EFL Teachers’ Perceptions and Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

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| **Article Info** |  | **ABSTRACT** |
| ***Article history:***  Submitted Jun xx, 201x  Accepted Jul xx, 201x  Published Aug xx, 201x |  | This study investigates English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers’ perceptions and the challenges they face in implementing Indonesia’s Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) Curriculum. Using a mixed-methods design, the study surveyed 50 vocational high school English teachers and interviewed six selected participants in Cilacap, Central Java. Quantitative data were gathered using structured questionnaires based on three core indicators—concept, content, and implementation—while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews focusing on personal experiences and contextual obstacles.Results indicate that the majority of teachers perceive the curriculum positively due to its flexibility, student-centered approach, and potential to foster learner autonomy and 21st-century skills. Teachers appreciate the opportunity to adapt teaching methods and content to the needs of their students, making learning more relevant and meaningful. However, challenges such as limited infrastructure, teacher readiness, lack of continuous professional development, and student motivation remain significant obstacles. These issues are particularly prominent in vocational school contexts, where students often lack experience with independent learning.The study highlights the importance of ongoing support, collaborative professional environments, and practical training to ensure the successful and equitable implementation of the curriculum. Recommendations are made to enhance policy execution and empower teachers as key agents of educational transformation. |
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1. **INTRODUCTION**

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum represents one of the most significant educational reforms in Indonesia’s recent history. Introduced in 2019 by the Ministry of Education and Culture, this curriculum marks a shift from a rigid, centralized, and content-heavy system toward a more flexible, student-centered, and autonomy-driven approach. The term "Merdeka Belajar," meaning "Freedom to Learn," underscores the philosophical foundation of this reform: empowering students to take ownership of their learning while granting teachers the autonomy to tailor learning experiences to the local context and learners’ individual needs.

This reform responds to longstanding issues in Indonesia’s education system, such as low student engagement, uneven learning outcomes across regions, and an overemphasis on rote learning. Studies have shown that many Indonesian students struggle with basic literacy and numeracy, while critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity—skills essential for the 21st century—are often neglected (Kemendikbudristek, 2021). As such, Merdeka Belajar seeks not only to improve educational outcomes but also to transform how learning is conceptualized and delivered in schools.

In the Merdeka Curriculum framework, the roles of both students and teachers are redefined. Students are no longer viewed as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in their own learning journey. Teachers, on the other hand, are positioned as facilitators, mentors, and curriculum designers. They are expected to develop and implement teaching strategies that foster critical inquiry, contextual relevance, and inclusive participation. These expectations demand a high level of pedagogical adaptability and professional commitment.

For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers, especially those teaching in vocational high schools, the stakes are particularly high. The shift to Merdeka Belajar requires not only changes in instructional strategies but also rethinking how English is taught to students whose focus is often on practical, job-related skills. Teachers must design lessons that are not only communicative and engaging but also aligned with the learners' vocational goals. This dual demand presents unique challenges that merit closer investigation.

Furthermore, the success of any curriculum reform depends heavily on how it is perceived and interpreted by frontline implementers—teachers. Perception affects acceptance, and acceptance influences implementation. If teachers do not fully understand or support the underlying principles of a curriculum, they are less likely to implement it effectively (Fullan, 2007). Thus, investigating teachers' perceptions provides crucial insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum as experienced on the ground.

Implementation, however, is rarely smooth. Numerous challenges have been reported in relation to Merdeka Belajar, ranging from lack of resources and training to resistance to change and insufficient policy support. Infrastructure disparities between urban and rural schools also contribute to unequal implementation. While some schools are able to embrace the digital, project-based learning promoted by the curriculum, others struggle with basic access to technology and support systems. The question arises: How do teachers navigate these conditions, and to what extent are they able to internalize and actualize the curriculum's ideals?

Given this context, this study aims to explore how EFL teachers in vocational high schools perceive the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and what specific challenges they face during its implementation. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of teachers' lived experiences with this reform. It is hoped that the findings can inform policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators in refining implementation strategies and enhancing support mechanisms.

In sum, this research is grounded in the belief that meaningful educational reform must engage those who enact it daily—teachers. Understanding their perspectives is not only relevant for evaluating the current reform but also essential for shaping future educational policy in Indonesia.

Research Questions:

1. How do EFL teachers perceive the Merdeka Belajar curriculum?
2. What challenges do they encounter in implementing it?
3. **METHODOLOGY**

This research employed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected through surveys, while qualitative insights were gathered via semi-structured interviews. This combination allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both general trends and deeper individual experiences. Participants Fifty English teachers from vocational high schools (SMKs) in Cilacap Regency participated in the survey. Six teachers were selected for in-depth interviews—three from public schools and three from private institutions. Criteria for selection included minimum five years of teaching experience and participation in Merdeka Belajar curriculum training. Instruments and Data Collection A structured questionnaire based on Ghavifekr et al. (2016) assessed perceptions across three indicators: concept, content, and implementation. Likert-scale questions measured agreement levels. Interviews focused on personal experiences, contextual challenges, and reflections on curriculum execution. Data Analysis Survey results were analyzed descriptively to determine overall trends. Interview data were coded thematically, focusing on recurring challenges and insights related to curriculum adaptation and teaching practices.

1. **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**3.1 Teachers’ Perceptions**

The research findings indicate that the majority of EFL teachers in Cilacap Regency have a favorable perception of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. This was measured through three indicators: concept, content, and implementation. Based on the survey involving 50 vocational English teachers:

1. Concept: 70% of teachers positively responded to the Merdeka Curriculum’s philosophical foundation. They agreed that it encourages freedom in learning, builds student character, fosters creativity, and promotes active participation. Teachers highlighted that the concept empowers students to explore knowledge based on their potential and interests.
2. Content: 75% of teachers agreed that the curriculum’s content is beneficial for both learners and educators. It allows the selection of relevant themes and methodologies aligned with the real-world context. Respondents emphasized that the curriculum is more practical and less rigid, enabling better contextualization of materials.
3. Implementation: 73% of teachers confirmed that they have more autonomy in determining learning strategies and evaluating student progress. Many appreciated the shift toward project-based learning, inclusive instruction, and 21st-century skills development.

Interviews supported these findings. For instance, one teacher (T1) stated that the concept is effective in promoting student creativity and lightening the burden of lesson planning. Another teacher (T2) expressed appreciation for the curriculum's flexibility, stating that it empowers institutions and individuals to tailor learning activities.

Nevertheless, not all responses were uniformly positive. About 30% of teachers expressed skepticism or disagreement with aspects of the curriculum, citing lack of readiness or misalignment with existing school culture. Some expressed concern that freedom without structured guidance can lead to confusion or inconsistency in learning objectives.

**3.2 Challenges in Implementation**

Despite the generally positive reception, several significant challenges emerged, categorized under human resources, mindset, and infrastructure:

1. Quality of Human Resources: 78% of teachers indicated that the effectiveness of implementation is heavily influenced by teacher competence. Teachers who are less experienced or unfamiliar with active learning strategies struggle more with the transition to Merdeka Belajar.
2. Mindset Issues: 79% of respondents acknowledged that teachers’ reluctance to abandon traditional teaching methods is a barrier. As one teacher (T4) mentioned, “Our mindset becomes a limitation. We want to be idealistic, but we hit practical roadblocks.”
3. Facilities and Infrastructure: 76% of respondents cited the lack of ICT tools, internet access, and learning media as critical limitations. Especially in rural or underfunded schools, these issues are compounded by limited budget and logistical support.
4. Time Constraints: Teachers reported difficulty in preparing individualized teaching materials, authentic assessments, and project-based activities. Many noted that these tasks are more time-consuming than conventional lesson planning.
5. Student Readiness: Several teachers observed that vocational school students, in particular, are not accustomed to independent learning. They often lack motivation, confidence, and prior experience with active engagement methods.

These results suggest that while teachers largely accept the reform conceptually, they need stronger institutional support to implement it effectively.

1. **CONCLUSION**

The results of this study offer valuable insights into the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, especially in the context of EFL teaching at vocational high schools. The generally positive perceptions from teachers demonstrate that the philosophical shift toward flexibility and learner-centeredness is welcomed. This reflects a broader recognition among educators of the need for change in Indonesia’s educational landscape.

The alignment of these findings with the conceptual framework of the curriculum reinforces its relevance. As outlined in the literature, the Merdeka Curriculum draws from constructivist principles, in which students construct meaning through active engagement, exploration, and contextual experience (Wiggins & McTighe, 2017). Teachers' support for the curriculum's emphasis on student agency, critical thinking, and real-world relevance suggests that these ideals are being understood and appreciated at the grassroots level.

However, transforming theory into practice remains a persistent challenge. Despite the high acceptance of the curriculum’s vision, implementation difficulties reveal a critical gap between policy design and practical application. This gap is common in large-scale educational reforms and is often attributed to insufficient change management (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010). In this case, the lack of structured teacher support, unclear instructional models, and inconsistent infrastructure provision become significant obstacles.

Moreover, professional development continues to be a central issue. The findings indicate that many teachers are still unsure how to translate Merdeka Belajar's principles into effective instructional strategies. As suggested by Ghavifekr et al. (2016), systemic change in education depends on comprehensive and sustained teacher training. The interviews conducted in this study confirm that one-time workshops or brief socializations are insufficient; teachers need long-term mentoring, collaborative learning spaces, and continuous performance feedback.

Mindset transformation is another complex aspect of this reform. Teachers’ resistance is often rooted not in opposition to change, but in uncertainty, workload stress, and lack of confidence. The shift from teacher-led instruction to student-centered inquiry requires a redefinition of professional identity. Teachers are not just knowledge transmitters but facilitators, designers, and coaches—a role shift that demands both pedagogical competence and psychological readiness.

In vocational high schools, the challenges are compounded. Students in these institutions often have lower academic motivation and limited exposure to autonomous learning. Many EFL teachers in the study mentioned difficulties in engaging students who prioritize practical, skill-based learning over abstract language study. This is supported by research on vocational education, which shows that learners benefit from more structured, purpose-driven instruction that connects language with real-life tasks.

Technological disparity also plays a critical role. The Merdeka Curriculum envisions a classroom enriched with digital tools and collaborative platforms. However, such conditions are far from universal. Teachers from under-resourced schools struggle with internet access, outdated equipment, and the absence of support staff. These limitations hinder their ability to design innovative projects or facilitate blended learning.

On a more optimistic note, the findings reveal that when teachers are supported, empowered, and given space to collaborate, they can become change agents. Several respondents mentioned starting peer-learning communities, co-designing teaching modules, and using reflective practices to improve their instructional strategies. This shows that bottom-up innovation is possible, even within a top-down reform.

Therefore, a sustainable approach to implementing Merdeka Belajar must consider the full ecosystem: policy clarity, school readiness, teacher capacity, student characteristics, and community engagement. It should also embrace adaptive implementation models—those that allow for gradual scaling, experimentation, and localization.

In sum, while the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum marks a progressive turn in Indonesia's education reform, its success hinges not only on conceptual acceptance but also on grounded, context-sensitive execution. It requires an integrated effort from stakeholders at all levels—government, schools, teachers, and communities—to ensure that the ideals of freedom, creativity, and student-centered learning are not only promoted but practiced.

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