

## Investigating English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, a newly introduced curriculum reform in Indonesia. Employing a case study design, the research involved in-depth interviews with English teachers from various secondary schools in Banten Province. The results show that teachers' reactions range from optimism and gratitude for the curriculum's adaptability to worries about scarce resources, a lack of professional development, and the unclear operationalization of important concepts. Although educators recognize *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s capacity to promote student independence and contextualized learning, many say they require more precise instructions, ongoing mentoring, and infrastructure assistance. These insights show how important it is to make sure that policy goals are in line with what happens in the classroom and to give teachers more control over their lessons by constantly boosting their skills.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum) is a recent educational reform introduced by the Indonesian government, aiming to enhance student-centered learning, promote learner autonomy, and foster holistic student development. Piloted across various levels of education—from primary schools to higher education institutions—the curriculum seeks to provide students with greater opportunities to explore, develop, and strengthen their competencies in an engaging, pressure-free, and meaningful learning environment (Khusni et al., 2022; Rohmah et al., 2023; Risniyanti & Setiawan, 2022). Emphasizing freedom in learning, creativity, and student well-being, *Kurikulum Merdeka* positions teachers as key facilitators in creating enjoyable and contextualized learning experiences (Ainia, 2020).

This curriculum's main goal is to help students become more proficient in reading and numeracy, two crucial measures of educational quality. According to Maria (2021) and Hasim (2020), numeracy is the actual application of numerical understanding in daily life, whereas literacy in this sense refers to not only the ability to read but also to critical thinking and analytical skills. These goals stem from the alarming results of the 2019 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which placed Indonesia 74th out of 79 nations in regards to both reading and mathematics (Mustaghfiroh, 2020). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology responded by launching a number of programs, such as the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, to address these issues and evaluate minimum competences using tools like character surveys and national exams.

*Kurikulum Merdeka*, an improvement on the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*), has generated conflicting reactions from educators, learners, and parents. Some stakeholders have welcomed its focus on local relevance and flexibility, while others have expressed concerns about the sufficiency of teacher preparation programs, unequal access to educational resources, and scarce resources. There are still several problems, including unequal textbook distribution, low teacher participation in training, and challenges customizing lesson plans to students' needs (Bustari, 2023). These worries underscore the necessity of investigating how educators, who are the primary implementers, view and react to the new curriculum.

Kurikulum Merdeka has been the subject of prior study on issues like teacher training, simplifying lesson plans, and the difficulties of incorporating project-based learning (Marwa et al., 2023; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). The experiences of teachers during the planning, execution, and assessment phases of curriculum implementation, in particular, are still not fully understood. How well the curriculum is implemented in the classroom is greatly influenced by elements including professional training, instructor education background, and teaching experience (Saputra & Hadi, 2022). In order to make a contribution, this study focuses on investigating English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in the term of planning, implementation, and evaluation.

## 2. METHOD

This study employed a case study design with semi-structured interview to explore English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* covering their understanding of its principles, planning and implementation strategies, and evaluation practices in junior high schools. The research participant was five English teachers. The participants are coded as DI, AL, DS, DH, and RS. All of whom also served as the sample, given the limited number of English teachers in the selected schools. The obtained data were analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes and patterns in the participants' responses on the implementation the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the junior high school level.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the result of interviews, it was found that the participants had various perceptions regarding the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English language teaching. Based on the interview results, themes were identified and categorized into planning, implementation, and evaluation.

### Planning

The planning covers participants' general perception, initial planning, and strategies before implementing the Independent Curriculum. Regarding on the general perception, most participants view the *Kurikulum Merdeka* as an educational innovation that promotes flexibility, creativity, and student-centered learning. They mentioned that this curriculum allows for the adaptation of learning materials to students' needs and encourages a more active and motivational learning environment. These perceptions reflect alignment with the core principles of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, particularly in promoting differentiated instruction and encouraging autonomy. Positive teacher perceptions are crucial for successful implementation, as they influence readiness and commitment. Additionally, the teachers noted that while the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has potential benefits, it is still relatively new and lacks comprehensive evaluation. Its effectiveness depends on various factors such as school resources, teacher readiness, and community support.

The participants implemented the curriculum at different times—some began in 2022, others in 2023. Two respondents (DI and AL) began implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in 2023, while others (DS and DH) reported implementation starting in the academic year 2022/2023. One teacher (RS) stated implementation began in 2022. This varied starting point suggests inconsistent adoption across schools. It also reflects the optional nature of *Kurikulum Merdeka* during the early implementation period. Staggered adoption may cause unequal teacher preparedness and student experience. In addition,

For the initial planning, all participants argued that in designing lesson plan based on *Kurikulum Merdeka* should insert competencies from the Pancasila Student Profile and tailored learning activities accordingly. It aligns with Azzahea & Dewi (2021), who highlighted the importance of the Pancasila Student Profile in character development at various educational levels. This planning aligns with the philosophy of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes the integration of national values and 21st-century skills. However, the success of such planning depends on teachers' understanding of differentiation and curriculum goals. The curriculum encourages differentiation, collaborative learning, and diverse assessment formats such as portfolios and presentations. Furthermore, participants expressed that the curriculum provided greater freedom in designing innovative, outcome-based, and student-centered learning activities. Autonomy can lead to innovation but may also result in inconsistency if not supported by adequate professional development and supervision.

### Implementation

The implementation includes the process of implementing the Independent Curriculum in the classroom, learning activities, and student and teacher responses. During the implementation, all respondents integrated the curriculum through student-centered learning, development of 21st-century skills, and the use of

various learning resources. Activities included podcast production, English debates, and blogging. Such practices support learner engagement and skill development, and demonstrate teachers' initiative in applying the curriculum principles effectively. This shows how *Kurikulum Merdeka* opens space for creativity in language learning. The primary challenges included limited teaching resources, insufficient teacher training, the need for a paradigm shift in evaluation, and the requirement for support from school leaders and parents. Without sufficient infrastructure and support, even the most motivated teachers may face burnout or fail to meet curriculum goals. Addressing systemic barriers is key to achieving consistent implementation.

All participants agreed that the *Kurikulum Merdeka* grants more autonomy in material selection. For example, an English teacher used K-Pop songs to teach vocabulary, while a science teacher involved students in local environmental research. This flexibility enables contextual learning and student engagement, but also places demand on teacher creativity and judgment. Not all teachers may be equally equipped to develop or curate high-quality materials.

After implementing the curriculum, participants voiced that their students' responses were varied based on age, interest, learning style, and parental support. Older students and those interested in English tended to show greater engagement and adaptability. This indicates a need for differentiated support for younger learners or those less motivated. Teachers must be equipped to tailor instruction and offer additional scaffolding. Teachers often collaborated to generate teaching ideas, integrate local culture, and solve problems through teacher communities. This collaboration serves as informal professional development and enhances the quality of curriculum implementation. Encouraging such communities could serve as a low-cost strategy to scale teacher support.

Teachers hoped for a stronger focus on language skills, integration of technology, development of high-quality materials, and enhanced collaboration among stakeholders. In general, the teachers appreciated the flexibility and innovation offered by the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. However, they also emphasized that its success is highly dependent on teacher readiness, adequate resources, and ongoing professional development. These hopes suggest that teachers are committed to continuous improvement but require institutional support to realize the full potential of *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

### Evaluation

Evaluation emphasizes the impact, effectiveness of training, and reflection on curriculum implementation. For the impact, Respondents (DI, AL, DS, DH) reported that their students' motivation, self-confidence, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills increased since implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Some used data comparisons to track progress before and after implementation. Dealing with the effectiveness of curriculum implementation, training was reported to increase teachers' confidence and effectiveness. Respondents also found value in joining teacher communities to share experiences and draw inspiration from peers. This highlights the role of continuous professional development in equipping teachers for curricular reform. One-off training may be insufficient; instead, sustained and context-relevant programs are necessary. Furthermore, participants recommended increased teacher training, better resource provision, continuous curriculum development, and more effective communication and socialization of the curriculum. They also identified the need for better access to digital resources, culturally relevant materials, and more structured feedback from supervisors.

Overall, the findings show that teachers generally support the values promoted by *Kurikulum Merdeka* and are making efforts to implement it effectively. However, implementation success remains uneven, depending heavily on training, resources, and support systems. For meaningful and sustainable reform, ongoing evaluation, capacity building, and collaborative support are essential.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Referring to the findings, it can be concluded that teachers at the junior high school level in the research area have a generally positive perception of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in teaching English. Teachers appreciate the flexibility and innovation offered by this curriculum, especially in terms of learning planning, selection of teaching materials, and more diverse and student-centered evaluation strategies. However, the implementation of this curriculum still faces various challenges, including limited resources, uneven training, and teacher readiness in changing learning and evaluation approaches. The success of implementation is highly dependent on teacher readiness, support from the principal and parents, and the availability of supporting facilities and infrastructure, especially for schools in remote areas. In terms of evaluation, teachers noted an increase in student learning independence, motivation, and critical and collaborative thinking skills. However, strengthening teacher capacity in conducting authentic and continuous evaluations is still very much needed.

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