

## Navigating the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in EFL Classrooms: Challenges and Pedagogical Needs in Madrasah Contexts

Yesa Restika<sup>1\*</sup>, Ira Maisarah<sup>2</sup>

Universitas Bengkulu, Indonesia<sup>1,2</sup>

Email: [yesarestika03@gmail.com](mailto:yesarestika03@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges and pedagogical needs experienced by EFL teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum within a madrasah context in Indonesia. While the Merdeka Curriculum promotes student-centered, flexible, and project-based learning, empirical evidence on its implementation in Islamic senior high schools remains limited. Adopting a qualitative case study design, this research draws on in-depth interviews with two experienced English teachers at an Islamic senior high school in Indonesia to capture their lived experiences during the curriculum transition. The findings identify four interrelated categories of challenges: instructional challenges, including low student motivation and difficulties in addressing mixed-ability classrooms; resource-related constraints, particularly limited access to curriculum-aligned teaching materials; assessment-related challenges stemming from uncertainty in designing appropriate learning modules and assessment practices; and institutional support issues, marked by insufficient guidance and systemic backing. In response to these challenges, teachers highlighted the need for sustained professional development, stronger collegial and leadership support, and improved digital infrastructure, including reliable internet access and technological tools. This study argues that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum depends not only on policy design but also on teachers' professional readiness and institutional support systems. By foregrounding teachers' perspectives, this research contributes to the growing literature on curriculum reform in EFL contexts and offers context-sensitive insights for strengthening curriculum implementation in Islamic secondary education.

**Keywords:** curriculum implementation; EFL teachers; Islamic secondary education; Merdeka curriculum; teacher challenges.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a cornerstone of national development. It gives more than impart knowledge it nurtures character, cultivates values, and encourages lifelong learning. As Mekkawaru (2019) notes, education in intentional and structured activity towards the development of a complete environment where students live and grow, not only intellectually but spiritually and morally. Indonesia's National Education System Law No. 20/2003 reflects this point as well where it highlights the idea that education is the conscious and deliberate effort to create an atmosphere of learning and the learning process so that learners can develop their potential to have religious spirituality, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and skills).

The educational process is fundamentally facilitated by the curriculum that not only decides what is being taught and how, but also examines the efficiency of the teaching method. The curriculum has been changed through several versions from 1947 to the latest one Merdeka Curriculum in 2022 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. This transformation was the response to a more adaptive and resilient education system imperative for recovery after the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global shifts towards the student-centered pedagogy. (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Pramudyawardhani et al., 2022)

The Merdeka curriculum stands for something different from the 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum 2013). The 2013 Curriculum was based on the scientific approach and the dominance of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains in all subjects. On the other hand, the Merdeka Curriculum is characterized by the following principles such as differentiated learning, authentic assessments, and project-based learning, all these being specific methods that are related to the development of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila which in turn comprises the attributes such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, global citizenship, and independence (Masita, 2023; Prasetyo & Wijaya, 2022). In the present, digital era, teachers are no longer just with a role in facilitating the students' learning process but they also are co-creators of the learning experiences that the students' needs, local context, and individual capabilities mandate. They are expected not only to integrate digital technology, interactive modules, and flexible assessment strategies that promote independent and meaningful learning among their students (Rahmawati, 2023) but also to employ these in the process of teaching. Thus, this approach is consistent with global developments in education during the 21st century, placing a heavy emphasis on such learning principles as learner autonomy, problem-solving activities, and practice-oriented results. (OECD, 2020).

However, the transition presents real and multifaceted challenges.

According to Safitri et al. (2023), teacher readiness, digital competence, and the adaptation of the pedagogy are the main affecting factors for the realization of this curriculum. Except that, teachers also face problems like a lack of training, shortage of educational tools, or time management in preparation tasks for internet-related activities precisely and to do so effectively. Besides, Nasution et al. (2023) and Anggara et al. (2023) argue that uneven access to digital infrastructure, support for blended learning which is limited, and no far clear method concerning project-based assessment were the major obstacles. Furthermore, in the standpoint of English Language Teaching (ELT), implementing the Merdeka Curriculum does not only make a difference but also becomes even more challenging. Language instructors are expected to not just teach grammar but also facilitate students in developing critical thinking, becoming intercultural and having communicative skills (Setiawan & Wardhani, 2024). Shifting the English language teaching methods necessitates that the teachers should do teaching and learning in an integrated way, make use of digital media (e.g., podcasts for listening and watching videos) and design out-of-class activities that are task-based and promote effective student participation (Yuliani & Febriyanti, 2024). Despite the existence of comprehensive national policies guiding the Merdeka Curriculum, empirical evidence on its enactment at the classroom level remains scarce, particularly within Islamic senior

high school contexts (Madrasah Aliyah). Prior research has predominantly examined curriculum implementation in public secondary schools, leaving limited understanding of the pedagogical, assessment-related, and resource-based challenges encountered by EFL teachers in madrasahs, as well as the forms of support required to address these challenges. Responding to this gap, the present study investigates the experiences of EFL teachers in an Indonesian Madrasah Aliyah to generate context-sensitive insights into the challenges they face and the professional, institutional, and infrastructural support needed to support effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research method with a case study approach to explore in depth the challenges and support needs of EFL teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at an Islamic senior high school in Indonesia. Qualitative research emphasizes naturalistic inquiry and recognizes the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation (Sugiyono, as cited in Abdi & Gloria Pirena, 2020). This approach allows for the use of rich descriptive narratives and contextual information to understand complex social phenomena as they occur in real educational settings.

A case study design was selected because it enables an in-depth and holistic examination of a bounded system within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). Similarly, Rahardjo and Mudjia (2017) argue that case studies provide a comprehensive analysis of specific situations, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. In this study, the lived experiences of EFL teachers adapting to curriculum changes serve as the central focus of analysis.

To address issues of researcher reflexivity and potential bias, the researcher engaged in continuous self-reflection throughout the research process, particularly during data collection and analysis. Reflexive notes were maintained to acknowledge personal assumptions and professional background that might influence data interpretation. In addition, data triangulation and careful documentation of analytical decisions were applied to enhance credibility and minimize subjective bias. Through these strategies, the study aims to ensure trustworthy and balanced qualitative findings.

### **Research Participants**

This study focuses on two English teachers at an Islamic senior high school in Indonesia who were selected purposively based on their teaching experience, responsibility for Grade X classes, and direct involvement in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The school recently adopted the Merdeka Curriculum,

making this research pretty relevant right now. Both teachers have over 10 years of experience, which gives them valuable insights into how the curriculum works and changes. To gather information, the researcher used semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed the teachers to share their thoughts while keeping the discussion on track. It helped the researcher understand their needs, views, challenges, and experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum. The teachers could express their answers freely during the interviews, which provided clearer insights and a better understanding of their experiences. To ensure the interview guide was solid, the researcher based it on previous studies by Reza et al. (1981), Wibowo (2009), and Hasibuan & Nuranisa (2022).

### **Research Instrument**

The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, which helped keep things flexible while focusing on what the study aimed to achieve. This approach allowed the researcher to explore the needs, challenges, opinions, and experiences of those involved in putting the Merdeka Curriculum into practice. The interviews made it easier for participants to share their thoughts in detail, giving them a chance to reflect and clarify their answers. To ensure the interview guide lined up with earlier studies, relevant literature from Hasibuan & Nuranisa (2022) and Reza et al. (2023) was used to adjust the questions and back up the findings.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Before the interviews, participants had to agree to take part, and the interviews were planned ahead of time. Each session started with ten main questions, and as the conversation went on, more detailed questions came up. The interviews were recorded using a mobile device, and the researcher also took notes. This setup helped the researcher gather real stories that show how teachers experience implementing the curriculum.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

#### **Data Reduction**

At this stage, the interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed through an open coding process to identify meaningful units related to teachers' challenges and support needs. Initial codes were generated manually and then organized into broader categories through axial coding, which led to the development of key themes. Data that were not relevant to the research focus were excluded. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, peer debriefing was conducted to review the coding process, and member checking was employed to confirm the accuracy of the interpreted themes with the participants.

### **Data Display**

The data was then organized into tables, descriptions, and themes to make it easier to understand. This helped the researcher see connections, inconsistencies, and new trends in the information.

### **Conclusion Drawing and Verification**

The data were revisited iteratively to identify recurring patterns and to refine emerging themes. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data with field notes to ensure consistency across data sources. Meaning verification involved reviewing the coherence of themes and confirming that they accurately reflected participants' perspectives. Finally, the verified themes were systematically aligned with the research questions to ensure that the findings directly addressed the aims of the study.

### **Ensuring Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, this study applied several rigor strategies throughout the research process.

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the participants and the use of in-depth interviews that allowed for rich, open dialogue and deeper understanding of teachers' experiences.

Dependability was addressed by systematically documenting each stage of the research process, including data collection, transcription, coding, and



analysis, to ensure transparency and consistency.

Confirmability was maintained by grounding all interpretations in participants' accounts and supporting analytical claims with direct evidence from the data, thereby minimizing researcher bias.

Transferability was considered by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar educational settings.

### **Member Checking**

The researcher used member checking to boost trust. After transcribing the interviews, the participants received their transcripts or summaries to review. This way, they could confirm that the data really showed their thoughts and experiences. Any needed changes were made based on their feedback to keep the original meaning intact.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the actual expectations and obstacles encountered by EFL teachers at an Islamic senior high school in Indonesia under the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Participants' views regarding teaching experiences, the problems, and the support that need to be available in order to cope with this new curriculum were collected through semi-structured interviews. The focus of the results, which

also include two aspects, came from two experienced English teachers at an Islamic senior high school in Indonesia who were interviewed: the challenges confronted when implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and the needs of educators for its successful implementation.

### **Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum**

#### ***Student Engagement and Motivation***

The findings indicate that low student engagement and motivation constitute a major barrier to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ELT. This issue appears to stem not only from students' lack of interest but also from weak foundational English skills developed during earlier schooling. Teachers reported that many students entered senior high school with minimal exposure to English, which limited their confidence and willingness to participate in learner-centered activities required by the curriculum.

*One teacher noted that only a small proportion of students showed genuine interest in learning English, while the majority remained passive due to unfamiliarity with the language (P1). Another participant explained that the emphasis on voluntary and enjoyable participation in the Merdeka Curriculum made it difficult to engage students who were already reluctant learners (P2).*

These findings suggest a tension between the curriculum's student-centered

philosophy and the reality of classrooms where learners lack sufficient linguistic readiness, directly addressing the first research question concerning implementation challenges

### ***Classroom Differentiation and Flexibility***

Although the Merdeka Curriculum promotes flexibility and differentiated instruction, the findings reveal that these principles are difficult to operationalize in mixed-ability classrooms. Teachers reported that accommodating students with varying proficiency levels often required repeated explanations of basic content, which reduced instructional time for higher-achieving students.

*One participant described the need to revisit the same material multiple times as inefficient and disruptive to lesson progression (P1), while another highlighted the difficulty of maintaining learning continuity when students required different levels of support (P2).*

This challenge reflects a structural limitation in curriculum implementation, where flexibility increases teachers' instructional burden without sufficient guidance or support mechanisms, thereby constraining effective classroom differentiation.

### ***Module and Assessment Design***

The findings further indicate that limited assessment literacy and insufficient training hinder teachers' ability to design curriculum-aligned modules and assessment tools. Teachers expressed

uncertainty in developing ATP, TP, and assessment rubrics that accurately reflect student progress within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

*One participant reported difficulty interpreting achievement categories due to unclear rubric descriptors (P2), while another emphasized the lack of adequate training opportunities related to curriculum planning (P1).*

These difficulties suggest that the challenge is not merely technical but conceptual, as teachers struggle to translate curriculum guidelines into measurable classroom practices. This theme directly addresses the research question regarding pedagogical and assessment-related challenges.

### ***Limited Curriculum-Aligned Resources***

The lack of textbooks and materials that are aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum poses additional difficulties.

*"We don't any English-language books that are specific to this program. The majority are traditional, ancient materials. P1*

### ***Needs for Effective Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum***

#### ***Professional Development***

Teachers emphasized continuous professional development as a critical requirement for effective curriculum implementation. Short-term or one-off training sessions were perceived as insufficient to support the complex demands of module design, assessment

planning, and differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum (P2).

This finding suggests that sustainable implementation requires ongoing, practice-oriented professional learning rather than episodic training, directly responding to the second research question concerning teachers' support needs.

### ***Peer and Leadership Support***

Institutional and collegial support was identified as an enabling factor in curriculum implementation. Teachers perceived principal leadership as instrumental in facilitating access to resources and fostering a collaborative culture, while peer discussions provided practical problem-solving opportunities (P1).

This indicates that curriculum implementation is not solely an individual teacher responsibility but a collective institutional process requiring coordinated leadership and collaboration.

### ***Infrastructure and Facilities***

Inadequate infrastructure emerged as a significant constraint on the implementation of technology-enhanced learning promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers reported limited access to classroom-based internet connectivity, instructional technology, and updated English learning materials, which restricted their ability to conduct interactive and project-based activities.

*Although teachers demonstrated a willingness to integrate digital tools*

*such as online quizzes and visual media, the absence of reliable WiFi in classrooms hindered consistent application of these approaches (P1). Similarly, the lack of basic instructional equipment, including projectors, limited the use of visual aids to support comprehension (P2).*

These findings indicate that curriculum innovation cannot be fully realized without parallel investment in infrastructural readiness, highlighting a mismatch between curricular expectations and school-level capacity.

## **Discussion**

These findings highlight the gap between the ideal vision of the Merdeka Curriculum and the practical realities on the ground.

### ***Student-Related Challenges***

As Baker and Westrup (2002) point out, many teachers often find themselves facing classrooms where students seem passive and unmotivated. This challenge becomes even more pronounced when students come in with weak foundational English skills. It is not just about lack of interest it is often rooted in deeper issues, like limited exposure to English during their earlier years of schooling. Irham and Wiyani (2013) echo this concern, noting that when students have not had enough prior experience with the language, it can really hold back their progress. In practice, this means that even when teachers bring energy and creativity to the classroom, they



might still struggle to spark engagement if students feel lost from the start.

### *Pedagogical Challenges*

While the flexible nature of the curriculum is meant to support students individual learning journeys, in practice it can sometimes create unexpected challenges. Teachers, for instance, may find themselves repeating similar material just to keep everyone on the same page, which can eat up valuable time. Nafi'ah et al. (2023) point out that although the goal is to accommodate different learning speeds and needs, the reality is that managing a classroom with mixed proficiency levels often leaves teachers feeling stretched thin. It is a balancing act wanting to support every student, yet struggling to move forward without leaving someone behind.

### *Assessment and Planning Challenges*

Creating ATP, TP, and clear assessment rubrics is not as straightforward as it sounds many teachers find it challenging, especially when they have not received enough hands on training. It is not just about filling out templates it involves a deep understanding of how to connect learning objectives with meaningful assessments. Wuwur and Erwin (2023) highlight this issue, explaining that the structure of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments in the Merdeka Curriculum can be quite complex and difficult to implement effectively. In the classroom, this often translates to uncertainty and extra workload, as teachers

try to meet high expectations without always having the tools or guidance they need.

### *Resource-Related Challenges*

A critical barrier identified in this study is the prevalence of inadequate and obsolete instructional materials, which emerged as a primary constraint in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This finding substantiates the seminal work of Baker and Westrup (2000), who argued that the absence of appropriate pedagogical tools severely compromises a teacher's ability to deliver effective instruction during periods of curricular transition. However, within the specific framework of the Merdeka Curriculum, this resource scarcity creates a more profound pedagogical paradox. While the curriculum mandates 'differentiated instruction' and 'student-centered learning,' the reliance on outdated materials forces EFL teachers into a defensive pedagogical stance, often reverting to traditional, one-size-fits-all methodologies. In the Madrasah contexts observed, this lack of curriculum-aligned resources does not merely hinder 'successful courses' as previously suggested, but actively stifles the development of the Pancasila Student Profile—a core pillar of the current reform. Consequently, without the provision of contextualized and digitally integrated materials, the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum remains largely symbolic at the classroom level, as teachers lack the

tangible means to operationalize its progressive tenets.

### ***Professional and Institutional Needs***

The findings of this study emphasize that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in EFL classrooms is not merely a matter of administrative compliance but a profound shift in pedagogical competence. The participants' struggle with module design and assessment practices highlights the critical importance of building technical skills through intensive, localized training, which resonates with the arguments of Dheafriksa et al. (2023) regarding the necessity of professional skill-building. However, this research further reveals that in the Madrasah context, the role of school leadership is even more pivotal; it serves as the primary catalyst for creating a supportive ecosystem for innovation. This aligns with Isa et al. (2022), who suggest that effective leadership directly correlates with curriculum success. In this study, the lack of structured peer-learning activities suggests that leadership must move beyond policy dissemination to actively fostering 'Professional Learning Communities' (PLCs). Without a deliberate mandate from school leaders to collaborate, EFL teachers often work in isolation, making it difficult to translate the complex tenets of the Merdeka Curriculum into practical, student-centered lessons in Grade X classes.

### ***Infrastructure Needs***

The successful integration of technology-enhanced language learning within the Merdeka Curriculum is heavily contingent upon the availability of robust technological affordances, including high-speed internet connectivity, digital hardware, and curriculum-aligned instructional materials. This study finds that a deficiency in these areas significantly hinders the teachers' ability to implement innovative EFL pedagogies. These findings reinforce the framework established by Wulandari and Muhiddin (2019), who posit that educational delivery and student engagement are intrinsically linked to the quality of a school's physical and digital infrastructure. However, this research extends the discourse by suggesting that in the Madrasah context, infrastructure is not merely a logistical requirement but a critical determinant of 'pedagogical agency.' Without adequate resources, EFL teachers are often forced into traditional, teacher-centered methods, thereby undermining the Merdeka Curriculum's core objective of fostering student-centered, autonomous learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the challenges and support needs of EFL teachers at an Islamic senior high school in Indonesia in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Overall, the findings indicate that while the curriculum offers flexibility and opportunities for innovative, student-centered learning, its effective

implementation is constrained by pedagogical readiness, assessment literacy, and limited instructional resources.

The study further highlights that successful curriculum enactment depends not only on teachers' individual efforts but also on sustained institutional support, professional development, and adequate infrastructure. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum's potential can only be realized when teachers are systematically prepared, supported, and equipped within their specific school context.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Yesa Restika and Ira Maisarah contributed equally to the development of the study's strategic recommendations and final synthesis. Both authors collaborated in translating the research findings into a multi-level framework aimed at improving the Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

Their joint contribution involves advocating for enhanced instructional leadership and professional development for school principals, as well as formulating collaborative pedagogical strategies for EFL teachers through peer-reflective practices. Furthermore, the authors collectively synthesized field evidence to provide critical insights for policy makers regarding the need for clearer technical guidelines and differentiated instruction. Finally, both authors contributed to the conceptualization of future research directions, emphasizing the importance of diverse educational contexts and the inclusion of students' perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum reforms.

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