

The Implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum for the Seventh-Grade English Class

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Abstract

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum was established to promote Indonesia's educational goal and as part of attempts to restore learning. It is a more flexible curriculum framework that focuses on necessary information while also building students' character and competence. However, not all schools have implemented the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum based on its principles. Therefore, this study aims to know the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for seventh-grade English lessons in Gunungkidul. This study employed a qualitative method to get the data from three English teachers. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations. The results of the study revealed that the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in grade seven junior high schools in Gunungkidul has not fully followed the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum concept. Only one of the three teachers implemented the mandated curriculum according to the concept. Others demonstrated to have implemented several concepts, such as giving diagnostic tests to grade seven students, student-centered learning, teaching according to students' learning styles and abilities, and implementing formative and summative assessments following the concept of an independent curriculum. Nonetheless, the teachers enthusiastically support the adoption of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for a variety of reasons, including material flexibility, applicability to real-world demands, and the development of creativity.

Keywords: *Backward design approach, English teacher, Merdeka Belajar curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum has arguably played a significant role in the provision of important education for the common good. Curricular changes are a necessity for a nation, given the societal dynamics, dramatic labor markets, technological advancements, and geo-economic and political competitions (UNESCO, 2022). Scholars in the field of curriculum inquiries have argued that the tensions in the curriculum changes lie in the modernist views vs. postmodernist views (Slattery, 2012; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017).

On the one hand, curricular changes may refer to mere technicalities in a modernity mode, such as providing a guide for organizing, directing, and guiding learning activities (Tyler, 2013; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). On the other hand, curricular changes may delve into a fundamental shift, whose focus is on the emancipatory end of the deprived groups to raise humanity (e.g. Giroux, 2010; Taubman, 2010; Slattery, 2012; Budiraharjo, 2015; Sutono & Budiraharjo, 2020).

Since its independence in 1945, Indonesian government, through the Ministry of

Education and Culture (MoEC), has mandated major national curricular reforms, such as 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2003, 2003, 2013, and the latest is the 2020, which was dubbed as *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. Curricular inquiries suggest that curriculum reforms are imperative for a nation, in order to respond to dynamic work requirements, technological advancements, social-cultural shifts, and economic changes (Ornstein & Hunkin, 2017; Sadewa, 2022). The setback of education is closely linked to the inability of the curriculum to achieve the needs of a certain era. Consequently, the curriculum must always be examined and updated in response to the knowledge, progress, and expectations of the market (Baharullah et al., 2022). *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, issued during the Covid-19 outbreak, appears to have come from diverse considerations, including the potential of learning loss the pandemic as well as the huge burden of content-based curriculum which perpetuates rote-learning and memorization as the major mode of learning.

According to Kemendikbud (2022) to support Indonesia's educational vision, and as part of efforts to restore learning, the *Merdeka Curriculum* (which was previously referred to as the prototype curriculum) was developed as a more flexible curriculum framework, while also focusing on essential materials and developing the character and competence of students. Students have more freedom in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum because they will have more opportunities to explore, carry out discussions more freely, and do outing classes instead of sitting while their teacher teaches (Pertiwi & Pusparini, 2021). Moreover, the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum also reduces the administrative burden on teachers because they can directly adopt and apply various examples of teaching tools available on the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform or develop their own based on the

characteristics of the school and the needs of students (Kemendikbud, 2022).

Even though the curriculum has officially been sanctioned in 2020, not all educational institutions have implemented the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for a number of reasons, such as a lack of training received by teachers, limited exposure to the curriculum policy, and limited resources available for deployment. Accordingly, many schools are not ready to implement it. In this case, teachers' concerns about the new curriculum and its implementation in schools vary. Due to their understanding and management situations in their schools, teachers may have varied worries about implementing new curricula and adapting new practices. Some teachers may be eager to contribute to the innovation process, while others may be resistant to change (Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023). This happens when they are faced with changes in the nature and beliefs they are based on previous experience and practice. Indeed, the implementation of this curriculum depends on school readiness, however, reflect on curriculum changes before, in the end, the government requires schools to implement the curriculum (Rusmiati et al., 2023).

Curricular transformations among teachers are not a simple task since teachers must have a deep and full comprehension of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum concept, as well as the necessity to change their perspective about reforms in this curriculum, to master what is *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and how the system structure works (Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023). The desire of teachers to innovate and develop themselves in dealing with curriculum changes must also be regarded. If the teacher is unwilling to make changes and is unable to put the principles in this curriculum into practice, the educational goals that are intended will not be met ideally.

Analysis related to the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in English lessons has been studied in various research.

Wilson and Nurkhamidah (2023) revealed that teachers who implement the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum were obliged to do a needs analysis in order to maintain a range of students' ability levels in the classroom. This enabled them to develop adaptable teaching programs that encompassed the entire learning periods, such as phases E and F. This curriculum allows teachers and students to design their own teaching and learning activities using ICT resources, such as YouTube videos and other internet sources, to enhance learning material and facilitate learning in class. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum emphasizes character development through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). The goal of this project was to help students build their identity, philosophy, Indonesian aspiration, and ability to meet 21st-century difficulties. Despite the curriculum's benefits, the teacher encountered significant difficulties while implementing it. One of the most important is controlling the differentiation of students' skill levels within a class. Teachers need to use effective ways to steer all students toward the same learning goals. The assessment procedure of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum will measure students' character development, good behavior, and enthusiasm to learn in addition to their academic performance. The findings imply that specific training for teachers in applying the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is required to address the issue raised. Moreover, Ferdaus and Ferdaus & Novita (2023) research showed that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum has been widely applied at one of the vocational high schools in Sidoarjo, especially in English lessons. However, challenges come as perspectives

shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. All strategies employed in the English learning process have resulted in a student-centered approach, which is also aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile goals. Furthermore, the freedom concept supported in this mandated curriculum has been able to inspire students and teachers to optimize relevant teaching and learning processes.

Meanwhile, a study by Pertiwi and Pusparini (2021) discovered that not all English teachers understand the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum concept. The application of a one-page lesson plan (RPP 1 Lembar) barely met the expectations of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. However, all participants were enthusiastic about the implementation of this new curriculum and eager to learn more. Although studies related to the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in English lessons have been thoroughly investigated, no studies have researched the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in English lessons in Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta. To fill up this gap, the researcher aims to find out the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for seventh-grade English lessons. The following research question aimed at this study: How was the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for seventh-grade English class?

METHODOLOGY

This study is intended to investigate the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for the seventh-grade English lesson. A qualitative descriptive method was applied in this research (Creswell, 2014). The researcher obtained the data at the three different public schools in Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta. The researcher chose three different public schools, one of the schools is a *Sekolah Penggerak* which is included in the

Mandiri Belajar level and the other two schools are included in the *Mandiri Berubah* level. The first school becomes *Sekolah Penggerak* which is located in the town center (urban area), the second is not too far from the town center (suburban area), and the third is quite far from the town center (rural area). The researcher considered this because the researcher wanted to know the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum at different levels and areas.

This study involved three participants. The first participant was a novice female English teacher who has been teaching for two years at a school in the urban area. The second participant was a senior male English teacher who has been teaching for 12 years at a school in a suburban area. Then, the last participant was a male senior English teacher who has been teaching for 20 years, and this year is his last year of teaching. He is teaching at a school in an urban area.

To gather the data, the researcher employed two instruments: semi-structured interviews and field observations. The interviews were conducted two times, each lasting for 50 minutes. The interview questions were divided into three sections: the first was about the teacher's understanding of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, the second was about how the teacher implemented the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the classroom, starting with determining learning objectives, assessments that teachers used to measure students' competency, and finally learning activities that teachers used to help students achieve learning objectives. The researcher also asked about teachers' challenges in implementing the mandated curriculum and how they encounter it. The final section was about a teacher's reflection on his/her teaching practice. All the interview results were recorded by the researcher to verify the validity of the data. Meanwhile, field observations were conducted for 14 days, starting in May 2023. Field observations were

conducted to determine whether what the participants stated correlated to the actual situation in the classroom. In addition, field observations were conducted to enrich the research data (completing the interview data). During the observation, the researcher took notes on important events in the classrooms. After the data was collected, the researcher analyzed and described the results of the interview in a table regarding the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for the seventh-grade English lesson. Then, the researchers described the interview results regarding the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. Finally, the researcher concluded the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification Aspects

Efforts to bring about curricular change will never be simple, especially because there are many factors that influence each other. In this study, the researchers intended to delve into the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for seventh grade English lessons in Gunung Kidul area. To analyze the data, the researchers employed the Backward Design approach provided by Wiggins and McTighe (2006).

Backward Design Model

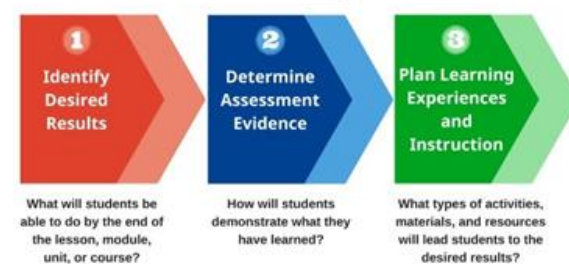


Figure 1. Backward Design Backward Design Approach by Wiggins and McTighe (2006)

Image retrieved from:

<https://humboldt2.instructure.com/courses/27792/pages/intro-to-student-learning-outcomes-slos>

a. *Identify Desired Results* Teacher A

Two years after completing her undergraduate program, Teacher A emerges as the figure of an idealistic teacher. She feels privileged to have the opportunity to teach at School A, the most favorite school in the city. Teaching English is a virtuous journey, since "[my] goal is that students can use English for student life not only at school, and students also don't just study at school but search for deeper materials independently." Located at the center of the city, the school where she teaches is a fertile place for the growth of "creative and innovative students" (Kemdikbud, 2022). There are 2 teachers at this school who registered themselves as motivational teachers (*Guru Penggerak*). They are passionate about inspiring, encouraging positive change, and advancing education.

Teacher B

Teacher B, a veteran teacher with 15 years of teaching, adheres to the imagination of teaching English by not only mastering English grammar, but also being able to "communicate in English verbally in daily life." English lessons cannot be reduced to language teaching, but also to "increase the strengthening of character, and at the same time the growth of soft skills as well."

On the one hand, Teacher B upholds the ideals of being a teacher who is reliable, creative and explorative, and always relevant to his students. He is one of the few junior high school teachers who has completed his Master's degree. On the other hand, the school's socio-cultural context does not really support it. School B is located in the sub-district center. Even though this school is in the favorite category in the area, the dynamics, speed, and responsiveness in responding to various government policies are not fast enough. His high enthusiasm for implementing the curriculum did not get enough support from the school community.

Teacher C

The results of the interview with Teacher C were not too different from the two previous teachers. This teacher, who will be retiring in two years, also has similarities with the two previous teachers. He hopes that learning English will also "stimulate the use of English in everyday life". Apart from that, learning English is expected to be able to develop their character in order to "form holistic and successful individuals." However, behind those same words hides unpreparedness and ignorance regarding the implementation of the curriculum in place. Data from observations shows that this teacher has demonstrated fossilized teaching skills, referring to learning patterns that are no longer relevant to current English language learning needs. This is exacerbated by the socio-cultural context of School C. This school is located in the outermost part of Gunungkidul, precisely on the border with Klaten, Central Java. Most of the people are peasants who tend not to have high academic aspirations.

b. Determine Acceptable Evidences

Teacher A

Assessment in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is a comprehensive assessment that encourages students to have competencies according to their talents and interests without burdening students with achieving the minimum score that students must take or saying no more KKM (minimum proficiency requirements) (Rahayu et al., 2022). The assessment in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is a comprehensive assessment that encourages students to develop competencies in accordance with their talents and interests, with less and less emphasis on merely acquiring materials to memorize through rote learning (Rahayu, et al., 2022). There are two key words that are emphasized, namely formative assessment as a means of

diagnosing student competence, and differentiated instruction to meet each individual's needs (Kemdikbud, 2022). Teacher A shows high enthusiasm for placing formative assessment as learning (AaL) and assessment for learning (AfL) (Yang & Xin, 2022). For this teacher, "I provide formative assessment at the beginning of learning and during the learning process." In other words, formative assessment is used as a diagnostic assessment, which "serves to determine students' learning styles and also their level of English language skills." The benefit of this assessment is "implementing differentiated learning." It is good to note that this teacher does not use the results of the assessment in the form of a test as the only instrument for understanding student competence. What is more interesting is that for teachers, this is a "reflective activity of identifying potential and weaknesses in students." She has neat records of the progress of each student. Determining the final results (i.e. summative assessment) is not only carried out through final tests, but also through reviewing each student's progress from the beginning to the end of the semester. With this data, it is self-evident that the teacher has the ability to integrate Assessment as Learning (AaL) and Assessment for Learning (AfL) with Assessment of Learning (AoL).

Teacher B

Teacher B shares some commonalities as Teacher A does regarding this second aspect, namely related to measuring learning outcomes. On the one hand, formative assessment is carried out to guide the process of learning and improve learning outcomes for students (Hamdi et al., 2022). On the other

hand, formative assessments are carried out periodically throughout the learning unit (Nurjanah, 2021). The fundamental difference between Teacher B, compared to Teacher A, lies in the mastery learning approach (Husain & Sulaeman, 2016), which has been the major characteristics of the previous curriculum. In this mastery learning approach, students will have the opportunity to take remedial teaching. In learning practice, he admits that "students who have not achieved learning outcomes are allowed to take remedial courses. With remediation, students can recall the material that has been taught, and their self-confidence is built." From the results of classroom observations and interviews, Teacher B shows a good commitment to helping his students learn. One of the things that stands out the most is his concern for the challenges and learning difficulties faced by every student in learning English. This last part is the main strength possessed by a teacher.

Teacher C

In contrast to the two previous teachers, Teacher C shows fundamental weaknesses related to how the assessment in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum should be carried out. The lack of professional training regarding the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy, his low interest in studying further, and the fact that he will soon retire in two years, seem to have accumulated in his ignorance in the details of implementing assessments as required in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. He himself admitted, "I actually don't fully understand the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. So, I still adopt the 2013 curriculum assessment method." The teacher

did mention the terms formative and summative assessments. However, from both observations and interviews, there is not enough evidence that the teacher executed the formative assessment optimally. Just like Teacher B, remedial teaching techniques are buzzwords that are often conveyed. Remedial teaching is one of the practical implications of the mastery learning concept, which was emphasized in the previous curriculum. What was shown by teacher C confirms that teachers will still teach in their own way, regardless of the new curriculum policy. Fundamental new things are not easily adopted, because teachers tend to become fossilized after years of teaching.

c. Plan Learning Experiences and Instructions

Teacher A

To begin the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum teacher gives a diagnostic assessment, as a differentiated learning guide (Barlian and Solekah 2022). In the teaching practice, teacher A implements the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum very coherently according to what is in the Kemdikbud, 2022 because her school encourages her to follow the *Merdeka Belajar* concept ideally. She explained, “I group students into 3 categories based on their cognitive competences which are considered from the results of the diagnostic test. Those who have excellent English skills belong to the platinum category, followed by students with good English competences in the gold category, and students who are not good enough are included in the silver category”. In differentiation learning, she presents the material by emphasizing the willingness, interest, and learning of students. In addition, the teacher can modify students’ learning objectives, processes, results or products, and the learning environment (Gusteti & Neviyarni, 2022). However, she meets a

challenge when adopting differentiated learning since she cannot apply teaching modules in all classes due to differences in students’ English abilities, learning styles, and classroom environments. She admitted that “Categorizing students according to their English language proficiency really helps me in mapping their competencies, but it’s a bit complicated and time consuming because I have to create different modules for each class and the material also has to be adjusted according to the groups”. Another feature in adopting *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is the student-centered-learning approach. The student-centered learning approach is one of the learning methods that must be carried out in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum (Pertwi et al., 2022). She serves as a facilitator of learning, and students are expected to be more active and have self-autonomy in seeking out various sources of learning. One of the ways to gather information during learning is by allowing students to utilize smartphones as their media for learning.

She explained, “Students may bring smartphones, but they must collect them and use them only when necessary for learning”. So, there is no misuse of smartphones during learning.

In terms of learning resources, teacher A used the book based on the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum provided by the government. She also uses Quizizz to assess students in learning. In accordance with what is said on Kemdikbud (2022), learning in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is adjusted for the level of student ability and supported by some technologies that provide a personalized approach to learning progression for each student. She admitted, “Incorporating technology into instruction will make learning more enjoyable, which will stimulate students’ enthusiasm for learning English”. The last *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum features that she implements is focusing on the essential material. This enables her to select topics that

are relevant and interesting to students, improving their enthusiasm and involvement in learning.

Teacher B

In terms of the first part of implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, Teacher B and Teacher A have certain similarities, namely conducting a diagnostic test. Its result can help teachers provide sorts of assistance that are appropriate for the problems encountered by the students (Putri & Rinaningsih, 2021). He described, "At the beginning of the school year, grade 7 students are given a diagnostic test. The test is given to students to measure their cognitive competence. The students are grouped into 5 groups based on their cognitive competence, starting with those with the highest scores in class A and ending with those with the lowest scores in class E." In reality, if differentiated learning is conducted in this manner, teacher A perceives student discrimination. The school's goal of establishing differentiated learning is admirable, but its approach must be rethought in order to avoid appearing prejudiced. The same like teacher A, teacher B also incorporates technology into his learning so that students are more involved and like the learning provided, and "learning does not appear monotonous". He often makes a narrative story video and uploads it to YouTube so that students can watch it and learn at home. It can encourage students' self-autonomy in learning. According to Pratama et al. (2020), students enjoy watching YouTube videos because they provide a dynamic and interactive learning experience, making the learning process more enjoyable and accessible. For the teaching adventure, he uses the book and worksheet based on the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum provided by the government. Furthermore, he is quite open and adaptable when it comes to student learning resources. He admitted, "I select material for students that is relevant to their communication needs in everyday life, such

as reading news articles, writing job application letters, or communicating in social situations". Thus, teacher B firmly agrees and advocates for the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in Indonesia.

Teacher C

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum at teacher C's school is nearly identical to that of teachers A and B, particularly by administering a diagnostic test for grade 7 at the start of the school year. This data will eventually be used to guide the teacher's steps in altering the difficulty level of learning materials through differentiated learning, ensuring that students' learning needs are addressed (Mustika, 2022). However, classroom learning is not going as planned. Teacher B has yet to apply differentiated learning due to a variety of factors, including a lack of time to focus on each student's needs and having no workshop on implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, so the teacher is unsure how to proceed. As a result, teacher C continues to employ the principles of the 2013 curriculum in the teaching practice. On the other hand, teacher C has employed the book based on the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum provided by the government as well as the worksheets. Student-centered learning is one of the characteristics of the independent curriculum. According to Kemendikbud (2022), the student-centered method promotes students to accomplish something as practical experience and to derive meaning from the experience they obtain. On the other hand, teacher C has not fully adopted student-centered learning because the majority of students have not learned basic English and hence are unable to study independently. Teacher C also continues to teach in a very conventional style and is not yet fully integrated with technology. This is since internet network coverage for classrooms is still limited, and there is no projector in the

classroom. For the listening practice, the students are invited to study in the language laboratory since speakers are already available. To attain the learning objectives, teacher C improves more students' speaking skills by having them practice greetings and assigning projects in the form of simple role plays. Role play is a useful strategy for developing students' speaking skills since it allows students to play various characters (Neupane, 2019). For instance, in learning simple present tense, teacher C divides students into groups; one group consists of four students. In the groups, students practice their daily activities using the simple present tense. Although the students still struggle with vocabulary, role play allows them to be more excited and quickly understand what and how a simple present is utilized. Furthermore, teacher C strongly supports the establishment of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum since it motivates teachers to develop innovative approaches to learning. Teachers might utilize numerous methods and strategies, such as games, roles, projects, or technology, to boost students' enthusiasm and activeness in utilizing English creatively when teaching English.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in grade 7 junior high schools in Gunungkidul has not been fully implemented following the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum concept. Only one of the three teachers implemented the mandated curriculum according to the concept. This is due to several issues, including schools' lack of preparedness with technology that supports the learning process, a lack of seminars on implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, students' English language skills, and a less conducive student learning environment. On the other hand, English teachers have implemented several concepts, such as giving diagnostic tests to grade 7 students, student-centered

learning, teaching according to students' learning styles and abilities, and implementing formative and summative assessments following the concept of an independent curriculum. Nonetheless, the teachers enthusiastically support the adoption of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for a variety of reasons, including material flexibility, applicability to real-world demands, and the development of creativity.

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