

CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN IMPLEMENTING THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by English teachers and students in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA 2 Wonosari. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that teachers experience difficulties in lesson planning, classroom implementation, and assessment, particularly related to time management, student diversity, and limited facilities. Students also face challenges in adapting to student-centered learning and technology-based instruction. These findings suggest the need for continuous teacher training and institutional support to ensure effective curriculum implementation.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, teacher challenges, student challenges, English learning.

Introduction

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced to promote flexible and student-centered learning in Indonesian schools. Despite its advantages, its implementation presents various challenges, particularly for English language instruction. This study focuses on identifying challenges encountered by teachers and students at SMA 2 Wonosari.

The Merdeka Curriculum represents one of the most significant educational reforms in Indonesia in recent years. Introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, this curriculum aims to transform conventional teaching practices into more flexible, student-centered, and competency-based learning. The reform emerged as a response to various educational challenges, including learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, rigid curriculum structures, and the need to prepare students with twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Unlike previous curricula that emphasized content mastery and standardized assessment, the Merdeka Curriculum provides greater autonomy to schools and teachers to design learning activities according to students' needs, interests, and local contexts.

Historically, curriculum development in Indonesia has undergone numerous changes, from the 1947 Curriculum to the Competency-Based Curriculum, the School-Based Curriculum (KTSP), and the 2013 Curriculum. Each reform sought to address

weaknesses in the previous system, yet frequent policy changes have often created uncertainty among teachers and school administrators. The Merdeka Curriculum attempts to simplify learning content, reduce administrative burdens, and encourage innovative teaching practices. However, successful implementation depends not only on policy design but also on teachers' readiness, institutional support, and students' learning characteristics.

In the context of English language teaching, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum presents particular challenges. English is a foreign language in Indonesia, and students generally have limited exposure to the language outside the classroom. Many learners experience difficulties related to vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, grammar, and speaking confidence. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes project-based learning, differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and technology integration, which require teachers to possess strong pedagogical competence and digital literacy. At the same time, students are expected to take a more active role in learning, participate in discussions, collaborate with peers, and reflect on their learning progress.

Several previous studies have reported challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Research by Ainiyah (2023) indicates that many teachers struggle to understand curriculum guidelines and design differentiated lesson plans. Astuti (2024) highlights limited training opportunities and inadequate facilities as major barriers to effective implementation. Other studies emphasize students' low motivation, uneven academic abilities, and limited access to technology as significant obstacles. These findings suggest that curriculum reform requires comprehensive support at multiple levels, including policy, school management, teacher professional development, and student guidance.

SMA 2 Wonosari is one of the schools that recently adopted the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning. Preliminary observations indicate that although the curriculum offers flexibility and innovation, there are gaps between curriculum expectations and classroom realities. Teachers experience difficulties in lesson planning, classroom management, and assessment, while students face challenges in adapting to student-centered learning and technology-based instruction. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges faced by English teachers and students in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA 2 Wonosari. Specifically, this research focuses on three main aspects: lesson planning, classroom implementation, and assessment practices. The findings are expected to contribute to improving curriculum implementation, enhancing teacher professional development, and strengthening English language education in Indonesian secondary schools.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore in depth the challenges faced by English teachers and students in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA 2 Wonosari. Qualitative research is appropriate for investigating complex educational phenomena because it allows researchers to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within their natural contexts. The case study approach was selected to provide a detailed and contextualized analysis of curriculum implementation in a specific school setting.

The research was conducted at SMA 2 Wonosari, located in Gorontalo Province. This school was selected because it has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in Grade 10 and Grade 11, while Grade 12 still follows the 2013 Curriculum. This transitional condition provided a valuable opportunity to examine how teachers and students adapt to the new curriculum framework. The participants consisted of one English teacher and several students from Grade 10 who were actively involved in the teaching and learning process.

Data were collected using three main techniques: interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teacher to obtain detailed information about experiences in lesson planning, instructional strategies, classroom management, and assessment practices under the Merdeka Curriculum. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to express their views freely and provide rich descriptions. Informal interviews were also conducted with selected students to explore their perceptions, learning difficulties, and learning experiences.

Classroom observations were carried out during several teaching sessions to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum was implemented in practice. The observations focused on teaching methods, student participation, use of learning media, classroom interaction patterns, and assessment activities. Field notes were taken to record important events, teacher-student interactions, and students' responses during the lessons.

Document analysis was conducted to examine lesson plans, teaching modules, syllabi, and assessment instruments prepared by the teacher. These documents were analyzed to identify the alignment between curriculum guidelines and classroom practices. The combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis enabled data triangulation, which enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke. The process began with familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents. Initial codes were then generated to identify meaningful units related to lesson planning,

classroom implementation, and assessment challenges. These codes were grouped into broader categories to develop themes. The themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted to answer the research questions.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in this study. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the school principal and relevant authorities. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using pseudonyms and omitting identifying information. By adhering to ethical principles, this study ensured the protection of participants' rights and the integrity of the research process.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning at SMA 2 Wonosari presents various challenges for both teachers and students. These challenges are categorized into three main aspects: lesson planning, classroom implementation, and assessment practices.

In terms of lesson planning, the teacher experienced difficulties in designing flexible and student-centered lesson plans. Although the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes differentiated instruction and contextual learning, limited time and heavy administrative workloads hinder effective planning. The teacher reported that conducting diagnostic assessments to identify students' abilities is essential, but adapting materials to different proficiency levels requires considerable effort. This finding supports previous studies indicating that teachers often lack sufficient training and guidance to implement differentiated instruction effectively.

During classroom implementation, several obstacles were observed. The teacher attempted to create interactive learning activities through group discussions, project-based tasks, and multimedia use. However, student participation remained uneven. Some students were actively involved, while others remained passive due to low confidence, limited vocabulary, and fear of making mistakes. Technological constraints, particularly unstable internet connections and limited access to digital devices, further restricted the use of online learning platforms. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of infrastructure and digital literacy in curriculum implementation.

Assessment practices also posed significant challenges. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes formative assessment and continuous feedback, yet in practice the teacher relied mainly on group assignments and informal observations. Providing individualized feedback was difficult due to large class sizes and time constraints. Consequently, assessment practices were not always aligned with

curriculum principles. This finding indicates the need for more practical training on formative assessment strategies.

From the students' perspective, adapting to student-centered learning was challenging. Many students were accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and struggled to take initiative. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom further hindered their progress. Unequal access to technology created learning disparities, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds.

Table 1.4. Discussion of Tematik analysis

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Data Source	Key Excerpt (Condensed)	Thematic Interpretation	Theoretical Link
Lesson Planning	Diagnostic assessment at the beginning of learning	Teacher Interview	"The first step I take is conducting an initial assessment to know students' abilities."	The teacher applies diagnostic assessment; however, diverse student abilities make flexible planning challenging.	Diagnostic assessment and differentiation (Tomlinson, 2017; Ainiyah, 2023)
	Students' transition and ability gaps	Teacher Interview	"They are new students transitioning from junior high school."	Differences in students' readiness affect lesson planning effectiveness.	Learner readiness in curriculum implementation (Kahn, 2017)
	Integration of local context	Interview & Observation	"I relate the material to students' daily lives."	Contextual learning increases relevance but is not fully supported by varied project activities.	Contextual learning approach (Zulaiha, 2022)
Limited teacher training		Teacher Interview	"Not all teachers receive Merdeka Curriculum training."	Lack of professional development affects teachers' readiness.	Teacher readiness and professional development (Brown, 2021)

Lesson Implementation	Creating a positive classroom climate	Interview & Observation	"I give appreciation to all students."	A supportive environment encourages participation.	Student-centered learning environment (Rizki, 2022)
	Unequal student participation	Observation	"Only some students are active in group work."	Collaborative learning is applied, but participation remains uneven.	Project-based learning challenges (Iskandar, 2024)
	Teaching strategy adaptation	Teacher Interview	"I adjust methods using discussions and videos."	Differentiation is attempted but limited by resources.	Differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2017)
	Technological constraints	Interview & Observation	"The main problem is internet connectivity."	Infrastructure limitations hinder technology-based learning.	Digital divide in education (Astuti, 2024)
Assessment	Dominance of group assessment	Observation	"There were no individual quizzes."	Individual competencies are not fully identified.	Formative assessment challenges (Kau, 2024)
	Difficulty monitoring participation	Teacher Interview	"Only one or two students usually work."	Assessing individual contribution remains difficult.	Authentic assessment issues (Ainiyah, 2023)
	Immediate feedback	Observation	"That's good, but don't forget the introduction."	Constructive feedback is given but not systematic.	Assessment for learning (Tapung, 2025)
	Limited assessment time	Observation	"There was no time for quizzes."	Time constraints limit continuous assessment.	Classroom assessment constraints (Nurhajati, 2023)

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA 2 Wonosari has not yet reached its optimal potential due to structural, pedagogical, and infrastructural challenges. Teachers require continuous professional development, stronger school support, and adequate facilities to carry out the curriculum effectively. Meanwhile, students need increased guidance, digital

literacy support, and differentiated instruction to adapt to the new learning approach. These findings reinforce previous studies suggesting that curriculum transformation must be accompanied by systemic improvements—teacher training, resource availability, and supportive school leadership—to ensure its successful implementation. Therefore, addressing these challenges is essential for creating an inclusive and effective English learning environment under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning at SMA 2 Wonosari presents both opportunities and significant challenges for teachers and students. Although the curriculum offers flexibility, autonomy, and a student-centered learning framework, its successful application in classroom practice remains constrained by various internal and external factors. The findings indicate that challenges primarily occur in three main areas: lesson planning, classroom implementation, and assessment practices.

In lesson planning, teachers experience difficulties in designing differentiated and contextualized learning activities that accommodate diverse student abilities. Limited time, heavy administrative workloads, and insufficient training hinder teachers' ability to fully apply the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. In classroom implementation, student participation remains uneven due to low confidence, limited English proficiency, and inadequate access to learning resources and technology. Assessment practices also require improvement, as teachers face constraints in conducting formative assessments and providing individualized feedback.

These findings suggest that curriculum reform should be accompanied by comprehensive support systems. Continuous professional development programs are essential to enhance teachers' pedagogical competence, particularly in differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and technology integration. Schools should also improve infrastructure, provide adequate learning resources, and strengthen collaborative practices among teachers. Moreover, students need guidance and motivation to develop confidence, autonomy, and active participation in learning.

In conclusion, while the Merdeka Curriculum provides a progressive framework for improving education, its effectiveness depends on the readiness of teachers, institutional support, and student engagement. Addressing the challenges identified in this study is crucial to ensuring that the curriculum achieves its intended goals of fostering independent, creative, and competent learners in Indonesian secondary schools.

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