

The portrait of teaching English in primary school under *Kurikulum Merdeka*: Teachers' voices

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Abstract

The changes in the national curriculum in Indonesia have been regular since the independence. It is an action taken to improve the quality of education given the demands of both era and society as well as a preparation of more competitive outcomes. This study concerns teachers' perceptions of the current curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). It is important to see how it is going in the practical field, particularly in teaching English in primary schools. Six English teachers from six different schools in Indonesia took part as participants in the current study. They were interviewed in two modes, onsite and online, to share their views regarding the Kurikulum Merdeka implementation. The result shows that both schools and policymakers have done several aspects regarding the implementation. Meanwhile, along with its implementation, the challenges exist including time allotment, students' proficiency, and students' motivation. Therefore, the findings should be taken seriously, to improve the quality of teaching English at the primary level.

Keywords: English; primary school; Kurikulum Merdeka; policy

INTRODUCTION

The role of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (MoECRT) as the policy maker is to direct the educational system in Indonesia to be better in the future. One of the policies that have been taken is curriculum transformation. It is not something new since the national curriculum in Indonesia has experienced changing for so many times (Alwasilah, 2013), starting from 1945, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004 (Competency-based curriculum), 2006 (School-based curriculum), 2013 (K-13 curriculum), and the latest is *Kurikulum Merdeka* which officially implemented in 2022 academic year. As the core of education, teaching, and learning, a curriculum is essential. Indeed, it is simply seen as a set of guidelines for what teachers must do to achieve the proposed objectives (Richards, 2001). The transformation of the curriculum is inevitable (Zein, 2018) since the quality of education in a nation must be improved time after time due to the demands of civilization and the fact that we cannot stay statically in the same situation.

Kurikulum Merdeka exists to complement the previous one (2013 curriculum), where it emphasizes the outcomes to be more competitive, creative, and critical (Angga et al., 2022) in all levels of education, primary, secondary, and tertiary. The development of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* is being influenced by the spirit of Ki Hajar Dewantara who stated that the education that is conducted should form the students to be long life learners with the freedom they possess to develop themselves (Saputra & Hadi, 2022). What can be highlighted from the *Kurikulum Merdeka* is the flexibility of the school in designing, implementing, and evaluating the process of teaching and learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2022b). In other words, the school has the freedom to develop teaching and learning based on students' needs and interests. Therefore, the learning outcome could be implemented in the student's daily life since it is relevant to them (Ardianti & Amalia, 2022).

At the primary school level, despite it is only applied in the first and fourth grades now, the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has resulted in changes to its structure. English subject for instance, status in the previous curriculum (K-13) was an additional subject that could be taught based on school readiness (Zein, 2012; Zein, 2018), while, in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the attention is raised slightly where it is included as an optional subject (Kemendikbudristek, 2022a). It indicates that the government started to be more serious in preparing the future of the nation by introducing English earlier. This is a good move taken since English is central in almost every aspect of life, not only in education, but in other aspects as well (Falah et al., 2023). In terms of learning objectives or *capaian pembelajaran*, each grade has different objectives according to *Badan Standar, Kurikulum dan Asesmen Pendidikan 2022* (Kemendikbudristek, 2022a). In the first and second grades which belong to Phase A, the students are demanded to understand the language orally (listening and speaking) thus they can interact with others in the context inside and outside the classroom (students' daily life). Meanwhile, in the third and fourth grades (Phase B), the students must be able to understand and respond to the language both orally and visually. Thus, they can communicate verbally as well as non-verbal. Finally, in Phase C (V & VI grades), the students need to understand and be able to respond to the language orally, in writing, and visually in a simple English interaction.

However, despite its early implementation, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has received some responses from both researchers and practitioners. Some of them are pro and support to be firmly applied to complement the previous curriculum. On the other hand, there are some critics directed since its campaign has not been all around. Several reports on it, including perception and opinion have been published recently (Sunarni & Karyono, 2023; Saputra & Hadi, 2022; Hidayati & Nurdi, 2023). But, in regards to teaching English in primary school, it has not received the attention it deserves (Putu et al., 2021). Therefore, since the subject of English is as important as other subjects in primary school, its practices in the field should also be portrayed both from teachers' point of view. Thus, it will address the lack of information about its implementation.

METHOD

The use of a suitable approach in a study is important (Bannan-Ritland, 2003). Since this study discusses perception and phenomena in the education field, the researcher endorsed the qualitative approach as the umbrella of the method. The current study employed a case study. In addition, a case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system such as an activity, event, process, or individual (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, this type of design is fit for answering the question raised in this study which is to get information regarding *Kurikulum Merdeka* implementation.

In this study, six English teachers (three from state primary schools and three from non-government schools) located in West Java were explored based on their experiences as well as perception towards the *Kurikulum Merdeka* implementation, particularly in teaching English in primary school where two out of six teachers had multi roles as English teachers as well as classroom teachers. Their involvement was based on the background education they have, where most of them graduated from English education study programs (three graduated from English education, one from English literature, and two from primary school teacher of education). In addition, their teaching experiences were considered a plus point where they have experience teaching English for three to ten years. It is believed they have experience in curriculum transformation. In collecting the data, an in-depth interview was employed. The research was conducted through two modes, on-site and online. It is based on the teachers' availability. In addition, the interviews were recorded, thus, the researcher can analyze the information gained. For those who do the interview on-site, they offered the researcher to sit in classroom observation. Therefore, it adds the information comprehensively towards how they conduct and organize the class.

Table 1. The profile of the participants

Participant	Gender/Age	Teaching Experiences	Proficiency Level	Educational Background	School Name / Status
Teacher A	Female / 26 Years	3 Years	Intermediate	English Education	SD IT DA
Teacher B	Female / 34 Years	10 years	Lower Intermediate	Primary school education	SDN KA
Teacher C	Male / 35 Years	7 years	Intermediate	English Education	SDN SKM
Teacher D	Female / 35 years	10 years	Lower Intermediate	Primary School Education	SDN MRJ
Teacher E	Male / 27 years	3 years	Intermediate	English Literature	SD IT LM
Teacher F	Female / 30 years	5 years	Intermediate	English Education	SD A

The findings that resulted were then analyzed by using thematic analysis which concerns identification, analysis, and reporting patterns within the data (Lochmiller, 2021). Further, they recommend the six steps of the procedure in analyzing the data which

consisted of familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. In this study, the thematic analysis can be described: first, transcribing the interview data, and dealing with *Kurikulum Merdeka* implementation. After that, the data was coded based on the interesting features and then arranged into potential themes regarding the issues that were raised in the study. Finally, the report of the study was written up. Since the design of the current study employed a case study which is one of the qualitative methods, member checking was used to validate the findings (Patton, 2014). Every participant was asked to review his or her response to the question during the interview.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section concerns how the teacher views the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and what challenges they face during its implementation.

Teacher's views of the English course in *Kurikulum Merdeka*

The views about the *Kurikulum Merdeka* were explained by the teachers variously. However, in this study, the researcher limits the scope to four aspects namely socialization, Course content, the role of teacher, and advantages. Based on the interview results, four teachers admitted they understand the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Meanwhile, two teachers, were not sure about the *Kurikulum Merdeka* since they did not have a proper explanation or socialization from the organization in charge. Their honesty was reflected in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1

"The spread of information about the Kurikulum Merdeka has been massive lately, through workshops and seminars. However, teaching English in primary school, in particular, cannot be found there and is very limited. That's why I browse some websites and digital platforms like YouTube that provide its content myself. But not too deep." (Teacher A)

What is stated by Teacher A is also confirmed by Teacher D who has been an English teacher for 10 years.

Excerpt 2

"English is important and needs to be taught in primary school. But how it is taught, particularly under the new curriculum has never been discussed and prioritized. I have to dig for the information by exploring the web of Kemendikbud. It is different for the classroom teachers. (Teacher D)

Meanwhile, teacher E and Teacher F shared different views since they live in other regencies that are close to the province.

Excerpt 3

“The campaign of the Kurikulum Merdeka has been done by both the Ministry of Education and Culture, Research, and Technology (MoECRT) and the regional office of Education (Dinas Pendidikan)” (Teacher E)

Excerpt 4

“I get the information of Kurikulum Merdeka from the socialization and also from the supervisor who comes to the school.” (Teacher F)

According to the above excerpts, it is implied that the campaign of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has not been spread to all regions in Indonesia adequately. Those who teach English, have little chance of joining the socialization held by the regional office since the target of socialization places the classroom teachers at first. Even, some English teachers need to find out by themselves through digital platforms and websites to get information about the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. It is no wonder, its implementation has not been maximum yet. Since it is a new thing, the spreading of information could be the first step taken to provide understanding to the implementor and to minimize the constraints that might occur. In addition, as a vital step, it needs to be held not only once but continually in all regions (Mantra et al., 2022). Therefore, its continuity, in other words, will provide more opportunities for the teachers to comprehend its principles and procedures. On the other sides, several studies have reported and indicated that the campaign of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has been proportional (Jannah & Harun, 2023; Saputra & Hadi, 2022). However, in terms of English courses at the primary level, even though it is part of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, it has not been discussed in a bigger proportion.

In terms of material that contained an English subject at primary school, all the teachers in this study have indicated that they know where to go when implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. All of them were aware of the content available from the textbooks or other learning sources. This information was added by the interview results below:

Excerpt 5

“Kurikulum Merdeka has different content to the previous one, the material is more complex to be taught since it integrates all macro skills.” (Teacher A)

Excerpt 6

“The material contained in the new curriculum is more comprehensive. Moreover, teachers are demanded to develop students' communicative competence.” (Teacher D)

Excerpt 7

“What makes it different from the last and the current curriculum can be seen in the material provided in the textbook. In the current curriculum, we cannot teach skill by skill rather than all in one and integrated. (Teacher F)

Based on the excerpts above, it can be implied that Teachers A, D, and F agree that the content of English is more comprehensive than before in the K-13 curriculum. Its comprehensiveness can be seen as well from "*Capaian Pembelajaran*" or learning outcomes

(Kemendikbudristek, 2022a) where it includes listening, speaking, reading, analyzing, writing, and presenting. The rationale of integrative English teaching has been the concern of many scholars. Zein (2018) for example, urged that to develop young learners' communicative skills, the teacher cannot teach them the skills one by one. Therefore, teaching English in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* could provide the young learner with ample opportunities to develop their all-round skills. However, even though teaching English is more comprehensive under the new curriculum, some teachers are worried about how to implement it, given not all the teachers are capable of doing effective teaching, particularly the teachers who have no good background in English. In addition, most of the students in primary school are not proficient yet. This concern is voiced by both teachers C and E, which can be implied from the excerpts below:

Excerpt 8

"What I'm afraid of is how to integrate all the competencies needed, given the students mostly lack of English proficiency". (Teacher B)

Excerpt 9

"The content of this curriculum is more complex, especially for the students in rural areas. Moreover, for a teacher who has no background in English, it is going to be difficult. (Teacher D)

The issue related to the quality of teaching English in primary school has been there for so long (Primary et al., 2023). One of them is the availability of English teachers who can teach effectively. Most primary schools employed classroom teachers with limited English qualifications to teach the students English. Therefore, it seems hard for the teacher to conduct the quality of English learning. To address this, both schools and teachers need to battle it out and be more creative and innovative in conducting an English course (Musthafa, 2010). Furthermore, not only teachers have been the focus of teaching English in Indonesia but, the students as well. Students who lack linguistics inputs are struggling in the learning process (Artini, 2017).

Almost in every curriculum, the teacher's role has been fundamental. It is no different in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. All of the teachers in this study were in a similar point of view that the responsibility of the teacher is getting serious in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. It can be seen from the following excerpts:

Excerpt 10

"English teacher not only should be able to teach but she or he needs to be creative and innovative given the learning process in the Kurikulum Merdeka emphasize more on students' characteristics and needs."

Excerpt 11

"The role of the teacher is as a facilitator in this curriculum. It has changed from the previous paradigm where the teacher was the only learning source."

Excerpt 12

"The roles of a teacher are two, as a learning designer and a facilitator. It seems hard to facilitate the students when they have no competencies in designing the learning".

Excerpt 13

"Since all the skills should be taught, the teacher needs to find an appropriate approach given the students' ability in English is mostly poor"

Based on the excerpts above, the roles of the teacher can be categorized into two, a learning designer and a facilitator. Both are significant in creating effective teaching and learning. As a learning designer, the teacher needs to see closely what types and what is the strength possessed by the students. It will relate to the approach, method, and learning media that will fit the students in the learning process. Therefore, the opportunity for them to get involved in a course is higher (Shin, 2012; Musthafa, 2010). Meanwhile, as a facilitator, since the starting point of this curriculum is the students' interests and needs, teachers should be on the front line to accommodate what they want to be in the future and what they need to maximize the ability they have. It is in the same line with (Jannah & Harun, 2023) who explained that by facilitating the students in their learning, they will be more interactive since their needs are fulfilled. However, there is little concern about how the students approach the new learning situation in this curriculum. The students with no background in English, cannot cope with the learning. Moreover, English skills in this curriculum should be taught integrative rather than partial.

Besides the socialization, course content, and roles of teachers, the advantages of implementing this curriculum have also been a concern of the teachers in this study. Their responses were various due to the school reality they were in. Five of six teachers believed that the *Kurikulum Merdeka* would benefit the students. One teacher was in doubt since the support facility that the school has was not significant. This information can be seen in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 14

"The new curriculum and the previous one had similar objectives. But, in reality, it seems hard when the support that the teachers need to develop is not there. Thus, I'm not sure that it will work faster" (Teacher D)

However, despite the acknowledgment that the *Kurikulum Merdeka* is no different from the previous one in terms of a support system, most of the teachers believe that it fits the development of the student's ability in English mastery particularly in preparing for a better future as it is implied from the excerpt below:

Excerpt 15

"If we continue doing what is demanded in Kurikulum Merdeka and keep making some improvements, the students would have a bigger opportunity to master the English language". (Teacher B)

Excerpt 16

“What is taught in the textbook, will benefit the students because it relates deeply to the students' daily life. (Teacher E)

Based on the excerpts above, it can be seen that support from both school and policymaker are needed. It will help the teacher to focus on what they need to do which is teaching. Supporting the teacher can be done variously. As stated by Musthafa (2010), giving a chance to go to workshop and seminars are the support that the school can provide. Therefore, the teacher can accelerate their knowledge to be applied in the school. However, since the optimism about the implementation of the curriculum is rising, improvement should always be made. Thus, it can achieve the goals proposed.

Challenges of teaching English in the context of Kurikulum Merdeka

Along with its implementation, teaching English in primary schools has resulted in several challenges. These challenges are including time allotment, students' lack of participation, and students' lack of motivation.

Excerpt 17

“Time allocation has always been the issue for me in teaching English. 70 minutes in a week is not enough” (Teacher D)

Excerpt 18

“We have limited time in teaching English in primary school” (Teacher E)

Another challenging thing is students' lack of language input. Some teachers admitted desperately in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 19

“My students have various backgrounds of language. During its implementation, instead of practicing English, they prefer their mother tongue to be used” (Teacher E)

Excerpt 20

“Since the structure of the Kurikulum Merdeka is more complex, the students who do not have the basics of English are struggling. (Teacher A)

Excerpt 21

“students' motivation in learning English is various. But most of them have lower motivation towards the English language.” (Teacher C)

Excerpt 22

“Many students think that English is difficult, it is influencing the student's motivation to learn English.” (Teacher D)

Excerpt 23

"Students in rural areas have lower motivation in learning English. The previous teaching and learning contribute to this." (Teacher F)

Based on the excerpts above, time allotment, students' lack of proficiency, and low motivation are still the same challenges that were faced in the previous curriculum (Zein, 2018; Artini, 2017). In terms of time allotment, the school policy can be taken, as it is recommended by Musthafa (2010) who stated time addition outside the class can be organized as an attempt to tackle this issue. Since the school has a hidden and operational curriculum, this action will benefit the students. Thus, learning English is not limited to the classroom, the students can also have an English environment after school. Meanwhile, to solve the problems of lack of proficiency and motivation, the teacher can work together and involve the parents since they also have the responsibility for students' development (Kartel et al., 2022) which has been effective in distance learning. Therefore, it is worth trying in an offline setting.

CONCLUSION

What has been voiced by English teachers in the current study, indeed, can be acknowledged as a constructive contribution since they express their thoughts based on reality in the practical field. The findings regarding the implementation and challenges of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* could all be considered and even an evaluation by the policy makers (school, regional office, and the MoECRT of Indonesia), therefore the development of teaching English in primary school will be better in the future. However, what resulted in the current study could not be generalized to all the areas in Indonesia which is the limitation of the study. Thus, future research should look at the bigger view to produce more comprehensive findings, particularly in the implementation of teaching English in primary schools under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

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