

# Teachers' Challenges in Teaching English in Implementing of *Merdeka* Curriculum at Smp N 3 Muara Bungo

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**Abstract-** The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to improve the quality of education in Indonesia by promoting flexibility, student-centered learning, and a competency-based approach. The implementation of this curriculum has posed significant challenges for teachers, especially in teaching English. Teachers are required to adapt to the diverse abilities of students, integrate new learning methods and technologies, and manage limited school facilities. The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges faced by English teachers at SMP Negeri 3 Bungo in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, where these conditions create specific obstacles that make its effective implementation more challenging. This study used a descriptive qualitative method to understand the phenomenon under study in depth. The research participants were three English teachers at SMP N 3 Muara Bungo who had been using the Merdeka Curriculum for approximately three years. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with the teachers. This study used audio recordings. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with teachers. This study used audio recordings. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques, which involved coding data to identify themes and sub-themes related to the challenges faced by teachers in the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings revealed the first challenge: a lack of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. Second, limitations in infrastructure and technology. Third, variations in student abilities. Fourth, diverse learning evaluations, which pose a challenge because student attitudes have not improved since the curriculum was implemented. Finally, administrative burdens and time constraints.

**Keywords** – Teacher` Challenges, Teaching English, Merdeka Curriculum

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## I. Introduction

The Merdeka Curriculum is a policy initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek, 2022) that emphasizes substance-based and student-centered learning. This curriculum provides flexibility in the learning process, allowing students more time to understand concepts, strengthen competencies, and develop skills through project-based and contextual approaches (Ndari, 2023; Rina et al., 2024). It is guided by the Pancasila Student Profile, which promotes holistic student growth and character development.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, however, presents challenges, particularly for English teachers. English, as a global language, requires communicative, contextual, and student-oriented teaching strategies. Teachers are expected to adapt to new instructional modules and integrate innovative teaching methods, such as project-based learning, digital media, and differentiated instruction (Dedi et al., 2023). Despite this flexibility, teachers often face difficulties due to limited preparation, insufficient training, lack of facilities, and variations in student abilities (Marlina, 2022; Kurniati, 2023).

Several studies highlight these issues. Suryani (2023) found that many teachers struggled to align lesson plans, classroom activities, and assessments with the

principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Jasrial et al. (2023) reported that differences in students' competencies posed significant challenges for teachers in creating inclusive learning. Meanwhile, Pratikno et al. (2022) emphasized that while the curriculum provides flexibility, its unclear implementation guidelines often confuse teachers. These findings suggest that teacher readiness and support are critical factors in successful implementation.

At SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo, the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented since 2022. Based on observations and teacher experiences, several challenges emerge, such as variations in student English proficiency, limited school facilities, administrative burdens, and insufficient professional development opportunities. Teachers must not only adjust their teaching methods but also deal with psychological and social pressures due to high expectations from schools and society. These conditions underline the need for further investigation into the challenges faced by English teachers in this school context.

Based on this context, this study addresses the following research question: *What challenges do English teachers at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo face in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum?*

The main objective of this study is to explore and analyze the challenges experienced by English teachers in applying the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo, thereby providing insights for improving future curriculum implementation strategies.

## II. Methodology Section

This study used a descriptive qualitative method with a case study design. This method was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly the challenges faced by English teachers at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo. The qualitative approach allows researchers to explore teachers' experiences, perspectives, and strategies within a specific social context (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) English teachers at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo, (2) having at least two years of teaching experience in the Merdeka Curriculum, and (3) willing to participate in the research.

Based on these criteria, three English teachers were selected as participants because they had direct experience in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the classroom.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo, Bungo District, Jambi Province, from February to April 2025. This school was chosen because it is one of the public junior high schools that has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum since 2022 and has conditions relevant to examining teachers' challenges, such as limited facilities and variations in student abilities.

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the main instrument. To maintain data systematization, semi-structured interview guidelines, observation sheets, and supporting documents (teaching modules, lesson plans) are also used. The interview guidelines contain open-ended questions about teachers' experiences, challenges, and strategies in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

The research process refers to Creswell's (2014) stages, namely:

- (1) formulating the research focus.
- (2) reviewing the literature.
- (3) formulating research questions, (4) collecting data through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis.
- (5) analyzing data thematically, and (6) compiling a descriptive research report.

Data collection techniques were obtained through in-depth interviews with three English teachers, classroom activity observations, and analysis of learning documents. Interviews were conducted semi-structured to allow flexibility in following participants' responses while remaining focused on the research topic (Creswell, 2014).

Data analysis techniques were conducted using a thematic approach. The analysis stages included: (1) organizing data, (2) reading all data, (3) coding, (4) developing categories and themes, and (5) interpreting data by relating it to previous theories and research (Creswell, 2014).

### **III. Results**

Findings show that one of the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo is the availability of infrastructure and technology. Teachers highlight both the potential and challenges in integrating technology into classroom learning practices.

#### **1. Technology to Support English Learning**

Teachers recognized that technology plays an important role in supporting English learning under the Merdeka Curriculum. Teacher HR mentioned the use of digital applications, online courses, YouTube, and interactive tools such as Kahoot and Quizizz to engage students in learning. Similarly, Teacher FW utilized online platforms such as Google Classroom, Moodle, and Edmodo, as well as podcasts and digital content, although some initiatives remain at the planning stage. In contrast, Teacher AW highlighted the limitations faced by students, noting that not all students have access to smartphones, which prevents equal participation in digital-based activities such as online quizzes.

#### **2. Technical Constraints**

Technical challenges were also identified as a significant barrier. Teacher HR admitted to difficulties in using digital applications such as Quizizz and relied on colleagues for guidance. Teacher FW reported solving technical issues by searching for solutions online or using alternative software. Likewise, Teacher AW explained that support from ICT teachers and peers was crucial in overcoming technical difficulties. These findings indicate that while teachers are open to using technology, they still rely heavily on peer support and trial-and-error learning.

#### **3. School Support**

School support was found to be a key factor in facilitating the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teacher HR emphasized the importance of teacher training, provision of teaching materials, and infrastructural support in motivating teachers and students. Teacher FW also highlighted the role of flexible curriculum policies, adequate resources, and professional training in enabling creative and innovative teaching. Teacher AW, meanwhile, appreciated the school's time allocation for supporting teachers. These findings suggest that institutional support contributes significantly to the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.

### **4. School Facilities**

The availability of school facilities was reported as both a strength and a challenge. Teacher HR noted that the school had provided internet access, books, and projectors (infocus) to support teaching. Teacher FW agreed but pointed out the absence of a language laboratory, which could further enhance English learning. Teacher AW highlighted the insufficiency of projectors, as the number available was far lower than the number of classes, making it difficult for all teachers to use them simultaneously. These findings indicate that while facilities are generally available, some limitations remain, particularly regarding language-specific resources.

This study explored the challenges faced by English teachers at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings are discussed based on emerging sub-themes: teachers' understanding, infrastructure, student diversity, evaluation, and administrative workload.

### **IV. Discussion**

#### **1. Lack of Understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum**

The results of the interviews show that the views of English teachers at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo regarding the Merdeka Curriculum vary greatly. Teachers recognize that this curriculum emphasizes flexibility, contextually relevant learning, and a student-centered approach, but there are still challenges in its implementation. In terms of student-centered learning, teachers see opportunities to increase student participation in communicating in English and provide space for teachers' creativity in adapting teaching methods and materials.

Regarding teacher training, experiences vary greatly: some say that online training is useful, while others feel that the training is not interactive enough and does not provide in-depth understanding. In terms of curriculum adaptation, teachers are trying to adapt through training in pedagogy, technology utilization, and collaboration, even though they are still hampered by time constraints and the number of students. Overall, teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum is still inconsistent, influenced by diverse training experiences and challenges in meeting student needs.

The study revealed that teachers still struggle to grasp the principles and practical application of the Merdeka Curriculum. Although they acknowledged its student-centered orientation and flexibility, implementation often reverted to conventional practices. According to Fullan's (2007) *Educational Change Theory*, meaningful transformation requires teachers' deep understanding of change, not just policy adoption.

These results align with Suryani (2023), who found that limited understanding and lack of resources hinder curriculum application, and with Reza et al., who noted teachers' low confidence and skills. Unlike those studies, this research emphasizes the importance of contextual factors, such as school culture, in shaping teachers' adaptation.

## **2. Limited Infrastructure and Technology**

The interview results show that infrastructure and technology limitations pose a major challenge in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo. Teachers utilize online platforms such as YouTube, Google Classroom, Kahoot, and Quizizz to support learning, but not all students have devices, so access is not yet equitable. Technical obstacles also frequently arise, but teachers try to be adaptive by finding their own solutions, asking colleagues for help, or using alternative applications. School support in the form of teacher training, provision of teaching materials, internet, and projectors is quite helpful, although facilities are still limited, especially the number of projectors and the lack of a language laboratory. Overall, technology has proven to be important in supporting English language learning, but limitations in student devices, technical barriers, and inadequate school facilities remain obstacles to the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Infrastructure and technological constraints were identified as major barriers. Although teachers attempted to integrate digital tools (Google Classroom, Quizizz, YouTube), limited devices and poor internet access restricted participation. The lack of facilities such as projectors or language labs further reduced effectiveness.

Fullan (2007) stresses that innovation requires systemic support, including facilities. Similar findings were reported by Herizal et al., who highlighted rural schools' infrastructure limitations, and Suryani (2023), who noted resource shortages. This study adds evidence

from a semi-urban school context, showing how unequal access among students hampers equitable learning.

## **3. Variations in Student Abilities**

The interview results show that variations in student abilities pose a major challenge in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The use of Project-Based Learning (PBL) is considered effective in increasing student creativity and engagement, although some teachers consider the rigid modules to limit flexibility. Students' attitudes are generally positive, as seen in their increased independence and communication, but some are still unmotivated. In terms of learning readiness, differences in background mean that some students are ready, while the majority are still passive. To overcome this, teachers try to apply differentiated learning, although some still use uniform assignments due to limitations. In positive reinforcement, teachers face constraints of time, facilities, and diverse strategies, including the use of different reinforcements. Classroom management is also viewed differently: some teachers believe flexibility increases student motivation, while others see no significant change. Overall, the variation in student abilities requires teachers to continuously adjust their strategies, although the differences in approach indicate real challenges in achieving the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Teachers encountered significant gaps in students' readiness and English proficiency. While some students were independent learners, others remained passive. Efforts to apply project-based and differentiated learning were constrained by time and resources.

This finding resonates with Astuti (2022), who argued that differentiated instruction remains difficult for teachers to implement. Reinforcement strategies also varied: some teachers used positive encouragement, while others relied on conventional discipline, echoing Wardhani's (2023) observation that school culture influences classroom management.

## **4. Diverse Learning Evaluation**

The evaluation of learning in the Merdeka Curriculum remains a challenge for English teachers at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo. Teacher HR believes that the main obstacle lies in the low motivation and interest of students, which has a direct impact on learning outcomes. Teacher FW highlights external constraints

such as limited time, infrastructure, teacher understanding, and disparities in regional capabilities and digital competencies. Meanwhile, Teacher AW criticized the loss of character assessment that was previously included in K13, so that evaluation now emphasizes cognitive aspects.

Overall, the challenges of evaluation are influenced by internal factors (student motivation), external factors (facilities, understanding of the curriculum, and teacher competence), and changes in the assessment system that do not yet fully support the goals of holistic education.

Assessment posed another challenge. Teachers struggled to design authentic evaluations that reflected both cognitive and character outcomes, limited by time, resources, and understanding of the new framework.

Fullan (2007) emphasizes that change requires systemic support; without it, assessment cannot capture holistic progress. This is consistent with Suryani (2023), who identified authentic assessment difficulties, and with Reza et al., who noted teachers' lack of competence in evaluation methods.

#### **5. Administrative Burden and Time Constraints**

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to manage a heavy administrative workload alongside their teaching duties, resulting in time constraints. HR and FW teachers emphasize the use of technology, collaboration, and simplification of reports to lighten the workload, while AW views administration as an obligation that is carried out alongside teaching. Flexible learning hours allow for adjustments to student needs, but often add to responsibilities and cause schedule conflicts.

Continuous curriculum changes also require consistent adaptation, which, according to teachers, requires support from schools and education agencies. In terms of time management, teachers' strategies vary: some use structured schedules, digital applications, or flexible approaches depending on the situation. Overall, although teachers strive to balance their tasks through technology, collaboration, and time management, administrative burdens and time constraints remain the main obstacles in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Teachers reported being overwhelmed by administrative tasks such as filling online forms and

uploading training reports, which reduced their teaching focus. Some adapted through technology use and collaboration, but others saw it as a mere burden.

According to Fullan (2007), successful change requires balancing structural demands with support for teachers' core role. This study confirms Suryani's (2023) finding that heavy workloads hinder adaptation, while highlighting the imbalance between professional development and teaching time.

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo is constrained by limited teacher understanding, unequal access to infrastructure, diverse student abilities, challenges in evaluation, and heavy administrative demands. These results reinforce previous studies (Reza et al., Herizal et al., Suryani, Astuti, Wardhani) while offering contextual evidence from a semi-urban school. Strengthening teacher capacity, improving infrastructure, and reducing administrative burdens are critical to ensuring effective and sustainable curriculum implementation.

#### **V. Conclusion**

This study examined the challenges faced by English teachers at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Bungo in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings indicate that teachers still face difficulties in fully understanding the objectives and principles of the curriculum, which limits the application of innovative and student-centered teaching strategies. In addition, inadequate facilities and unequal access to technological resources create structural barriers to the use of digital-based learning methods.

Another key challenge lies in the variation of student abilities. Differences in readiness, motivation, and English proficiency hinder the effective application of differentiated and project-based learning. Assessment practices are also constrained by limited resources, time pressures, and insufficient mastery of authentic evaluation, resulting in evaluations that fail to comprehensively capture students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Furthermore, excessive administrative demands place an additional burden on teachers and reduce their focus on core teaching activities. These findings

demonstrate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires not only teacher adaptability but also systemic support. Adequate training, improved facilities, simplified administrative procedures, and sustained mentoring are essential to optimize the principles of flexibility, contextual relevance, and student-centered learning envisioned in the curriculum.

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