

## **FLEXIBLE APPROACH IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING CURRICULUM DESIGN: OPTIMIZING TEACHING IN MERDEKA CURRICULUM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Merdeka Curriculum implemented in Indonesia aims to create an education system that is more adaptive and responsive to local and global needs. In English language teaching, curriculum flexibility allows teachers to adjust learning materials to students' local contexts, thus encouraging student engagement in the learning process. This study aims to explore the application of flexibility in English curriculum design under the Merdeka Curriculum in five junior high schools in Solok City, West Sumatra. A qualitative approach with a case study method was used, with data collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and student interviews. The results showed that flexibility in the preparation of teaching materials and teaching methods allowed teachers to adjust teaching to local needs. However, teachers faced challenges in balancing local materials with national competency standards and limited resources. This flexibility increased student engagement, although some students struggled without adequate guidance. In conclusion, support in the form of guidance, training, and additional resources are needed to optimize the implementation of curriculum flexibility.*

**KEYWORDS** curriculum flexibility, Merdeka Curriculum, English language teaching, junior high school



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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Merdeka Curriculum is one of the latest initiatives of the Indonesian government that aims to create an education system that is more adaptive and responsive to the needs of students. In Indonesia, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is a progressive step that gives teachers greater autonomy in designing teaching strategies that are relevant to the local context and global challenges. According to (Irawati et al., 2022), the Merdeka Curriculum allows

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teachers to design learning materials and methods that are appropriate to the conditions of students and the local environment, providing flexibility that is very important in teaching English, which now plays a key role in increasing global competitiveness.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are given the freedom to develop teaching materials that are appropriate to the local context and students' needs. This flexibility is needed so that English language learning remains relevant to global demands, especially since the ability to communicate in an international language is increasingly becoming a mandatory skill (Kozma, 2003); (Hapudin, 2021). (Marlina et al., 2024) stated that this curriculum provides an opportunity for teachers to focus more on the individual needs of students, encouraging more meaningful and contextual learning (Macalister & Nation, 2019).

Flexibility in curriculum design allows teachers to adjust teaching methods based on the different needs of students. According to (Pratikno et al., 2022), the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum provides teachers with the freedom to determine teaching materials, teaching methods, and evaluation systems that are appropriate to students' abilities. However, this freedom also presents its own challenges, especially related to teachers' readiness to face rapid and complex changes (Al Fajri & Andarwulan, 2023); (Macalister & Nation, 2019).

In addition, Nation and Macalister (2010) emphasize the importance of a flexible approach in curriculum development, where curriculum design does not have to follow a rigid sequence of steps. Teachers have the freedom to start from anywhere in the curriculum process, such as adjusting materials, teaching formats, or assessments, depending on the needs and environment of students. This flexible approach provides room for teachers to continue to adjust teaching throughout the learning process, while ensuring that students' needs are better met.

However, the flexibility provided by the Merdeka Curriculum also brings challenges for teachers. According to (Pratikno et al., 2022), although teachers have autonomy in preparing teaching materials and learning strategies, they are often confused in balancing this freedom with achieving the established competency standards (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008). Research by (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006) ; (Agusta & Sa'dijah, 2021) shows that most teachers are still not ready to fully utilize this flexibility, which ultimately affects the quality of learning outcomes.

English language teaching in Indonesia is increasingly crucial as the need for foreign language skills in various sectors of life increases. (Mutiah, 2019) emphasized that English plays an important role in increasing the competitiveness of human resources in Indonesia (Macalister & Nation, 2019). Therefore, integrating flexibility in English curriculum design is an important step to ensure students are able to compete globally.

Although the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented at various levels of education, in-depth studies on flexibility in curriculum design, especially in English language teaching, are still limited. Previous studies have focused more on technical aspects of implementation, such as teacher training and adaptation of learning resources (Nurzen et al., 2022). However, studies on how this flexibility impacts overall English language learning outcomes are still very minimal. According (Irawati et al., 2022) stated that one of the biggest challenges is the

limited readiness of teachers to understand and apply the flexibility provided (Macalister & Nation, 2019).

Situmorang (2023) added that although the Merdeka Curriculum provides teachers with greater freedom, many of them are still confused about how to use this flexibility effectively. This indicates a gap in the knowledge and skills needed to implement curriculum flexibility, especially in teaching English.

At the international level, similar challenges related to flexibility in curriculum design are also found. According to (Kumaravadivelu, 2013) stated that flexibility in English curriculum design is essential to ensure that teaching is appropriate to the local context. However, the main challenge lies in how teachers can balance between autonomy and educational standards that must still be met (Macalister & Nation, 2019). Also noted that the use of technology in English language teaching can support flexibility, but requires significant adjustments to teachers' pedagogical approaches.

Previous studies on curriculum flexibility in English language learning in the Independent Curriculum have been conducted by several researchers. Studied the implementation of differentiated learning in the Independent Curriculum in English subjects, finding that curriculum flexibility allows for adjustments to teaching methods according to student needs. Discussed the problems of implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum (Jannah et al., 2022), including the challenges faced by teachers in balancing local materials with national competency standards. In addition, (Mahbub & Al Fauzi, 2018) identified the English needs of vocational high school students through a needs analysis approach, emphasizing the importance of curriculum flexibility in meeting students' specific needs. These studies show that flexibility in the Independent Curriculum can increase student engagement, but also presents challenges for teachers in its implementation

This study aims to explore how flexibility in English curriculum design in the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented, as well as the factors that influence its success. Specifically, this study analyzes the implementation of flexibility in English curriculum design in the Merdeka Curriculum, identifies factors that influence the implementation of flexibility in English teaching and explores the challenges faced by teachers in implementing a flexible approach in English teaching.

Thus, this study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions in the development of a more adaptive English curriculum, in accordance with the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum and the 21st century. In addition, this study is also expected to help teachers in developing more effective teaching strategies, especially in facing the challenges of teaching English in the era of globalization (Coyle et al., 2010); (Macalister & Nation, 2019).

This study is very important because it provides in-depth insights into optimizing flexibility in the curriculum for English language teaching. The findings of this study are expected to be a guideline for policy makers, educators, and curriculum developers in designing an education system that is more adaptive and relevant to global needs. For example, (Marlina et al., 2024) emphasized that with a more flexible teaching approach, students can develop critical skills that are essential in the global workplace (Macalister & Nation, 2019).

In addition, this study can also provide new perspectives for English teachers in designing teaching strategies that are more responsive to students' needs. A flexible approach is expected to make students more active in the learning process, as well as improve the communication skills they need to face global challenges (Harmer, 2014); (Macalister & Nation, 2019).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore the implementation of curriculum flexibility in teaching English under the Merdeka Curriculum. This study was conducted in five junior high schools (SMP) in Solok City, West Sumatra Province. The selection of schools was based on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in teaching English in these schools.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with English teachers who have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, classroom observations were conducted to directly observe the implementation of curriculum flexibility in daily teaching practices. Additional interviews were also conducted with several students to obtain their views on the effectiveness of the curriculum in supporting flexible and relevant learning.

The research instruments used include semi-structured interview guides and observation sheets that have been validated by experts in the field of English curriculum and education. These instruments ensure that the data collected is relevant and in accordance with the focus of the research, namely flexibility in curriculum design.

The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, where the main themes related to the implementation of curriculum flexibility were identified and interpreted. To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation techniques were used by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and related documents, such as Learning Outcomes and Teaching Modules implemented in the schools.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the implementation of flexibility in English curriculum design under the Merdeka Curriculum in five junior high schools in Solok City, and to identify factors that influence its success. Based on thematic analysis of data collected through interviews, classroom observations, and student interviews, several key findings can be identified as follows:

### **1. Flexibility in Adapting Teaching Materials**

From the results of interviews with English teachers, the majority of teachers stated that the Merdeka Curriculum provides freedom in compiling and adjusting teaching materials. This allows them to integrate local needs, such as students' culture and environmental context, into English learning. One of the teachers at SMP B Kota Solok revealed that they use materials that are relevant to students' daily lives, such as topics about local tourism. This flexibility increases student engagement in the learning process.

However, even though teachers feel they are given freedom, there are some obstacles. Most teachers expressed concerns about the difficulty in compiling

materials that balance local content and national competency standards. Some teachers felt that this flexibility also required more time to prepare materials, thus requiring additional support from the government in the form of training.

## 2. Flexibility in Teaching Methods

Findings from classroom observations showed that teachers were able to implement more varied teaching methods compared to the previous curriculum. For example, teachers at SMP C Kota Solok adopted a project-based approach where students were asked to make presentations on certain topics in English, which were tailored to their environment. This approach helped students develop communication and critical thinking skills that are relevant to the needs of the 21st century.

However, this flexibility is not always easy to implement. Some teachers have difficulty implementing varied methods due to limited resources, such as lack of access to technology or adequate teaching materials. This was found especially in SMP E Kota Solok, where limited technology hindered teachers in implementing technology-based learning methods as expected in the Merdeka Curriculum.

## 3. Students' Experience of Curriculum Flexibility

Interviews with students showed that they felt the benefits of this flexible approach. Students at SMP A and SMP D Kota Solok expressed that they felt more active in learning and understood the material more easily because the topics raised were more relevant to their lives. They also felt that the varied teaching methods, such as group discussions and presentations, made them more confident in using English orally.

However, some students admit that sometimes they find it difficult when the material or teaching method used does not suit their learning style. Some students prefer a more structured teaching method and feel that too much freedom makes them confused about the main focus of learning.

## 4. Challenges in Implementing Curriculum Flexibility

Key findings from interviews and observations identified significant challenges faced by teachers in implementing curriculum flexibility. One of the biggest challenges was the lack of clear guidance on how to utilize this flexibility without neglecting competency standards. Several teachers stated that they felt confused in balancing the freedom to develop teaching materials and achieving the expected competency targets.

In addition, the time required to plan flexible materials and varied teaching methods is a separate obstacle. Teachers at SMP B and SMP C in Solok city mentioned that although they wanted to use more project-based methods or other creative approaches, the workload and time constraints forced them to choose methods that were more practical and easy to implement.

**Table 1. Key Findings from the Implementation of Curriculum Flexibility in Junior High Schools in Solok City.**

Flexibility Aspect	Positive Findings	Challenge
<b>Adaptation of Teaching Materials</b>	Teachers can adapt materials to local contexts, such as students' culture and environment. - Increase student engagement in learning.	Teachers have difficulty balancing local content with national competency standards. - Need more time to prepare materials.

<b>Flexibility Aspect</b>	<b>Positive Findings</b>	<b>Challenge</b>
<b>Teaching Methods</b>	Teachers can use various methods such as project-based learning. - Teaching is more contextual and relevant to students' needs.	Limited resources (technology, teaching materials) limit the application of technology-based methods. - Not all students are suited to varied methods.
<b>Student Experience</b>	Students feel more involved and find it easier to understand material that is relevant to their lives. - Students are more confident in using English.	Some students feel confused by too much freedom in teaching methods.
<b>Teacher Challenge</b>	Teachers feel they are given autonomy to design teaching that suits local needs.	Lack of clear guidance regarding the use of flexibility without ignoring competency standards. - Limited time for preparation of flexible materials.

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of flexibility in the Merdeka Curriculum provides significant benefits in increasing student engagement and learning relevance, but there are still various challenges that need to be overcome, especially regarding clearer guidelines and resource support.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Flexibility in Adapting Teaching Materials**

This study found that the application of flexibility in the preparation of teaching materials greatly supports the relevance of English teaching in SMP Kota Solok. Teachers have the freedom to adjust teaching materials to the local context and students' needs. Emphasized that curriculum flexibility allows teachers to create relevant teaching, both locally and globally. In SMP B Kota Solok, for example, the use of local tourism topics increases students' learning motivation because they can understand the material in a context they are familiar with (Marlina et al., 2024).

However, challenges arise when teachers have to balance local content with national competency standards. According to (Irawati et al., 2022) found that many teachers had difficulty adapting contextual materials to national standards, which caused confusion in their implementation. The need for official guidance and better training was also emphasized by (Pratikno et al., 2022), who suggested that this flexibility should be accompanied by clearer instructions to ensure that local materials remain relevant to the standards set by the government.

In addition, a study by (Nurhadi et al., 2020) emphasized the importance of teacher training in developing locally relevant yet global materials. Flexible materials must not only be appropriate to local needs but must also provide students with the ability to compete internationally. Teachers at SMP 5 Solok reported this difficulty, especially in adapting local materials to meet national standards, indicating the need for more systematic support to help teachers manage this balance.

## **2. Flexibility in Teaching Methods**

The application of varied teaching methods is one of the advantages of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers at SMP 3 Solok are able to use project-based learning approaches and group discussions, which increase student engagement in learning English. According to (Pratama & Kusuma, 2021), the project-based approach supports the development of critical thinking and collaboration skills, which are very important in the context of the 21st century. At SMP 3 Solok, students are asked to work on projects related to the local environment, which not only improves their language skills but also increases their understanding of the local context.

However, technological limitations are one of the main challenges in implementing more flexible and interactive teaching methods. It showed that technology plays an important role in supporting teaching flexibility, especially in facilitating distance and project-based learning. At SMP E Kota Solok, limited access to technology is an obstacle for teachers in implementing technology-based methods, which is in accordance with (Warschauer, 2004) findings on the importance of adequate technological infrastructure in language education in the digital era.

In addition, (Kusuma & Prasetyo, 2020) suggested that teacher training in utilizing technology optimally is key to implementing flexible teaching methods. Limited technological resources not only affect the effectiveness of varied learning methods but also limit teachers' ability to innovate in teaching. Teachers at SMP E realized that limited access to technology narrowed their choice of teaching methods, which ultimately limited student engagement in more interactive and engaging learning.

## **3. Student Experience of Curriculum Flexibility**

Students' experiences of curriculum flexibility were generally positive. Students interviewed stated that they felt more engaged in learning when the teaching materials and methods were tailored to their daily lives. This supports the findings of research by (Setiawan, 2021), which showed that flexibility in the curriculum can increase students' motivation and engagement because they see a direct relevance between the material being studied and their real lives.

However, while this flexibility is beneficial for some students, others feel confused when given too much freedom without clear guidance. Research by (Prasetyo et al., 2022) shows that while learning autonomy is important, students still need clear structure and guidance from teachers. This was also felt by students at SMP E Kota Solok, who felt confused in determining their learning priorities without strong direction from their teachers. Therefore, it is important for teachers to maintain a balance between flexibility and guidance, as suggested by (Pratama & Kusuma, 2021), so that students can utilize learning freedom effectively.

## **4. Challenges in Implementing Curriculum Flexibility**

One of the main challenges in implementing curriculum flexibility is the lack of clear guidance on how to implement it without neglecting the achievement of competency standards. It was found that many teachers felt confused in balancing teaching autonomy with the demands of achieving national competency standards (Irawati et al., 2022). This is reinforced by the findings of (Kusuma & Prasetyo,

2020), who emphasized that the success of flexibility in the curriculum is highly dependent on stronger policy support and intensive training for teachers.

Limited time to plan flexible materials is also an obstacle for teachers. (Nurhadi et al., 2020) stated that curriculum flexibility requires longer planning time and more resources compared to conventional curriculum. In SMP B and SMP C, Solok City, teachers felt an additional burden due to limited time to prepare materials that were appropriate to students' needs. González and O'Neill (2021) also suggested that to overcome this challenge, more flexible time is needed for planning and teaching, which allows teachers to innovate without feeling burdened by time pressure.

## CONCLUSION

This study successfully explored the application of flexibility in English curriculum design under the Merdeka Curriculum in five junior high schools (SMP) in Solok City, West Sumatra. The results showed that teachers have the freedom to adapt teaching materials to local contexts, such as culture and students' needs, which has a positive impact on student engagement in the learning process. However, challenges remain in terms of aligning local materials with national competency standards, which requires clearer guidelines and additional training for teachers.

Flexibility is also seen in teaching methods, where teachers are able to apply more varied methods, such as project-based learning, which helps students develop critical thinking and communication skills. However, limited resources, especially technology, are a barrier to the implementation of more innovative technology-based learning methods. Student experiences generally indicate that curriculum flexibility increases their engagement, although some students feel confused when given too much freedom without sufficient guidance from teachers.

The biggest challenge faced by teachers is the lack of clear guidance on how to utilize curriculum flexibility without sacrificing the achievement of competency standards. In addition, limited time and resources are also obstacles in designing flexible teaching materials and methods. Based on these findings, this study emphasizes the importance of better support for teachers in the form of training, more detailed guidance, and the provision of adequate resources. The flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum has great potential to improve the quality of English language teaching, but its success depends heavily on the readiness and support provided to teachers. These findings provide important contributions to the development of a curriculum that is more adaptive and relevant to students' needs in the era of globalization.

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