IDEAS

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Teachers' Barriers in Implementing Merdeka Curriculum in Teaching English at Junior High School

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Abstract

This study examines the barriers encountered by English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at UPT SMPN 1 Sabbang Selatan. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through observations, interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that teachers face significant challenges in curriculum comprehension, resource availability, and assessment adaptation. Specifically, teachers struggle with understanding differentiated instruction, utilizing digital tools, and developing student-centered learning strategies. Additionally, limited access to teaching resources and inadequate training hinders effective curriculum execution. Classroom observations indicate that while some teachers attempt to implement innovative strategies, traditional methods remain dominant due to insufficient support. Assessment practices also vary, with some teachers effectively using structured rubrics, while others lack proper evaluation techniques. The study concludes that addressing these barriers requires targeted professional development programs, enhanced resource allocation, and institutional support to improve curriculum implementation. Future research should explore intervention strategies to overcome these barriers and optimize English language teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum framework

Keywords: English Teachers' Barriers; Implementing Merdeka Curriculum; Teaching English

Introduction

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced to improve the quality of education in Indonesia by fostering independent learning, creativity, and student-centered teaching approaches (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2022). However, despite these objectives, the curriculum presents significant challenges for teachers, particularly in rural areas like UPT SMPN 1 Sabbang Selatan. Teachers are required to adapt to new pedagogical methods, integrate digital tools, and implement differentiated instruction, which can be difficult without adequate training and resources (Reza, Rohmah, & Abdullah, 2023).

Several studies have explored the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Fitra and Tiarina (2023) found that teachers experience difficulties in lesson planning, integrating digital tools, and adapting to students' diverse needs. Similarly, Mukhibin and Nafidhoh (2023) reported that limited institutional support, insufficient training, and inadequate resources are major obstacles to effective curriculum application. Saputra et al. (2024) highlighted that while some teachers attempt innovative approaches, many still rely on traditional teaching methods due to a lack of guidance and professional development opportunities.

Despite these studies, research on the specific challenges faced by English teachers in rural schools remains limited. Most existing literature focuses on general curriculum implementation without addressing the unique difficulties encountered in teaching English under the Merdeka Curriculum. The lack of research in this area leaves a gap in understanding how English teachers navigate curriculum changes and what support they require for successful implementation.

Although several studies have examined the implementation challenges of the Merdeka Curriculum, most research focuses on general curriculum adoption rather than subject-specific implementation. Research targeting English teachers remains limited, particularly in rural schools where socio-economic constraints and technological limitations pose additional barriers. Existing studies primarily emphasize broad pedagogical challenges, overlooking the specific difficulties faced in teaching English, such as language proficiency disparities among students, lack of relevant instructional materials, and difficulties in incorporating communicative language teaching methods within the Merdeka framework. Additionally, there is a gap in empirical research exploring how English teachers in remote areas adapt their teaching strategies to align with curriculum requirements while addressing resource constraints. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the unique barriers faced by English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at UPT SMPN 1 Sabbang Selatan and identifying potential solutions to enhance curriculum application in similar rural settings.

Based on the research gap identified, this study aims to answer the following research questions: How is the Merdeka Curriculum implemented in English

language teaching for seventh and eighth-grade students at UPT SMPN 1 Sabbang Selatan in the 2024/2025 academic year? And What barriers do English teachers face in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at UPT SMPN 1 Sabbang Selatan?

The objective of this study is to analyze the specific challenges faced by English teachers in adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum and to explore practical solutions that can enhance the effectiveness of its implementation. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on English teachers in a rural setting, an area that has been largely overlooked in previous studies. By examining the real challenges they encounter and their adaptive strategies, this study provides new insights that can inform policy-making and teacher training programs to improve curriculum implementation in similar educational contexts.

Method

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore the barriers faced by English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The study was conducted at UPT SMPN 1 Sabbang Selatan, focusing on English teachers of the seventh and eighth grades during the 2024/2025 academic year

A qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies (Creswell, 2013). Data collection was conducted through observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

Three English teachers from UPT SMPN 1 Sabbang Selatan were selected using a purposive sampling technique. These teachers were actively involved in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in their classrooms. The Data Collection Techniques of this study were:

1. **Observations:** Conducted in classrooms to examine the actual teaching process and curriculum application.
2. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews provided insights into teachers' perceptions, challenges, and strategies.
3. **Document Analysis:** Lesson plans, assessment records, and instructional materials were analyzed to complement the data.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The collected data were categorized based on emerging themes related to barriers in implementing the curriculum. Member checking was employed to ensure validity and reliability.

Data collection was carried out through multiple methods, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted to examine the actual teaching process and curriculum application, while interviews provided insights into teachers' perceptions, challenges, and strategies for overcoming barriers. Additionally,

relevant documents such as lesson plans, assessment records, and instructional materials were analyzed to complement the data.

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The process involved transcribing interviews, coding responses, and identifying key themes related to teachers' barriers in implementing the curriculum. The analysis was conducted systematically to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, with member checking employed to confirm the accuracy of the data with the participants.

Results

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Teaching English

The study identified three primary stages in curriculum execution: planning, implementation, and evaluation.

1. *Planning Stage*
    Teachers used *Modul Ajar* as a reference for lesson planning. However, challenges arose in adapting lesson plans to students' diverse needs. Some teachers successfully incorporated differentiated learning, while others struggled due to a lack of understanding of student-centered approaches. This finding aligns with previous research that highlights the importance of flexibility in curriculum planning to accommodate different learning styles.
2. *Implementation Stage*
    The classroom observations revealed variations in instructional methods. Teachers who actively engaged students through collaborative activities and interactive discussions reported higher levels of student participation. Conversely, those who adhered to rigid, traditional methods struggled with student engagement. A common challenge was the integration of technology in lesson delivery, with some teachers citing limited access to digital tools and inadequate training as major obstacles.
3. *Evaluation Stage*
    Assessment practices varied among teachers. Some effectively utilized structured rubrics and formative assessments to track student progress, while others relied on traditional examination methods that did not fully align with the Merdeka Curriculum's competency-based approach. This inconsistency suggests a need for additional training on innovative assessment strategies that emphasize continuous feedback and student self-reflection.

Barriers in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

The findings indicate that teachers face multiple barriers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. These challenges can be categorized into three major areas: environmental, pedagogical, and institutional barriers.

Environmental Barriers

Environmental barriers, such as limited access to teaching materials, poor infrastructure, and inadequate digital resources, were commonly reported. Teachers in rural areas, in particular, faced difficulties in incorporating ICT-based learning due to unreliable internet connectivity. These challenges hindered their ability to effectively implement the curriculum's emphasis on digital literacy and project-based learning.

Skill Barriers

Teachers expressed difficulties in adapting to student-centered learning approaches. Many were accustomed to teacher-led instruction and found it challenging to transition to methods that required active student participation. Additionally, classroom management issues arose as teachers struggled to maintain student engagement while implementing new pedagogical techniques.

Knowledge Barriers

A lack of professional development opportunities was a significant institutional barrier. Teachers reported minimal access to training programs on the Merdeka Curriculum, leading to inconsistent implementation. Furthermore, administrative workload and insufficient support from school management added to the difficulties in adopting new instructional strategies.

Summary of Key Findings

To summarize, the study highlights the following key findings:

1. Teachers demonstrated different levels of preparedness in executing the curriculum.
2. Traditional methods persisted due to training limitations and resistance to change.
3. Infrastructure and resource constraints negatively impacted the integration of ICT-based learning.
4. A need for continuous professional development was evident to enhance teachers' pedagogical skills.

These findings suggest that successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires a comprehensive approach, involving targeted training, improved access to resources, and institutional support to facilitate an effective transition to student-centered learning.

Table 1. The Table of barriers

Type of Barriers	Challenges Faced
Environmental contact Barriers	Limited resources, inadequate infrastructure
Pedagogical/Skill Barriers	Difficulty in applying student-centered methods
Knowledge Barriers	Lack of professional development and support

Discussion

Barriers in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

The findings of this study revealed three primary barriers to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum: environmental barriers, skill-related barriers, and knowledge barriers. These challenges align with previous research that emphasizes the complexity of transitioning from traditional teaching methods to student-centered learning under the new curriculum framework (Fitra & Tiarina, 2023)

Environmental Barriers

One of the most prominent challenges reported by teachers was the lack of adequate resources and infrastructure. Teachers noted that digital tools and instructional materials were either outdated or unavailable, making it difficult to integrate technology-based learning, a core aspect of the Merdeka Curriculum. As one teacher stated,

> *"We want to use digital media, but the internet connection is weak, and we don't have enough devices"*

This aligns with prior studies highlighting how insufficient technological infrastructure in rural schools' limits curriculum implementation (Mukhibin & Nafidhoh, 2023)

Skill-Related Barriers

Another major obstacle was teachers' struggle with adapting to student-centered learning approaches. Many teachers found it difficult to shift from teacher-led instruction to more interactive methodologies, as they were more familiar with traditional, lecture-based teaching. A teacher explained,

> *"We are expected to facilitate discussions, but students often remain passive, and we don't always know how to engage them"*

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that professional development is crucial for enhancing teachers' pedagogical skills in student-centered instruction (Saputra et al., 2024). This knowledge gap led to inconsistencies in lesson planning and evaluation practices, reinforcing the need for more comprehensive training sessions (Lestari, 2023)

Points of Discussion

1. **Limited Resources and Infrastructure** – The lack of digital tools, unreliable internet access, and outdated instructional materials hinder effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Schools in rural areas face more significant challenges in integrating technology into teaching and learning processes.
2. **Teacher Adaptability to Student-Centered Learning** – Many teachers still struggle to transition from traditional lecture-based methods to more interactive, student-centered approaches, leading to passive learning environments.
3. **Professional Development Needs** – The study highlights a critical gap in teacher training, particularly in implementing differentiated learning and competency-based assessments. Short training sessions are insufficient to equip teachers with the necessary skills.
4. **Assessment Challenges** – Inconsistent assessment methods indicate a lack of clear guidelines and training on how to evaluate students under the new curriculum framework.
5. **Administrative and Institutional Support** – Teachers report heavy workloads and insufficient institutional support, which further complicate curriculum implementation. There is a need for structured peer collaboration and ongoing mentorship programs.

Implications for Curriculum Implementation

The challenges identified in this study have significant implications for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching. Firstly, professional development programs should be extended to focus on practical classroom strategies that promote student engagement and differentiated learning. Secondly, school administrators must ensure the provision of adequate digital resources to support technology-integrated instruction. Lastly, a more structured approach to teacher collaboration, such as peer mentoring programs, could help bridge knowledge gaps and promote best practices in curriculum execution.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the findings of this study, future research should explore intervention strategies that address these barriers, such as implementing teacher training modules tailored to the specific challenges faced in rural schools. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking teachers' adaptation to the Merdeka Curriculum over time would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of ongoing professional development initiatives.

Knowledge Barriers

The study also found that many teachers lacked a deep understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum framework, particularly regarding differentiated instruction and competency-based assessment. One teacher admitted,

> "We were given basic training, but it was too short. I still don't fully understand how to create assessments aligned with the new system"

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that English teachers at UPT SMPN 1 Sabbang Selatan face significant challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. These barriers include **limited access to resources and digital tools, difficulties in adapting to student-centered learning approaches, and a lack of proper training on competency-based assessments.** The study highlights that while some teachers have made progress in incorporating elements of the new curriculum, many still struggle with its practical application due to insufficient institutional support and administrative constraints. These findings reinforce the importance of providing targeted training and infrastructural improvements to ensure the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in rural schools.

This study also confirms previous research stating that curriculum changes require a strong support system, including adequate **teacher training, infrastructure, and assessment tools** (Fitra & Tiarina, 2023). Without these essential components, teachers will continue to face difficulties in adapting to new pedagogical frameworks, ultimately affecting students' learning outcomes.

Research Limitations

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted at a single school, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other institutions implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Second, the study primarily relied on qualitative data, which may not fully capture the extent of curriculum implementation challenges at a broader scale. Lastly, time constraints prevented a more in-depth longitudinal analysis to track teachers' adaptation over a longer period.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Teacher Training Programs** – The government and educational institutions should implement continuous professional development programs focusing on student-centered learning, digital literacy, and differentiated instruction.
2. **Improved Infrastructure –** Schools in rural areas need better access to teaching resources, including internet connectivity and digital tools, to effectively integrate the Merdeka Curriculum.
3. **Institutional Support –** School administrators should provide structured peer mentoring programs to facilitate knowledge-sharing among teachers and reduce adaptation challenges.
4. **Further Research –** Future studies should expand to multiple schools and include quantitative data to measure the effectiveness of different intervention strategies in overcoming curriculum implementation barriers.

By addressing these issues, stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum, ensuring that teachers are well-equipped to provide high-quality English language instruction aligned with national education goals.

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