The Challenges Teachers and Students Face in Implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum for Teaching and Studying English at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in teaching English at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara during the academic year 2023-2024. The research aims to identify teachers' and students' challenges to teach and study English. Using a qualitative descriptive research design, data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation review. The findings reveal that the school adopted the Independent Changing option of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, utilizing a Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in English lessons. However, challenges such as the lack of differentiated instruction, inadequate technological resources, and poor classroom infrastructure were identified. The study highlights the need for specialized teacher training, improved communication with parents, and enhanced support systems to overcome these challenges. The research contributes to understanding the practical aspects of curriculum implementation in remote areas, providing insights into effective strategies to enhance English language learning outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The education landscape has undergone significant transformations driven by technological advancements and societal changes. Industry 4.0 and Civilization 5.0 have brought about technological disruptions and innovations across various sectors, including education. The quality of education directly influences a nation's future, necessitating continuous improvements and adaptations in the educational system (Widyastuti, 2022). One crucial aspect of educational development is curriculum reform, which must keep pace with contemporary demands and technological advancements. The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, introduced by the Indonesian government, represents an effort to align education with current needs and future challenges (Mulyasa, 2023).

The success of a nation's educational system is a reflection of its overall development. The curriculum is pivotal in this success, encompassing learning process design, implementation, and evaluation. Indonesia has experienced several curriculum changes over the past decades, particularly in the post-New Order era, including the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) in 2004, the Curriculum at the Unit Level (KTSP) in 2006, the 2013 Curriculum (K13), the Revised 2013 Curriculum, and the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum (Muhammedi, 2016). These changes have been influenced by various factors, including the global pandemic, necessitating a shift in educational strategies and curriculum to adapt to new learning environments (Khoirurrijal et al., 2022).

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum aims to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting learning recovery and enhancing educational outcomes. This curriculum emphasizes project-based learning to develop soft skills and character, focuses on essential competencies for mastery, and tailors education to the local context and students' levels (Kemendikbudristek, 2021). The rationale behind this curriculum reform is rooted in the need to improve fundamental skills such as reading and numeracy, as highlighted by the 2019 PISA study, which ranked Indonesian students 74th out of 79 countries in mathematics and literacy (Widyastuti, 2022).

Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum offers three options: Independent Learning, Independent Changing, and Independent Sharing. These options provide varying degrees of flexibility for educational institutions to integrate the new curriculum components while maintaining existing frameworks (Hadiansah, 2022, Mukhibat M, 2014). In the context of English language teaching, the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum aims to equip students with lifelong learning skills by fostering qualities such as independence, critical thinking, creativity, and global awareness. This curriculum supports active student participation in selecting texts and learning activities, promoting a more dynamic and flexible learning environment (Kemendikbudristek, 2021).

Despite the promising aspects of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, its implementation, particularly in remote areas, presents unique challenges. SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara, located in East Kalimantan, has adopted the Independent Changing option to gradually transition to this new curriculum starting from the seventh grade. Initial interviews with the school principal and English teacher revealed that the school is still in the adjustment phase, striving to align with the new curriculum's requirements while addressing the diverse needs of its students. Most incoming students at the junior high school level are English beginners, highlighting the need for effective strategies to enhance their language proficiency (Dewi et al., 2023).

The learner-centered approach of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum emphasizes modifying student conduct and addressing their lack of proficiency in English across six language skills: listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing, and presenting (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). However, the transition to this approach is challenging due to the varying levels of English proficiency among students and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted foundational literacy skills. The significant role of teachers in facilitating this learning process underscores the need for targeted support and resources to overcome these challenges.

Several studies have explored various aspects of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, focusing on its implementation, digitalization, teacher perceptions, and alignment with educational standards. For instance, (Pratikno et al., 2022) emphasized the importance of understanding human resources and digitalization in effectively implementing the curriculum. (Novita et al., 2022) highlighted the role of digital tools in supporting curriculum changes. At the same time (Prakoso et al., 2021) and (Jasrial et al., 2023) examined teachers' perceptions, indicating a generally positive outlook toward the curriculum's adaptability and flexibility. (Kamil, 2023) assessed the alignment of curriculum content with the CEFR framework, emphasizing the need for consistency between curriculum intentions and educational materials.

Despite these studies, there is a notable gap in research focusing on implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in remote areas, particularly in the context of English language teaching. SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara's experience provides a unique case study to explore this implementation in a

school that has chosen the Independent Changing option. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the challenges and strategies in teaching English under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in a remote setting.

Filling this research gap is crucial to better understanding how the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum can be effectively implemented in diverse contexts and its impact on English education in remote areas. This study will provide valuable insights into the practical aspects of curriculum implementation, highlight the challenges teachers and students face, and propose strategies to enhance educational outcomes.

This study aims to investigate how the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum is implemented in teaching English at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara in the seventh grade of the academic year 2023-2024. It seeks to identify the challenges teachers and students encounter when applying the curriculum to English language instruction. It also explores teachers' strategies to effectively implement it effectively, enhancing student learning outcomes and engagement.

2. METHODS

The research design is a qualitative study aiming to provide a detailed understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences with the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. As defined by (Creswell, 2019), this approach involves gathering in-depth individual perspectives and researching in a natural environment. The study utilizes a descriptive qualitative research design characterized by descriptive analysis and employs methods such as triangulation to gather comprehensive data (Sugiyono, 2022). This method is chosen to explore how the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum is implemented in English language teaching at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara, focusing on the curriculum's execution and the challenges teachers and students face.

The primary data collection techniques include participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation review. Informants are selected purposively based on their knowledge and involvement with the curriculum, including the vice principal of curriculum development, the Pancasila Project Profile Coordinator, ten seventh-grade students, and the seventh-grade English teacher. Data collection follows a snowball sampling principle, ensuring a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the implementation process. This study aims to provide valuable insights into the practical aspects of curriculum implementation and propose strategies to enhance educational outcomes in a remote setting.

After a comprehensive assessment of its resources, student demographics, and the surrounding environment, the government stipulated to initiate *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum implementation at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara in the 2022/2023 academic year. This was based on the Decree of the head of the education standards, curriculum, and assessment agency number 044/H/KR/2022. Because of this decree, SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara has been stipulated as a school applying an Independent Change option. Under the option, this school applied two curricula. The government let the school apply the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum using teaching tools offered from grade 7, while other levels used the former curriculum, the 2013 Curriculum. This strategic decision allowed the school to gradually transition to the new curriculum while addressing its unique needs and challenges.

The seventh-grade English teacher, Teacher EH, utilizes a Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in her lessons. This approach, which includes stages like Building Knowledge of the Field, Modeling, Joint Construction, and Independent Construction, has been effectively incorporated into her teaching practices. However, the observation highlighted a gap in implementing differentiated learning, a core aspect of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Teacher EH grouped students based on numbers rather than their learning abilities and preferences, indicating a need for more tailored instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learners.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum creates several challenges for teachers and students when teaching and learning English at the junior high school level. Many different aspects of these issues can significantly affect the program's success. The following is the list of questions that have been asked to the teacher and students.

Table 1. Interview Guidelines

Main Question	Aspects	Informants	Interview Questions
What challenges do teachers and students encounter when applying the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum to teach and study English?	Challenges	Teacher	a. What aspects of the curriculum that you find particularly challenging to incorporate into your teaching practices? b. What are the challenges or limitations of using technology to enhance curriculum implementation? c. What challenges do you encounter in adapting the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum to address students' varying learning styles and abilities? d. What challenges do you encounter as teachers when implementing student-centered learning approaches in teaching English?
		Students	a. What challenges do you face as students studying English under the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum? b. Are there any aspects of the curriculum or teaching methods you need help understanding or engaging with? c. How do these challenges affect your English learning experience and academic performance?

Teacher's Challenges

a. Challenging Aspect to Incorporate *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum into Teaching Practices

Differentiation learning was challenging for Teacher EH's class because she faced various abilities. Therefore, regarding differentiated learning, she had to look at students' learning styles and their abilities regarding English through initial assessments. From there, she could create a learning plan that

covers each student's ability differences. According to Teacher EH, the term "differentiation" within the classroom refers to the skills and learning preferences of the learners. In this situation, Teacher EH was charged with developing an engaging and diverse learning process that considered every student's ability and learning style. Teacher EH explained it in the following interview excerpt:

Excerpt 1. - Teacher EH: "Differentiated learning practice refers to students' learning styles and abilities. Teachers must be challenged to design the learning process with exciting and varied methods to accommodate all students' skills and learning backgrounds".

She added that the number of students over thirty was another obstacle that differentiated learning had to overcome. The preparation for this task needed great attention, particularly concerning the modules, facilities, supporting tools, etc.

b.   Limitations of Using Technology to Enhance Curriculum Implementation.

First and foremost, Teacher EH considered the absence of the Language Laboratory as the main problem in applying the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum well regarding technology usage at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara. Here is her statement:

Excerpt 2. - Teacher EH: "However, we do not have a language laboratory available. Moreover, the infrastructure does not support it".

Coincidentally, Teacher EH's class for learning did not seem very good because of the lighting. She perceived no curtains or covers in the classroom, so the exposure from the LCD was unclear. Furthermore, with microphones and speakers, because they were limited, she only used simple ones. The classroom was not ideal for learning a language. It did not have soundproofing, which means that the child's ability to concentrate on the native speaker in the recording was disrupted by the environment outside.

c.   Student-Centered Learning Challenges.

Teacher EH battled the students' inactivity. There was a tendency for the pupils to remain passive, receiving exclusively from the teacher. Mrs. EH explained more in the following interview excerpt:

Excerpt 3.- Teacher EH: "Arousing their initiative to explore learning sources outside the guidebook or from the teacher's sources requires effort. Their motivation still needs to improve, so they cannot learn independently".

She believed that the previous curriculum still influenced the current curriculum. So, even though she was hoping to create a more student-centered curriculum, students were more passive than active, perhaps due to their lack of understanding of English. She continued that some students may resist the transition towards active learning, as they may prefer a more conventional, teacher-led method in which they were given knowledge rather than being required to seek it out on their own. The teachers were then responsible for providing pupils with regular encouragement and support to help them become more involved in learning.

Students' Challenges

a.   Aspect of the Curriculum or Teaching Methods Students Find Difficult to understand or Engage with

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum acknowledges the importance of digital literacy and supports the use of technology in education. It recognizes that technology is a powerful tool for learning, collaborating, and obtaining information (Imron et al., 2023). This curriculum uses technology to improve learning experiences in this era of quick technological change. Students should have access to a wide range of resources, interactive learning materials, and international networks thanks to the integration of digital tools and platforms. As a student, ZH was aware of the importance of technology. She explained as follows.

Excerpt 4.-Student ZH: "It can help because today's technology is increasingly advanced. There is something called a translator, which can help you understand words you do not understand".

From Student ZH's statement above, it is clear that as a student, ZH acknowledged that technology's increasing advancement could benefit learning English. She realized that there are tools, such as translators, that can assist in understanding unfamiliar words. However, there is no language laboratory at SMP Negeri 5, as mentioned before; thus, the classes are taught in the classroom. Mrs. EH explained the class's condition by saying,

Excerpt 5.-Teacher EH: "Coincidentally, the class for learning did not seem very good because of the lighting. There are no curtains or covers in the classroom, so the exposure from the LCD could be more precise. Likewise, with microphones, LCDs, and speakers, because they are limited, we only use simple ones. The classroom is also not soundproof, so the students' focus when listening to the native speaker in the recording is disturbed by the atmosphere outside".

In the above excerpt, Mrs. EH said that the conditions in the class were inadequate for learning due to insufficient lighting. She saw the need for more curtains or coverings, which made the LCD unclear. Furthermore, she clarified that the supply of microphones, LCDs, and speakers was restricted, necessitating the usage of just basic models. In addition, she noted that the classroom lacked soundproofing, resulting in learners being distracted by external noise while listening to recordings of native speakers. The place where the audio quality could be better and the visual presentation, which may include images or videos, could be more precise. Students seldom engage in English classes that make use of technology-based multimedia as a consequence of this.

Besides the infrastructure, internet connection was also a challenge for students in keeping up with technology-based learning. The researcher interviewed one of the students named KM about whether or not she had ever utilized the school network; she responded that she had tried it before, but it was not available to students. She then explained that the teacher requested the students bring a phone with a data plan for personal use. Nevertheless, not all students can afford to buy a quota. Student AL confessed that sometimes he could not use his cell phone to join the class because there was no quota. This was because he had no money to buy the quota.

b. Challenges faced by students studying English under the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum

A core principle of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is establishing a student-centric learning atmosphere where students are motivated to play an active role in their learning. This strategy strongly depends on the students' capacity to articulate their ideas, actively participate in conversations, and understand intricate information. These exercises become highly challenging for students with a restricted vocabulary. The primary reason for this deficiency in vocabulary can be attributed to students needing to receive English lessons during their elementary school years. As stated by Student KL,

Excerpt 5: Student KL: "I have never had English before. So, I learned English as a seventh-grade junior high school student".

Individuals with this condition may struggle to effectively express their thoughts, actively engage in collaborative tasks, and comprehend instructions and subject matter. Consequently, they may experience frustration and become disinterested in the educational process. Based on the interviews, some students expressed difficulties with the student-centered approach. One of the students was FH. The researcher earnestly asked FH if he would gather the courage to deliver a speech in front of his friends. The researcher also inquired about the specific reasons for nervousness in Student FH. He responded that he needed to be more confident. The researcher then inquired why Student FH was not assured. He explained that his lack of vocabulary and fear of making mistakes were the reasons.

The difficulty of having a restricted range of words is made much more complex by the requirement for independent study in the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. Students are required to demonstrate initiative, actively search for materials, and delve into subjects extensively. Nevertheless, individuals needing a solid foundation in vocabulary may have difficulties while attempting to access educational resources independently. As a result, students might have challenges in their reading

comprehension abilities, which are essential for comprehending textbooks, worksheets, and other educational materials. This obstacle can hinder their capacity to excel in tasks and exams, consequently impacting their academic achievement.

c. How the Challenges affect Students' English learning experience and Academic Performance

1). Student-Centered

Active engagement and motivation are nurtured through student-centered learning, which empowers students to control their learning. Without this approach, students may adopt a passive learning style, leading to decreased motivation and enthusiasm for acquiring English language skills. This condition happened to Student FR. The following is his statement;

Excerpt 6. - Student FR: "When I learn English, it does not seem easy to understand. Sometimes, I would not say I like English. I like Physical Education".

Student-centered learning also promotes the capacity to think critically and develop problem-solving skills through active involvement in debates, discussions, and projects, along with the opportunity to earn. With this method, students might be able to make the most of opportunities to build this essential talent crucial to gaining proficiency in English and various academic subjects.

Additionally, it is essential to implement student-centered learning strategies to help develop these crucial cognitive skills. The absence of student-centered learning could hinder the development of literacy skills, affecting the student's ability to read, write, and comprehend English. As stated by Student KL below.

Excerpt 7. - Student KL: "English is difficult to pronounce. How to write and speak is different. I need to improve my English because I only learned in seventh grade".

2). Technology-Based Learning

Technology-based learning systems often use interactive and engaging approaches to stimulate student motivation. Nevertheless, without these tools, students may see conventional learning techniques as more captivating, leading to a decline in interest and involvement in English classrooms. Student NJ confessed that he was bored while studying English.

Excerpt 8. - Student NJ: "Our primary focus is on using textbooks and worksheets, which may sometimes be seen as monotonous and repetitive. I want to study using interactive resources such as movies, apps, or online games, enhancing my engagement and motivation to study".

Utilizing an interactive approach to maintain students' motivation is essential, primarily through technology-based learning. Interactive and multimedia-rich content will enhance students' learning and comprehension. Technology-based learning can personalize students' learning experiences. These tools can allow students to learn at their own pace and access diverse resources. Teachers should boost digital literacy and access to technology since these two aspects make the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum stand out in its implementation at all levels of education.

Furthermore, technology provides various tools, including interactive exercises, online dictionaries, and films, which help enhance vocabulary and comprehension. Lack of these resources may limit students' access to diverse instructional materials, hindering their ability to study efficiently. Therefore, having a wide range of materials to facilitate thorough learning is crucial.

Digital learning tools often provide interactive and repeated tasks that strengthen language proficiency. These tools are necessary for students to have more chances to apply and hone the information they have gained, which might impede their advancement in acquiring the English language. Therefore, using digital technologies is crucial to provide many practice possibilities.

Discussions

a.   Teacher's Challenges

Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum relies on several significant challenges for teachers and students, the most important of which are differentiated instruction, technology limitations, and a need to shift towards a student-centered approach. Precisely, regarding differentiated instruction, teachers cannot follow this teaching mode, and they should prepare well in advance to adjust to the most realistic approach. Teachers struggle with differentiated instruction since they must customize their methods to cater to unique students' needs and learning preferences. Regarding the absence of a Language Laboratory, teachers are not likely to complete the curriculum fully because the technology would have limitations.

Additionally, students need to be used to a more participative learning style. Teacher EH struggled with differentiated instruction due to the relative heterogeneity in the level of her students. She would have to identify the levels of English proficiency and learning preferences using diagnosing tests. Based on this information, she should design a teaching plan to address the unique variability of students' abilities. Teacher EH considers classroom differentiation a customized teaching approach to cater to unique students' skills and learning preferences. Therefore, the teaching approach should be dynamic, diversified, and focused on each student's learning preferences. Teacher EH also noted that the high number of students in her class, often exceeding thirty, presented additional problems in implementing classroom differentiation. This factor required more preparedness, especially regarding accessible educational resources and tools.

In addition, Teacher EH stated that the obstacle to efficiently implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum was mainly due to the need for a language laboratory unit and the emphasis on insufficient infrastructure. According to her, the classroom environment, which was a sign of low illumination among other dysfunctional and scarce equipment like LCDs, microphones, and speakers, also affected learning. Outside noise impeded students' ability to concentrate on native speaker tapes since the classroom lacked soundproofing. Teacher EH's statement was parallel (Nur Fitria's, 2023). She mentioned that the absence of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) retarded the ICT-based learning. Facilities and infrastructure also support successfully implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum (Rahayu et al., 2022).

Teacher EH also needed help with the passive, dependent student. She emphasized that students should be proactively persuaded to look for educational resources beyond those officially suggested, given their low levels of motivation from that group. Overcoming the impact of having a teacher-centered curriculum is one challenge because these students are already used to doing things in the traditional way, which makes it harder for them to apply student-led activities. Encouraging and guiding students to engage in learning is one of the most consistent aspects teachers need to maintain.

(Hijriani et al., 2024) conducted research that parallels Teacher EH's challenges; using *Merdeka Belajar*, they demonstrated significant improvements in students' reading comprehension skills after using it - suggesting creative educational approaches can effectively boost learning results. Teacher EH's challenges mirror broader issues identified with educational innovations, including tailored instruction and technological assistance; research conducted on differentiated learning and blended learning environments by (Amalia et al., 2023) and (Shamsuddin & Kaur, 2020).

b.   Students' Challenges

In the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, students face significant challenges, including an inadequate level of available infrastructure for change to compete with the Education System and conditions that bind limited internet connectivity so that many students cannot effectively be involved in technology-driven education. They also need help connecting with student-centered learning models, especially those with limited vocabulary in English. These issues significantly affect their motivation and commitment to learning, resulting in academic outcomes, thus underlining the importance of better guidance and good resources ensuring a successful learning experience. Here is the explanation.

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum emphasizes the vital role of digital literacy and technology in education. It aims to help students improve their learning experiences through digital technologies that facilitate access to various resources, interactive materials, and global networks (Imron et al., 2023). According to Student ZH, modern technology, such as translators, may aid in comprehending new terms. Nevertheless, the lack of a language laboratory and substandard classroom settings, such as insufficient lighting and restricted equipment, impede the efficient use of technology in the learning process. The absence of adequate soundproofing further hampers students' concentration during courses that use audio elements. In addition, the restricted availability of internet connection presents a difficulty for students accessing technology-driven education. According to Student KM and Student AL, they had challenges in using the school network and acquiring personal data plans.

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum emphasizes establishing a student-centered student-learning environment that fosters active engagement (*Kemendikbudristek*, 2022). Nevertheless, children with a restricted vocabulary, sometimes due to inadequate knowledge of English throughout their elementary schooling, need more support. For example, Student KL started her English language acquisition in the seventh grade, resulting in a consequential impact on her ability to articulate ideas and participate in collaborative activities. Based on the findings, Student FH reported feeling less confident participating in activities like public speaking due to his restricted vocabulary and fear of making errors. Including individual study in the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum intensifies these difficulties since students who need a solid vocabulary base have problems accessing and comprehending educational materials, affecting their academic achievement.

The next challenge is student-centered learning. The student-centered learning promotes active engagement and motivation by empowering students to assume responsibility for their education. Without this technique, learners may adopt a passive learning style, resulting in less desire and excitement for the English language. For example, Student FR expressed difficulty with English and preferred Physical Education. Student-centered learning fosters the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Without it, students may fail to seize chances to develop these crucial abilities, which are vital for achieving competence in English. Student KL emphasized the challenges associated with acquiring English pronunciation and writing abilities, which significantly influenced her development of literacy skills.

Furthermore, technology-based learning systems use interactive and captivating techniques to enhance student motivation. These tools are necessary for pupils to see traditional learning processes as monotonous. Student NJ conveyed a lack of interest in conventional textbook-oriented education and a strong preference for interactive learning materials such as movies and online games. Technology offers digital dictionaries and interactive workouts that improve vocabulary and understanding (Desnaranti et al., 2022). Students' access to different instructional materials is limited due to the unavailability of these resources, which hinders efficient learning. In addition, digital learning tools provide enough opportunities for repeated practice, which is crucial for achieving language competency. Excluding them, students may need more opportunities to apply and enhance their knowledge, thus impeding their progress in acquiring English.

Similarly, (Aryati, 2023) found identical obstacles in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, from lesson planning to using media and classroom management. This aligns with difficulties that learners experience when navigating technology or partaking in learner-active, constructivist environments. It is a reminder of the extent to which mere resources and help are required for better educational outcomes.

4. CONCLUSION

Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara in the academic year 2023-2024 has affected the method of teaching and educational outcomes. There is also a significant challenge within the English teaching and learning process faced by teachers and students following the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. Differentiated learning in a classroom setting is

non-trivial and resource-intensive to prepare for. Hence, it is not easy to reconcile with the capacity of teachers as their sole instructional modality. In addition, these language barriers are compounded by practical limitations in implementing the curriculum due to the lack of a language laboratory and insufficient equipment for classroom teaching. Besides, there may be an issue with moving toward a learner-centered approach due to students' behaviors, which are generally passive and require a teacher to be in charge. In addition, students encounter challenges such as low levels of participation in technology-led instruction due to poor infrastructure and Internet connectivity and limited opportunities for active engagement in learner-centric learning activities because of their lack of English vocabulary.

Various strategies must be included for the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum to work correctly. Based on the observation and interview results, the teachers need to upgrade their skills by undergoing training in English, as it will help them correctly apply the differentiated learning and learner-centered approach in the syllabus. The curriculum change should be communicated well with the students and their parents for a smooth transition. Furthermore, daily practicing official and casual English has dramatically helped enhance students' fluency to support a student-centered class. The schools should implement strategies that apply teacher training targeted to instruction in English and new pedagogical models, regular communication with students/parents that would support this curriculum transition and policies for encouraging more frequent use of English to maintain the interest-engagement of students.

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