



The Impact of Merdeka Curriculum on Students' Interest in Learning English

Riskha Zahwannisa¹, Yani Lubis²

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan

Corresponding E-Mail: riskha030402153@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This study investigates the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Balai and its impact on students' interest. Using descriptive qualitative methodology, data were collected through interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and questionnaires administered to 34 students. Results indicate that 97% of students (33/34) reported improved understanding of English learning under the new curriculum, with particular improvements in speaking, listening, and pronunciation skills. Teachers successfully implemented game-based learning methods and integrated technology effectively. Despite initial challenges in resource allocation and training, the curriculum implementation has been successful in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Independent Curriculum; English Subject; Students' Interest*

Introduction

Education in Indonesia has gone through many changes, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted how learning is delivered. One of the government's key efforts in improving the education system is the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum a new learning approach that emphasizes flexibility, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction tailored to students' interests and needs. This curriculum also gives teachers the freedom to design teaching materials and methods based on the local context and the characteristics of their students.

The curriculum itself is broadly defined as a series of learning plans consisting of objectives, content, teaching materials, and methods used as a reference in organizing learning activities to achieve certain educational goals (Suparman, 2020). In line with Law No. 20 of 2003, the curriculum is a collection of learning tools containing objectives, content, teaching materials, methods, and

media that are used in the teaching and learning process to rationally achieve educational goals. From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns with the curriculum development model by Tyler (1949), which identifies four components of curriculum: goals, content, learning activities, and evaluation. These components reflect how the Merdeka Curriculum was designed to respond to both global educational demands and local classroom realities.

Philosophically, the Merdeka Curriculum is inspired by the ideas of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, a pioneer of Indonesian education. He believed that education should free learners from ignorance, dependency, and pressure. Teachers, in his view, are not just knowledge providers, but guides figures who set examples in front, inspire in the middle, and support from behind. His famous principle, "Ing ngarsa sung tuladha, ing madya mangun karsa, tut wuri handayani," reflects this belief and is embedded in how the Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to act as facilitators who help students learn actively and meaningfully.

The concept of independent learning gives teachers the flexibility to adapt lesson plans to students' needs while emphasizing core materials that are meaningful and relevant (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). The role of "guru penggerak" (driving teachers) is central in this approach, where teachers are seen as key agents of change who create a positive, student-centered classroom environment (Ningrum & Suryani, 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum is characterized by three primary elements, as per Nafi'ah et al. (2023): project-based learning that is consistent with the Pancasila student profile, student-centered learning that prioritizes core competencies, and teacher autonomy in the implementation of learning strategies.

Furthermore, by encouraging empowerment and the development of 21st-century abilities, Darmawan and Winataputra (2020) emphasized how the Merdeka Curriculum enhances student autonomy and advances student-centered learning. In a similar vein, Riyanto (2019) states that the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to liberate students from inflexible and excessively theoretical education in favor of a more relevant and contextualized educational experience. The International Baccalaureate (IB), the Finnish National Curriculum, and New Zealand's Competency-Based Curriculum are just a few examples of global curricula that support this goal by emphasizing independence for students, contextual learning, and the development of critical life skills. Similar to the Merdeka Curriculum, these approaches place a high value on adaptability, teamwork, and critical thinking as necessary elements of 21st-century relevant education.

This curriculum speaks for a more contextual and dynamic approach to the acquisition of the English language. Students are encouraged to choose learning materials and activities that match their personal interests and learning styles. This not only improves their language skills but also builds creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). English is categorized as an intracurricular subject within the Merdeka Curriculum (Permendikbud, 2024),

aimed at preparing students to become lifelong learners and reflective citizens through flexible and personalized learning opportunities.

However, English remains a difficult subject for many high school students in Indonesia. Students find English too complex because they must master extensive vocabulary and variants of English structures, as well as pronunciation. According to Tambunsaribu (2020), 77% of students considered English difficult to learn and 66% identified grammar as their main challenge. Additionally, many English lessons are delivered through monotonous, lecture-style instruction that lacks practical engagement, which makes the subject harder to absorb. This is consistent with global findings in EFL education, where students often experience demotivation due to limited interaction, lack of authentic use, and rigid testing.

Because of these issues, student interest and engagement have become essential factors in successful English learning. According to Fadilah and Suryani (2022), students are more likely to develop an interest in learning when the process is enjoyable, relevant, and allows them to actively participate. The flexible nature of the Merdeka Curriculum creates a space where these conditions can be met but it's important to explore whether this is actually happening in real classrooms, especially at the senior high school level.

Previous research, such as the study by Ariska Nadira (2024), showed that the Merdeka Curriculum positively influenced students' learning interest at the junior high school level, with a 56.1% contribution. However, there is still limited research specifically looking at its impact on English learning interest at the senior high school level. This is a missed opportunity, as English is an essential skill for students preparing to enter a globalized world.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Balai, a senior high school that began implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2023/2024 academic year. Although still in the early stages of implementation, the school is known for its strong academic performance and active support for the development of both students' intellectual and creative potential. With well established learning facilities and a commitment to educational innovation, SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Balai provides a relevant and supportive context for examining how the Merdeka Curriculum influences students' interest in learning English.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum affects students' interest in learning English at the senior high school level, particularly at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Balai. The study also seeks to identify which elements of the curriculum most influence student motivation and to explore students' perceptions of learning English within this new educational framework. By doing so, the study hopes to offer insights and recommendations to improve English teaching practices in line with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Literature Review

The Merdeka Curriculum represents a shift in Indonesian education toward more flexible, student-centered, and contextual learning practices. Grounded in the educational philosophy of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, this curriculum seeks to liberate students from rigid, exam-driven instruction and instead promotes meaningful learning experiences that align with students' interests and developmental stages. Dewantara's principle, "tut wuri handayani," continues to influence how teachers are positioned not only as knowledge transmitters but also as facilitators and motivators who guide students in developing their potential (Istiq'faroh, 2020). Internationally, this movement reflects broader curricular reforms seen in Finland, New Zealand, and the International Baccalaureate framework, all of which emphasize flexibility, critical thinking, and learner autonomy (Sahlberg, 2011).

Implementing a curriculum of this scale, however, requires more than pedagogical shifts it calls for systemic change in teacher mindset, leadership engagement, and school culture. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are expected to develop customized learning modules, implement project-based instruction, and accommodate diverse learner profiles. Studies have shown that professional development, peer collaboration, and institutional support are crucial to help teachers navigate this transition (Anggraini et al., 2022; Hasanah et al., 2022). Lubis, Bayani, and Tarmizi (2024), in their study of a *sekolah penggerak*, emphasized that the success of curriculum reform lies in the willingness of school leaders and teachers to engage in cultural transformation. They found that even in schools with limited resources, curriculum change could be successfully enacted when principals inspired innovation and provided consistent supervision and digital infrastructure.

Student interest is one of the most critical factors in determining the success of English language learning, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. The Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982) suggests that students acquire language more effectively when they are motivated and emotionally supported. This idea is further supported by Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key drivers of intrinsic motivation.

In the Indonesian context, Fadilah and Suryani (2022) found that students who were allowed to express themselves through collaborative and multimedia activities in English classes demonstrated higher engagement and stronger motivation. Similarly, Budiarta and Kasni (2020) showed that the use of game-based learning significantly enhanced students' interest and understanding in English instruction, particularly at the elementary level.

Although research on the Merdeka Curriculum is growing, studies that specifically examine its influence on English learning at the senior high school level remain limited. Nadira (2024), for instance, found that the curriculum improved student interest in English at the junior high level, contributing to a 56.1% increase in engagement. However, these findings have yet to be tested in upper-secondary

contexts, where academic pressure and language complexity increase. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in an SMA (senior high school) setting and how it affects students' interest in learning English. The findings are intended to contribute to ongoing discourse on curriculum innovation and provide practical insights for educators navigating similar reforms.

method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore in depth how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum affects students' interest in learning English at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Balai. This approach was selected because it aligns with the nature of the research, which seeks to understand social and educational phenomena from the perspective of the subjects who experience them directly. This is consistent with Miles and Huberman's emphasis on the importance of context and meaning in qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The study was conducted in September 2024, during the active implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes differentiated learning, project-based activities linked to the Pancasila student profile, and teacher autonomy in designing instructional materials (Nafi'ah et al., 2023; Hasanah et al., 2022).

The research subjects consisted of one English teacher from grades X and XI, and 34 students from class XI-1. The teacher was selected purposively due to her active involvement in the planning and implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum for over one semester. The students from class XI-1 were selected directly by the school principal as a representative sample of grade XI students who had undergone English learning based on the Merdeka Curriculum for at least one semester. Among the 34 students, 11 were male and 23 were female, aged between 16 and 17 years. They shared a relatively homogeneous social and educational background, as they were enrolled in the same public high school.

Data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations. The semi-structured interview was conducted with the English teacher using a guide consisting of open-ended questions, such as: (1) How is the Merdeka Curriculum implemented in English classes? (2) What are the notable differences in teaching and learning before and after its implementation? (3) Have you observed any changes in students' motivation or interest? (4) What challenges have you faced during the implementation? and (5) What strategies or approaches have you found to be most effective? The interview was conducted in person and lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The questionnaire was distributed to all students in class XI-1 via Google Forms and consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions. An example of a closed question was: "Do you feel more interested in learning English since the

implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum?" with a Likert scale of responses. An example of an open-ended question was: "Which English skills do you think have improved during learning with the Merdeka Curriculum?" The questionnaire was validated through content review by a supervising lecturer and a senior English teacher to ensure its relevance to the research objectives and clarity of wording.

Observations were carried out during three English class sessions to examine student engagement, teaching methods, and student responses to the content and instructional media. The observations were conducted directly and used as supplementary data alongside interviews and questionnaires. These observations aligned with the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which promotes active, student-centered learning and character development through contextual projects.

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which involves four steps: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coding was done manually by repeatedly reading transcripts and students' written responses. Initial codes such as "teaching method," "student response," and "teacher challenges" were grouped into broader thematic categories for descriptive analysis. Although no qualitative data analysis software was used, the validity of the findings was maintained through source and method triangulation.

Data saturation was reached after analyzing all questionnaire responses and the interview transcript, as no new information emerged and the patterns in students' responses became repetitive. To enhance credibility, member checking was performed by presenting the interview summary to the teacher, who confirmed the accuracy and representation of her views.

The researcher positioned herself as an external party with no formal affiliation to the school or its staff, which allowed for greater neutrality. Nevertheless, the researcher maintained social sensitivity and ethical conduct throughout data collection, using neutral language and avoiding leading questions. Reflexive awareness was applied during the analysis process to reduce interpretive bias.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. The researcher obtained formal permission from the school principal and submitted an official research request letter. All participants received and signed an informed consent form, which outlined the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, participants' rights, and confidentiality guarantees. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time without penalty. Participant identities were anonymized, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

Result

Teacher Readiness in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Before the full implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the English teacher at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Balai had taken several steps to prepare for the changes. The teacher participated in professional development programs such as

workshops on the development of the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP), diagnostic assessments, and differentiated instruction. These sessions also included mentoring on how to develop learning objectives and teaching modules that matched the students' characteristics.

According to the teacher, understanding the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum flexibility, student-centered learning, and project-based instruction was key in adjusting teaching strategies. "I started by understanding my students' learning profiles and then adjusted my lesson plans based on that," the teacher explained. This shows that the preparation went beyond administrative tasks and was pedagogically grounded.

Innovative and Adaptive Teaching Practices

In practice, English lessons under the Merdeka Curriculum emphasized student participation, varied teaching methods, and the use of technology. The teacher employed activities like group discussions, creative projects, and interactive games using digital platforms. These strategies helped make learning more engaging and less rigid.

During classroom observations across three sessions, students responded positively. They were excited about presenting group projects, participating in vocabulary games, and performing short dialogues. The teacher remarked, "Some students who used to be quiet are now more confident when I assign them roles like news anchors or hosts in English."

Lessons were tailored to students' individual needs. Visual learners were given more images and infographics, while kinesthetic learners were encouraged to take part in roleplay. These adjustments reflected a strong application of differentiated instruction in the classroom.

Students' Responses to English Learning

A total of 34 students from class XI-1 completed a questionnaire regarding their experiences learning English under the Merdeka Curriculum. The responses reflected a generally positive shift in their interest, engagement, and confidence.

Table 1. Summary of Students' Responses to the Merdeka Curriculum

No	Question	Yes	No	% Yes
1	Are you aware of changes in the English curriculum?	32	2	94%
2	Do you feel more interested in learning English under the Merdeka Curriculum?	33	1	97%
3	Is learning more enjoyable and less boring with the new curriculum?	33	1	97%

4	Do you feel more confident speaking English in class?	28	6	82%
5	Has your speaking ability improved under the new curriculum?	30	4	88%
6	Do you feel the teacher considers your individual learning style?	27	7	79%
7	Do you enjoy project-based or game-based learning activities?	34	0	100%
8	Do digital media (videos, images, online quizzes) help you understand the material better?	31	3	91%
9	Are you more active in discussions or answering questions in class?	29	5	85%
10	Has the Merdeka Curriculum made you more motivated to learn English in the future?	33	1	97%

As shown in Table 1, the majority of students responded positively to the new curriculum. Notably, 97% felt more interested in learning English, 100% enjoyed project-based activities, and 91% believed digital media helped them better understand the material.

Most students said the learning experience felt more dynamic and motivating. One student wrote, "I understand English better now because we use images, videos, and sometimes play quizzes on our phones." Another student said, "When we do group projects or presentations, I get to practice speaking more, and I'm not as afraid to make mistakes."

Observations confirmed these responses: students were more active during games, group work, and open discussions. The use of digital tools made the class atmosphere livelier and helped students grasp the material more effectively.

Challenges in the Classroom and How They Were Addressed

Despite the overall positive response, the teacher still faced several challenges during implementation. One major issue was the varying levels of student ability. The teacher explained, "Some students catch on quickly, while others still struggle to form simple sentences. I have to adjust my approach based on their levels."

Another concern was the lack of focused discussions on English teaching in teacher working groups (KKG). This limited opportunities for collaboration and idea-sharing among English teachers. To overcome this, the teacher turned to online resources and sought additional training on differentiated learning strategies.

Time management was also a concern. Although project-based learning was engaging, integrating it into a fixed schedule proved challenging. This suggests that

institutional support, such as more flexible scheduling, could enhance curriculum implementation further.

Impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on Students' Learning Interest

Overall, the Merdeka Curriculum has had a positive impact on students' interest, engagement, and English language skills. Questionnaire data and classroom observations indicate that students are more enthusiastic, confident, and motivated to participate in English lessons. The teacher reported noticeable improvements in vocabulary use and speaking performance, as reflected in class presentations and test results.

That said, not all students progressed at the same pace. Some still struggled with pronunciation and sentence construction. This variation highlights the need for continued adaptation and support, even within a flexible curriculum model.

In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum shows strong potential in increasing students' interest in learning English when implemented with creativity and sensitivity to individual needs. However, sustainable success also depends on consistent teacher training, peer collaboration, and supportive school policies.

Discussion

Teacher Readiness in Implementing the Curriculum

The teacher's proactive approach in preparing for the Merdeka Curriculum through curriculum training, lesson module development, and diagnostic assessments reflects key dimensions of curriculum implementation theory (Fullan, 2007). Fullan emphasized that successful reform requires alignment between teacher capacity, institutional support, and student readiness. In this study, the teacher adapted instructional design based on learning profiles, demonstrating agency and flexibility. This readiness contributed to the successful integration of student-centered methods.

However, professional isolation remains a concern. As the teacher noted, subject-specific collaboration especially for English was limited. This supports international findings (Tan & Deneen, 2015) that systemic reform should include opportunities for professional learning communities to share and reflect on curriculum adaptation practices. Without this, curriculum implementation may become uneven across schools or subjects.

Innovative and Adaptive Teaching Practices

The shift from traditional lecture-based instruction to interactive, differentiated, and project-based learning aligns strongly with student-centered learning theory (Bransford et al., 2000). Students were given space to construct meaning through peer discussion, role-play, and media-rich activities. The teacher's use of varied strategies adjusting tasks to students' cognitive and learning

styles is also a concrete application of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001).

These teaching practices not only made lessons more enjoyable, but also empowered students to take ownership of their learning. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which argues that student motivation increases when they experience autonomy and competence. Students in this study reported enjoying more freedom in class, contributing to a sense of ownership and pride in their work.

Student Responses to English Learning

Survey results showed high levels of engagement and interest: 97% of students felt more motivated, 91% reported better understanding with digital media, and 100% enjoyed project-based learning. These results echo prior studies in Indonesia (Hasanah et al., 2022; Nadira, 2024), which found that Merdeka Curriculum improved student motivation and classroom activity, particularly in language learning.

More significantly, students also expressed increased confidence and participation, which is crucial in English as a foreign language contexts. The ability to speak without fear of judgment represents not just linguistic growth but also socio-affective development. When students feel heard and supported, they are more willing to take risks, a condition essential for language acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

Challenges in Practice and Coping Strategies

Despite the generally positive outcomes, challenges surfaced especially in terms of student diversity and time limitations. The teacher had to manage a wide range of proficiency levels within one class. Although differentiated instruction mitigated this to some extent, it demanded additional time, preparation, and classroom management skills.

Time constraints also affected the depth of project implementation, echoing broader concerns in curriculum reform globally (Sahlberg, 2011). Moreover, the teacher noted the lack of structured opportunities for collaboration among English teachers, limiting collective reflection and shared learning. This situation reflects Fullan's (2007) view that reform efforts may fail when teachers work in silos without adequate systemic support.

To address these issues, teacher training programs must go beyond basic curriculum familiarization and include practical tools for managing mixed-ability classrooms, designing interdisciplinary projects, and using digital learning resources effectively. Moreover, schools and districts should consider scheduling flexibility and inter-teacher mentoring to sustain innovation over time. This is consistent with the findings of Lubis et al. (2024), who emphasized that sustainable curriculum change in *sekolah penggerak* depends on strong school leadership and the ability to shift teacher mindsets through mentoring, digital innovations, and regular supervision, especially when facing structural or resource limitations.

Impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on Learning Outcomes

The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on student agency, meaningful learning, and curriculum flexibility has shown promising results in this case. Students became more confident in using English orally, more motivated to participate, and more engaged in tasks that connect learning to real-life experiences. These findings support the curriculum's philosophy and reflect the goals of national education reform.

However, critical reflection is essential. The assumption that all teachers can independently design effective instructional materials may lead to disparities, especially in under-resourced schools. Not every school has access to digital tools, nor do all teachers have equal experience with active learning approaches. Without equitable support and sustained policy guidance, implementation risks becoming fragmented and uneven.

Additionally, this study was limited to a single school and conducted over one semester. The short duration prevents conclusions about long-term impacts or student performance in standardized assessments. The researcher's outsider status, although helpful for neutrality, may have influenced interpretations due to limited immersion in the school culture.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on these findings, several practical implications can be drawn. First, ongoing professional development in differentiated instruction and project-based learning should be prioritized, particularly for English teachers. Second, schools should be given flexibility in time allocation to implement richer and deeper learning tasks. Third, subject-based collaboration platforms need to be strengthened to promote reflection and shared practices.

At the policy level, the government should invest in curriculum resources, digital infrastructure, and teacher mentoring systems. Future research should expand to different regions, school types, and subject areas, ideally through longitudinal designs. Evaluating long-term outcomes will clarify whether the early gains observed in motivation and engagement translate into sustained learning success.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English learning at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Balai has shown promising results in increasing students' interest and motivation. Through careful planning, teacher training, and the use of engaging, student-centered methods such as project-based learning and digital media integration, students reported feeling more confident and enthusiastic about learning English. The findings demonstrate that when teachers design learning experiences based on students' individual needs and preferences, it leads to greater

engagement, improved speaking and listening skills, and a more positive classroom atmosphere.

Although several challenges were encountered such as diverse student proficiency levels, time constraints, and limited opportunities for peer collaboration these were largely mitigated through adaptive teaching strategies and the teacher's commitment to ongoing learning. The study highlights that successful curriculum implementation requires not only pedagogical innovation but also institutional support, continuous professional development, and collaborative platforms among educators.

To ensure long-term impact, it is essential to provide structured teacher training in differentiated instruction and technology use, strengthen support systems for inter-teacher collaboration, and enhance access to learning resources. Ultimately, the Merdeka Curriculum holds strong potential to foster meaningful, personalized English language learning especially when implemented with creativity, responsiveness, and reflective practice.

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