

High school teachers' readiness for the implementation of *Merdeka* curriculum in English language teaching

Kesiapan pengajar SMA terhadap pengajaran bahasa Inggris dalam kurikulum Merdeka

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum influences the approaches to teaching and learning foreign languages. The newly introduced Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia has not been implemented by all high schools yet. The readiness of foreign language teachers was one of the influential factors for the school acceptance of the new curriculum. This study examined the readiness of foreign language teachers from high schools that have not yet implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. Data were obtained through questionnaires which were distributed to the English teachers and other subject teachers from several high schools in Indonesia. The results showed that there were two main dimensions that influenced the teacher readiness; the first is several changes that must be implemented and second, the negative attitudes towards the new curriculum. It is hoped that the results of this study can contribute as a support to enhance teachers' positive attitude to ensure the implementation of the new curriculum.

KATA KUNCI

Kurikulum;
guru bahasa
Inggris;
kesiapan guru
sekolah
menengah
atas;
sikap guru

ABSTRAK

Kurikulum berpengaruh terhadap pendekatan pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa asing. Kurikulum Merdeka yang belum lama ini diterapkan di Indonesia belum diterapkan oleh seluruh sekolah menengah atas. Kesiapan pengajar bahasa asing berpengaruh terhadap penerimaan sekolah terhadap kurikulum baru tersebut. Penelitian ini mengkaji kesiapan guru bahasa asing dari SMA yang belum menerapkan kurikulum Merdeka. Data diperoleh melalui kuesioner yang disebarakan kepada guru bahasa Inggris dan guru bahasa asing lainnya dari beberapa SMA/SMK di Indonesia. Hasil menunjukkan dua dimensi utama yang berpengaruh terhadap kesiapan guru, yaitu perubahan yang harus diberlakukan dan sikap negatif terhadap kurikulum yang baru. Diharapkan hasil penelitian ini berkontribusi sebagai masukan perlunya sikap positif guru sebagai pendukung implementasi kurikulum yang baru.

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Introduction

Curriculum plays an important role in determining the direction of foreign language teaching and learning process (Judd, 1981; Macalister & Nation, 2019). Digitalization and globalization have further increased English influence to become one of the most widely used global languages in the world (Rohimajaya et al., 2022). In Indonesia, aside from being taught as a foreign language, English also plays a role as one of the *lingua franca* that is formally taught in schools based on the curriculum (Zein, 2022). Curriculum development can be done through revising the current curriculum, or formulating a new curriculum that has never existed before (Nasution, 2016). Since 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has prompted the introduction of a new curriculum that is currently known as the Merdeka Curriculum.

Merdeka Curriculum is structured as one of the government's efforts to improve Indonesian students' literacy competence in the digital era (Rohimajaya et al., 2022). This curriculum was firstly introduced as an alternative curriculum that can be optionally applied by schools as a substitute for the previous 2013 Curriculum. Therefore, while there are several schools that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, other schools still maintain the 2013 Curriculum.

The Merdeka Curriculum and the 2013 Curriculum have some similarities and differences that have been widely studied in recent years (Nugroho & Narawaty, 2022; Pouw & Mulyanti, 2023; Rohimajaya et al., 2022). Nugroho and Narawaty (2022) pointed out that both curricula use text-based learning (genre-based approach) in teaching English, but the Merdeka Curriculum places more emphasis on diagnostic assessment and strengthening the students' Pancasila profile. In addition, the new curriculum introduces important materials for character building with an emphasis on its project-based assessment (Rohimajaya et al., 2022).

A good curriculum is a curriculum that can help equip students with competencies of the 21st century, one of which is the ability to learn independently (Chen et al., 2022). Schools have an important role in implementing effective education management so that students are able to improve their academic performance independently (Akuba et al., 2021). Some studies analyzed the teacher perceptions in general (Festiyed et al., 2022; Loilatu et al., 2022; Nurliani et al., 2023) towards the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in schools. While some teachers still predominantly use summative assessments compared to other assessments (Festiyed et al., 2022), in general, teachers acknowledge the benefits of the Merdeka Curriculum (Festiyed et al., 2022; Nurliani et al., 2023). A large number of existing studies in the literature have examined the Merdeka Curriculum, but those focusing on the extent to which teachers are prepared for implementing the curriculum have been scarce. It is necessary to focus on teachers because they are an important factor that influences school readiness to implement the latest curriculum. For example, in integrating technology into teaching and learning, it is vital for teachers to have a positive perception toward ICT (Eryansyah & Erlina, 2023). In addition, it is teachers who need to adjust material and learning with the new curriculum in order to meet the expectations of the national policy, school and parents (Wang, 2007). Teachers who are ready to implement the new curric-

ulum are one of the determinants of educational success (Hidayah et al., 2022). Therefore, this study intends to find out the level of school readiness towards the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum as represented by the perceptions of high school teachers in a city in Indonesia. The present study is to answer the following questions: "1) How is the teacher's readiness for the Merdeka Curriculum? 2) Are there any differences between teachers from different subjects?"

Method

This study used a mixed-method approach. We selected 25 teachers, 8 of whom are English teachers and 17 are non-English subject teachers, from several senior and vocational schools located in Jakarta, Demak, Surakarta, and Malang, Indonesia. Data were collected through an online Google Form questionnaire, which depicted teacher's background information such as gender, age, educational background, subjects taught, length of teaching experience, type of school (SMA or senior high school/SMK or vocational high school) and the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum at their institution. This study used the adaptation of the Curriculum Changes Perception Scale (CCPC) as the instrument (Kayir & Toraman, 2021) with a 5 Likert scale answers (1 defines 'Strongly Disagree', 2 as 'Disagree', 3 means 'Neutral', 4 denotes 'Agree', and 5 gives the meaning of 'Strongly Agree'). The CCPC instrument consists of 11 questions which are divided into two dimensions, all presented on the second page. The first dimension was a negative attitude towards the new curriculum which was represented through items number 1, 2, 3, 7, 11. The second dimension was the changes that must be implemented and consists of items number 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10. For each item, there were additional questions asking the respondents to describe why they selected a certain rating. The likert scale responses were analyzed non-parametrically using SPSS application chi-square analysis to answer the first research question. Furthermore, the respondents' reasons for each question were analyzed qualitatively by identifying the patterns and keywords to answer the second research question. Suggestions and recommendations were given based on the results of the analysis.

Results

As has been mentioned previously, the results derived from the online questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. This section reports the results from both analyses.

Statistics and data analysis

The quantitative findings show the average comparison between English teachers and teachers of other subjects as shown in Table 1. The first dimension (i.e., negative attitudes towards the new curriculum) is represented through items number 1, 2, 3, 7, 11. The second dimension (i.e., changes that must be implemented) consists of item 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10.

Table 1. The mean and chi-square score

Dimension	Statement	Mean	Chi-square (Asymp. Sig.)
Resistance to application of curriculum changes	1. It is not easy to implement the Merdeka Curriculum	3.08	.092
	2. I do not consider implementing Merdeka Curriculum because the programs change very often.	2.44	.034*
	3. I do not consider changing the program since curriculum changes are influenced by politics.	2.76	.938
	7. Since I prepare the students for the exam, I do not consider the curriculum change.	2.40	.056
	11. I do not apply the curriculum changes as they are not scientific.	1.76	.008*
The effect of curriculum changes on teaching/learning settings	4. Curriculum changes (Merdeka Curriculum) increase student motivation.	3.92	.102
	5. Merdeka Curriculum positively affects classroom management.	4.04	.077
	6. Since the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum, the quality of the learning environment has increased.	3.80	.155
	8. Curriculum changes reveal students' interests and abilities.	4.08	.044*
	9. As the curriculum changes, the content of the course becomes more updated.	4.36	.001*
	10. Since the information is constantly changing, the curricula must also change.	3.76	.040*

*significant

Table 1 showed that both English and non-English teachers in general had neutral and low resistance toward curriculum changes, which was shown by the mean score that is below 4 for item number 1, 2, 3, 7, and 11. However, there were some differences between the teachers' response in item 2 (Sig. = .034), item 11 (Sig. = .008), item 8 (Sig. = .044), item 9 (Sig. = .001), and item 10 (Sig. = .040). These findings were corroborated by qualitative data.

Qualitative data

There were two dimensions that would be discussed further qualitatively. First, regarding the resistance toward the new curriculum, item 2 and item 11 showed the following pattern. Both teachers had a positive attitude towards program changes. They disagreed (rating 2.25-2.53) if the Merdeka Curriculum was not considered because program changes often occur (item 2: 'I do not consider implementing Merdeka Curriculum because the programs change very often.').

"Dalam dunia pendidikan, selalu ada perubahan dan guru harus dapat menyesuaikan diri... setiap perubahan pasti memiliki manfaat untuk perkembangan peserta didik" (In the world of education, there are always changes and teachers must be able to adapt ... every change will definitely have benefits for students' development.) (Teacher #1, English teacher, Bekasi)

"Saya mempertimbangkan secara sadar karena perubahan kurikulum merdeka dibekali dengan kebijakan pendukung guru penggerak dan diskusi aktif antar guru sekolah berkurikulum merdeka." (I consider it consciously because the changes to the Merdeka curriculum are equipped with supporting policies for encouraging teachers and promoting active discussions between school teachers with an independent curriculum.) (Teacher #2, English teacher, Jakarta Timur)

“Kurikulum memang sering berubah, tetapi kompetensi yang diminta sama saja” (The curriculum does change frequently, but the competencies required are the same.) (Teacher #3, Mandarin teacher, Malang)

“Perubahan program tidak terlalu berpengaruh, karena pada dasarnya tujuan pembelajarannya kurang lebih sama” (The changes in the program are not too influential, because basically the learning objectives are more or less the same.) (Teacher #4, Japanese teacher, Malang)

“Memang kurikulum adalah otaknya pendidikan, tetapi permasalahan di Indonesia bukan kurikulum yang buruk tetapi terlalu sering ganti kebijakan kurikulum sehingga membingungkan murid dan guru, dan ujian nasional serta ujian2 lain dihapus /diganti sistemnya sedangkan untuk membuat anak belajar dengan tekun salah satunya lewat ujian.” (Indeed, the curriculum is the heart of education, but the problem in Indonesia does not lie in the curriculum; it is the change in the curriculum policies which is done so often that it confuses students and teachers, and the national exams and other tests are removed/replaced by the system, while to make children study diligently, one of them is through exams.) (Teacher #5, History teacher, Malang)

The teachers' accounts suggest that as long as the required competencies are similar and the curriculum changes are not too extreme, teachers' attitudes towards the new curriculum remain positive. As illustrated in the following responses to item 11: 'I do not apply the curriculum changes as they are not scientific', most respondents tend to disagree.

“Semua kurikulum zaman ini pasti berdasar alasan ilmiah” (All curricula nowadays are definitely based on scientific reasons.) (Teacher #6, English teacher, Malang)

“Saya berupaya untuk menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka secara ideal. Asumsi saya, Kurikulum Merdeka mungkin dianggap kurang ilmiah karena memberikan fleksibilitas yang besar kepada guru untuk mengembangkannya.” (I strive to apply the Merdeka Curriculum ideally. My assumption is that the Merdeka Curriculum may be considered less scientific because it gives teachers great flexibility to develop it.) (Teacher #7, English teacher, Bekasi)

“Kurmer sangat ilmiah karena proyek dan diskusi sangat diapresiasi” (The Merdeka Curriculum is very scientific because projects and discussions are highly appreciated.) (Teacher #8, Chinese teacher, Malang)

“Salah satu ciri sifat ilmiah adalah adanya landasan teori dan metodologi. Saya berpikir setiap kurikulum memiliki landasan teori dan metodologinya, terlepas teori dan metodologi itu dari aliran / paham mana.” (The characteristic of scientific nature is the existence of a theoretical and methodological basis. I think every curriculum has a theoretical and methodological foundation, regardless of which theory and methodology it belongs to.) (Teacher #9, Religion teacher, Bekasi)

“Banyak hal ilmiah yang dapat dikembangkan di kurikulum merdeka” (Many scientific activities can be developed in the Merdeka Curriculum.) (Teacher #10, Chemistry teacher, Bekasi)

“Kurikulum memberikan kebebasan guru dalam membuat materi, tetapi tetap berpedoman pada tema yang telah disesuaikan pemerintah” (The curriculum gives teachers a freedom to adjust the materials, which are still guided by the themes that have been determined by the government.) (Teacher #11, Japanese teacher, Malang)

“Penerapan kurikulum merdeka justru sangat ilmiah mengacu pada character building, literasi abad 21, leadership, entrepreneurship dan art development serta psychology; salah satunya adalah tujuan pembelajaran selalu berkembang yang mempunyai goals mengembangkan skills siswa di masa depan.” (The implementation of the Merdeka curriculum is actually very scientific as it is concerned with

character building, the 21st century literacy, leadership, entrepreneurship and art development as well as psychology; one of its aims is sustainable development of students' skills.) (Teacher #12, Mathematics teacher, Bekasi)

Furthermore, regarding the dimensions of changes that must be made, there are differences between items 8, 9, and 10. For item 8: 'Curriculum changes reveal students' interests and abilities', it was revealed that the teacher's response tended to be neutral (rating 3) and agreeing (rating 4).

"Karena keberadaan mata pelajaran pilihan memberikan kesempatan untuk siswa bebas menentukan mapel yang ingin ia kuasai dan kembangkan sesuai dengan karakteristik jurusan di universitas yang dituju." (The existence of elective subjects provides an opportunity for students to independently decide which subjects they want to master and develop according to the characteristics of the majors at the intended university.) (Teacher #13, English teacher, East Jakarta)

"Kebetulan, di sekolah saya memang sudah ada program pengembangan minat dan bakat yang diterapkan sebelum Kurikulum Merdeka diimplementasikan. Jadi, minat dan kemampuan siswa terungkap bukan karena perubahan kurikulum, melainkan karena sudah menjadi ciri khas sekolah." (Incidentally, before the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum, my school already implemented such a talent development program. So, students' interests and abilities are nurtured and developed not because of the change in the curriculum, but because the program has become the hallmark of the school.) (Teacher #14, English teacher, Bekasi)

"Pendidikan berdiferensiasi adalah salah satu prinsip dasar Kurikulum Merdeka. Dengan prinsip ini, sekolah wajib memetakan potensi/kekuatan peserta didik lewat tes akademis dan non akademis. Berdasarkan data tersebutlah guru meramu kegiatan belajar." (Differentiated instruction is one of the basic principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. With this principle, schools are required to map the potential and strengths of the students through academic and non-academic tests. Based on this data, the teacher formulates learning activities.) (Teacher #15, Religion teacher, Bekasi)

Regarding item 9: 'As the curriculum changes, the content of the course becomes more updated', the two groups of teachers tend to agree with the statement, as shown in the following excerpts.

"Update modul diperlukan karena informasi di modul yg sudah ada tidak lagi relevan" (Updating the module is necessary because the information in the existing module is no longer relevant.) (Teacher #16, English teacher, East Jakarta)

"Ini merupakan sisi positif dari kurikulum merdeka. Muatan pembelajaran dikaitkan dengan kehidupan siswa dan siswa ada proyek sehingga bisa memunculkan kreativitas siswa." (The positive side of the Merdeka Curriculum is that the learning content is closely related to the lives of students and they are given projects to work on, which develops their creativity.) (Teacher #17, History teacher, Malang)

Seen from the teachers' responses to item 10: 'Since the information is constantly changing, the curricula must also change', it is apparent that they have a higher tendency to agree with curriculum changes that are driven by constantly changing information. Non-English teachers also agreed but gave a slightly more neutral rating.

"Menurut saya, kurikulumnya tidak perlu berubah namun dikembangkan saja dan disesuaikan dengan perkembangan zaman. Sehingga, guru-guru tidak perlu melakukan penyesuaian yang signifikan dan pemerintah tidak perlu mengeluarkan budget yang sangat besar untuk merombak kurikulum." (In my opinion, the curriculum does not need to change, but it needs to be developed and adapted from time to time. Hence, teachers do not need to make significant adjustments and the

government does not need to spend a very large budget to change the curriculum.) (Teacher #18, English teacher, Bekasi)

“Semua hal di dunia ini berhubungan. Sedikit banyak perubahan di satu hal akan mempengaruhi perubahan hal lain.” (Everything in this world is connected. Slight changes in one thing will affect changes in other things.) (Teacher #19, English teacher, Malang)

“Kurikulum tidak harus berubah, yang harus diupgrade metode pembelajaran oleh guru sebagai fasilitator dan penggunaan media pembelajaran yang menyesuaikan zamannya. Sehingga informasi yang didapat siswa juga bervariasi tanpa mengubah kurikulum.” (The curriculum does not have to change. It is the learning methods that must be upgraded by the teachers as facilitators and the learning media that must be adaptive to the changing times. In doing so, students will have various knowledge without having to change the curriculum.) (Teacher #20, History teacher, Malang)

“Kenapa zaman berubah kurikulum juga harus berubah karena kurikulum/pendidikan pondasi anak-anak bangsa menimba ilmu dan bekal masa depan mereka. Apa dan SDM bagaimana yang dibutuhkan di masa depan. Saya sangat setuju melalui kurikulum merdeka dapat lebih lagi dan terus berkembang dalam menyongsong era VUCA di bidang digitalisasi dan industri 5.0.” (Why should the curriculum change with the times? It is because the curriculum is the foundation for learners to gain knowledge and prepare for their future. It determines what and how human resources are needed in the future. I totally agree that through the Merdeka Curriculum, we can do more and continue to develop in facing the VUCA era in the field of digitalization and industry 5.0.) (Teacher #21, Mathematics teacher, Bekasi)

“Menurut saya tidak demikian. Perubahan tetap perlu, namun tidak setiap perubahan informasi serta merta menuntut seluruh komponen kurikulum berubah. Perubahan bisa saja sebagian, misalnya standar isi, standar lulusan, sementara metodologi bisa saja dipertahankan. Atau sebaliknya.” (I don't think so. Changes are still necessary, but not every change demands the whole components of the curriculum to change. Changes may be partial, for example in the content and graduate standards, but the methodology can be maintained, or vice versa.) (Teacher #22, Religion teacher, Bekasi)

“Pada saat informasi berubah, harusnya metode pembelajaran saja yang ditingkatkan menjadi semakin inovatif, seru dan menyenangkan.” (When information changes, only the learning methods should be improved to become more innovative, exciting, and fun.) (Teacher #23, Japanese teacher, Malang)

Discussion

Curriculum development can be done in various ways, one of which is through improvisation of the current curriculum (Nasution, 2016). The Merdeka Curriculum can be implemented as the development of the previous one, in this case, the 2013 Curriculum (Ramadhan & Warneri, 2023). Thus, not all components of the previous curriculum disappeared, but underwent improvements to suit the times and support students' achievement of the 21st century competencies. This is in line with the response of one of the teachers who stated that although curriculum changes, the expected outcomes are still similar.

However, implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the high school level amid the COVID-19 pandemic posed several challenges for teachers and students (Anwar et al., 2022; Hayati et al., 2023). Some of them include the need for time for teachers to adjust to the different teaching approaches expected by the new curriculum (Nugroho & Narawaty, 2022).

The findings of this study show that teachers have a good perception about the Merdeka Curriculum, which support the findings from Hidayah et al. (2022). This could be due to the realization that curriculum changes do not always create pessimistic feelings, as has been mentioned by the teachers in this study. Optimistic teachers view curriculum changes as opportunities to learn new knowledge thereby encouraging them to develop effective teaching strategies (Abduh et al., 2022). However, preparation for national exams cannot be ruled out because the burden that is too heavy can affect the teacher's readiness to implement the new curriculum (Adnan & Prihananto, 2022).

Teachers tend to use a certain philosophically based approach in their teaching methodologies (Kayir & Toraman, 2021). Teacher perceptions correlate positively with their readiness to implement appropriate teaching for students (Ismail et al., 2022). This becomes one of the reasons teachers have a tendency to have a negative attitude towards the new curriculum which has a different philosophical value from them. Senior teachers tend to be conservative, whereas junior teachers are more open to change (Kayir & Toraman, 2021), which causes differences in perceptions between pre-service teachers and in-service teachers. The Merdeka Curriculum is formulated to provide flexibility to teachers in providing teaching that is adapted to the characteristics of students (Prakoso et al., 2023).

Sometimes, the implementation of the curriculum that is not optimal can be caused by school policies that have not fully implemented the new curriculum i.e., they are still guided by the old curriculum, and a lack of training for teachers, even though teachers need to apply learning that is more student-focused (student centered approach) (Prasetyono et al., 2021). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy for teachers across generations is also an important consideration, so that teachers are better prepared to implement teaching changes (Eryansyah & Erlina, 2023).

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced during a pandemic so teachers need to make adjustments according to how the lessons are being delivered, online or offline (Nurhattati et al., 2023). However, in improvising, teachers still need to pay attention to the linguistic principles they want to use, for example communicative teaching, or other principles (Li et al., 2020).

The long-term effects of exams also influence teachers' perceptions of the new curriculum (Vu & Nguyen, 2021). Training increases teacher readiness in implementing the new curriculum (Syafryadin et al., 2022). Teachers need to balance their roles as curriculum technicians and curriculum makers (Suharti et al., 2022). Therefore, besides understanding the new curriculum, teachers also need to improvise in developing syllabus and teaching materials.

English competence is one of the things that needs to be considered by teachers in preparing high school students for further higher education (Habiburrahim et al., 2022b). Curriculum reform is needed to improve the quality of education (Dewi, 2021). As a suggestion, teacher readiness can be increased through training, for example using concept maps for SMK teachers (Hidayat et al., 2022).

Regardless of the findings obtained, this study has some limitations and strengths. First, bias to the internal validity of the data can occur due to small sample size. Second, as this research only included a small number of respondents, the results might not be

generalized to all context and settings, and therefore, is open for further research involving larger samples. Nonetheless, this research has the potential for allowing generalizations for the small city scope, in this case Bekasi and Malang. As a suggestion, further research can consider student's perception toward the teachers and how it affects the quality of learning (Setiawan et al., 2020). Students' flexibility in exploring knowledge is positively correlated with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Fahira et al., 2022). This means that teacher readiness is important to be considered by stakeholders so that student satisfaction with the quality of learning increases and the expected competency outcomes can be achieved. Providing as many opportunities as possible for students to apply the knowledge they have learned is useful for increasing competence in the current industrial era 4.0 (Habiburrahim et al., 2022a).

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify the level of school readiness as represented by the perceptions of high school teachers. Based on the data that has been obtained, it can be concluded that in general the Indonesian high school teachers have a positive attitude towards curriculum changes. This is confirmed by both the quantitative and qualitative results which showed that the teachers were quite optimistic and had low resistance toward the Merdeka Curriculum. However, this study is limited in the small sample size and thus, another study with larger sample should be done to elaborate similarities and differences regarding the teacher's readiness for the application of the Merdeka Curriculum.

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