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## TEACHER AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN TEACHING ENGLISH

**Nur Octaviana<sup>1</sup>, Abdul Arif<sup>2</sup>, Elly Syahadati<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>123</sup>Universitas PGRI Pontianak, Email: nuroctaviana712@gmail.com

### *Abstrak*

Persepsi Guru dan Siswa tentang Pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka dalam Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi guru dan siswa terhadap implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di SMPN 1 Sukadana. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain *Concurrent Triangulation Mixed Method*, dengan pendekatan kuantitatif melalui angket tertutup kepada 180 siswa kelas VIII dan pendekatan kualitatif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan satu guru bahasa Inggris berpengalaman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru memperoleh dampak positif berupa fleksibilitas yang lebih tinggi dalam memilih metode pengajaran, merancang konten pembelajaran yang kontekstual, serta melaksanakan asesmen formatif yang relevan dengan kebutuhan siswa. Fleksibilitas ini memungkinkan guru untuk menyesuaikan pembelajaran dengan karakteristik dan keterbatasan siswa di daerah terpencil, sehingga meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran. Sementara itu, siswa menunjukkan persepsi positif terhadap kejelasan instruksi, atmosfer kelas, keterlibatan belajar, efektivitas metode pengajaran, dan kemandirian belajar. Kurikulum Merdeka terbukti mendukung praktik pembelajaran yang lebih adaptif, berpusat pada siswa, dan relevan secara kontekstual.

**Kata Kunci :** Kurikulum Merdeka, Persepsi Guru, Respon Siswa.

### *Abstract*

*Teacher and Students' Perception on the Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Teaching English. This study aimed to explore English teacher's perceived impacts of Merdeka Curriculum in teaching practice and students' responses on English teacher teaching practice using Merdeka Curriculum at SMPN 1 Sukadana. The research employed a Concurrent Triangulation Mixed Methods design, collecting quantitative data through a closed-ended questionnaire from 180 eighth-grade students and qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with an experienced English teacher. The findings revealed that the teacher experienced positive impacts such as greater teaching methodology adjustment selection, curriculum context alignment and formative, relevant assessment. This flexibility allowed the teacher to better address the diverse needs of students in a rural setting and improved instructional quality. Students demonstrated positive responses in terms of instructional clarity, classroom atmosphere, learning engagement, teaching effectiveness, and learning independence. The Merdeka Curriculum facilitated adaptive, student-centered, and contextually relevant teaching practices.*

**Keywords:** Merdeka Curriculum, Teacher Perception, Students Responses.

## INTRODUCTION

In education, the curriculum is defined as a structured framework that outlines the educational content students are required to learn. Sudjana (2005) observes that the curriculum reflects the educational objectives established by teachers and is implemented through diverse instructional designs and activities. This framework connects educational objectives with classroom practices.

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In response to the educational disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing demand for contextual and adaptable instruction, Indonesia introduced the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022. This curriculum reform prioritises student-centered learning, literacy and numeracy development, and character building via project-based learning (Utami *et al.*, 2023). The platform grants educators the autonomy to design learning activities tailored to students' developmental stages and offers access to various digital tools via the Merdeka Mengajar platform (Anselmus Dami *et al.*, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant transition from rigid, standardized instruction to differentiated and contextual teaching practices.

Several recent studies have explored the broader implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the policy or conceptual level. For instance, Fristiviona *et al.* (2024) found that primary school students exhibited higher motivation and self-regulation under the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly when digital scaffolding was integrated. Similarly, Lestari, Lestari, and Nularsih (2024) reported that English teachers appreciated the curriculum's flexibility but expressed concerns about the lack of structured guidance in instructional delivery. Moreover, in a Ghanaian context, Boateng, Addo, and Asamoah (2024) revealed that successful curriculum reform hinges on teachers' agency and alignment between policy design and classroom realities.

Despite its widespread implementation, there is a scarcity of studies examining the practical application of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly from the perspectives of English teachers and students. Existing research primarily focusses on curriculum reform at the macro policy level, resulting in a gap in understanding the interpretation and implementation of these reforms in specific classroom contexts, particularly in English language instruction within rural schools. This gap highlights the necessity of examining both teacher and student perceptions as mediating factors that affect the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.

This research explored English teacher's perceived impacts of Merdeka Curriculum in teaching practice and students' responses on English teacher teaching practice using Merdeka Curriculum at SMPN 1 Sukadana. This research utilizes Bandura's (1986) theory of perception and motivation, along with Fredricks *et al.*'s (2004) engagement theory, to address the disparity between curricular intentions and classroom realities.

The findings aim to enhance understanding of the operational dynamics of educational reforms at the ground level, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and

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curriculum developers to improve English language instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employed a Concurrent Triangulation Mixed Methods Design as proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). Concurrent Triangulation Design is a type of mixed methods approach in which both qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously, analyzed independently, and then compared or integrated to validate findings or provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem Creswell & Plano Clark (2018, p. 65). In which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected independently yet concurrently to address different but complementary research questions. The qualitative approach was used to explore the English teacher's perception of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in teaching English. Data for this part were obtained through a semi-structured interview conducted with one English teacher at SMPN 1 Sukadana. Meanwhile, the quantitative approach aimed to measure students' responses to the teacher's instructional practices under the same curriculum. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 Likert-scale items, distributed to 180 eighth-grade students.

The instrument for the quantitative component was a closed-ended questionnaire comprising 19 items utilized a 5-point Likert scale. The instrument assessed seven constructs: clarity of instruction, teaching method effectiveness, student engagement, relevance of materials, assessment and feedback, learning independence, and classroom atmosphere. The questionnaire underwent expert review and was tested in a pilot study to confirm its validity and reliability. Data for the qualitative strand were collected via a semi-structured interview with the English teacher, concentrating on six fundamental themes: teaching methodology adjustment, curriculum content alignment, assessment practice changes, instructional planning autonomy, student engagement perception and classroom management adjustment. The audio recordings were transcribed precisely, and the responses underwent thematic analysis.

Each data set was analyzed separately using appropriate methods. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, while the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to identify trends and general perceptions. The findings from both data sets were then compared

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and interpreted jointly in the discussion section to generate a comprehensive understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented in the English language classroom from both teacher and student perspectives.

This design was chosen because it allows the researcher to draw conclusions that integrate both individual experiences and broader patterns, while also ensuring the validity of findings through data triangulation. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings supports a holistic analysis that is particularly relevant for examining perceptions in curriculum implementation within educational settings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### A. Findings

#### **English Teacher's Perceived Impacts of Merdeka Curriculum on Teaching Practice**

The results of this study showed that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum brought positive impacted for English teacher, particularly in rural junior high school contexts. The findings were organized into six primary themes that illustrated the multifaceted impacted of the curriculum reform.

#### **Teaching Methodology Adjustment**

The interviewed teacher noted that the *Merdeka Curriculum* positively influenced teaching methods, allowing more autonomy and adaptation to student needs. Rather than following rigid procedures, the teacher modified instruction based on students' characteristics, emphasizing drilling and grammar-translation methods for rural learners with very limited English proficiency (0–10%). The teacher explained that due to the lack of early English instruction and scarce resources, lessons had to begin from the basics, focusing on reading and grammar practice. This flexibility reflects Vygotsky's (1978) *Zone of Proximal Development* and supports Estaji's (2024) view on responsive teaching approaches, as well as Hartanto's (2022) findings that rural teachers often rely on drilling and grammar-translation. Overall, the teacher's adaptations demonstrate a commitment to student-centered instruction within resource-limited contexts. This was evident in teacher assertion,

*“Following observations and preliminary evaluations, the instructional methods employed in the classroom corresponded to the characteristics of the students.”*

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*“Based on the initial assessment, the majority of those students have an English language proficiency level between 0 to 10%. This is because there is no English language instruction in elementary school, and there are very few English language courses available in the surrounding area. And people's awareness of enrolling their children in English lessons is still lacking. So, whether I like it or not, I have to start over with the material, from the very beginning. So, what I often apply in class is drilling, going back to the conventional grammar translation method, drilling, and increasing practice so that they get used to the basics. For the time being, I usually focus more on reading with grammar.”*

### **Curriculum Content Alignment**

The research findings indicated that teachers were also positive impacted by changes made to the curriculum, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum granted teachers greater flexibility, *“Learning outcomes serve as a reference... I was free to explore within it,”* this framework allowed the teacher to select learning resources that more effectively addressed students' individual needs and contextual limitations. The flexibility of curriculum content enabled the teacher to concentrate on materials pertinent to students' experiences.

The teacher employed international references, such as McMillan, to enhance content instead of adhering strictly to national textbooks. This was evident with teacher stated:

*“So, I decided to always take the material or practice questions from outside, from those provided by the British Council, or from books written by McMillan grammar, and so on. Those are books that are truly native English, not Englishized Indonesian.”*

### **Assessment Practice Changes**

Assessment practices changes finding indicates had positive impacted. The teacher acknowledged that Authentic Assessment could be adjusted to accommodate the specific needs of students and the expectations of parents, particularly concerning vocabulary proficiency. As stated by the teacher,

*“What could be accomplished was transforming the demands from students and parents into criteria that could be integrated into authentic assessments.”*

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### Instructional Planning Autonomy

Instructional planning autonomy finding indicates positive impacted. Teacher experienced increased freedom in determining both the content and delivery methods of instruction, as they were no longer bound by rigid learning models or centralized curriculum guidelines. As stated by the teacher *“I have already rebelled against the English teaching system. There are many AI-based English teaching methods, multimedia-based, group work-based, jigsaw, project-based, problem-based learning, all sorts of things. But it all comes back to whether our students are capable of following the learning that is structured in such a way.”* The teacher also demonstrated the ability to independently select authentic and high-quality learning resources, stating, *“I decided to always take materials from books that are indeed written by McMillan Grammar.”* The teacher exercised considerable autonomy in selecting instructional materials and pedagogical approaches. The teacher explicitly rejected the use of online sources that he perceived as unreliable or inauthentic, and instead preferred high-quality materials from reputable international publishers such as McMillan. This demonstrated a strong sense of *teacher agency*, defined by Biesta *et al.* (2015) as the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively, not merely as implementers of external mandates, but as active contributors to the learning process. This finding was consistent with the research of Retnawati *et al.* (2021), who emphasized that granting teachers greater curricular freedom enables them to adopt educational content that is more relevant and meaningful to the lived experiences of their students.

### Student Engagement

In numerous respects, the teacher was positively affected by the implementation of strategies aimed at increasing student engagement. As the teacher stated, *“I personally tried to create an environment where they had to be active,”* the teacher became more proactive in designing lessons that fostered student participation and interaction. The teacher implemented motivational tools, such as a checkmark system, to improve engagement, demonstrating a responsive teaching approach. As teacher stated *“Your grades would go up based on these checkmarks.”* The teacher further noted that the classroom environment had become more dynamic and participatory as a result of this approach. As the teacher remarked, *“The class was livelier and more chaotic, partly because of the checkmarks.”* This observation indicated that the strategy developed by

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the teacher effectively promoted active engagement, transforming the learning process into one that was more meaningful and student-centered.

This pedagogical approach aligned with the student engagement framework proposed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), which conceptualized engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains. These dimensions collectively contribute to students' overall academic success and depth of learning. The findings also similar with Susanto and Widodo's (2022) empirical research, which showed that student participation significantly increased when learners were given responsibility and the freedom to express themselves in the learning process.

### **Classroom Management Adjustment**

Classroom management adjustment finding indicates had a positive impacted on teacher. Teacher we're able to make the classroom more adaptable and responsive to the cognitive and affective needs of students. Teachers reported that they had begun conducting cognitive and non-cognitive assessments from the beginning of the semester to understand the initial conditions of students in terms of academic abilities and learning preferences. This was evident the teacher statement,

*“Yes, since the Merdeka Curriculum, I had become familiar with what is called cognitive assessment...”*

The teacher modified instructional rhythms in the classroom according to students' emotional states and readiness, incorporating non-academic reflection activities to promote a more comprehensive learning environment. As teacher stated,

*“I create an atmosphere that goes up and down. Sometimes it's relaxed, then suddenly the tension is brought up again, then relaxed again like that.”*

The teacher also gives pupils time to think about things that aren't related to school, and these thoughts are subsequently used to plan future lessons. This fits with Fraser's (1994) idea of how important it is to has a supportive classroom atmosphere and Doyle's (1986) idea of an ecological classroom structure and the humanistic focus articulated by Handayani (2021) found: that humanistic ways of managing a classroom can make learning more comfortable.

**Students' Responses on Teacher's Teaching Practice Using Merdeka Curriculum**

Table 1. Summary of Students' Responses

Indicator	Mean Score
Instructional Clarity	4.48
Classroom Atmosphere	4.35
Student Engagement	4.26
Teaching Method	4.18
Effectiveness	
Learning Independence	4.12
Feedback and Assessment	4.08
Relevance of Materials	4.05

Based on the table above, the researcher found the result students' responses are largely positive, based on quantitative findings. The aspect rated highest was instructional clarity, supporting Rosenshine's (1987) emphasized that learning was particularly effective when instruction was clear and well-organized. Clear instructional delivery provided students with a coherent mental framework, enhancing engagement and reducing confusion. Students also gave the classroom atmosphere high marks, which means it was a safe and helpful place for them mentally. This result was consistent with the study conducted by Lestari, Lestari, and Nularsih (2024) at a junior high school in Semarang, which also identified clarity in teacher instruction as a critical factor influencing the effectiveness of Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Teachers who provided explicit directions enabled students to more accurately understand both the learning objectives and the required tasks.

Students demonstrated enthusiasm for active learning methods, especially group work and role-playing, which aligns with Brown's (2007) assertion that diverse strategies improve engagement. Their perception of increased autonomy indicates a transition toward self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002), although some individuals require additional scaffolding. This finding was consistent with observations by Rambe and Suganda (2023), who reported that middle school students at *Sekolah Penggerak* expressed high enthusiasm toward project-based learning as implemented through the Merdeka Curriculum. Their study highlighted

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that when students were given the opportunity to participate actively in their learning, their motivation significantly increased.

## B. Discussion

Overall, the findings of this study aligned with broader empirical evidence and with the pedagogical foundations of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasized learner-centered instruction and active engagement. The teacher's use of multiple, contextually appropriate methods demonstrated an effective translation of curriculum principles into classroom practice, thereby fostering an environment conducive to meaningful and participatory learning.

Feedback was predominantly regarded as constructive, although there was variability in perceived usefulness. Students recognized their strengths and areas for improvement, demonstrating alignment with the formative principles established by Hattie and Timperley (2007), say that constructive feedback makes people more motivated and helps them understand better. Stiggins (2005) also said that assessment for learning helps students see what they are good at and what they need to work on.

The lower score for material relevance indicates potential for enhancing the alignment of lesson content with students' lives, which is a fundamental aspect of backward design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). Lestari and Suryani (2021) found that teachers often make things easier and change them to fit the students' social and cultural background, which makes them think more positively about the material. This study agrees with earlier ones that show that relevant and contextual material helps students learn in a way that is useful and meaningful.

Integrating both teacher and students perspectives revealed a coherent narrative of improvement facilitated by the Merdeka Curriculum. Instructional clarity and material relevance were enhanced through adaptive teaching, while diversified pedagogical techniques increased student engagement. Furthermore, classroom management practices evolved toward more supportive and responsive strategies, fostering a psychologically safe learning environment in accordance with Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist principles. Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum not only empowered teacher's with professional autonomy but also fostered a more engaging, inclusive, and effective learning experience for students.

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## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that the Merdeka Curriculum had a positive impact on English teaching practices, particularly by expanding teacher autonomy in instructional planning, material selection, assessment, and classroom management. The teacher interviewed no longer followed a centralized approach but adapted methods and materials based on students' actual needs and context. This was evident in the use of drilling and grammar-translation techniques for students with limited proficiency, and in the selection of authentic resources from international publishers such as McMillan, rather than relying on unreliable local sources.

Instructional flexibility empowered the teacher to design content aligned with students' starting points, as identified through cognitive and non-cognitive assessments. Classroom practices were adjusted to be more dynamic and emotionally responsive, promoting a supportive atmosphere. The teacher also implemented motivational strategies to increase student engagement, reflecting a shift toward student-centered pedagogy.

Complementing the qualitative findings, student responses to the Merdeka Curriculum were predominantly positive. Instructional clarity received the highest rating, followed by classroom atmosphere and engagement. These results support the claim that the Merdeka Curriculum facilitates more effective, relevant, and learner-responsive teaching. However, the relatively lower score for material relevance suggests room for improving content contextualization. Overall, the curriculum supports a pedagogical shift that values teacher agency and student experience, aligning classroom practice with both national learning goals and local classroom realities.

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