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A QUALITATIVE STUDY THROUGH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui persepsi guru sekolah menengah pertama terhadap Kurikulum Merdeka yang diluncurkan oleh Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia. Kurikulum ini menekankan fleksibilitas pembelajaran serta pengembangan karakter peserta didik melalui pendekatan pembelajaran berbasis proyek dan penerapan asesmen formatif. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Partisipan penelitian terdiri atas enam guru bahasa Inggris yang mengajar di sekolah menengah pertama negeri yang telah mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur serta dokumentasi berupa modul ajar dan rencana pelaksanaan pembelajaran. Selanjutnya, data dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan tematik untuk mengidentifikasi tema-tema utama yang muncul dari pandangan para guru. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun para guru telah memahami konsep dasar Kurikulum Merdeka, mereka masih menghadapi berbagai kendala dalam implementasinya. Kendala tersebut terutama berkaitan dengan keterbatasan sumber daya, kurangnya pendampingan dan pelatihan, serta keterbatasan teknologi. Meskipun hasil evaluasi akademik belum menunjukkan perubahan yang signifikan, para guru menyatakan bahwa penerapan pembelajaran berbasis proyek mampu meningkatkan keterlibatan dan partisipasi siswa dalam proses pembelajaran. Selain itu, asesmen formatif yang diakui memiliki peran penting dalam Kurikulum Merdeka masih menghadapi berbagai tantangan dalam pelaksanaannya. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini merekomendasikan penyelenggaraan pelatihan yang lebih intensif dan terarah serta penyediaan sumber daya yang memadai guna mendukung implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka secara efektif. Terlepas dari berbagai tantangan yang ada, Kurikulum Merdeka memiliki potensi yang besar untuk meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di tingkat sekolah menengah pertama.

Kata Kunci: Persepsi Guru, Kurikulum Merdeka

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find out how junior high school teachers perceive Merdeka Curriculum, which was launched by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture and emphasizes flexibility and student character development through a project-based approach and formative evaluation. In this study, a qualitative approach was used. This case study involved six English teachers in public secondary schools that have implemented Merdeka Curriculum. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, as well as documentation of teaching modules

and lesson plans. A thematic approach was used to analyse the data to find the main themes that emerged in the teachers' views. Research shows that although teachers understand the basics of Merdeka Curriculum, they face problems implementing it. This is mainly related to the lack of resources, lack of instruction, and technological limitations. Although academic test results have not shown significant changes, teachers also said that using project-based learning can increase student engagement. Although recognized as important, the use of formative assessments is still difficult. To effectively implement Merdeka Curriculum, this study suggests that training should be more concentrated and resources should be available. Despite some problems, Merdeka Curriculum has great potential to improve English language learning in junior secondary schools.

Keywords: Teacher Perception, Merdeka Curriculum

A. INTRODUCTION

Merdeka Curriculum, the latest education reform in Indonesia, begins in phases from 2022. It was created as part of the Merdeka Belajar policy proposed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (Kemendikbudristek). This policy was created to respond to the various challenges facing education in the 21st century. Merdeka Curriculum offers flexibility in lesson planning, gives teachers the freedom to choose teaching methods and materials, and emphasizes character strengthening through the creation of a "Pancasila Learner Profile" (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Among the key strategies in this curriculum are project-based activities, diagnostic assessments and differentiated approaches.

Merdeka Curriculum challenges teachers as direct implementers in the field (Saputra, Putriani, et al., 2025). Not only must teachers understand the concepts of this curriculum theoretically, but they must also be able to apply them in everyday life (Singh, 2024). New competencies that must be mastered include understanding learning objectives, creating independent teaching modules, and conducting formative assessments (Wardana, 2024). This results in various reactions from teachers, depending on their individual readiness and the school environment.

This curriculum change also has a major impact on the position of English as one of the subjects that must be studied at the junior high school level (Saputra, Rizky Yolanda, et al., 2025). English is not only considered as a tool to communicate around the world, but also considered as a tool to learn 21st century skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and digital literacy (Mitchell & Buntic, 2023). English teaching in the free curriculum is expected to be more contextualized and project-based, and able to develop students' individual potential (Iffa Kharimah et al., 2023). However, these needs require pedagogically and technically prepared English teachers. This is especially true for teachers who are adept at using differentiation approaches, using digital media, and understanding Pancasila student profiles in cross-linguistic and cultural contexts (Emir & Yangın-Ekşi, 2024).

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively investigate junior high school teachers' perceptions of how effective Merdeka Curriculum is in teaching English. In addition, this study aims to identify the problems faced by teachers in implementing the curriculum. In addition, this study also aims to show the adaptive strategies or responses made in the classroom. This study is expected to make a real contribution to the development of education policy, particularly in terms of creating teacher training programs, creating relevant learning resources, and assisting curriculum implementation. This is expected by focusing on teachers' experiences and perspectives. In addition, the results of this study can be used by education stakeholders to ensure that curriculum policies match the actual circumstances and needs in schools.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teachers' Perceptions of Curriculum Implementation

Teachers' perceptions play a significant role in determining the success of educational reforms and curriculum implementation. Perception refers to the process through which individuals interpret and make sense of information, experiences, and phenomena in their environment. In educational settings, teachers' perceptions influence how they understand, accept, and implement curriculum changes. According to Saputra (2025), individuals are more likely to engage effectively in an innovation when they perceive it as meaningful and supportive of their professional autonomy. Similarly, teachers' beliefs and perceptions affect their instructional decisions, classroom practices, and responses to educational reforms (Saputra, Putriani, et al., 2025).

Educational change is often shaped by teachers' interpretations of policy initiatives. Teachers who perceive curriculum reforms positively tend to demonstrate greater commitment to implementation, whereas negative perceptions may create resistance or challenges in practice (Shivolo & Omari Mokiwa, 2024). Therefore, investigating teachers' perceptions provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and identifies factors that facilitate or hinder educational change.

Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology as part of Indonesia's effort to transform its educational system (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). The curriculum emphasizes flexibility, student-centered learning, competency development, and the strengthening of character

education through the Profile of Pancasila Students (Kartika, 2024). Unlike previous curricula, the Merdeka Curriculum grants teachers greater autonomy in designing learning activities that accommodate students' needs, interests, and learning abilities.

The curriculum is based on the principle that learning should focus on essential competencies rather than extensive content coverage (Edwin et al., 2024). It encourages project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and formative assessment to support students' holistic development. According to official government guidelines, the Merdeka Curriculum aims to create a more adaptive and meaningful learning environment that enables students to develop critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills required in the twenty-first century (Yanti, 2024).

As the primary implementers of educational policy, teachers are expected to understand and apply the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum in classroom practice. Consequently, their perceptions of the curriculum become a crucial factor in determining whether its objectives can be achieved effectively.

Teacher Perception as a Lens for Understanding Educational Reform

Teachers' perceptions can be understood through the framework of educational change theory. According to saputra, successful educational reform depends not only on policy design but also on how teachers interpret and enact the reform in their daily practice (Saputra, Ibrahim, et al., 2025). Teachers' understanding of curriculum objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment approaches influences the extent to which reforms are implemented successfully.

In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers' perceptions may encompass their views regarding curriculum flexibility, readiness to implement differentiated instruction, assessment practices, availability of resources, professional development opportunities, and institutional support (Saputra, M. A. et al, 2026). Positive perceptions may contribute to successful implementation, while concerns related to workload, training, or resource limitations may create challenges. Therefore, examining teachers' perceptions provides an important perspective for understanding both the opportunities and obstacles associated with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of junior high school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning. A qualitative approach was chosen as it is suitable for exploring individuals' subjective experiences, interpretations of meaning, and individual

reflections on social phenomena, particularly curriculum change (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018). This exploratory study focuses on how teachers understand, respond to, and assess the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching at the junior secondary level.

This study involved six English teachers who taught at the junior secondary level in three public and private schools in Panyabungan sub-district. They were selected purposively. Candidates must meet three criteria: (1) a minimum of five years of English teaching experience; (2) have implemented Merdeka Curriculum for at least one school year; and (3) are willing to actively participate in the interview and discussion process. The purposive sampling method ensures that the data obtained comes from the right sources and has an in-depth understanding of the subject under study (Fadli, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews and documentation were used to collect data. This method allows researchers to explore teachers' perspectives and experiences flexibly while still focusing on important questions that have been prepared in advance. Understanding of Merdeka Curriculum, experiences in designing and implementing learning, perceptions of changes in learning outcomes, and challenges and strategies for implementing the curriculum were interview topics addressed in the interview protocol. Each interview session was recorded and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. In addition to interviews, documentation was also collected in the form of lesson plans (RPP), teaching modules made by teachers, and students' formative assessment results. The purpose of this data was to support the interview findings and provide a real context for the learning methods used.

The thematic approach (theme analysis) developed by Braun and Clarke was used to analyze the collected data (Braun, V., & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted in six stages: (1) transcription and repeated reading of the data, (2) initial coding of relevant parts of the data, (3) identification of major themes, (4) review of themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) compiling a story about the results of the analysis. To maintain the validity of the data, the methods of source triangulation and member supervision were used. In this process, the researcher confirmed the interpretation of the interview results from the participants to ensure congruence of meaning.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

In this study, four main themes were found that describe junior high school teachers' views on how effective Merdeka Curriculum is in teaching English. This is the result of interviews with English teachers in three schools who have implemented Merdeka Curriculum for one year of education. They cover matters such as understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, difficulties in implementing it, the role of teachers in project-based learning, evaluation and evaluation, and how the curriculum affects student learning outcomes.

Understanding of Merdeka Curriculum

Most educators acknowledged their understanding of the key principles of Merdeka Curriculum: flexibility in learning design and autonomy in choosing teaching methods. While most teachers recognized the value of the curriculum, many had difficulty understanding the more technical aspects of implementation, such as incorporating the Pancasila learner profile into English language learning. Some educators noted that they had not received sufficient training to implement the curriculum in an appropriate and successful way. "I know about the flexibility, but sometimes I am confused about choosing the right method for students with different characters," said one teacher.

Challenges in Implementation

Inadequate resources for teaching materials and professional training are the main issues faced by teachers when implementing Merdeka Curriculum. Some teachers face difficulties developing teaching modules that are in line with the curriculum principles that emphasize project-based approaches and formative assessment. In addition, the lack of adequate technological devices is also an obstacle for educators to implement more interactive and digital media-based learning methods. As an illustration, one educator said, "We would be greatly helped if there was more structured training on how to implement formative assessment. Also, not all schools have adequate technology facilities to support project-based learning."

Teachers' Role in Project-Based Learning

English teachers in the schools involved in this study said that one of the things they like about Merdeka Curriculum is the project-based approach, which allows them to make learning more interactive and contextualized. Some teachers have tried to incorporate simple projects such as making videos or presentations into their speaking and writing assessments. However, they feel that time constraints and dense materials hinder project-based learning.

Impact on Student Learning Outcomes

Most teachers believe that Merdeka Curriculum helps students learn, especially in terms of student engagement levels. Students who were previously less involved in classroom activities are now more involved in discussions and group projects. However, this impact has not been fully seen in academic exam results, as the more conventional curriculum approach before Merdeka Curriculum is still influential.

DISCUSSION

Teachers' Understanding and Perception of the Merdeka Curriculum

Previous studies have found that many teachers realize the importance of the flexibility of the independent curriculum, but they often have difficulty implementing it (Saputra, M. A., Batubara, R., Nasution, A. C., Safitri, R., Mardia, N. A., Lubis, R., … Azizah, 2026). Lack of thorough and systematic training is a major factor that hinders teachers in understanding and adapting the new curriculum (Yolanda et al., 2025). This suggests that more focused and continuous training is needed to assist teachers in understanding the teaching methodologies and strategies proposed by the Merdeka Curriculum (Saputra, Putriani, et al., 2025).

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

The challenges faced by teachers in terms of limited resources and technology are also findings that are often found in other studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Salsabila et al., 2024). Without adequate support, both in terms of teaching materials, training, and infrastructure, implementing a curriculum based on project-based learning and formative assessment will be difficult to implement optimally.

The Effect of Project-Based Learning on Student Engagement

Most teachers believe that project-based approaches have the potential to increase student engagement in learning. This is supported by research showing that this approach can encourage students to be more creative, critical, and active in completing tasks (Levitt & Grubaugh, 2023). However, the success of this method relies heavily on how prepared the teacher is in planning and managing the project.

Formative Assessment in Merdeka Program

In addition, results relevant to the current literature indicate the difficulty of implementing formative assessment. Additional skills in observation and adequate documentation are required for formative evaluations that focus on continuous evaluation of student progress (Retnowati et al., 2024). In terms of strategies and tools that can assist this assessment process, teachers in the field still need support.

E. CONCLUSION

The results of interviews with English teachers show that despite the push for flexibility and approaches based on student needs, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum still faces a number of major problems. Inadequate resources in terms of training, teaching materials and technological infrastructure that support project-based learning and formative assessment are the main problems faced. This suggests that further efforts are needed to improve teachers' capacity to implement this curriculum well.

In addition, the results of this study show that project-based learning has a positive impact on students' engagement in lessons. However, this effect is not yet fully visible in the academic test results. Therefore, education policy makers should provide more systematic and continuous training to teachers and improve their access to appropriate learning resources to increase learning efficiency. teachers said that the approach of giving them freedom to design learning helps them but they need greater support in technical matters, such as training on formative assessment and the use of technology in learning. As a result, the Ministry of Education and Culture and related agencies should support the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum by providing more professional training and adequate facilities to support technology-based learning. Although Merdeka Curriculum has great potential to improve English language learning in junior secondary schools, its success largely depends on the readiness of teachers

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