Curriculum Reform Meets Classroom Realities: Selected Indonesian Teachers' Perspectives on the *Merdeka* Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum marks a transformative shift in Indonesia's English Language Teaching (ELT) landscape by promoting flexibility, student-centered learning, and project-based approaches. However, the success of such curriculum reform relies heavily on how teachers, as frontline implementers, perceive, adapt, and navigate its complexities in diverse classroom realities. Addressing a critical gap in existing research that predominantly focuses on policy-level analysis, this qualitative case study investigates the lived experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of Indonesian ELT educators amidst the early stages of Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Drawing on Fullan's theory of educational change, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving 20 English teachers, 30 students, and 10 administrators across rural, suburban, and urban settings. Thematic analysis revealed that while the curriculum fosters innovation and autonomy, teachers face significant constraints including insufficient training, technological inequity, and excessive administrative demands. Despite these challenges, educators expressed strong support for student-centered instruction, multimedia integration, and skill development emphasizing communication and critical thinking. This study contributes uniquely by offering context-specific insights into teacher agency within systemic constraints, advocating for equitable resource allocation, professional development, and collaborative policy feedback mechanisms. By amplifying teacher voices, this research not only informs national curriculum design but also engages in broader global conversations on curriculum autonomy, pedagogical reform, and the essential role of teachers in enacting meaningful educational transformation.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is undergoing a significant educational transformation to align its system with global demands and local values. At the heart of this reform is the Merdeka Curriculum, a bold initiative by the Ministry of Education that gives schools and educators greater autonomy in shaping learning experiences. It promotes student-centered learning, encourages creative teaching, and supports holistic development rooted in the national values of Pancasila (Rahmawati & Kusumaningtyas, 2024). Within this evolving educational landscape, English Language Teaching (ELT) emerges as a particularly significant domain due to its dual role in advancing academic achievement and preparing students for global engagement.

In this context, English is no longer viewed as a subject limited to grammar instruction and memorization. It is now positioned as a dynamic tool for communication, cultural exchange, and real-world problem-solving. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes experiential learning through project-based approaches and differentiated instruction, enabling teachers to tailor lessons to diverse learner profiles (Latifa et al., 2023). While these ideals align with global best practices in ELT, their application within Indonesia's varied school contexts introduces both promising opportunities and intricate challenges. It is therefore essential to investigate how educators, as frontline implementers of reform, interpret and navigate these pedagogical shifts in practice.

Existing research has largely examined the Merdeka Curriculum from policy and theoretical angles. Studies by Hunaepi and Suharta (2024) and Rahmawati and Kusumaningtyas (2024) provide valuable insights into the rationale and structure of the curriculum, but often do not address the day-to-day experiences of teachers. This top-down approach neglects the complex realities of classroom implementation and the essential role of teacher agency. Similarly, prior work on ELT in Indonesia has emphasized methodological innovation, digital integration, and assessment strategies (Nooralam & Sakhiyya, 2022; Ni'mah et al., 2024), yet has rarely addressed how teachers respond to large-scale curriculum reform. Although these contributions advance the understanding of pedagogical change, they offer limited perspective on how reform is operationalized within ELT classrooms.

Further compounding the issue is a lack of research that examines systemic and contextual factors shaping teacher autonomy in Indonesia. Despite the curriculum's promotion of flexibility, educators often face barriers such as administrative demands, uneven technological access, and limited professional development (Emawati et al., 2024; Giawa, 2024; Rahmah et al., 2024). The literature also tends to generalize findings across settings without accounting for disparities between urban and rural schools or the varying capacities of institutions to support innovation. As a result, the nuanced realities faced by educators remain underexplored. Moreover, the global conversation on curriculum reform has increasingly recognized the importance of teacher agency, yet few Indonesian studies have centered educators' voices in assessing curriculum implementation (Weda et al., 2023).

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding the lived experiences of English teachers adapting to Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum by shifting the analytical focus from policy outcomes to classroom enactment, highlighting how teachers engage with reform through practical decision-making, adaptation, and innovation. Hughes and Lewis (2020) stress the importance of teacher autonomy in delivering the curriculum effectively, yet such autonomy is often constrained by external pressu res and limited resources, as noted by Mustofa et al. (2023). The non-compulsory status of English, as discussed by Fajriah et al. (2019), adds further complexity by disrupting consistency in pedagogy, materials, and assessments.

This study also explores how teachers navigate the tension between curriculum ideals and local realities, offering insights into the need for more responsive professional development and resource strategies. Rabbidge (2017) emphasizes that teachers' present-day practices are shaped by historical experiences with previous reforms, reinforcing the importance of supporting educators through change. By situating Indonesian English Language Teaching (ELT) within global discourses on teacher agency, curricular autonomy, and responsive reform, the study highlights the importance of collaboration and professional identity development. Jiang and Zhang (2021) argue that teacher engagement with reform can transform their professional identity, especially when supported by favorable institutional contexts, while Haapaniemi et al. (2020) show how collaborative curriculum design enhances teacher agency and contextual relevance. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions on education reform and provides evidence-based recommendations for future policies and professional development that champion pedagogical innovation and practical feasibility, as underscored by Voogt et al. (2016) and Rahman et al. (2018).

The study's novelty lies in its educator-centered, qualitative approach and its contribution to understanding the translation of curriculum policy into classroom practice. By engaging teachers from diverse school environments including urban, suburban, and rural contexts, it reveals how structural disparities and professional agency interact to shape curriculum implementation. It also offers practical recommendations for teacher training and support systems, grounded in authentic classroom experiences. In doing so, the study adds a vital perspective to international discussions on educational reform in post-centralized systems.

The primary objective of this study is to explore how ELT educators perceive and implement Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum by examining the challenges they encounter, the strategies they adopt, and the degree of autonomy they can exercise within institutional and systemic constraints. These findings are vital for assessing the practical viability of curriculum design and informing improvements that emphasize teacher capacity and learner outcomes. By foregrounding educator perspectives, the study seeks to shape both policy and practice in alignment with the curriculum's core objectives. Ultimately, it offers a timely and contextually grounded analysis of how the Merdeka Curriculum is transforming English language instruction at the classroom level, highlighting the tensions and opportunities that emerge when ambitious reforms intersect with everyday teaching realities. The findings carry significant implications for ELT in Indonesia and similar contexts, reinforcing the value of teacher voices in advancing sustainable, culturally relevant, and impactful educational change.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Merdeka Curriculum in ELT: Philosophical Foundations and Policy Aims

The Merdeka Curriculum represents a paradigm shift in Indonesia's education system by promoting pedagogical autonomy, flexibility, and student-centered learning grounded in Pancasila values, aiming

to nurture adaptable and socially responsible learners (Lestari, 2023). Rooted in constructivist theories by Piaget (1976) and Vygotsky (1978), the curriculum encourages active, collaborative, and contextual learning, which is especially vital in English Language Teaching (ELT). Student-centered approaches enhance learner engagement and long-term retention (Weimer, 2013).

However, current literature predominantly addresses the reform from top-down perspectives (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Rahmawati & Kusumaningtyas, 2024), neglecting how these philosophies are enacted in classroom practice. Furthermore, the non-compulsory status of English in some regions introduces inconsistencies in pedagogy and assessment (Fajriah et al., 2019), which remain underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on teachers' lived experiences and their interpretations of policy ideals, highlighting how philosophical foundations are negotiated in practice. It also contributes new insights into the contextual variability of ELT implementation, recognizing the diverse challenges and adaptations encountered by educators in rural, suburban, and urban school environments, where factors such as resources, administration, and institutional culture significantly shape outcomes.

2.2. Pedagogical Innovations, Practical Constraints, and Educator Agency

The Merdeka Curriculum promotes pedagogical innovation, notably through project-based learning, which fosters collaboration, inquiry, and critical thinking (Thomas, 2000), and the integration of technology to enhance language acquisition through multimodal and adaptive tools (Hockly, 2018). While these approaches theoretically align with the curriculum's emphasis on meaningful engagement, implementation has been uneven due to barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, digital inequity, limited training, and heavy administrative burdens (Emawati et al., 2024; Rahmah et al., 2024). These challenges often restrict teachers' agency, creating a disjunction between policy ideals and classroom realities. Although technology is widely endorsed, its use in under-resourced schools remains insufficiently explored; Giawa (2024), for example, acknowledges its value but omits specific pedagogical practices and constraints. This study addresses such gaps by capturing teachers' experiences with educational technology in ELT, revealing both its potential and its practical limitations.

Furthermore, while effective professional development is essential (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), existing training models often lack relevance and consistency, underscoring the urgency for teacher-informed reform. Through a qualitative, educator-centered lens, this study reveals how teachers navigate institutional demands, employ innovative strategies,

and address systemic challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. It offers practical recommendations to enhance training programs and provides policy-relevant insights grounded in classroom realities. By doing so, the study contributes to global discourse on teacher agency, pedagogical innovation, and curriculum reform, emphasizing that meaningful and sustainable change in ELT must be anchored in the lived experiences of educators.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology curriculum implementation, a minimum of two years of teaching experience, and representation from rural, suburban, and urban school contexts. This sampling approach ensured a diversity of perspectives, enhancing the depth, credibility, and contextual relevance of the findings

To ensure data triangulation and strengthen the validity of the study, three primary data collection methods were employed:

1) **Semi-Structured Interviews**: In-depth interviews were conducted with all 60 participants (20 teachers, 30 students, and 10 administrators). These interviews explored participants' perceptions of the curriculum, its pedagogical implications, associated challenges, and the extent to which it aligns with their teaching or learning contexts.

2) **Classroom Observations**: Fifteen English class sessions were systematically observed to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum was implemented in practice. Observations focused on instructional strategies, classroom interaction patterns, and the use of project-based and student-centered learning approaches. Field notes captured teacher behaviors, student engagement, and contextual nuances that complemented interview data.

3) **Document Analysis**: Curriculum-related documents were analyzed to understand how the Merdeka Curriculum had been interpreted and operationalized across different schools. These documents included lesson plans, instructional materials, curriculum frameworks, and assessment rubrics. The analysis provided insight into the alignment between policy expectations and classroom realities.

Data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017), allowing for systematic interpretation of qualitative data:

1) **Familiarization with Data**: All interview transcripts, observation notes, and document records were read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content.

2) **Initial Coding**: The data were coded inductively and deductively to identify salient patterns and emerging concepts related to curriculum implementation, teacher agency, and pedagogical innovation.

3) **Theme Development**: Codes were organized into broader themes such as curriculum adaptability, teacher autonomy, administrative burden, and student engagement.

4) **Review and Refinement**: Themes were refined to ensure internal coherence, distinctiveness, and alignment with the research objectives.

5) **Interpretation**: Themes were interpreted within the framework of Fullan's (2016) theory to highlight the interplay between systemic structures and teacher decision-making. Particular attention was given to how policy shifts translate into pedagogical practices and how teachers negotiate reform mandates in their unique contexts.

By integrating multiple data sources and analytical layers, this methodical approach provides a robust foundation for understanding the complex realities of ELT reform under the Merdeka Curriculum. The methodological rigor also ensures that the voices of educators are authentically represented, thereby contributing to more grounded and actionable insights in the discourse on curriculum change.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of a qualitative case study exploring the perceptions, challenges, and classroom strategies of English Language Teaching (ELT) educators in response to the implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. Drawing from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the data are organized into two thematic subsections that reflect the study's overarching research aims.

4.1. Educators' Perceptions and Classroom Adaptation to the Merdeka Curriculum

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has introduced a dynamic shift in English Language Teaching (ELT), prompting educators to navigate a landscape marked by both promise and constraint. Teachers reported a broad spectrum of familiarity and engagement, with some expressing confidence and others encountering significant barriers. These varied perceptions were shaped by factors such as institutional support, digital access, training opportunities, and the level of administrative flexibility within schools.

Educators who had early exposure to the curriculum, particularly those working in urban and suburban schools, voiced a positive outlook on its emphasis on student autonomy, creativity, and contextual learning.

Teacher 2 shared, *"The curriculum gives us space to design more meaningful tasks. [...] We use projects like short videos, and the students really come alive when they present. They're proud of their work."*
[Intv.SX-T2: 1'.10"-2'.12"]

This perspective was supported by observations in well-equipped schools, where students were actively involved in thematic storytelling and group presentations using digital platforms. In one observed class, learners collaboratively created multimedia content titled *My Local Hero*, a project that integrated English communication skills with local cultural values. The instructional materials included student-centered rubrics focusing on teamwork, content originality, and fluency, as confirmed through document analysis.

However, such innovative practices were not consistently realized across all contexts. In rural and digitally underserved areas, the adaptation of the Merdeka Curriculum was often constrained by logistical limitations.

Teacher 9 described the situation as follows: *"I'd love to use technology, but we do not have reliable internet or projectors. So I go back to using printed worksheets."*
[Intv.SX-T9: 2'.15"-3'.12"]

This reality was mirrored in classroom visits, where digital tools were entirely absent. Observed lessons relied heavily on lecture-based delivery and textbook exercises. Corresponding lesson plans did not reflect student-centered practices but instead emphasized rote grammar instruction and isolated vocabulary drills. The lack of digital integration or collaborative learning was especially evident in schools that lacked structured teacher training or peer support mechanisms.

A dominant theme emerging from interviews was the tension between pedagogical freedom and administrative pressure. Although the curriculum encouraged creativity, educators frequently cited burdensome documentation tasks that hindered meaningful classroom engagement.

Teacher 6 explained, "*We are encouraged to be creative, but we also spend hours filling out lesson logs and curriculum maps. It takes away the time we need to actually teach.*"
[Intv.SX-T6: 1'.10"-2'.12"]

This sentiment was corroborated during observations where teachers paused instruction to complete forms or review administrative requirements. Document samples included overlapping and repetitive entries such as daily lesson logs, evaluation templates, and performance indicators, indicating the significant bureaucratic load teachers were expected to manage.

Despite these challenges, several teachers demonstrated a high degree of adaptability when supported through targeted training and collaborative environments. Educators who participated in workshops or school-based learning communities showed stronger alignment with the curriculum's vision.

Teacher 7 reflected, *"The webinars helped me design more relevant projects. I learned to connect lessons to the students' lives and make them more involved."*

[Intv.SX-T7: 3'.10"-3'.30"]

This proactive approach was reflected in lesson documents that included differentiated tasks, inquiry-based prompts, and culturally grounded themes. In these classrooms, learners engaged in discussions, role plays, and poster-making activities while teachers facilitated rather than dictated the learning process. Such practices indicated a deeper internalization of the curriculum's intent.

Collaboration among educators played a critical role in enabling successful adaptation. Peer learning groups, both formal and informal, served as platforms for sharing strategies and co-developing instructional resources.

Teacher 13 noted, *"I got great ideas from our WhatsApp group. [...] We share materials and help each other adjust to the new demands."*

[Intv.SX-T13: 5'.10"-6'.20"]

Observational data confirmed that schools with a culture of collegiality exhibited more vibrant learning environments. Lessons were co-taught or designed collaboratively, integrating various modes of learning such as visual storytelling, interactive debates, and online tools like Padlet and Quizizz. In contrast, schools with minimal collaboration displayed lower levels of innovation, with instruction often confined to traditional delivery methods.

Teachers also highlighted concerns about equitable access to professional development and infrastructure. In schools where leadership actively supported curricular innovation, teachers were more confident in navigating change. However, in institutions without such support, many educators felt isolated.

Teacher 7 also stated, *"I joined a curriculum webinar, but there was no follow-up. Without mentoring, I just do what I've always done."*

[Intv.SX-T7: 4'.12"-4'.40"]

Documents from these teachers lacked the depth and flexibility seen in other settings. Lesson plans remained static, often replicating templates from earlier curricula with minimal adjustment for student needs or technological integration.

The findings presented in this section emphasize the intricate relationship between curriculum reform and classroom realities. Teachers were not passive recipients of reform but rather active agents negotiating complex and varied conditions. While the Merdeka Curriculum resonated with many educators due to its emphasis on learner engagement, real-world relevance, and holistic development, its implementation was significantly shaped by structural factors such as digital readiness, administrative demands, and the availability of collaborative and professional support systems.

Four key themes emerged: the perceived pedagogical value of the curriculum, the administrative constraints that reduced instructional time, the uneven distribution of technological and training resources, and the empowering effect of professional collaboration. These themes collectively illustrate that successful implementation is not solely dependent on teacher motivation but requires a supportive ecosystem that includes leadership engagement, resource allocation, and peer learning opportunities.

Curriculum reform, especially one as ambitious as the Merdeka model, must be accompanied by robust infrastructural and institutional support. While the vision of student-centered, project-based learning holds considerable promise, its translation into practice will remain uneven without addressing the disparities across school contexts. Teachers' ability to enact the curriculum is inseparable from the environments in which they work. Addressing these systemic disparities is essential not only for ensuring consistent implementation but also for honoring the curriculum's foundational aim to democratize and humanize learning.

4.2. Challenges, Support Systems, and Impacts on Student Learning

DAlthough many educators expressed optimism about the pedagogical promises of the Merdeka Curriculum, their narratives revealed deep-rooted challenges that hindered consistent implementation. These challenges were not merely pedagogical but systemic in nature, intersecting with infrastructural inadequacies, professional development gaps, and policy-level expectations that did not always align with ground realities. Teachers were often caught between the ideals of curriculum reform and the pragmatic constraints of their school environments.

One of the most recurrent barriers involved unreliable digital infrastructure. Teachers, especially in rural and remote areas, struggled with limited or non-existent internet access, insufficient hardware, and the absence of basic classroom equipment such as projectors and functioning audio systems.

Teacher 11 stated, *"Even when I want to do project-based work, I cannot depend on the*

internet or lab. [...] Sometimes we just cancel the plan and return to traditional worksheets.”

[Intv.SX-T11: 7'.10"-8'.30"]

This statement was substantiated by field observations. In multiple rural settings, teachers were seen abandoning multimedia projects due to network failures or power outages. Scheduled online tasks were often replaced by low-tech alternatives such as guided reading or copied handouts. Analysis of lesson documents from these schools revealed that teaching plans were repeatedly modified to exclude digital components, and many educators manually annotated their plans to reflect last-minute changes dictated by infrastructure breakdowns.

The data also indicated a persistent mismatch between the curriculum's aspirations and classroom realities. While the Merdeka Curriculum encourages differentiated, technology-enhanced learning, teachers frequently noted that their schools lacked even the most basic resources to implement these innovations.

Teacher 5 remarked, *“We are encouraged to use technology, but we do not even have enough electricity time in school, let alone laptops or speakers.”*

[Intv.SX-T5: 3'.12"-3'.20"]

Observational records from several mountainous schools confirmed this pattern. Teachers were often seen adjusting on the spot, shifting from collaborative group work to solitary tasks when technical conditions failed to support active learning. These contextual limitations shaped not only the lesson content but also teacher expectations, gradually narrowing the scope of what they considered realistic within their classrooms.

Another major concern expressed by educators related to student readiness. Teachers reported that many students lacked the foundational English skills required to participate meaningfully in communicative and creative learning tasks.

Teacher 8 explained, *“When asked to present, many students are silent. They are not confident and some do not understand basic instructions.”*

[Intv.SX-T8: 6'.10"-6'.30"]

These concerns were reflected in classroom observations. In numerous cases, students remained passive during English instruction, responding minimally or not at all to teacher prompts. In such classrooms, teachers often reverted to Bahasa Indonesia to clarify instructions. Worksheets were heavily scaffolded with example phrases and fill-in-the-blank items, and few opportunities were available for free expression or improvisational speech. Rubrics retrieved from student assignments showed that oral tasks were simplified to ensure completion, rather than structured for challenge and growth.

In addition to language limitations, student engagement also presented a challenge. Teachers pointed to a lack of intrinsic motivation, especially when students were expected to work independently.

Teacher 12 noted, *“Some students just wait for instructions. They are not used to learning independently.”*

[Intv.SX-T12: 3'.30"-3'.49"]

The shift toward self-directed learning proved difficult in classrooms where habits of autonomy had not been previously cultivated. Observers noted that although group work was frequently attempted, much of it remained teacher-initiated, with students reluctant to take initiative. To compensate, teachers implemented structured routines and step-by-step task guidance, introducing autonomy in measured increments.

Technology, while a promising tool, also introduced behavioral concerns. Educators highlighted the dual role of mobile devices in both enabling and disrupting learning.

Teacher 14 remarked, *“Students like using phones for tasks, but once they finish, they open TikTok. [...] It is hard to control.”*

[Intv.SX-T7: 3'.11"-3'.30"]

This sentiment was confirmed during visits to digitally equipped classrooms. While students showed enthusiasm when using mobile platforms such as Padlet or Quizizz, teachers frequently had to intervene to redirect attention. Some educators implemented phone collection policies during specific parts of the lesson, while others relied on verbal reminders and informal agreements. Reflective teaching journals indicated that managing digital behavior added emotional strain, particularly in large class settings where individual monitoring was difficult.

Amid these constraints, educators consistently articulated what forms of support would most effectively enable them to enact the curriculum's aims. High on the list were opportunities for in-depth, practice-oriented professional development and a reduction in bureaucratic workload.

Teacher 1 emphasized, *“We need real training, not just webinars. [...] Face-to-face sharing with real examples would help.”*

[Intv.SX-T1: 4'.10"-4'.40"]

Attendance records revealed that fewer than half of the teachers had participated in hands-on workshops. Those who had received more direct training demonstrated greater confidence in designing creative tasks, incorporating student reflection journals, and employing peer assessment. Their instructional documents reflected a more nuanced understanding of curriculum principles, with specific

references to student wellbeing, cross-disciplinary themes, and the development of twenty-first-century skills.

In contrast, teachers who had only attended online sessions reported limited understanding and minimal changes in practice. These teachers submitted lesson plans that largely mirrored traditional formats, often recycled from previous years with minor updates.

Administrative load also emerged as a critical obstacle. Many educators expressed frustration with the volume of reports, lesson logs, and assessment matrices they were required to complete.

Teacher 15 reflected, *"Sometimes we spend more time filling reports than designing lessons. […] It is tiring."*

[Intv.SX-T15: 2'.40"-3'.30"]

Document analysis confirmed this claim. Workload distribution tables showed significant portions of teacher hours allocated to compliance tasks. Interviews revealed that these requirements often took precedence over innovation and reflective planning, especially during high-stakes reporting periods.

School leadership proved to be a decisive factor in how well teachers coped with these demands. In institutions where principals adopted a facilitative rather than directive role, teachers felt more empowered to experiment and refine their practice.

Teacher 18 noted, *"Our headmaster gives us freedom to try new things. He even observes and helps with feedback. That motivates us."*

[Intv.SX-T18: 4'.10"-3'.30"]

Field notes from this site described a collaborative atmosphere where lesson planning was shared among teaching teams and peer observations were encouraged. Internal memos promoted innovation, and teachers were invited to reflect on and document their instructional challenges without fear of punitive judgment. In such environments, the Merdeka Curriculum was more than a set of guidelines. It was perceived as a living document that evolved alongside the school culture.

Importantly, teachers recognized and embraced the curriculum's philosophical shift toward holistic learning. Rather than limiting instruction to grammar and textbook drills, they reported new opportunities to address emotional intelligence, intercultural awareness, and moral reasoning.

Teacher 10 reflected, *"We now talk about feelings and values in class. It is no longer just grammar. It is more human."*

[Intv.SX-T10: 5'.10"-5'.30"]

Classroom observations validated this transformation. Students were engaged in empathetic interviews with family members, explored values through storytelling, and reflected on emotions during writing tasks. Instructional materials from these sessions included objectives that explicitly targeted collaboration, ethical thinking, and social awareness, suggesting a genuine shift in pedagogical focus.

In summary, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum hinges on the alignment between curricular ideals and systemic support. While many teachers have demonstrated resilience and creativity, their capacity to transform instruction is closely tied to the resources, leadership, and institutional culture within their schools. The curriculum's long-term impact will depend on how these ecosystems evolve to accommodate not only pedagogical reform but also the lived realities of those tasked with carrying it forward.

5. Discussion

5.1. Educators' Perceptions and Classroom Adaptation to the Merdeka Curriculum

This study reveals a broad spectrum of teacher familiarity with the Merdeka Curriculum, ranging from confident implementation to limited comprehension. Such variance is largely influenced by institutional resources, prior involvement in pilot programs, and access to targeted professional development. Teachers with deeper curriculum understanding reported more positive classroom experiences, particularly valuing the curriculum's emphasis on student-centered and project-based learning, which fosters autonomy, collaboration, and critical thinking. These benefits are notably exemplified in the Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Cahyani, 2021; Syarifah & Emiliasari, 2019).

Grounded in constructivist learning theory, this pedagogical shift actively engages students as co-constructors of knowledge (Tang, 2023; Muganga & Ssenkusu, 2019). Project-based learning (PjBL), as the literature affirms, enhances creativity, critical thinking, and narrative competence by allowing students to develop personal expressions through language (Syarifah & Emiliasari, 2019; Sultan & Javaid, 2018). This shift aligns with international calls for experiential models of learning that move beyond passive, didactic instruction (M. & O., 2023). Furthermore, global pedagogical discourse continues to highlight the effectiveness of inquiry-based, experiential learning in improving both cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes (Keiler, 2018; Jalinus et al., 2017). These approaches reposition teachers as facilitators who guide students through contextualized, meaningful learning (Tang, 2023; Muganga & Ssenkusu, 2019), reflecting the Merdeka Curriculum's transformative vision for dynamic, collaborative classrooms (Lackéus, 2020).

However, findings also expose a gap in the practical application of such pedagogy. Teachers who identify as only "moderately familiar" with project-based methods tend to demonstrate a superficial understanding that hinders effective implementation (Oroh et al., 2019; Almulla, 2020). This limited familiarity reflects an underlying deficiency in pedagogical foundation and strategic knowledge, as emphasized by Keengwe and Onchwari (2011).

To address this, sustained and contextually grounded professional development is imperative. Teachers must be equipped not only with theoretical understanding but also with concrete tools for lesson design, assessment, and technology integration (Niess, 2011; Umirbekova et al., 2019). Effective adoption of PjBL demands both conceptual clarity and hands-on experience in cultivating collaborative, learner-centered environments (Almulla, 2020). Additionally, professional development must respond to practical constraints such as limited time for collaboration or reflective practice (Mahdi, 2020; Keengwe & Onchwari, 2011). Integrating frameworks like Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) can help bridge theory and classroom practice by aligning subject matter, instructional methods, and technology use (Koehler et al., 2013; Niess, 2011). Importantly, such training should inspire not only skill acquisition but also pedagogical innovation that responds to evolving student needs (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Umirbekova et al., 2019).

Feedback mechanisms embedded within instructional practice also serve to enhance teacher adaptation. Teachers who reflect on their classroom experiences and receive constructive input demonstrate stronger alignment with curricular goals (Eck & Ramsey, 2019; Grieser & Hendricks, 2018; Akuom & Greenstein, 2022). Consequently, professional development should emphasize reflective, sustained, and adaptive learning processes that match the complexities of modern education.

Another key insight is the constraining effect of administrative demands on instructional creativity. Teachers consistently reported that bureaucratic obligations, such as extensive lesson documentation and reporting, diverted time and energy away from planning engaging instruction. This supports Roza et al. (2024), who criticize legacy ELT practices for stifling pedagogical innovation. Addressing this issue requires systemic reform, including reducing administrative burdens and reallocating non-instructional tasks to support staff to enhance teacher focus on learning design.

School leadership and peer collaboration emerge as essential enablers of effective curriculum adaptation. Institutions that prioritize active training and cultivate professional communities enable teachers to align practice with curricular ideals. One teacher credited peer mentorship with helping translate abstract policy into practical teaching strategies, emphasizing the importance of frameworks that empower teacher agency and peer learning (Hinson et al., 2023). The broader literature confirms the benefits of mentorship, including improved confidence, problem-solving skills, and professional identity among both mentors and mentees (Barr et al., 2023; Izadi, 2024). Peer learning also improves student communicative competence, reinforcing the value of interaction-driven instruction (Rodphotong, 2018; Trabulsi et al., 2023). Structured mentoring systems have shown measurable gains in student performance and emotional wellbeing, particularly when near-peer relationships bridge experience gaps and promote learner confidence (Allen et al., 2022; Yanke et al., 2023).

Despite the curriculum's emphasis on digital integration, many educators remain uncertain about effective technology use due to insufficient training and infrastructural limitations. This underscores a critical systemic gap: equipping teachers not only with devices but also with pedagogically grounded strategies for digital instruction. Leadership plays a pivotal role in supporting teacher innovation and ensuring that technological resources are meaningfully integrated into classroom practice.

Overall, this section highlights four interrelated findings. First, teacher familiarity with the Merdeka Curriculum significantly influences implementation effectiveness. Second, unequal access to digital tools and professional development exacerbates implementation gaps. Third, excessive administrative workload constrains instructional creativity. Fourth, strong leadership and collaborative networks are indispensable for sustainable reform. These insights extend existing research on educational change by illustrating how teacher agency is mediated by institutional conditions (Fullan, 2016; Voogt et al., 2016).

Although the Merdeka Curriculum presents a pedagogically progressive model grounded in autonomy, flexibility, and holistic learning, its success depends on systemic readiness. This includes reducing administrative overload, enhancing equity in resource allocation, and tailoring teacher training to classroom realities. The originality of this study lies in its qualitative, teacher-centered focus, offering granular perspectives on how macro-level reforms are navigated and enacted within diverse school contexts.

5.2. Challenges, Support Systems, and Impacts on Student Learning

This study identifies several systemic barriers that hinder the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in rural and underserved schools. A key obstacle is the lack of reliable digital infrastructure, which significantly limits the feasibility of multimedia-based and project-oriented activities. As

noted in field observations, educators frequently had to revise lesson plans to omit technology-based components due to electricity shortages or poor internet connectivity. These constraints dilute the curriculum's transformative intent and underscore the need for more equitable distribution of educational resources.

Another critical challenge involves student readiness. Many teachers observed that students often lacked foundational English skills necessary for participating in independent or collaborative learning activities, which led to passive classroom behavior. To compensate, educators adjusted instructional expectations and provided extensive scaffolding. While this support is necessary, it also tends to reduce the level of autonomy and rigor envisioned by the curriculum. This discrepancy between curricular goals and learner capabilities points to a misalignment in vertical curriculum design and signals the need for interventions that build foundational language proficiency.

The findings also reveal the complex role of technology in classrooms. Digital tools can enhance engagement but simultaneously introduce distractions, particularly from social media. Aivaz and Teodorescu (2022) observed that students often resist restrictions on device use, suggesting a need for strategies that integrate mobile technology constructively while fostering self-regulated learning (Aivaz & Teodorescu, 2023). This highlights the importance of digital literacy as a core component of both teacher and student training. Teachers increasingly report devoting substantial effort to managing device-related distractions, demonstrating the nuanced demands of digital integration in instructional settings (Neiterman & Zaza, 2019). Research shows that such distractions impair academic performance and cognitive focus; for example, Limniou (2021) found that while BYOD policies offer flexibility, they may also lead to cognitive overload if not effectively managed.

Similarly, Henderson et al. (2015) noted that although digital tools may enhance focus, they often result in superficial engagement rather than deep learning. Zhu (2024) emphasizes the need for comprehensive frameworks to manage these distractions while optimizing the pedagogical value of educational technology. Effective classroom management strategies, as advocated by Korpershoek et al. (2016), include proactive rule-setting and gamification approaches (Mora, 2020; Djami, 2022), which can help create more structured and engaging learning environments. Tools like GoGuardian have also proven effective in reducing off-task behavior by reinforcing accountability and digital focus (Pungong et al., 2023).

In the face of these challenges, educators consistently expressed a need for practical, contextually relevant professional development.

Research shows that face-to-face workshops yield greater improvements in teacher motivation and learning outcomes than generic webinars. Hands-on, real-world scenarios are particularly effective in fostering engagement and satisfaction among participants (Karampourian et al., 2023; Milne et al., 2022). Moreover, schools that foster strong leadership and collaborative planning cultures tend to support higher levels of teacher innovation and professional growth. In contrast, institutions lacking such support often see teachers revert to conventional practices, driven by diminished confidence and insufficient institutional backing (Meniado, 2020).

Importantly, the holistic vision of the Merdeka Curriculum is beginning to reshape classroom practices. In English Language Teaching (ELT), educators are increasingly incorporating emotional intelligence, ethics, and intercultural awareness, thereby positioning ELT as a platform for socio-emotional development and global citizenship (Khan & Mohammed, 2024; Dewaele et al., 2018). Evidence suggests that emotional intelligence training within teacher education enhances both instructional quality and student well-being, cultivating inclusive and empathetic learning environments (Hamdzah et al., 2020; Hen, 2020). This pedagogical evolution reflects a broader shift toward nurturing 21st-century competencies such as empathy, cultural sensitivity, and critical thinking (Susanto et al., 2024).

Simultaneously, the integration of technology—particularly artificial intelligence—is reshaping English instruction by providing personalized learning experiences and innovative teaching tools (Zhang, 2023; Akbarani, 2024). However, meaningful integration of these technologies depends on comprehensive teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. As Kiyozumi et al. (2022) emphasize, technology alone cannot drive educational transformation. A balanced approach that harmonizes technological innovation with core pedagogical principles is essential for preparing educators to navigate the evolving demands of contemporary classrooms (Wang, 2019).

This study reinforces the need for a systemic shift in policy that recognizes teachers not as passive implementers but as co-constructors of curriculum. Professional development should be ongoing, dialogical, and tailored to specific classroom contexts, with greater emphasis on school-based mentoring and peer-led innovation. Infrastructure investments must prioritize bridging digital and resource gaps, particularly in disadvantaged regions. Administrative reforms should aim to reduce bureaucratic burdens and cultivate environments that empower teacher creativity and experimentation.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how teacher practices evolve with continued exposure to the Merdeka Curriculum.

Comparative studies across regions or school types could further identify best practices and persistent barriers. Additionally, incorporating student perspectives would offer a more holistic understanding of how curriculum reform influences learning experiences and educational outcomes in diverse Indonesian ELT settings.

5. Conclusions

This study offers a comprehensive and contextually grounded examination of how English Language Teaching (ELT) educators in Indonesia perceive and implement the Merdeka Curriculum. It identifies four key findings: the curriculum's student-centered vision is widely appreciated by teachers; structural and digital inequalities pose significant barriers to consistent implementation; administrative burdens limit instructional creativity; and strong leadership and collaborative professional environments enhance teacher adaptability. The study's novelty lies in its qualitative, teacher-centered approach, which highlights the nuanced realities of curriculum enactment across urban, suburban, and rural contexts. By amplifying educators' voices, this research contributes meaningfully to both national and international discussions on curricular reform, teacher agency, and classroom-level innovation.

Nonetheless, a key limitation of the study is its relatively small sample size, which, although sufficient for in-depth exploration, may not capture the full diversity of experiences across Indonesia's expansive educational landscape. This constraint underscores the need for broader, more representative studies in the future. The implications are far-reaching, suggesting that successful curriculum reform depends not only on policy design but also on the systemic conditions that support teachers in translating that policy into meaningful practice. Future research should involve larger and more varied participant groups, adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches, and integrate student perspectives to deepen understanding of how reform impacts learning experiences and outcomes across diverse educational settings.

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