

## **Implementing of Kurikulum Merdeka: Challenges in Teaching English at SMPN7 Tanjungpinang**

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### **Abstract**

*There have been a lot of articles discussing how the kurikulum merdeka has made significant changes in the education field, some of them addressed the challenges in the implementation. This research focused on the challenges faced by English teachers in SMPN 7 in implementing the curriculum merdeka. This qualitative descriptive research aims to describe in detail the challenges experienced during the process of implementing the curriculum merdeka. Through semi structure interviews, this research proves the challenges experienced by teachers such as the difficulty of implementing differentiated learning due to the large number of students, the lack of technological skills for the digitise learning, and the differences in student evaluation comparing to the previous curriculum. Although they tried to overcome these problems one by one, this should be a topic of concern for researchers in other articles and education observers to evaluate the curriculum. Hopefully, this research can help educators to come up with solutions to these problems.*

**Keywords:** *challenges, English education, implementation, Kurikulum Merdeka*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The education system plays a crucial role in developing a high-quality generation and is constantly evolving. According to (Aiman et al., 2024), this ongoing change often requires updates to the curriculum to better meet the needs of students and the expectations of modern society. In Indonesia, this evolution has led to numerous curriculum revisions, with around eleven different curricula introduced since 1947. The journey began with the Rentjana Pembelajaran curriculum and has progressed to the current Kurikulum Merdeka. Each curriculum update responds to shifts in the educational landscape and societal demands, aiming to enhance the quality and relevance of education (Rosmayanti & Yahrif, 2023). The Rentjana Pembelajaran curriculum, launched in 1947, initiated structured educational reforms in Indonesia. Over the years, several curricula have been developed, including Kurikulum 1975, Kurikulum 1984, and Kurikulum 2013, each targeting specific educational objectives and challenges. The latest reform, Kurikulum Merdeka, focuses on flexibility and student-centered learning, enabling educators to adapt their teaching methods to diverse student needs (Pusat Informasi Kolaborasi Kemdikbud., n.d.). This curriculum prioritizes essential learning materials and skill development through project-based learning that encourages critical thinking and creativity among students (Ummi Salamah et al., 2024). Its goal is not only to enhance academic performance but also to foster character and competencies relevant to the demands of the 21st century (Pusat Informasi Guru Kemdikbud., n.d.).

The Kurikulum Merdeka has been widely adopted in Indonesian schools to enhance learning by allowing teachers greater autonomy in designing engaging instructional methods, supported by specialized training. Kurikulum Merdeka launched in 2022 in Indonesia, aims to enhance educational quality through flexible learning approaches but faces significant challenges in its implementation. Many teachers require additional training to adapt to the new curriculum, and there is a notable lack of resources and infrastructure, particularly in remote areas, which hampers effective execution (Almarisi, 2023). As of 2024, only 29 junior high schools in Tanjungpinang have adopted this curriculum, highlighting the disparity in access (BPMBKM, n.d.). The Ministry of Education is working to address these issues to ensure equitable access to quality education across the nation.

The Kurikulum Merdeka represents a significant shift from previous educational frameworks by prioritizing the development of student potential over traditional academic metrics (Kemdikbud, n.d.). Unlike earlier curricula, this independent curriculum eliminates the concept of superior classes, emphasizing that every student possesses unique intelligences and capabilities. It not only focuses on academic achievement but also values non-academic skills, thereby fostering a more holistic approach to education. Teachers are positioned as facilitators who must assess and adapt to the diverse learning needs of their students. This necessitates an understanding of individual student characteristics, making differentiated learning a hallmark of the Kurikulum Merdeka. According to research, this curriculum encourages educators to tailor their teaching methods and materials to suit the varied interests and abilities of students, promoting a more personalized learning experience.

Furthermore, the Kurikulum Merdeka is designed to cultivate essential skills and character development in students. As highlighted by Zulfikri Anas from the Ministry of Education, this curriculum allows teachers to choose the format, content, and experiences that best meet educational goals while respecting each student's unique learning journey (Kemdikbud, n.d.). This flexibility not only enhances engagement but also supports the exploration of students' individual potentials. Ultimately, the Kurikulum Merdeka aims to create a more inclusive educational environment where every student can thrive according to their strengths and interests. By embracing differentiated instruction, educators can better support diverse learning styles and foster a culture of respect for individual progress (Angga et al., 2022)

However, its implementation faces significant challenges, particularly in English language instruction, where limited resources and varying student readiness can hinder effective teaching. Research highlights a gap in understanding the specific difficulties English teachers encounter under this curriculum, as disparities in students' backgrounds and prior exposure to English complicate efforts to provide equitable learning opportunities. A study conducted at Muhammadiyah Junior High Schools in Yogyakarta found that while teachers generally have positive perceptions of the Kurikulum Merdeka, they still face confusion and challenges due to their lack of understanding of diverse student needs and insufficient resources for teaching English effectively (Riskianto et al., 2023). While some educators are exploring alternative assessment methods to better reflect student engagement and creativity, ongoing professional development is essential for refining teaching practices. Ultimately, addressing these challenges is crucial

for maximizing the potential of the independent curriculum and improving student outcomes in Indonesia's evolving educational landscape.

### ***Review of Related Studies***

Research on the Kurikulum Merdeka began to develop significantly. Researchers are reviewing how effective this curriculum can improve student needs and provide learning that is in line with the times. Many articles have discussed how the Kurikulum Merdeka affects the development of student potential, both in positive and negative aspects. The Merdeka Curriculum is considered difficult to implement in some schools. For example, such as inadequate facilities and the variety of student characters as found in high schools in Malang and Mataram based on previously conducted research (Reza et al., 2023)

In contrast to what was found at SMPN 5 Sangatta Utara, the obstacles found were the lack of differentiated instruction and inadequate classrooms. This is contrary to the issue promoted by the independent curriculum which is centered on differentiate and digitalize learning (Astuti et al., 2023). Student-centered learning also did not show significant progress. This is due to the lack of student participation because of their unfamiliarity with the English language.

From the information above, the researcher determined a research problem that underlies this article, 'what are the challenges faced by teachers in SMP 7 in implementing the independent curriculum?'. Among the 29 schools implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka in Tanjungpinang, SMPN 7 has been actively engaged with the curriculum for approximately three years. This research aims to evaluate the challenges faced by English teachers at SMPN 7 in delivering effective language instruction. By examining these challenges, the study seeks to provide constructive feedback for enhancing the curriculum and identifying solutions. Ultimately, this research hopes to clarify the obstacles teachers face and promote collaboration among educators and policymakers to improve the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka for the benefit of all students.

### **METHOD**

In this study, the researchers employed qualitative methods to gather data. Qualitative research is widely recognized in academic circles for its effectiveness in exploring intricate social and behavioral phenomena that quantitative approaches may overlook.(Naeem et al., 2023). By opting for this method, the participants' experiences and perspectives, ultimately enhancing the depth and quality of the study's conclusions researchers aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research findings through a descriptive lens. This approach allows for a richer exploration of.

### **Respondents**

The researchers obtained data from four respondents who are English teachers at SMPN7 Tanjungpinang. All respondents have experience in teaching English and have gone through several curriculum changes, including kurikulum merdeka.

### **Instruments**

The researchers employed semi-structured interviews as the primary

instrument for data collection, focusing on the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang. According to Boswell (2023), "semi-structured interviews are the bread and butter of qualitative research" because they combine the organization of structured interviews with the flexibility of open-ended questions, allowing for deeper insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. By utilizing qualitative methods, the researchers gained deep insights into participants' perspectives, motivations, and experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in this context as they allow researchers to "explore participant thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular topic" while also delving into personal and sometimes sensitive issues(dovetail, n.d.).

This method is characterized by a flexible interview protocol that includes predetermined questions but allows for follow-up inquiries based on participants' responses, facilitating a more natural dialogue(George, n.d.). The interview process involved selecting a purposive sample of English teachers from the school, ensuring a diverse representation of experiences and teaching practices.

### **Procedures**

Data collection from the four respondents was conducted on the same day at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang. This was carried out to avoid any bias in the information provided by the respondents. Each respondent was interviewed in a different place within a short time span. The interviews were conducted in the office and outside the classroom in order to prevent distraction from other teachers' activities. The respondents were interviewed by one member of the research team. Since there were four members of the research team and the respondents, each member of the research team interviewed one respondent. The researcher would ask the respondents a list of prepared questions. In between, the researcher would insert additional questions to follow the discussion line to explore more in-depth information, as well as to create a more relaxed atmosphere. The interview was conducted for approximately 10 minutes. During the interview process, the researcher recorded all information with an audio recorder. The results of this interview will be transcribed for data analysis to obtain research results.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a widely recognized qualitative research method that systematically identifies and interprets patterns within data. This approach allowed the researchers to code the transcripts and uncover recurring themes related to the challenges encountered by teachers. By organizing the data into meaningful categories, thematic analysis facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced in teaching English under the Kurikulum Merdeka. Thematic analysis involves several key steps, including familiarization with the data, coding, theme generation, and reviewing themes, which enhance the rigor and reliability of the findings (Naeem et al., 2023).

This flexible method is particularly effective for exploratory studies, as it enables researchers to adapt their analysis to various contexts without predefined hypotheses. By synthesizing these themes, the study aimed to provide actionable insights that could inform teacher training programs and curriculum development initiatives in similar educational settings. The systematic nature of thematic analysis

not only aids in identifying significant patterns but also contributes to a deeper understanding of complex educational challenges faced by teachers (Kiger ME, n.d.).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This research has been conducted on 12 November 2024 at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang. By using semi-structured interviews, the respondents who are English teachers have provided information about the obstacles they face in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. The results of this research were analysed with thematic analysis to provide a detailed description of what is experienced by English teachers at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang. The following section is the data that we have obtained from the semi-structure interview with 4 English teachers at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang.

### **Implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang**

According to the interview results, the Kurikulum Merdeka has been implemented at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang since the school year 2020/2021. This curriculum will be introduced in stages, beginning with grade VII and progressing to grade IX during the 2024/2025 school year. The primary methodologies employed in this implementation include project-based learning, differentiated learning, and the use of digital technologies in learning activities.

Teachers at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang prioritize student-centered learning by giving students extra chances to be active participants in learning activities. Understanding students' needs, including various learning modes such as audio, visual, and audio-visual, is critical to this implementation. This is consistent with the kurikulum ideals, which stress teaching approaches that are flexible enough to accommodate student characteristics.

#### **Extract 1:**

*ER: "We emphasize students to play an active role in learning. Students practice more than just receiving material."*

*RN: "Learning is done in accordance with the students' capacity to perceive, some are audio, visual, or audio-visual."*

This implementation demonstrates teachers' dedication to providing relevant, student-centered learning experiences. This technique is consistent with constructivism philosophy, which holds that students are active participants in their learning. However, the implementation of this Kurikulum Merdeka also shows some challenges for teachers, especially regarding the effectiveness of learning in classes with large numbers of students. There are the challenges that researchers found at SMPN 7 Tanjung Pinang based on interviewed to the teachers.

### **Challenges in Implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang**

#### ***The large number of students in one class is one of the primary challenges***

Even though the Kurikulum Merdeka offers a lot of new developments,

there are certain difficulties with its application at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang. The large number of students in one class is one of the primary challenges. It's challenging to implement differentiated learning effectively in a class of around 50 children. Large classes are challenging for teachers to manage, particularly when it comes to make sure each student receives the attention they require. Teachers also have difficulties due to the heavy administrative load. Teachers must take part in a number of extra trainings and activities as part of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which frequently cuts into their break time and preparation for lessons. Teachers' passion for teaching in the classroom may be impacted by this.

**Extract 2:**

*NR: "Teachers are burdened with additional training, resulting in less time off."  
(NR)*

*NV: "The over class is almost 50 children, so it is difficult to implement differentiation."  
(NV)*

Another problem involves adapting to technology, especially for older teachers who are unfamiliar with digital media. Some teachers struggle to understand new technology; however, they continue to try to improve the quality of learning.

***Differentiated Learning Challenges***

Differentiated learning is one of the Kurikulum Merdeka main concepts. A concept that requires teachers to modify their teaching approaches to their students' talents, interests, and needs. However, the study results suggest that differentiated learning has not functioned optimally at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang, mostly because of the large number of students in one class.

**Extract 3:**

*NV: "Differentiation theory is difficult to implement in a class with too many students."  
(NV)*

*ER: "We tailor learning to the needs of students."  
(ER)*

In big class settings, teachers have to emphasize product differentiation over process. This shows that differentiated learning works better in small groups, where teachers can provide more customized attention to each student.

***The challenge of digitalization in learning***

Digitalization has become a fundamental component of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which supports the use of technology to improve learning quality. At SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang, the majority of teachers do not have difficulty adapting to technology, particularly those who are utilized to using computers and electronic media. However, for older teachers, digitization has become a challenge that needs extra training.

**Extract 4:**

*RN: "Children are more interested in using digital. So, I don't think there are any difficulties."*

*ER: "Senior teachers learn from the younger generation to master IT."*

Students appreciate the digitization of learning and more attracted to digital media. This reflects a paradigm shift in education, in which technology is increasingly vital in supporting the teaching-learning process.

***Transition from Kurikulum 2013 to the Kurikulum Merdeka***

The change from Kurikulum 2013 (K13) to Kurikulum Merdeka is a big challenge for SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang. Teachers had to change their mindsets and learning strategies from a competency-based curriculum to a more flexible and contextualized curriculum. This process included not only curricular document revisions, but also improvements to teaching practices, assessment, and classroom management.

Teachers struggled to understand the core concepts and principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka throughout the beginning stages of implementation. One of the most significant issues was the absence of practical assistance for adopting the new curriculum. The government-provided guidebooks were frequently insufficiently detailed, so teachers needed more time to find references and produce teaching materials on their own.

**Extract 5:**

*ER: "At the beginning, we felt confused because of the significant differences between K13 and Merdeka Curriculum."*

*NR: "Teaching materials are not fully available, so we have to innovate to create relevant teaching materials."*

However, the stage of transition allows teachers to be more creative and imaginative. Teachers are urged to provide educational materials that are contextualized to the students' local conditions. For example, in Tanjungpinang, an English teacher developed a project-based learning module based on local cultural themes such as folktales and nautical traditions.

The most significant challenge for teachers adopting the Kurikulum Merdeka at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang is the large number of students in a single classroom. This has a direct impact on the efficacy of differentiated instruction and overall classroom management. Other problems, such as administrative load and technology adaptation, while substantial, can be addressed with further training and support from the school and government. Improving the quality of learning in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum needs stronger policy support, such as reducing the number of students per class, increasing teacher capacity through practical training, and providing more comprehensive teaching materials. This is necessary to guarantee that the Kurikulum Merdeka objectives are properly achieved at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang.

## CONCLUSION

This research findings the challenges faced by English teachers at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang in implementing the kurikulum merdeka. Although the curriculum supports flexibility and a student-centered approach to learning, its implementation is challenged by a number of problems, including a large number of students in a single class, a high workload for administrations, and adaptation to digitalization, particularly among senior teachers. Given the complexity of bigger training programs, implementing differentiated learning is an also significant challenge. The transition from kurikulum 2013 to kurikulum merdeka involves significant changes in mindsets and learning practices, which initially confused some teachers. Teachers were able to create contextually relevant instructional resources, such as modules based on local culture. To effectively achieve the kurikulum merdeka objectives, stronger support is necessary, such as reducing the number of students on one class, giving more relevant teacher training, and providing more complete teaching materials. These ideas have the purpose to increase kurikulum merdeka implementation, improve learning quality, and provide students with a more meaningful educational experience. The findings also provide a foundation for future study into more effective solutions to similar challenges in other educational situations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to anyone involved in our article. Especially to SMPN7 Tanjungpinang for participating as respondents in our data collection. As well as our supervisors who always provide guidance, feedback, and help us to complete our article project.

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