
Reimplementing English as a Mandatory Subject in Elementary Schools: Teachers' Beliefs under the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

There-implementation of English as a compulsory subject at the elementary school (SD) and Madrasah Ibtidayah (MI) levels in the Merdeka Curriculum has caused a debate about its impact on educators and students. This study explores teachers' beliefs regarding this reimplementation and examines both challenges and benefits associated with teaching English at the elementary level. Data were collected using a qualitative approach through interviews with five teachers who are members of the MGMP (Subject Teacher Forum) Rayon 2 under the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jambi City, Jambi. The findings highlight challenges such as administrative burdens, insufficient training, and resource limitations. However, teaching English early also provides benefits, including better preparation for advanced education and improved linguistic and interpersonal skills. These insights are crucial for policymakers to refine strategies supporting curriculum implementation.

Keywords

Teachers' beliefs, Merdeka curriculum, Elementary, English education

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Introduction

Despite the Indonesian education system undergoing various changes in recent times, the Merdeka Curriculum has once again made English mandatory at both elementary schools (SD) and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) where in the previous 2013 curriculum, English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools was removed to focus on local content and reduce students' academic burdens (Arif, 2015; Kemendikbudristek, 2024). This policy is said by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek, 2024) to be a comprehensive response to the result of globalization that is increasingly complex. The reintroduction of English will help create human resources to promote national development and compete internationally; schools will implement their curricula, which will consist of topics relevant to the local area.

The re-implementation of English at the elementary school level under the Merdeka Curriculum is likely to reduce the concerns of many parties about students' ability to be competent at the global level. However, the success of the implementation of this new policy depends on how ready and able teachers are to make the necessary curriculum adjustments. Knowledge of the teacher's pedagogical content (PCK) and learning atmosphere is an important decision for performance teachers to implement this policy. The above situation shows that many Indonesian teachers are not qualified to teach English which results in varied teaching methods (Adam et al., 2021; Morganna et al., 2020). However, this problem is exacerbated by the availability of resources needed to support teachers, the number of students in the classroom as well as the motivation of each student (Adam et al., 2021).

The Merdeka Curriculum provides a framework for balancing local relevance and global preparedness by reintroducing English and allowing for more curricular flexibility (Kemendikbudristek, 2024). This study investigates teachers' beliefs surrounding this policy, including the barriers and affordances it provides. This analysis completes the research's complex perspective on the Merdeka Curriculum while also providing recommendations for optimizing its implementation in elementary schools (SD) and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI).

Literature Review

The Significance of Early English Education

Studies have shown that early exposure to English improves cognitive, as well as linguistic development. Studies such as Berens et al. (2013) claim that dual-language education

enhances children's Phonological skills because decoding in one language lays the groundwork for further language acquisition. Additionally, Yin et al. (2022) indicated that early exposure to biliteracy contributes to the development of cognitive abilities and impacts the processing systems of multilingual speakers, offering evidence that early engagement in learning languages promotes stronger cognitive and linguistic resources.

For instance, Barac et al. (2014) provided a critical review on the cognitive development of young dual-language learners, finding that early bilingualism contributes positively to cognitive flexibility and executive function — both of which are crucial for academic success. They note that early exposure to multiple languages leads to higher levels of problem-solving and cognitive control that are essential for mastering complex subjects later in life. Similarly, Palermo et al. (2013) identified English exposure as a significant positive predictor of English vocabulary abilities among Spanish-speaking preschool children, in both home and classroom environments. Their research highlights that exposure to English in the early stages and at a consistent level helps not only the vocabulary acquisition but also language development in its broader sense, reinforcing that early English education serves as the building block for further learning.

This is consistent with the findings of Justice et al. (2011) who examined preschool classrooms' peer effects and found children's language increases are positively correlated with the language abilities of their schoolmates. Their research shows how important it is to be in a language-filled environment while growing up. Moreover, Uccelli et al. (2014) The Core Academic Language Skills (CALs) and the importance of academic language in school success A Few Types of Academic Language Academic language consists of three primary skill sets. Exposure to academic language such as English from a young age has been shown to help students move more easily from complex texts and concepts, and this finding could have significant implications for academic performance under the Merdeka Curriculum which aims to equip students with the necessary skills needed for success in their educational endeavors.

Challenges in Implementing Educational Reforms

There are a number of barriers to implementing educational reforms that can have an impact on effectiveness and sustainability. Resistance to change among educators is one of the biggest barriers, which can be rooted in longstanding beliefs and practices. It has been

found that effective curriculum reform was promoted by "using collective proactive strategies that strengthened the use of social resources in working groups" (Birt et al., 2019; Lee & Yin, 2010). Moreover, to ensure the sustainability of reforms over time, initial success does not mean that we can assume that they will be adopted for a long time in teachers' practices. The emotional aspects of educational change: Another major challenge is the emotional aspects of educational change. According to the research, "educational change is an emotionally intense process," and so identifying how teachers feel about these kinds reforms can go a long way in determining the success of those reforms (Lee & Yin, 2010). Indulging these feelings is essential for creating a climate conducive to change. If we acknowledge the emotional terrain of educational reform, we can begin to craft plans that understand those challenges and assure teachers that their emotional health is being considered, which will enable more successful implementation of reforms in schools.

The specific implementation of the reforms, such as where to allocate resources and how to implement training, also pose challenges. Given the increased scrutiny of teacher competence in the context of educational reform and accountability efforts (Range et al., 2012; Wieman et al., 2013), school leaders are in the pivotal position to support effective teacher practice. Such pressure can make teachers more overwhelmed and even complicated the implementation process on the ground

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative approach to explore in greater depth how teachers perceive the reintroduction of English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools, particularly within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. This approach was selected because it enables a richer understanding of the participants' lived experiences, thoughts, and perspectives in a real-world educational context. Information was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with a group of English teachers who had been purposefully selected. The data gathered from these interviews were then examined using thematic analysis, allowing the researcher to uncover recurring patterns and significant themes. The sections that follow describe the overall design of the study, the participant recruitment process, how the data were gathered, and the steps taken in analysing the findings.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with the aim of exploring the beliefs of teachers who are participants in this study related to the problem of re-implementation of English as a compulsory subject at the elementary school level, either SD or MI, under the auspices of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Participants

The participants in this research were five English teachers from Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) who are members of the MGMP (Subject Teacher Forum) Rayon 2 under the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jambi City. These teachers had previously expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Three of the participants had prior experience teaching English at the elementary school (SD) and madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) levels when English was still part of the curriculum under the 2013 Curriculum. Meanwhile, the other two had no experience teaching at the SD or MI levels and only had experience teaching English at the MTs or equivalent levels and at the MA or high school (SLTA) levels.

The number of participants was chosen based on the consideration that qualitative research emphasizes the importance of diversity in the experiences and perspectives of interviewed teachers. With a sufficient number of participants, this study aimed to capture variations in teaching experience, educational background, and perspectives regarding the reinstatement of English as a subject in the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Consequently, the interview results are expected to reflect a broader spectrum of insights from the teachers involved.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing participants to share detailed insights into their experiences and beliefs. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. This analysis consisted of six stages: familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for emerging themes within the data, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing a report of the analysis results. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes in the interview data, including challenges, benefits, and recommendations (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

The following is the coding process of interviews with the five participants using thematic analysis techniques. Each emerging theme or category was identified from the interview data, and relevant quotes from the participants were grouped according to their respective themes.

Table 1 Themes and Subthemes Identified from Research Findings

Themes	Sub-themes
1 Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum	Developing Learning Modules Facility Limitations Teacher Readiness Administrative Workload
2 Benefits of Teaching English Early	Preparing Students for Advanced Levels Increasing Students' Confidence
3 Social and Cultural Challenges in Learning English	Regional Dialects and Pronunciation Challenges in Rural Areas Social Perceptions of English
4 Solutions and Recommendations for Successful Implementation	Provision of Competent English Teachers Continuous Training and Support Provision of Facilities and Resources Curriculum and Policy Improvements

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

There are 3 subthemes from “Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum”: Developing Learning Modules, Facility Limitation, Teacher Readiness and Administrative Workload.

Developing learning modules refers to the effort and challenges faced by teachers in preparing materials, resources, and evaluations that align with the Merdeka Curriculum's differentiated learning approach. These challenges often stem from the need to personalise instruction for diverse learning profiles. The participants in this study reported the following challenges: Time-Consuming Preparation and Creative and Tailored Content. Teachers as participants (P) in this study highlighted the extensive time needed to create effective learning modules:

- *"We have to prepare teaching materials and evaluation tools for each category, which makes teachers very busy." (P1)*
- *"Preparing materials under the Merdeka Curriculum takes a long time because each child needs guidance tailored to their abilities." (P3)*

Then, Teachers struggled with designing creative and engaging content suited for different learning styles:

- *"Now we must prepare more creative teaching materials, adjusted to students' learning styles, whether they are visual or auditory learners." (P4)*

The complexity of these tasks illustrates the increased demands placed on teachers under the Merdeka Curriculum.

The second challenge is Facility Limitations. Facility limitations refer to the lack of infrastructure and resources that hinder the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers particularly noted challenges in rural schools. Participants mentioned inadequate access to essential tools:

- *"Facilities like laptops and other teaching media are often limited." (P4)*
- *"Schools in rural areas face severe shortages of technology, such as projectors and Smart TVs." (P5)*

Teachers also struggled with limited access to textbooks and other instructional resources:

- *"The facilities in some schools are still inadequate to support differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum." (P1)*

These limitations contribute to disparities in the curriculum's implementation, particularly between urban and rural schools.

The third challenge in implementing the English subject at SD and MI under the Merdeka Curriculum is Teacher Readiness. Teacher Readiness refers to the preparedness and capability of educators to teach English under the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly those without prior experience in teaching the language.

The participants highlighted that some teachers lacked foundational skills in English:

- *"Teacher readiness varies greatly; some schools may not be prepared because teachers do not have a background in English." (P1)*

Many teachers expressed the need for professional development:

- *"Many teachers have not received enough training to teach English, especially in elementary schools." (P2)*
- *"In rural schools, teachers often lack adequate training, making it hard for them to meet curriculum expectations." (P5)*

This lack of preparedness underscores the necessity for targeted training and resources to support teachers in implementing the curriculum effectively.

The last challenge found based on the participants' information is Administrative Workload. The administrative workload describes the increased responsibilities teachers face in preparing learning materials, assessments, and reports under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Participants noted that the administrative process had become more demanding:

- *"The administrative workload is now heavier. Preparing assessments and modules is far more complex than before." (P2)*
- *"Many hours are spent managing administrative tasks like lesson planning and evaluations." (P3)*

Furthermore, Teachers also reported the need for tailored administrative work:

- *"The administrative burden has increased because teachers must make numerous adjustments based on student learning profiles." (P4)*

These challenges highlight the need for streamlining administrative processes to reduce the strain on educators.

Benefits of Early English Education

There are 3 subthemes from "Benefits of Teaching English Early": Preparing Students for Advanced Levels and Increasing Students' Confidence. Teaching English early was perceived as highly beneficial for preparing students for the next stages of education, such as junior high school. The participants expressed that Students exposed to English early adapt more smoothly to advanced material:

- *"When they enter junior high school, they are already familiar with English basics, so we no longer have to start from scratch." (P1)*

The participant also stated that students gain confidence in navigating English at higher levels:

- *"If students learn English in elementary school, they are better prepared to face English challenges in secondary education." (P4)*

These insights highlight the long-term benefits of early English education, which eases transitions to higher education.

Furthermore, the next subtheme of "Benefits of Teaching English Early" is Increasing Students' Confidence. Teaching English early fosters a sense of confidence and enthusiasm among students. Students show greater willingness to practice English as seen in the following excerpt:

- *"Children feel more confident; they enjoy using English in class or even outside of class." (P3)*
Interactive methods such as songs and games boost enthusiasm:
- *"Students are excited to learn English, especially through interactive methods like videos and songs." (P4)*

These findings illustrate how early exposure to English promotes not only skill development but also a positive mindset toward language learning.

Social and Cultural Challenges in Learning English

There are 3 subthemes obtained from "Social and Cultural Challenges in Learning English" namely Regional Dialect and Pronunciation, Challenges in Rural Area, and Social Perception of English. Social and cultural challenges describe obstacles rooted in regional characteristics, societal perceptions, and the availability of local resources that impact English learning. Students' regional accents often influenced their English pronunciation, making it harder for them to achieve fluency. Participants observed difficulties caused by strong regional dialects:

- *"The biggest challenge is regional dialects. Children often use their local accents when speaking English." (P3)*

Teachers noted a lack of focus on proper English pronunciation in early education, making it more difficult to correct later:

- *"Students mimic their dialect when learning English, so teaching them standard pronunciation takes extra effort." (P3)*

The second subtheme of Social and Cultural Challenges in Learning English is Challenges in Rural Areas. Rural schools face distinct barriers in implementing English education effectively due to limited resources and infrastructure. Rural schools often lack basic teaching tools and materials:

- *"In rural areas, learning facilities like books and technology are very scarce." (P1)*
- *"In villages, facilities for learning English are more limited, which hinders curriculum implementation." (P4)*

Many rural schools struggle to recruit teachers with English expertise:

- *"In rural areas, the main challenge is finding qualified English teachers." (P5)*

The third subtheme of Social and Cultural Challenges in Learning English is Social Perceptions of English. Social attitudes toward English influenced how students approached the language. Some students hesitated to use English out of fear of being judged by peers:

- *"Some students feel shy speaking English because they are afraid of being perceived as pretentious by their peers." (P2)*

Social norms sometimes discouraged students from practising English:

- *"Students feel pressured when learning English, especially in areas where foreign language use is uncommon." (P5)*

The final theme focuses on actionable strategies to address the challenges and enhance the effectiveness of English education under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Solutions and Recommendations for Successful Implementation

There are 4 subthemes of “Solutions and Recommendations for Successful Implementation”: Provision of Competent English Teacher, Continuous Training and Support, Provision of Facilities and Resources, and Curriculum and Policy. The first subtheme of Solutions and Recommendations for Successful Implementation is Provision of Competent English Teachers. Participants emphasised the importance of deploying well-trained and skilled English teachers to schools. Schools need teachers with strong English skills and pedagogy:

- *"The government must place teachers truly competent in English in elementary or Islamic elementary schools." (P1)*

Priority should be given to rural areas where teacher shortages are most severe:

- *"The government should assign qualified English teachers to underserved rural schools." (P5)*

The second subtheme in this part is Training and Continuous Professional Development. Ongoing teacher training was identified as critical to improving English instruction. Teachers require targeted programs to build both linguistic and pedagogical skills:

- *"Training is essential to help teachers understand the materials and teaching techniques." (P1)*

Participants requested regular workshops and follow-ups:

- *"There must be government support for continuous training." (P4)*

The next subtheme is Provision of Facilities and Resources. Adequate resources are crucial for effective teaching and learning. Schools need to be equipped with tools like Smart TVs, projectors, and internet access:

- *"Facilities such as language labs are greatly needed to support interactive English learning." (N4)*

Participants requested an increase in the availability of textbooks and supplementary materials:

- *"Schools need more English books aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum." (P5)*

The third subtheme is Curriculum and Policy Improvements. Revising the curriculum and related policies can help address practical challenges. Participants advocated for adaptations to accommodate resource disparities:

- *"The curriculum should be more flexible, especially for schools in areas with limited resources." (P4)*

Participants highlighted the need for systematic changes to improve teacher support:

- *"The government needs to review policies regarding training and facilities to ensure better access for English teachers." (P5)*

These findings provide a comprehensive exploration of the challenges, benefits, and practical recommendations for implementing English education under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant challenges and benefits encountered by teachers and students in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the context of teaching English. These findings are contextualized by examining the relevant literature and connecting them to existing theories and previous research. The discussion focuses on the key themes identified in the study: challenges in implementing the curriculum, the benefits of early English education, social and cultural challenges, and the strategies employed to overcome these difficulties.

The first discussion is Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. There are several main challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as part of the implementation of the independent curriculum. Almost all of them are in line with previous findings and research. One of the main challenges is the development of learning modules (sub-theme 1.1). Teachers report that creating modules is time-consuming and complex due to the need for differentiation and incorporation of creative teaching approaches. These findings are

consistent with Nuraeni et al. (2020), who observed that teachers transitioning from teacher-centered to student-centered methodologies often struggle with the demands of creating engaging and distinct learning materials. Similarly, Reza (2023) notes that the Independent Curriculum introduced to address educational challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic presents significant obstacles, especially in the area of module development. Furthermore, Safitri (2023) emphasized that the shift in the assessment and evaluation system under the Independent Curriculum adds another layer of complexity. Teachers are now being asked to prioritize diagnostic assessments that cater to both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of learning, further complicating their responsibilities

These findings emphasize a consistent theme: while the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to foster innovative and flexible educational practices, the practical challenges faced by teachers in module development and assessment remain significant barriers to its successful implementation.

In addition to material preparation, facility limitations (sub-theme 1.2) posed significant challenges. Many participants reported a lack of essential infrastructure, such as laptops, projectors, and other teaching tools, particularly in rural areas. These challenges are corroborated by findings from previous studies, which highlight the impact of inadequate infrastructure on educational outcomes (Baloyi, 2023; Tahmasebi, 2023). For example, Tahmasebi (2023) highlights the digital divide in rural communities, emphasizing how limited access to technology exacerbates educational disparities. Similarly, Baloyi (2023) discusses the high workload and insufficient resources faced by rural educators, which adversely affect their ability to deliver quality education.

Teacher readiness (sub-theme 1.3) was another critical issue identified by participants. Teachers without formal training in English found it particularly challenging to meet the curriculum's demands. This challenge echoes findings in the literature. Hilliard (2014) highlighted that teachers trained in non-language subjects often struggle to deliver content effectively in English, frequently resorting to code-switching to facilitate student understanding. Similarly, Vroom and Seaman (2014) argued that top-down curriculum reforms often fail to provide teachers with adequate training and support, hindering their willingness to adopt new teaching methodologies. Furthermore, Tondeur et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of equipping pre-service teachers with technological pedagogical content

knowledge, noting that insufficient preparation in integrating technology exacerbates the difficulties teachers face when adapting to new curricula. These studies collectively highlight the need for comprehensive teacher training programs to enhance readiness and support the successful implementation of innovative educational frameworks like the Merdeka Curriculum.

Lastly, the administrative workload (sub-theme 1.4) was identified as a significant barrier to effective curriculum implementation. Teachers expressed frustration over the increased time required for administrative tasks, which left them with less time for actual teaching. This concern aligns with findings from Strohl et al. (2014), who noted that rising administrative demands contribute to teacher burnout and job dissatisfaction. Hunnur (2013) also emphasized that excessive paperwork and administrative duties are among the primary stressors for teachers, leading to decreased motivation and engagement in the classroom.

To address this issue, it is essential for educational administrators to streamline administrative processes, enabling teachers to focus more on instructional quality and student engagement. Notably, the reference by Cottney and Innes (2014), which discusses medication-administration errors in healthcare settings, is not relevant to the context of teacher workload and was therefore excluded from this analysis.

The second discussion is about the benefits of Early English Education. Despite these challenges, the participants also acknowledged the significant benefits of teaching English early in elementary school. Preparation for advanced education (sub-theme 2.1) was one of the key benefits identified. Teachers noted that early exposure to English better prepares students for junior high school, reducing the need to revisit basic English skills at higher levels. Research by Gawi (2011) indicates that early exposure to English significantly enhances language skills, leading to better performance in later educational stages. This finding is supported by Mwamwenda (2014), who highlights the importance of early childhood education in laying a strong foundation for future learning, particularly in language acquisition. Furthermore, while Kim et al. (2013) focus on the challenges faced by non-native English-speaking students in English-speaking countries, their findings suggest that increased English language proficiency is crucial for academic adjustment. These findings indirectly relate to the benefits of early English instruction. Additionally, Martínez et al. (2014) found that students who participated in bilingual programs with early English instruction performed better in reading and

mathematics. This suggests that early language education benefits not only language proficiency but also overall academic achievement.

In addition to preparation for advanced studies, early English education also had a positive impact on students' English proficiency (sub-theme 2.2). Participants reported that students who began learning English in elementary school were more confident and adept at grasping advanced language skills in junior high. It was supported by Azarnoosh (2014) who found that early exposure to English significantly enhances students' motivation and self-efficacy in language learning, which aligns with the participants' observations regarding increased confidence in their students (Azarnoosh, 2014). Similarly, Chung & Huang (2010) reported that elementary school students who engage with English at an early age develop more favorable attitudes towards the language, which subsequently translates into better performance in later stages of education (Chung & Huang, 2010). Furthermore, Newton et al. (2014) emphasized that confidence in language skills is crucial for academic success, suggesting that early English education fosters a solid foundation for students, enabling them to tackle more complex language tasks in junior high (Newton et al., 2014). Additionally, Papi & Teimouri (2012) noted that positive attitudes towards English learning, cultivated through early education, can lead to improved language proficiency and academic outcomes (Papi & Teimouri, 2012).

Moreover, early English education was found to increase students' confidence (sub-theme 2.3). Teachers observed that students who were introduced to English early exhibited more enthusiasm and comfort in using the language. This aligns with findings from several studies that underscore the importance of early language exposure in fostering positive attitudes towards language learning. For instance, Gawi (2011) found that children who start learning English at a young age demonstrate higher levels of proficiency and greater enthusiasm for using the language, which supports the notion that early exposure cultivates a more comfortable learning environment. Similarly, Kuhl (2011) emphasizes that early language learning has significant implications for cognitive development, suggesting that children who engage with a second language early on are more likely to develop confidence in their language abilities. Furthermore, Hoff et al. (2011) highlight that dual language exposure can enhance vocabulary and grammar skills, which in turn boosts students' self-assurance in using the language. Additionally, Bialystok & Craik (2010) discuss the cognitive advantages of

bilingualism, noting that early language learners often exhibit enhanced executive control, which can contribute to their overall confidence in language use. Collectively, these studies reinforce the idea that early English education not only improves language proficiency but also significantly enhances students' confidence and enthusiasm for learning.

The third discussion, which addresses the findings, is Social and Cultural Challenges in Learning English. The study also uncovered significant social and cultural challenges faced by students, especially those from rural areas. One of the main issues identified was the regional dialects and pronunciation (sub-theme 3.1), which affected students' ability to pronounce English correctly. For instance, Cao (2010) discusses how students' identities and cultural contexts influence their language acquisition, noting that dialectical differences can hinder their ability to engage fully in English learning environments. Furthermore, Fairtlough et al. (2013) highlight that social factors, including dialect and pronunciation, can impact students' academic progression, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds. Additionally, (Wu & Hammond, 2011) found that international students often struggle with language proficiency due to their regional accents, which can affect their social integration and academic performance. These studies illustrate that regional dialects and pronunciation issues are critical factors that can impede students' confidence and competence in learning English, particularly for those in rural settings.

Another challenge was the lack of resources and support in rural areas (sub-theme 3.2). Many rural schools were found to have inadequate facilities for English instruction, which hindered effective teaching. Research indicates that such deficiencies can lead to lower student engagement and achievement in language learning (Fairchild et al., 2012; Odejobi, 2014). Additionally, rural educators often face challenges related to limited access to professional development opportunities, which further exacerbates the difficulties in delivering quality instruction (Kaye et al., 2010; Mwai et al., 2013). These studies highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to improve resource availability and support for English education in rural settings.

The social perceptions of English (sub-theme 3.3) also presented challenges. Some students expressed hesitation in speaking English due to fear of being judged by their peers. This is in line with Huang & Jun (2014) who emphasize that students' willingness to communicate in English is significantly influenced by their prior learning experiences, which

often leave them feeling unprepared and anxious in speaking situations. Similarly, (Osterman, 2014) found that Japanese university students reported a lack of meaningful practice opportunities, which contributed to their reluctance to engage in English conversation, echoing the sentiments of students who fear peer judgment. Furthermore, Hamad (2013) identified that fear of public speaking in English is prevalent among students in Saudi colleges, indicating that anxiety can severely hinder language acquisition and practical usage. These studies collectively underscore the importance of addressing emotional barriers and enhancing speaking opportunities in educational settings to foster a more supportive environment for language learners.

The final discussion in response to the findings focuses on Solutions and Recommendations for Successful Implementation. To overcome these challenges, the participants of this study identified several strategies that could improve the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These included providing competent English teachers (sub-theme 4.1) which aligns with findings by (Sunguya et al., 2014), who highlight that time constraints and scheduling issues significantly hinder the effective implementation of interprofessional education. This parallels the challenges faced by English teachers in Indonesia regarding curriculum adaptation and teacher preparedness, as noted by (Copland et al., 2013)

Furthermore, the study participants also emphasized the need for continuous teacher training (sub-theme 4.2) to address gaps in English teaching proficiency, especially for those without a background in the language. For instance, Ekinci & Acar (2019) argue that teachers often feel an intrinsic motivation to pursue professional development, primarily to improve student performance and enhance their teaching effectiveness, which aligns with the participants' emphasis on training for those lacking a solid English background. Similarly, Acharya (2019) highlights that professional development activities, particularly those focused on student-centered teaching, significantly bolster teachers' self-efficacy, thereby improving their instructional practices and ultimately benefiting student learning outcomes. Furthermore, Abraham et al., (2022) demonstrate that training in ICT-assisted English language teaching not only enhances teachers' knowledge and skills but also equips them with the necessary tools to effectively integrate technology into their teaching, which is increasingly vital in contemporary educational contexts.

Additionally, the participants advocated for improvements in facilities and resources (subtheme 4.3), including the provision of modern teaching tools and better access to learning materials. The participants' advocacy for improvements in facilities and resources, particularly the provision of modern teaching tools and better access to learning materials, aligns with findings from recent literature that underlines the importance of adequate resources in enhancing educational outcomes. Additionally, the integration of technology in education, as discussed by Guy et al. (2014), illustrates how modern teaching tools can enhance learning experiences and outcomes, supporting the participants' call for improved resources. This reference is relevant and supports the claim regarding the benefits of technology in education.

Finally, the study recommended flexibility in the curriculum to accommodate schools with fewer resources, which is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of English language instruction in diverse educational settings. Research indicates that a flexible curriculum can better address the unique challenges faced by under-resourced schools, allowing for adaptations that meet local needs Griffin et al. (2014). Furthermore, Karina (2023) emphasizes that flexibility in teaching methods can help mitigate students' speaking anxiety, particularly in environments where resources are limited. Additionally, Mukminin et al. (2015) argue that a responsive curriculum that considers the specific contexts of learners can significantly improve engagement and learning outcomes. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of curricular flexibility in fostering an inclusive and effective English language learning environment, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight both the challenges and benefits of teaching English under the Merdeka Curriculum. While the curriculum presents significant challenges, such as the need for teacher training, facility improvements, and overcoming social perceptions, it also offers considerable benefits, particularly in preparing students for advanced education and enhancing their English skills. The study's findings align with existing literature on the importance of early English education and the challenges faced by educators in implementing new curricula. Based on these findings, it is recommended that policymakers focus on enhancing teacher preparedness, providing better resources, and ensuring ongoing support to foster the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

In addition to highlighting the main findings, this study also puts forward several down-to-earth suggestions to help make English teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum more effective. Among these are better access to teacher training that focuses on specific needs, regular workshops to sharpen teaching skills, and stronger collaboration between schools and the local community. It's also important to make sure that basic learning tools and facilities are available. Beyond that, improving how educators and other stakeholders communicate, as well as encouraging teaching approaches that are sensitive to local culture, can really help deal with the social and cultural hurdles that both teachers and students face. Altogether, these ideas point to the need for a joined-up effort—one that goes beyond infrastructure and focuses on creating a more inclusive, encouraging space for learning.

Disclosure statement

The Authors state that there is no potential conflict of interest.

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