

Exploring the Potential of Merdeka Curriculum in Promoting Student-Oriented English Language Learning

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history:</p> <p>Received: Jan 12, 2025 Revised: Jan 23, 2025 Accepted: Feb 14, 2025</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <p>Educational Innovation; English; Merdeka Curriculum; Secondary School; Student-Centered Learning.</p>	<p>This study aims to explore the potential of Merdeka Curriculum in promoting student-oriented English language learning at the secondary school level. Merdeka Curriculum, as the most recent education policy in Indonesia, emphasizes flexible, differentiated learning based on students' needs and interests. Through a qualitative approach with a case study method, data was collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of learning documents. The results show that the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum provides space for teachers to design English learning that is more contextual, communicative, and project-based. In addition, students show a higher level of engagement and motivation in the learning process. However, implementation challenges such as teacher readiness, limited resources and varying understanding of the curriculum concept remain. This research recommends continuous training for teachers as well as systemic support from the school and government to maximize the transformation of English learning through Merdeka Curriculum.</p> <p><i>This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC license.</i></p>



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1. INTRODUCTION

The evolving landscape of global education has driven countries to adapt their educational frameworks to better equip students with skills necessary for the modern world (Sari, 2021). In Indonesia, one of the most notable efforts in this direction has been the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, a significant reform that fosters student autonomy, critical thinking, and holistic development (Putra & Handayani, 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum represents a shift from traditional, teacher-centered instruction to a more flexible, student-centered approach, reflecting similar trends globally where education systems strive to engage students as active participants in their own learning (Zulkarnain & Ananda, 2020). By empowering students to take ownership of their educational journey, this curriculum aims to develop capable, independent, and adaptable learners in a rapidly changing world.

A crucial area of interest within this framework is English language education. English, as a global lingua franca, is essential for Indonesian students who aspire to engage in academic, professional, and cultural exchanges internationally (Azizah et al., 2023). However, the shift to a more independent learning approach within English classes brings both opportunities and challenges. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages English teachers to move beyond traditional rote methods, opting for interactive, context-based instruction that emphasizes communication, comprehension, and critical language skills (Mulyani & Rahmawati, 2021). Studies from similar curriculum reforms in other nations, such as Japan and South Korea, have highlighted that adopting a student-centered approach in language education can lead to improved language retention, but it also requires a supportive learning environment and accessible resources (Nakajima, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2021).

Despite the curriculum's progressive goals, implementing this new approach has proven challenging, especially in English language education (Hasan & Pratiwi, 2020). Teachers and students have reported difficulties adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum's flexible structure, with frequent assignments and assessments adding to the workload (Kurniawan & Wijaya, 2022). Although these assignments aim to reinforce learning through practical application, they have sometimes resulted in what both teachers and students describe as "assignment fatigue" (Rahardjo & Anggraini, 2021). This phenomenon is not unique to Indonesia; educational reforms in other countries also show that increased workload, if not aligned with clear learning objectives, can lead to burnout and decreased student motivation (Ramos, 2020; Tanaka & Saito, 2021).

Teachers play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of any curriculum. Within the Merdeka Curriculum, they are required to design lessons that cater to students' individual needs while fostering autonomy and critical thinking (Effendi et al., 2023). However, many teachers have expressed that they need further training and professional development to effectively translate these curriculum goals into actionable teaching practices, particularly within the constraints of English language instruction (Yuliana et al., 2021). Teachers are expected to integrate language learning with contextualized, real-world scenarios, which requires both adaptability and creativity (Aminah & Hadi, 2020). Studies from similar educational reforms, such as the 21st-century learning model implemented in the Philippines, show that professional development is critical for equipping teachers to handle these new demands (Garcia & Francisco, 2021).

From the student perspective, the Merdeka Curriculum introduces new forms of engagement that, while promising, also pose challenges. Research indicates that students generally respond positively to increased autonomy in learning but may struggle with the self-discipline needed to manage their assignments effectively (Fitriani et al., 2022). In English language classes, the need for consistent practice and immersive learning is particularly pressing, as language acquisition involves not only understanding but active use and engagement (Sutrisno & Marpaung, 2021). Studies in similar contexts, such as Malaysia's emphasis on bilingual education, highlight that students benefit from structured support in developing language skills, which is essential in maintaining a balance between independence and guidance (Rahman & Razak, 2021).

The high volume of assignments within the Merdeka Curriculum also raises questions about its impact on student well-being and motivation. Suharto et al. (2022) argue that while assignments can enhance learning outcomes when aligned with achievable goals, excessive workloads risk undermining students' motivation and overall engagement. Additionally, research emphasizes the importance of clearly defined learning objectives and realistic expectations to foster a positive attitude toward learning (Putri & Fauzan, 2023). This aligns with findings from a recent study in India, where students responded better to assignments that were purposeful and manageable, suggesting that task quality, rather than quantity, is crucial to student success (Sharma, 2021).

Given these insights, evaluating the Merdeka Curriculum's impact on English language learning is critical. The curriculum's emphasis on student independence must be weighed against the potential stress caused by high assignment loads and the varying degrees of support available to students and teachers (Aminah & Hadi, 2020). Previous research in flexible learning models, such as those in Finland and Canada, suggests that when implemented effectively, curricula that encourage student autonomy can lead to improved learning outcomes, but only when supported by well-designed assessments and clear guidelines. This study aims to address these gaps by evaluating the Merdeka Curriculum's effectiveness in fostering English language proficiency among Indonesian students. By examining the curriculum through the perspectives of teachers and students, the research seeks to understand how the curriculum's assignment structure and teaching flexibility impact language acquisition. Understanding these dynamics is essential in identifying potential areas for improvement, particularly in terms of workload balance, support mechanisms, and training for educators tasked with implementing the curriculum's objectives.

Ultimately, the findings of this research will provide valuable insights for policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators in enhancing the Merdeka Curriculum's effectiveness for English language instruction. This study seeks to offer practical recommendations for adapting the curriculum in ways that maintain its core goals while addressing the concerns of assignment fatigue, resource limitations, and instructional support. Addressing these issues will be crucial to ensuring that the

Merdeka Curriculum fulfills its promise of empowering Indonesian students with the language skills and critical thinking needed in an increasingly interconnected world.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of grade X students and English teachers in senior high schools in Musi Banyuasin in learning English based on the Merdeka Curriculum. This research design aims to gain an in-depth understanding of classroom interactions and teachers' views, emphasizing detailed observation and interpretation of the social context of learning. Participants consisted of English teachers and grade X students who were selected through purposive sampling technique. This selection was made to represent a diversity of social and educational backgrounds, and to ensure that all participants had direct experience with the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum so that they could provide meaningful data. Data is collected through classroom observations and teacher interviews. Observations were carried out directly to record interactions between teachers and students, teaching strategies used, student involvement, and the frequency of assignments given. In addition, field notes and reflective journals are used to add depth to information related to learning dynamics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews were semi-structured to allow teachers to express their views on the curriculum objectives, implementation challenges, task management and student achievement. This approach helped to gain a comprehensive understanding of the support needed to implement the curriculum effectively (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved reviewing and coding the interview transcripts and observation notes to find relevant patterns and themes, such as teaching practices, student engagement, task load, and constraints faced in implementing the curriculum (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The ethical aspects of the research were maintained through the provision of informed consent to all participants, including parental consent for participants who were minors. This study also ensured confidentiality of data and provided participants with the opportunity to review their responses, thus maintaining anonymity and integrity of the findings (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

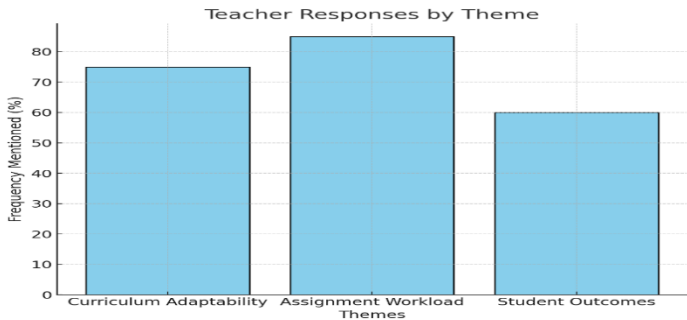
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Teacher Interviews

Interviews with teachers provided additional insights into the main challenges and successes they experienced while implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Three central themes emerged from these discussions: Curriculum Adaptability, Assignment Workload, and Perceived Student Outcomes.

Table 1: Key Themes and Teacher Responses		
Theme	Example Response	Frequency Mentioned
Curriculum Adaptability	Adjusting English lessons to the flexible curriculum structure can be challenging.	75%
Assignment Workload	There are too many assignments, which can overwhelm both students and teachers.	85%
Student Outcomes	Students engage well in class but find it difficult to apply lessons beyond assignments.	60%

Table 1 shows that 85% of teachers reported concerns about the high volume of assignments, which they felt led to “assignment fatigue” among students. Additionally, 75% of teachers indicated difficulties in aligning their English lessons with the flexible curriculum structure, reflecting a need for additional resources or support in adapting lesson plans. Finally, 60% of teachers observed that although students were engaged in class, they struggled to apply learned material in practical contexts beyond classroom assignments.



The bar graph highlights that "Assignment Workload" was the most frequently mentioned issue, indicating that teachers perceive the volume of assignments as overwhelming for students. Curriculum Adaptability also emerged as a significant challenge, pointing to a need for strategies or resources that can help teachers align English lessons more effectively with the curriculum's flexible structure.

3.2. Summary of Observed Themes and Findings

The study's findings underscore important aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in English classes, with key insights into teaching techniques, student engagement, and teacher challenges. The summary table below consolidates these findings across both classroom observations and teacher interviews.

Table 2: Summary of Observed Themes and Findings	
Theme	Key Findings
Teaching Techniques	High engagement in group discussions and Q&A sessions; lower engagement in real-world applications.
Assignment Workload	85% of teachers found the assignment volume overwhelming, affecting student motivation.
Curriculum Flexibility	Teachers encountered challenges in adapting English lessons to the curriculum's flexible framework.
Student Engagement	Students actively engaged in interactive activities but struggled with practical language applications.

These findings suggest that while interactive techniques such as group discussions and Q&A sessions are effective in engaging students, there may be a need for increased emphasis on real-world applications to improve practical language skills. The high volume of assignments and challenges with curriculum flexibility highlight areas where additional support and adjustments could benefit both teachers and students.

Discussion

Teaching Techniques and Student Engagement

Observations indicated that interactive teaching techniques, including group discussions and Q&A sessions, had a positive impact on student engagement. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and peer collaboration. Studies by Garcia and Francisco (2021) and Kim and Lee (2021) similarly demonstrate that collaborative learning environments can foster better engagement and enhance language retention. The findings align with communicative language teaching (CLT), which promotes interaction as an essential part of language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Students appear more motivated and engaged when they are active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge, reinforcing the idea that social interaction in language learning fosters confidence and fluency (Hedge, 2000).

Despite the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on practical, context-based learning, real-world application activities in observed classrooms were limited and showed lower engagement levels. This finding contrasts with the principles of task-based learning (TBL), which advocates for real-world language applications to help students achieve authentic communication (Ellis, 2003). Studies by Rahman and Razak (2021) and Sato and Storch (2020) support the effectiveness of TBL in improving students' practical language skills by immersing them in tasks that mimic real-life scenarios. The limited use of real-world application in this study suggests a gap between curriculum objectives and classroom practice, indicating a need for additional support or training to help teachers integrate practical applications into English lessons effectively. These findings underscore the importance of balancing traditional and interactive methods to promote comprehensive language proficiency.

Assignment Workload and Student Motivation

Teacher interviews revealed concerns about assignment workload, with 85% of teachers reporting that students and educators felt overwhelmed. This finding aligns with research by Laitinen et al. (2022), who argue that excessive assignments in flexible curricula can diminish students' intrinsic motivation and increase academic stress. The study echoes self-determination theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000), which posits that individuals are most motivated when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Excessive workloads can reduce students' sense of competence, ultimately decreasing their motivation and engagement with learning tasks. High workloads are particularly counterproductive in language learning, where manageable, continuous practice is more beneficial for retention and confidence than high-pressure assignments (Sharma, 2021; Hedge, 2000).

The findings suggest a misalignment between the Merdeka Curriculum's aim to foster independent learning and the volume of assignments given, which can hinder motivation. Research on similar flexible learning models, such as Finland's education system, emphasizes the need for balanced workloads to sustain student motivation and prevent burnout (Sahlberg, 2015). Studies by Suharto et al. (2022) and Chandra et al. (2021) also stress that thoughtfully structured assignments support long-term learning goals and reinforce core competencies without overwhelming students. For English language learning within the Merdeka Curriculum, assignments that are strategically aligned with learning objectives and paced for regular practice may enhance student learning and maintain their enthusiasm for language acquisition.

Teacher workload also emerged as a concern, with educators feeling the burden of grading and managing a high volume of assignments. This finding is consistent with research by Yuliana et al. (2021) and Roberts and Williams (2021), who found that workload management is a crucial factor in teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction, particularly within flexible curricula. Reducing assignment volume or providing structured resources may help alleviate the workload on teachers, enabling them to focus on quality instruction rather than administrative tasks.

Curriculum Adaptability and Teacher Training

The theme of curriculum adaptability emerged prominently in teacher responses, with 75% reporting challenges in adapting English lessons to the Merdeka Curriculum's flexible structure. This aligns with previous findings in Indonesia, where flexible curricula have often encountered difficulties in practical implementation due to limited training and resources (Aminah & Hadi, 2020; Putra & Handayani, 2022). Adaptability is a core element of the Merdeka Curriculum, intended to empower teachers to tailor instruction to the needs of diverse student populations. However, adapting to this flexible structure requires teachers to adopt new strategies and tools, especially in English instruction, where traditional grammar-focused methods may conflict with flexible, student-centered approaches (Hasan & Pratiwi, 2020; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Effective teacher training is critical to help educators navigate the shift toward more adaptable curricula. In studies of curriculum reform in South Korea and Japan, Kim and Lee (2021) and Nakajima (2020) found that teachers benefit from specialized training in student-centered, flexible methods, which enhances their confidence and capacity to implement curriculum changes. The challenges observed in this study suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum may require supplementary training programs focused on English language education to provide teachers with the skills and resources needed to meet curriculum goals effectively. Professional development programs that focus on flexible methodologies, lesson adaptation, and technology integration could bridge the gap between curriculum objectives and practical teaching.

Moreover, curriculum adaptability must be supported by clear guidelines that enable teachers to balance flexibility with consistency. Research by Sato and Storch (2020) shows that structured support systems, including teaching resources and lesson templates, allow teachers to implement flexible curricula without compromising learning objectives. By providing clear yet adaptable guidelines, the Merdeka Curriculum could empower teachers to create consistent yet innovative language instruction that meets students' needs in a supportive and effective manner.

Implications for English Language Education

The study's findings carry several implications for English language education within the Merdeka Curriculum, suggesting strategies for enhancing student engagement, workload balance, and adaptability in classroom instruction. First, the positive impact of interactive teaching methods, such as group discussions and Q&A sessions, on student engagement highlights the need to prioritize collaborative activities in English classes. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism supports this approach, emphasizing that peer collaboration enhances language development and comprehension. Studies by Hedge (2000) and Ellis (2003) suggest that communicative and collaborative activities encourage practical language use and improve students' confidence, both essential for achieving language fluency.

Second, addressing assignment workload is crucial to sustaining student motivation and engagement. Research by Laitinen et al. (2022) and Suharto et al. (2022) suggests that assignment quality is more important than quantity, with manageable, relevant tasks proving more effective in reinforcing learning objectives. For English language learning, assignments that promote regular, meaningful language practice without overburdening students may improve both retention and engagement. Chandra et al. (2021) propose that well-designed assignments should align with

curriculum goals while fostering independence, allowing students to practice language skills without the pressure of excessive workload.

Finally, the challenges surrounding curriculum adaptability point to the importance of comprehensive professional development. As the Merdeka Curriculum encourages flexible, student-centered approaches, it is vital to support teachers with specialized training and clear resources. Research by Kim and Lee (2021) and Roberts and Williams (2021) underscores that targeted training enables teachers to handle curriculum changes effectively, ultimately benefiting student outcomes. Providing teachers with adaptable lesson plans, technology resources, and professional development workshops can help them implement flexible methodologies that align with the curriculum's aims.

4. CONCLUSION

This research reveals that Merdeka Curriculum has great potential in improving English language learning, especially through interactive and student-centered approaches. Observations show that methods such as group discussions and question and answer sessions are able to encourage active student involvement, in line with the curriculum's aim to create a participatory learning atmosphere. The study also highlighted a number of constraints in the practical implementation of the curriculum. Teachers experience challenges in managing excessive task loads, which can trigger boredom among students. In addition, the flexibility of the curriculum structure, which is intended to provide flexibility in teaching, has created difficulties for some teachers in designing effective and consistent learning. These findings suggest that although Merdeka Curriculum supports a more modern and dynamic approach to learning, its success depends heavily on the readiness of implementation in the field. Stronger structural support is needed, including adequate teacher training, clear methodological guidance and realistic workload management so that teachers and students are not overburdened. Adjustment to these challenges is key so that Merdeka Curriculum can be implemented optimally and can truly create an effective, enjoyable, and meaningful English learning experience.

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