



An Evaluation of Teaching Practices, Challenges, and English Teachers' Readiness in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in West Kalimantan Schools

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Abstracts

This study aims to evaluate classroom learning practices, identify the challenges faced by teachers, and gather information regarding their readiness during the teaching and learning process in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools in West Kalimantan. This curriculum provides opportunities to enhance creativity and flexibility in learning. The study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive approach, in which participants were selected purposively, consisting of 20 English teachers—10 from urban schools and 10 from rural schools. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The data were analysed using Miles and Huberman's principles, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings show that most teachers have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, with 80% implementation in urban schools and 40% in rural schools. Teachers encountered several challenges, including limited supporting facilities, inadequate access to technology, and uneven human resource capacity. The results also indicate that most teachers feel ready to implement the curriculum, although their levels of readiness are not uniform. Nevertheless, evaluations from various stakeholders play a significant role in enhancing the successful implementation of this curriculum.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum Implementation, Learning Practices, Challenges, Readiness

Introduction

The curriculum serves as a structured plan containing regulations, objectives, and content designed to guide various activities within the learning process.

Khoirurrijal et al. (2022:1) state that “the curriculum holds a highly significant and strategic position.” As an instructional guide, the curriculum ensures that students achieve the competencies expected of them. It also acts as a bridge between policymakers (the government) and practitioners namely teachers, who implement the curriculum at the classroom level. Therefore, as the primary executors of teaching and learning, teachers must fully understand the curriculum so that learning objectives can be effectively achieved. Teachers must also be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum they are implementing.

The curriculum in Indonesia has undergone several revisions. These changes reflect the government’s efforts to improve the quality of education nationwide. Nofrianni et al. (2024) note that “one of the ways the government attempts to enhance educational quality is through curriculum reform.” Currently, the government has introduced a new curriculum, the Merdeka Curriculum, aimed at providing students with greater flexibility and opportunities to learn according to their needs. Vinna et al. (2024) explain that “the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is an initiative intended to raise the standard of education in Indonesia.” This curriculum emphasizes contextual and project-based learning while strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students, which includes being faithful, pious to God Almighty, well-mannered, independent, collaborative, globally diverse, critical-thinking, and creative individuals (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Nevertheless, the implementation of any new policy carries specific goals and targets. Manu et al. (2024) state that the Merdeka Curriculum is intended to accelerate the achievement of national education goals, particularly in producing highly competitive and globally capable human resources. This aligns with Mayangsari et al. (2024), who argue that the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to be more flexible, centered on essential content, and focused on character development and competency building. Kurniawan et al. (2024) further assert that the Merdeka Curriculum represents an educational approach aimed at fostering inclusive, creative, and empowering learning to prepare students for the challenges of the modern world.

The implementation of this curriculum has now been carried out across Indonesia. However, the effectiveness of its implementation requires careful attention, particularly in terms of achieving predetermined goals. The adoption of a new curriculum inevitably presents challenges, both in human resources and school facilities. Kause et al. (2025) explain that although a curriculum is ideally designed to support the smooth execution of education, repeated curriculum changes often create confusion among stakeholders, thereby hindering its effective implementation.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum spans all provinces in Indonesia, including West Kalimantan. Its adoption in this region occurs within diverse geographical, infrastructural, and sociocultural contexts, giving rise to unique challenges. Schools in urban areas such as Pontianak generally have better learning facilities, while schools in remote areas continue to face limited internet

access, ICT tools, and electricity stability. These disparities directly affect English teachers' ability to utilize digital platforms and manage differentiated instruction. In addition, teacher distribution and professional capacity remain uneven due to training and mentoring programs being concentrated in major cities, leaving rural schools with less technical support. Limited digital literacy and restricted access to English learning resources also hinder the optimal implementation of project-based learning and authentic assessments, key features of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Overall, these conditions indicate that curriculum implementation in West Kalimantan is heavily influenced by disparities in infrastructure, teacher competence, geographical challenges, and cultural diversity. Every school experiences its own challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Riska (2024:291) identifies several obstacles faced by teachers, including educator competency readiness, limited availability of facilities and infrastructure, issues related to time allocation, insufficient planning, and mismatches between students' mindsets and attitudes.

Beyond these challenges, the government must also ensure the readiness of teachers, as their preparedness is essential for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. According to Adiba and Andriyati (2025), teacher readiness in responding to curriculum changes is a critical factor in ensuring that students receive learning experiences that align with contemporary demands. Aulia and Andini (2024) emphasize that teacher readiness is a key element determining the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Teachers are required to possess a deep understanding of curriculum changes and adequate competencies to adapt their pedagogical practices accordingly. Teachers who understand curriculum concepts well will be better equipped to implement them effectively in the classroom. Kurniawan et al. (2024) and Arofaturrohman et al. (2023) similarly highlight that teacher readiness is an essential determinant of the curriculum's success.

Therefore, teachers (including English teachers) must have opportunities to strengthen their competencies. Schools and government institutions can provide regular training or workshops to ensure English teachers are well-prepared to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. English teachers are also required to develop strong pedagogical and digital competencies, including communicative teaching, digital media integration, and language-based project learning. English teachers play a crucial role in enhancing students' global competence, as learners engage with English through local and culturally relevant contexts.

Several measures can be taken by the government to support the success of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as providing adequate technological and human-resource-based facilities. Ensuring equitable technological access across regions will facilitate the curriculum's implementation. Nurhayati et al. (2025) note that although the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes technological integration, many Indonesian schools still face infrastructural limitations that hinder the implementation of technology-based learning. Therefore, evaluating learning

practices during curriculum implementation, identifying challenges faced during teaching and learning, and assessing teacher readiness are essential. Khoirurrijal et al. (2022) argue that "curriculum evaluation must be innovative, dynamic, periodic, and aligned with contemporary developments and the competencies required by society and industry." Such evaluations provide crucial information for improving the quality of education.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Merdeka Curriculum

Every curriculum inevitably has strengths and weaknesses. Understanding both aspects enables more effective curriculum implementation. According to Al Wahid (2024:13), the Merdeka Curriculum offers three main advantages. First, it emphasizes mastery of essential learning content. Second, it allocates specific time for reinforcing values and character development. Third, it provides schools with greater flexibility in designing learning programs and allows teachers to tailor instruction based on students' individual abilities and needs.

Riska (2024:288) adds that the strengths of the Merdeka Curriculum include deeper and more meaningful learning, greater learning autonomy, dynamic and creative instructional practices, extensive use of diverse media and learning resources, and enriched learning experiences. Despite these benefits, Riska (2024:289) points out several weaknesses, such as the need for active participation from both teachers and students, greater time and resource requirements, and the challenge of balancing student mindsets and attitudes.

Other limitations include limited teacher understanding of curriculum concepts and implementation techniques particularly in remote areas unequal distribution of facilities, insufficient training and mentoring for teachers during the transition, and discrepancies between central policies and school-level realities, especially in regions like West Kalimantan with diverse geographical, technological, infrastructural, and cultural conditions. In light of these issues, evaluating English learning practices, identifying implementation challenges, and assessing teacher readiness becomes essential to ensure that the curriculum is implemented effectively and meaningfully.

As Situmorang et al. (2025) state, "curriculum evaluation plays a crucial role in education, aiming to measure the extent to which students' progress toward predetermined objectives." Thus, the results of this research will provide valuable insights for schools and policymakers regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Research Method

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant educational innovation that allows schools to design learning materials based on classroom needs. This study focuses on teachers' perspectives regarding learning practices, implementation challenges, and their readiness in applying the curriculum. Therefore, a descriptive qualitative method was employed. This

approach enables the researcher to understand real conditions in the field by collecting data directly from the involved participants (teachers). Sugiyono (2016:224) emphasizes that data collection is the most important initial stage of research, functioning to obtain the necessary information.

The sample was selected purposively, consisting of English teachers at the junior high school level: 10 from urban schools and 10 from rural schools. The researcher chose junior high schools because this level represents a critical transition stage in English learning, where foundational skills developed in primary school begin to evolve into more complex communicative competencies. At this stage, teachers are required to implement the Merdeka Curriculum more consistently, including differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and communicative approaches.

Additionally, junior high schools in West Kalimantan present significant contrasts between urban and rural contexts, providing opportunities to better understand how infrastructural disparities, digital literacy levels, and teacher preparedness affect learning practices. Another essential reason is the limited research focusing specifically on the junior high school level. Thus, selecting SMPs allows for a more comprehensive exploration of curriculum implementation at a strategic phase in students' English language development.

Data were collected from August to October 2025 through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. Fifteen interview questions were developed across five themes: teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, English teaching practices under the curriculum, challenges in implementation, teacher readiness, and school support and infrastructure availability. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis. Gall et al. (2003:222) describe interviews as a data collection process involving predetermined questions posed by the interviewer.

Classroom observations were also conducted to examine activities, routines, and interactions (Darlington & Scott, 2002:74). The researcher observed alignment between learning objectives, instructional flow, and the use of teaching modules. Observations also focused on the implementation of differentiated instruction, communicative approaches, and task-based learning. Document analysis was performed by examining syllabi and lesson plans (RPP) used by schools to assess the alignment between intended instruction and classroom practices.

Data analysis followed three stages: (1) data reduction to filter relevant information, (2) data display in narrative or visual form to facilitate interpretation, and (3) conclusion drawing after synthesizing analyzed data. These analyses aimed to produce insights on classroom practices, challenges faced by teachers, and their readiness during curriculum implementation. To ensure the validity of findings, the study employed data triangulation by integrating classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.

This procedure enabled the researcher to verify the consistency of information across sources—what teachers reported, what occurred in the

classroom, and supporting written evidence. Consequently, the data obtained were not solely based on teacher perceptions but were reinforced by actual practices and authentic documents, providing a more valid and comprehensive understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation.

Nonetheless, this study has several methodological limitations. First, the number of participating schools and teachers was limited, meaning the findings may not fully represent the diverse conditions across West Kalimantan. Second, classroom observations and interviews rely on researcher interpretation, making subjectivity difficult to eliminate entirely. Third, the relatively short observation period may not capture long-term variations in instructional practices. Therefore, future research with a larger participant pool, more diverse data collection techniques, and longer observation periods is needed to develop a more comprehensive and valid understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in West Kalimantan.

Results and Discussion

Results

This study aims to evaluate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, identify the challenges faced by teachers, and examine the extent of their readiness in the teaching and learning process. The findings indicate varying percentages of learning practices carried out across different types of schools, particularly between those located in urban and rural areas. The data were collected through interviews with participants who met the established criteria.

Table of Merdeka Curriculum Learning Practices

Types of Schools	Learning Practices	Description
Urban Schools	80%	Eighty percent of the teachers reported that they have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in their classrooms and possess a good level of understanding of its principles
Rural Schools	40%	Only 40% of the teachers have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, and they also reported having a limited understanding of its concepts

The findings of the study indicate that most urban schools have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum (IKM), with 80%—or 8 out of 10 teachers—reporting positive experiences with its application. This is supported by the teachers' strong understanding of the curriculum's principles. One teacher, identified as N, stated, *"We have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum since it was first introduced, and we possess a good level of understanding, although the distribution of human resources in our school is still uneven."*

Teachers in urban schools demonstrated instructional practices aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as designing more flexible lesson plans and teaching modules tailored to classroom needs, translating learning outcomes into daily objectives, offering learning choices to students, and incorporating local contexts—for example, project assignments based on regional culture. In practice, learning activities were oriented toward student-centered engagement through collaborative work, exploration, and project-based tasks, with teachers acting primarily as facilitators.

Assessment practices also reflected the curriculum's emphasis on authentic and formative evaluation, including portfolios, project assessments, speaking recordings, and performance-based rubrics. Additionally, teachers implemented differentiated instruction by providing varied levels of difficulty and task options to meet students' diverse needs. Technology was used in a contextual and functional manner—for example, mobile phones for recording speaking tasks or digital platforms for maintaining student portfolios.

Observational data further revealed positive impacts of the Merdeka Curriculum in urban schools, particularly in fostering students' creativity and independence. This aligns with Nurhayati et al. (2025), who argue that "*the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to bring positive transformation to Indonesian education by offering more relevant and meaningful learning experiences for students.*" Learners appeared more motivated and actively engaged in classroom activities.

In contrast, rural schools showed a markedly different condition. Only 40%—or 4 out of 10 teachers—reported implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This is further supported by the statement of a teacher identified as E, who explained, "*We do not feel ready to implement the curriculum; our understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum is still very limited.*" Teachers also expressed challenges in operating technology, which hindered their ability to carry out curriculum-aligned teaching practices.

Many reported that "*although we have attended training sessions, our understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum remains insufficient.*" These challenges have contributed to minimal changes observed in students' learning outcomes. For this reason, rural teachers hope that the government will expand opportunities to support teacher professional development, provide continuous and structured training programs, and improve the distribution of facilities across schools. In other words, equitable access to well-qualified human resources and adequate school facilities—including technological infrastructure—plays a crucial role in ensuring the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The study also reveals several challenges experienced by teachers during the implementation process, as shown in the following table:

Table of Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Types of Challenges	Percentage of Challenges	Description
Technological Limitations	55%	The research data indicate that 55%, or 11 out of 20 teachers from both urban and rural schools, reported that school facilities remain limited, particularly those related to digital technology
Limited Training	55%	The majority of teachers, representing 55% of the total participants, reported that they had limited access to training or workshops needed to support their professional competency development
Teacher Human Resources	40%	The data also indicates that although some teachers already possess knowledge related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (IKM), this understanding is not yet evenly distributed. This is reflected in the finding that 40%, or 8 out of 20 teachers, reported that the quality of human resources (HR) in their schools remains low and uneven in terms of understanding and applying IKM

Based on the table above, it can be inferred that teachers' readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum varies considerably. Teachers in urban areas demonstrate a different level of preparedness compared to those in rural settings. Even within the same school context—urban or rural—individual readiness levels differ from one teacher to another. One participant, identified as M, stated, *"We frequently ask one another for clarification, and often our views do not align."*

These differences are shaped by multiple factors, including the teachers' level of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, the frequency with which they participate in professional development, and the availability of supporting facilities for curriculum implementation. The interview data were supported by classroom observations. In several urban schools, English teachers had implemented communicative learning activities, such as asking students to perform role-plays based on real-life situations to encourage oral fluency.

Teachers also made use of simple digital platforms, such as Google Classroom and video-based interactive tools, to support reading and listening activities. Conversely, in rural schools, learning remained largely focused on structured exercises such as gap-filling, sentence translation, and vocabulary repetition due to

limited facilities and unstable internet access. Observations also revealed that some teachers attempted small-scale projects—such as poster creation or short dialogue tasks—although these projects were mostly implemented in small groups and had not fully aligned with the stages of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) project model.

The interviews further revealed an unexpected finding: administrative workload remains high despite the Merdeka Curriculum being promoted as more streamlined. In theory, the curriculum aims to simplify instructional administration. However, English teachers in several schools reported increased administrative demands, particularly in developing independent teaching modules, designing differentiated assessments, and documenting P5 project outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate significant differences in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum between urban and rural schools. These differences manifest across multiple dimensions. As shown in the table above, most urban schools (80%, or 8 out of 10 teachers) had implemented the curriculum effectively. Teachers in these schools demonstrated a strong understanding of the curriculum, enabling them to apply it optimally in the classroom.

This aligns with Arofaturrohman et al. (2023), who state that teacher readiness for curriculum implementation is reflected in several aspects, including teachers' understanding of the curriculum, mastery of teaching methods, technological competence, availability of learning resources, assessment ability, and commitment to continuous professional development. In addition, urban schools' proximity to administrative centers ensures faster access to facilities, training, and curriculum support systems—creating a more conducive environment for curriculum application.

Febrianningsih and Ramadan (2023) similarly highlight that successful curriculum implementation is influenced by factors such as curriculum comprehension and availability of infrastructure. Conversely, data from rural schools show that only 40% (4 out of 10) of teachers had implemented the curriculum adequately. Many of them reported challenges related to limited access to resources and facilities. This finding supports Nazar et al. (2024), who argue that difficulties in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum stem from limited experience with independent learning, restricted access to references, and limited IT literacy.

Geographic constraints and inadequate digital infrastructure in rural areas reduce teachers' opportunities to attend training and access online learning platforms. This is reinforced by Kause et al. (2025), who note that *"many teachers still struggle to fully understand the concept of this curriculum."* Additionally, the shortage of qualified teachers and heavy workloads contribute to the slower adaptation of the new curriculum model. Thus, the implementation gap arises from a combination of unequal access, resource limitations, geographic conditions, and

educators' capacity to respond to curriculum changes.

The data further show that teachers in urban schools experience fewer challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, while rural teachers face more substantial barriers, including limited technological access and inconsistent government-led training. Ma'sum and Biantoro (2025) emphasize that teachers still lack adequate opportunities to attend in-person training. Nurhayati et al. (2025) also point out that, in less developed areas, curriculum implementation is hindered by infrastructure limitations, especially in technological access and learning resources.

Nasution (2023) adds that major obstacles include limited experience with independent learning, insufficient reference access, unequal access to professional development, and time-management challenges. The study also highlights differences in teacher readiness for curriculum implementation. Most teachers in urban schools felt prepared, whereas rural teachers reported low readiness due to limited facilities and uneven human resource capacity. Therefore, the government must provide more comprehensive training to prepare teachers for curriculum implementation. As noted by Aniza et al. (2024), "*teacher readiness can be improved through government training programs, school-led initiatives, or teachers' independent efforts to develop their competencies.*"

Teachers also need to undertake extensive preparation for implementing the curriculum. According to Kurniawan et al. (2024), "*teacher readiness encompasses not only conceptual understanding but also the ability to conduct comprehensive assessments, commitment to professional development, and proficiency in preparing lesson plans aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum format.*" Overall, several actions can be taken by the government and schools to support the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum—such as providing intensive training for all teachers, ensuring equal distribution of learning facilities (including technological tools), and formulating policies that reinforce implementation.

These efforts would help teachers prepare for and adopt the curriculum successfully. Alfansuri et al. (2024) highlight that "*the availability of adequate educational resources is also a determining factor in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.*" Furthermore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language instruction in West Kalimantan is closely linked to the region's sociocultural and geographic context. The province's ethnic diversity, including Madurese, Malay, Dayak, and Chinese communities, creates a multilingual environment that requires culturally responsive teaching strategies.

Incorporating local cultural elements—such as Madurese traditions, Malay customs, Dayak practices, or local folktales—can strengthen students' connection to English learning while reinforcing their cultural identity. West Kalimantan's geography, characterized by vast distances and reliance on river transportation, also affects equitable access to learning facilities. Thus, English instruction should provide authentic learning experiences that broaden students' global perspectives while remaining grounded in local realities—for instance, through simple

correspondence tasks, instructional videos, or collaborative projects linking local culture with global themes.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in urban and rural contexts differs significantly. Implementation in urban areas is considerably more effective, with the majority of teachers already applying the curriculum. In contrast, only a small proportion of teachers in rural areas have done so. Several challenges arise across both contexts, although the obstacles are more substantial in rural schools. Despite these challenges, most teachers expressed a sense of readiness to implement the curriculum, although their level of understanding remains uneven.

These differences are influenced by inadequate infrastructure, uneven teacher competencies due to limited training, and insufficient access to technology. While the Merdeka Curriculum has demonstrated positive impacts on English learning, government intervention is needed to strengthen policy frameworks promoting equal access to professional development, teacher competency enhancement, and resource provision across urban and rural schools.

These implications must be supported by sustained training policies and consistent monitoring systems. Teacher education institutions (LPTK) should also adapt their curriculum to emphasize competencies related to differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and digital literacy to align with the Merdeka Curriculum. This study contributes significantly by providing empirical evidence on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the junior secondary school (SMP) level—an educational tier often overlooked in existing studies, especially concerning English language instruction.

By focusing on SMPs in West Kalimantan, this research expands the existing literature, which has predominantly examined senior high schools or urban-based model schools. The study offers new insights into how English teachers implement key curriculum principles, including flexible lesson planning, differentiation, local-context projects, authentic assessment, and contextually relevant technological use. Additionally, the findings reveal unique dynamics rarely discussed in prior studies, such as high teacher motivation in rural areas, mismatches between available facilities and their utilization, and variations in readiness that do not always correlate with the amount of training received.

Hence, this study enriches the literature by providing a more nuanced, contextualized, and representative understanding of Merdeka Curriculum implementation at the SMP level.

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