The Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Teaching English at Junior High Schools in Kupang City: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed to investigate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in teaching English at junior high schools in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, from July to August 2024. The research focused on three objectives: (1) to analyze how English teachers prepared lesson plans, (2) to explore how they used lesson plans in the learning process, and (3) to assess student achievement within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. The study employed a case study approach, involving three English teachers from different schools. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings revealed that teachers demonstrated autonomy in lesson planning, varied their teaching strategies, and utilized diverse assessment methods. However, the research also highlighted challenges such as time constraints, the need for professional development, and limited technology integration. This study offers practical implications for enhancing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching.
KEYWORDS:
Merdeka Curriculum, lesson planning, teaching strategies, assessment methods, English language teaching, Kupang City

INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia has undergone significant transformations in recent years, driven by the need to adapt to the demands of 21st-century learning. One of the most notable developments is the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum (Freedom Curriculum), launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2022. This curriculum seeks to promote more flexible, student-centered learning, moving away from the rigid, standardized approaches that characterized previous curricula such as Kurikulum 2013 (K-13) [1]. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes a differentiated approach to instruction, empowering teachers to tailor their lesson plans and instructional methods to suit the diverse needs and abilities of students [2]. The curriculum's focus on differentiated instruction aligns with global trends in education that encourage active learning, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration [3]. Additionally, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes character education through the Pancasila Student Profile, a set of values designed to foster responsible, globally aware citizens [4]. These values are integral to the overall objectives of the curriculum, promoting both academic achievement and personal development.

However, the shift to the Merdeka Curriculum has presented numerous challenges, particularly for teachers accustomed to previous, more prescriptive curricular frameworks. With the new curriculum, teachers have greater autonomy but also face increased responsibility in designing lesson plans, selecting instructional methods, and assessing students [5]. This newfound flexibility requires a deep understanding of the curriculum's goals as well as the capacity to implement them effectively in a variety of classroom settings, including resource-limited environments. In places like Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, where infrastructure and teacher training may be less robust than in urban areas, the transition poses unique difficulties [6]. English language teaching, in particular, has been affected by these changes. As a compulsory subject, English is an essential part of the national curriculum. However, in regions like Kupang City, where students

often have limited exposure to the language outside the classroom, teachers face additional challenges in fostering both engagement and proficiency [7]. Under the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are expected to incorporate technology, adopt Project-Based Learning (PBL), and apply a Genre-Based Approach (GBA) to develop students' English communication skills [8]. These methods represent a significant departure from traditional, lecture-based approaches, requiring teachers to embrace new pedagogical frameworks.

Given these changes, it is crucial to understand how teachers in Kupang City are implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the context of English language teaching. While previous research has examined the general implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, there has been limited focus on how it impacts English instruction at the junior high school level, particularly in less urbanized regions like Kupang [9-10].

Previous studies, have largely focused on comparing the Merdeka Curriculum to previous curricula, examining how its principles differ from those of Kurikulum 2013 in a general sense [9]. Similarly, Kusuma and Ferdaus (2022) explored the benefits and challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational and secondary education [10]. However, these studies have not delved deeply into subject-specific challenges, such as those encountered in English language teaching. Moreover, they have often neglected regional variations and the specific contexts of schools in less urbanized or resource-constrained areas like Kupang City.

This study seeks to address these gaps by focusing on the specific challenges and strategies used by English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Kupang City. By examining how teachers design their lesson plans, deliver instructional content, and assess student performance, this research provides a more detailed understanding of how the curriculum impacts English language teaching. It also highlights the importance of teacher autonomy in creating flexible, adaptive lesson plans and assessment tools, which are crucial for meeting the unique needs of students in Kupang [11].

Given the critical role that English plays in global communication and its importance in the Indonesian education system, improving the quality of English teaching is essential for enhancing student outcomes [12]. By exploring how teachers are adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum, this study aims to provide practical insights that can inform future professional development programs, curriculum refinements, and policy decisions aimed at supporting teachers in achieving the curriculum's broader objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Merdeka Curriculum: Concept and Objectives

The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, represents a significant departure from previous educational frameworks such as Kurikulum 2013 (K-13). It is designed to offer greater flexibility for teachers to craft lessons tailored to the needs and abilities of individual students, emphasizing student-centered learning and differentiated instruction [13]. Central to the curriculum is the Pancasila Student Profile, which encourages the development of six key competencies: faith, creativity, critical thinking, independence, mutual cooperation, and global citizenship. These competencies align with broader educational trends that advocate for holistic student development, integrating academic, personal, and social growth [14].

Research on curriculum reform, particularly in developing countries, has often emphasized the need for flexibility and autonomy in teaching practices to address diverse student needs. In this context, the Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers more agency in the classroom, moving away from the standardized national assessments that characterized previous curricula. The curriculum also aims to promote Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Genre-Based Approaches (GBA), which encourage students to engage more actively in the learning process, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills [15].

Lesson Planning in the Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum offers teachers the freedom to develop their own lesson plans based on the needs of their students. This represents a shift from the Kurikulum 2013, which provided highly structured lesson plan templates [16]. In the context of English language teaching, lesson planning under the Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to consider the linguistic competencies of their students, their interests, and their socio-cultural backgrounds, enabling more personalized learning experiences [17]. Teachers are also expected to integrate ICT tools and incorporate digital learning resources to support language acquisition, reflecting global trends toward technology-enhanced learning environments [18].

One key aspect of lesson planning in the Merdeka Curriculum is the emphasis on differentiated instruction, which allows teachers to design multiple pathways for students to access content and demonstrate understanding [19]. This approach recognizes that students learn in different ways and at different paces, and it encourages teachers to offer varied learning activities that cater to these differences. The lesson plans are not fixed but instead are adaptable, allowing teachers to modify them based on ongoing classroom assessments and student feedback.

Implementation of Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes active learning, where students take a more participatory role in their education. This shift is supported by pedagogical strategies like Project-Based Learning (PBL) and the Genre-Based Approach (GBA), which have been found to be effective in promoting language skills and critical thinking [20]. In English teaching, the Genre-Based Approach helps students understand different types of texts and how to construct them, making it a crucial element in developing reading and writing proficiency [21]. The Project-Based Learning method, on the other hand, encourages students to engage with real-world problems, applying their language skills in meaningful contexts [22].

Technology integration is another critical component in the implementation phase. According to Dudeney and Hockly the use of technology in language learning can significantly enhance student engagement and language acquisition, especially when interactive tools and digital resources are utilized [23]. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages the use of digital media, not just for content delivery but also for formative assessments, collaborative work, and self-directed learning, aligning with 21st-century education paradigms [24].

Assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum

Assessment practices under the Merdeka Curriculum differ significantly from those of previous frameworks. Rather than focusing solely on standardized testing, the new curriculum emphasizes authentic assessment methods that evaluate a student's competencies in more holistic ways [25]. Authentic assessment includes real-life tasks, such as presentations, projects, and portfolios, which allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in meaningful contexts. This shift in assessment aligns with constructivist theories of learning, which posit that knowledge is actively constructed by learners and should be assessed in ways that reflect this process [26].

Furthermore, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the need for assessments to focus on three core areas: attitude, knowledge, and skills [27]. This triad reflects the curriculum's broader goals of producing well-rounded individuals who are not only academically proficient but also possess strong character and social skills. Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of assessment tools, including self-assessments, peer assessments, and teacher assessments, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of student progress.

Moreover, technology plays a key role in modern assessment practices. The use of digital platforms for administering quizzes, providing immediate feedback, and tracking student progress has become an integral part of the Merdeka Curriculum's assessment framework [28]. Research indicates that such technology-enhanced assessments can improve both the validity and reliability of assessment outcomes, providing more accurate measures of student learning [29].

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Although the Merdeka Curriculum provides significant benefits, it also presents challenges, particularly in less urbanized areas like Kupang City. Teachers in these regions often lack access to the necessary resources, such as training, technology, and learning materials, to fully implement the curriculum as intended [30]. This issue is compounded by the limited infrastructure and professional development opportunities available to teachers, making it difficult to adopt more innovative teaching methods and assessments [31]

Additionally, teachers may face challenges in adapting to the new pedagogical demands of the curriculum. The increased focus on teacher autonomy requires them to be proficient in designing differentiated lesson plans and assessments, which can be overwhelming without adequate support [32]. As such, teacher training and professional development will be crucial to the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the long term. This detailed Literature Review adds depth to your research by highlighting relevant theories and providing academic citations to back up key concepts.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching at junior high schools (SMP) in Kupang City. A qualitative methodology is chosen to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and practices of English teachers, as it allows for the exploration of complex educational phenomena and the subjective perspectives of participants [33].

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study research design, which is particularly suited for exploring the nuances of educational practices within specific contexts [34]. A case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching, focusing on the experiences and strategies of teachers in Kupang City. This design is advantageous for understanding complex phenomena within real-life settings, making it ideal for capturing the multifaceted aspects of curriculum implementation.

The primary purpose of this research is to investigate how English teachers in junior high schools in Kupang City develop lesson plans, deliver instructional content, and assess student achievements within the framework of the Merdeka

Curriculum. By focusing on these areas, the study aims to identify effective practices, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing English teaching under this new curriculum.

The study is guided by three key research questions that explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching at junior high schools in Kupang City: (1) How do English teachers develop lesson plans in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) How do English teachers utilize lesson plans in the teaching and learning process under this curriculum? and (3) How do English teachers assess student achievement in this context? These questions are framed within a conceptual framework that emphasizes the significance of teacher autonomy, differentiated instruction, and the use of diverse teaching strategies in aligning with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. By investigating how teachers create and implement lesson plans, engage students, and assess their learning, the research aims to highlight effective practices and the challenges faced in adapting to this innovative educational framework, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of curriculum implementation in a localized context.

Subjects

The participants in this study comprise English teachers from three different junior high schools in Kupang City: SMP Agape Indah, SMP Pancasila, and SMP Cendana. A total of three teachers were purposefully selected based on their experience and willingness to participate in the study. This purposive sampling technique ensures that the selected teachers possess the relevant insights and experiences necessary for understanding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in their classrooms [35].

Instruments

The research employed a combination of qualitative instruments to gather comprehensive data on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three English teachers from different junior high schools in Kupang City to explore their perspectives on lesson planning, material delivery, and student assessment, allowing flexibility in responses for deeper probing. Additionally, direct classroom observations were carried out at SMP Agape Indah and SMP Pancasila, documenting teaching methods, student engagement, and the use of media and technology during lessons to analyze real-time implementation. Relevant documents, including lesson plans, assessment tools, and curriculum guidelines, were also collected and analyzed to identify the alignment of teachers' plans and assessments with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. By triangulating data from these three instruments—interviews, observations, and document analysis—the study aimed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, providing a richer understanding of how English teachers navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the Merdeka Curriculum.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using the framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which encompasses four key stages: data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification [36]. Initially, data condensation involved summarizing and organizing the raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analyses to highlight essential information regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Next, data display entailed creating visual representations, such as charts and matrices, to facilitate the identification of patterns and themes across the data sources. Following this, conclusion drawing involved interpreting the displayed data to generate insights about the teachers' experiences, strategies, and challenges in implementing the curriculum. Finally, verification was undertaken by cross-referencing findings with the original data to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the conclusions drawn. This systematic approach to data analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding English teaching practices within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings reveal several key aspects of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching:

Findings

The findings of this study reveal various strategies and practices that English teachers at the junior high school level in Kupang City employ to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. The research focused on three main aspects: lesson planning, instructional delivery, and assessment practices. The results are discussed in detail below.

Lesson Planning under the Merdeka Curriculum

The study found that the English teachers demonstrated considerable autonomy in their lesson planning, which is a key aspect of the Merdeka Curriculum. All three teachers involved in the study emphasized the importance of considering student diversity when developing their lesson plans. Unlike previous curricula, which often followed a more rigid structure, the Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers to tailor lesson objectives and activities to their students' specific needs and learning levels.

The teachers reported using various resources for lesson planning, including textbooks, online resources, and teacher collaboration. A common strategy mentioned was the adaptation of existing lesson plans from the previous curriculum, modifying them to align with the new principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. For example, one teacher stated:

"I adapted my lesson plans to include more student-centered activities and to give students more freedom to express themselves in English. I no longer strictly follow the textbook but use it as a reference while developing projects and group work" (Teacher 1, July 10, 2024).

Additionally, the teachers integrated the Pancasila Student Profile into their lesson plans by incorporating activities that promote collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Genre-Based Approach (GBA) were frequently used to help students develop both language and life skills.

Despite the flexibility afforded by the curriculum, challenges were reported in creating differentiated lesson plans that cater to the varying needs of students in large and diverse classrooms. Teachers expressed concerns about the time required to plan such lessons:

"Differentiating instruction for 20 to 25 students with varying abilities is challenging. Sometimes, I need more time to plan each lesson, especially when I have to create different activities for different groups" (Teacher 2, July 12, 2024).

Instructional Delivery and Teaching Strategies

The implementation of lesson plans in the classroom revealed a shift towards more interactive and student-centered teaching strategies. Teachers used methods like Project-Based Learning (PBL), Genre-Based Approach (GBA), and Collaborative Learning, which are central to the Merdeka Curriculum. These strategies enabled teachers to create a more engaging and participatory learning environment.

One of the key strategies employed by teachers was the use of English as the primary language of instruction. This was particularly notable, as the teachers mentioned the importance of encouraging students to practice English as much as possible during class. Teacher 3 explained:

"I try to use English throughout the lesson to expose the students to the language more often. I explain the difficult parts in Indonesian but encourage them to respond in English during discussions and group activities" (Teacher 3, July 16, 2024).

In addition to PBL and GBA, teachers reported using technology to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Digital tools such as YouTube videos, PowerPoint presentations, and online quizzes were incorporated into lessons, supporting the curriculum's emphasis on integrating ICT (Information and Communication Technology). One teacher noted:

"Using technology helps students stay engaged. They like watching videos, especially when we discuss things like culture or speaking exercises. It makes learning more interesting" (Teacher 1, August 5, 2024).

However, the findings also indicated limitations in terms of technological access, particularly in more rural areas or schools with limited resources. Teachers reported relying on their personal devices for classroom activities, which could limit the effectiveness of technology integration.

Assessment Practices in the Merdeka Curriculum

Assessment practices under the Merdeka Curriculum focused on authentic assessments, which aim to evaluate student learning through real-world tasks rather than traditional exams. The teachers reported using a variety of assessment tools, such as portfolios, projects, group presentations, and peer assessments.

All three teachers noted that assessments were designed to evaluate not only students' knowledge but also their attitudes and skills. This aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on holistic development, aiming to assess students across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. For example, Teacher 2 explained:

"I assess their knowledge through quizzes and tests, but I also look at how well they work in groups, how they communicate in English, and their attitude toward learning. These are all part of the assessment process" (Teacher 2, August 8, 2024).

One of the innovative aspects of assessment under the Merdeka Curriculum is the focus on Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5). Teachers integrated P5 assessments into their English classes by evaluating students' abilities to collaborate on projects, think critically, and reflect Pancasila values in their work. This was particularly evident in the use of group projects and presentations, where students had to demonstrate not only their language skills but also their understanding of broader societal values.

The teachers expressed positive outcomes from these diverse assessment methods, noting that students were more engaged and motivated when given opportunities to apply their knowledge in meaningful tasks. However, they also highlighted the challenges of conducting such assessments in large classes, where individual attention is often difficult to provide.

"Authentic assessments require more time and effort because I need to monitor each student's progress closely. This can be difficult when you have 20 or more students in the class" (Teacher 3, August 16, 2024).

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

While the study highlighted several positive aspects of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, it also identified some challenges faced by teachers. One common issue was the lack of adequate professional development and training. Teachers reported feeling insufficiently prepared to fully implement differentiated instruction and holistic assessment techniques:

"I think more training is needed, especially for differentiated learning and how to manage large classes effectively. We've been given some guidance, but it's still a challenge to implement it properly" (Teacher 1, August 5, 2024).

Additionally, limited resources were frequently mentioned as a barrier, particularly in terms of access to technology and teaching materials. Teachers expressed the need for more support in these areas to fully align their teaching with the curriculum's expectations.

These expanded findings provide a clearer and more detailed picture of the research outcomes, highlighting specific strategies used by teachers, the challenges they face, and how they adapt their teaching to the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with broader literature on curriculum reform and educational innovation, particularly in how teachers adapt to new demands in lesson planning, instructional delivery, and assessment. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools in Kupang City offers key insights into the autonomy, flexibility, and challenges experienced by English teachers.

Teacher Autonomy and Lesson Planning

The study highlights the significant autonomy that English teachers have in designing their lesson plans under the Merdeka Curriculum. This contrasts with previous curricula, where lesson planning was often more prescriptive and uniform across schools [37]. The flexibility in the Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to consider students' individual needs, levels of proficiency, and learning styles. As supported by previous research, this autonomy can lead to more tailored and effective instruction [38].

The finding that teachers adapt existing materials and collaborate with colleagues in the development of lesson plans further reinforces the notion that collaboration is crucial in educational reform. Collaboration among teachers allows for the exchange of ideas and helps in overcoming the challenges of curriculum change [39]. However, the challenge of differentiation, especially in large classes, reflects existing concerns in the literature that such flexibility requires additional teacher support and professional development [40].

Student-Centered Instruction and Diverse Teaching Strategies

The move towards student-centered instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum, as seen in the use of Project-Based Learning (PBL) and the Genre-Based Approach (GBA), is consistent with global trends in educational reform aimed at fostering critical thinking, creativity, and student engagement [41]. Teachers' efforts to implement interactive, engaging strategies reflect an alignment with constructivist approaches to learning, where students actively construct knowledge through meaningful tasks [42].

However, as noted in this study, the effective implementation of these strategies is contingent upon several factors, including class size, technological resources, and teachers' familiarity with the new approaches. Similar challenges have been reported in other contexts of curriculum change, particularly when teachers are required to adopt new pedagogies without sufficient training [43]. The fact that teachers often rely on personal devices to integrate technology into their lessons highlights a critical need for institutional support, particularly in more resource-constrained environments like Kupang [44].

Assessment Practices: Authenticity and Holistic Approaches

The study's findings on assessment practices under the Merdeka Curriculum reveal a shift towards authentic assessment, where students are evaluated based on real-world tasks and their holistic development rather than traditional tests alone. This approach aligns with the curriculum's goal of fostering a more comprehensive understanding of students' skills and attitudes [45]. The use of portfolios, group projects, and peer assessments supports the literature, which suggests that authentic assessments can promote deeper learning and better prepare students for real-world challenges [46].

The inclusion of Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) in assessment practices also underscores the curriculum's focus on character education, in line with the Pancasila Student Profile. This aligns with national education goals to develop students who embody the values of Pancasila—including integrity, collaboration, and critical thinking [47].The findings suggest that teachers are making meaningful efforts to integrate these values into both instruction and assessment, though there are ongoing challenges in maintaining consistency across large, diverse classrooms.

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Despite the positive steps taken by English teachers in Kupang City to implement the Merdeka Curriculum, this study also reveals significant challenges. Teachers report feeling underprepared for some of the more complex demands of the

curriculum, such as differentiated instruction and the use of multiple assessment methods. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that suggest that teachers often struggle with curriculum reform due to insufficient professional development [48].

In particular, teachers' difficulties in managing large, mixed-ability classes underscore the importance of differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum [49]. While the curriculum emphasizes the need for tailoring instruction to individual students, teachers report that this is time-consuming and challenging to implement without adequate resources and training. The literature suggests that for differentiation to be successful, teachers need ongoing professional development, smaller class sizes, and access to diverse teaching materials [50].

The findings also indicate that limited access to technology remains a significant barrier to fully realizing the potential of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in more remote areas such as Kupang. Teachers' reliance on personal devices and internet connections reflects broader inequalities in access to educational resources across Indonesia [51]. As educational technology becomes an increasingly important component of modern education, addressing these disparities will be crucial for ensuring the success of curriculum reforms like Merdeka [52].

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for both policy and practice in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. First, there is a clear need for additional teacher training and professional development. As teachers are given more autonomy, they also require the skills and knowledge to effectively plan, deliver, and assess student learning in diverse and complex classroom settings [53]. This aligns with the broader educational research that highlights the importance of continuous professional learning in times of curriculum reform [54].

Second, the findings underscore the need for greater resource allocation, particularly in terms of technology. Schools in more remote or underfunded areas, such as some in Kupang, require better access to digital tools and internet connectivity to fully integrate technology into their teaching practices. As the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes ICT integration, addressing these resource gaps is crucial for ensuring equitable access to quality education [55].

Lastly, the study highlights the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum's implementation. Regular feedback from teachers, students, and school administrators is essential to identifying both successes and areas for improvement. This could be achieved through collaborative networks where teachers share best practices and challenges, further fostering a culture of continuous improvement [56].

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by English teachers in junior high schools in Kupang City. It underscores several key findings related to teacher autonomy, teaching strategies, student assessment, and the challenges of curriculum reform. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of how national curriculum reforms are interpreted and applied at the local level, especially in regions with distinct socio-economic and educational contexts. The study demonstrates that teachers under the Merdeka Curriculum have a significant degree of autonomy in designing lesson plans, selecting teaching materials, and determining appropriate assessment methods. This flexibility allows teachers to tailor instruction to the diverse needs of their students, a central tenet of the Merdeka Curriculum. By allowing teachers to make pedagogical decisions based on their unique classroom dynamics, the curriculum promotes innovation and creativity in teaching practices. However, this autonomy also places a greater responsibility on teachers to continuously develop their skills and knowledge, particularly in areas such as differentiated learning and ICT integration. Teachers in Kupang City have embraced student-centered instructional strategies such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and the Genre-Based Approach (GBA), which align with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on fostering critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. These strategies, coupled with the use of technology, encourage active student participation and engagement in the learning process. The shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods to more interactive and dynamic teaching aligns with contemporary educational theories, which argue that students learn best when they are actively involved in constructing their own knowledge [57]. Despite these efforts, the study also reveals that teachers face significant challenges in implementing these strategies consistently, particularly due to large class sizes and limited resources.

In terms of student assessment, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes authentic assessments, which evaluate students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes through real-world tasks. The study found that teachers have adopted diverse assessment methods, including portfolios, group projects, and peer assessments, which align with the curriculum's emphasis on holistic student development. The integration of Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) into assessments highlights the curriculum's focus on fostering Pancasila values among students. These authentic assessments provide a more comprehensive understanding of student achievement beyond traditional exams, encouraging students to develop critical life skills. However, the study notes that teachers still struggle with maintaining consistent and reliable assessment practices due to time constraints and varying levels of student readiness. Despite the progress made, the study identifies

several ongoing challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers report difficulties in managing differentiated instruction for students with varying abilities, especially in large classes. Additionally, the lack of access to technology and digital resources, particularly in resource-limited schools in Kupang, remains a major barrier to fully integrating ICT into the teaching and learning process. These challenges mirror those reported in other contexts of curriculum reform, where teachers often feel underprepared for the demands of new pedagogical approaches [58]. Addressing these challenges will require sustained efforts in teacher training, resource allocation, and institutional support.

Implications

The findings of this research have several academic implications. First, they contribute to the growing body of literature on curriculum reform, particularly in the context of English language teaching in Indonesia. The study provides concrete examples of how teachers interpret and implement the Merdeka Curriculum, offering valuable insights for both policymakers and educators. Second, the findings highlight the importance of teacher autonomy and the need for professional development programs that equip teachers with the skills necessary to design and implement effective lesson plans, teaching strategies, and assessments. Lastly, the study underscores the need for further research on the long-term impact of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in terms of its effect on student motivation, academic performance, and overall educational outcomes.

For the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, several practical steps are necessary. First, professional development programs should be provided to help teachers better understand and implement the curriculum's principles, particularly in areas like differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and the use of technology in the classroom. Additionally, resource allocation must be improved, particularly in rural and underfunded schools, to ensure that all teachers and students have access to the tools and materials necessary for successful learning.

Collaboration among teachers, school administrators, and educational policymakers is crucial for overcoming the challenges identified in this study. Schools should also foster a culture of continuous learning by providing platforms for teachers to share best practices and resources, both within and across schools. This collaborative approach will ensure that teachers feel supported in their efforts to implement the Merdeka Curriculum and can effectively adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs of their students.

In conclusion, this study has shown that the Merdeka Curriculum provides teachers with significant autonomy and flexibility in shaping their teaching practices. English teachers in Kupang City have made commendable efforts to implement student-centered instructional strategies and authentic assessment methods, despite facing various challenges related to class size, resource limitations, and differentiated learning. While the Merdeka Curriculum holds promise for improving educational outcomes in Indonesia, its success will depend on sustained investment in teacher training, resource provision, and institutional support. The insights gained from this study offer valuable guidance for future curriculum reforms, both in Indonesia and in other educational contexts undergoing similar transformations.

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