

Exploring teacher agency and instructional practices in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum: A qualitative study of English Language teaching in Indonesian Senior High Schools

Tri Achmad Efendi*^{ORCID} & Alvin Aprilia Arijanto

English Education Department, STKIP Bina Insan Mandiri, Raya Menganti, Kramat,
Wiyung, Surabaya, East Java 60228, Indonesia
e-mail: triachmad@stkipbim.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study explored English teachers' practices in the implementation of English Language Teaching (ELT) under the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian senior high schools. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the researchers collected data through semi-structured interviews with three English teachers from three schools. This study investigated how teachers adapt the curriculum to classroom practice and their perceptions of students' engagement and learning outcomes. To provide contextual insight, placement tests (vocabulary and reading tests) and writing test results were examined to illustrate the alignment between teaching approaches and outcomes. The findings revealed that teachers who adopted student-centered and collaborative strategies reported higher student motivation and stronger motivation on both tests. In contrast, a textbook-oriented or teacher-centered approach is associated with limited student progress. Therefore, this study emphasizes the critical role of teacher agency and the availability of resources in realizing the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, English Performance, ELT, Teaching Practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, students live in a competitive world not only in their home country but also worldwide, so they need to sharpen their soft skills in order to add value. One of the prominent skills in the 21st century is the ability to use English to communicate internationally. Being proficient in English opens up more opportunities for global participation. To face challenges and adapt to the situation in the globalization era, the government has already made efforts to guide teachers to maximize the teaching and learning process through the Merdeka Curriculum. The Merdeka curriculum, which was introduced by the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, Nadiem Makarim in 2022, aimed to give freedom for teachers to teach creatively and suit the teaching pace according to their real situation and condition in the classroom. This curriculum attempts to value students based on their pace of learning. Additionally, it is expected to promote innovation in the teaching and learning processes, including active, creative, and independent learning (Lestari & Margana, 2024; Ndari et al., 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum also seeks to reduce the burden of administration on teachers, so that they can focus on teaching.

One of the expected ELT implementations is to use student-centered learning to develop students' 4C skills (creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication), as framed in 21st century education. In addition, teaching and learning focus on six skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing. Furthermore, ELT in the Merdeka curriculum is divided into phases A through F. Phase A-C is used for elementary level, D is used for junior high school level, meanwhile E and F is for senior high school level. At the end of Phase F, students are supposed to reach B1 at the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level. B1 level is known as the intermediate level; at this level, students are able to understand familiar topics and confidence in most situations that might happen while traveling in English-speaking countries. In addition, students at this level are able to produce simple, coherent texts about particular topics and describe experiences, events, wishes, and aspirations, as well as briefly justifying opinions or explaining plans.

However, EF (2024) released a result of the English Proficiency Index of EFL countries; surprisingly, Indonesia was grouped with low English proficiency. Unfortunately, this trend seems to decrease from year to year. This fact has led the researcher to seek out teaching practices under the Merdeka Curriculum on English Language Teaching since it has been implemented for more or less three years. Therefore, it is essential for educators to critically evaluate current ELT teaching methodologies and the alignment of the Merdeka Curriculum with desired language learning outcomes. Empirical studies have been conducted on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. For instance, a study was conducted by Balqis et al. (2025) investigating the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching at SMAN 1 Cilegon and SMAN 2 Krakatau Steel Cilegon through observations and interviews with teachers. The findings indicated that students in both schools showed progress, especially in their speaking and writing skills. Another study conducted by Arif Rachman (2023) tried to find out English language teaching based on the Merdeka Curriculum in public senior high schools in Bandung. He highlighted several critical impacts of the implementation of English instruction such as student engagement and learning outcomes. Both studies focused on investigating the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in senior high schools. However, neither of them included learning outcomes as evidence of implementation. Therefore, the current study was conducted to explore the teaching practice and try to provide context through students' tests to gain better insight.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore teacher practices in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum and their influence on classroom practices.

2.1. Participants

The participants included three English teachers from three private schools in Surabaya, Gresik, and Sidoarjo and 11 Senior High School students, most of whom were in the eleventh grade from each school. The following is the demographic information of the teachers (see Table 1):

Tabel 1. Participants Information

	Ms. Fitri	Mr. Sanusi	Ms. Sulaimah
Education level	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree
Teaching Experience	More than 6 years	More than 6 years	More than 6 years
Experience with Merdeka Curriculum	More than 3 years	More than 3 years	More than 3 years
Teaching in grade	10-12	10-12	10-12

These three teachers were senior teachers with more than five years. They held a bachelor's degree in English. They mentioned that they had even experienced the Merdeka Curriculum for more than three years. They were similar in that they all taught in all grades in their schools.

2.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted to obtain data. Interviews were used to gather information on teaching strategies, curriculum implementation, student engagement, and observed learning outcomes. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa, Indonesia, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Additionally, a student placement test on vocabulary, grammar, and writing was used as secondary data for contextual insight. The tests were used to categorize students' proficiency levels according to the outcome placement test-scoring guide. The outcome is a course book provided by the National Geographic Learning (NGL). These scores were used to triangulate and contextualize teacher reflections, particularly student proficiency and classroom challenges. Therefore, the researchers did not statistically analyze the data. This test from Outcome assesses three areas: vocabulary and grammar (placement test), writing, and oral placement. However, owing to limited time, the researchers used only placement tests and writing tests. The placement test consists of 50 items testing grammar and vocabulary that accommodate all levels, from elementary to advanced. Meanwhile, students were asked to choose a writing task and complete the task using prompts. Writing assessment guidelines were provided to help test examiners determine the appropriate level for the student.

2.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, it was coded manually to identify the patterns and themes related to curriculum implementation. Peer debriefing was conducted during the coding process to maintain trustworthiness. Meanwhile, the data from the placement test in the form of scores were placed into five categories: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. This score was used to provide a context for students' learning outcomes. To analyze the data, the researcher used a rubric, as shown in the Table 2-4 below.

Table 2. Placement Test

Placement Test results	
Score	Recommended Level
0-18 points	Elementary
19-25 points	Pre-intermediate
26-32 points	Intermediate
33-39 points	Upper intermediate
40-46 points	Advanced

Table 3. Writing Placement Test Results

Writing Test results	
Score	Recommended Level
0-1 points	Elementary
2-3 points	Pre-intermediate
4-5 points	Intermediate
6-7 points	Upper intermediate
8-9 points	Advanced

Table 4. Writing Rubric

Writing Assessment Guidelines	
Beginner (0-1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The topic is not developed at all, and writing seems to take enormous effort. ▪ The purpose of the text and the writer’s aim are entirely unclear. ▪ The text is not organised at either the paragraph or sentence level. ▪ There is insufficient language control to express even very simple ideas. ▪ There are very many errors in the use of language and standard writing conventions. ▪ There is little or no use of appropriate vocabulary and structures.
Low (2-3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The topic is not well developed, and writing seems to take considerable effort. ▪ The purpose of the text and the writer’s aim are generally unclear. ▪ The text is not well organised at either the paragraph or sentence level. ▪ There is insufficient language control to express relatively simple ideas. ▪ There are many errors in the use of language and standard writing conventions. ▪ There is very limited use of appropriate vocabulary and structures.
Fair (4-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The topic is quite well developed, although writing seems to take some effort. ▪ The purpose of the text and the writer’s aim are not entirely clear. ▪ The text is reasonably well organised, at least at the sentence level. ▪ There is usually sufficient language control to express simple ideas. ▪ There are some errors in the use of language and standard writing conventions. ▪ There is limited use of appropriate vocabulary and structures
Good (6-7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The topic is well developed, and writing seems to take little effort. ▪ The purpose of the text and the writer’s aim are generally clear ▪ The text is reasonably well organised at both the sentence and paragraph level. ▪ There is sufficient language control to express simple ideas. ▪ There are a few errors in the use of language and standard writing conventions. ▪ The text contains a range of appropriate vocabulary and structures
Very good (8-9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The topic is very well developed, and writing seems to take very little effort. ▪ The purpose of the text and the writer’s aim are clear. ▪ The text is well organised at both the sentence and paragraph level. ▪ There is sufficient language control to express some quite complex ideas. ▪ There are few errors in the use of language and standard writing conventions. ▪ The text contains quite a wide range of appropriate vocabulary and structures
Excellent (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The topic is fully developed, and writing seems effortless. ▪ The purpose of the text and the writer’s aim are perfectly clear. ▪ The text is extremely well organised at both the sentence and paragraph level. ▪ There is sufficient language control to express a range of complex ideas. ▪ There are almost no errors in the use of language and standard writing conventions. ▪ The text contains a wide range of appropriate vocabulary and structures

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

Qualitative findings from teacher interviews revealed several key themes regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English Language Teaching (ELT). The teachers shared their experiences, highlighting the benefits and challenges of the new curriculum.

3.1.1. Instructional Strategy and Curriculum Flexibility

One of the key principles of the Merdeka Curriculum is teachers' freedom in instructional strategy and flexibility to suit their classroom needs. In response to this principle, the teachers reported that they varied in how they used the flexibility offered by the curriculum. Ms. Fitri emphasized that the Merdeka Curriculum has affected how she taught by encouraging a deeper understanding of each student's character and learning needs. In this case, she actively tried to apply differentiated instruction in her classroom, as suggested in the curriculum framework. She recognized that this enabled her students to reach varying levels of English proficiency. She also combined the government's use of official textbooks with technological tools such as computers, laptops, and Wi-Fi to enhance the delivery of lessons and create a more engaging learning environment. Sanusi reported a more limited approach, stating that he relied primarily on the Merdeka Curriculum textbook because of restricted access to other teaching resources, such as the Internet and technological devices. Ms. Sulaimah adopted peer teaching and group discussion techniques, believing that students can learn effectively through collaboration and mutual support from their classmates (see Table 5).

Table 5 Interview Key Findings

Teacher	School Location	Instructional Strategy	Implication for Teaching Strategy
Ms Fitri	Sidoarjo	differentiated learning.	Student-centered learning; uses technology and differentiation to improve engagement and address learning diversity.
Mr. Sanusi	Gresik	Textbook oriented	Teacher-centred
Ms. Siti Sulaimah	Surabaya	Peer teaching and group discussions	Uses curriculum flexibility to innovate while staying within guidelines; values collaboration and contextual resource use for better student engagement.

The different instructional strategies used by English teachers to implement the current curriculum have led to different outcomes. Ms. Sulaimah's students received the highest mean score in both reading and writing. Mr. Sanusi's students received the least. The following Table 6 shows a comparison of students' scores in reading and writing with their means based on their teachers. The results revealed significant differences between the groups. It can be seen that the mean reading scores across three groups were relatively similar, but the mean writing scores were sharply different. Ms. Fitri and Ms. Sulaimah's students who were taught student-centered approaches had higher mean writing scores compared to Mr. Sanusi's students who used primarily textbook-based teaching.

Table 6. Comparison of students' scores in reading and writing

student	Ms. Fitri		Ms. Sulaimah		Mr. Sanusi	
	Placement test	Writing	Placement test	Writing	Placement test	Writing
1.	26	0	39	7	29	0
2.	33	2	37	4	16	0
3.	20	0	37	7	26	0
4.	28	2	36	7	45	0

student	Ms. Fitri		Ms. Sulaimah		Mr. Sanusi	
	Placement test	Writing	Placement test	Writing	Placement test	Writing
5.	24	2	36	5	20	2
6.	46	4	36	3	17	1
7.	38	4	36	4	16	0
8.	36	3	28	1	12	0
9.	39	4	29	1	23	0
10.	36	2	31	0	31	0
11.	37	1	31	0	25	0
Mean	33.00	2.18	34.18	3.55	23.64	0.27

3.1.2. Student Engagement and Motivation

The participants had mixed responses to the second interview question, “Do you observe any improvements since the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum?”, Ms. Fitri noticed improvements in student engagement. One noticeable change was her students’ motivation, although students at lower proficiency levels were motivated to learn. Another indicator was that the students showed more confidence, which could be seen in their willingness to ask for help from their peers without hesitation. In turn, students at the medium and high proficiency levels responded supportively and collaboratively. According to Ms. Fitri, this mutual assistance contributed positively to the learning environment and encouraged all students to strive toward their academic goals. Ms. Sulaimah experienced her student’s gaining independence in learning. She acknowledged only slight improvements in her classrooms. Peer teaching and group discussions provided opportunities for students to learn from one another. However, she highlighted that the impact of the curriculum on students’ engagement and motivation mostly relied on how well the learning materials were adapted to the students’ context. Furthermore, she stressed that students were active in classroom discussions when materials were relevant and tasks were interactive.

In contrast, Mr. Sanusi observed no significant changes in his students’ engagement or learning outcomes when he implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. He further explained that his students remained passive and did not show an interest in English. He was aware of his constraints on teaching resources. From his experience, it could be inferred that curriculum goals alone are insufficient to make the classroom more dynamic and active unless accompanied by shifting teaching methods and sufficient support. These findings show that student engagement is a product of how teachers implement curricula through appropriate instruction. Classrooms that were instructed using a more collaborative, student-centered approach gave students more opportunities to explore and motivate them, while more traditional, lecture-based classes struggled to engage students.

3.1.3. Students Performance

The teacher participants experienced how the Merdeka Curriculum influenced students’ performance or skills differently. The three teachers felt that there was some improvement in reading ability, but writing outcomes seemed slow. Fitri reported that her students had improved slightly in terms of reading comprehension. She believed that she had implemented a genre-based approach. Students were exposed to various texts, which helped them to gain a better understanding of their reading skills. In addition, they became more confident when reading. However, she said that her students were required to work harder in writing. Even though she had already pushed them to write, they still found it difficult. Furthermore, she said that they had difficulty in generating ideas in writing. The process of writing was the most difficult. Ms. Sulaimah’s students showed relatively strong performance on the placement test (mean=34.18) and writing (mean = 3.55). Several of the students performed well-structured writing exercises. This could indicate that genre-based tasks and collaborative and interactive learning environments support productive skill development. She said in the interview that she used a genre-based approach to teach her students, and she thought it gave them exposure to various kinds of texts, vocabulary, and grammar.

In contrast to these two groups, students taught by Mr. Sanusi, who used a teacher-centered approach, obtained lower scores on both tests. Most students were unable to perform well. This reflects both the limited engagement and underdeveloped language skills. The patterns from these three teachers suggest that teachers who implement more interactive and student-centered approaches provide more effective support in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and writing development. It should also be noted that the role of teacher agency is crucial in shaping outcomes under the current curriculum.

3.2. Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore teachers' practices of the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings showed that its implementation has brought about positive changes based on teachers' views. However, some concerns need to be addressed.

3.2.1. Shifting Pedagogies

Nowadays, education faces the challenge of preparing students to face a rapidly changing global world. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum is aimed at shifting teaching from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach to prepare students have a critical and creative character (Serin, 2018). Student-centered aims to accommodate students' needs in facing more challenging and competitive situations after graduation. In addition, student-centered learning is claimed to be effective in enhancing students' 4C skills, as they are demanded in 21st century learning (Adeoye & Jimoh, 2023; Bell, 2010; Rahman et al., 2019; Wardani & Fiorintina, 2023). Therefore, it is important to shift teaching to a student-centered approach. As stated earlier, this curriculum is conceptually student-centered. It is conceptually designed to enhance students' 4C skills. The current implementation of the Merdeka curriculum has been seen as a positive deed as it has brought significant shifts in English Language Teaching (ELT) implementation in the classroom as it was reported by the interviewed teachers under this study. Participants acknowledged the shifting practice of student-centered approaches. For instance, Ms. Fitri highlighted the importance of differentiated instruction and the integration of technology to aid learners in gaining proficiency. In addition, the use of technology helps students develop their interests and language skills (Almalki, 2020; Anwar et al., 2021).

Ms. Sulaimah leveraged the curriculum's flexibility to implement group-based and collaborative learning activities. As she acknowledged that the current curriculum demands that students engage in meaningful and collaborative activities, group-based activities made her class lively and allowed them to learn from their peers. Teachers are not the only source of knowledge in the classroom. This is in line with previous studies that reported that students gain some benefits in doing group discussions such as self-confidence, responsibility, respect, and oral skill presentation (Abulhassan & Hamid, 2021; Hánh & Trang, 2023). Unfortunately, it could be portrayed that there are still teachers who remain stuck in traditional teaching. For example, Mr. Sanusi relied solely on textbooks and used a lecture strategy in his teaching, demonstrating limited integration with digital media or technology, as he stated that his school does not support it. Structural constraints, such as limited resources and institutional support, appear to mediate how teachers operationalize curricular reforms. This finding is consistent with Ndari et al. (2023) those who emphasized the implementation gap within the Merdeka curriculum. These differences suggest that, while the curriculum encourages innovation, its actual implementation is mediated by individual teacher capacity and institutional support. Therefore, one of the most important components of successful curriculum implementation is teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge.

3.2.2. Student Engagement

Regarding the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, the teachers provided different views based on their classroom experiences. Ms. Fitri could see that she noticed improvements among students with low English proficiency, especially in motivation, confidence, and supportive learning

environments. Conversely, Mr. Sanusi did not report any improvements in student behavior or engagement. His students remained passive and uninterested, indicating that the curriculum alone may not have been sufficient to drive engagement without accompanying changes in the teaching methods, resources, or school culture. Ms. Sulaimah noted slight improvements and emphasized that student outcomes depend heavily on how well teachers adapt learning materials to student needs. This theme reinforces the idea that the teacher's role remains central in unlocking the curriculum's potential benefits.

It cannot be denied that teachers play a central role in the teaching and learning processes. They are architects in a class who shape the design of the class. In addition, teachers should be able to guide, motivate, direct, and build characters as well as students' knowledge (Barus et al., 2022). However, based on Barus, teaching and learning will not run smoothly and effectively unless students cooperate and make use of what teachers have already taught. Therefore, students' engagement is also a crucial factor in achieving the expected curriculum goals (Hiver et al., 2021). Engagement is students' willingness to engage in classroom activities such as doing something, concentrating, trying, and paying attention (Barus et al., 2022; Rangvid, 2018). Payne (2019) There are three indicators of engagement: (1) students' attention, (2) students' attachment, and (3) students' ability and willingness to perform the activities or tasks given. To achieve high engagement, classroom interaction should be maximized. The shifting of pedagogical practices from teacher-centered to student-centered in the Merdeka curriculum has positive implications for teachers. Two of the three teachers reported that the use of technology and group discussion led students to engage in the classroom.

3.2.3. Uneven Skill Development

Placement tests for reading and writing have provided mixed results. The placement test scores, with a mean score above 30, placed the majority of students in the intermediate category. This reflects a moderate proficiency in vocabulary and grammar. By contrast, writing proficiency was considerably lower, with a mean score below 1, categorizing most students at the elementary level. These results indicate a critical gap in writing instruction, potentially highlighting the need for more structured writing practices, feedback loops, and targeted support within the curriculum framework. These findings also indicate that the use of a genre-based approach, as mandated in the curriculum, contributes to vocabulary and grammar development.

This gap reflects an instructional imbalance in which reading is given more space while writing is underdeveloped. This is because teachers might lack the strategies or time to provide structured writing instruction such as process-based writing, peer feedback, and genre modelling. These findings support previous critiques that language curricula often fail to develop students' productive skills with the same rigor as receptive skills. The research findings in this study differ from similar studies on the genre-based approach, which highlighted the success of this approach in developing students' writing skills (Lukmawardani & Badriyah, 2022; Mastura et al., 2020).

The objective of using a genre-based approach is to meet students' needs to construct texts in various contexts to enhance their literacy skills. In addition, as stated on <https://kurikulummerdeka.com/capaian-pembelajaran-bahasa-inggris-pada-kurikulum> Yassin et al. (2024) the current national curriculum requires secondary school students to be able to recognize, use, and produce basic oral and written interactional and interpersonal texts with their social functions, schematic structures, and linguistic qualities. It is clear that ELT in primary and senior high school under the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on strengthening the ability to use English in six skills: listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing, and presenting. In this case, the genre-based approach should focus on various texts, such as oral, written, visual, audio, or multimodal texts.

This study had some limitations that need to be addressed. First, the sample was relatively small and limited to three private senior high schools, which does not reflect the broader context of Indonesian education. Second, it was limited to grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills; other important skills and

components such as speaking, listening, viewing, and presenting, which are emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum, were not addressed.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explores the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ELT and its impact on student performance in Indonesian secondary schools. Specifically, this study sought teacher insights and students' test results to examine the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. The findings revealed that the Merdeka Curriculum promotes flexibility and student-centered learning. However, there is a key concern regarding the gap between reading and writing proficiencies. This could be because of how different skills are taught, with writing receiving less attention and support. This study had some limitations that need to be addressed. First, the sample was relatively small and limited to three private senior high schools, which does not reflect the broader context of Indonesian education. Second, it was limited to grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills; other important skills and components such as speaking, listening, viewing, and presenting, which are emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum, were not addressed.

Ethical approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent statement

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

Authors' contributions

T.A.E. contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, analysis of findings, and drafting of the initial manuscript. A.A.A. was involved in data collection, literature review, interpretation of results, and refinement of the discussion section. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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Statement of Disclosure

There were no conflicts of interest disclosed by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Tri Achmad Efendi

Tri Achmad Efendi is a Lecturer in the English Education Department at STKIP Bina Insan Mandiri Surabaya, Indonesia. His primary research interests include Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), as well as curriculum and material development. He actively contributes to research on innovative teaching practices and curriculum implementation in Indonesian contexts, emphasizing student-centered learning approaches.

Alvin Aprilia Arijanto

Alvin Aprilia Arijanto is a graduate of the English Education Department at STKIP Bina Insan Mandiri Surabaya, Indonesia, completing his degree in 2024. Driven by a passion for teaching and educational research, he collaborated as a research assistant with Tri Achmad Efendi. His research interests focus on English language teaching methodologies and the practical application of curriculum innovation in classroom settings.

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