

English Teachers' Perceptions of the Transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of English teachers regarding the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 11 Sorong Regency and SMP Muhammadiyah Sorong Regency. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through interviews with five English teachers—three from SMP Negeri 11 and two from SMP Muhammadiyah. The interviews included ten questions aimed at understanding teachers' views on curriculum implementation, their responses to the transition, and the challenges they face. The findings reveal that while the Merdeka Curriculum offers benefits such as flexibility and a focus on holistic student development, it also presents significant challenges. These challenges include inadequate training, limited resources, and difficulties in adopting new technologies. Teachers noted both positive and negative aspects of the transition, such as opportunities for personalized learning but also increased workload and the need for more preparation time. Furthermore, the training received was found to have varying levels of effectiveness, highlighting the need for consistent and comprehensive professional development. This study emphasizes the importance of addressing these challenges to ensure the successful and equitable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across Indonesia's diverse educational landscape. Insights from this research can guide policymakers and educators in enhancing teacher support and curriculum adaptation strategies

Keywords: Curriculum Transition; Merdeka Curriculum; English Teachers' Perceptions

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Introduction

A curriculum is a crucial tool for achieving educational success. A proper and well-designed curriculum is essential to achieving intended learning objectives and meeting national education goals. Over the years, Indonesia has implemented numerous curricular revisions to adapt to evolving educational needs and societal demands. The curriculum provides a structured framework for organizing teaching and learning activities, covering content, resources, and instructional methods (Hamalik, 2017). Its purpose goes beyond delivering knowledge—it serves as a foundation for fostering critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability in students.

According to Hamalik (2017), the curriculum has three main functions: conservative, critical or evaluative, and creative. It also plays adaptive, integrative, preparatory, and diagnostic roles in education. These functions highlight the curriculum's influence on shaping student outcomes and ensuring that education remains relevant to societal needs. Furthermore, Effendi Hasibuan (2019) emphasizes that the curriculum profoundly impacts both formal and informal education outcomes, making it a cornerstone of national education.

Curriculum transitions are an inevitable part of education reform, especially in addressing the challenges of a rapidly changing world (Mulyasa, 2019). The shift from the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) to the Merdeka Curriculum reflects Indonesia's effort to improve educational outcomes by fostering greater flexibility, creativity, and student-centered learning. However, implementing such changes is often met with challenges, particularly for teachers who must adapt their teaching practices to align with the new framework.

Teachers play a pivotal role in this process, as their ability to effectively convey knowledge and design engaging learning experiences directly impacts student performance.

The transition from K-13 to the Merdeka Curriculum is particularly significant in the context of English education. English is a global language, and its mastery requires an integrated approach to developing language skills. For teachers accustomed to the structured, assessment-focused paradigm of K-13, the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on creativity and autonomy demands a shift in mindset and teaching strategies. This change introduces challenges such as adapting to less rigid standards, managing student-centered learning, and ensuring alignment with broader educational goals. These challenges are further compounded by limited resources, insufficient training, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted education systems globally.

In Sorong Regency, where this study was conducted, the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum has raised many questions among English teachers. Teachers at SMP Negeri 11 Sorong Regency and SMP Muhammadiyah Sorong Regency face unique challenges in implementing the new curriculum, particularly in designing innovative teaching methods while navigating systemic and contextual barriers. This study aims to explore their perceptions of the curriculum transition and its implications for English education.

Understanding teachers' perceptions is vital for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the Merdeka Curriculum during its implementation phase. By focusing on their experiences, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into how curriculum transitions impact teaching practices, student outcomes, and overall educational quality. Moreover, the findings will contribute to the broader discourse on curriculum reform, offering practical recommendations for supporting teachers and improving the transition process.

Literature Review

Perception

Perception is the process through which individuals organize and interpret sensory stimuli to give them meaning. Branca, as cited by Alvianti and Alrianingrum (2021), defines perception as an interplay of stimuli that creates meaningful responses within individuals. Unlike mere sensory recognition, perception involves understanding what the stimulus signifies. For instance, when visual stimuli, such as light, are processed by the retina, the brain's visual cortex interprets these signals to create a three-dimensional model of the external environment. This process highlights the distinction between sensation, which identifies stimuli, and perception, which comprehends them. Perception allows individuals to integrate and interpret data from various sensory organs, enabling them to identify and understand objects and their related stimuli.

The 2013 Curriculum

The 2013 Curriculum (K-13) was developed as a progression from earlier curricula, such as the competency-based curriculum of 2004 and the KTSP curriculum of 2006. According to Prof. Ir. Muhammad Nuh, the 2013 Curriculum emphasizes a competency-based approach focusing on attitudes, skills, and knowledge. It aims to foster active, creative, and innovative problem-solving among students while integrating character education into all subjects.

The advantages of the 2013 Curriculum include holistic competency development, including attitudes, skills, and knowledge, and its adaptability to social changes at local, national, and global levels. For instance, elementary students are guided to develop

attitudes within their immediate environment, while junior high students are encouraged to apply these attitudes across broader social contexts. By the senior high school level, students are expected to demonstrate attitudes that reflect national identity and global awareness. However, the curriculum also includes challenges, such as teachers' readiness to adopt its creative demands. Many teachers lack adequate training and understanding of concepts like the scientific approach, lesson planning (RPP), and authentic assessments. Additionally, teachers were not directly involved in developing the 2013 Curriculum, creating gaps in implementation and understanding.

The Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced to address issues of learning loss and increasing educational disparities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Directorate of Elementary Schools, this curriculum focuses on diversified intracurricular learning, allowing students to explore concepts and strengthen competencies. Teachers are granted the flexibility to select instructional materials based on their students' needs and interests, fostering a personalized approach to education. Officially enacted in December 2019, the Merdeka Curriculum aligns with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) Decree Number 56/M/2022, which emphasizes adapting curricula to unit-specific conditions.

Muin et al. (2022) describe the Merdeka Curriculum as a framework designed to optimize content and provide sufficient time for students to explore and strengthen their skills. This curriculum aims to develop students' independence in thinking, supported by teachers' intellectual freedom in designing learning activities. The lack of restrictions, such as rigid RPP requirements, allows teachers to tailor learning experiences to meet students' needs. This flexibility enables students to reach their full potential by fostering critical thinking and creativity. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on flexible teaching resources and diversified learning opportunities demonstrates its potential to address the limitations of previous curricula. However, its success heavily relies on teachers' readiness and ability to adopt independent learning approaches that align with students' individual needs and interests.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to explore English teachers' perceptions of the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. According to Creswell (2015), qualitative research is particularly suited for gaining a deeper understanding of complex topics, such as individual experiences and perceptions. It focuses on narrative and comparative analysis to provide detailed insights into the research problem. The qualitative approach used in this study includes interviews, observations, and data collection from multiple sources, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the subject.

The study focuses on English teachers from SMP Negeri 11 Sorong Regency and SMP Muhammadiyah Sorong Regency. These schools were selected due to their distinct characteristics, such as differing resources, teacher demographics, and experiences with implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. SMP Negeri 11 represents a public school with established structures, while SMP Muhammadiyah offers insights from a private school context. This combination provides a balanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced during the curriculum transition. Five English teachers—three from SMP Negeri 11 and two from SMP Muhammadiyah—were purposefully selected based on their direct involvement in teaching English under both curricula. This targeted sampling ensures that participants have relevant and valuable insights into the transition process.

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews, which consisted of ten open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' perceptions of the curriculum transition. The questions focused on key areas such as the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum, responses to the transition, challenges faced, and perceived benefits and drawbacks of the new curriculum. These questions were developed based on a review of relevant literature and consultations with curriculum experts to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. To validate the interview guide, a pilot test was conducted with two teachers who were not part of the final sample. Feedback from the pilot test was used to refine the wording and clarity of the questions. The interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable environment during school hours to minimize disruptions and create a conducive setting for honest and reflective responses. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim for analysis. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the teachers' responses. This approach enabled the researcher to categorize and interpret the perceptions, experiences, and challenges shared by the participants. By integrating data from both schools, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum transition's impact on English teachers in Sorong Regency.

Result

This study explores English teachers' perceptions of the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on implementation differences, challenges, and their adaptability to current conditions. Data were collected from five English teachers at SMP Negeri 11 Sorong Regency and SMP Muhammadiyah Sorong Regency using semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal significant insights into how teachers perceive and navigate the curriculum transition.

Implementation of the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Curriculum

Teachers shared varying opinions about implementing the 2013 Curriculum. While acknowledging its structured nature, they noted that it requires adaptation to each school's unique conditions. One teacher stated, "...*this school has implemented it, although it is not perfect... adjust it to school conditions...*" (Resource 5). Another emphasized that the 2013 Curriculum evaluates students' attitudes, knowledge, and skills comprehensively, "*Actually it's almost the same. Only in 2013 there was...an assessment of attitudes, knowledge, and skills...*" (Resource 2).

Regarding the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers highlighted its flexibility but also pointed out challenges, including inadequate training and the reallocation of hours to P5 (Project to Strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile). One teacher remarked, "...*not much different from the 2013 curriculum... the most striking difference... the reduction in learning hours transferred to P5*" (Resource 1). Another added, "...*we haven't directly received special training from the government... we don't really understand what the independent curriculum actually is...*" (Resource 5). These comments underscore the lack of preparation and support for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

Responses and Obstacles of the Curriculum Transition

Teachers expressed mixed reactions to the transition. While some praised the inclusion of P5 for character development and creativity, others viewed the curriculum changes as superficial or overly reliant on digitalization. One teacher noted, "...*actually good... P5 is the application of character values... more creative... still needs adjustments...*" (Resource 1). However, another criticized the frequent curriculum changes,

stating, “*Personally, I don't like it... every time we change government, change leaders, change ministers we change the curriculum... it seems like it's being forced...*” (Resource 5).

Challenges also emerged regarding infrastructure and resources. A teacher explained, “*...not all areas can cover that in terms of adequate facilities and infrastructure...*” (Resource 4). This highlights the disparity between urban and rural schools, which affects the equitable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Curriculum Suitability for Current Conditions

Teachers identified the strengths and weaknesses of various curricula and suggested combining elements from different frameworks to create a more adaptive system. For instance, the KTSP Curriculum was praised for its regional adaptability and its role in fostering competition through exams. One teacher stated, “*...the KTSP curriculum is better... according to the development conditions of a region... the national exam is necessary to measure the extent of students' abilities...*” (Resource 5).

The 2013 Curriculum was commended for its holistic assessments, with one teacher noting, “*...the 2013 curriculum is good... because there is an assessment of attitudes, social attitudes, mutual respect...*” (Resource 2). The Merdeka Curriculum, however, was viewed as more aligned with contemporary needs. A teacher remarked, “*...all curricula are suitable depending on the era... it's safe now, I think the independent curriculum is very suitable...*” (Resource 4). These comments suggest that while the Merdeka Curriculum offers promise, its effectiveness hinges on addressing implementation challenges and providing better training for educators.

In summary, the results reveal key differences in teacher perceptions of the two curricula. The 2013 Curriculum is valued for its structure and comprehensive assessments, while the Merdeka Curriculum offers flexibility and relevance but faces challenges in training and implementation. Teachers expressed a preference for combining the strengths of these curricula to create a more adaptive and balanced system. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators in refining and supporting curriculum implementation.

Discussion

The study utilized a qualitative descriptive method with interviews as the primary data collection tool, focusing on five English teachers from SMP Negeri 11 Sorong Regency and SMP Muhammadiyah Sorong Regency. The findings provide significant insights into teachers' perceptions of the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. While the Merdeka Curriculum was generally perceived positively for aligning with contemporary educational needs and promoting student-centered learning, its implementation revealed various challenges, particularly in diverse and under-resourced regions like Sorong Regency.

A key advantage of the Merdeka Curriculum is its flexibility, which allows teachers to tailor lessons to students' unique cultural and contextual realities. This feature is particularly relevant in Sorong Regency, a region characterized by its cultural richness and geographical isolation. Teachers noted that the curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning and the P5 (Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project) encouraged creativity, collaboration, and character development among students. One teacher remarked that the P5 provided opportunities to integrate local values and cultural themes into the classroom, which enhanced students' engagement and made learning more meaningful. This aligns with research by Satria et al. (2022), which highlights the potential of culturally responsive teaching to foster independence and exploratory learning.

Similarly, Muin et al. (2022) emphasize that the Merdeka Curriculum's design enables teachers to connect content with students' lived experiences, promoting a deeper understanding of learning materials. However, implementing P5 posed challenges, such as reduced teaching hours for core subjects and the need for extensive preparation, which led to mixed opinions about its overall effectiveness.

Despite its benefits, the Merdeka Curriculum's reliance on technology and innovative teaching methods presented barriers for schools in Sorong Regency. Teachers reported limited access to digital tools and inadequate infrastructure, which hindered the effective adoption of technology-enhanced learning. Additionally, many teachers, particularly those with limited digital literacy, struggled to integrate technology into their teaching practices. This finding aligns with the observations of Rahman and Nurdiana (2022), who highlight the technological gap as a significant issue in rural schools, emphasizing the need for targeted support to bridge these disparities. This technological gap underscores the need for targeted support to ensure that the curriculum's benefits are equitably realized across different regions.

Another critical barrier was the lack of comprehensive teacher training. Teachers in private schools noted that they had not received sufficient training to fully understand and implement the Merdeka Curriculum. This lack of support forced many to seek additional knowledge independently, often through online resources. Consequently, inconsistencies in curriculum implementation emerged, affecting the uniformity and quality of educational delivery. These findings align with the work of Santoso and Setiawan (2022), who argue that inadequate training limits teachers' ability to adapt to curriculum changes effectively. While teachers appreciated the curriculum's flexibility in lesson planning, they also expressed concerns about the increased workload required to design customized lesson plans and assessments without adequate training.

The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on differentiated learning placed additional pressure on teachers to balance curriculum requirements with limited resources and time. While this approach fosters an engaging learning environment, it also disrupted classroom continuity due to frequent workshops and training sessions. These disruptions left some students feeling unsupported, particularly when teachers were away from the classroom. This finding resonates with research by Simatupang and Siregar (2023), who emphasize the importance of sustainable and consistent professional development programs to minimize disruptions and ensure effective curriculum implementation.

The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers and educational institutions. First, comprehensive and continuous teacher training is essential to ensure that educators are well-prepared to implement the Merdeka Curriculum effectively. Training programs should emphasize not only the technical aspects of the curriculum but also strategies for integrating cultural relevance and adapting to local contexts. As Gardner (2021) notes, professional development should include training in differentiated instruction and culturally responsive teaching to better equip teachers in diverse regions. Second, investments in infrastructure are crucial to bridging the technological gap, particularly in regions like Sorong Regency. Providing schools with adequate digital tools and improving internet connectivity will enable teachers to leverage technology more effectively in their teaching practices.

Policymakers should adopt more inclusive approaches that address the unique needs of schools in diverse regions. For instance, allocating resources based on regional disparities can help ensure that under-resourced schools receive the support they need to meet curriculum expectations. Additionally, encouraging collaboration between schools and local communities can enhance the cultural relevance of the curriculum while fostering greater engagement among students. The work of Fitriyah and Wardani (2022) underscores

the value of community involvement in making educational reforms more effective and sustainable. In conclusion, while the Merdeka Curriculum holds promise for fostering flexibility, creativity, and cultural relevance in education, its successful implementation requires addressing the challenges identified by teachers. By prioritizing teacher training, infrastructure development, and region-specific strategies, policymakers and educational institutions can ensure a smoother transition and equitable outcomes for all learners.

Conclusion

This study highlights the perceptions of English teachers regarding the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, offering valuable insights into its benefits and challenges. While the Merdeka Curriculum introduces flexibility, creativity, and a focus on holistic student development, its implementation has faced significant hurdles, particularly in the areas of teacher training, resource allocation, and technological adoption. These challenges are more pronounced in private schools, where teachers often lack adequate support and training, and in regions with limited infrastructure. To address these issues, actionable steps are essential. Policymakers and educational institutions must prioritize comprehensive and continuous teacher training programs. These programs should equip teachers with the skills to design student-centered, culturally relevant, and technology-integrated lessons. Special attention should be given to private schools and rural areas to ensure equitable access to training. Furthermore, investment in infrastructure, such as digital tools and reliable internet connectivity, is necessary to support the effective adoption of technology-enhanced learning. Policymakers should also develop region-specific strategies that account for the diverse educational contexts across Indonesia.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of the Merdeka Curriculum on student performance and teacher adaptability. Studies examining the impact of curriculum flexibility on academic outcomes and the scalability of this approach in other regions will provide deeper insights. Additionally, investigating the role of professional development programs in sustaining teacher readiness over time could inform strategies for continuous improvement. By addressing these challenges and focusing on teacher support and infrastructure, the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to transform education in Indonesia, fostering motivated learners and resilient educators in diverse and dynamic learning environments.

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