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Descriptive Study of Teachers' Perceptions in Using Merdeka Curriculum in Teaching English

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Abstract

This recent research aimed to describe teachers' perceptions in using Merdeka Curriculum in teaching English in SMA Negeri 3 Gorontalo Utara and SMA Negeri 5 Gorontalo Utara. The method of this research was qualitative design that is hoped to give detail and in-depth information about certain phenomenon. the result of research showed teachers positively perceive the *Merdeka Curriculum*'s structure, commending its flexibility in organizing intracurricular content to cater to diverse student needs through innovative approaches. The division of teaching hours into intracurricular and *Pancasila* strengthening is also acknowledged. Implementation strengths include flexible teaching models, student-centered learning, and school autonomy. Challenges include effective teaching hour allocation, adapting to new terminology, and the need for continuous support, especially in English learning. Regarding the *Pancasila* Students' Profile, teachers appreciate the multifaceted approach to character education, emphasizing practical application over theoretical understanding. The early stages of the P5 program show promise in integrating *Pancasila* values, yet challenges persist in students' character attitudes and the call for enhanced collaboration.

Abstrak

Penelitian terbaru ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan persepsi guru dalam menggunakan Kurikulum Merdeka dalam mengajar bahasa Inggris di SMA Negeri 3 Gorontalo Utara dan SMA Negeri 5 Gorontalo Utara. Metode penelitian ini adalah desain kualitatif yang diharapkan dapat memberikan informasi detail dan mendalam tentang fenomena tertentu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru-guru menganggap positif struktur Kurikulum Merdeka, memuji fleksibilitasnya dalam mengatur konten intrakurikuler untuk memenuhi berbagai kebutuhan siswa melalui pendekatan inovatif. Pembagian jam mengajar menjadi intrakurikuler dan penguatan Pancasila juga diakui. Kelebihan implementasi meliputi model pengajaran yang fleksibel, pembelajaran berpusat pada siswa, dan otonomi sekolah. Tantangannya termasuk alokasi jam mengajar yang efektif, beradaptasi dengan terminologi baru, dan kebutuhan dukungan berkelanjutan, terutama dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Mengenai Profil Siswa Pancasila, guru menghargai pendekatan multiaspek terhadap pendidikan karakter, menekankan penerapan praktis daripada pemahaman teoretis. Tahap awal program P5 menunjukkan potensi dalam mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai Pancasila, namun tantangan masih ada dalam sikap karakter siswa dan tuntutan untuk peningkatan kolaborasi.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Nurdin et al. (2023), the implementation of the curriculum within the education system should be based on students' competency attainment under specific circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic is one such exceptional condition that has resulted in various learning deficits in student competency achievements. To address this issue, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has decided to introduce a new curriculum called the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

Teacher readiness is crucial for the successful implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Teacher readiness directly influences their ability to engage in activities that enhance their observational, questioning, reasoning, and communication skills based on the learning materials received (Nurzen, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to provide specialized training and professional development opportunities for teachers on how to effectively implement the new curriculum (Ingtias et al., 2022). Schools can organize such activities by inviting education and curriculum experts or engaging local education staff.

Perception refers to the process of interpreting information obtained through human senses. In this study, the perception formation of teachers regarding the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is explored based on their experiences. These experiences shape their opinions and perceptions of the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. As science and technology continue to advance, the roles and responsibilities of teachers have become increasingly challenging (Buchanan, 2020).

Furthermore, teachers should be able to translate the official curriculum into actual classroom instruction. This requires a diverse range of professional skills and expertise for successful implementation. Based on the observations at SMA Negeri 3 Gorontalo Utara, it was found that the school has implemented the *Merdeka* Curriculum starting from the 2022/2023 academic year, specifically in class X (ten). According to an English teacher at SMA Negeri 3 Gorontalo Utara, the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum at the school is progressing as anticipated by the ministry.

However, it is found that there are certain obstacles that still hinder the full implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum at the school. One of these obstacles is the complexity of learning planning and assessments, and this complexity arises from the significant changes that occurred when transitioning from the 2013 curriculum to the *Merdeka* Curriculum, which has led some teachers to lack a complete understanding of the *Merdeka* Curriculum and its implementation. Consequently, teachers form separate opinions and perceptions regarding the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

This research holds significant importance as it sheds light on teachers' perceptions of using the *Merdeka* Curriculum in teaching English, a crucial aspect of educational reform. Understanding teachers' perspectives is vital for evaluating the curriculum's effectiveness and identifying potential areas for improvement. The findings can inform policymakers and educators about the impact of the *Merdeka* Curriculum on student learning outcomes and guide future curriculum development efforts.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the existing literature, adding valuable insights to the discourse on educational reforms and curriculum implementations in the context of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy. Based on the explanation above, the research objective of this research is to describe teachers' perceptions of using *Merdeka* Curriculum in teaching English. Hence, the researcher conducted the research that is formulated by the title "Descriptive study of teachers' perception in using *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in teaching English".

2. METHOD OF RESEARCH

This research employs a qualitative design with the aim of providing detailed and in-depth information about teachers' perceptions of using the *Merdeka* Curriculum to teach English. The chosen research method is a case study, which is considered most suitable for this investigation. The study takes place in SMA 3 Gorontalo Utara and SMA 5 Gorontalo Utara, with two English teachers as participants who extensively use the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

Participants are selected using purposive sampling, specifically two English teachers from SMA 3 Gorontalo Utara and SMA 5 Gorontalo Utara, who were observed by the researcher beforehand. Data collection is conducted through semi-structured interviews, deemed the most common and important method in qualitative research. The interviews are conducted in person, with the researcher reading questions to the participants and recording their responses. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility to explore ideas or

responses more deeply. This study focuses on how teachers understand the use of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in teaching English to high school students.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings showed the insights gathered from interviews with teachers at SMA 3 Gorontalo Utara and SMA 5 Gorontalo Utara. They shared their perspectives regarding the structure of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, where one notable aspect was the commendation for the curriculum's flexibility, allowing teachers to organize intracurricular content and implement project-based learning in subject-based or thematic approaches based on the specific needs of students. This adaptability was seen as fostering collaborative learning across multiple subjects, contributing to the cultivation of *Pancasila* Learners. It is further supported by Ministry of Education and Culture (2022). The curriculum also influences the pace and instructional methods employed by teachers to fit students' demands. Teachers recognized the comprehensive scope of material and competencies outlined in the Learning Outcomes of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Although they referenced competencies from the previous curriculum 2013, they also bear the responsibility of further developing these competencies. The narrative form of the learning outcomes was acknowledged for its alignment with the developmental stages of learners.

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum embodies ideas for changing Indonesian education to form the nation's future successors (Albar & Mastiah, 2022; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). The *Merdeka Belajar* Program on the *Merdeka* Curriculum explores teachers' and students' potential and innovation in improving classroom learning quality (Rahmansyah, 2021; Wiguna & Tristaningrat, 2022). The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum is here to perfect the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum. This improvement is carried out from a simpler and more comprehensive aspect of the learning structure that focuses more on essential material and developing student competencies. Contextual and project-based learning strategies make learning activities more interactive and interesting (Rahayu et al., 2022; Sumarsih et al., 2022). In addition, project learning provides opportunities for students to actively explore factual issues such as issues of health, environment, society, and others to develop competence and character in the *Pancasila* Student Profile (Jannati et al., 2023; Saputra & Hadi, 2022).

Merdeka Belajar is basically a form of assessment of minimum ability, which includes aspects of literacy, numeracy, and character surveys (Astini, 2022; Kurniati et al., 2022). In the literacy aspect, the assessment is not only carried out by measuring students' reading abilities but also by measuring the ability to analyze the content of the reading along with understanding the concepts behind it (Fahlevi, 2022; Feriyanto, 2022). Likewise, the measurement of numeracy abilities does not only measure students' mathematical abilities, but also measures students' ability to apply numerical concepts in real life (Idhartono et al., 2023). One remaining aspect, namely the Character Survey, is not a test but a search for the extent to which ethical, religious, and Pancasila values are applied (Sabriadi & Wakia, 2021). The *Merdeka Belajar* program can improve students' abilities and skills in solving new and complex problems, this is because, in the *Merdeka Belajar* program, the teacher provides facilities and gives freedom to students to develop naturally so as to be able to provide direct experience in the learning process (Hafid & Mahsun, 2020; Rahmawanti & Nurzaelani, 2022).

The curriculum structure for high schools (SMA/MA) is divided into two primary learning activities, namely regular or routine learning, which is intracurricular, and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. Teaching hours (JP) are regulated per year. Educational institutions can flexibly allocate learning time to achieve the specified JP. Educational institutions can use subject-based, thematic, or integrated approaches to organize learning. The Merdeka Curriculum structure is divided into two phases at the high school level: Phase E for grade 10 and Phase F for grades 11 and 12. There are two types of learning: intracurricular learning and cocurricular learning.

In SMA Negeri 3 Gorontalo Utara and SMA Negeri 5 Gorontalo Utara, another crucial aspect was the perceived flexibility in the allocation of teaching hours (JP) within the *Merdeka* Curriculum. This flexibility provided schools with the autonomy to adjust teaching hours based on the unique needs of students, curriculum development plans, and grade levels. However, challenges arised in ensuring effective teaching hours, particularly due to the allocation of 25% of JP for the *Pancasila* Student Profile Strengthening Project, impacting subjects such as English.

These findings were in line with the curriculum structure in the *Merdeka* Curriculum, which consists of intracurricular activities, the *Pancasila* Student Profile Strengthening Project, and extracurricular activities. The allocation of teaching hours in the curriculum structure is presented as a total for one year and is supplemented with recommendations for teaching hour allocation if presented on a regular or weekly (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022).

Teachers implemented various learning approaches, accommodating students' diverse preferences and learning styles, including visual, auditory, and movement-based methods. This commitment to

differentiation ensured that instructional materials meet the students' needs and preferences of students. Various instructional approaches were also employed, including subject-based, thematic-based, and integrated learning. Thematic-based learning, for instance, involves using an English textbook with themes related to the environment, exemplifying how subjects are interconnected. Furthermore, teachers underscore the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of English language learning within the *Merdeka* Curriculum, recognizing that this process was still in its early stages.

Qiong (2017) further describes perception as a three-step process involving selection, organization, and interpretation. The initial phase, selection, entails transforming environmental stimuli into meaningful experiences. Given the vast amount of information present in the world, individuals cannot process all stimuli simultaneously, leading to a selective process where only a subset of information is perceived. Furthermore, the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) experienced was also emphasized by teachers, highlighting its role in guiding students to solve problems and think critically. PBL was seen as fostering active student participation and contributing to the achievement of material objectives.

Moreover, teachers noted both similarities and differences when comparing the *Merdeka* Curriculum with previous curricula. While there were changes in some terminology disparities, teachers perceive overall consistency, particularly in the shift from Basic Competencies (KD) to Learning Outcomes (CP) or the changes in terms of the elements of teaching English. This shift provides teachers with greater discretion in elaborating details, aligning with the curriculum's emphasis on freedom and flexibility.

Meanwhile, the teachers' perspectives on the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum offered valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses woven into this innovative educational approach. The findings from the interviews conducted at SMA 3 Gorontalo Utara and SMA 5 Gorontalo Utara revealed diverse opinions among educators, contributing to the understanding of the curriculum's impact. One prominent theme was the varied teaching models employed within the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Teachers highlight the flexibility of this curriculum, allowing them to choose from approaches such as project-based learning (PjBL), integrated learning, problem-based learning, and the incorporation of technology in teaching. Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) emerged as a frequently utilized approach, with teachers emphasizing their effectiveness in addressing students' challenges and fostering engagement.

The underlying principles of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, as articulated by one teacher, underscored student-centred learning, active learning methods, problem-solving, and the development of critical skills like critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. The curriculum encouraged teachers to transition into becoming learning facilitators, supporting students in exploration and discovery. Another teacher emphasized the shift toward granting students greater freedom and responsibility in managing their own learning, catering to individual strengths, interests, learning styles, and challenges. In English language learning, the advantages perceived by teachers within the *Merdeka* Curriculum included a focused and in-depth approach that enabled optimal development of student competence. The flexibility of the curriculum allowed for a more independent learning model, giving students the freedom to choose subjects aligned with their interests, talents, and aspirations. Additionally, interactive learning methods like project-based learning enrich students' experiences, providing practical contexts for understanding English.

The autonomy granted to schools and teachers in determining learning methods was highlighted as a significant advantage. This flexibility allowed students to learn according to their abilities and interests, fostering creativity through varied and challenging activities. The emphasis on responding to individual learning needs, coupled with the flexibility in allocating learning time and content options, enables a differentiated approach to cater to the diverse levels of skills and interests among students. However, challenges and weaknesses also surface in the teachers' reflections. The commitment to student-centred and innovative approaches demanded significant effort from teachers. Not all students may inherently possess the independence required for certain learning models. The need for continuous workshops and support for teachers to optimize *Merdeka* Curriculum implementation was stressed, particularly in the context of English learning.

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Furthermore, besides the intracurriicular implemented in *Merdeka* Curriculum there was also co-curricular named The *Pancasila* Student Profile. In his thesis (Arifin, 2021) explained that *Pancasila* students idealize the generation of Indonesians who can understand, internalize, and implement *Pancasila* values in the diverse reality of the millennial era. Life in the millennial era requires the implementation of *Pancasila* values to adapt to changing realities, particularly in the dynamics of the lives of young generations of Indonesian students. The Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education and Culture for the Years 2020-2024, as stated in Ministerial Regulation No. 22 of 2020, mandates the vision and mission of education in Indonesia through the *Pancasila* Student Profile. This profile represents the future and the desired character of students as envisioned by the Indonesian government. The *Pancasila* Student Profile is a graduate profile aimed at demonstrating the character and competencies expected to be achieved and to strengthen the noble values of *Pancasila* within students and stakeholders (Ismail et al., 2020).

Pancasila Students Profile is a graduate profile aimed at demonstrating the character and competencies achieved, with the expectation of strengthening the noble values of within students and stakeholders in Ministry of Education and Culture the teachers' perceptions of the *Pancasila* Students' Profile within the *Merdeka* Curriculum revealed a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to character education. The emphasis went beyond theoretical understanding, incorporating discussions, reflections, and practical activities to enable students to comprehend, internalize, and apply *Pancasila* values in their daily lives. The P5 program, though in its early stages, demonstrated a commitment to integrating *Pancasila* values into various subjects and fostering a familial approach through collaborative activities.

The teachers recognized the challenges and successes associated with the implementation of the P5 program. Successes were seen in the potential development of social skills, understanding *Pancasila* values, and positive impacts within the local community or society. However, challenges were acknowledged, including factors such as students' character attitudes, habits of undisciplined living, the influence of digital technology leading to laziness, and a need for improved collaboration among stakeholders. As per the vision and mission of the Ministry of Education and Culture outlined in Ministerial Regulation No. 22 of 2020 on the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education and Culture for the Years 2020-2024, the concept of *Pancasila* Students is defined as the embodiment of Indonesian students as lifelong learners with global competence and behaviour aligned with *Pancasila* values, characterized by six main attributes: faith, devotion to God Almighty, noble character, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity.

Yet the ongoing adjustment phase in incorporating themes like “noble character”, “sustainable lifestyle” and “local wisdom/global diversity” highlighted the adaptability of the curriculum to address emerging needs. The measurement of student progress involves specially designed assessment tools, including formative and summative assessments and student portfolios, reflecting the holistic and evolving nature of the *Pancasila* Student Profile.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

4.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, the teachers' perceptions of the *Merdeka* Curriculum's structure reflected a positive perception. This indicated a commendation for its flexibility, which allowed for the organization of intracurricular content which fulfilled the specific needs of students with various innovative approaches. Additionally, the perceived flexibility in teaching hours divided into intracurricular and strengthened the *Pancasila* profile. Concerning the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, the flexibility in teaching models, student-centred learning, and the autonomy granted to schools were highlighted as strengths. However, challenges were also found in the effective allocation of teaching hours, adapting to new terminology, and the demand for continuous support and workshops, particularly in the context of English learning.

Regarding the *Pancasila* Students' Profile, teachers underscored the multifaceted approach to character education, going beyond theoretical understanding to practical application. The P5 program, while in its early stages, showed promise in integrating Pancasila values into various subjects, yet challenges involve students' character attitudes and the need for improved collaboration. In conclusion, teachers' perceptions of the *Pancasila* Students' Profile indicate a commitment to holistic character development within the Curriculum.

4.2 Sugestion

The conclusion drawn from the study provides several recommendations for various stakeholders. For students, it is recommended that they take an active role in the teaching-learning process and engage with the *Merdeka* Curriculum to achieve better learning outcomes. The curriculum has been found to enhance

student participation and engagement, leading to better outcomes. Thus, students should take advantage of this opportunity to improve their learning experience. In addition, students should make use of the resources and facilities available to them to support their learning. This can aid in successfully implementing the curriculum and improve their learning outcomes.

For teachers and lecturers, it is recommended that they attend workshops and training programs to acquire the necessary skills and strategies for the successful implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. The study highlighted the importance of training and capacity building for teachers to ensure the effective implementation of new educational initiatives. Providing students with a conducive learning environment and utilizing available resources to support the curriculum's implementation can also aid in improving learning outcomes. Teachers should strive to provide their students with a learning experience that is engaging and participatory and promotes better learning outcomes.

For future researchers, it is recommended that they investigate the sustainability of the positive outcomes of the *Merdeka* Curriculum over time and identify potential challenges in its implementation. The study's findings suggest that the curriculum has the potential to improve the quality of education and learning outcomes in schools. However, it is essential to evaluate the sustainability of these positive outcomes over time. Furthermore, exploring ways to address the challenges in the implementation of the curriculum, such as the lack of understanding among some teachers regarding the concept of *Merdeka Belajar*, can aid in successful implementation. Finally, conducting comparative studies to evaluate the effectiveness of the *Merdeka* Curriculum compared to other educational initiatives in improving student learning outcomes can contribute to the existing literature on academic policies and programs.

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