

From 2013 to Merdeka: Investigating Curriculum Change and Its Impact on Students' Motivation in Learning English

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates the impact of the curriculum transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum on students' motivation in learning English at SMP YPK Fakfak. The study involved 80 students across grades VII to IX, with grades VII and VIII learning under the Merdeka Curriculum and grade IX under the 2013 Curriculum. Data were collected using two main instruments: a motivation questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire assessed students' motivation levels, while the interviews explored personal experiences and influencing factors in greater depth. The findings revealed that students taught under the Merdeka Curriculum consistently demonstrated very high levels of motivation, with scores ranging from 92.05 to 96.01. In contrast, students under the 2013 Curriculum showed slightly lower motivation, with scores between 80.47 and 82.04. Key internal factors contributing to motivation included personal interest, desire to communicate in English, and enjoyment of interactive classroom activities. External factors such as parental support, access to learning media, and school facilities also played a significant role. Students under the Merdeka Curriculum expressed greater enjoyment and engagement due to diverse and creative learning activities such as drama, videos, and songs, which helped boost their confidence and reduce anxiety. Meanwhile, the exam-focused and rigid structure of the 2013 Curriculum was perceived as limiting student interest and participation. The study concludes that the Merdeka Curriculum's flexible, student-centered design positively influences learners' motivation in English learning. It highlights the value of interactive media, teacher encouragement, and a supportive learning environment in enhancing student engagement.

Keywords: Motivation; 2013 Curriculum; Merdeka Curriculum

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Introduction

The dynamics of global education have prompted numerous countries to re-evaluate and reform their curricula to better prepare students for 21st-century challenges. Indonesia is no exception. In recent years, the Indonesian government introduced a major policy shift by transitioning from the 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum 2013) to the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). This transition emphasizes a more flexible, student-centered approach that fosters autonomy, critical thinking, and creativity (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). In this context, English—an essential global language—remains a core subject, vital for academic achievement, global communication, and career success. However, the effectiveness of English instruction is not determined by curriculum structure alone, but also by how it affects students' motivation to engage in language learning.

The Merdeka Curriculum grants teachers greater autonomy in designing contextualized lessons and promotes project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and character development. These characteristics sharply contrast with the 2013 Curriculum, which was often criticized for its rigid, standardized, and teacher-centered design (Yanti & Harahap, 2023). Since motivation plays a key role in second or foreign language learning—shaping learners’ persistence, effort, and outcomes—it is crucial to assess how curriculum reforms influence student engagement (Putri & Lestari, 2024). Although studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, including teacher preparedness and policy-related challenges (Anindya & Wibowo, 2023; Rahayu, 2022), few have explored its impact on students’ motivation in English learning. Most research tends to prioritize institutional readiness or instructional alignment, leaving a significant gap in understanding how students emotionally respond to the changes. This study addresses that gap by focusing on students’ intrinsic interest and motivational development—a critical but underexplored aspect of curriculum evaluation.

Moreover, the rapid digitalization of education during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the growing need for student-driven learning approaches. As schools resume face-to-face or hybrid learning under the Merdeka Curriculum, it becomes increasingly relevant to examine whether these curriculum features genuinely inspire learners to be more engaged and enthusiastic in learning English. Hartati and Fikri (2023) emphasize that while motivation is fundamental to adapting to new educational models, it is often sidelined in reform assessments further emphasizing the need for learner-centered investigations. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on students’ motivational responses rather than curriculum content or delivery alone. It seeks to understand how students and teachers experience the change and whether it fosters a more engaging and emotionally supportive English learning environment. By including both student and teacher perspectives, the study offers a more holistic picture of how curriculum transformation affects classroom dynamics and learner attitudes.

Motivation is essential in language acquisition, especially for junior high school students who are at a crucial developmental stage. A curriculum that promotes creativity, contextual learning, and learner autonomy should ideally enhance motivation. However, empirical evidence is needed to validate this assumption, making this study both timely and important. Therefore, this research aims to explore students’ perceptions of learning English under the Merdeka Curriculum, examine how teachers perceive the influence of curriculum change on students’ motivation, and identify the level of student interest in engaging with English learning both inside and outside the classroom within the new curriculum framework. By answering these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how national curriculum reform influences student motivation at the school level. It also provides valuable insights for policymakers, curriculum developers, and educators working to build a more motivating and responsive English language education system in Indonesia.

Literature Review

a. Curriculum Change in Indonesian Education

Curriculum reform in Indonesia reflects a continuous effort to improve educational relevance and effectiveness. The 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum 2013) was implemented with a focus on character education, integrated thematic learning, and scientific approaches. However, it was often criticized for being overly centralized, inflexible, and too focused on cognitive outcomes (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). To address these limitations, the Merdeka Curriculum was introduced to provide more flexibility for schools and teachers in designing learning based on student needs and local context. The shift from a teacher-

centered to a student-centered model is expected to foster deeper engagement and learning motivation (Yanti & Harahap, 2023). Teachers are now encouraged to use differentiated instruction and project-based learning, which potentially affects students' learning motivation, particularly in foreign language contexts.

b. English Learning Motivation: Definitions and Theoretical Perspectives

Motivation in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is a critical determinant of student success. According to Dörnyei (2019), motivation in second language acquisition is influenced by individual goals, attitudes, and the social learning environment. It encompasses both intrinsic motivation—driven by interest and enjoyment—and extrinsic motivation—driven by external rewards such as grades or praise (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language starting from primary or secondary levels, and learners' motivation can be shaped by factors such as curriculum design, teaching strategies, peer interaction, and exposure to English media. Research by Pratiwi and Gunawan (2022) emphasizes that students demonstrate higher motivation when learning activities are relevant to their lives and when they feel a sense of autonomy.

c. The Relationship Between Curriculum and Learning Motivation

The interaction between curriculum design and student motivation has been widely acknowledged. Curricula that encourage active learning, student autonomy, and real-world application of knowledge are more likely to increase intrinsic motivation (Putri & Lestari, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on contextualized and meaningful learning, aims to create such an environment. While the 2013 Curriculum was more rigid and uniform across schools, the new curriculum allows for greater adaptation to local needs and student interests. This personalization is expected to positively influence motivation levels. International studies have shown similar patterns—curriculum reform that incorporates flexibility and learner-centered pedagogies tends to boost student engagement and enthusiasm (Le & Phan, 2021; Rahim et al., 2022).

d. Previous Studies on Curriculum Impact and Student Motivation

Several studies in Indonesia have examined the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum and the early stages of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, many of these focus on teacher readiness, textbook changes, or instructional techniques, with limited attention to students' motivational responses. For instance, Nuraini and Susanto (2023) found that students felt more motivated in schools that implemented project-based learning aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. Meanwhile, Handayani and Syafrizal (2024) observed that motivation improved when learners had more control over their learning process. Nonetheless, there is still a scarcity of focused research investigating how students perceive these curricular changes specifically in relation to English learning motivation.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate the impact of curriculum transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum on students' motivation in learning English. The case study method was selected to allow for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and motivational factors among students who were exposed to different curriculum models within the same school context. The research was conducted at SMP YPK Fakfak, located in Fakfak Regency, West Papua. The participants consisted of 80 students drawn from grades VII to IX. Students in grades VII and VIII were taught using the Merdeka Curriculum, while grade IX students were taught using the 2013 Curriculum. To gain insights from both groups, the researcher collected data from all students through a motivation questionnaire and conducted interviews with a purposive sample of six students—three from each curriculum group.

Two instruments were used to collect data: a motivation questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was administered to all 80 students to assess their levels of motivation in English learning. It measured aspects such as participation, interest, enjoyment, and persistence. The questionnaire responses were then categorized into five motivation levels based on a predefined score range (Very Low to Very High). Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with six students (three from each curriculum group), selected randomly, to explore their perceptions, personal interests, and external influences affecting their motivation. These interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of qualitative aspects such as learning enjoyment, confidence, and classroom experiences.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures following Ary et al. (2010). The analysis process included:

1. Coding. The researcher read and re-read the interview transcripts to identify key phrases and themes. Similar units of meaning were grouped under the same codes.
2. Data Reduction. Redundant or irrelevant information was removed, and the focus was placed on meaningful patterns related to students' motivation and curricular impact.
3. Data Display. Data were organized into narrative descriptions, tables, and categorized explanations to aid interpretation.
4. Conclusion Drawing - Final interpretations were made by identifying relationships among emerging themes and comparing motivational trends across curriculum groups.

Descriptive statistics (mean, median, and standard deviation) were used to analyze the questionnaire responses and determine the general motivation levels across classes. Scores were categorized as follows: 20-35 (Very Low), 36-50 (Low), 51-65 (Moderate), 66-80 (High), and 81-100 (Very High). This mixed qualitative and descriptive design enabled the researcher to compare motivational differences between curriculum groups and identify internal and external factors influencing students' engagement in English learning.

Result

This section presents the findings of the research on the impact of curriculum change from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum—on students' motivation in learning English at SMP YPK Fakfak. The results are organized into two major areas: (1) comparison of motivation levels between students taught using different curricula, and (2) exploration of the internal and external factors influencing motivation based on students' responses in interviews.

a. Differences in Student Motivation Levels

The motivation levels of students were measured using a structured questionnaire distributed to 80 students across grades VII to IX. Students in grades VII and VIII were taught using the Merdeka Curriculum, while those in grade IX followed the 2013 Curriculum. The questionnaire assessed the students' motivation using a Likert scale, with scores later categorized into five levels: very low, low, moderate, high, and very high. The following table summarizes the average motivation scores by class and curriculum:

Table 1: *Student Motivation Scores and Levels by Curriculum*

Class	Number of Students	Motivation Score	Motivationz Level	Curriculum Used
IX A	15	80.47	High	2013 Curriculum
IX B	15	82.04	Very High	2013 Curriculum
VIII A	10	96.01	Very High	Merdeka Curriculum
VIII B	10	92.06	Very High	Merdeka Curriculum
VII A	10	92.08	Very High	Merdeka Curriculum
VII B	10	95.01	Very High	Merdeka Curriculum
VII C	10	92.05	Very High	Merdeka Curriculum

From the data above, it is evident that students learning under the Merdeka Curriculum exhibited consistently very high levels of motivation, with scores ranging from 92.05 to 96.01. All Merdeka Curriculum classes reached the highest category of motivation. In contrast, the 2013 Curriculum group scored slightly lower. Class IX A had an average motivation score of 80.47, which is categorized as High, while Class IX B reached 82.04, qualifying as Very High, but still lower than most Merdeka Curriculum classes. These results indicate a clear trend: the Merdeka Curriculum positively correlates with higher motivation among junior high school students in learning English. This difference can be attributed to the structural nature of both curricula. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student autonomy, flexible learning methods, and the integration of media and real-world contexts, which evidently increase student interest and engagement. On the other hand, the 2013 Curriculum tends to be more rigid and exam-focused, potentially causing student stress and reducing enjoyment in the learning process.

b. Factors Influencing Student Motivation

To gain deeper insights into the factors influencing student motivation, interviews were conducted with six students, three from each curriculum group. The data were analyzed thematically, and the findings are grouped into three categories: internal (personal) factors, external (environmental) factors, and curriculum-based influences.

1. Internal (Personal) Factors

a. Interest in English Learning

Students from both curriculum groups expressed an interest in learning English, but the level of enthusiasm differed. Those taught under the Merdeka Curriculum often highlighted the enjoyable and interactive nature of the learning activities. One student stated:

“I like it because there are fun activities like watching videos, acting in drama, or singing songs.”

(Student 2, Merdeka Curriculum)

In contrast, students in the 2013 Curriculum group enjoyed learning English but often related it to academic success or teacher expectations rather than enjoyment:

“I’m motivated because this curriculum (2013) makes me active, and I like learning English even though it’s sometimes difficult.”

(Student 1, 2013 Curriculum)

b. Desire to Communicate in English

Both groups of students showed a desire to speak and understand English well. However, the opportunities provided by the Merdeka Curriculum, such as discussions, group work, and drama, made students more confident.

"I became more confident speaking English because of activities like discussions and drama. We can practice without being afraid of making mistakes."
(Student 3, Merdeka Curriculum)

This supportive environment contrasts with the 2013 Curriculum, which tends to focus on grammar drills and written exercises.

c. *Self-Confidence and Curiosity*

Students under the Merdeka Curriculum reported a noticeable boost in self-confidence, largely due to the open-ended and student-driven nature of classroom activities.

"I feel more confident because the teacher gives us time to speak and ask questions. It makes us braver."
(Student 2, Merdeka Curriculum)

Students from the 2013 Curriculum group also mentioned confidence, but usually in the context of test preparation rather than natural language use.

2. *External (Environmental) Factors*

a. *Parental and Peer Support*

The interviews revealed that motivation was strongly reinforced by family and peer encouragement. This was consistent across both groups.

"My parents always say English is important. That makes me more serious in studying."
(Student 2, 2013 Curriculum)

"Support from parents and friends makes me more motivated to learn English."
(Student 1, 2013 Curriculum)

b. *Media Exposure*

A significant difference emerged in students' exposure to English through media. Merdeka Curriculum students experienced English via videos, music, and online materials both inside and outside the classroom.

"I like learning from the videos or songs our teacher gives. It's easier to understand and fun."
(Student 1, Merdeka Curriculum)

This media integration helped students improve pronunciation, vocabulary, and interest, while students in the 2013 Curriculum relied more on textbooks and dictionary use.

c. *Facilities and Learning Resources*

Students from both groups recognized the importance of school facilities, but the use of such tools varied. 2013 Curriculum students noted the availability of dictionaries, books, and infocus projectors, but the activities remained more traditional.

"We have books, dictionaries, and an infocus projector. Those help me understand English."
(Student 3, 2013 Curriculum)

Students in the Merdeka Curriculum, however, emphasized how media and tools were integrated into dynamic lessons, not just used for static presentations.

3. *Curriculum-Based Factors*

Students expressed clear preferences for learning that was enjoyable and creative. Those learning under the Merdeka Curriculum felt freer to explore ideas and participate in a range of activities.

"We don't only learn from books. We can use other media we like. That makes learning more fun."
(Student 1, Merdeka Curriculum)

“I prefer this curriculum because it’s not rigid and more enjoyable.”
(Student 3, Merdeka Curriculum)

Conversely, students under the 2013 Curriculum appreciated the structure and guidance but sometimes felt overwhelmed by the workload.

“The 2013 Curriculum makes me active and disciplined, but sometimes there’s too much focus on exams.”
(Student 1, 2013 Curriculum)

“I study harder because there are many tasks, but sometimes it’s tiring.”
(Student 3, 2013 Curriculum)

These contrasting responses indicate that while both curricula offer value, the Merdeka Curriculum is more successful in maintaining student motivation by reducing pressure and increasing enjoyment.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly indicate that students taught under the Merdeka Curriculum demonstrated higher levels of motivation compared to those following the 2013 Curriculum. This suggests that curriculum structure significantly influences learners’ engagement and enthusiasm in language learning. While these results support prior research emphasizing the benefits of student-centered approaches (e.g., Putri et al., 2021), this study offers new insights by highlighting not only the role of interactive materials but also the curriculum’s autonomy-supportive environment, which allowed for creative and personalized learning experiences. Drawing from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2017), such autonomy-enhancing settings fulfill students’ basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—thereby fostering intrinsic motivation.

A critical contribution of this study lies in showing how learning media—such as videos, songs, and collaborative activities—become more effective when embedded within a flexible curriculum. While previous research (Wicaksono & Rachmijati, 2020) emphasized the importance of multimedia in increasing interest, this study deepens that understanding by revealing that media effectiveness is mediated by curricular freedom. Under the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers were empowered to adapt learning tools and strategies to suit student interests, making the activities not only engaging but also personally meaningful, which in turn stimulated higher motivation levels.

Moreover, the interviews revealed that internal motivational drivers—such as curiosity, confidence, and the desire to speak English—were stronger among students in the Merdeka Curriculum. These students described the classroom as a place where they could take risks and use English without fear, aligning with constructivist theories that emphasize the role of psychological safety and active learner participation in knowledge construction (Narayan et al., 2019). The reduced anxiety and enhanced learner agency noted in this study reflect an environment conducive to intrinsic goal orientation, contrasting with the performance-driven approach of the 2013 Curriculum.

External influences also emerged as important contributors to motivation. Students exposed to the Merdeka Curriculum reported greater parental encouragement, increased peer collaboration, and more consistent access to English materials via digital platforms such as YouTube and social media. These findings complement research by Dewi et al. (2022), which identified the importance of environmental support in sustaining language motivation. However, this study extends that understanding by showing how the curriculum’s integration of everyday digital content helps bridge formal learning with students’ real-world interests, fostering continuous engagement beyond the classroom.

The role of the teacher was also pivotal. While both groups appreciated supportive teachers, students under the Merdeka Curriculum described their teachers as more approachable and creative. These impressions align with recent studies (Suryani & Widodo, 2023) that stress the importance of teacher affect and relational warmth in promoting learner motivation. The Merdeka Curriculum's design encouraged such positive teacher-student interactions by granting instructors more flexibility to innovate, tailor instruction, and respond to student needs—ultimately supporting a more emotionally responsive pedagogy.

Furthermore, activities like group discussions, role-plays, and interactive games proved effective in lowering student anxiety, a known barrier to foreign language learning. This supports findings by Novitasari et al. (2021), who concluded that emotionally enjoyable experiences reinforce learning and memory retention. In this study, students reported that such methods enhanced their confidence, participation, and willingness to communicate in English, which are critical indicators of sustainable language motivation.

Despite these promising findings, the study has limitations. The sample was limited to one school and a relatively small group of students, making it difficult to generalize results to broader contexts. In addition, the study did not examine students' actual language proficiency, which could have influenced their motivation levels. Future research should consider expanding the sample and incorporating measures of linguistic competence to explore the interplay between proficiency and motivation.

Another limitation is the short-term nature of the study. Motivation can fluctuate based on external conditions such as exams, classroom environment, or personal stress. As Lestari et al. (2022) recommend, longitudinal studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how motivation evolves under different curriculum models over time. Tracking students' progress and attitudes across academic terms or school years could reveal whether the Merdeka Curriculum's motivational benefits are sustained or situational.

The implications for English language teaching are significant. Regardless of the curriculum, educators should prioritize learner autonomy, positive classroom interactions, and creative use of media to nurture motivation. Activities that support self-expression, emotional safety, and real-world relevance should be at the forefront of instructional planning. In particular, the use of student-centered tasks—supported by teacher encouragement and relatable content can transform English lessons into engaging and empowering experiences.

Future studies should explore how different components of the Merdeka Curriculum (e.g., project-based learning, differentiated instruction) contribute to student motivation. Additionally, research could investigate how digital media consumption outside of school interacts with formal instruction to shape learners' language attitudes. Comparing motivation trends across rural and urban schools would also provide a richer picture of how context influences curriculum effectiveness. Ultimately, this study underscores the need to view curriculum reform not only as a structural shift but also as a psychological and emotional catalyst that can profoundly shape learners' educational journeys.

Conclusion

This study investigated the differences in students' motivation to learn English under two curriculum models—the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum—at SMP YPK Fakfak. The results showed that students taught using the Merdeka Curriculum consistently exhibited higher motivation levels than those under the 2013 Curriculum. This was attributed to the curriculum's flexibility, student-centered design, and the use of varied and interactive learning activities such as role plays, videos, songs, and group discussions,

which made learning more enjoyable and meaningful. In contrast, the 2013 Curriculum, while still promoting motivation to some extent, relied heavily on exams, memorization, and textbook-based tasks, which often led to academic pressure and limited student engagement. Internal factors such as curiosity, self-confidence, and a desire to use English in real-life situations were significant motivators, as were external influences like parental support, access to media, and peer interaction. The Merdeka Curriculum allowed students to engage with English both in and out of class more naturally, enhancing their intrinsic motivation.

These findings confirm that curriculum design plays a pivotal role in shaping student motivation. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on flexibility, creativity, and learner autonomy offers a more effective approach to encouraging students to actively participate in English learning. Therefore, schools and educators are encouraged to adopt similar student-centered and media-rich strategies, even in different regional contexts, to support higher engagement and motivation across diverse student populations. At the policy level, this study suggests that national and regional education stakeholders should promote broader implementation of flexible curriculum frameworks that prioritize motivation alongside academic achievement. This includes providing schools with autonomy in content delivery, teacher training in interactive pedagogies, and investment in learning technologies. Future curriculum reforms should continue to focus not only on content and assessment but also on creating psychologically supportive and engaging environments that sustain long-term learner interest in English and other subjects.

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