Exploring English Teachers' Experiences Under The Merdeka Curriculum

Eksplorasi Pengalaman Guru Bahasa Inggris Dalam Pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka

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Article Info	Abstrak
	Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman guru Bahasa Inggris dalam mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka di salah satu sekolah menengah kejuruan di Merangin. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis dan melibatkan dua orang partisipan dari sebuah sekolah menengah kejuruan. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara dan kemudian dianalisis. Penelitian ini menggali perspektif guru Bahasa Inggris mengenai tantangan yang mereka hadapi dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di kelas serta strategi yang mereka terapkan untuk mengatasi tantangan tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tantangan yang dihadapi berkaitan dengan faktor siswa dan faktor sekolah. Tantangan tersebut meliputi kurangnya pelatihan, kesulitan pedagogis, permasalahan motivasi belajar siswa, keterbatasan dalam pengelolaan waktu, heterogenitas siswa di dalam kelas, keterbatasan sarana dan prasarana sekolah, serta minimnya dukungan dari orang tua. Untuk mengatasi tantangan tersebut, guru menerapkan berbagai strategi, seperti meningkatkan keterampilan digital, memanfaatkan sumber belajar daring gratis, berkolaborasi dengan sesama guru, serta merancang perencanaan pembelajaran yang lebih fleksibel. ***Kata Kunci : Kurikulum Merdeka, pengalaman guru, tantangan pembelajaran***

Abstract

The purpose of this study to explore English teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at one of the vocational schools in Merangin. Using a descriptive qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, two participants from a vocational school were involved in this study. The data were collected through interviews and subsequently analyzed. This study explored English teachers' perspectives on the challenges they faced in teaching English in the classroom and the strategies they employed to address those challenges. The findings revealed that the challenges were related to student-related factors and school-related factors. The challenges included a lack of training, pedagogical difficulties, motivational issues, time management constraints, student heterogeneity in the classroom, inadequate school facilities and infrastructure, and limited parental support. To overcome these challenges, teachers applied strategies such as improving their digital skills, utilizing free online learning resources, collaborating with fellow teachers, and designing more flexible lesson plans.

Keywords : Merdeka Curriculum, teachers' experiences, teaching challenges

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian government has implemented Merdeka Curriculum as a new policy in the education system to replace Curriculum 2013 (K-13) in 2022. This curriculum is designed to give teachers and schools greater flexibility in structuring learning to suit student's needs. One of the main objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum is to create learning that is more relevant, fun, and adaptive to the times (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022).

The previous 2013 curriculum focused on improving student competencies through thematic and integrative approaches that encourage critical and creative thinking. However, in its implementation, there are many challenges faced by educators, such as difficulties in adjusting teaching methods and inequality in the quality of education in various regions (Arifin, 2020). Therefore, Merdeka Curriculum comes as a solution to provide freedom for schools and teachers to determine learning materials and methods that are more in line with the conditions and needs of students.

One of the main features in the Merdeka Curriculum is a learning system based on the principle of Merdeka Belajar. This system emphasizes the development of student competencies with methods that are more flexible and centered on individual needs (Ananda & Fadhillah, 2022). Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum provides more space for students to learn according to their interests and talents, with a choice of materials that can be adapted to local and global contexts. In addition, this approach also prioritizes project-based learning that encourages collaboration, creativity, and problem solving. In this system, teachers do not only act as material deliverers, but also as facilitators who support the development of students' competencies more optimally.

In implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, English subjects have their own challenges and opportunities. English as an international language plays an important role in opening global access for students. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, English learning does not only focus on mastering grammar and vocabulary, but also on developing communication skills, creativity, and digital literacy (Marlina, 2021). English learning is expected to be more contextual and relevant to students' daily lives. However, implementing English language learning in the Merdeka Curriculum requires significant changes in the methods and strategies used by teachers as well as the readiness of infrastructure that supports the implementation of a more flexible and technology-based curriculum.

Although the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to overcome various problems in the 2013 Curriculum, in reality, its implementation still faces many obstacles. Many teachers have difficulty adjusting to more flexible learning methods with limited resources, both in terms of time, training, and facilities (Suryadi, 2022). Another challenge is the lack of readiness of some teachers in utilizing technology in learning and the inequality of education quality between urban and rural areas. In English language learning, for example, there are obstacles in utilizing digital media, limited time for in-depth learning, and significant differences in student abilities. Therefore, these challenges need to be studied further to find appropriate solutions so that this curriculum can be implemented effectively throughout Indonesia.

This research is important given the ongoing transition in Indonesia's education system, particularly in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. By focusing on teacher's experiences in implementing learning strategies, this research is expected to provide deeper insights into the challenges faced by educators, especially in English language teaching. Understanding the experiences and obstacles experienced by teachers will be valuable in improving education policy and improving the quality of learning. In addition, the results of this study are also expected to serve as a reference for the development of English teacher training and contribute to supporting the successful implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in the future.

So, for that reason the researcher decided the title of this research is: ""Exploring English Teacher's Experiences Under The Merdeka Curriculum.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach to achieve the research objectives. The qualitative approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of English teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Qualitative research focuses on exploring and interpreting meanings constructed by individuals based on their experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). A phenomenological approach emphasizes participants' lived experiences and how they perceive and make sense of the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994).

The study was conducted in 2025 at a vocational high school in Merangin Regency, Jambi Province. Two English teachers participated in this study and were selected using purposive sampling. This sampling technique was applied to ensure that the participants met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Mukminin, 2012). The criteria included having a minimum of four years of teaching experience, being actively involved in teaching during the research period, and having direct experience in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

In this study, the researcher used interviews to collect the data. In-depth interviews were employed as a qualitative data collection method aimed at obtaining detailed and comprehensive insights from the participants. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012), in-depth interviews are particularly useful for exploring teachers' perspectives in specific educational settings. This approach was flexible and used a semi-structured interview format, allowing the researcher to follow the participants' narratives naturally. The interviews in this study were conducted with English teachers to explore their experiences and perspectives in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Each interview lasted approximately 16–25 minutes.

The researcher employed thematic analysis to analyze the data. Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within data through a reflexive and iterative process. The data analysis in this study followed six steps:

1. Familiarization with the Data: The researcher read and transcribed the interview data thoroughly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Irrelevant information was eliminated, and relevant data were selected for further analysis.

2. Labeling (Coding): In this phase, the researcher assigned initial codes to meaningful segments of the data that reflected important patterns related to the research focus.

3. Searching for Initial Themes: The coded data were then grouped into broader themes that represented significant aspects of teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

4. Reviewing Themes: The researcher reviewed and refined the themes by checking their relevance to the coded data and their consistency with the overall dataset. This process involved merging, revising, or discarding themes as necessary.

5. Defining and Naming Themes: The researcher clearly defined and named each theme based on its core meaning and relevance to the research objectives.

Report Preparation: The final findings reflected the overall experiences of English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and were supported by direct quotations from participants and relevant literature

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Teacher's Challenges under Merdeka Curriculum

   a. Lack of Training

   Based on the results of the interview, the lack of training is one of the internal challenges of teachers in teaching under the Merdeka curriculum. As P1 reports,

   > *"... setelah itu yang saya dapatkan ya mungkin dari cuma dari apa namanya webinar-webinar gitu belajar sendirilah dari situ." (P1)*

   This statement indicates that the teacher experienced difficulties in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum due to limited access to official training programs. Consequently, the teacher relied heavily on independent learning through online webinars to understand curriculum implementation.

   b. Pedagogical Challenges

   The interview data also reveal that pedagogical challenges were encountered during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. P1 explained:

   > *"...kalau di SMK itu harus sesuai dengan jurusan. Berarti pembelajarannya lebih mengarah ke jurusan, kalau TKJ lebih ke komputer kalau TB berarti lebih ke busana gitu. Jadi, gak semua fasilitasnya itu lengkap..." (P1)*

   These findings show that pedagogical challenges arise because English teachers in vocational schools are required to align learning materials with students' majors. This

alignment demands additional pedagogical adaptation, particularly when supporting facilities are not fully available.

c. Motivational Challenges

Student learning encouragement or motivation to learn and be active in English lessons is also a challenge. The challenge of the motivation was conveyed by the two teachers. Statements from teachers one and P2 are as follows:

> *"...kalau motivasi siswa itu sebenarnya ya kita tahu sendiri kalau siswa di sini kan SMK itu mereka lebih sukanya memang ke jurusan. Walaupun memang bahasa Inggris itu sekarang sudah masuk ke kategori mata pelajaran jurusan... pembelajarannya memang kurang menarik gitu mereka kurang semangat."* (P1)

The interview results indicate that students' motivation to learn English remains relatively low, as vocational students tend to prioritize subjects related to their majors. In addition, students' lack of confidence and reluctance to speak English further hinder active participation in the classroom.

d. Time Management Challenges

The lack of availability of books and adequate facilities also has an impact on the allocation of teachers' time to compile learning materials and determine teaching plans. As in the following P2 interview:

> *"...Buku K13 tetap dipakai, tapi harus dipadukan dengan modul ajar Merdeka. Guru jadi dituntut lebih kreatif menyesuaikan materi dengan kebutuhan siswa. Keterbatasan sumber ini juga berpengaruh pada alokasi waktu. Jadi guru harus pandai mengatur strategi, mana yang diambil dari buku yang lama yang tersedia lalu di sesuaikan dari modul baru."* (P2)

The need to integrate materials from the 2013 Curriculum with Merdeka Curriculum modules requires additional preparation and planning time, resulting in an increased teaching workload.

e. Heterogeneity of Students in the Classroom

Teachers must address differences in learning styles, interests, and levels of understanding, requiring them to adapt their teaching approaches to ensure all students can participate optimally in the learning process. This is the following teacher statement:

> *"...kemampuan siswa kan juga berbeda tuh satu sama lain. Ada siswa-siswa itu gak semuanya sama dalam menerima pembelajaran gitu... kami mengikuti yang siswa sukai."* (P1)

These excerpts reveal that student heterogeneity is a major challenge. The teacher needs to design differentiated learning to accommodate different learning styles and

abilities, such as grouping students based on their interests or strengths (visual, kinesthetic, or communicative).

f. Inadequate School Facilities and Infrastructure

The lack of technological devices, teaching materials, and supporting facilities learning process, forcing teachers to find alternatives to ensure learning continues. This is evident in the following quote:

"...tantangannya mungkin lebih ke fasilitas. Gak semua fasilitasnya itu lengkap gitu. Jadi, ketika kami butuh alat untuk praktek memang ada beberapa kendala." (P1)

The teachers reported that the lack of facilities such as computers, textbooks, and practical tools hindered the full implementation of Merdeka Curriculum.

2 Teachers' Strategies to Overcome Internal and External Challenges

This section discusses the strategies employed by English teachers to address the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Based on the interview data, teachers applied several strategies, including self-learning and collaboration, adaptive teaching, motivation building, effective time management, and creative utilization of limited resources.

Self-Learning and Collaboration

1. Independent Learning

One of the main strategies to overcome the lack of training was self-directed learning and collaboration with peers. As P1 explained:

"...pelatihan itu saya dulu pernah sekali... setelah itu yang saya dapatkan ya mungkin dari cuma dari apa namanya webinar-webinar gitu belajar sendirilah dari situ." (P1)

Teachers took the initiative to study the Independent Curriculum independently due to the lack of formal training.

2. Collaboration

In addition to independent learning, teachers also collaborated with senior teachers to understand module creation and implementation of the Independent Curriculum. As P2 explained:

"...karena masih baru karena saya masih baru kayak saya berkolaborasi dengan guru-guru yang sudah senior saya minta tolong kayak mana sih cara modul tentang kurikulum merdeka itu gimana caranya, bikinnya gimana. Terus, guru-guru di sini baik, langsung mau ngajari..." (P2)

This collaboration helped teachers adapt despite not receiving comprehensive formal guidance. This indicates that teachers take initiative to continue learning independently by attending webinars, studying online materials and do collaboration to help each other. According to Richards & Farrell (2005), teacher autonomy in professional learning through

self-reflection, peer collaboration, and informal training is crucial in the absence of formal professional development.

Adaptive Teaching

1. Adapting Teaching Methods

To face pedagogical challenges and heterogeneity in the classroom, teachers implemented adaptive and differentiated instruction. As P1 said:

> *"...yang suka siswa yang suka menggambar gitu ya itu saya kumpulkan satu kelompok... siswa yang suka membuat video, itu saya satukan mereka sesama yang suka bikin video..."* (P1)

Teachers adapt their learning methods to students' interests and abilities in response to pedagogical challenges and class heterogeneity. This adaptation makes it easier for teachers to manage students with different abilities and learning styles.

2. Utilizing Alternative Technology

Limited school facilities encourage teachers to use alternative technologies such as students' cell phones and online resources to support learning. This allows learning to continue even when facilities are incomplete. As explained by P2,

> *"...menggunakan media sosial, media digital itu. Seperti ada yang, kan anak-anak ini kan kalau setiap belajarin saya, saya pasti suruh bawa HP ya. Karena kebanyakan materinya kan di HP karena buku kita kurang. Jadi menggunakan media digital, saya sampai saya kirim linknya, kalian mereka lihat."* (P2)

This method aligns with the differentiated learning approach proposed in the Merdeka Curriculum, allowing teachers to adjust lessons based on students' interests and abilities. According to Tomlinson (2014), adaptive teaching helps maximize student engagement and participation in diverse classrooms.

Motivation Building

1. Increasing Self-Confidence

Teachers increase students' self-confidence by linking English material to their majors. P1 said:

> *"...kami sesuaikan dengan yang dibutuhkan siswa. Misalnya siswa di jurusan TBSM berarti ke motor. how to change oil misalnya. kalau di tata busana, cara membuat pola..."* (P1)

By linking English with practical, real-life examples from their major, teachers helped students see the relevance of English to their future careers. This aligns with Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) principles, which emphasize connecting academic material with real-world application to increase student motivation (Johnson, 2002).

2. Efficient assignment management

Teacher also manage assignments effectively to address time and the resource constraints. They choose assignments that are easy for students to complete using personal computers and can be submitted through digital platforms. This is supported by P1:

"..Jadi, kita bisa browsing atau misalnya kan contohnya kita menggunakan pjbl. Jadi, tugas membuat video itu di-share ke media sosial.". P1

From the P1 statements we relize that teacher also optimizing the Project-Based Learning (PBL) model with more flexible and efficient video-based assignments. By using social media for assignment submission, teachers can save time, reduce the visibility of the school environment, and facilitate monitoring of student work. This demonstrates a hybrid approach, allowing teachers to efficiently manage time while meeting both old and new curriculum standards. Pratama (2022) states that effective time allocation requires teachers to prioritize core competencies and integrate project-based activities without sacrificing key content.

Creative Use of Limited Resources

Simple Media Innovation and Optimizing Available Facilities

In response to inadequate school facilities, teachers used alternative media and student devices to support learning. As P1 shared:

"...kami hanya gunakan yang ada di sekolah. kalau misalnya seperti komputer kan kurang gitu ya. Nah itu kita gunakan kita boleh bawa HP, browsing, tugas membuat video itu di-share ke media sosial." (P1)

This shows teachers' creativity in optimizing available resources. Mulyasa (2022) supports that innovation and resourcefulness are essential competencies for teachers implementing modern curricula in under-resourced schools

CONCLUSION

This section presents a discussion of the research findings. This study posed two research questions. Interview results revealed factors influencing teachers' difficulties in implementing the Independent Curriculum. The challenges include lack of training, limited experience with the curriculum, and difficulty adapting teaching methods to diverse student populations, inadequate school facilities, limited learning resources, and student heterogeneity within the classroom.

The interview results also answered the research question regarding the strategies teachers use to overcome these challenges. Interviews indicated that independent learning, collaboration, adaptive teaching, motivation development, time management, and creative use of limited resources are strategies employed by teachers. The findings of this study are similar to those of Richards and Farrell (2005), who explain that self-directed learning and professional collaboration help teachers develop their competencies when formal training is limited. Adaptive teaching

strategies also support the concept of differentiated teaching by Tomlinson (2014). Further, the use of digital media and available technologies reflects the TPACK framework by Mishra & Koehler (2006), which highlights the importance of creatively integrating technology in teaching. Based on this data, researchers do not need to eliminate or add new categories because the strategies found in this study are in line with existing theories and previous research.

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