

ENGLISH TEACHERS' VOICES ON CURRICULUM CHANGE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN RURAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Curriculum changes are crucial in modern education to adapt to society's needs and technological advancements. Yet, rushed or poorly considered alterations might disrupt education's flow and harm students' learning and progress. Hence, this study explores rural Junior High School English teachers' voices on curriculum changes and the Merdeka curriculum implementation regarding curriculum aspects. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, five English teachers from rural schools in Bengkulu Province, Indonesia, were selected purposively. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect data and those data were analyzed using an interactive model. The findings of this study indicate teachers' positive reception to curriculum changes, benefiting both students and educators. The Merdeka Curriculum's implementation fulfilled various aspects, such as goals, resources, and teaching methods, yet encountered hurdles, like inadequate facilities, assessment system awareness, and learning module development. Despite successes, teachers expressed the necessity for training and workshops to effectively integrate the Merdeka curriculum into their teaching practices. In conclusion, rural English educators exhibit optimism toward the Merdeka Curriculum, appreciating its advantages while acknowledging challenges related to resource scarcity and the need for enhanced training in curriculum execution.

Keywords: curriculum change, English language teaching, teachers' voices, the Merdeka curriculum implementation, rural schools.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has embarked on a significant educational reform known as the Merdeka Curriculum, aimed at fostering independent and critical thinking among students. This departure from conventional rigid curriculum structures emphasizes student-centered learning and flexibility in educational paths. However, the success of any curriculum change heavily

relies on the teachers who implement it, particularly in rural areas where unique challenges may exist.

Teachers play an indispensable role in translating theoretical curriculum changes into practical classroom strategies and instructional methods. Their expertise, dedication, and understanding of the curriculum are vital for effective implementation (Mwanza & Mkandawire, 2020). Additionally, teachers' experiences in the classroom provide valuable feedback during curriculum development, ensuring alignment with educational goals and practical considerations (Saifulloh, 2014). Their continuous professional development and willingness to adapt to emerging pedagogical approaches are key factors in ensuring the successful integration of innovative curriculum changes into the learning environment.

As educational frameworks evolve, such as the Merdeka Curriculum initiated in 2021 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which aims to empower students by offering them more autonomy in selecting subjects, projects, and activities, teachers' input becomes even more crucial. According to Riyadi and Budiman (2023), this student-centered approach is designed to enhance creativity, problem-solving skills, and adaptability to a rapidly changing world. Moreover, Rohimjaya et al. (2022) assert that it emphasizes character education, aiming to instill values like tolerance and social awareness among students. Teachers' insights and expertise are instrumental in bridging the gap between theoretical framework and practical application within such innovative educational paradigms, ensuring effective implementation while nurturing students' holistic development.

While the Merdeka Curriculum holds promises of innovation and adaptability in reshaping the educational landscape, its practical implementation encounters hurdles, particularly evident in rural settings. Previous research studies by Damayanti and Muhroji (2022), Lestari (2023a), and Sunarni and Karyono (2023) have shed light on the positive outcomes and ease that accompany the adoption of the Merdeka Curriculum. These studies have highlighted the curriculum's potential to provide students and educators with increased flexibility and a more engaging learning experience.

However, amidst these optimistic prospects, Djafar et al. (2023) emphasized significant challenges encountered within rural schools. Issues such as inadequate facilities and a lack of comprehensive knowledge among educators have surfaced as substantial barriers to the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in these settings. The disparity in resource availability and the varying levels of preparedness among educational institutions in rural areas significantly impact the curriculum's execution, potentially impeding its intended transformative effects.

Moreover, within the domain of English language teaching, the studies conducted by Rohimja et al. (2022) and Sari (2023) have brought to the forefront a multitude of challenges

encountered by teachers. These challenges predominantly revolve around the alignment of existing coursebooks with the principles and objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, these investigations revealed the complexities teachers encounter in catering to the diverse and individualized needs of students within the framework of the new curriculum. Adapting instructional materials, designing differentiated learning approaches, and maintaining student engagement throughout lessons pose significant hurdles for educators striving to integrate the Merdeka Curriculum effectively into their English language teaching practices.

Despite some studies focusing on specific aspects of curriculum implementation, a comprehensive understanding of English teachers' experiences and perspectives on curriculum changes, especially in rural junior high schools across various regions in Bengkulu Province, remains scarce. Thus, there is a critical need to bridge this gap by exploring the voices and insights of English teachers in rural settings regarding the Merdeka Curriculum. This is because the existing literature primarily addresses limited aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation, particularly in rural areas, and mostly focuses on specific challenges or benefits observed. However, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that delve into the varied experiences and perspectives of English teachers within rural junior high schools regarding this curriculum change.

This research aims to address this gap by examining English teachers' voices on the Indonesian curriculum change, specifically focusing on the Merdeka Curriculum, within rural junior high schools across diverse regions in Bengkulu Province. The study seeks to gain nuanced insights into teachers' experiences, challenges, perceptions, and recommendations related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching, thus contributing valuable perspectives to educational policymakers, curriculum developers, and practitioners. Based on the issue in this study, the research questions are addressed as follows;

1. What are teachers' voices on the Indonesian curriculum change who taught English at rural junior high schools?
2. What are teachers' voices on the curriculum change aspects in the Merdeka curriculum who teach English at rural junior high schools

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a case study method which was under a qualitative approach by following Creswell (2017). This method was chosen because this study uncovered English teachers' voices on the curriculum change and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

based some aspects at some rural schools in some regencies in Bengkulu Province, Indonesia. The data of this study were in terms of the statements and opinions of the respondents regarding the problems that were investigated. Moreover, this study only uncovered the phenomena that occurred at these schools so the results of the study may not be the same as other studies.

Respondents

This study involved five English teachers who taught at rural Junior High Schools in some regencies in Bengkulu Province, Indonesia. They were chosen based on a purposive sampling method by following the theory of Sugiyono (2017). The considerations for choosing them were 1) they taught English at rural schools in Bengkulu, 2) they had implemented the Merdeka curriculum, and 3) they were willing to become research participants without coercion. The demographics of the participants are presented in the following table

Table 1. The Demographics of the Participants of the Study

No	Teacher	Gender	Age	Initial of School	Educational Background	Teaching Experiences	Certification Status	Teaching Responsibilities
1	FE	Female	36	SMPN A Seluma	Master's Degree	9 years	Non-Certified Teacher	Grades VII, VIII, and IX
2	BS	Female	31	SMPN B Seluma	Bachelor's Degree	9 years	Certified Teacher	Grades VII and VIII
3	PYI	Female	36	SMPN C Central Bengkulu	Master's Degree	12 years	Certified Teacher	Grades VII and VIII
4	LE	Female	29	SMPN D Muko-muko	Bachelor's Degree	4 years	Non-certified teacher	Grades VII and VIII
5	SPA	Female	31	SMPN E Central Bengkulu	Bachelor's Degree	4 years	Non-certified teacher	Grades VII, VIII, and IX

As described in Table 1, since the focus of this research was the Merdeka curriculum, the teachers involved were those who implemented the Merdeka curriculum in these schools totaling five teachers. Three other teachers who taught at grade IX in SMPN B Seluma, SMPN C Central Bengkulu, and SMPN D Muko-Muko were not involved in this study because they still applied the 2013 curriculum. This was because the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum was in process and it depended on the policy of each school. Thus, one of the considerations in the purposive sampling technique aimed to avoid bias in collecting data based on the principles of Sugiyono's (2017) theory.

Procedures

The data for this study were gathered using semi-structured interviews. The questions of the interviews were built based on the curriculum aspects regarding the curriculum changes. The following is the blueprint for the interviews;

Table 2. The Blue Print of the Interviews

Research Question (RQ)	No	Aspect	Sub-Aspect	Questions	Follow-Up Questions
RQ 1	1	Curriculum Change	Curriculum Change' Opinion	Could you share your opinion of curriculum change happening now in our country?	Does this curriculum change have positive or negative impacts on education?
					Does this curriculum change have positive or negative impacts on English teaching at rural schools?
RQ2	2	Knowledge of the Merdeka Curriculum	Knowledge of the Merdeka curriculum	Could you share your understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum?	
			Efforts to Improve Teachers' Knowledge of the Merdeka Kurikulum	What efforts you have made to improve your knowledge of the Merdeka Curriculum?	What are government and school principals' efforts to handle it?
	3	Goals and Objectives	Goals and Objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum	What are the goals and objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum?	Is it good or not?
	4	Learning Resources	Teaching and Learning Materials	What is the availability of the teaching and learning materials in the Merdeka curriculum?	-
			Constraints in designing modules	Do you have any constraints in designing modules?	Why?
	5	Teaching Method	Teaching Method in the Curriculum Merdeka	What teaching methods do you apply in implementing the Merdeka curriculum?	Are those methods suitable for your students' characteristics?
	6	Teaching and Learning Facilities	School Facilities	Do learning facilities in your school support the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum?	What does your school need?
	7	Evaluation	Assessment System	Have you known the assessment system in the Merdeka curriculum?	Could you explain more about those assessment systems?

The questions of the interviews were under seven aspects which were divided into two research questions. Those aspects then were broken down into sub-aspects and questions to get deeper information into teachers' voices regarding curriculum changes and the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum. The questions and answers in the interviews used the Indonesian language. It aimed to avoid the misunderstanding of the teachers in answering and giving information related to the questions.

Data analysis

The data that had been gathered by using semi-structured interviews were analyzed qualitatively using an interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014). This model involves three key stages: data reduction, data display (or visualization), and conclusion drawing. Firstly, data reduction encompassed transcribing interview data and refining it by selecting, simplifying, and abstracting relevant information. Secondly, data display facilitated the presentation of research findings through narrative descriptions. Lastly, the concluding stage involved deriving final conclusions based on the verified and appropriate data, addressing the research focus formulated earlier

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

After conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants of this study, teachers' voices on the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum as a new curriculum are broken down into two sections as formulated in the research questions. Those are as follows;

Teachers' Voices on the Curriculum Change

This section explains teachers' voices on curriculum changes called the Merdeka curriculum. The teachers' statements are as follows;

I agree with the curriculum change that has been implemented now. This is because this curriculum has more benefits in the learning system especially the needs of teaching is suitable to the school's condition and environment (Translation version - LE, October 6th, 2023).

In my opinion, the Merdeka curriculum is good and it is not significantly different from the previous curriculum, this current curriculum is more flexible and adaptable but some improvements are necessary for rural schools (Translated version - Fn, October 6th, 2023).

The statements above show that teachers agreed with the curriculum change. This change brings a new atmosphere in the teaching and learning process. They believed that this current curriculum would give more benefits for both teachers and students to achieve the English learning outcomes. Moreover, the curriculum change impacted for English teaching and learning process, as stated below;

In the Merdeka curriculum, English learning focuses more on student needs and student level and we can make it simpler, more relevant, and interactive because it is provided on the platform. So, for remote schools, especially in the village where I teach, it can be implemented easily. In other words, the current curriculum change is more flexible for English teaching in school (Translation version - PYI, October 7th, 2023).

I also believe that this curriculum change will bring better changes for English teaching and learning processes in schools, particularly rural schools... English lessons have been designed based on student's level and grade ... students would be active due to the implementation of

the teaching methods covered in the Merdeka Curriculum (Translation Version – SPA, October 7th, 2023).

Based on the statements above, teachers stated that this current curriculum is more adaptable and flexible to be applied in schools including rural schools. This current curriculum has been designed based on students' needs and levels so it is acceptable for rural schools. But the government is suggested to increase the quality of the learning facilities in every school to support them in teaching English.

Teachers' Voices on the Curriculum Change Aspects in the Merdeka Curriculum Who Taught English at Rural Junior High Schools

Teachers' Voices on the Knowledge of the Merdeka Curriculum and Efforts to Improve It

This section explained the teachers' voices on the Merdeka curriculum and the goals of the Merdeka curriculum. The statements are as follows;

The Merdeka curriculum is a curriculum that contains students-cantered learning objectives so the students and teachers have many enough times to achieve the learning outcomes" (Translation version - BS, October 6th, 2023).

The Merdeka curriculum is a vary intracurricular learning curriculum ... vary learning contents in order students have enough times to understand concepts and strength the competency ... teachers have flexibility in choosing learning tools so the learning can be adjusted to students' interest and needs" (Translation version - PYI, October 7th, 2023)

The teachers' voices above show that the Merdeka curriculum had some benefits for both teachers and students and to achieve the goals of English teaching because this curriculum applies student-centered learning and various intracurricular. As a result, students had more time to understand the concept and strengthen their competence. Moreover, this curriculum provided flexibility in choosing learning tools so that learning could be tailored to the interests and needs of students

Moreover, the efforts that teachers, schools, and governments made to improve teachers' knowledge of the Merdeka curriculum are stated as follows;

I attended some training on the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum (Translation version - LE, October 7th, 2023)

I follow independent training using the PMM (*Pelatihan Merdeka Mengajar* – Independent Training for Teaching) platform and IHT (In-House Training) that the school carries out (Translation version - BS, October 7th, 2023)

I follow independent training on the PMM platform. On this platform, I got information about the Merdeka curriculum (Translation version - PYI, October 7th, 2023)

Our school held IHT (In-House Training) for implementing the Merdeka curriculum (BS, October 6th, 2023).

As shown in the teachers' statements above, teachers improved their knowledge by following training through the PMM platform. This application was provided by the government and it could be installed on mobile phones. Teachers could access all information and materials for training. Moreover, the schools also held IHT (In-House Training) regarding the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum. The PMM application is shown in the following figure:

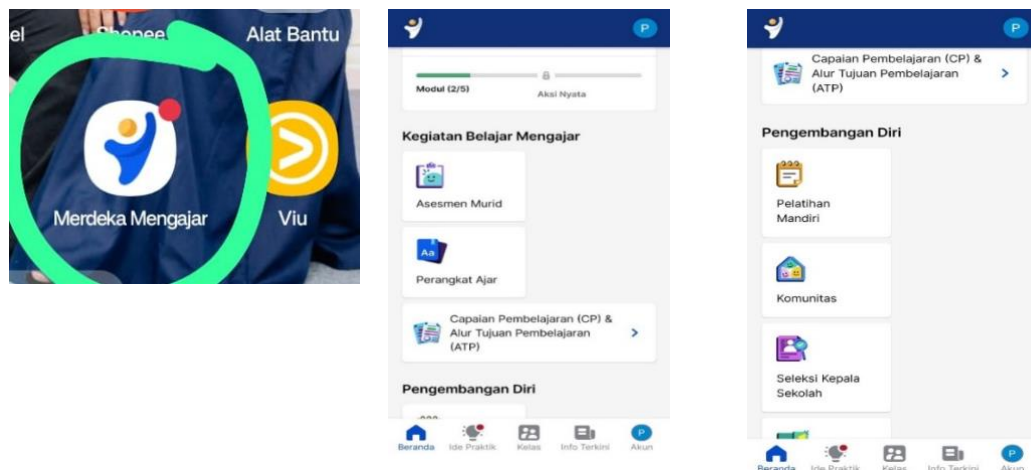


Figure 1. PMM Platform

Figure 1 shows the PMM platform that teachers used and accessed for independent training. It provided the teachers' needs in the form of features including independent training, teaching tools, assessment, modules, learning outcomes, current information, community, and others. Meanwhile, the IHT was internal school training held by every school to improve the competence of educators and teaching staff. The IHT materials were the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in forming a Pancasila (Indonesian Five Principles) student profile "MB-MM (*Merdeka Belajar - Merdeka Mengajar - Independent Learning, Independent Teaching*)".

Teachers' Voices on Goals and Objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum

This section provides teachers' voices on goals and objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum for English teaching and learning process in schools. Their statements are as follows;

I believe that government has designed the goals and objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum particularly English teaching and learning process. This curriculum focuses on improving students' English skills and competencies through the ease of the English lessons, methods, and their involvement during learning English ... (translation version - PYI, October 7th, 2023).

The objectives of this curriculum are to make students more independent in learning English and focus on improving students' English skills through the program and teaching and learning

methods provided in this curriculum. I see that our students are more motivated to learn English. (translation version - BS, October 7th, 2023).

The statement above show that teachers believe the government has crafted specific objectives for the Merdeka Curriculum, especially concerning the English teaching and learning process, aimed at enhancing students' English proficiency through accessible lessons and engaging methodologies. These objectives emphasize fostering students' independence in learning English while enhancing their language skills via the curriculum's structured programs and teaching methodologies, resulting in heightened student motivation towards English learning.

Teachers' Voices on Learning Resources

This section provides teachers' voices on learning resources that they can use in the teaching and learning process. Their statements are as follows;

English learning resources for the Merdeka curriculum are available, such as learning outcomes, modules, and media. We just need to download them from the PMM. We just have to create it in such a way... (translation version - PYI, October 7th, 2023).

Learning resources are available at schools and on the PMM platform (Translation version - BS, October 6th, 2023).

As shown in the interview results above, teachers have no problems with English learning resources for the Merdeka curriculum. These resources had been provided by the government in the PMM platform. The teachers only downloaded and made some modifications based on the topics of the learning.

Moreover, designing modules based on the Merdeka curriculum were designed for every meeting and they were substitutes for lesson plans. Modules were more complete than lesson plans. The statements are as follows;

There are still several obstacles in designing the P5 module, especially in designing project activities to suit school conditions and facilities ... (Translation version - LE, October 6th, 2023)

Yes, I still experience problems because the training I follow is only through the PMM platform... if there are problems, we cannot ask, so for beginners, we only do "ATM (*Amati, Tiru, dan Modifikasi* – Observe, Copy, and Modify)" the teaching modules in PMM (Translation version – BS, October 6th, 2023)

The modules of English learning can be taken from the PMM. We downloaded from it and made some modifications so we have no problems with it (Translation version – PYI, October 7th, 2023)

I think I have no problems, so far, I take the modules from the PMM application and I adjust modules according to the needs ... (Translation version SPA - October 6th, 2023)

Based on the interviews above, some teachers had problems in designing modules based on the Merdeka curriculum while others did not. The problems included designing project activities to suit school conditions and facilities.

Teachers' Voices on Teaching Method

This section provides teachers' voices on teaching methods in the Merdeka curriculum. The results of the interviews are stated as follows;

Teaching methods applied in the Merdeka curriculum include Project-Based Learning and differentiated methods but I do not have enough knowledge about the differentiated method (Translation version – BS, October 6th, 2023).

I applied the Project-based learning method. I try to make it suitable for students' characteristics by working together with school members (Translation version - LE, October 6th, 2023).

I applied a Project-based learning method and I work hard to make it suitable for my students by guiding them and I do not have problems with that (Translation version - SPA, October 6th, 2023)

Teaching methods in the Merdeka curriculum are good and interesting to be applied to students. Based on my experience, students are more active in learning English (Translated Version - FE, October 6th, 2023).

The results of the interviews show that all five teachers applied the Project-based Learning method and differentiated instruction strategy in teaching English. They stated that these methods and strategies had been suitable to students' characteristics so they had no problems in applying them. They worked together with school members in making projects carried out by students.

Teachers' Voices on Teaching and Learning Facilities

This section provides teachers' voices on the condition of the school facilities to support the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum. The teachers' statements are presented as follows;

There is a satellite for Wi-Fi in school because our school is in a rural area so our school got it from the government ... and we have some laptops ... but we rarely use them because the electricity often goes out here ... we have LCD projectors (translation version - PYI, October 7th, 2023)

Our school has insufficient teaching and learning facilities to support the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum. Our school only has two InFocus projectors and one speaker. Some electrical plugs in some classes do not work (Translation version - BS, October 6th, 2023).

Considering that our school is in a regency and village, of course, it still really needs improvements and additions to school facilities so that the implementation of P5 can run optimally (Translation version - LE, October 6th, 2023).

... no language laboratory in our school can be used for English language learning, especially learning listening skills (Translation version - SPA, October 6th, 2023).

The statements above show that the schools in the rural areas had insufficient teaching and learning facilities to support the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum. Those included language laboratory, LCD projectors, electrical plugs, internet connection, and electrical problems.

Teachers' Voices on the Evaluation

This section provides teachers' voices on the assessment system in the Merdeka curriculum. There were two forms of assessment in this curriculum; summative and formative assessments. The teachers' statements are as follows;

The assessment in the Merdeka curriculum is a summative assessment that is used to report learning outcomes such as school report cards. There are four summative assessment results, namely needing guidance, fair, good, and very good. For example, the criteria for needing guidance category are between 0-60, the adequate category is between 61-70, the good category is between 71-80, and the very good category is between 81-100. For formative assessment, the assessment format is in the form of a rubric in the form of a graph in the form of project performance observations, written tests, oral tests, and assignments... However, we also still need guidance regarding this assessment. Apart from that, the obstacle is guiding the children in the project because they cannot yet be released independently.

Considering that the implementation of this curriculum is still new, there are still many things that must be understood regarding the assessment system, especially in making P5 report cards (Translation version - LE, October 6th, 2023).

I still know little about the assessment system so its application is still confusing ... (Translation version – BS October 7th, 2023).

I am still studying the assessment system in this curriculum because there are two assessment forms, namely formative and summative assessments (Translation version - SPA, October 6th, 2023).

The statements of the teachers above show that they still needed more guidance and understanding of the assessment system. They were still confused about them.

Discussion

Teachers' Voices on Curriculum Changes

The agreement of teachers with curriculum changes is a significant finding that underscores the importance of their support and involvement in the education system. When teachers agree with curriculum changes, it suggests a positive reception of the new educational framework (Patekur et al., 2022). Their endorsement signifies that they recognize the value and relevance of the updated curriculum, which is crucial in ensuring its successful implementation. This alignment between teachers and the curriculum reflects a harmonious relationship

between those responsible for curriculum development and those tasked with its execution, which is essential for achieving educational goals.

Furthermore, teachers agree with curriculum changes because it has a positive impact on the overall quality of English teaching and learning. Baş and Cihad (2019) argue that teachers who embrace these changes are more likely to be motivated and enthusiastic in their teaching, which, in turn, can lead to improved student engagement and learning outcomes. Their support can also result in a smoother transition to the new curriculum, reducing potential resistance or obstacles to implementation. Therefore, the finding that teachers agree with curriculum changes not only highlights their crucial role but also signifies a promising step toward enhancing the educational experience for students.

The findings obtained from this current study resonate with the research conducted by Damayanti and Muhroji (2022), Lestari (2023b), Sunarni and Karyono (2023), and Rohmah et al. (2023), collectively highlighting a consensus regarding the Merdeka Curriculum's user-friendly nature compared to the 2013 curriculum. These studies converge on the assertion that the Merdeka Curriculum offers a more straightforward and accessible framework, attributed to its provision of various conveniences and adaptable approaches to learning. A notable advantage emphasized across these studies is the empowerment of students through the Merdeka Curriculum, affording them the freedom to actively participate in structuring and directing their learning experiences. This autonomy granted to students fosters a sense of ownership, encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their educational journey, thereby nurturing self-directed learning habits and enhancing their overall engagement with the curriculum.

In essence, the results of this present and previous studies show that the simplicity of the Merdeka Curriculum is due to the advantages it provides, especially the freedom for students to organize their learning. This autonomy fosters a sense of responsibility among students, thereby potentially producing more effective learning outcomes compared to the more structured 2013 curriculum.

Teachers' Voices on the Curriculum Change's Aspects in the Merdeka Curriculum Who Taught English at Rural Junior High Schools

Teachers' Voices on the Knowledge of the Merdeka Curriculum and Efforts to Improve It

The research findings indicate that teachers possess a considerable understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, which has been acquired through various sources such as training sessions, guidance from school principals, and insights shared by fellow teachers. Their

knowledge base about the Merdeka Curriculum appears to have been enriched through a collaborative learning environment involving structured training programs, administrative leadership, and peer-to-peer exchange among educators. This collective comprehension underscores the importance of multifaceted support systems contributing to teachers' familiarity and competence with the Merdeka Curriculum.

In terms of improving knowledge of the Merdeka Curriculum, the finding shows that teachers have improved their knowledge through training on the PMM platform, and attending the IHT training is a testament to the importance of ongoing professional development in the field of education. Art-in (2014) states that teachers' training for the new curriculum offers several benefits, including effective teacher development, improved learning management, enhanced analytical thinking in students, positive learning experiences, and policy implications for educational improvement. The training can be carried out using technology. The utilization of technology, such as the PMM platform, is a practical and accessible means for teachers to expand their knowledge and enhance their teaching skills. These training opportunities empower educators to stay updated with the latest pedagogical approaches, curriculum changes, and educational best practices (Siregar et al., 2023). In particular, the accessibility of the PMM application on mobile phones underscores the government's commitment to making professional development resources readily available, ensuring that teachers can conveniently access these tools and continue their growth as educators.

The fact that teachers have taken advantage of such training opportunities indicates their dedication to continuous improvement and their willingness to embrace innovative teaching methods. This not only benefits the teachers themselves but also has a ripple effect on the quality of education. Better-informed and trained teachers are more effective in the classroom, resulting in improved learning experiences for students (Siregar et al., 2023). In this way, the finding underscores the pivotal role of professional development and accessible technological tools in equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to provide high-quality education and contribute to the overall advancement of the education system.

Teachers' Voices on Goals and Objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum

Based on the findings, teachers believe the goals and objectives of this current curriculum benefit both teachers and students. The changes have brought about improvements in the teaching and learning processes. These benefits can encompass various aspects, such as increased student engagement, a more student-centered approach, and the development of critical thinking skills (Latif et al., 2020; Rohimajaya et al., 2022). Teachers' acknowledgment of these advantages underscores the effectiveness of the Merdeka curriculum in achieving its intended goals.

Based on this finding, the goals and objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum are planned well. It confirms Richard's (2001) statement that the goals and objectives of the curriculum must describe overarching aims and aspirations of what students must achieve at the end of the program or course. When both teachers and students benefit from the Merdeka Curriculum, it signifies a more comprehensive and successful English teaching at any student's level or grade. For example, teachers who find the curriculum beneficial are likely to be more motivated and dedicated in their roles, which can lead to a more conducive learning environment. Meanwhile, students who experience the advantages of the Merdeka curriculum are more likely to be enthusiastic and engaged learners, which can result in improved language proficiency and academic achievement (Putri et al., 2023). Thus, these findings suggest that the Merdeka curriculum is contributing positively to the achievement of the goals of English teaching, aligning with the broader objectives of enhancing English language skills and promoting effective teaching methodologies.

Teachers' Voices on Learning Resources

The interview results indicating that teachers do not face any issues with English learning resources for the Merdeka curriculum reveal a positive aspect of the curriculum implementation. The fact that these resources have been readily provided through the PMM platform, a government initiative, demonstrates a proactive approach to supporting teachers in delivering effective English language education. The materials provided have been suitable for learning objectives. Teaching materials that are under teaching principles can achieve learning outcomes (Fauzan et al., 2023). Thus, the accessibility to resources not only simplifies the teaching process but also ensures a level playing field for students in both urban and rural areas, where resources might traditionally be more limited. The ability of teachers to download and adapt these resources to match specific learning objectives and topics speaks to their flexibility and creativity in tailoring the curriculum to their students' needs.

Furthermore, the availability of these resources on the PMM platform indicates a government commitment to enhancing English language education. Providing a repository/digital of materials for teachers to use and adapt not only eases their workload but also supports the development of diverse and engaging learning experiences (Cohen et al., 2013). Thus, these findings highlight the importance of continued government investment in education infrastructure and resources, which is instrumental in empowering teachers and improving students' access to quality learning materials. Overall, the accessibility and adaptability of English learning resources for the Merdeka curriculum through the PMM platform contribute positively to the success of this educational reform initiative.

Moreover, the interviews revealing disparities in teachers' abilities to design modules based on the Merdeka curriculum shed light on the importance of providing adequate support and guidance to educators during the implementation of curriculum changes. It is not uncommon for teachers to encounter challenges when adapting to new curriculum frameworks, particularly when it involves designing project activities tailored to their specific school conditions. These challenges can be attributed to factors such as the availability of resources, classroom infrastructure, and the unique needs of their students (Djafar et al., 2023). The discrepancy in teachers' abilities to navigate these hurdles underlines the necessity of offering targeted training and assistance to educators to ensure a smooth transition to the Merdeka curriculum.

These findings signify the importance of collaboration and knowledge sharing among teachers and training carried out by practitioners from universities. Teachers who have successfully overcome the challenges of designing modules specific to their school conditions can serve as valuable resources for their colleagues facing similar issues. Encouraging a culture of peer support and professional development can be an effective strategy for addressing these curriculum-related challenges (Setiawan et al., 2022). Ultimately, it is essential to acknowledge the diverse needs and circumstances of teachers and provide them with the necessary tools and resources to effectively implement the Merdeka curriculum, thereby enhancing the curriculum's overall impact on students' learning experiences.

Teachers' Voices on Teaching Method

The findings show that teachers who applied project-based learning and differentiated instruction strategies in teaching English are indicative of a progressive and student-centered approach to education. Project-based learning encourages students to actively engage in their learning by working on real-world projects and problems, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Ilham, 2022). Sutomo et al. (2021) assert that by integrating this approach into their English classes, teachers are likely to provide students with opportunities to apply their language skills in practical contexts, which can lead to a deeper understanding and retention of the language.

Moreover, teachers apply differentiated instruction in teaching English in the Merdeka curriculum. It is a valuable strategy as it recognizes that students have diverse learning needs and abilities. Differentiated instruction is one of the teaching approaches that enable students to learn in various ways based on their valuable individual differences (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019). Differentiated instruction is the adaptation of curriculum components in the parts of content, process, and product and refers to the needs of students according to their interests,

readiness, and learning profiles (Satyarini et al., 2022). Thus, by tailoring their teaching methods to accommodate these differences, teachers can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment, ensuring that every student has a chance to succeed and thrive in their English studies.

In addition, the findings highlight the adaptability and innovation of teachers in their efforts to enhance English language education. Project-based learning and differentiated instruction can make English classes more engaging and effective, ultimately benefiting students by promoting critical thinking, problem-solving, and a deeper understanding of the language (Ilham, 2022; Markula & Aksela, 2022; Sutomo et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of pedagogical approaches that focus on student growth and success, demonstrating the dedication of educators to providing a well-rounded education in English language skills.

Teachers' Voices on Teaching and Learning Facilities

The finding that schools in rural areas lack essential teaching and learning facilities to support the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum highlights a significant challenge in ensuring educational equity and quality. Educational resources and infrastructure are pivotal in facilitating effective teaching and learning, especially digital educational resources (Ke et al., 2022). In this context, the absence of critical tools like language laboratories, LCD projectors, and reliable internet connections can hinder the full realization of the Merdeka curriculum's goals, particularly in enhancing the educational experience for students. Without these resources, students in rural areas may be at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts in more urban or well-equipped schools.

The presence of electrical problems and insufficient electrical plugs further compound the challenges faced by these schools. These issues can disrupt the teaching process, creating an environment where teachers may struggle to utilize modern teaching tools and technologies effectively. Additionally, electrical problems can lead to frequent disruptions in classroom activities, affecting the overall quality of education. Addressing these resource deficiencies in rural schools is vital to ensure that all students, regardless of their geographical location, have equal access to quality education and the opportunities provided by the Merdeka curriculum. It underscores the need for targeted investments in rural education infrastructure to bridge the educational divide and allow all students to fully benefit from curriculum reforms.

Teachers' Voices on the Evaluation System

The statements made by the teachers in which they express the need for more guidance and understanding of the assessment system in the Merdeka curriculum indicate a crucial area

where additional support and clarification are required. The assessment system is a pivotal component of any curriculum as it determines how student learning is evaluated and measured (Prastikawati et al., 2020). Teachers' confusion about this system can lead to inconsistencies in grading, potentially impacting the fairness and accuracy of student assessments. This finding underscores the importance of providing comprehensive training and clear guidelines on the assessment criteria and procedures within the Merdeka curriculum to ensure that teachers are well-equipped to carry out assessments effectively.

Furthermore, addressing teachers' concerns and providing the necessary guidance regarding the assessment system is essential not only for the teachers' professional development but also for the overall success of the curriculum. When teachers fully understand and can confidently implement the assessment system, it contributes to more reliable and valid measurements of student progress (Nakita et al., 2022). Additionally, it helps maintain transparency in the evaluation process, ensuring that students and their parents are informed about the criteria used to assess their performance. In sum, addressing the teachers' need for clarity in the assessment system is a critical step in enhancing the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum and maintaining the integrity of the education system.

Based on the findings of this study, this study is quite different from Djafar et al.'s (2023). The facilities in the rural schools in this present study are more complete than the schools in Djafar et al.'s study although insufficient learning facilities were still found in this present study. Moreover, this present study is in line with Damayanti and Muhroji (2022), Lestari (2023b), Sunarni and Karyono (2023), and Rohmah et al. (2023). The teachers claimed that the Merdeka curriculum is better than the 2013 one. They get many benefits and easiness that were provided by this curriculum. These benefits are also experienced by students who make them active in learning and easy to achieve learning outcomes. Based on their opinion, this is possibly caused by this Merdeka curriculum providing more flexibility and autonomy to schools and teachers in designing and implementing the curriculum, as well as promoting critical thinking, creativity, and character building among students. Moreover, in the Merdeka curriculum, learning outcomes are formulated into six phases with periods according to the level of competency of students. This is different from the previous curriculum which had a yearly period.

In conclusion, the Merdeka curriculum is regarded as a better curriculum than the previous one. The teachers in this study who teach English at rural schools get more benefits from the implementation of this curriculum. The teachers can teach English based on students' needs and levels. In other words, the curriculum development of the Merdeka curriculum is well implemented, and even the projects are carried out extraordinarily to the teacher's previous

expectations (Kamila & Agus RM, 2023). Each aspect of the curriculum has been suitable for the goals of the curriculum development.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This article has discussed the English teachers' voices on the current curriculum change and the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum viewed from the curriculum change aspects. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that teachers' voices on the curriculum change are positive because this curriculum is adaptable, flexible, and meets the student's needs in learning English. Moreover, teachers' voices who teach at rural schools in Bengkulu indicate that this curriculum is well developed although they still face some problems such as teaching and learning facilities and knowledge of assessment systems in their schools that are in the rural areas, while other aspects such as the goals and objectives, existing learning resources, and teaching methods have been developed well by the government.

Based on the findings, some suggestion proposed in this study are; 1) The government or related parties such as universities or educational agencies must provide more training or workshops for teachers especially the implementation of the assessment. 2) The government is suggested to increase the quality of the teaching and learning facilities for each school to ease teachers in the English teaching and learning process at their schools. The government concerned may renovate school buildings that are no longer adequate, build learning facilities that do not yet exist (e.g., language labs, science labs, sports arenas, library), provide reading materials for teachers and students in libraries and online websites (e.g., books, magazines, newspapers, article journals, short stories, and dictionaries), provide internet network connectivity (e.g., TELKOM network and independent Tower Wireless Radio), and provide ICT devices (e.g., laptops, computers, and LCD projectors). The government 3) further research is suggested to conduct a study with a larger sample size by carrying out a survey method to get more data about teachers' voices in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum as the newest curriculum in Indonesia.

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