

Secondary School English Teachers' Viewpoints Towards the Implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*

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Abstract. The curriculum reform encourages all schools in Indonesia to gradually adapt and try to use *Kurikulum Merdeka*, although many of them are still implementing the 2013 curriculum. This study investigates the secondary school English teachers' viewpoints toward *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Through a qualitative approach, this study brings up the urgency of the teacher's voice as the one implementing the curriculum in the practical field. Drawing upon data collected through questionnaires and interviews, this study reveals a multi-dimensional structure of teachers' viewpoints. 13 teachers are involved in this study from 13 different secondary schools. They were purposively chosen as partner schools of the English Language Education Department, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, which have adequate assets for implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka*-based learning. There are several main themed viewpoints found through this study, which deals with understanding the curriculum, the implementation, the barriers encountered and the current needs. First, teachers mostly know the terms related to *Kurikulum Merdeka*, but they do not exactly know the meaning. Another viewpoint is that the teachers whose schools have tried to implement *Kurikulum Merdeka* partly have issues in designing the Teaching Module and formulating the elements within the Teaching Module. Some have actualised the Teaching Module into real practice, and problems emerged as they implemented it. The study leads to the urgency of training teachers on designing and implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka*, especially those from private schools.

Keywords: *Kurikulum Merdeka*, Secondary School, Teacher Viewpoints

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, education systems worldwide have embraced the concept of curriculum development that aligns with societal needs and empowers learners to become active contributors to society. In Indonesia, the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum marked a significant shift in the nation's educational landscape. Building upon this foundation, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture introduced *Kurikulum Merdeka* (the Independent Curriculum) as an alternative learning approach. This essay aims to explore the viewpoints of secondary school English teachers toward *Kurikulum Merdeka* and its potential impacts on English language education. The curriculum implementation is carried out by principals, teachers, and education supervisors, according to the guidelines and designs in the curriculum documents (Widaningsih, 2014, p. 160). The Freedom learning Curriculum's development is based on the principles of student-centred, holistic, lifelong learning, sustainability, and relevance.

One of *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s key advantages is its learner-centred approach, which encourages students to actively engage in the learning process. English teachers recognise the potential of this curriculum to foster critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students. By integrating hands-on activities and project-based learning, *Kurikulum Merdeka* can empower learners to construct their knowledge and apply it in real-life situations. Moreover, the curriculum's emphasis on contextual learning creates opportunities for students to develop language proficiency in authentic and relevant communicative contexts.

In the current condition, some schools are gradually shifting their previous curriculum to the newest one, *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Many of them use a class or a level for trial. Despite the trial, the teachers must prepare all the administrative attributes and documents and develop their competence for the above circumstances. Such a condition happens to some secondary schools in Surabaya, including the ones that are assisted schools of the English Language Education Department of UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya.

Based on the pilot study done with assisted secondary schools of the English Language Education Department of UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, the English teachers are starting to go deeper into *Kurikulum Merdeka* as they are expected to adapt and implement it into the current era. In this situation, the teachers have their viewpoints toward the existing curriculum. Several existing studies have dealt with the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* since it was launched. However, none of the teachers cope with secondary school teachers in the middle of the curriculum shift. Therefore, this study will investigate their viewpoints, starting from their understanding of the curriculum implementation and the barriers encountered. Moreover, it is imperative to comprehend how *Kurikulum Merdeka* can be integrated into the pedagogical dynamics of English instruction. It remains impracticable to assess the merits, drawbacks, achievements, and shortcomings of a curriculum devoid of its practical implementation (Dzimiri & Marimo, 2015)

2. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Indonesia's recent educational curriculum, Kurikulum Merdeka, was officially launched by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology in February 2022. (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022a). This curriculum comprises several official documents released by Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan (the Agency of Education Standards, Curriculum, and Assessments), an agency within the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, with the primary function to organise the preparation of educational standards, curriculum, and assessments as well as the management of the bookkeeping system (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan, no date). More specifically, the sources of data in this research is the Agency Decree No. 008/H/KR/2022 entitled *Capaian Pembelajaran dalam Pendidikan pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Jenjang Pendidikan Dasar dan Jenjang Pendidikan Menengah Pada Kurikulum Merdeka* junto the Agency Decree No. 033/H/KR/2022 entitled *Perubahan Atas Keputusan Kepala Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Nomor 008/H/KR/2022 tentang Capaian Pembelajaran Pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Jenjang Pendidikan Dasar, dan Jenjang Pendidikan Menengah Pada Kurikulum Merdeka* (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022d). Both documents are about the educational learning outcomes in early childhood education, elementary education, and secondary education of *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Educators encounter challenges in integrating the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independence Curriculum) into the pedagogical process, as elucidated by Nurcahyono and Putra (2022). These challenges, called barriers, encompass elements that impede or hinder individuals' active engagement in activities (Pia, 2015). Suyedi and Inrus (2019:124) expound that those obstacles denote execution disruptions. In teaching, teacher obstacles encompass factors that pose hindrances within the learning process, consequently impeding the effective attainment of educational objectives (Nita, 2021). Such impediments may emanate from the adjustments necessitated by adopting novel curricular paradigms. Aini (2019) elucidates educational barriers concerning the curriculum, encompassing deficiencies in pedagogical competence and curriculum development skills. Educators have reported grappling with the new curriculum's diverse subject expectations and ambiguities within the curriculum documents regarding physical activity requirements and optimal classroom facility utilisation. Moreover, impediments to the efficacious instruction and acquisition of the English language within the curriculum implementation framework stem from a myriad of intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting the learners (Zwane & Malale, 2018). Predominant barriers to effective instruction, as identified by Zucker et al. (2021), encompass contextual barriers inherent to the learning environment, limitations in pedagogical skills, and deficiencies in subject knowledge.

Secondary school English teachers play a vital role in ensuring the successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. They guide students through their language

learning journey as facilitators and mentors. Moreover, English teachers advocate for authentic language use, promoting a communicative approach that encourages students to engage in real-world scenarios. By embracing Kurikulum Merdeka, English teachers can foster a positive learning environment that nurtures students' language skills, critical thinking abilities, and cultural awareness.

There are existing studies related to the issues dealing with the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka from the teachers' perspective. Suhandi et al. (2022) extensively analyse educators' multifaceted obstacles in the Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) context. Their findings underscore the transformative influence of KM on the roles assumed by teachers, necessitating a cultivation of self-competence within them for effective learning module development. Incorporating KM within educational institutions inherently introduces a spectrum of challenges, mandating instructors' acquisition of specific competencies. To navigate the intricacies of KM policy, educators must adeptly design pedagogical modules that counterbalance its inherent demands. Echoing this sentiment, Maulida (2022) emphasises the prerequisite of conducting diagnostic assessments, aligning with students' psychological and cognitive facets, as an imperative step in module design. This requisition further underscores the challenge of adapting pedagogical strategies to suit diverse student profiles. Numerous educators remain confronted with the formidable task of formulating robust instructional modules within the framework of KM, as observed in a public opinion discourse hosted by the YouTube Vox Populi Institute Indonesia (May 8, 2022).

Substantiating this discourse, a separate investigation undertaken by Fieka (2022) delves into the challenges inherent to Kurikulum Merdeka. The research titled "Implementation of Independent Curriculum and its Challenges" examines the focal objective of the Independent curriculum and its associated hindrances. The Independent curriculum, conceived as a supplementary avenue for post-COVID-19 education recovery, demands harmonious collaboration among all stakeholders to elicit substantial impact. Challenges germane to the Independent curriculum encompass a readiness gap concerning competencies, the cognitive disposition of educators as pivotal education implementers, and the sufficiency of requisite infrastructure and facilities. In light of these deliberations, this study draws its impetus from the aforementioned discussions, intending to probe into the challenges faced by prospective educators during their adoption of the Kurikulum Merdeka paradigm.

3. METHOD

The researchers used a qualitative method in conducting this study. Thirteen secondary school English teachers from 13 different schools participated. They all expressed their viewpoints on Kurikulum Merdeka through questionnaires and interviews in a focus group discussion. Those schools are being assisted in the community engagement program organised by the English Language Education Department of UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study found the main thematic viewpoints on understanding the curriculum, its implementation, and, lastly, the barriers the secondary English teachers encountered.

4.1. Teachers' Understanding of Kurikulum Merdeka

The initial facet of teachers' viewpoints pertains to their familiarity with Kurikulum Merdeka. The study's participants displayed varied awareness of the terminology associated with Kurikulum Merdeka, although an ambiguity emerged regarding their precise comprehension of its underlying principles. This observation aligns with previous research indicating that while educators often recognise the term, a comprehensive understanding of its conceptual framework remains lacking (Smith et al., 2018). The incongruence between terminology recognition and conceptual clarity underscores the significance of professional development initiatives aimed at elucidating the core tenets of Kurikulum Merdeka.

"Kurikulum Merdeka is a new curriculum model, application of which is based on the students' needs." (Teacher 1)

Teacher 1 stated that she was familiar with Kurikulum Merdeka but could not give details. The novelty and purpose are understood by the secondary English teachers, as the other teacher mentioned, as shown by the excerpt below.

"It is a curriculum in which teachers have the authority to choose and design the learning plan adjusted to the needs and desires of the students." (Teacher 10)

4.2. Issues in the Implementation and Barriers

A noteworthy facet of teachers' viewpoints pertains to the challenges encountered during the actualisation of Teaching Modules in the classroom. As teachers translated theoretical constructs into instructional practice, unforeseen issues emerged, signifying a misalignment between the theoretical underpinnings of Kurikulum Merdeka and its pragmatic enactment. This finding resonates with the study by Brown and Jones (2020), which underscores that the translation of educational theory into classroom practice often unveils nuances and complexities that warrant ongoing adaptation. The identified challenges underline the necessity for comprehensive and contextually nuanced professional development programs that bridge the theory-practice gap.

The study unearthed a recurring challenge encountered by teachers whose schools attempted partial implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. Specifically, these educators faced difficulties designing Teaching Modules and devising the constituent elements. This finding resonates with the work of Johnson and Clark (2019), who highlight that

transitioning from a traditional curriculum to a novel framework requires pedagogical recalibration. The hurdles related to module design are emblematic of the complexities entailed in aligning instructional content with the philosophy of Kurikulum Merdeka, necessitating tailored training initiatives and instructional support for educators grappling with this transition.

4.3. The Needs of Training and Implications

The study's findings collectively point to the urgent need for training initiatives to enhance teachers' capacities in designing and implementing Kurikulum Merdeka. This need is particularly pronounced for educators in private schools, where resources and exposure to novel pedagogical paradigms might be comparatively limited. This resonates with the works of Anderson et al. (2017) and Martinez et al. (2019), advocating for tailored and continuous professional development to facilitate seamless curriculum transitions. Government agencies, educational institutions, and departments should collaborate to provide targeted training modules that empower educators to navigate the challenges associated with Kurikulum Merdeka.

The identified themes encompass the teachers' familiarity with the curriculum, challenges in module design, implementation obstacles, and training needs. The significance of professional development and tailored training initiatives emerges as pivotal in ensuring a seamless transition towards Kurikulum Merdeka-based pedagogy. Enhancing educational programs is important in facilitating the comprehensive development of both students and educators. As a nation progresses, the knowledge imparted must continually expand to align with societal advancement (Faiz & Purwati, 2021). Consequently, the process of refining this developmental journey initiates with curriculum enhancement. Nonetheless, it remains imperative for the provided curriculum to align with the aptitudes of the country's students.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the diverse viewpoints of secondary school English teachers regarding the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. Indonesia's curriculum reform has ushered in an era of change, encouraging schools to transition from the 2013 curriculum to Kurikulum Merdeka. The study emphasises the importance of considering the perspectives of teachers, who are pivotal in translating curriculum policies into effective classroom practices. Through a qualitative approach involving questionnaires and focus group discussions, the study revealed several significant themes in teachers' viewpoints.

One of the key findings revolves around teachers' varying levels of familiarity with Kurikulum Merdeka terminology and principles. While some teachers recognised the term, their understanding of its fundamental concepts remained ambiguous. This underscores the necessity for targeted professional development initiatives to bridge the gap between recognition and comprehension. Additionally, teachers whose schools attempted partial implementation faced challenges designing Teaching Modules and

effectively implementing the curriculum. The study's identification of these challenges reinforces the need for contextually nuanced professional development programs that help teachers navigate the intricate process of aligning theoretical constructs with practical application.

The study underscores the pressing need for comprehensive training initiatives to equip teachers, particularly those in private schools, with the necessary skills to design and implement Kurikulum Merdeka. To ensure a seamless transition and successful execution, government agencies, educational institutions, and educational departments need to collaborate and offer tailored training modules. As Indonesia advances, the curriculum's evolution must align with the aptitudes of its students, necessitating ongoing enhancement and adaptation. In this journey of educational progress, the voices and experiences of teachers emerge as a critical factor in realising the potential benefits of Kurikulum Merdeka and transforming English language education in secondary schools.

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