

ENGLISH TEACHERS' READINESS IN IMPLEMENTING MERDEKA BELAJAR CURRICULUM (A CASE STUDY AT MADRASAH)

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Abstract

Teachers must take initiative while designing *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum since they are the main facilitators of a cooperatively developed curriculum. This study aims to know the English teachers' readiness in implementing *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in private schools, since this curriculum has been used for less than two years. This study focuses on English teachers' readiness, especially in Cognitive aspect in implementing Merdeka Curriculum at Madrasah. This research was conducted in two private junior high schools and two private senior high schools. The data were obtained from five English teachers. The method used in this study was qualitative-descriptive and the data were collected by using an interview. The researcher analysed the data by using Miles & Huberman techniques, consist of data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusion. The result showed that some teachers in this study has met the readiness indicators, meanwhile, the rest have not met the indicators. Overall, readiness of English teachers in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum varies, with the majority demonstrating a relatively high level of preparedness. Of the five teachers interviewed, three exhibited readiness across all four key indicators: comprehension of the curriculum's principles, the ability to design instructional materials (including CP, ATP, and assessment planning), implementation of differentiated learning, and application of both formative and summative assessments.

Abstrak

Guru harus mengambil inisiatif dalam merancang kurikulum Merdeka Belajar karena mereka merupakan fasilitator utama dalam pengembangan kurikulum secara kolaboratif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui kesiapan guru bahasa Inggris dalam mengimplementasikan kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di sekolah swasta, mengingat kurikulum ini baru digunakan kurang dari dua tahun. Fokus penelitian ini adalah pada kesiapan guru bahasa Inggris, khususnya dalam aspek kognitif, dalam mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka di Madrasah. Penelitian ini dilakukan di dua Madrasah Tsanawiyah swasta dan dua Madrasah Aliyah swasta. Data diperoleh dari lima orang guru bahasa Inggris. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah deskriptif kualitatif, dan data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara. Peneliti menganalisis data menggunakan teknik Miles & Huberman, yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa beberapa guru telah memenuhi indikator kesiapan, sementara yang lain belum memenuhi indikator tersebut. Secara keseluruhan, kesiapan guru bahasa Inggris dalam mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar bervariasi, dengan mayoritas menunjukkan tingkat kesiapan yang relatif tinggi. Dari lima guru yang diwawancarai, tiga orang menunjukkan kesiapan pada keempat indikator utama: pemahaman terhadap prinsip kurikulum, kemampuan merancang perangkat ajar (termasuk CP, ATP, dan perencanaan asesmen), pelaksanaan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, serta penerapan asesmen formatif dan sumatif.

INTRODUCTION

According to Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, the curriculum is a set of plans and arrangements that include objectives, content, and learning resources, as well as strategies for developing learning activities to accomplish certain educational goals. Curriculum plays a significant role in determining a nation's educational progress from concept to implementation to practice in the field (Mulia, Nasution, Asmendri, & Sari, 2023), since the curriculum serves as a guide for teachers as they develop an effective learning experience. Learning activities can be carried out well if they pay attention to the conditions of the curriculum applied, remembering that the implementation of education refers to the curriculum used (Thoriq, 2023).

The process of changing and developing the curriculum must be implemented because the curriculum is not a fixed concept but dynamically developed according to the needs and developments of the times (Thoriq, 2023). Rahayu (Rahayu, Rosita, Rahayuningsih, Hernawan, & Prihantini, 2022) stated that curriculum development is important to improve the quality of education. Curriculum development is a government-led innovation or renewal in the sphere of national education to give solutions to a variety of issues or problems in education. Therefore, relevant parties can prepare these approaches according to the school's needs. Since the beginning of independence, the curriculum in Indonesia has changed and improved several times. It focuses on the efficiency of achieving learning goals optimally (Andriani, 2020). The changes started from 1947 to the recent curriculum namely *Merdeka Belajar* (Sari, 2023).

The term "Merdeka Belajar" emerged in Nadiem Makarim's speech, Ministry of Education and Culture, on the celebration of Teachers' Day (Purani & Putra, 2022). This curriculum is an effort of the government to overcome a learning loss during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Sukmawati (Sukmawati, Syam, Ibrahim, Amaliah, & Sujarwo, 2023) mentioned that an independent curriculum is a framework of curriculum which has evolved into a more flexible curriculum. This curriculum supports the schools, teachers, and students to be more innovative and creative (Sherly, Dharma, & Sihombing, 2020).

According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum will be run as an optional addition during 2022 – 2024 (Swawikanti, 2022). Hence, this curriculum has been implemented since 2022. However, there are still choices available to schools that are not ready to implement the independent curriculum. These include using the 2013 Curriculum or the Emergency Curriculum until a learning recovery curriculum review is completed in 2024 (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022).

One of the keys to succeeding in implementing *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is the teachers' role. Teachers should have knowledge about the setting. Some teachers may be eager to participate in the process of discovering fresh innovations, but others might discover it challenging to deal with transformation. For this reason, teachers must have an in-depth understanding of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum concept and must shift their perspective regarding curricular changes to learn what the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is and how the system is developed (Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023). According to Triayomi (Triayomi, Endang, & Modestha, 2022), teachers must take the initiative while designing this new curriculum since they are the main facilitators of a cooperatively developed curriculum. For this reason, teachers' readiness is required (Nursaputri & Sabat, 2023).

Since the *Merdeka Belajar* is the newest curriculum, some challenges may be faced by the teachers, and they should be ready for that. This has been widely discussed by previous researchers. Tricahyati & Zaim (Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023) observed English Teachers' Readiness in Implementing of 'Merdeka Belajar' Curriculum in Teaching English at Junior High School in Padang. They revealed that the English teachers in those schools are categorized "ready but need a little improvement". They also stated that the teachers there faced some problems, such as formulating learning outcomes and recognizing the students' characteristics. Then, the research by Kurniati & Kusumawati (Kurniati & Kusumawati, 2023) revealed that the general problem in implementing the independent curriculum is time management. Meanwhile, based on Azizah (Azizah, Prastikawati, & Hawa, 2023) research, it was concluded that since the teachers attend the seminars and training of *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, they will have an optimal readiness in implementing this curriculum.

Some of these issues are problems that are often experienced by teachers when implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, especially in public schools, which have been using this curriculum for a longer period. In 2024, the government was expected to fully implement this curriculum; so, the researcher intends to analyze teachers' readiness in recent years, especially at Madrasah level.

This study was conducted at two Islamic Junior High Schools and two Islamic Senior High Schools, namely MTs Jakarta Pusat, MA Jakarta Pusat, MTs Al-Falah Klender, and MA Al-Falah Klender. The objective of this research is to find out the English teachers' readiness in implementing Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at Madrasah level. Therefore, the researcher formulates the research question "How is the English teachers' readiness in implementing Merdeka Belajar Curriculum?". This study is intended to inspire other researchers to investigate the mental aspects of teacher readiness and explore how mental preparedness influences practical readiness in the classroom.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive method to provide an in-depth depiction of teachers' readiness to implement the Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) Curriculum. A qualitative approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to understand phenomena from the perspective of the research subjects—namely, the teachers—through direct interaction and narrative data collection. The study did not aim to test hypotheses but rather to explore and describe the social reality occurring in the field in a holistic and contextual manner. The descriptive method was used to systematically and clearly present the forms of teacher readiness, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they adopted in responding to this new curriculum policy. The data obtained were analyzed thematically, thus revealing patterns, trends, and dynamics within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the school level.

The data collection techniques used in this research included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted in the school environment to directly observe teaching activities and how the Merdeka Curriculum was implemented in practice by the teachers. In-depth interviews were conducted with a number of informants, including teachers, school principals, and education supervisors, selected purposively based on their involvement in the curriculum implementation. These interviews aimed to explore their experiences, perceptions, and levels of preparedness in adopting a curriculum that emphasizes

student-centered learning, differentiation, and the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile. Documentation was used as supporting data, including syllabi, lesson plans, teaching modules, and records of learning evaluations. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the steps of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the data was ensured through source and technique triangulation, as well as credibility checks via member checks with the informants. Through this approach, the research aims to provide a comprehensive and accurate picture of teachers' readiness in facing the educational transformation brought about by the Merdeka Curriculum.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Understanding the Curriculum

Based on the result of interview, three out of five English teachers who were interviewed demonstrated a good understanding of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum concept. First, TsP1 expressed the opinion that this curriculum provides students with the freedom to be creative and to actualize themselves through the skills they master.

"As we know, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum allows students the freedom to be creative and to express themselves through the skills they have mastered." (TsP1)

As the mentioned above, it showed that Merdeka Belajar curriculum is flexible and recognized the student-centred approach. The character and interests of students in learning are highly diverse so that they were given freedom to explore their skills that needed to be acquired. Meanwhile, other teachers stated that they did not understand yet about this curriculum even though they were still confused.

"We are just starting to understand, we are still in the process of learning to comprehend it. Because, last year, it was a trial period, and we were 36 only truly beginning the implementation. So, it's like we're just starting to understand it." (TsP2)

"Here, we are still learning and figuring things out. So, um, what I mean is, it's just limited to what I've done so far, and we haven't even reached, uh, what's the word, not even 50%. We're still in the process of learning, so we haven't fully implemented it yet." (TsP3)

From the statement above, it showed that they were still in the process of figuring out the Merdeka Belajar concept. This is indeed not easy; teachers need to motivate themselves to gain a depth understanding of this curriculum, as they play a crucial role in the success of differentiated learning. In this regard, the role of the school is equally important in preparing teachers to be more ready for the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

None of the five teachers have used the Merdeka Mengajar Platform, which the government has created, and which includes information regarding the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. The teachers got the information from institution socialization or KEMENAG and attended the training about the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

"We get information about the Merdeka curriculum from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the supervisors from the City Ministry of Religious Affairs. The workshops could be held at schools or religious training centres. Lastly, I participated in the training at the city ministry of religious affairs office for a week. We were taught a lot, starting from the introduction to the independent curriculum, to creative and innovative learning media, and even how the assessment reports look like in the independent curriculum." (MAP5)

"If the information about the Merdeka curriculum comes, people from the foundation will come to socialize the Merdeka curriculum..." (MAP4)

Moreover, the teachers also got the information from other teachers who have implemented and those who are still in the process of implementing. This is from the results of interviews with MAP₄ and TsP₂ which revealed that:

"...Secondly, from teachers who have already implemented the independent curriculum. To learn on their own, they usually ask the teachers who already have experience." (MAP₄)

"There are also forums provided for groups of teachers of each subject in all MTs in Central Jakarta so that we can share our teaching experiences." (TsP₂)

So, it can be concluded that the teachers have effectively utilized information sources, allowing them to have a good understanding of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

Readiness in Preparing Lesson Plans or Teaching Modules

Based on the result of interview, teachers mostly prepared the teaching modules by themselves or teams that have been created in the school.

"Now, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is in the form of modules. We create the modules ourselves. So, there is what we call a steering committee, which then forms a small team to create the modules." (TsP₁)

This aligns with Barlian (Barlian, Solekah, & Rahayu, 2022) that schools should create professional development programs that encourage teachers to design their own teaching modules, which would deepen their understanding of the curriculum. Learning activities at school will not run effectively if there is no good planning (Pertwi, Novaliyosi, Nindiasari, & Sukirwan, 2023). By doing so, teachers will become more adept at identifying the core principles of Merdeka Belajar, such as differentiation, student autonomy, and project-based learning, and effectively implementing these in the classroom.

MAP₅ also mentioned that they still need references in creating teaching modules. This is a normal and legitimate thing, if it aligns with the students' needs. To counterbalance this reliance on external resources, Barlian (Barlian et al., 2022) advocates for fostering teacher independence in module development. Teachers should be encouraged to actively engage with the curriculum's structure, which will allow them to better internalize its pedagogical objectives and tailor lesson plans to their classroom context. This process requires teachers not just to implement pre-designed modules but to create and adapt materials that reflect both the curriculum's goals and the unique needs of their students.

All teachers have developed teaching modules tailored to the needs and characteristics of students. This was revealed by MAP₄ and TsP₁ regarding the process of creating teaching modules. In addition, the teachers' efforts in creating teaching modules include attending training and constantly conducting research.

Based on the interview, it was concluded that all teachers have teaching modules and that there were not many difficulties in the process of compiling them, because fundamentally, teachers can refer to the teaching modules prepared by the government or conduct research from other sources. Also, the availability of sample teaching modules from the government played a significant role in facilitating lesson preparation.

Readiness in the Teaching and Learning Process in Implementing Differentiated Learning

While most teachers made considerable efforts to adapt their teaching strategies, there were notable differences in how effectively they managed to implement differentiated learning. Below, we explore how different teachers applied these strategies and the challenges they faced. Based on the interview, TsP₂, MAP₄, and MAP₅ demonstrated readiness by adapting their learning strategies to address the diverse needs of students. These teachers used various techniques to ensure that students were provided with appropriate learning opportunities, reflecting the student-centered principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

MAP₄ use of diagnostic assessments at the beginning of the lesson allows for effective grouping of students based on their prior knowledge or skill levels. This approach aligns with Kemendikbud (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), which emphasizes that personalized learning begins with understanding the starting point of each student. By assessing students' abilities early, MAP₄ can design activities that cater to the different learning needs within the classroom. This type of formative assessment ensures that students are neither left behind nor unchallenged, making the learning process more effective and inclusive. As Yulianto (Yulianto, 2022) mentioned, diagnostic assessment is a type of independent evaluation conducted to identify the characteristics, competency levels, strengths, and weaknesses of students' learning approaches. This information helps tailor the learning process to suit the diverse competencies and needs of the students.

TsP₂ took a tiered approach to differentiate learning by offering varied levels of tasks for advanced and beginner students. This approach is a classic example of scaffolding techniques where learning activities are designed to support the learner's development at each stage of their learning process. As Karimatunisa & Sartika (Karimatunisa & Sartika, 2024) point out, scaffolding in diverse classrooms is essential to ensure that all students, regardless of their ability level, are provided with tasks that are challenging but still within their zone of proximal development. TsP₂'s method ensures that both advanced and struggling learners can succeed and progress at their own pace.

MAP₅'s Strategy: Although not as explicitly detailed as MAP₄ and TsP₂'s strategies, MAP₅'s flexibility in adapting to student needs—evidenced by their general approach to lesson planning—suggests an understanding of the need for differentiation. MAP₅'s ability to modify resources and activities in response to students' progress allows them to adjust instruction based on ongoing assessments, which is a key aspect of differentiated instruction.

Using Technology and Media in Learning

In this study, most interviewed teachers incorporated digital tools such as Quizizz, Wordwall, and Bamboozel into their teaching practices to foster engagement, enhance learning experiences, and create a more interactive classroom environment.

The integration of tools demonstrates how teachers are embracing technology to make learning fun and interactive. These platforms are known for their ability to engage students through game-based learning, providing immediate feedback, and creating a competitive yet supportive environment where students can learn in a less formal, more enjoyable way.

TsP₃'s comment reflects the value of these digital platforms in enhancing student participation and motivation. Those tools are designed to make quizzes and assessments feel like games, which encourage students to actively participate, collaborate with peers, and

reinforce their knowledge in a low-stakes environment. Research by Nadeem(Nadeem, Oroszlanyova, & Farag, 2023) suggests that game-based learning can significantly increase students' engagement and retention of knowledge, especially when used in a context that encourages friendly competition and peer learning. In addition to enhancing the engagement of students in the learning process, the integration of technology within the classroom contributes to the development of a broader knowledge base and better prepares students for future challenges. Consequently, the adoption of game-based learning should be regarded as a crucial element of a creative pedagogical approach, aligned with the educational requirements of the 21st century(Islam, Komalasari, Masyitoh, Juwita, & Adnin, 2024).

Incorporating technology in the classroom helps break the traditional teacher-centered approach, shifting toward more student-centered learning. By allowing students to interact with the content through these platforms, teachers can create a dynamic learning environment where students are more actively engaged in their learning process. These platforms also offer immediate feedback, which is crucial for formative assessment, an important aspect of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum that focuses on ongoing assessment rather than just final outcomes.

Despite the positive impact of these technologies, MAP4 highlighted significant challenges related to limited access to technological resources, such as projectors. This limitation presents a considerable barrier to fully implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, which relies heavily on digital tools to enhance the learning experience.

This aligns with the findings of Ihsan(Ihsan, 2022), who identified infrastructure limitations as a major barrier to the effective implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Ihsan emphasized that many schools, especially in remote or underfunded areas, face difficulties in providing adequate technological resources, which impedes the ability of teachers to fully integrate digital tools into their teaching practices. Without access to technology, teachers are forced to revert to traditional teaching methods, which may not fully align with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum's goals of student-centered and interactive learning.

For the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum to be fully realized, it is essential for schools and policymakers to address these gaps by investing in technology, training teachers, and ensuring that all students have equal access to digital learning tools. By doing so, the educational system can truly leverage the potential of technology to create more engaging, interactive, and inclusive learning environments that benefit all students.

Readiness in Reporting Learning Assessment

Assessment plays a central role in the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, which emphasizes a shift from traditional, rigid assessments like KKM (Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal) to a more holistic and authentic assessment system that better reflects students' overall progress and competencies. In this study, the teachers were observed to successfully implement both formative and summative assessments, which are integral to the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum framework. These assessments are designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of student learning, focusing not only on final outcomes but also on ongoing growth and improvement throughout the learning process.

The move from KKM-based evaluations—which focus on meeting specific, predetermined academic standards—to a more holistic approach was well-received by the teachers. This shift reflects a significant change in how student progress is measured. Rather than solely assessing students' ability to meet minimum requirements, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum framework

encourages assessments that capture a more nuanced view of a student's development, considering factors such as individual progress, creativity, problem-solving skills, and collaborative abilities.

MAP5's Approach indicates a clear alignment with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum's objectives of emphasizing student growth. By prioritizing individual progress, MAP5 moves away from the restrictive nature of KKM, where students were often required to meet a fixed threshold to pass. Instead, formative assessments, which focus on continuous evaluation, allow for a more flexible and personalized approach to measuring student success.

This approach resonates with Rosidah (Rosidah, Pramulia, & Susiloningsih, 2021), who argue that authentic assessment provides a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of a student's abilities. According to Rosidah (Rosidah *et al.*, 2021), authentic assessment allows teachers to evaluate not just knowledge retention but also skills development, critical thinking, and problem-solving capabilities, which are all essential components of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Teachers can track students' progress over time and adjust teaching strategies, accordingly, ensuring that all students can succeed, regardless of their initial skill level. Yulianto (Yulianto, 2022), in his statement, agreed that the assessment implementation in the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum can be carried out by incorporating the models of diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, and summative assessment.

However, despite the positive shift toward formative assessments in most of the teachers' practices, TsP₁ was observed to rely more heavily on summative assessments. TsP₁'s emphasis on final exams or projects suggests that they may still be in the process of transitioning from traditional assessment methods to the more flexible and ongoing forms of evaluation promoted by the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

While TsP₁ acknowledged the shift in assessment practices, the reliance on summative assessments suggests that further training is necessary to fully integrate formative assessments methods into their teaching practice. Formative assessment is designed to guide instruction and is a key component of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum's emphasis on personalized learning. Teachers need to provide feedback regularly throughout the learning process to help students understand their progress and areas for improvement.

This gap highlights the need for continued professional development to help teachers develop a deeper understanding of formative assessment practices. As noted by Rosidah (Rosidah *et al.*, 2021), ongoing professional development is crucial for enabling teachers to effectively incorporate authentic assessments into their classrooms. Teachers must be equipped not only with the skills to design formative assessments but also with the knowledge of how to use them to support students' continuous improvement.

Teachers' Problem during the Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

Based on the results of interviews, the teachers' problems are the students' ability and interest in the English subject. This is because, in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, the English subject was eliminated in the previous phase. In this case, teachers are required to understand the level of comprehension and needs of the students so that they can find efficient ways for the students to understand the material being taught.

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has been implemented in private schools for less than two years, in contrast to public schools that have primarily adopted it. This has compelled teachers in private schools to continue their efforts to thoroughly comprehend the Merdeka Belajar

Curriculum. Teachers encounter challenges during the implementation of the program, including obstacles in the learning and assessment processes.

In the learning process, four teachers mentioned the same challenge, which is maintaining the diverse competencies and needs of students to achieve the learning objectives planned in the teaching module. Due to the situation, teachers play an important role, not only in planning the teaching module but also in understanding the level of comprehension and needs of the students. This is very challenging for English teachers, not only in private schools but also in public schools.

This is according with Wilson & Nurkhamidah (Wilson & Nurkhamidah, 2023) who argued that the differentiation students' level of skills and requirements is the essential difficulty which it influences and generate challenges in designing a teaching process, in the teaching process, and the assessment process.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the overall readiness of English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum varies, with the majority demonstrating a relatively high level of preparedness. Of the five teachers interviewed, three exhibited readiness across all four key indicators: comprehension of the curriculum's principles, the ability to design instructional materials (including CP, ATP, and assessment planning), implementation of differentiated learning, and application of both formative and summative assessments. These participants articulated a clear understanding of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum as a student-centered approach that emphasizes learner autonomy, creativity, and contextualized instruction. Their instructional planning reflected a flexible and simplified model in alignment with curriculum objectives, and their classroom practices incorporated a range of strategies to accommodate students' varying abilities and learning preferences. Furthermore, these teachers were able to implement assessment in a comprehensive manner, utilizing diagnostic, formative, and summative tools in accordance with the curriculum guidelines. In contrast, the remaining two participants demonstrated partial readiness. While they showed some awareness of the curriculum's objectives, their implementation was still in its initial stages, with some reliance on conventional methods and limited engagement in differentiated instruction or curriculum-specific assessment strategies. This variation in readiness suggests that while positive progress has been made in the adoption of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, continued professional development, mentorship, and institutional support are critical to facilitating a more uniform and effective implementation across educational contexts.

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