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The Implementation of '*Merdeka Belajar*' Curriculum in the English Teaching Process

(Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar pada Proses Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to describe the implementation process of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in English teaching in the classroom. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the data. The study was conducted at SMA N 1 Tilamuta, focusing on English subject teachers and 10th-grade students. The results indicate that only 4 out of 12 teaching activities were effectively implemented during the teaching process. The first activity involves teachers organizing learning based on students' needs while connecting it to real-world contexts, the environment, and cultures that interest students, achieving 94.4%. Next, teachers designed interactive learning to facilitate structured, integrated, and productive interactions between teachers and students, among students, and between students and learning materials, reaching 88.89%. Teachers also applied various teaching methods with a student-centered approach, achieving 72.22%. Finally, teachers assigned tasks to assess students' understanding of the material taught, with a result of 55.55%. The study concludes that the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in English learning at SMA N 1 Tilamuta still has significant shortcomings in pre-activities, main activities, and post-activities.

Abstrak

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mendeskripsikan bagaimana proses implementasi kurikulum Merdeka Belajar pada proses pengajaran bahasa inggris di dalam kelas, penelitian ini menggunakan metode deksriptif kualitatif untuk meneliti data. Penelitian ini dilakukan di SMA N 1 Tilamuta dengan objek Guru Mata Pelajaran Bahasa Inggris dan siswa kelas 10. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan hanya 4 poin kegiatan yang dapat terlaksana dengan baik dari total 12 poin kegiatan dalam proses pengajaran. Kegiatan poin pertama yaitu guru menyelenggarakan pembelajaran sesuai dengan kebutuhan dan dikaitkan dengan dunia nyata, lingkungan, dan budaya yang menarik minat murid memperoleh 94,4%, selanjutnya kegiatan guru merancang pembelajaran interaktif untuk memfasilitasi interaksi yang terencana, terstruktur, terpadu, dan produktif antara guru dan murid, sesama murid, serta antara murid dan materi memperoleh 88,89%, kemudian guru menggunakan berbagai metode pembelajaran yang bervariasi dengan siswa sebagai fokus/pusat pembelajaran meraih 72,22%, dan kegiatan terakhir yaitu guru memberikan tugas untuk mengukur pemahaman siswa terhadap materi yang diajarkan memperoleh 55,55%. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah implementasi kurikulum merdeka dalam proses pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di SMA N 1 Tilamuta masih banyak kekurangan, baik pada pra kegiatan, kegiatan inti, maupun pasca kegiatan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Indonesia implemented online learning due to the COVID-19 outbreak, which significantly contributed to learning loss. According to Dra. Sri Wahyuningsih, M.Pd., Director of Elementary Schools at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, a survey conducted by the World Bank, UNICEF, and the Ministry of Education and Culture revealed that "there was a decrease of 0.44 to 0.47 percent of the standard deviation, equivalent to 5 to 6 months of learning per year."

The 2019 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed the proceeds of the evaluation of Indonesian students only occupied sixth place from the underside; out of 79 countries, Indonesia ranked 74th in the discipline of literacy and mathematics (Firdaus et al., 2022). Due to this problem, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture has decided to launch a new curriculum, "Merdeka Belajar," as a measure to address the learning loss that has occurred in Indonesia over a long period and worsened during the COVID-19 outbreak (Novasyari, 2021).

Moreover, Jojor et al. (2022) claimed that the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum could decrease the interrupted learning that happened during the pandemic, and a thesis by Zahrotun (2021) she did the study when *Merdeka Belajar* known as the policy and the result was that one of the *Merdeka Belaja*r programs, known as the activator teacher, has carried out by the teacher to aid in the improvement of students achievement and self-competence by teaching creatively, independently, and innovatively through the use of technological media and the implementation of several *Merdeka Belajar* Program goals (creativity, independence, critical thinking, and collaboration) (Munna & Kalam, 2021).

Furthermore according to Kemdikbud (2022) a teacher named Tri Yuli Setyoningrum shared her experience when using *the Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for teaching English by giving the freedom to choose the method they prefer to retell the legend they read, may go through comics, write folklore on blogs, storytelling, presentations using PowerPoint, etc, and the result it can increase the student's learning enthusiasm and the students who are usually passive in class can make a good and easy-to-understand task, Mrs. Yuli added that she was amazed when saw the students' task that exceeded her expectation. This shows that the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum builds up the students' creativity.

In SMAN 1 Tilamuta the researcher found some problems that happened during the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, such as having some students that do not have any knowledge related to English lessons, but the teacher seemed less concerned about students who were lacking or unable in English, this can be seen from if there are students who do not submit assignments, the teacher does not provide sanctions or other solutions to students, as well as if students whose grades do not reach the minimum mastery criteria, because the teacher relies on remedial, due to in this curriculum the students do not need to mastery a subject but, in reality in Merdeka curriculum English lesson is general subject. A previous study conducted by Tumulo (2022) at SMA Negeri 4 Gorontalo found that problems in the learning process can occur due to the lack of optimal guidance provided by teachers.

During the teaching process, only a few students were focused even though the teachers used interactive methods such as games, discussion, and giving a project to the students, also unfair class distribution for teachers which is from 10 classes 2 teachers teach and one of them teaches 8 classes. Moreover, the students said there is a teacher who still uses the old method which is the lecture method and the teacher does not care about students' circumstances in the classroom even if they are sleeping or even eating, since they are staying in the classroom and listen to the explanation of the teacher, otherwise, this method does not work well because the students will get bored even some of them are sleep during the teaching process, considering in Merdeka Belajar curriculum allowing the teachers to develop their tools as the media and even suggest to make any project to help the teachers in the teaching process. Therefore, according to Barlian et al. (2023), to address this issue, teachers should conduct curriculum analysis and diagnostic assessments to map students' interests and learning styles, implement learning by focusing on four elements: content, process, product, and learning environment, evaluate the outcomes produced, and conduct formative and summative tests to determine follow-up actions and improvements for the subsequent learning process (Hadi & Izzah, 2018).

The researcher chose this topic as the study because that is true the existence of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum can overcome learning loss and is better than the previous curriculum shown by several studies mentioned above, otherwise in SMA Negeri 1 Tilamuta there are some problems arise during the implementation of this curriculum, as a result, this research focuses on elaborating on how an English teacher at SMAN 1 Tilamuta teaches English using the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum with those problems.

2. METHODS

In this study, the researcher used descriptive qualitative to describe how the English teaching and learning process during the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, and the source of data are two teachers who teach the English subject and the students in 10th grade at SMAN 1 Tilamuta in on of the classes. The researcher chose this type of method because this method can help researchers explain how the teaching activity by using the Merdeka curriculum.

In this study, the data collection was gained by using: Interviews, the researcher used an unstructured interview with the vice-principal of curriculum who was also the teacher who teaches the 10^{th} grade. Unstructured interviews are free interviews in which the researcher did not use an interview guide that had been prepared systematically and completed for data collection. The interview guide used is only an outline of the problems that will be discussed. The researcher used this kind of interview since Unstructured or open-ended interviews, are often used in preliminary research. In preliminary research, an unstructured interview was used to collect data, which was then analyzed descriptively to produce valid results. (Arifa et al., 2023).

The researcher observed how the teaching process in the school based on the *Merdeka* curriculum is being implemented (Pertiwi et al., 2022). Since the researcher found the teachers did not have the teaching modules during the teaching process, thus the researchers observed them based on some teaching modules by Junilon. S. Ananda. S.Pd. Gr, Harmayulis S.Pd. SD, Nur Laily, S.Pd and theory about the principle of learning by Anggraena, et al. (2022) that have three activities in their learning process such as pre-activity, main activity, and post-activity. The data have been analyzed in several steps: 1) Data reduction (Classification), 2) Data Display, and 3) Conclusion.

2.1 Data Reduction (Classification)

According to Riyanto (2003), data reduction should be classified which are important data, simplified the data, and abstracted the data. Therefore, on this reduction, there is a process of living in and living out. The researcher classified the data into the teaching process by teacher that focuses on three activities from pre-activity to post-activity by seeing which points were done by the teacher and which were not and the learning process by students by focusing on students' learning activities to see their attention, seriousness, discipline and their skill in asking or answering while the teacher taught used Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

2.2 Data Display

In qualitative research, the data display can be done in the form of brief descriptions, charts, the relationship among the categories, flow cards, etc. By displaying the data, it will be easier to understand what is happening and plan for further work based on what has been understood (Hardayani et al., 2020), In this case, the researcher has used a brief description hence the implementation of English teaching process using *Merdeka* curriculum can be explained. The analysis procedure was initiated in this step. The brief description format in which these data were presented helped the researcher better understand what had happened in the field and organize the findings for the next study. This process was through making a perception in the teaching process and connecting it with some points in pre-activity, main activity until the post-activity to understand what has already happened to conclude how the teacher implements *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in teaching English and its relation with the student's response. The conclusion is the essence of the research findings that describe the latest opinions based on the previous description (Hardayani et al., 2020). The researcher examined all of the data to see whether the data and the interpretation of the data could be regarded as legitimate, as the prior conclusion of all of the data that were shown was still just temporary. When the researcher reviewed the data or the source of the data, consistency between the conclusion and the data was ensured if the conclusion of all the data was supported by strong evidence. Whether or not the way the teachers taught the students matches the points in some teaching modules and theories about the principle of learning (Anggraena et al., 2022). As a result, the conclusion drawn or obtained may be regarded as believable.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the result of an unstructured interview with the English teacher who is also the vice principal of Academic Affairs and Curriculum in SMA Negeri 1 Tilamuta, some problems faced by the students and teachers during the learning process in the class, such as the teacher appeared less concerned about students who were lacking or unable in English, and only a few students were focused during the teaching process. In addition, there is an unfair class distribution arrangement whereby two teachers teach ten classes, one of whom teaches eight classes, also, there is a teacher who still uses the outdated lecture method and does not seem to care about the conditions of the students, including if they are sleep or eat, as long as they remain in the classroom and listen to the teacher's explanations. The researcher did the observation to see if those problems still appeared in the teaching process and how the teachers dealt with them.

Here the explanation of the data in the form brief description using some points in lesson plans by Junilon, Harmayulis, and Laily and the theory about the principle of learning by Anggraena et al. (2022) to find out how the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum during the teaching process, and explained each point of it.

3.1 Pre-Activity

The pre-activity phase involved two key components: diagnostic assessment and student motivation. Diagnostic assessments were conducted in 8 out of the total meetings (44.44%), but only by the second teacher. This approach aligns with Anggraena et al. (2022), who highlight the importance of diagnostic assessments in helping teachers understand students' knowledge levels and readiness for the material to be taught. Moreover, such assessments were observed to increase students' engagement and enthusiasm, as evidenced by their active participation and eagerness to answer questions. However, the first teacher did not implement diagnostic assessments, opting instead to check attendance, begin teaching directly, or occasionally remind students of classroom rules. This lack of diagnostic assessment led to a uniform approach across all classes, with the teacher using the same methods, materials, and examples regardless of individual student needs. Consequently, this approach hindered the teacher's ability to tailor lessons effectively to the students' varying levels of understanding.

In terms of motivation, the second teacher actively encouraged students in 6 out of the total meetings (33.3%), focusing on enriching their English vocabulary and improving their grammar skills, particularly the simple past tense, which is essential for narrative texts. This motivational approach aimed to boost students' confidence and engagement with the material. Conversely, the first teacher did not provide any motivational input, whether related to studying or learning English, resulting in a teaching process that lacked inspiration and failed to address the students' developmental needs. This practice contrasts with Anggraena et al.'s (2022) theory, which stresses that effective and enjoyable learning should consider students' developmental stages, levels of achievement, and diverse characteristics.

3.2 The Main Activity

The main activity commenced once the pre-activity concluded, focusing on teaching the material. This phase encompassed seven key points, which are elaborated below:

3.2.1 Teacher Organizes Learning According to Students' Needs, Real-World Contexts, Environment, and Culture

This point was implemented in 17 out of 18 meetings (94.44%), making it the most frequently applied activity by both teachers. The first teacher carried out this activity in 5 meetings, utilizing interactive media to design engaging learning experiences. However, the material lacked a connection to the students' immediate environment. For example, the teacher primarily used foreign stories, with only one Indonesian narrative—"Putri Hijau" from North Sumatra—neglecting Gorontalo or Sulawesi-based stories that might have been more relatable and engaging. This disconnection was evident as students were more interested in watching the video than in the story itself.

In contrast, the second teacher incorporated this point into 12 meetings. The teacher included games in the teaching process, which the students found enjoyable and engaging, leading to active participation. Additionally, the second teacher used popular Indonesian folktales, such as *The Legend of Crying Stone* and *Malin Kundang*. While these stories were not from Gorontalo, their familiarity resonated with students, making them more attentive. Furthermore, the second teacher also linked the material to real-life grammar applications, particularly in using the simple past tense, which helped students improve their English proficiency.

3.2.2 Teacher Designs Interactive Learning

Interactive learning activities were observed in 16 out of 18 meetings (88.89%). The first teacher employed videos as teaching media and provided summaries of the stories, capturing students' attention.

However, the teacher failed to foster productive interaction among students or between students and the material. Instead, tasks related to the videos were often assigned as homework, with answers easily searchable online. In one instance, the teacher displayed the story text using a projector, had students read it, and posed questions requiring immediate responses. Yet, the teacher's ambiguous feedback, such as "Is it true?" caused students to doubt their answers, leading to less effective learning outcomes. The second teacher's approach was more interactive, incorporating games and the Q&A method into lessons. Students were enthusiastic and actively participated, indicating the teacher's ability to create a dynamic and engaging learning environment.

3.2.3 Teacher Uses Various Methods That Focus on Students

This point was applied in 13 out of 18 meetings (72.22%). Unfortunately, the first teacher implemented it only once, during a session where students read a narrative text and answered questions directly. In most other sessions, the teacher employed repetitive methods, such as summarizing the text and assigning tasks, leading to passivity among students. This approach did not align with Anggraena et al. (2022), who emphasize the holistic development of students' competence and character through varied and engaging teaching methods. In contrast, the second teacher utilized game-based learning, administrative tasks, and the Q&A method. These methods placed students at the center of the learning process, fostering active participation and engagement.

3.2.4 Teacher Uses Open-Ended Questions

This strategy was observed in only 5 meetings (27.62%), exclusively implemented by the second teacher. The teacher posed open-ended questions and developed follow-up inquiries based on students' responses, encouraging critical thinking and dialogue. The first teacher, however, relied solely on close-ended questions requiring short answers, such as "yes" or "no," which resulted in a quiet and monotonous learning environment.

3.2.5 Teacher Gives Good Feedback to Students

Good feedback was observed in only 2 meetings (11.11%), both conducted by the second teacher. This teacher prepared small rewards, such as snacks, for active participants and provided constructive feedback on assignments, highlighting errors and suggesting corrections. In contrast, the first teacher gave only brief affirmations like "yes" or "that is right," without elaborating on students' mistakes or providing meaningful feedback, which hindered students' progress.

3.2.6 Guest Teacher Involvement and Linking Material to Actual Issues

Neither teacher implemented these points during the observed meetings. No guest teachers were invited, and while the materials included moral values, they were not linked to actual issues or the students' immediate contexts. This lack of contextual relevance contradicts Anggraena et al.'s (2022) assertion that lessons should integrate learners' environments, cultures, and communities.

3.2.7 Assessment of Learning Outcomes

The observed teaching practices failed to fully achieve the goals of the Merdeka curriculum. According to Nurani et al. (2022), the curriculum emphasizes simplicity, depth, freedom, and relevance. The first teacher simplified the material but did not explore it in depth, resulting in a superficial understanding. The second teacher adhered more closely to curriculum principles but still fell short of fostering comprehensive student competency. For instance, students rarely practiced English during lessons, and teachers often reverted to Indonesian, limiting the development of communication skills.

General learning outcomes, such as the ability to use English in various contexts (Hermawan et al., 2022), were not achieved. Specific skills, including listening-speaking, reading-viewing, and presenting, were also underdeveloped due to insufficient opportunities for practice. For example, listening activities often involved passive tasks, such as identifying past tense structures in texts, rather than interactive exercises. Similarly, writing and presenting skills were neglected, as students were not tasked with producing or sharing their work.

In conclusion, while the second teacher demonstrated better alignment with the Merdeka curriculum principles, both teachers encountered challenges in achieving the desired learning outcomes. Improvements in material relevance, interactive methods, and English usage are essential to foster students' overall competency and engagement.

3.3 The Post-activity

The post-activity phase is the final stage in the teaching process, which includes the teacher's assessment to measure student understanding. Based on observations, most teachers conducted this activity during their lessons. Out of 18 meetings observed, 10 involved post-activity assessments, accounting for 55.55%. Each teacher conducted this assessment in 5 meetings. However, significant differences were noted in how the teachers approached this activity. The first teacher conducted assessments without paying attention to the students. Tasks were often left for students to complete independently, which allowed them to

consult Google or collaborate with peers, even for assignments designated as individual tasks. Moreover, the teacher never provided feedback on the students' work, leaving them unaware of whether their answers were correct or incorrect (Sari et al., 2020).

The second teacher also assigned tasks in five meetings, but not all assignments effectively measured student understanding. For instance, one of the tasks was collaborative, allowing students to work together, which limited its utility as a tool for individual assessment. However, there were instances where the teacher provided individual assignments along with feedback. This included observing students and visiting them to ensure the tasks were completed independently, which made it possible to use these assignments to gauge student understanding (Sari et al., 2020).

Both teachers provided instructions for the final projects in the last meeting. The first teacher asked students to find a narrative story on Google or create one themselves to present in front of the class. The second teacher informed students that their final project would be a viva voce. A crucial element missing from both teachers' strategies was the suggestion that students create a summary of the material, either individually or collaboratively with the teacher (Sutomo et al., 2020).

The sequence of activities from pre-activity to post-activity significantly influences students' learning processes. The teaching methods employed by the first teacher were found to have numerous shortcomings, which adversely affected the students' learning experiences. Researchers observed that in two classes across six meetings, only one session allowed for effective student learning. During other sessions, only a few students, typically those in the front row, actively participated. While students appeared focused during video viewing, they struggled to answer related questions. In some instances, students engaged in unrelated activities, such as chatting, laughing, or completing tasks unrelated to the subject. Additionally, students displayed poor questioning skills, which are critical for learning. The teacher did not address these issues, which hindered effective learning (Pratiwi, 2019).

Regarding learning outcomes and objectives, the researchers found that neither the general nor specific objectives were fully achieved. General objectives included enabling students to use oral, written, and visual texts in English to communicate appropriately for various audiences and purposes, and to express their feelings and discuss topics relevant to their daily lives and social issues (Hermawan et al., 2022). However, these objectives were not met due to inadequate teaching of textual materials, lack of in-depth discussions, and insufficient use of English by the teacher. Over six meetings, the teacher used English briefly in only one session and did not encourage students to use English during lessons. This contradicts the expectation that teachers provide ample opportunities for students to practice English (Hermawan et al., 2022).

Specific objectives included three points: reading and responding to texts, participating in discussions and collaborative activities, and writing narrative texts using correct structures and linguistic features (Hermawan et al., 2022). Of these, only the first point was partially achieved, as some students were able to understand and identify stories in visual texts, such as animated videos (Nasution, 2017). The second point, involving discussion and collaboration, was not achieved due to the exclusive use of lecturing without student engagement. The third point, writing narrative texts, was also largely unmet. The teacher provided only brief explanations of narrative text characteristics without detailed teaching, examples, or practical exercises. As a result, students were unable to write narrative texts effectively. The only related activity was the final project presentation, which was insufficient for achieving this learning outcome (Hermawan et al., 2022).

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1 Conclusion

The application of the Merdeka curriculum in the English teaching process in SMA N 1 Tilamuta which is carried out by two teachers who support English subjects still has many shortcomings, both in pre-activity, main activity, and post-activity. It can be shown from the amount of the percentage from each indicator in learning activities, on two points in the main activity the percentage is below 50%, both of the points are 44,44% for giving assessment diagnostic and 33,3% for giving motivation, then in main activity only 3 points reach more than 50% such as teacher should arrange learning to meet the needs of students while connecting it to real-world, environments, and cultures that attract with them with 94,4%, teacher should design interactive leaning 88,89%, and teacher uses various method that focus on students 72,22%.

4.2 Suggestions

Researchers suggest that teachers pay more attention to students during the learning process because teachers only focus on students who can answer or students who are in the front row, this naturally makes the learning process less able to run well because many students are focused on their business or their activities, apart from that the researcher also wants to provide suggestions regarding the material being taught, instead

of using folklore from abroad or outside the Gorontalo area, it would be better if the teacher used folklore from Gorontalo itself which is more relatable to students and also the students can be better understand their own regional culture. The researcher also wants to suggest that teachers use English more often and provide opportunities for students to be able to speak English during the learning process.

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