasila Students Profile, which includes critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, character education, and personalized learning. It also allows teachers greater autonomy to design learning experiences according to students' interests, local context, and specific classroom needs. As Rohmah et al (2023) stated that teachers in the Merdeka

Curriculum are encouraged to act as facilitators and can choose suitable teaching methods and materials. This is the reason why the teachers have a significant responsibility to construct conditions in which students can be developed as independent learners.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, English education at junior high school focuses not only on developing six core skills but also on understanding different cultures (*Capaian Pembelajaran*, 2022). Students are encouraged to learn about and respect other cultures while also appreciating their own. This helps them become more open-minded and value diversity. The curriculum also promotes creative and critical thinking through various learning materials and projects. As Artama et al (2023) stated that learning using project-based based helps students to develop their skills like thinking critically, working in teams, and solving real-life problems. Teachers are also expected to help students engage with multiple forms of communication, such as written texts, visuals, and multimedia. Because of this, multimodal can have different influence on students' interest and can lead them to be more engaged and confident.

In order to support this kind of learning approach, Merdeka Curriculum offers several teaching strategies that can be used as teaching tools. Some of them are using teaching modules, differentiated instruction, diagnostic assessment, and reflective practices. An example of using differentiated instruction is that the teacher should be able to provide different learning activities that can be used by all students, ensuring that every student can be engaged and can achieve success in their class. As shared from Oktoma et al (2025) that differentiated learning can lead student to be more engaged. Another example of Merdeka Curriculum's innovative strategy is lesson planning that can be supported by teaching modules, as it is now possible to use teaching modules that can include assessment and reflective practices, as shared from Hardanie (2022). These strategies can help create a more inclusive and effective learning environment where all students have the opportunity to grow and succeed.

Teachers' perspective is also essential in determining the effectiveness of teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This can be used to ensure that teachers are able to implement effective strategies for their students. This may be because the success of curriculum innovation cannot be separated from the overall success of education in general (Brundrett et al., 2015). A teacher without a clear understanding and positive perspective about the curriculum may not have the courage to apply a new teaching method. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum is not implemented well in the classroom, and teachers still use the old learning instruction methods that are not in line with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum. This can limit the potential effects of the new curriculum, and it can be a disadvantage for students.

However, teachers' challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum have been outlined in several studies. For instance, in the study of Reza et al. (2023), teachers face considerable challenges as a result of inadequate training, a lack of confidence, and a lack of digital skills, as well as time and resources in the classroom. Likewise, Yusa et al. (2023) indicated some problems in the following aspects: work overload, low preparedness, and limited course materials availability. Ningsih and Adnan (2023) conducted research on student-teachers in the context of their practice in the classroom, revealing teachers' difficulties in designing learning modules, implementing project-based learning, and assessing students. These reveal that the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for student-centered learning in flexible ways.

In the rural setting, these implementation challenges can be even more challenging because the majority of rural schools still experience limited access to technology, inadequate teaching resources, limited availability of training, and poor infrastructure (Akter et al., 2024; Shan et al., 2022). Teachers may also have to deal with different abilities in the class and fewer limited professional opportunities. Besides, others are not yet accustomed to the core tenets of Merdeka Curriculum, such as student-

centered learning, differentiated instruction, and reflective teaching. These factors can render rural teachers unable to properly execute the curriculum.

Hence, it is important to know the actual experiences of rural teacher in order to ascertain what kind of support is genuinely needed. As a school that is new to the *Merdeka* Curriculum, it presents a relevant case to investigate teacher's perspective on the new curriculum, *Merdeka* Curriculum, and its challenges in implementing the new curriculum in a rural setting. The findings of this research are expected to benefit more efficient strategies and policies on curriculum support in rural areas. In addition, the findings from this study will be helpful for teachers in rural areas, policymakers, developers of the curriculum, and others to improve the quality of education across Indonesia.

Research Methodology

To explore teacher's experience and difficulty in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in rural areas, the study applied a qualitative research approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was employed because it is most to examine real-life contexts in a specific setting and provides in-depth understanding. A case study design was used to focus on a specific context which is in the rural school, SMP Negeri 9 Seluma, Bengkulu Province. This school has recently started applying the new curriculum in 2024. The participant of this study was one and only English teacher who works in SMPN 9 Seluma as rural school. Purposive sampling was used to select participant based on their direct involvement with the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. The selection criteria were designed so that all the participants had experience in teaching under the new curriculum. This allowed the researcher to explore their unique challenges and practical experiences more thoroughly.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. As Creswell (2014) stated semi-structured interview is one of the strongest instruments for qualitative research. This method was chosen because it offers flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions, while also allowing participants to share their experiences freely. The instrument was adapted from Lestari (2023), designed to explore several areas: teacher's perspective and challenges faced in the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted online through WhatsApp because it depends on the participant's availability. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent.

The collected data were transcribed and analyzed by using thematic analysis. Next, it was coded using thematic analysis. It adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures that comprised familiarization with the transcripts, initial coding generations, theme searching, and exploration of how the discovered themes correlated with research questions. For the purpose of ensuring the accuracy of the results, member checking was carried out by allowing the research participant to verify the research transcripts and the research results for accuracy. This study provides insight into the realities of operation in applying *Kurikulum Merdeka* in environments that may have limited training and access to resources. These findings will potentially guide future teacher support and curriculum improvement in similar rural environments.

Findings and Discussion,

Findings

This section presents the main findings from semi-structured interviews with English teacher at rural schools implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum in their teaching practices for the first time in 2024.

Teacher's Perspective on the Merdeka Curriculum**1. Professional Exposure and Familiarity**

The teacher showed a strong and clear understanding of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. She indicated that she understood the curriculum by discussing with other teachers, which helped her improve her basic knowledge and keep up with the latest advancements in education systems. In a formal way, she joined the activities for professional development, for example, workshops and training sessions. She also mentioned that she used the Platform *Merdeka Mengajar* (PMM), which is an application provided by the government on the internet, to help the teacher learn about the new curriculum and how they can improve their teaching practices.

"I knew the new curriculum from my colleague at my school and also from the PMM application. I also followed some activities and workshops about the new curriculum."

This result implies that rural teacher is not lagging when it comes to professional growth. They may still be able to continue learning through the support of the schools they are in, such as through the sharing of knowledge with colleagues, and through the availability of digital tools such as the PMM application. This will enable them to better grasp the application of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, despite being in a rural setting.

2. Curriculum Relevance and Flexibility

The teacher felt that the *Merdeka* Curriculum provides her with the flexibility to adapt to the needs of the students. As the teacher said:

"In my personal view, I really believe this new curriculum can take sides on my students' abilities because not all of the students in my class have the same ability. They are diverse and have many differences among them."

This shows that the understanding about differentiated instruction as a key part of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is good because she used in the teaching practice. By differentiated instruction, the teacher was able to help all of her students catch up and make progress by giving them different kinds of activities, even when students come from very different backgrounds and levels of proficiency.

3. Encouraging Independent Learning and Confidence

The teacher was assured that the *Merdeka* Curriculum is vital in supporting students' learning of the English language, using autonomy and confidence. She discovered that the curriculum lets the students grow based on their own capacities and strengths rather than putting too much emphasis on their weaknesses.

"Of course, yes, because it brings new understanding of how to make students independent with their own characteristics without reducing their lack, and it makes students more confident."

This is part of the student-centered ideology that the *Merdeka* Curriculum advocates for. The experience of the teacher confirms this, and it shows how the students are likely to take charge and become proactive in the learning process when they are given the space to learn in a manner that they are comfortable with.

4. Interactive Learning and Active Learning

The teacher revealed that she uses differentiated instruction in her classroom, which has been effective in motivating the students. The teacher revealed how this strategy has helped her in increasing the students' participation and making the classes more lively and participatory.

"I am concerned about differentiation learning it really helps me to make my class interactive and active."

The teacher in this study confirmed that the *Merdeka* Curriculum has provided her with an opportunity to be more responsive and innovative in planning. This has helped them in organizing themselves in a way that meets the demands of every student while maintaining their interest and concentration. The teacher's experience revealed that differentiated instruction has helped in the development of a more stimulating learning environment in the classroom, apart from academic advancement.

5. *Teacher as Facilitator*

The teacher also recognized the fact that the *Merdeka* Curriculum repositions her as a facilitator, not as the source of information. She emphasized the fact that the locus of all classroom activities is now transferred from the teacher to the student, therefore indicating the existence of a student-centered approach.

"I think not really because as long as I teach, I role of a facilitator and manager for them"

"Yes, of course. The center of the activity is not me but them, my students."

The above results of the interview show how learning is becoming more student-centered, not teacher-centered. The experience shared by the teacher above relates to the manner in which the curriculum promotes interactive learning. As a facilitator, the teacher can empower her students not only in their English proficiency but also in their thinking skills, exploring, etc.

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

1. *Limited Resources and Infrastructures*

The teacher mentioned that issues with the unstable power supply, the poor internet connection, and the lack of digital tools as the impediment for the effective roll-out of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in the rural school.

"The difficulties, I think, are in the lack of our infrastructure in our school. So, sometimes I have to make media without any signal, electrical, or something like that."

These issues impacted the utilization of technology and online study materials, which are the integrak components of modern learning and teaching. These issues hindered the teacher from using digital media and creating effective learning materials for the students. The teacher's experience shows that even though the *Merdeka* Curriculum advocates the use of technology, there is no support in every school because of the rural setting.

2. *High Preparation Demands*

The teacher clarified that another problem faced in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum was that the class activity should be prepared with varied activities. She had students with diverse needs and diverse levels of proficiency in the English language. She was not able to apply the same activity across the whole class.

"I think the difficulties are about the activity in my class, because I have to prepare some activities, not only one."

The teacher must prepare additional materials and activities to serve all students so that they can be challenged and supported. Although this way of teaching assists the students in their learning, it needs additional time and effort from the teacher. This discovery indicates how a critical providing teacher with sufficient time, resources, and guidance is critical to prepare quality lessons for all students. If this is not provided, the additional workload will be a problem for the full implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

Discussion

This research investigated the experience of rural English teacher at SMPN 9 Seluma in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The results confirm that the Merdeka Curriculum encourages flexibility, student-centeredness, and innovation (Kasman & Lubis, 2022). Its implementation success lies in the degree of teacher's understanding and their implementation of it in their classroom, particularly in rural schools. In this study, the teacher had a clear understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum from both formal training and informal discussions with her peers. PMM also facilitated her to sharpen her understanding and have access to learning resources. It was supported by the studies, which mentioned that the teacher was more influenced more by internal factors than by external factors in the implementing Merdeka Curriculum (Falah et al., 2023; Umar et al., 2024). In this study, the teacher wanted to apply the principle of the Merdeka curriculum in her teaching practice by knowing the information with her peers and through the platform. It indicates that effect of self-initiation of the internal factor can empower the teacher in the application of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, especially in the context of rural education.

In line with the Merdeka Curriculum approach, the teacher employed differentiated and student-centered teaching strategies in the teaching practice. The strategies can accommodate the various needs of students and their English proficiency levels. This has the potential to improve the students' engagement, as supported by the study of Oktoma et al. (2025). The study revealed that that differentiated instruction has the potential to improve the students' engagement and accommodate the various learning styles of the students. The teaching approach of the teacher enabled her to engage all the learners in the learning process and grow them according to their individual capacity. The students were able to enhance their autonomy and self-esteem, which is one of the major aims of the Merdeka Curriculum approach. The experience of the teacher proves the effectiveness of the project-based approach of the curriculum, which allows the learners to learn through various forms of presentation. The teacher employed various creative teaching approaches, which enabled the learners to be actively engaged in the class and thus created an inspiring environment despite the lack of resources. The experience of the teacher proves the effectiveness of the innovative approach of the curriculum, which allows the learners to learn despite the lack of resources in the rural area.

The rural teacher has more serious challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. One of the greatest challenges faced by the rural teacher in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum was lack of proper infrastructures in the school, which lacked a decent internet connection, no electricity, and lacked digital devices, to hinder the full implementation of technology-based and online modes of learning. This supports previous findings (Akter et al., 2024; Shan et al., 2022) that rural schools in general do not have infrastructural support to cope with curriculum change. As stated by Reza et al. (2023), teachers tend to struggle with a shortage of training, low levels of confidence, low levels of digital skills, and a lack of classroom resources and time. These issues point to the necessity of special support and facilities to enable rural teacher to break through constraints and apply the Merdeka Curriculum efficiently. The second obstacle was lesson preparation, that overwhelmingly in demand. Due to the fact that her students had a range of abilities, the teacher needed to prepare different activities for every lesson. This made teaching preparation consume more time and increased her workload. This finding was found similarly with Yusa et al (2023), which there were high workload issues when implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum. This finding shows teacher's commitment to implement the new curriculum; however, better support and time management strategies should be considered to avoid teacher burnout.

Despite all these challenges, the teacher managed to solve the problems that only using any available school resources that existed, like books, speakers, and nature. In addition, discussions with others and online resources like YouTube from outside rural settings have been used to find the

information. These coping mechanisms illustrate the need for teacher flexibility and creativity, particularly in rural schools where help mechanisms are lacking. Lastly, the teacher emphasized the need for ongoing and accessible training, but requires additional face-to-face workshops and written resources because they cannot always depend on the availability of the internet. This corroborates the argument given by Yunitasari et al (2023) that workshops and preparation-enhancing activities can boost teacher's intellectual and mental readiness to handle the modifications and challenges of the new curriculum. Professional development for rural teacher's needs to be realistic and sensitive to local conditions. Otherwise, unless properly addressed through training and support, the realization of the Merdeka Curriculum will remain constrained, particularly in schools that are distant from urban areas.

In conclusion, it is confirmed that the *Merdeka Curriculum* has the potential to support the process of learning and teaching through a student-centered approach, flexibility, and the development of essential skills that are required in the 21st century. However, it is not as simple as understanding it for teachers; it is also essential to support it with adequate infrastructure, moderate workloads, creative utilization of available resources, and continued professional growth depending on the nature of the rural setting. The findings of the study have the potential to be used by education leaders/policymakers to serve rural teacher better and make the Merdeka Curriculum a success.

Conclusion and Suggestion

This research aims to investigate the perceptions and challenges of an English teacher in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings of this research indicate that although the English teacher had a high level of understanding and positive attitudes towards the curriculum's flexibility and student-centered approach, there were still challenges faced by the teacher. These findings indicate that although the Merdeka Curriculum is innovative, it is still important to consider other factors that can facilitate its application, especially in rural areas. However, it is worth noting that although this research was conducted with a single participant, it is limited. Therefore, future studies should consider a number of teachers and students, as well as collaboration with other stakeholders, especially in rural areas.

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