

## The English Teacher's Perspective and Challenge on Implementing Merdeka Curriculum

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**Abstract** - In navigating the complexities of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, English teachers find themselves at the forefront of educational innovation. The English teacher's role becomes pivotal in sculpting an effective learning experience within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. This study is aimed to investigate the English teachers' perspective and challenge on implementing Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching and learning process. This study delves into the English teachers' perspective and all their challenges when they implemented Merdeka Curriculum. Through qualitative descriptive, the study aims to shed light the various perspectives and challenges encountered by English teachers, providing valuable insights for curriculum improvement and professional development in language action. Interviewing three English teachers who teach at madrasah which becomes pilot project for implementing Merdeka Curriculum, subsequently, the data is obtained indicating that they hold the perspective that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning has advantages in achieving material targets without rushing and in fostering student engagement, which is a requirement of the Merdeka Curriculum. According to them, these two aspects are positive outcomes of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning. However, having positive aspects does not mean there are no challenges. The research subjects in this study stated that the biggest challenges in implementing the Merdeka curriculum in English language learning are understanding and accommodating the diversity of students' character and learning styles, which will impact the determination of an effective model for English language instruction.

**Keywords:** Merdeka curriculum, English learning, Teacher's perspective and challenge

### I. INTRODUCTION

Coming after the end of covid pandemic situation, merdeka curriculum was introduced to our educational system as a replacement the 2013 curriculum. According to Manchali, 2014; Martin and Simanjorang, 2022 which was cited by Rizaldi and Fatimah, 2022 changes in the curriculum arise due to the circumstances and external pressures necessitated to compete effectively individuals' lives, both on a national and international scale. Quoting the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) website, Merdeka

curriculum is a curriculum with various intracurriculars. Merdeka curriculum has a concept of optimization on content based learning, so that students will have more time to understand the learning concept and to strengthen their competencies. In accordance with information from the teacher information center website <https://pusatinformasi.guru.kemdikbud.go.id>, the emergence of the independent curriculum is initiated by the result of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that 70% students in the age of 15 years

old were under minimum competency in understanding the simple text or applying the basic mathematic concepts. This PISA score has not increased in last ten to fifteen years. That study shows us about the big gap between regions and between social-economy societies in the case of learning quality. Moreover, this situation is being worst during the covid-19.

To address this issue, the Ministry of Education and Culture-Research and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) has implemented a simplified curriculum under special conditions (emergency curriculum) to mitigate learning loss during the pandemic. As a result, out of 31.5% of schools using the emergency curriculum, it is indicated that the use of the emergency curriculum can reduce the impact of the pandemic by 73% (literacy) and 86% (numeracy). Changing an old version of something with another new thing is not easy, including Merdeka curriculum. Already accustomed to the implementation of the 2013 curriculum, educators need more time to familiarize themselves and adapt to this new independent curriculum. As outlined by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2022, the Merdeka Curriculum has been crafted as a curriculum framework that is more adaptable, forming an integral part of educational reform initiative. It emphasizes crucial content and cultivation of students' character and skills. Stated by Nur Azmi Rohimajaya, Rudi Hartono, Issy Yuliasri, Sri Wuli Fitriati that the Government explained about the main characters of merdeka curriculum in a case of learning recovery are: (1) project based learning to develop students' soft skill and character according to the Pancasila student profile; (2) Focusing on essential materials in order to provide sufficient time to learn basic competences intensively, such as literation and numeration; and (3) independency for teachers to conduct differentiated learning based on students' competencies. These three new things are actually challenging, since the teacher haven't been familiar with.

One of primary obstacles is the need for educators to face a period of adaptation and familiarization, especially if they used 2013 curriculum before. Merdeka curriculum introduces an adaptive framework. This will take times for teachers to understand the nuances and adjusting their methodologies in teaching and learning process. Moreover, merdeka curriculum also stresses on students'

character building, not only on students' academic achievements. This also can be a new challenge for teachers to integrate these two components effectively. Coming from some challenges mentioned above then the teacher's perspectives appear. Therefore, this study is aimed to gain the information about English teacher's perspectives and challenges during the implementation of Merdeka curriculum on teaching English. The main focus of the study is the English teachers' perspectives and challenges who teach at MA Minhajut Tholabah. It is one of the biggest and popular Islamic senior hih school in Purbalingga regency. MA Minhajut Tholabah has been designated as the first school to implement the Merdeka curriculum since last academic year. After two years have conducted the Merdeka curriculum, the writer wants to know how their perspectives and challenges on implementing Merdeka curriculum in English teaching and learning process. Recognizing the teacher's perspectives and challenges is very important to make right evaluations that the final goal is on student's achievement.

So far, there hasn't been specific research addressing the perspectives and challenges of English language teachers in implementing Merdeka curriculum. However, several studies with similarities to this research have been conducted, such as the studies by Sokoi & Krismiyati (2015), Weda, Sakkir, & Sakti (2022), Sunarni & Karyono (2023), and Rifki, Babo, & Rahman (2023). They explore the perceptions and challenges of students and English language teachers regarding the implementation of the independent learning curriculum at the Elementary School, Junior High School, and University levels. While the focus, theories, and methods differ, the commonality lies in the exploration of the independent learning curriculum. Meanwhile, research on language aspects has been conducted by Muta'allim, Sofyan, & Haryono (2020); Salikin, Muta'alim, Nawawi, Alfani, Ghaffar, & Wafi (2021); Muta'allim, Alfani, Hosaini, & Sayfullah (2021); Muta'allim, Alfani, Mahidin, Agustin & Wicaksi (2021); Sofyan, Yudistira, Muta'allim, Alfani & Ghaffar (2022); Yudistira, Muta'allim, Nurcaya, Julhadi, & Pattiasina (2022); Sofyan, Badrudin, Fitriani, & Muta'allim (2022); Irsyadi, Fitriyah, Hanifiyah, & Muta'allim (2022); Sofyan, Firmansyah, Muta'allim, Solissa, & Rosikh (2022); Yudistira & Muta'allim (2023);

Mahardhani, Nawiruddin, Jalaluddin, Julhadi, & Muta'allim (2023); and Julhadi, Muta'allim, Fitri, Efendi, & Yahya (2023).

Based on the review of several studies above, no specific research has been found that addresses the perspectives and challenges faced by English language teachers in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. Therefore, this study can be considered relatively new, with significant potential to contribute to education, particularly in the context of English language education. With ample room for exploration and a substantial potential contribution to educational development, researchers are keenly interested in undertaking this study. Building on this background, the research problem is formulated as follows, What are the perspectives and challenges of English language teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum?

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

The study used descriptive qualitative, especially case study. According to Fajar Novtian and Zakky Yafani (2023), a case study is an approach used to investigate and examine occurrences or phenomena related to a particular subject. Qualitative study is a methodology that conducted to gain a profound comprehension and spell out social or human phenomena. The data collection method of this study was interview. The data was analyzed by using reduction and data display. This research aims to gain profound insights into the perspectives and challenges faced by English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The research subjects were selected from various schools and English teachers, ensuring diversity in experiences and viewpoints. The participant observation method was employed, where the researcher attentively listened to teachers' discourse related to the Merdeka Curriculum, supported by note-taking recording techniques. Direct observation of English teaching sessions was conducted to understand the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in practical contexts. The collected data encompass the perspectives and challenges of English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The respondents in this study were English teachers from various educational levels actively involved in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. After data collection, the researcher transcribed and applied data analysis methods, including data reduction, classification by type, validation, and data interpretation. The

overall study provides a comprehensive overview of the reality in the field, involving the practical experiences of teachers and direct interaction with the teaching process.

## III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION FINDING

There were three English teachers of MA Minhajut Tholabah who become the interviewees about their perspective and challenge during the implementation of merdeka curriculum in English teaching and learning process. The first interviewee is more senior than the other two, because she has taught English in MA Minhajut Tholabah for about 6 years, while the other two English teachers are fresh graduate and they teach in MA Minhajut Tholabah since the first semester of academic year 2023/2024. The data of the study which was gained from interview were classified into three classifications. They were English teachers' perspectives of implementing merdeka curriculum on English teaching and learning process, English teachers' challenges of implementing merdeka curriculum on English teaching and learning process and their strategies and suggestion in the case of improving the quality of English teaching and learning process by using curriculum merdeka.

### a. English teachers' perspectives

The first question which was asked in the context of English teachers' perspective is "*how familiar are you with merdeka curriculum?*" The answers are as follows:

First interviewee : *I am familiar enough with the merdeka curriculum. I got a little bit information about merdeka curriculum when I joined PPL when I was a college student.*

Second interviewee: *I knew merdeka curriculum for the first time when joining PPL. My guru pamong told me that the school has been used Merdeka curriculum, so she informed me merdeka curriculum.*

Third interviewee : *Merdeka curriculum is familiar enough for me, since I joined some training of merdeka curriculum program which was facilitated by this school.*

The next question was "*in your point of view, what is the advantage of merdeka curriculum in English teaching and learning process?*" The answers are as follows:

First interviewee : *The materials which are taught to the students can be customized with the students' and the school's needs.*

Second interviewee: *The strength of merdeka curriculum requires the students to be active during the teaching and learning process, while the teacher roles is just as a facilitator. This means that students will learn to be more independent and confident in learning. They do not just wait for the teacher to 'spoon-feed' them the material.*

Third interviewee : *The goal of Merdeka curriculum is students' understanding not materials' achievement target. I felt so happy that in merdeka curriculum there was no certain target of material achievement like in 2013 curriculum, for example, in 2013 curriculum the target of material achievements have been decided. In the first semester there were 5 topics must be delivered to students without considering whether the students have understood or not, because the target is all materials have been delivered. While in merdeka curriculum, the teacher will not move to the next material until the students understand well the previous materials.*

Another perspective was dig up by asking a question "do you think that merdeka curriculum support the students' English skills? If it is yes, what is the example?"

First interviewee : *Yes, of course. Students have a lot of chances to practice English more in Merdeka curriculum.*

Second interviewee: *Because there is no chasing deadline of materials, students will have much more time to practice English. I think that is the part of support of merdeka curriculum for the students improving their English skills."*

Third interviewee : *I do agree that merdeka curriculum has supported the students' English skills to improve. A learning process that is not rushed, no chasing deadlines, making the learning activities as*

*comfortable as possible. Teacher will introduce new material only when all students truly understand the previous material, regardless of how much time it takes. Through this concept, the students' English skill will improve better because they have much more time to master English in all skills rather than chasing the deadlines.*

b. English teachers' challenges and strategies

After asking some questions to dig up their perspectives of Merdeka curriculum on teaching and learning English, the writer also asked some questions to gain the information about the challenges they had when implementing merdeka curriculum on English teaching and learning process. The question was "Do you have difficulties or challenges when you were implementing merdeka curriculum in English teaching and learning process? If it is yes, what was that and what is your strategy to solve that challenge?" The answers of this question were as follows:

First interviewee : *The main challenge was thinking and applying different teaching methods for various characters of students. Moreover, having a passive student was another challenge too.*

*Giving more attention to each student is the key to solve the problem which I mentioned before. We are as teacher do not give attention and care to the smart or active students only but also to the passive students. Unfortunately, our goal to pay attention to students was often misinterpreted by them. For example, when we chose a passive student to be more active by asking him or her to perform in front of the class, which means to make them be more usual to perform, so that their confidence will increase, but she or he were misinterpreted. He or she thought that we were embarrassing them in front of his/her friends.*

Second interviewee: *Trying to implement different teaching methods for different character of students is not an easy as I think before. As a teacher we must be creative to create an innovative teaching and learning*

process. The more creative we are, the easier for us solving the problem of different teaching methods for our students. Ice breaking is also full of help to solve the problem of creating different teaching methods.

Third interviewee : The challenge is we have to know all the students skill (kemampuan) one by one. Moreover, another challenge is most of our students have not been ready yet with this merdeka curriculum. As we know that merdeka curriculum asks the students to be active learners. Teacher roles as facilitator only. However, there are a lot of students who like to be spoon – feed of materials by their teacher. How to solve this problem is depending of our consistency. If the problem is students' lack of habit in active learning, their tendency to prefer being given material rather than seeking it themselves, so we need to always be consistent to ask them and facilitate them to be active learners. We also need to create innovative and creative methods or strategies for teaching English.

Another supported question asked to the interviewees was “share your own experience on implementing merdeka curriculum. Is there any moment that influenced your way to teach or influence your mind about English teaching and learning process?” Here are their answers:

First interviewee : Merdeka curriculum has changed my mind about teaching method. That implementing the same method for different class is wrong. Merdeka curriculum made me know that A method for teaching certain material cannot always be implemented in another class. The implementation of teaching method must be customized with students' character. I had an experience when I taught in girl class which was different with boy class. In girl class, I asked them to present a certain material and it went well. However, when I asked the boy class to do the presentation, it was totally failed, because the boy class was easier to asked to analyze problem or concept of material.

Second interviewee : Before I knew about merdeka curriculum, what I knew

about teaching was a teacher who stood in front of the class, explained a material from the beginning to the end, and finally asked the students to complete the exercises. In merdeka curriculum students are actually asked to carry out problem solving activities as often as possible, discover material concepts and draw conclusions, accompanied by the teacher.

Third interviewee : I found two different characters in one classroom. The one who is very active in learning process, they tried hard to find the material concept, asked a lot of questions for anything they did not know to the teacher. Another one is very passive. They only waited the teacher to give them the whole materials. Facing this situation, then made me think how to handle this situation well. Finally, I have learnt that before entering the class, I had to be ready in everything, such as materials, various methods, creative and innovative learning activities, assessments, etc.

## DISCUSSION

### Teachers' Familiarity

Teacher's familiarity was the first asked question. Their familiarity of merdeka curriculum is important to know, because it will influence their perspective of merdeka curriculum itself. All the interviewees of this study said that they were familiar enough with the concept of merdeka curriculum through the training program or private training from someone who is more senior and more experienced than them. The more familiar they are with the certain issue, in this case is merdeka curriculum, the smaller the chance, the less likely they are to form incorrect perspectives. How does someone give their opinion about something if they even do not know what the thing is.

### The Advantage of Merdeka Curriculum

From the interview, it is gained a data about the English teacher's perspective especially the advantage of merdeka curriculum. There were three different advantages of implementing merdeka curriculum on English teaching and learning process. First interviewee said the customized material was very beneficial. Another advantage was told by the

second interviewee. She said the students centered learning was the main advantage of implementing merdeka curriculum in English learning process. Students centered learning approached is one of the required components should align 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. The development of school should shift from a teacher-centered learning approach to a student-centered one (Novtian et al., 2023; Yaftani et al., 2023) This shift is necessary as modern students need to adapt to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills to prepare for their future. This condition gave a lot of benefit to English teacher. One of them is teacher will not be too tired explaining the material from the beginning to the end of learning hour. Students will also be pushed to be active learner and independent learner which was very good to improve their character building.

The third interviewee said that the students' understanding was the main goal of merdeka curriculum, not the material achievement so it was more beneficial. Many real-life incidents narrated that a teacher's material achievement target for a semester is often met successfully. However, when tested on students, the grades still turned out to be low. This raised a significant question: does the quantity of material delivered to students equated to the level of understanding they possessed? Perhaps, it was not just about achieving material targets; the students' comprehension might still be in the realm of imagination. It would be futile for students to study for years if they don't attain maximum understanding because the focus is just on material achievement targets each semester. Therefore, shifting the focus to the students' comprehension achievement is prioritized in the merdeka curriculum, benefiting both teachers and students alike. By all these advantages, all the interviewees agreed that merdeka curriculum supported the students' English skill to improve. Customizing the English material, students-centered learning, and the students' understanding as the main goal are three conditions of implementing merdeka curriculum in English teaching and learning process which give a lot of support for students to improve their English skills.

### **Teachers' Challenge and Its Solutions**

As mentioned in the background of study that the transition of new curriculum is not an easy thing to do. English teachers face a lot of challenges during the implementation of merdeka curriculum in English teaching and

learning process. The result of the interview showed us that students' different character was the main challenge to implement the merdeka curriculum in English teaching and learning process. This was conveyed by all the interviewees. Students' different character influenced learning instruction. Differentiated instruction is one of the new concepts advocated in the implementation of the merdeka learning curriculum (Novtian et al., 2023; Yaftani et al., 2023). Differentiated instruction is highly recommended by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture to be applied in learning. Differentiated instruction in learning process is new for most of teacher, including English teacher. Therefore, this became challenge for especially the interviewees of this study.

Another challenge for English teachers is students' passivity and students' lack readiness. This condition is contrary with the demand of merdeka curriculum, it is students-centered learning. The students' condition does impact the effective execution of learning, including learning models, as the key to successful implementation lies in students' engagement and comprehension of the learning process (Novtian et al., 2023; Yaftani et al., 2023). Moreover, the data also showed that the students were not ready with the concept of students-centered learning as they preferred staying quiet, receiving and having the English material explained to them by the teacher than actively seeking information. There were two conducted ways to solve this problem, implementing the interactive and innovative way to teach English, so that students will be more active and high interested and the implementation of ice breaking to increase the students' readiness and check their focus before having learning process.

### **IV. CONCLUSION**

As a replacement curriculum for the 2013 curriculum, the Independent Learning Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) is now well-known and well-understood by English teachers at MA Minhajut Tholabah. As the first school to implement the Independent Learning Curriculum in Purbalingga Regency, all teachers have been facilitated with training on the curriculum for the past two years. This training has made them familiar with the Independent Learning Curriculum. One of the advantages of the Independent Learning Curriculum in its implementation in English language learning is

that the material can be adjusted to the needs of students and the school, not solely adhering to the government's syllabus. Another advantage is student-centered learning, encouraging students to continuously think critically, creatively, innovatively, and confidently in their learning—qualities demanded in 21st-century education. The third advantage, also beneficial for both teachers and students, is that the focus is on students' understanding as the primary target, shifting away from the emphasis on how much material has been delivered. These three advantages are considered to have supported students in optimizing their English language proficiency. In addition to these advantages, English teachers face challenges in implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum in English language teaching. The diversity of students' characters and the application of various teaching models according to students' characters are the first challenges faced by English teachers. Dealing with students who are too passive and prefer to be given explanations rather than actively seeking information is another challenge encountered. The writer realizes that this study has some weaknesses in method, instrument of collecting the data, or any other. This study has more focus on gathering the data of English teacher's perspective and challenge on implementing merdeka curriculum in English teaching and learning process. Although the subject of the study also mentioned the solution of the challenges, but further research still needs to be done to prove its validity.

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