



EnJourMe (English Journal of Merdeka) :
Culture, Language, and Teaching of English

Journal homepage: <http://jurnal.unmer.ac.id/index.php/enjourme/index>

Pedagogical challenges in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum in English language teaching

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ARTICLE INFO

Received 07 August 2025
Accepted 12 August 2025
Available online 31 December 2025

Keywords:

Merdeka curriculum,
implementation challenges,
teachers' difficulties

DOI:

[10.26905/enjourme.v10i2.16012](https://doi.org/10.26905/enjourme.v10i2.16012)

ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the difficulties faced by English teachers in implementing the Merdeka curriculum in SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa. The main issue identified is the lack of understanding among teachers regarding the concept of Merdeka curriculum, the limitations of supporting media facilities, and the challenges in implementing flexible teaching methods. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with research subjects consisting of teacher and students in SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa. Data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, and documentation. Data analysis is conducted through the stages of data reduction, data display, and verification or conclusion drawing. Research results show that teachers have a good understanding of the basic principles of the Merdeka curriculum, but teachers face various challenges such as the lack of adequate learning media not fully understanding the mechanism of implementing the Merdeka curriculum causes teachers to still be limited in designing learning modules. In addition, students also face difficulties in adapting to the new learning approaches, especially in terms of communication and self-confidence. The conclusion of this study states that although the Merdeka curriculum has the potential to improve the quality of education, the implementation is still hindered by various obstacles. Therefore, support from the school and government is greatly needed, including more effective training and adequate provision provision. This research provides insights for policymakers in addressing the main challenges faced by teachers when implementing the Merdeka curriculum and improving teachers' personality independently.

How to cite this article (APA Style): Gulo, D., Harefa, T., Zega, R., Waruwu, Y. (2025). Pedagogical challenges in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum in English language teaching. *EnJourMe (English*

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, the education system continues to undergo updates to create education that is more relevant to the needs of the times and world developments. One of the significant steps recently taken by the Indonesian government is the implementation of the *Merdeka curriculum*. The curriculum represents a substantial shift in education in Indonesia, emphasizing a broad and flexible approach to learning (Irawati et al., 2022). The goal of this curriculum is to equip students with the abilities and expertise necessary for modern life (Ingtias et al., 2022). This curriculum is designed to provide flexibility to educators and students, allowing them to learn more flexibly, creatively, and according to their respective potential (Muna et al., 2025). The *Merdeka* curriculum is expected to transform the world of education, particularly in the realm of English language learning (Amalia, 2023). This curriculum will enhance students' abilities in critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Teachers can also become good facilitators, create an inclusive learning environment, and utilize technology to aid learning (Ni'mah et al., 2024).

Additionally, it is expected that the educational process will be tailored to real-world needs, enabling students to adapt to the global society. Therefore, teachers who serve as one of the significant factors in the success of education must gain a better understanding of how the *Merdeka* curriculum is implemented. Moreover, teachers must adjust their perspective on many new elements introduced in this new curriculum. The ideal educational goals cannot be achieved if teachers do not implement changes or apply all the principles contained in this curriculum.

Learning English with the *Merdeka* curriculum presents many challenges (Reza, et al., 2023). Although this curriculum is intended to improve the quality of education, the reality on the ground reveals that teachers face numerous challenges, ranging from understanding the concepts to applying them in the real world. Therefore, broader support is needed, including intensive training for teachers, provision of adequate facilities, and ongoing guidance, to ensure that the *Merdeka* curriculum is well implemented and has a positive impact on students.

However, many of the English teachers also face various difficulties when doing so. They must understand new ideas, incorporate innovative methods, and adjust their strategies to accommodate the diverse backgrounds of students, who are the primary actors in the learning process (Mandalawi, 2024). The readiness of teachers to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum is still an issue. Several factors influence this, including the limited number of instructions, lack of facilities, and insufficient understanding of how this curriculum can be applied in classroom life.

Amidst the technological advancements in the 4.0 industrial era in secondary schools, several challenges arise in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum (Reza, et al., 2023). They include the need for independent educational institutions, the need for consistent improvement in teachers' abilities, and the need for adequate infrastructure (Hartawati & Karim, 2024). Additionally, Asrifan et al., (2023) found several issues with the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum. This includes the competence, abilities of teachers, educators' perspectives on their roles as implementers of education, and the readiness of infrastructure, facilities, and resources. Teachers, as the frontline of education, face various challenges in implementing this curriculum. Some of the difficulties encountered include limited understanding of the curriculum concept, lack of supporting facilities, and resistance to changes in teaching methods that are more flexible and based on the potential of the students.

In the national curriculum, learning general English at the primary and secondary education levels provides students with opportunities to broaden their horizons in terms of social relationships, culture, and employment opportunities available worldwide. Their critical thinking skills can be improved by understanding this sociocultural and intercultural knowledge. All Indonesian students must have the ability to communicate effectively in English with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of learning English as a global language and aims to improve the quality of English in Indonesia. As implementers of the *Merdeka* curriculum, teachers must ensure that they are able to apply it effectively so that students can learn.

The curriculum structure will be more adjustable, and the time allocation will be planned to be completed in one year. To organize learning outcomes, also focus on important materials. Additionally, flexibility provides teachers with the opportunity to adapt a variety of teaching tools to meet the needs and characteristics of students. It became a reality, however, because the *Merdeka* curriculum is a relatively new educational program. English teachers in Indonesia must apply all rules and guidelines of the *Merdeka* curriculum. According to previous research, the primary challenge faced by English teachers in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum is the issue of preparation, which is linked to various administrative aspects of implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. Another study found that English teachers in Indonesia face many challenges when implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum.

Urgent research on the challenges of English teachers in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum is followed by efforts to improve student learning outcomes. Effective curriculum implementation is crucial for improving student learning outcomes. If teachers face difficulties in implementing the curriculum, students are

less likely to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Research on the challenges teachers face in implementing the curriculum can help identify obstacles to effective implementation and provide information on strategies to overcome them, ultimately improving student learning outcomes. A study of the difficulties faced by teachers in implementing the curriculum can also provide valuable insights into policy-making and decision-making at various levels of education, including the school level and the broader education system.

One context that reflects these challenges is SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa, a junior high school where teachers strive to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum despite various limitations. The school faces challenges such as limited facilities and restricted access to technological resources, which hinder the creation of an innovative and interactive learning environment. These constraints, combined with the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of students, often impede the practical application of the curriculum. As a result, English teachers in this setting encounter additional difficulties in adapting their teaching methods to align with the principles of the *Merdeka* curriculum. This situation highlights the need to examine more closely the specific challenges faced by English teachers in implementing the curriculum at SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa.

In implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum, teachers not only play the role of educators but also facilitators, which means they must create and deliver lesson materials in a creative and engaging manner. Teachers must be innovative to create an engaging and interactive learning environment. This makes it easier for students to understand the lesson material. By employing new methods, such as project-based learning and interactive discussions, teachers can help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The *Merdeka* curriculum values teachers' creativity and emphasizes the importance of acquiring critical thinking skills for students. Students should not only passively receive information; they must also be able to analyze, evaluate, and apply their knowledge to real-world situations. Students at SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa have diverse educational backgrounds and learning experiences, which impact their ability to adapt to the change in learning patterns. Because they are accustomed to traditional learning approaches that focus on memorization, students often struggle to adapt to more exploratory and independent learning methods.

The readiness of teachers to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum is still an issue. So, researchers determine research objectives to find out how teachers implement, difficulties of teacher in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum in the teaching and learning process at SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach. A qualitative design was selected to gain a holistic and contextual understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in a natural school setting. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives regarding their readiness, challenges, and strategic responses during the implementation process. By focusing on a specific educational context, the case study method enables a comprehensive examination of the complexities, constraints, and opportunities that arise in real-world curriculum implementation.

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative orientation to explore and describe teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, the obstacles they encounter, and the strategies they employ to address these challenges. In line with [Fadlurrohimi et al., \(2020\)](#), case study research involves field-based inquiry conducted within a particular environment to understand authentic educational practices and the dynamics that shape them.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and documentation analysis. The interviews provided detailed insights into teachers' experiences and perceptions, while the questionnaires gathered structured responses related to curriculum understanding, implementation challenges, and attitudes toward its application. Documentation was analyzed to support and triangulate the data obtained from the other instruments, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted through a systematic process involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Relevant data were selected and organized into meaningful categories and themes to facilitate interpretation. Through this process, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum within their specific institutional context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

As part of the data collection process, the researcher conducted an in-depth interview with an English teacher at SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa on April 10, 2025. The purpose of this interview was to obtain detailed information regarding the teacher's experiences and challenges in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. A summary of the interview findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Results of English teachers’ interview

Key question	Summary of teacher’s response
Understanding of <i>Merdeka</i> curriculum	Focuses on developing student potential and integrating technology.
Main challenges	Limited media, incomplete books, lack of training, reduced hours, unprepared students.
Difficulties adjusting methods	Yes, media and resource limitations hinder optimal implementation.
Availability of teaching materials	Inadequate; still using old books, limited access to resources.
Student difficulty in understanding	Yes, due to weak English foundation, low confidence, and lack of teaching media.
Impact of facilities on implementation	Significant; manual teaching due to poor infrastructure.
Socio-economic impact	Minimal; students can access mobile technology.
Training availability and effectiveness	Available but limited and mostly online; not effective.
Fellow teachers’ attitude	Positive, but still adapting and struggling to create engaging media.
School support	Some support via BOS funding plans, but not yet fully realized.
Strategies to overcome challenges	Motivation, creating a fun environment, guiding students individually.
Adapting teaching despite limitations	Uses its own resources, prints materials for students, encourages communication.
Use of technology in teaching	Uses tablets; improves understanding and student enthusiasm.
Guiding student independence	Provides personal support and motivation inside and outside the classroom.
School/government support needed	More training, resources, and adequate technological tools required.

Based on the interview results in Table 1 with the English teacher at SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa, it was found that the teacher has a good understanding of the core concepts of the *Merdeka* curriculum, which emphasizes the development of students’ potential and adaptation to technological advances. However, the teacher faces several challenges in its implementation, including limited learning media, incomplete availability of *Merdeka* curriculum textbooks, which still rely on the previous K13 books, minimal and ineffective training, and limited time for conducting learning activities.

In adjusting teaching methods, the teacher struggles due to the lack of supporting tools. Lessons are often delivered manually, and many students have difficulty understanding the material due to weak English foundations from previous schooling, low self-confidence, and communication challenges. Although students’

socioeconomic background is not a major obstacle, it still contributes to the issues. The school has planned to use *Bantuan Operasional Sekolah* funds or School Operational Assistance to develop teaching modules, but this has not been fully realized.

To address these obstacles, the teacher applies various strategies, such as motivating students, creating a fun classroom environment, and providing personal guidance to build students' confidence in using English. The teacher also uses digital tools like tablets, which help improve student engagement and understanding. Additionally, the teacher encourages students to be more independent and active in the learning process. Finally, the teacher emphasizes the need for stronger support from both the school and the government through continuous training, sufficient resources, and adequate technology to ensure the effective implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum, particularly in English language learning.

In addition to interviews, data in this study were also obtained through the distribution of questionnaires to English teachers in SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa. This questionnaire is designed to explore the understanding, experiences, and challenges faced by teachers in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum in English language learning. The distribution of the questionnaire aims to complement the interview data and obtain a more objective picture of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing this *Merdeka* curriculum. The questionnaire used in this research was designed based on field observations to ensure its relevance and accuracy. This research has been conducted over a period of one month, starting from March 18 and ending on April 17. The questionnaire form used by the researchers is based on observations made in the field. The following are the results of the questionnaire conducted by the researcher.

Table 2 – Teachers' perceived barriers and adaptation to the *Merdeka* curriculum

Statement	Response
I understand the basic concept of the <i>Merdeka</i> curriculum.	Agree
I am having difficulty in developing teaching modules.	Agree
Lack of learning facilities is the main obstacle for me.	Agree
I am already accustomed to using Project-Based Learning.	Agree
Facilities at my school support the <i>Merdeka</i> curriculum	Disagree
I have difficulty adjusting materials to students' diverse abilities.	Agree
I can assess learning outcomes as required by the <i>Merdeka curriculum</i> .	Disagree
I need further training on the <i>Merdeka curriculum</i> .	Agree
I feel stressed due to limited facilities and curriculum demands.	Agree
I keep trying to find creative ways despite limited resources.	Agree

Based on the survey results presented in the Table 2, it can be seen that teachers have a good understanding of the basic concepts of the *Merdeka* curriculum.

However, in practice, there are still several significant obstacles. One of the main challenges faced is the difficulty in developing teaching modules that align with the *Merdeka* curriculum approach, especially in adjusting the material to meet the diverse needs and abilities of students. In addition, the limitations of learning facilities in schools also pose a significant obstacle that is felt by teachers. The inadequate condition of facilities and infrastructure has made it difficult for teachers to optimize the learning process according to the principles of this new curriculum. Despite facing various limitations, the teacher still shows a positive attitude and strives to find creative ways to ensure that the teaching and learning activities continue to run well. Teachers have also become accustomed to applying project-based learning methods, which are one of the main approaches in the *Merdeka* curriculum. However, the aspect of assessing students' learning outcomes is still considered quite difficult to align with this curriculum approach, thus adding a burden to its implementation. Not only technically, this challenge also has a psychological impact, where teachers feel stressed due to the pressure from limited facilities and high curriculum demands.

Overall, it can be said that the results of this questionnaire indicate that teachers greatly need further training in order to better understand and master the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum comprehensively. Despite facing many obstacles, the enthusiasm and commitment of teachers in developing the learning process remain evident, indicating a positive potential for improvement and adaptation in the future if adequate support can be provided.

Therefore, the researchers conclude that based on the analyzed questionnaire results, it can be concluded that English teachers in SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa have an initial understanding of the *Merdeka* curriculum and are accustomed to applying several methods that align with that curriculum, such as project-based learning. However, various obstacles are still found in its implementation, especially in the preparation of teaching modules and the adjustment of materials to the diverse abilities of students. The limitations of facilities and infrastructure are also a major obstacle that impacts teacher work stress. Nevertheless, teachers continue to show enthusiasm for innovating and adapting, as well as recognizing the importance of further training to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum more effectively.

Based on the interview with the English teacher at SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa, the teacher demonstrated a solid understanding of the key concepts of the *Merdeka* curriculum, particularly its emphasis on developing student potential and integrating technology into the learning process. However, the teacher reported several major challenges in its implementation. These include the lack of learning media, the unavailability of *Merdeka* curriculum textbooks which leads to continued reliance on the previous K13 curriculum, minimal and ineffective training opportunities, and

reduced lesson hours. In addition, many students struggle to adapt to the new curriculum, especially in English learning, due to a weak foundation, low self-confidence, and communication difficulties.

The teacher also faces challenges in adapting teaching methods to align with the new curriculum due to limited resources and supporting tools. Lessons are often conducted manually, and the insufficient availability of teaching materials affects the quality of instruction. While the students' socioeconomic background is not a significant hindrance, the limited infrastructure in the school remains a major concern. Although the school has planned to allocate BOS funds for developing teaching modules, this initiative has not been fully implemented. Nevertheless, the teacher has employed several strategies to address these issues, such as creating a positive classroom environment, motivating students, offering individual guidance, and using digital tools like tablets to improve student engagement and comprehension.

Discussion

The results of the questionnaire distributed to the same teacher further confirm the interview findings. The teacher agrees with the fundamental concepts of the *Merdeka* curriculum and is accustomed to applying Project-Based Learning, which is central to the curriculum. However, there are clear difficulties in preparing teaching modules and adjusting content to meet students' diverse abilities (Latifa et al., 2023). Limited learning facilities and infrastructure were identified as significant obstacles. Additionally, assessing students' learning outcomes based on the new curriculum standards remains challenging, which increases the teacher's workload and emotional stress. Despite these challenges, the teacher shows a positive attitude and continues to seek creative ways to maintain the quality of learning. The need for further training is strongly felt, as it is crucial to improve understanding and ensure a more effective implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum (Irsyad et al., 2024). With stronger support from both the school and government in terms of training, resources, and technology, there is a strong potential for improved adaptation and successful implementation of the curriculum, especially in English language education.

The study by Awaliyah & Tiarina (2023) reveals that teachers face difficulties in understanding new concepts of the *Merdeka* curriculum, limitations in infrastructure, as well as differences in focus in assessing students. The comparison between similarities and differences is as follows (Abidin & Malisa, 2024). The similarity lies in the use of qualitative descriptive methods to explore the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. In addition to similarities, there are also differences between the studies, which lie in the integration of qualitative data from interviews and questionnaires, which provides a comprehensive overview of the

conditions on the ground. On the other hand, the limitations in the available resources pose a challenge in research. Therefore, although this research provides valuable insights, there is room for further development, especially in terms of the application of technology and more varied learning methods.

Fitra and Tiarina (2023) added the five main challenges faced by teachers, including designing lesson plans, using media, and classroom management. The similarity between the current study lies in the approach to data collection through interviews and questionnaires. On the other hand, the previous study had a more specific focus on the practical challenges faced by teachers in the field (Lestari, 2023). Additionally, the current study has more instruments, such as questionnaires that provide additional data in a specific context, which may not fully reflect the challenges faced by teachers in other schools. Therefore, although both studies have similar methods, their focus and context provide different insights into the challenges of implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum in Indonesia (Hikmawati et al., 2024; Aryati, 2023).

The findings of this study are consistent with the research of Fitra and Tiarina (2023), which reveals that teachers experience various difficulties in implementing the curriculum. One of the most prominent challenges concerns teachers' limited understanding of new terminologies and concepts such as *core competencies* and *learning objectives*. While educational theory emphasizes that a clear grasp of these concepts is crucial for achieving effective learning outcomes, many teachers struggle to interpret and apply them in classroom practice. This reflects a clear gap between theoretical expectations and the realities faced by teachers in the field (Muna et al., 2025; Karmaker & Al Hasan, 2025).

Another major issue concerns assessment practices. Although curriculum theory underscores that assessment should encompass character development and students' non-academic competencies, the findings show that teachers continue to rely on traditional evaluation methods (Annuri et al., 2025; Miah et al., 2025). This inconsistency suggests that teachers are not yet fully equipped to implement alternative assessment approaches, leading to feelings of frustration and uncertainty. It also highlights that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient; teachers need continuous practical training and access to relevant resources to successfully adapt their assessment practices.

Furthermore, the study identifies infrastructural limitations as a persistent barrier to effective implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum. Educational theory affirms that a supportive learning environment is essential for meaningful teaching and learning; however, teachers report inadequate access to textbooks, teaching aids, and technological tools. This situation reinforces the need for stronger collaboration

among schools, government bodies, and communities to ensure that theoretical principles can be effectively translated into practice (Nernere, 2024; Nurhikmah & Farani, 2025).

Interestingly, teachers' coping strategies also demonstrate the gap between theory and practice. Many teachers utilize digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok to obtain teaching materials and inspiration. Although this aligns with theoretical perspectives advocating technology integration in education, dependence on informal sources can lead to inconsistencies in instructional quality and alignment with curriculum objectives. Hence, while teachers' creativity and adaptability are commendable, they still require structured guidance and access to verified learning resources.

Overall, these findings underline the need for sustained professional development, adequate infrastructural support, and stronger institutional collaboration to bridge the divide between theoretical expectations and classroom realities. Only through such comprehensive support can the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum be optimized to achieve its intended educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Based on research conducted on the difficulties faced by English teachers in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum in SMP Negeri 4 Lahewa, researchers found that teachers still face various challenges in its implementation. Although in general teachers have understood the basic concepts of the *Merdeka* curriculum, such as the importance of developing students' potential and using a more flexible and project-based approach, however, in practice, there are still many obstacles encountered. One of the main obstacles is the limited facilities and infrastructure in schools, such as the lack of available textbooks, technological tools, and learning media that support.

In addition, teachers also face difficulties in preparing and adjusting teaching modules to meet the diverse needs and abilities of students. The lack of effective training and the insufficient support from both the school and government also contribute as hindering factors in the implementation process of this curriculum. Not only does it have a technical impact, but this condition also places psychological pressure on teachers due to the high demands of the curriculum that are not supported by adequate facilities. Nevertheless, the teacher continues to show enthusiasm and high commitment in carrying out their duties by trying various strategies, such as creating a fun learning atmosphere, motivating students, and utilizing simple and available technology.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the success of the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum, especially in the English language classroom, greatly requires

comprehensive support from various parties, especially schools and the government, so that its implementation can run more optimally and provide a positive impact on the English language learning process.

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