

**TEACHERS PERSPECTIVES REGARDING THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF *MERDEKA BELAJAR* IN ENGLISH CLASS: AN EXPLORATORY
STUDY IN INDONESIAN CONTEXT**

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to determine English teachers' perspectives, efforts, and challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) Curriculum in the classroom. Anchored from the interpretative paradigm, the study applied qualitative design using observation and interview to collect the data. The participants were the seventh and eighth -grade English teachers at one of the state Islamic schools in East Java. Data were obtained through observation and interviews. The data is analyzed using content analysis techniques and then validated using the data triangulation method. The results of the research showed that teachers had four perspectives, four efforts, and four challenges. The teachers' perspectives included: (1) The Freedom to Learn Curriculum encourages motivation and creativity, (2) The effectiveness of the curriculum, (3) Encouraging independence, and (4) Differentiated learning models. The teachers' efforts included: (1) Creating teaching materials, (2) Giving quizzes, (3) Making students work in groups, and (4) Providing feedback. The teachers' challenges included: (1) Adjusting to the new curriculum, (2) Unsupportive signals, (3) Adapting teaching to students' characters and needs, and (4) Difficulty in maintaining student engagement in the classroom. The conclusion of this research is that the teachers' perspectives were conveyed positively, and the teachers have made creative efforts for self-learning.

Keywords: Merdeka Belajar curriculum, teacher's challenges, teacher's efforts, teacher's perspectives

INTRODUCTION

The curriculum plays a pivotal role in the success of the learning process. It serves as a comprehensive framework encompassing a learning plan and guide to assist teachers in their instructional endeavors. Through the implementation of a curriculum, the learning process within the classroom becomes purposeful, aligning with the predefined educational objectives. As Martin & Simanjourang (2022) aptly noted, an education curriculum enhances students' cognitive abilities, leading to improved skills. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that with the

evolving landscape of education, curriculum changes are inevitable. Adapting to these changes poses a challenge for teachers, requiring them to consistently strive to comprehend and integrate each newly inaugurated curriculum.

In Indonesia, the educational landscape has witnessed several changes in recent years, with the latest curriculum being the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, implemented for the first time in February 2022. The introduction of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum aligns with the evolving needs of society in the current era, emphasizing not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of life skills. According to Indriani et al. (2023), this curriculum is designed to enhance student character by addressing affective, cognitive, and psychomotor abilities. Moreover, the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum advocates for a specific learning approach known as differentiated learning. This approach is highly recommended to ensure a comprehensive educational experience. The introduction of new curricular elements carries inherent consequences, and teachers, being the primary contributors to the educational process, are tasked with adapting to these changes. It is imperative to understand how teachers perceive these changes, as this insight is crucial for comprehending the challenges, they may face in effectively implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum.

Due to its significance, this study aims to investigate the extent to which teachers successfully adapt to the new curriculum by exploring their perceptions. The research was conducted at an Islamic public high school in East Java, focusing on the perspectives of grade 7 and 8 teachers who teach English under the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. It is noteworthy that before transitioning to the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, the school had previously implemented the Curriculum 2013. In connection with this transition, a prior study by researcher Muhajir (2016), revealed compelling factors emerging from the shift, marked by a debate between two factions expressing divergent opinions. Consequently, both school and teachers experienced a noteworthy transformation. In this student-centric curriculum, students are encouraged to discover and develop their individual characters, allowing for a certain degree of freedom in terms of

creativity (Lestari 2022). Furthermore, there has been a slight alteration in the learning model within the current *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. Teachers at the school have adopted the "Discovery Learning" model, resulting in increased student engagement and enhanced learning outcomes. The students' exhibit heightened enthusiasm for learning under this innovative approach.

As emphasized by Damore & Murray (2009), the teacher's perception regarding the content to be taught holds paramount importance in realizing the objective of fostering improved collaboration among students. This sentiment is echoed by Fraga & Harmon (2014) , who assert that a teacher well-versed in the learning model of the curriculum is equipped to comprehensively understand the classroom dynamics and the students' responses to the material and questions presented. Consequently, the teacher gains insight into the students' development and progress. Moreover, the adoption of the Discovery Learning teaching model is widespread among educators. According to Balim (2009) , when teachers incorporate the discovery learning model into their classrooms, students engage in learning with enthusiasm, avoiding boredom. Notably, students demonstrate enhanced thinking skills during learning sessions, particularly when they are actively involved in direct observations.

When teachers adeptly implement learning models, students naturally comprehend the material more effectively. As asserted by Nafi'ah et al. (2023), a teacher's mastery of the curriculum and learning models carries a profoundly positive impact on students. The students' individual characteristics become more apparent when they can grasp the materials presented by the teacher. What sets this research apart from several previous studies is its dual focus. While prior research predominantly concentrated on either the curriculum or the learning model, this study uniquely centers on both aspects concurrently examining the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and the associated learning model. This research also aims to describe the teacher's perspective after implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum learning model in the classroom, find the efforts made by teachers while implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum learning model in the

classroom, and explain the challenges that teachers have experienced while implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum learning model in the classroom.

While prior research has delved into the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, there remains a notable gap in understanding English teachers' perspectives when utilizing the learning models embedded in the curriculum. Consequently, this study aims to bridge this gap by scrutinizing the teacher's viewpoint on the learning models within the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. The anticipated outcomes of this research are poised to enhance comprehension for both researchers and readers, shedding light on the nuanced perspectives of teachers while employing the learning models integrated into the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum.

METHOD

In line with the interpretative paradigm, this research adopted a qualitative design. In this study, the researcher explored teachers' perspectives on curriculum implementation. To understand their perspectives, the researcher had to analyze the views of both English teachers, namely the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher at one of the Islamic public high schools in East Java. The researcher conducted school observations on September 18, 2023, followed by interviews on January 4, 2024. The following were the participants in this study:

Table 3.1
Demography of Research Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience
1.	Hastuti	Female	47	She has been teaching English in one of East Java's Islamic public high school for 22 years. And during that time, she continued to teach in grade 7.
2.	Siti	Female	53	She has been teaching English in one of East Java's Islamic public high school for 29 years. And during that time, she continued to teach in grade 8.

The data analysis technique for this research utilizes content analysis. Content analysis is one of the analysis techniques commonly used in the context of qualitative research that requires researchers to analyze interview results (Creswell, 1994). The stages of content analysis technique are as follows:

1. Data Preparation:

The first step in content analysis is to gather all texts or materials to be analyzed. Researchers will conduct interviews with 7th-grade English teachers and 8th-grade English teachers at one of the Islamic public high school in East Java, resulting in complete interview data.

2. Classification or Categorization:

After preparing the data, the researcher then classifies or categorizes some interview results according to the topics to be discussed and relevant to the research objectives. This will facilitate the researcher in completing the analysis stage.

3. Analysis:

Next, the researcher will enter the stage of analyzing the grouped and categorized interview data. The researcher will begin analyzing and explaining in detail each group of discussion topics.

4. Reporting Results:

The final step is to report the results of the interview data analysis comprehensively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teachers' Perspectives on the Implementation of Learning Models in Accordance with the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Indonesia

The curriculum plays a crucial role in education at various levels. This role encompasses several aspects involving curriculum planning, development, and implementation. As stated by Sukmawati (2021), the curriculum is a system with interrelated components that support each other, namely the goal component that sets the direction of education, the learning experience component, the goal

achievement strategy component, and the evaluation component. However, these components will not be useful without teachers who implement them. Therefore, teachers are essential for the development and success of the curriculum in Indonesia. With teachers, education in Indonesia will continue to progress alongside curriculum development.

Teachers' perspectives are also crucial for the Indonesian community to understand the journey of a teacher in implementing the curriculum. Of course, each teacher has a different perspective, such as the perspectives of the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher from one of the Islamic public high school in East Java. After conducting interviews, the researcher finally identified four perspectives from these two teachers. The first perspective touches on how the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum strongly encourages student motivation and creativity. Below are the interview data from the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher:

During the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and its system in the learning process, students become more enthusiastic about learning. This is because the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum emphasizes on enhancing students' creativity. Therefore, 7th-grade students, who are new to the junior high school level, may think that advancing to higher grades will not make them bored with the learning system... [data from interview with 7th-grade English teacher]

Students are encouraged to constantly develop their creativity through drawing and coloring. This activity is indeed liberating because besides honing students' creativity, they can also understand their individual characters... [data from interview with 8th-grade English teacher]

From the interviews above, it can be concluded that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum has a positive impact on students' understanding of themselves as individuals. Their abilities and creativity are honed and emphasized with the aim of enabling them to understand their true character. Furthermore, the second perspective revolves around the effectiveness of implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the classroom. Effectiveness in conducting learning in the classroom will certainly be evident if teachers employ appropriate teaching methods (Atin Sri Handayani, Kantri Nurlisa, and Mustafiyanti Mustafiyanti

2023). In the interview data from the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher, it was stated that:

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum may indeed make it easier for teachers to teach and help students understand the material well, but in my opinion, it is not so effective because this school is located in a rural area. In terms of technology, it is more limited compared to other schools. Moreover, the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum heavily emphasizes technology such as the internet. In relation to this, the internet signal here is also not very strong, so it becomes a barrier for students to delve deeper into learning... [data from interview with 8th-grade English teacher]

When the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum serves as a driver for learning, students grasp the taught material more quickly by the teacher. Therefore, the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is highly effective in facilitating classroom learning. Especially in the context of English language learning, it will be more effective because essentially English language teaching in elementary school is not so intense, but when students enter junior high school, the learning becomes more intense, and automatically the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum greatly assists teachers in teaching... [data from interview with 7th-grade English teacher]

From the data above, it is evident that the 7th-grade English teacher can manage the class well, thus finding effective points during teaching using the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the classroom. However, if the learning process does not proceed smoothly, it means the teacher's focus is solely on one problem point, declaring that learning will not be effective (Atin Sri Handayani et al. 2023).

The next perspective, the third one, reveals that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum encourages student autonomy in learning. An example of fostering autonomy is through the use of practical learning methods. The use of practical learning methods during the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is indeed quite common. Based on the theory by Yamin & Syahrir (2020), it is stated that with the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and when practical methods are implemented in the classroom, the classroom atmosphere becomes more serious and students' focus will be balanced. As seen in the interview data from the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher below:

The previous curriculum and the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, in my opinion, are very different. Speaking about the teaching method, the previous curriculum mainly focuses on a lecture-style approach, where students listen to detailed explanations in the form of sentences, which may make students not fully grasp the material and easily get bored. On the other hand, for the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, I find it very effective in helping students understand the material. As instructors, we mainly provide a keyword, and students will explore the explanation according to their abilities. Additionally, in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, there are many practical-based learning activities, which make students feel enthusiastic about learning... [data from interview with 7th-grade English teacher]

In the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and the previous curriculum, there are certainly significant differences, especially in the teaching system. In the previous curriculum, as an instructor, I realized that many students became bored listening to the material being taught. Students also often felt sleepy in class, and in my opinion, this would hinder them from receiving the learning material well. However, with the system aligned with the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, students become more enthusiastic about learning because there are many practical activities involved... [data from interview with 8th-grade English teacher]

Therefore, both the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher are pleased with the focus on practical methods. The researcher also concludes that with the practical method, students enjoy learning. It is worth noting that making students enjoy learning in the classroom is quite challenging because most students will feel bored if they are only given material explanations. By using practical methods, students become more active, and they automatically think with focus.

The last perspective talks about the differentiation learning model in schools not being fully maximized in practice. In fact, differentiation learning is considered effective and can improve students' learning abilities because students

can master the learning material well (Iskandar 2021). However, both the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher stated that this learning model is not maximally implemented in one of the Islamic public high school in East Java. This can be seen from the interview data below:

The differentiated instruction model, in my opinion, should indeed be implemented in this school because, according to my research, forming study groups based on the needs and abilities of students will create a greater sense of responsibility. However, because this school is located in a rural area, the implementation of differentiated instruction cannot be done to its maximum potential due to the limited number of classrooms... [Data from interview with 7th-grade English teacher]

The differentiated instruction model within the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is excellent, but it is not extensively implemented in this school. Because our school is located in a rural area, which is not particularly large, and the students here are also more difficult to manage, therefore, the implementation of differentiated instruction seems to be not as optimized... [Data from interview with 8th-grade English teacher]

From the interview data on differentiation learning above, it can be concluded that the reason why differentiation learning cannot be maximally implemented is due to the location and condition of the school not being adequate enough to maximize such learning. Both teachers also stated that the school would continue to function without implementing differentiation learning; however, differentiation learning is still important to be applied.

The Efforts Made By Teachers To Implement The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum Learning Model In The Classroom

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is quite different from previous curricula. Indriani et al. (2023), state that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum aims to enhance students' character development in affective, cognitive, and psychomotor abilities. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum also emphasizes practical methods in classroom learning so that students' abilities will be clearly visible. Students' activeness in the classroom is also a crucial point for the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. With active students in the classroom, their characters can also be observed and developed effectively.

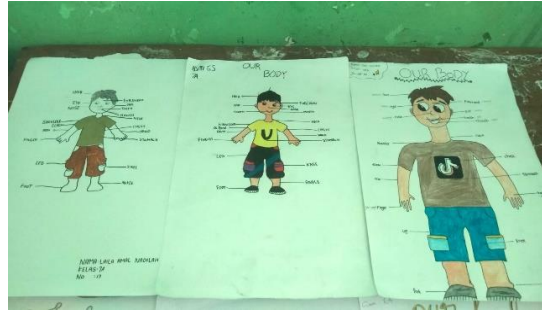
Therefore, every teacher must make efforts to keep students engaged and enjoying the learning process using the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the classroom. This effort is also possessed by the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher from one of the Islamic public school in East Java. The researcher found four efforts used by both teachers to implement the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the classroom. It is worth noting that the efforts discovered from both teachers tend to be similar. However, the methods used differ because the taught material also varies.

The first effort is that both the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher use teaching materials to make students active in the classroom. Project-based teaching materials are expected to increase students' activeness in mastering English through creative projects (Makrifah and Widiarini 2019). The teaching materials used by the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher have similarities. Both of them use illustrated papers, but the content of the materials differs. This can be seen from the interview data from the teachers below:

In the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, not only the English teacher, but all teachers here generally use teaching materials to teach in the classroom. Personally, I often create drawings and then print them, guiding students to color the drawings and name each part of them. This can make students more active, and it also allows the teacher to easily assess the extent of students' understanding of the material taught... [data from an interview with a 7th-grade English teacher]

In 8th grade, the efforts made are actually quite similar to those of the 7th-grade teacher, but the level of learning is increased to a more detailed level. Teaching materials still use paper with drawings that I create and then print, but the content of the paper is not as simple as just naming body parts with one word. In 8th grade, students are already encouraged to create short sentences like descriptive sentences... [data from an interview with an 8-grade English teacher]

The following are examples of teaching materials used by the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher:



Picture 1 Names of Human Body Parts Test (7th-grade)



Picture 2 Animal Abilities Test (8th-grade)

In this *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, project-based learning is indeed stipulated and must be implemented by teachers during the teaching process. Therefore, the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher have started using teaching materials for instruction in the classroom. It is observed that all students are happy with the teaching materials provided, but there are still some students who are slow in following the lessons using the materials. The reason for the students' tardiness is that they lack vocabulary mastery, which often confuses them when given instructions by the teacher to form short sentences

However, the researcher also found that the level of learning success using teaching materials in the classroom is quite good. According to Kholida (2021), the success of teaching materials used by teachers in the classroom is undoubtedly based on factors that also originate from the teacher's attitude and actions during teaching.

The second effort is by frequently posing questions and keywords and then presenting them to the students, instructing all students to answer. This effort is made to make students more active in the classroom. In the interview data collected by the researcher from the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher, as written below:

I often use keywords in the form of pictures to make students active in the class. I usually instruct students to answer in English based on the picture I provide. Then, if the students have answered in English based on the picture, I will follow up with further questions such as the function of the picture, so students will think more deeply about the meaning of the picture..." [data from an interview with a 7th-grade English teacher]

The students are very enthusiastic when I start a quick-answer quiz using keywords written on the whiteboard. Usually, I will write one word and then students will create a sentence containing that keyword. Then, students will raise their hands and I will choose 5 students out of 28 in the class. I will continue the quiz until all students have had a turn to answer... [data from an interview with an 8th-grade English teacher]

It appears that the two teachers have different approaches in delivering keywords. However, the core objective is the same, which is to make all students active and focused on learning. According to the interview data from the 8th-grade teacher, it is evident that the teacher diligently conducts quick answer quizzes to sharpen students' speed in answering given questions. As stated by Meisanthi (2019), providing quizzes to students in relatively short periods can enhance students' learning outcomes and encourage them to learn at all times. This automatically prompts students to strive to be active in the classroom.

Meanwhile, the success of this effort is also measured by the students' focus. According to Trisna et al. (2017), all quizzes will not run smoothly if

students are not focused on them. Therefore, teachers must design ways to make students interested in participating in quizzes.

The third effort is to frequently engage students in group work to encourage discussion and build confidence in speaking or expressing opinions in class. As mentioned by Kartikasari (2017), when teachers use group work methods in classroom learning, students' confidence gradually increases, and they experience improvement in learning. As seen in the interview data from the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher below:

I also sometimes use the group work system to enhance my students' self-confidence. As I observe, each student's character in my class is different, so my hope is that by implementing group work, students will become closer and get to know each other's characters. Then, they will also feel confident in discussing and expressing their opinions in the classroom. Why is this necessary? Because I often conduct question-and-answer sessions in class, so those sessions require students' self-confidence as well... [data from an interview with a 7th-grade English teacher]

I believe that working in groups is sometimes very necessary for students in the classroom because I have assessed that many students have gained confidence in expressing their opinions and answering questions aloud in class. Especially the 8th-grade students whom I often invite to discuss together after the lesson is over; they can express their opinions calmly and without feeling embarrassed in front of their peers. Perhaps not all students are brave enough to voice their opinions yet, but there are already many 8th-grade students who are confident. So, working in groups is very suitable for improving skills during discussions and expressing opinions... [data from an interview with an 8th-grade English teacher]

It is evident that both teachers strongly encourage student activity in the classroom. Therefore, these efforts are still being implemented by the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher at one of the Islamic public high school in East Java. Based on research by Nugraheni et al. (2022), when students work in groups, they have a greater opportunity to express themselves. Additionally, students can make friends with diverse characters. Through group work, students can also learn and understand the characteristics of their peers, enabling them to confidently express their opinions.

The last effort made by the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher, based on the interview data, is providing feedback to students'

work. The researcher found that providing feedback to students is crucial and something teachers must do. This allows students to self-evaluate based on the feedback given. According to Maharani & Widhiasih (2016), students feel happy and more enthusiastic about learning if they receive positive feedback, but they feel sad and demotivated if the feedback is negative. As shown in the interview data below:

Providing feedback for students' work is also very important because by providing feedback to students, they will also learn to evaluate themselves. However, not many students can evaluate themselves at first, but gradually they will understand the feedback from the teacher. Especially for the subject of English, and 7th-grade students seem to have to start from scratch, so after I provide feedback, I will also ask 7th-grade students to immediately correct their mistakes in answering assignments. So they will also be accustomed to evaluating themselves after being given feedback by the teacher... [data from an interview with a 7th-grade English teacher]

At first, I didn't implement the effort of providing feedback for the assignments of 8th-grade students, but it seems that 8th-grade students were already accustomed to receiving feedback when they were in 7th grade, so when they finished their assignments, they eagerly awaited feedback from me. Therefore, I started providing feedback for students' work. And I have observed that by providing feedback on student work, students become more responsible for what they do, and they become diligent in evaluating their own work. That's why I decided that providing feedback for student work is an important effort that teachers should undertake... [data from an interview with an 8th-grade English teacher]

It is evident that providing feedback to students' work is necessary so that students can self-evaluate and take responsibility for their tasks. As stated by researchers Wahyudi & Sari (2016), every teacher providing feedback to students is expected to give feedback that encourages self-evaluation, because if feedback is given appropriately, students will also receive it gladly. In other words, students' mood in learning and evaluating is also influenced by the feedback given by the teacher on their work. The researcher also found that both teachers and students benefit from this effort. Teachers benefit by facilitating them to monitor students' progress in learning and gradually understand students' abilities. Meanwhile, students benefit by understanding the answers to the tasks that have been responded to by the teacher.

The Challenges Experienced By Teachers In Implementing The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum Model While Teaching In The Classroom

In implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, teachers undoubtedly face difficulties. It should be noted that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum presents different challenges compared to previous curricula. A common challenge faced during the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is in developing teaching materials because many teachers do not fully understand the essence of each component of these teaching materials (Lenny Kurniati 2023). Whereas in previous curricula, a common challenge faced by teachers was that many teachers did not fully understand the curriculum, so they conducted teaching without considering or implementing the curriculum (Angga et al. 2022).

Despite all the common challenges mentioned above, the researcher has found that each teacher faces their own specific challenges during the implementation of the curriculum in the classroom. This certainly applies to the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher from one of the Islamic public high school in East Java. During the interviews, the researcher found several common challenges faced by both English teachers. Some of the challenges discovered appeared to be similar, but there was one significant challenge mentioned only by the 8th-grade English teacher.

The first challenge is that teachers must adapt to the new curriculum, namely the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. There are many differences between the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and the previous curriculum. As stated by Agustina & Mustika (2023), the change in curriculum has a tremendous impact on teachers because the latest curriculum is vastly different from the previous one. Teachers must adapt from the beginning while selecting materials that focus on meeting students' needs and adding teaching materials that have never been done in the previous curriculum. As seen in the interview data from the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher below:

Adjusting to the latest curriculum is the biggest challenge because we as teachers must clearly understand the contents of the new curriculum. Moreover, this *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum has a different learning system compared to the previous curriculum. So, whether we like it or not, as teachers, we also have

to adapt the learning system of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Facing grade 7 students might not be too difficult because they are just entering junior high school, and the students will automatically follow the learning system from the beginning... [data from an interview with a grade 7 English teacher]

For me as an 8th-grade teacher, adjusting to the new curriculum, namely the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, honestly, is quite difficult. Because the learning system is also very different from the previous curriculum. And also, it seems that 8th-grade students are quite surprised by the new learning system that I use in the classroom. I'm also not in a rush to immediately change the learning system because both I as a teacher and my students need to adapt. So, I gradually change the learning system until both I and the students are able to accept and follow it well... [data from an interview with an 8th-grade English teacher]

It can be seen that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is acknowledged by teachers as quite challenging to implement and requires time for adaptation. According to Manik et al. (2022), in the latest curriculum, namely the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, teachers not only need to adapt to the curriculum content but also need to adjust and keep up with the times. In the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, teachers must have a better understanding of technology because they will more frequently use technology as a means of teaching. The researcher has also found that this is quite challenging for the 8th-grade English teacher at one of the Islamic public high school in East Java due to age-related factors that may make it difficult to keep up with technological advancements.

The second challenge is only experienced by the 8th-grade English teacher. This challenge is the inability to heavily rely on technology due to the school's location having difficulty obtaining good signal reception. Therefore, it can be discussed that indeed the signal at the school location is very poor, even though there is already Wi-Fi available in the school, the signal is still not strong enough for all students to use. As shown in the interview data below:

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum heavily emphasizes technology, while in this school area, the signal is not very good for using technology. The technology referred to here is mobile phones. In this *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, the internet is highly necessary because students are often directed to search for references online, and teachers must be open to technological advancements. However, as a 53-year-old teacher, I find it difficult to keep up with technological advancements. If teachers do not understand technological advancements well, they will also find it difficult

to teach students. Therefore, I am still learning to understand technology. As for the internet signal issue, for now, I balance it by teaching without using the internet, which means for references, I provide references that I already have and show them to the students. However, the use of the internet will continue to be implemented to follow the learning system of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum... [data from an interview with an 8th-grade English teacher]

Based on the opinions of Hidayat et al. (2020), technology allows students to easily access unfamiliar material, making the learning process more effective. Furthermore, if teachers and students can effectively utilize technology, then all aspects of learning can be resolved smoothly (Luh and Ekayani 2017). However, if the school struggles to access signals, teachers must find appropriate solutions so that students can still utilize technology effectively. One solution is to shift tasks that should be done at school to be completed at home. These tasks are based on the requirement to search for references on the internet. Therefore, learning at school can be carried out without relying on technology.

The third challenge is the difficulty for teachers to adjust the learning process to the needs and characteristics of students. The researcher found that this challenge had been experienced by teachers in previous curricula. However, this challenge did not greatly affect the 8th-grade English teacher because they had already discussed it with the 7th-grade English teacher, and the 8th-grade English teacher only needed to continue from there. As shown in the interview data from both teachers below:

In this *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, there is a learning system that requires us, as teachers, to adapt to the needs and characteristics of students. Actually, this has been a consistent challenge for us and we have already experienced it in the previous curriculum. However, the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum emphasizes this adjustment even more. Especially for me as a 7th-grade teacher who has just started teaching students fresh out of elementary school, I indeed have to adapt from the beginning because I am just meeting and getting to know each student. Adapting to students' characters is not too difficult for me, but adjusting to their needs is quite challenging because differentiated learning in this school is not widely implemented. So, regarding students' learning needs, for now, I am still continuously adapting... [data from an interview with a 7th-grade English teacher]

Based on the opinion of Herwina (2021), when teachers adjust their teaching to the needs and characteristics of students, they can automatically determine and deliver the material correctly. Adapting teaching to students' characteristics is indeed easier than adapting it to their needs. If teachers can adjust both aspects, they can easily implement differentiated learning, as outlined in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum.

The final challenge faced by the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher is that teachers must find solutions for every instance when students are not in a good mood, leading to a less lively classroom atmosphere and decreased student engagement during lessons. This challenge may seem common but is not simple. As seen in the interview data below:

The classroom atmosphere becomes dull if students are not in the mood to learn. This often happens with 7th-grade students. In my teaching, I start from the basics because not all students received English language lessons in elementary school. Therefore, many students feel bored during the lessons. That's the challenge I have to face. I have to find ways to improve students' moods for learning. As a teacher, I greatly hope for active student participation in classroom learning. So, I often conduct icebreakers during the lesson to re-engage students' interest in learning... [data from an interview with a 7th-grade English teacher]

In this 8th-grade class, it is quite challenging to get students to be active in the classroom because the material I teach is at an advanced level, such as creating short sentences from a given keyword. Not many students can create short sentences because their vocabulary knowledge is lacking. Additionally, when given a keyword, some students immediately sigh because they find it very difficult and believe they are incapable of doing it. This becomes a challenge for me as an 8th-grade English teacher. Eventually, I decided to ask each student about their difficulties in creating short sentences and help those who are not yet familiar by constructing short sentences. I still use this method until now to address that challenge... [data from an interview with an 8th-grade English teacher]

Based on the opinion of Diharjo et al. (2017), student engagement in the classroom can be influenced by the methods employed by teachers during teaching. Therefore, in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, teachers are expected to prepare various solutions or methods to keep students active in the classroom. As shown in the interview data below:

The ice-breaking method I use during the middle of the lesson doesn't always go smoothly because some students seem to get even more bored since I use this method frequently. As a result, I have to think of other methods to break the monotony during English lessons. I employ a quick Q&A method and offer a small reward to entice students to participate actively. This method is quite effective in sparking student interest and encouraging them to be active in the learning process... [data from an interview with a 7th-grade English teacher]

Gradually providing motivation is also one of my methods in facing the challenge of making students active in the classroom. Some people might think that giving motivation is something ordinary and surely done by teachers in the classroom. However, not every teacher gives motivation every day in class. For me, giving motivation such as sharing success stories of alumni from this school is important. I see that students become interested in listening to motivation from me, and after that, their enthusiasm for learning ignites. Students also ask more about things they don't know about the material I provide. However, the motivation I give is adjusted to the material I present on that day. So, it will trigger their active participation in the classroom during English language learning... [data from an interview with an 8th-grade English teacher]

So far, the researcher has concluded that using the appropriate methods is crucial. It is essential for every teacher to have more than one teaching method as a precaution in case students are not responsive to one method. Methods such as ice breaking, group work, rapid question-and-answer sessions, providing small rewards, and giving motivation may be common practices among teachers. However, based on the researcher's observations, while these methods are common, they are necessary for teachers during language classes to effectively engage and activate students.

CONCLUSION

The perspectives of the 7th-grade English teacher and the 8th-grade English teacher during the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the classroom have been described positively. Starting from the curriculum supporting the recognition of students' characters, the effectiveness of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, the practical methods frequently used by teachers in teaching English in the classroom, and lastly, the differentiation learning model that is not commonly used in class due to school conditions that do not allow for

differentiation learning. This indicates the need for integrating social-emotional value components in English teaching to assist in holistic student development.

Furthermore, the efforts made by the 7th-grade and 8th-grade English teachers while teaching using the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the classroom have proven that the teachers have been fairly effective in implementation. These efforts include using teaching materials, posing various questions, encouraging students to work in groups, and providing engaging feedback to students. The teachers seem to have made creative efforts for *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, although not yet optimal. Therefore, these English teachers need to receive further training so that all their efforts can be carried out smoothly and optimally.

Lastly, the challenges faced by the 7th-grade and 8th-grade English teachers during the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the classroom have been explained in detail. Among them are the teachers needing to adapt to the new curriculum, inadequate signal strength, difficulty in adjusting teaching to the needs and characters of students, and struggling to maintain student engagement during the learning process in the classroom. Although most of the challenges mentioned are common, it should be noted that regarding the second point discussing technology, technology is an essential component for the continuity of learning in the classroom. Therefore, teachers must strive to maximize its use as well. Perhaps through discussions on how to improve the signal quality in the school's location so that technology usage can be smooth.

The suggestion, for teachers, when facing the new curriculum, namely the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, teachers should expand their understanding of it by attending seminars available in Indonesia, so they can implement the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in schools effectively. It can be seen from the results of this research that the differentiation learning model has not been widely implemented due to school conditions that are not conducive. If teachers have a clear understanding of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, they will also be able to find solutions to ensure that the differentiation learning model continues to be implemented effectively in schools. For school principals, when dealing with the

Merdeka Belajar curriculum, school principals should facilitate the necessary resources for classroom learning. For example, school principals should consider solutions to ensure good signal quality for technology use because the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum emphasizes technology as a learning mediator. They should also increase facilities to support projects that students will undertake to complete their learning. For the government, In facing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, the government should be more open to accepting proposals from schools across Indonesia. The government should also prepare numerous seminars related to the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum so that teachers can understand it well. Additionally, the government should conduct direct observations in every school and prepare for aspects that are lacking in schools, such as school public facilities.

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