

## Evaluating the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Teaching English in High School: Challenges and Opportunities

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study was to provide insight into how the Merdeka Curriculum is being taught at one of high school in South Sulawesi, it is SMAN 1 Takalar. Using a phenomenological descriptive design, the study gathers descriptive data from verbal or written statements as well as actions that are seen. The 20 teachers of SMAN 1 Takalar were research participants. There were selected purposively, by some considerations, namely: The first category consisted of teachers who have participated in the Guru Penggerak program. The second category was the teacher who have joined the PPG Program while the third category was the teacher who have not joined both of the program above. To collect the data the research use observation, interview and documentation. The research employs observation, interview, and documentation methods to gather data, supplemented with checklists and documentation from the research site, including relevant books, regulations, and photographs. Based on observations, the research's conclusions showed that teachers had done a good job of implementing autonomous curriculum learning. Teachers that successfully move through the phases of learning preparation, execution, and assessment. Overall success is observed, despite difficulties in updating, and is attributed to the proactive application of distinctiveness and technology integration strategies. Teachers' assessments of the quality of learning are influenced by evaluation techniques like learning reflection. In summary, SMAN 1 Takalar's learning environment is positively impacted by the Merdeka Curriculum. encouraging dynamism and adaptability to the demands of students. In order to maximize the benefits of the curriculum and guarantee fair outcomes for all parties involved in the learning process, it is imperative that ongoing efforts be made to comprehend and address the diverse teacher viewpoints.

**Keywords:** Merdeka Curriculum, Senior High School

### Introduction

All people should have access to education since it is essential to their existence and the development of their countries and states. It produces skilled laborers who can handle the difficulties and rivalry of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4.0), when critical thinking abilities and technical literacy are becoming more and more important. As stated by Ahmadi (2014). There are two ways to look at education: as a process and as a result. It is described as the process of human connection with their surroundings. However, education also causes behavioral changes, demonstrating its capacity to shift with the times and keep up with trends. It adjusts to suit the requirements of people as well as the surroundings.

Education in Indonesia has made several adjustments to the current situation. In 2021, the government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, launched a prototype curriculum. This curriculum will be further refined in 2022 to become the Merdeka Curriculum, also known as "Kurikulum Merdeka". The launch of this curriculum is in response to the education crisis and learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, this curriculum will be widely used as the standard curriculum in schools. According to (hamalik, 2007); Susanto (2022), learning loss

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refers to the decline in knowledge and skills in academic development that occurs when education is interrupted.

The curriculum implementation process involves three main stages, each with its own set of activities and challenges. The first stage is the planning phase, where the curriculum plan is detailed, including the selection of learning objectives, the development of teaching materials, and the design of evaluation methods. This stage presents challenges in formulating clear objectives, selecting appropriate teaching strategies, and integrating student needs. By systematically following these stages, schools and teachers can ensure that the implemented curriculum achieves the desired learning objectives and can be continually enhanced to improve the quality of education (Hamalik, 2007).

Based on the initial observation conducted by the researcher in May 2023 at SMP Negeri 1 Gorontalo, it was observed that in terms of classroom learning, some teachers primarily rely on lecture-based methods, which can result in student boredom and passivity. Students are still treated as objects in the learning process, and their creativity is limited because the teaching and learning activities are predominantly teacher-centered. The students are often occupied with various assignments, including homework. However, the learning resources used in the classroom are mostly limited to textbooks, which provide little opportunity for students to explore materials from various sources beyond the prescribed textbooks.

Based on this observation, there are challenges in teaching and learning practices in schools. In addition, based on the interview with the English Teacher of SMPN 1 in Gorontalo, it was mentioned that there are other issues, such as a low level of teacher understanding of information technology and a lack of preparation to face the digital era. Training programs related to implementing and utilizing information technology for teachers must improve their implementation. However, within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are expected to be creative, innovative, and capable of adapting to the increasingly advanced digital era in order to deliver enjoyable and compelling learning experiences. Therefore, it is essential to address these challenges and provide appropriate support and training for teachers to enhance their understanding and skills in utilizing technology and implementing student-centered teaching methods.

The previous research (Sumarsih et al., 2022) showed that the Merdeka Curriculum in "Driving School" promotes students' nobility, independence, critical thinking, creativity, cooperation, and appreciation for diversity. The principal encourages innovative programs and collaboration among teachers. In this study, the researcher investigates how teachers perceive the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum for the Students. The research focuses on strategies to promote critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability to the students' learning styles. By comparing findings, the researcher aims to gain insights into the effectiveness of the curriculum and identify potential improvements for the Students.

Lince (2022) conducted research on the Merdeka Curriculum and found that its implementation emphasizes curriculum achievement through effective, active, and student-centered learning. The Merdeka Curriculum serves as a solution to enhance students' learning motivation. By integrating these findings with the research on teacher perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum and its implementation for the Students, the researcher aims to further explore the correlation between effective teaching strategies and student motivation. This comparison will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's impact on student learning outcomes and motivation within the context of the Students.

According to the research conducted by Widodo and Rofiqoh (2020), it was found that teachers of the Students need to employ relevant teaching techniques that align with the current era. They should stay updated with technological advancements in order to create an inclusive and engaging learning environment that effectively taps into students' potential. In our study on teacher perceptions regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and its teaching to the Students, the author will investigate how teachers integrate technology and adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of the technologically proficient Students. By aligning these

findings, the author expects to uncover the best practices to optimize the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on student learning outcomes and foster students' enthusiasm for learning.

Evaluating the Merdeka Curriculum in education, this research aims to identify the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Teaching English at SMAN 1 Takalar. This school was regarded as an exemplary school in its area, offering valuable perspectives on the application of the Merdeka Curriculum in comparable learning environments. In addition, SMAN 1 Takalar is a good choice to assess new educational initiatives like the Merdeka Curriculum since it may have demonstrated a certain level of readiness or current performance criteria.

## **Material and Method**

The type of this study was a qualitative research approach with phenomenology descriptive design. Qualitative approach was a research procedure that generated descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals and observed behaviors. After the data has been collected, the next stage was data analysis. (Cresswell, 2012) also stated that qualitative research involved exploring a problem and developing a comprehensive understanding of a critical phenomenon.

### ***Data Resource***

In data collection, the researcher needed to include data from valid sources. As stated by (Arikunto et al., 2015), good data was obtained from appropriate and accurate sources. This study collected data from teachers who have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in their teaching. The researcher utilized purposive sampling to include homogeneous sampling to recruit teachers who can participate in this research. Lopez & Whitehead (2013) explained purposive sampling as a sampling strategy that was frequently employed, where participants were selected based on predetermined criteria that were relevant to a specific research question. In this study, the researchers selected three categories of teachers as participants for data collection. The first category consisted of teachers who have participated in the Guru Penggerak program. The second category was the teacher who have joined the PPG Program while the third category was the teacher who have not joined both of the program above. The researcher gained insights into implementing the Merdeka Curriculum by selecting these three categories. Based on this category, the researcher chose six teachers as the data resources.

### ***Research Instrument***

To collect the data the research use observation, interview and documentation. (Sandu, 2015) stated that the most effective way to use the observation method was to supplement it with observation forms or checklists as instruments. The interview was a purposeful conversation between two parties: the interviewer who asked the questions and the interviewee who provided answers to those questions (Moleong, 2018). According to (Sudaryono, 2017) documentation aimed to obtain data directly from the research site, which included relevant books, regulations, activity reports, photographs, and relevant data films. The researcher digitally recorded the conversation during the interview between the researcher and the participants using an audio or tape recorder.

### ***Technique of Analyzing Data***

The data analysis technique involved examining the data to derive an explanation for a particular phenomenon. The data in this study included interview transcripts and was accompanied by audio recordings. According to Miles and Huberman (Saleh, 2017) qualitative data analysis consisted of three procedures for analyzing and interpreting the data after collecting it they are data reduction, data display, and verivying conclusion.responsibility of teachers and stakeholders to comprehend and execute the curriculum's intentions accurately.

## **Results and Discussion**

## Results and Discussion

### Results

Number of studies have been conducted on the issues of Merdeka Curriculum in learning English on several aspects, there is an empirical gap in dealing with the measuring and investigating students' involvement and engagement in classroom especially in English courses. To bridge this gap, this study aims to investigate how the Merdeka curriculum was delivered in learning English especially in high school learners and, to reveal challenges do teachers encounter when applying the Merdeka curriculum.

In implementing the curriculum there are three phases that go through, the first is the planning phase, the second is implementation phase and the third is evaluation phase (hamalik, 2007) so that the data collection process is also carried out by paying attention to these three phases. The explanation is as follows;

#### *Planning Phase*

Based on the results of the research that has been conducted, it can be seen that all teachers have carried out the stages of learning preparation well. In the planning stage, there are two phases that are considered, the first is the preparation of teaching modules before carrying out learning and the second is the delivery of learning objectives to students. Further explained as follows;

#### **1. Preparation of Learning Module**

Based on the results of the observations that have been carried out, the teacher has successfully completed the stages of preparing the teaching module well. All teachers have created the necessary teaching modules before starting to teach lessons in the classroom. This shows that the teacher has been able to make learning module that include strategies, programs, procedure, the methods and assessment instruments based on Merdeka Curriculum regulations.

Although all teachers have prepared teaching modules in accordance with independent curriculum regulations, when interviewed, teachers gave different responses regarding this preparation instrument where five teachers gave positive responses regarding the preparation of teaching modules while one other teacher conveyed difficulties in preparing teaching modules.

Based on the results of interviews, the ability to compile teaching modules is based on the fact that teachers are accustomed to making teaching modules in accordance with Merdeka curriculum regulations because for driving schools as Referral Vocational Schools that have been running for the third year, this has been done, teachers also feel that the planning stage has not changed much from what was done before.

Teachers managed to plan the curriculum well, especially in creating modules in accordance with the Merdeka curriculum. They are familiar and comfortable with the curriculum preparation process, and demonstrate good adaptability. Despite the change in curriculum, the curriculum preparation process still involves the same tasks, just more concise. As the conclusion, teachers have successfully followed Merdeka curriculum with good planning skills.

#### **2. Delivery of Learning Objectives**

Merdeka Curriculum teachers are emphasized to be able to convey the learning objectives carried out at each meeting. Based on the results of the observations made, four of the teachers observed showed similarities by conveying learning objectives at the beginning of the lesson while the other two teachers did not convey learning objectives.

Based on the results of interviews, all teachers have expressed their agreement regarding the important role of conveying these learning objectives before starting

learning, it's just that there are still some teachers who have not carried out this activity. the following is a description of the teacher's response;

### ***Implementation Phase***

The implementation phase of learning with the Merdeka curriculum is carried out by prioritizing things that have been done in preparation for learning. In the implementation phase there are two things that are considered in the observation process in this research, the first is the use of various techniques and the second is the use of various activities in learning in order to support students' and active participations during learning process. Learning that involves a variety of methods and activities in independent curriculum learning is related to the implementation of differentiated learning approach, which is one of the learning approaches introduced along with the release of the independent curriculum. The description will be explained as follows;

#### **1. Using Various Technique**

Based on the results of observations, teachers use various methods that adapt to students' needs to increase students' creativity in the classroom. Four out of six teachers apply the differentiated learning approach. Teachers who implement differentiated learning have similarities in the way they tend to differentiate content based on the learning styles of their students. Meanwhile, there are still two other teachers who have not implemented various techniques or methods which in the independent curriculum are called differentiated learning in the classroom.

The observed teachers use a variety of strategies to foster students' creativity. These teachers frequently adapt their lessons according to the learning preferences of their students'. However, there are two teachers have not used a variety of diverse learning strategies. Teacher emphasizes differentiation by highlighting special discoveries found in the Merdeka curriculum. In conclusion, even though varied learning is embraced by most teachers as a means of encouraging creativity, there are still issues and variances with its application.

#### **2. Various Learning Activities**

The results of observations and interviews that have been conducted show that the learning carried out by teachers uses various activities or assignments for the classes taught. Similarities can be seen from how four out of six teachers provide various activities carried out in the classroom, but from the interviews made there are still teachers who only focus on using one activity or one method in learning.

Most teachers apply differentiated modules, as presented by Teacher 3. Utilizing product, process, and content differentiation helps students engage in projects that suit their learning styles. Although there were two teachers who chose one method, most agreed that a variety of activities supported student participation. However, teacher 1 highlighted challenges related to implementation, with students feeling overwhelmed by the number of things that had to be implemented. In conclusion, in the Merdeka curriculum, a differentiated approach and a variety of activities are key to increasing student creativity, although there are certain challenges.

### ***Evaluation Phase***

In Merdeka curriculum learning, at the learning evaluation stage, apart from the summative assessment which is carried out at the end of the semester, there is also a formative assessment which is used as a daily assessment or assessment of the learning process carried out by teachers and students. In this research, the focus is on seeing how teachers carry out reflection which is included in the form of formative assessment of the learning that has been carried out.

Based on the observations made, it can be seen that four teachers have carried out the reflection process in learning, all of which are carried out at the end of the learning session, but the other two teachers have not carried out this learning reflection process. The reason for not implementing the reflection process is because teachers do not have enough time to do it. Even so, all teachers agree that this reflection process is an important part of learning.

It can be concluded that the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the importance of reflection as a key aspect in formative assessment. The main conclusions involve a new focus in the curriculum, student motivation, and reflection as measures of learning success.

### ***The result of Interviews about the Challenges and Opportunities***

The interviews' findings indicate that, on the whole, the participants found Merdeka curriculum to be very helpful in helping them in designing the scenario for learning English in the classroom. However, there were some challenges and constraints that they face. View every one of these dialogue outcomes below:

MH: "Our teaching strategies have seen some intriguing modifications as a result of the Merdeka Curriculum. In contrast to the conventional lecture-based education we were accustomed to, it promotes a more student-centered approach. However, there have been some difficulties in adjusting to this new curriculum".

SR: ".....hmmm....the Merdeka Curriculum is a substantial departure from our prior methodology. It's refreshing that it places more of an emphasis on students' critical thinking and independence. However, a number of issues have made implementation difficult".

MT: "I understand.....mmm....you know although there may be advantages to the new curriculum, the transition has not been easy. To make it work, there are a few obstacles we must get past".

SH: "The absence of thorough training is one of the main issues. A few workshops were held, however they didn't offer enough useful tips for carrying out the curriculum. A lot of us are unprepared and uncertain about how to properly lead the increasingly student-centered learning activities".

CH: "The availability of resources is a major additional issue. The Merdeka Curriculum makes extensive use of interactive materials and technology; however, our school does not have the required infrastructure".

AS: "Further, many students find it challenging to transition to a student-centered approach. They frequently lack the self-discipline and abilities necessary for autonomous learning because they are accustomed to more conventional, teacher-led training".

### **Discussion**

The process of implementing this learning is carried out into three phases, namely the preparation phase, the implementation or execution phase and finally the evaluation phase (Hamalik, 2007). Based on the research results described above, teachers at SMAN 1 Takalar have carried out all phases of learning implementation well. This can be seen from how teachers prepare learning tools in accordance with the rules of the Merdeka Curriculum, carry out learning by applying strategies or models typical of the Merdeka Curriculum such as differentiated learning and integrating technology in learning, as well as evaluating learning by reflecting and preparing follow-up plans.

The planning phase carried out in the Merdeka curriculum includes the creation of teaching modules which is the new name for planning the implementation of learning. Teachers at SMAN 1 Takalar have prepared this teaching module before entering the classroom.

Based on the findings above, it was found that the teacher prepared this module by considering the needs of the class and students because the preparation was not tied to form or format but still needed to pay attention to the existing core components. This finding is supported

by findings by Ikhrum, (2023); (Sunra et al, 2024) who stated teachers design based on the independent learning curriculum always refers to six principles, namely: simple, easy to understand and implement. Focus on the competence and character of all students. Flexible, can be used according to teacher needs. Aligned, in accordance with the initial goals, worked together, as well as paying attention to the results of the study from feedback.

However, there are still teachers who feel that this curriculum change creates difficulties in implementation, especially in the planning stage, because teachers have to pay attention to students' backgrounds, needs and learning interests so that they can be in accordance with the plans made. Pratikno et al., (2022) found that human resources in Indonesian, independent from curriculum design to implementation in schools, found significant obstacles where the government was successful in designing the curriculum but it was constrained in implementation.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the learning planning stage for learning using the Merdeka curriculum at SMAN 1 Takalar has been carried out well. One of the supporting factors is that teachers are already familiar with this stage because it has been implemented for three years, but they are still experiencing difficulties in adapting to the updates. brought by the Merdeka curriculum.

In terms of implementation, teachers carry out learning using methods that support the achievement of learning objectives which are also tailored to the needs of students. Based on Afandi et al., (2023) Learning methods are the methods or stages used in interactions between students and teachers to achieve learning goals that have been determined in accordance with the material and mechanisms of learning methods.

Based on the findings described in the findings section, it was found that teachers at SMAN 1 Takalar used differentiated learning methods as a way to train creativity and increase student participation in learning. According to Pitaloka & Arsanti (2022), differentiated learning method is a method that accommodates students' learning needs. Teachers facilitate students according to their needs, because each student has different characteristics, so they are not given the same treatment in the learning process. The Merdeka Curriculum is synonymous with learning that supports students, as well as differentiated learning. The use of technology in learning is also in the spotlight in implementing the Merdeka curriculum because it is considered one of the teacher's professional competencies in learning. As stated by Harris et al., (2009) that the TPACK framework effectively integrates technology, pedagogy, content knowledge, and context in teaching, enhancing teachers' knowledge and assisting in professional development.

In learning at SMAN 1 Takalar the teacher actively integrates technology in learning, this shows the seriousness of the teacher in developing learning carried out in the classroom which also follows the nature of the current era which also influences student preferences. As stated by Tari & Hutapea (2020) that teachers play a crucial role in assisting students in utilizing digital technology, despite the challenges faced by them in the digital age.

Based on the findings presented, it can be seen that some teachers at SMAN 1 Takalar have carried out a learning evaluation process through reflection activities in each lesson. The purpose of carrying out this reflection is to review the learning activities that have been carried out. This finding is in line with the findings of Jannah (2023) who stated that the benefits of reflection are that it can assess whether the learning that has taken place is good or not, and can channel positive expressions towards teachers related to the teaching and learning process and also reviewing learning experiences and taking lessons to learn better in the future.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMAN 1 Takalar achieved positive progress in the preparation, implementation and evaluation phases of learning. Majority of the teachers have succeeded in developing learning modules that consider the needs of students and classes. Although most teachers were familiar with the planning stage after three years of implementation, some still had difficulty adjusting to the curriculum updates. In the implementation phase, teachers apply differentiated learning methods to increase student creativity and participation, in accordance with the principles of the Independent Curriculum. Technology integration in learning is also actively carried out, supporting the TPACK concept. Likewise, the learning evaluation stage has

been carried out well through formative assessments in the form of learning reflections which are then used to develop follow-up plans for the class.

For education measurements, the Merdeka Curriculum's application in high school English language instruction offers both opportunities and obstacles. 1. Difficulties: Making sure the curriculum adequately tackles the learning loss that happened during the pandemic is one problem (Walukow et al., 2023). Creating a curriculum that is adaptable and customized to the unique requirements and circumstances of every educational unit is one way to meet this problem. 2. Possibilities: The Merdeka Curriculum's implementation offers a chance to concentrate on fostering the development of soft skills and character in addition to language proficiency. With the aid of this method, students can develop into well-rounded people with strong communication, cooperation, and critical thinking skills in addition to their English proficiency.

## Conclusion

At SMAN 1 Takalar, the Independent Curriculum's implementation is progressing well. The learning phases of preparation, execution, and assessment have all been effectively completed by the teachers. Students' needs were taken into consideration when creating the learning modules, although some teachers found it challenging to adjust to curricular changes. In line with the Independent Curriculum's guiding principles, learning strategies for differentiation and technological integration are actively employed during the implementation stage. Through learning reflection, evaluation is done, which aids teachers in determining the caliber of learning and creating plans for follow-up. While some teachers continue to encounter challenges, overall implementation can be deemed effective as there has been positive growth in learning assessment, preparation, and execution. As the implications, creating a curriculum that is adaptable and customized to the unique requirements and circumstances of every educational unit is one way to meet this problem. 2. Possibilities: The Merdeka Curriculum's implementation offers a chance to concentrate on fostering the development of soft skills and character in addition to language proficiency. With the aid of this method, students can develop into well-rounded people with strong communication, cooperation, and critical thinking skills in addition to their English proficiency.

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