

### Exploring *Kurikulum Merdeka*: ELT Practices in an Islamic Secondary School in Batam

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#### Abstract

Curriculum reforms play a vital role in improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in language. *Kurikulum Merdeka* introduces a student-centered approach to learning in Indonesia. Yet little is known about how it is implemented in Islamic secondary schools where national and religious goals must be aligned. This study investigates English teachers' perspectives on the curriculum's effectiveness, challenges, and best practices in this context. A qualitative case study was conducted through classroom observations, interviews, and field notes. Findings indicate that the curriculum enhances student engagement, particularly when instruction involves real-life themes, technology, and task choice. Teacher 1 noted that even students who "usually sleep in class now want to learn," while Teacher 2 found learners more active when discussing "issues happening around us." However, limited training, infrastructure constraints, and unclear assessment practices created implementation challenges. Teachers addressed these issues through differentiated instruction, authentic materials, peer collaboration, and ongoing professional learning. This study contributes context-specific insights into how English instruction adapts to *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Islamic schooling. It recommends more practical teacher training, improved digital access, and clearer assessment guidelines. Future research should examine diverse regions and track long-term development of learner autonomy under the curriculum.

**Keywords:** *Kurikulum Merdeka, English Language Teaching, Curriculum Implementation.*

#### 1. Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in shaping students' knowledge, skills, and competencies, with curriculum implementation being a central aspect of the teaching and learning process (Karakuş, 2021; Gulo, 2024). A well-structured curriculum serves as a guideline for educators to deliver subject content effectively, ensuring that students meet the expected learning outcomes (Yang & Li, 2022). In Indonesia, recent curriculum reforms, transitioning from *Kurikulum 2013* to *Kurikulum Merdeka*, aim to promote a competency-based and student-centered approach that strengthens English language proficiency (Syahputra & Hutasuhut, 2022).

*Kurikulum Merdeka* introduces greater flexibility in lesson planning, assessment, and instructional strategies (Latifa et al., 2023; Meutia et al., 2024). It allows contextual adjustments based on school conditions and learner needs. Zaki et al. (2025) observed this

flexibility across Batam's schools, especially between inland and remote areas where resources and teacher readiness vary. The curriculum promotes active student participation and adaptive teaching, aligning with Marsevani (2021), who found students were aware of learning goals and willing to set personal objectives, even while still relying on teacher support. However, challenges such as limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and weak institutional support hinder implementation (Bhat & Dahal, 2023). Observing classroom practices can offer insight into both strengths and gaps in applying the curriculum (Tarusha & Bushi, 2024)

While many studies explore teacher perspectives through interviews, more structured and standardized evaluation tools are needed. Checklists provide systematic classroom analysis (Basaruddin & Mustafa, 2023), though they may miss the depth of teacher adaptation and perception (Khan et al., 2025). Therefore, combining checklist observations with qualitative methods such as interviews and field notes will provide a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' perspectives. Unlike previous studies that rely solely on interview data, this research integrates real classroom evidence through observation checklists, field notes, and direct teacher reflections in an Islamic school context. This mixed approach allows stronger validation of findings and provides a clearer picture of how *Kurikulum Merdeka* is enacted in daily English teaching practices.

Existing research has reported several positive instructional outcomes associated with the curriculum. *Kurikulum Merdeka* supports student motivation and teacher creativity through flexible learning activities Fabela et al. (2024) and Hardiyana et al. (2024). It facilitates technology integration and enables teachers to connect new material with students' prior knowledge (Riskianto et al., 2023; Latifa et al., 2023). Despite these strengths, challenges persist. Teachers still struggle with inadequate infrastructure, diverse learner needs, and gaps in digital literacy skills (Jusnita & Ismail., 2018; Ritan et al., 2023; Ni'mah et al., 2024). These issues suggest that the curriculum does not yet benefit all learners equally.

Although many studies examine curriculum implementation in general schools, limited attention has been given to English language teaching in Islamic secondary schools. These institutions must align national academic goals with religious values, which introduces unique instructional demands (Moslimany et al., 2024). Additionally, there is a lack of evidence regarding how teachers adapt instruction, technology use, and assessment to the expectations of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. This situation highlights the need for context-based investigations that capture real classroom practices and teacher experiences. This issue is urgent because English teachers in Islamic schools must simultaneously meet national curriculum standards and religious learning goals, yet practical guidance for balancing these demands remains limited.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates English teachers' perspectives and their classroom practices in implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* in an Islamic secondary school in Batam. Therefore, this study focuses on how English teachers perceive and implement *Kurikulum Merdeka* in classroom practice. Through observations, interviews, and field notes, the study examines three core areas: curriculum effectiveness, challenges encountered, and the best practices teachers apply. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. **RQ1:** How do English teachers perceive the effectiveness of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Islamic secondary schools?
2. **RQ2:** What challenges do teachers face in implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English language teaching?

3. **RQ3:** What best practices do teachers apply to support the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English classes?

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore how teachers implement *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English language teaching. The case study method is widely recognized in social science research for its value in addressing educational issues (Gulsecen & Arif, 2006). It allows researchers to examine teachers' behavioral conditions from a contextual perspective, offering insights beyond statistical results (Zainal, 2007). This approach suits the study's goal to understand teacher experiences, instructional methods, and the challenges of adapting to curriculum changes (Puspitasari, 2024). By focusing on a specific educational setting, the study provides insights into how teachers effectively implement, navigate difficulties with, and adapt the curriculum (Munna & Kalam, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2024).

The research was conducted at an Islamic secondary school in Batam, selected for its unique context. Unlike public schools, Islamic institutions must integrate religious education with national academic standards. Implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* in this setting provides a chance to examine how English instruction adapts to accommodate religious values. Research on this context remains limited, making it important to explore how educators manage such dual demands.

Two English teachers were selected as participants using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English classes. Both teachers had more than two years of experience teaching under the curriculum and were responsible for planning, delivering lessons, and assessing students' progress. The selection criteria included: (1) active implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in daily instruction, (2) willingness to participate in interviews and classroom observations, and (3) teaching experience in an Islamic secondary school setting. Classroom observations were conducted in each teacher's classes, followed by interviews to explore their instructional strategies, challenges, and curriculum adaptations.

### 2.1 Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and researchers field notes, ensuring a rich and holistic analysis of English language teaching under the new curriculum (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

#### 1. Classroom Observation

Classroom observations were a key data collection method to examine how English language teaching strategies were applied under *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Observing teachers in their natural settings enabled the capture of instructional practices, classroom management, and student engagement, offering insights into both planned and spontaneous interactions. To ensure comprehensive data, the observation process combined two components.

First, a structured observation checklist was used, covering indicators such as curriculum implementation, teaching techniques, student engagement, classroom management, assessment, and technology use. Each item was rated on a Likert scale from "Very Poor" to "Very Good." Observations were conducted during two teaching sessions with different lesson topics to identify instructional patterns.

Second, field notes documented qualitative aspects not reflected in the checklist, including spontaneous teacher-student interactions, emotional responses, classroom dynamics, and technical disruptions. These notes enriched the structured data with

contextual insights.

Combining checklist ratings and field notes allowed the study to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach supported systematic comparisons across lessons and a deeper interpretation of teaching effectiveness and student behavior (Hayati et al., 2021) resulting in a context-sensitive analysis of ELT practices.

## 2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Following the observations, two English teachers participated in individual interviews lasting 20 to 30 minutes. These explored their perspectives on curriculum implementation, instructional challenges, and adaptation strategies specific to teaching English under *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Reza et al., 2023). Conducted in Indonesian or English based on preference, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

**Table 1. Teacher Interview Guidelines and Question Indicators**

No	Variable	Indicator	Interview Question
1	<b>Effectiveness</b>	Increased student engagement and motivation	How has the implementation of <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> influenced your students' engagement and motivation in learning English?
		Development of critical thinking skills	In what ways has <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> facilitated the development of critical thinking skills among your students?
		Independent learning behavior	Have you observed any changes in students' ability to learn independently since adopting <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> ? If so, please elaborate.
		Achievement of learning outcomes	How effectively does <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> help students achieve the intended learning outcomes in English?
		Integration and impact of technology	How has the use of technology been integrated into your English teaching under <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> , and what impact has it had on student learning?
2	<b>Challenges</b>	Training and professional development limitations	What challenges have you faced regarding training and professional development opportunities related to <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> ?
		Resource and infrastructure limitations	Can you describe any limitations in resources or infrastructure that have hindered the effective implementation of <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> in your English classes?

No	Variable	Indicator	Interview Question
<b>3 Best Practice</b>	Addressing diverse student backgrounds and needs		How do you address the diverse learning needs and backgrounds of students when implementing <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> in your English teaching?
	Assessment and evaluation difficulties		What challenges have you encountered in assessing and evaluating student performance under <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> ?
	Balancing curriculum with school (Islamic) context		How do you manage the balance between meeting the requirements of <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> and the specific needs of an Islamic school context?
	Innovative teaching strategies		Can you share any innovative teaching strategies that have been particularly effective in implementing <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> in your English classes?
	Teacher collaboration		How have you collaborated with fellow teachers to enhance the implementation of <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> in English teaching?
	Use of authentic materials		What role do authentic materials play in your English teaching under <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> , and how have they impacted student learning?
	Professional development initiatives		What professional development initiatives have you undertaken to improve your implementation of <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> ?
	Student-centered learning approaches and their outcomes		How have you incorporated student-centered learning approaches in your English classes under <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> , and what has been the outcome?

Data collected from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and field notes were analyzed using a mix-method approach combining descriptive quantitative analysis and qualitative content analysis. Observation checklist indicators, measured using Likert-scale, were summarized using frequency counts and mean scores to identify overall trends in student engagement, teaching practices, and curriculum implementation. These quantitative results were then compared with qualitative findings to support the interpretation of overall classroom performance.

Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed thematically. The analysis followed established qualitative frameworks that involved (1) initial coding of teacher statements and observed behaviors, (2) categorizing codes into emerging patterns, and (3) refining themes aligned with the research questions. To maintain credibility, data from observations, interviews, and field notes were triangulated, ensuring that interpretations reflected both measured classroom behaviors and teachers' explanations of their practice. This approach allowed the quantitative checklist data to reinforce the qualitative insights regarding the effectiveness and challenges of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English language teaching.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Findings**

##### **3.1.1 Effectiveness of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English Language Teaching**

The implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English language teaching presented several elements of effectiveness based on data collected from teacher interviews, classroom observation checklists, and detailed field notes. This section discusses the effectiveness across five primary indicators: student engagement and motivation, development of critical thinking, independent learning, achievement of learning outcomes, and the use of technology in the classroom.

###### **a) Student Engagement and Motivation**

Both teachers experienced a noticeable improvement in student engagement when implementing student-centered, interest-based strategies. Teacher 1 explained that by identifying students' interests and proficiency levels at the beginning of the semester, she could tailor activities such as speaking practices, vocabulary games, and writing assignments to align with their preferences. This adaptive approach resulted in increased enthusiasm, particularly when students could choose preferred tasks.

Observation data thoroughly supported these accounts. Throughout procedural text lessons, students actively responded to prompts, participated in vocabulary brainstorming, and volunteered to contribute on the board. Field notes captured their smiles, peer interactions, and remaining focused, especially during activities incorporated visuals and collaborative work.

However, grammar-focused lessons presented a contrasting dynamic. In these sessions, participation levels decreased, and students appeared less energetic. Field notes documented disengagement, with several students becoming distracted or hesitant to participate during passive, note-taking-oriented tasks. This pattern implies that while the *Kurikulum Merdeka* may foster motivation, integration of interactive pedagogical strategies are still needed for effective grammar instruction. Similar findings were reported by Fabela et al. (2024), who emphasized that flexible and meaningful learning tasks improve engagement.

Based on these findings, teachers may benefit from additional support in developing communicative and interest-based grammar activities so that motivation remains consistent across all English lessons.

###### **b) Development of Critical Thinking**

Teachers noted positive effects on students' critical thinking skills, though the outcomes varied by lesson type. Teacher 1 stated that she frequently employed open-ended tasks and reflective questioning, often withholding direct explanations to prompt student reasoning. She explained that she sometimes asked "trigger questions" so students could attempt to analyze and respond independently before guidance was given. She believed

that this strategy fostered intellectual independence and deeper engagement during classroom discussions.

Classroom observations confirmed active cognitive involvement during collaborative vocabulary tasks, where students negotiated meaning, discussed word usage, and proposed alternative expressions. Field notes recorded instances of peer debate and student-led questioning that even challenged teacher explanations. However, this pattern was not consistent across all lessons. In grammar-based sessions, instruction tended to emphasize rule memorization over reasoning, which limited higher-order thinking opportunities. Checklist ratings reflected this contrast, with higher critical-thinking indicators in reading and writing lessons than in grammar-focused activities. These findings support earlier work by Latifa et al. (2023) showing that student-centered tasks are more likely to stimulate deeper cognitive processes.

Teacher 2 also incorporated critical-thinking elements through issue-based discussions requiring students to evaluate scenarios, interpret texts, and justify their opinions. She highlighted that students became “actively participate instead of just sitting” when activities required analytical responses and multiple viewpoints. Observation data showed greater student involvement during lessons that encouraged debate, especially when topics connected to real-world issues and personal experiences. Similar to Hardiyana et al. (2024), these findings suggest that contextualized discussions help students reason more critically in English.

These results imply that continuous professional development may be needed to help teachers design critical-thinking tasks across all language components, especially grammar. Policymakers could support this by providing structured training and model lesson plans that encourage analytical questioning and student reasoning, ensuring that critical-thinking goals outlined in *Kurikulum Merdeka* are fulfilled more consistently in ELT classrooms.

#### **c) Independent Learning**

Observations and interviews indicated that autonomous learning was progressing slowly, despite *Kurikulum Merdeka*’s emphasis on learner independence. Teacher 1 noted that while students were more confident during group tasks, many struggled to work independently without explicit instructions. She observed frequent hesitation in starting tasks and reluctance to respond to unfamiliar questions. Observation checklists reflected lower engagement in individual activities compared to group or pair work. Field notes also captured students frequently seeking clarification and waiting for direction during autonomous tasks.

To support autonomy, Teacher 2 adopted peer-supported strategies by grouping students heterogeneously and assigning specific roles within each team. He reported that this approach boosted confidence among lower-performing students while providing leadership opportunities for advanced learners. Though helpful, Teacher 2 acknowledged that students remained unaccustomed to working independently without prompting.

Both teachers expressed optimism that with sustained scaffolding and encouragement, students would gradually grow more comfortable with independent learning. They recognized that while *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides space for learner agency, its success hinges on consistent teacher support to counteract passive learning habits developed in previous curricula.

#### **d) Achievement of Learning Outcomes**

Teachers reported that achieving learning outcomes became more feasible under *Kurikulum Merdeka* due to its flexible structure and emphasis on differentiated instruction. Teacher 1 no longer adhered rigidly to textbook pacing and instead conducted diagnostic

assessments at the semester's start to identify student strengths and needs. She then adjusted lesson objectives accordingly, ensuring they remained realistic and measurable.

Classroom observations reflected this practice. In one lesson, Teacher 1 reviewed objectives at the session's end, asking students to summarize their progress. Students demonstrated their learning by presenting vocabulary contextually and completing collaborative writing tasks that directly aligned with stated goals.

Similarly, Teacher 2 designed communicative tasks aimed at functional language use, including short speeches, role-play exercises, and blog writing. He emphasized outcomes that measured students' ability to apply language meaningfully rather than solely focusing on accuracy. Observation checklists consistently rated indicators such as "learning objectives are clearly stated," "activities align with objectives," and "students demonstrate progress" highly in both teachers' classrooms. Field notes noted that students showed awareness of lesson goals and took pride in presenting their work.

#### e) Use of Technology

Technology played a supportive role in achieving learning goals, sustaining engagement, and modernizing instruction. Teacher 1 frequently used tools like Canva, Wordwall, and Quizziz to create interactive lessons, especially during afternoon classes when student focus typically declined. She stated that students are "happy when they see games or colorful visuals," which makes learning more enjoyable. Observations confirmed higher engagement during tech-supported lessons. In one session, a Wordwall vocabulary game sparked visible excitement and peer encouragement, with even usually quiet students participating actively. These moments indicate that well-integrated technology promotes inclusion and improves motivation, consistent with findings by Teresa et al. (2024) indicating that digital media boosts participation in *Kurikulum Merdeka* classrooms. This aligns with the view that multimodal digital tools strengthen communication and meaning making in EFL classrooms by enabling students to interact through diverse modes such as images, audio, and interactive texts (Ferstephanie & Pratiwi, 2023).

However, infrastructure issues sometimes disrupted lesson plans. Teacher 1 experienced problems such as broken projectors and limited classroom facilities, noting that "we do not have a language lab" and that teachers must often "replace activities with what is available". Unstable internet and equipment limitations occasionally forced her to revert to more traditional, less interactive methods. This suggests that access to adequate technological resources remains a key factor in optimizing digital learning environments.

Teacher 2 emphasized adaptability by allowing students to choose preferred presentation platforms. She explained that she gives students freedom to modify their slides using tools like Canva or Microsoft PowerPoint "as long as it suits the topic". Observations showed students confidently navigating digital tools, demonstrating improved creativity and digital literacy. This approach also promoted learner autonomy, as students were encouraged to express ideas using media they were comfortable with.

These findings imply that while *Kurikulum Merdeka* encourages technology integration, policymakers and schools must improve digital infrastructure and provide ongoing training so teachers can deliver technology-enhanced lessons consistently across all classes.

#### 3.1.2 Challenges In Implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka*

Although *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides teachers with greater flexibility and the opportunity to implement more student-centered learning, its execution in real classroom settings has introduced several complex challenges. These challenges are not only technical but also pedagogical and administrative in nature. This section presents the five main categories of difficulty faced by Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 in implementing the

curriculum: professional development, infrastructure, student diversity, assessment, and integration with school values. Each category reflects a set of interconnected barriers that influence how effectively teachers can deliver the intended outcomes of the new curriculum.

#### **a) Professional Development and Teacher Training**

Both teachers cited a lack of practical, structured professional development as a key challenge. Teacher 1 explained that *Kurikulum Merdeka* training was primarily self-paced and online, with recorded modules and readings offering little peer interaction or real-time feedback. While flexible, this approach left her unsure about proper implementation, relying on trial and error in class, which caused anxiety, especially when using new strategies.

Teacher 2 echoed this concern. Although he joined webinars and online teacher communities, he found them overly theoretical and lacking classroom-specific examples. This aligns with Zaki et al. (2025), who found that teachers in Batam, particularly in remote areas, struggled with curriculum adaptation due to the absence of hands-on, context-based training.

To address this, Teacher 2 stressed the importance of school-based professional learning communities where teachers can share experiences and receive relevant feedback. Without this, many peers remained unsure, affecting curriculum consistency.

Although classroom observations didn't measure teacher preparedness directly, limited strategy variation and missed reflective opportunities—especially in grammar lessons—suggested training gaps. Both teachers emphasized the need for collaborative, practical, and context-aware training.

#### **b.) Infrastructure and Technological Access**

One of the biggest obstacles for both teachers was their limited access to classroom infrastructure, particularly for digital learning. Teacher 1's tech-based lesson plans were frequently disturbed by problems including malfunctioning projectors, slow internet, and a lack of a language lab. Students demonstrated less focus and were more prone to distraction when digital equipment malfunctioned, as was the case during a multimedia presentation, according to observations. Similar issues were encountered by Teacher 2, especially during speaking and listening exercises, when low audio quality and restricted device access decreased student participation. He attempted to use his own devices, such as phones and speakers, but these temporary fixes were not always successful.

Observation checklists reflected these infrastructure constraints. Items such as "availability of audiovisual resources" and "integration of technology in instruction" received lower ratings in sessions affected by technical issues. Both teachers demonstrated adaptability in modifying lesson delivery; however, the inconsistent availability of essential resources remained a persistent challenge beyond their control.

#### **c) Student Diversity and Learning Needs**

Student diversity in academic ability, emotional needs, and language exposure posed challenges for both teachers. Teacher 1 noted varying educational backgrounds in her class, with some students working independently while others needed ongoing support. To address this, she used informal assessments at the beginning of the academic year to identify learning styles and proficiency, then designed differentiated tasks with multiple versions tailored to student levels. While effective, this approach required additional preparation, modified instructions, and separate rubrics, which were difficult to maintain consistently.

Teacher 2 applied mixed-ability grouping and assigned roles such as facilitator, recorder, or presenter to foster collaboration. Although this improved group interaction, performance gaps remained, and some students stayed passive.

Emotional and behavioral concerns added complexity. Teacher 1 observed that personal stress and mental health issues affected student participation. She offered flexible deadlines and one-on-one check-ins, but balancing individual support with overall class needs remained demanding and time-consuming.

#### ***d) Assessment and Evaluation Practices***

Both teachers experienced difficulties with assessment under *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Although the curriculum encourages the use of formative, authentic, and reflective evaluations, applying these approaches consistently remained a challenge. Teacher 1 stated that preparing assessments for students with different skill levels took more time and required careful judgment, especially when analyzing qualitative results.

She also had to create specific rubrics for each task and adjust them depending on whether students worked individually or in groups. This made it harder to ensure fairness. She often questioned if her grading was equitable. Field notes recorded student confusion about grading criteria, indicating that the standards used were not always clear or well communicated.

Teacher 2 used project-based assessments and activities such as group dialogues and presentations. Although he prioritized fluency and confidence over grammatical accuracy, he found it difficult to explain scores when there were no standardized rubrics or benchmarks.

Observations showed both teachers relied on informal feedback and questioning but rarely used peer or self-assessment. The lack of clear guidelines made it difficult for students to monitor their progress. These challenges highlighted the need for practical assessment procedures and institutional support.

#### ***2.1.3 Best Practices in Implementing Kurikulum Merdeka***

Despite the challenges faced during the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 successfully applied several effective teaching practices. These practices reflected the core goals of the curriculum, including student engagement, flexible instruction, and reflective teaching. Based on interviews, observations, and field notes, five key areas of best practice were identified. These include attention to learning styles, informal teacher collaboration, integration of authentic materials, continuous professional development, and the application of student-centered instruction.

#### ***a) Application of Learning Styles and Instructional Strategies***

Teacher 1 began each semester by identifying students' learning preferences, such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic styles. This helped her design varied activities to meet different learning needs. In one lesson, she used gesture-based vocabulary games and image matching, which helped students who usually stayed quiet to become more active and confident.

Observations showed that students were more enthusiastic during movement-based and visual tasks. Instead of relying only on textbooks, Teacher 1 offered hands-on activities that supported deeper understanding. She noted that when students felt their learning styles were acknowledged, their motivation increased. This made the lessons more inclusive and engaging.

Teacher 2 applied similar strategies through performance-based speaking activities. He used podcasts, speeches, and role-plays that allowed students to apply English in real-life situations. Observations recorded high engagement, especially when students could choose how to present their work. These methods reflected his effort to connect instruction with student strengths.

Both teachers demonstrated that recognizing learning preferences supports curriculum success. Varied strategies improved participation and understanding while helping to meet diverse classroom needs. This practice aligned with the student-centered focus of *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

**b) Informal Collaboration with Colleagues**

Although formal professional learning communities were not established at either school, both teachers regularly engaged in informal collaboration. Teacher 1 often sought advice from more experienced colleagues on lesson planning and classroom management. She commented that she frequently learns strategies by “asking senior teachers about how the students here usually are and what they are capable of” during informal discussions between teaching shifts. These exchanges helped her adjust her teaching and better understand new curriculum components.

Teacher 2 also valued peer input when preparing assessments and learning tasks. He explained that teachers “discuss about students and share ideas when we have time” even without a structured program, which helped him reflect on his practice and design more suitable activities. Conversations in informal settings, such as the teacher’s lounge or during breaks, often sparked new ideas and built a sense of shared responsibility. Similar to findings by Meutia et al. (2024), informal teacher collaboration can foster innovation and stronger implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* strategies.

Collaboration, though unscheduled, has become a regular part of both teachers’ routines. It reduced feelings of isolation, provided support for experimenting with new methods, and encouraged resource sharing. This mutual guidance saved preparation time and contributed to improved lesson quality. Without consistent formal training programs, peer interaction acted as a practical and context-relevant professional learning model, allowing teachers to stay reflective and adaptable to curriculum demands.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that schools would benefit from creating more structured yet flexible collaboration forums, such as mini-workshops or peer mentoring, so that teachers can systematically share strategies and address curriculum challenges together. Strengthening this informal culture into professional learning communities may enhance consistent and effective *Kurikulum Merdeka* practices.

**c) Use of Authentic Materials**

Both teachers made consistent use of authentic materials in their English classes. Teacher 1 included real-world content such as recipe videos, social media posts, and news articles to support reading and writing tasks. She stated that students “can be more active with videos or pictures rather than only writing on the board,” which helped them connect English with daily life. In one observed lesson, students watched a cooking video before writing their own procedural texts, which encouraged meaningful vocabulary use and supported comprehension.

Teacher 2 also used current topics to promote discussion and critical thinking. He mentioned that students are more motivated when learning about “issues happening around us or more global topics,” as these themes reflect their interests and everyday experiences. Observation checklists recorded increased participation during these lessons, with students expressing opinions confidently in speaking tasks.

Field notes confirmed that students reacted positively to real-world materials. They spoke and wrote with reduced anxiety because the tasks felt relevant and useful. Authentic instruction also encouraged students to apply English beyond the classroom, supporting both communication skills and real-world language competence. These outcomes align with

findings from Latifa et al. (2023), who emphasized that contextual learning improves comprehension and engagement in English lessons.

This approach reflects the teachers' focus on relevance and context, which directly supports Kurikulum Merdeka's student-centered goals. From a policy perspective, schools could enhance these practices by increasing access to diverse media resources and providing training on adapting authentic materials for different proficiency levels, ensuring that all students benefit from meaningful communication opportunities.

#### **d) Ongoing Professional Development**

Both teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to professional growth. Teacher 1 joined the Guru Penggerak program and regularly attended webinars focused on curriculum, teaching strategies, and classroom management. She also followed educational blogs and teacher forums to stay updated and apply new ideas in class.

She explained that professional development helped her reflect on her teaching. By documenting student responses, she improved lesson planning and feedback. She reported feeling more confident in implementing the curriculum because she could compare her methods with national standards. Field notes showed clearer organization in her lessons and more responsive teaching.

Teacher 2, although not involved in a formal training program, also demonstrated ongoing professional learning. He frequently asked questions and shared experiences with peers, explaining that he is the type of teacher who is "not ashamed to ask if I experience difficulties". He also used online platforms and teacher networks to explore new ideas related to assessment, differentiated instruction, and project-based activities. These informal efforts supported his gradual adaptation to curriculum demands.

The findings align with Ni'mah et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of continuous teacher learning to overcome implementation challenges in Kurikulum Merdeka. From a policy standpoint, schools may need to provide more structured professional learning opportunities, such as guided workshops or mentorship systems, so that independent teacher efforts are supported and consistent across the school environment.

#### **e) Student-Centered Instruction**

Student-centered instruction was a consistent strength in both classrooms. Teacher 1 regularly gave students options to choose task types, such as writing, speaking, or drawing, based on their preferences. This encouraged autonomy and allowed students to take greater ownership of their learning. In one lesson, some students created group posters while others gave oral presentations on the same topic.

Field notes showed that students became more motivated and confident when they could decide how to present their learning. The classroom atmosphere was inclusive, with students helping one another and actively participating. The teacher supported this with positive feedback and encouragement, which improved their collaboration and communication skills.

Teacher 2 also emphasized student voice by allowing them to choose project topics based on hobbies or opinions. He grouped students purposefully to foster peer interaction. Observations noted strong participation and engagement in these sessions.

Both teachers showed that student-centered planning is not just about giving choices. It means building a learning space where students feel supported and involved. This approach reflects *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s goal of developing learner agency and meaningful participation.

### **3.2. Discussion**

The interplay between curriculum ideals and classroom realities in this study highlights

both the strengths and challenges of Kurikulum Merdeka. The curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning was evident in its capacity to respond to students' individual needs and preferences. English instruction under this framework enhanced classroom interaction, notably in boosting student engagement and offering flexibility in teaching approaches (Fachruddin, 2022; Arizona et al., 2024; Sadiqzade, 2025). This strategy succeeded in motivating learners and increasing their participation (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Nuranisa, 2024). When lessons connected to real-life themes and permitted student choice, students demonstrated greater confidence, especially in speaking and reading activities (Rokayah et al., 2023; Husnul Haq & Wakidi, 2024). These observations align with Baek & Eisenberg (2021) conclusion that task relevance and learner autonomy are central to improving classroom participation..

Overall, this study contributes evidence from an Islamic secondary school context, demonstrating how teachers adapt curriculum principles into meaningful English learning practices. To strengthen these outcomes, schools should provide ongoing teacher support, particularly in designing interactive grammar lessons and ensuring access to technological resources that sustain student-centered learning. Future studies may expand to larger samples or compare different Islamic school settings to explore how institutional culture and resource availability influence the effectiveness of Kurikulum Merdeka in ELT.

However, grammar instruction continued to present difficulties. These sessions often involved limited student engagement and a return to teacher-centered practices. Zhang (2023) pointed out that shifting from memorization-based grammar instruction to interactive and communicative activities requires time and consistent support for teachers. Without careful task redesign to include communicative elements, the active learning goals promoted by the curriculum remain difficult to achieve.

Although *Kurikulum Merdeka* emphasizes independent learning, the findings showed that students continued to rely on teacher guidance, particularly during individual tasks. While the curriculum encourages autonomy, its practical application indicated that learner independence is still developing. Teacher 1 explained that students often "wait for the teacher's direction before starting the activity," showing uncertainty in working without explicit instructions. This reliance suggests that habits from previous teacher-centered practices may still influence learning behaviors. Teacher 2 also noted that students with lower English proficiency tend to "ask their friends who are more capable to guide them," indicating a form of peer support but still limited self-initiation.

Observation records documented moments where students hesitated to engage unless the teacher modeled examples or clarified task expectations. This finding resonates with Wahyudin et al. (2024), who emphasized that independent learning must be gradually cultivated through structured guidance and a deliberate transfer of responsibility. Therefore, while curriculum identifies that independence as a goal, its successful implementation relies on teachers providing the necessary scaffolding that enables students to progressively build confidence and autonomy.

One area of consistent effectiveness was the curriculum's flexibility in adapting learning objectives to diverse student needs. Both teachers successfully modified lesson goals based on diagnostic assessments, ensuring outcomes remained realistic and attainable. This approach supports Hossain (2024) recommendation that meaningful learning can be achieved when instruction is carefully aligned with students' language levels and educational backgrounds. The alignment between objectives and student activities in this study confirms *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s support for personalized, learner-centered education.

Technology integration also contributed positively to instruction. Teachers used digital tools like Canva, Wordwall, and Quizziz to enrich classroom activities and maintain student interest. Yet, infrastructural problems often disrupted lessons. Issues such as poor internet access, faulty equipment, and limited classroom resources hindered implementation. Mali et al. (2023) observed a similar situation, reporting that despite national policy promoting digital learning, infrastructure gaps remain widespread in many Indonesian schools.

Several implementation challenges were also observed. Teachers expressed the need for more practical and continuous training to implement Kurikulum Merdeka effectively. Teacher 1 explained that although she joined webinars and online workshops, “sometimes it is still difficult when applying it into real classrooms” because the training is not always context specific. Teacher 2 shared similar concerns, stating that he preferred to “ask other teachers if I experience difficulties,” which indicates reliance on informal support networks due to limited formal guidance.

Most professional development opportunities were limited to online modules, which teachers felt lacked meaningful interaction and opportunities to clarify questions regarding classroom practice. These findings support Alicea et al. (2025), who emphasized that school-based learning communities enable teachers to reflect, share ideas, and collaboratively overcome instructional difficulties. In this study, the absence of structured mentorship led teachers to depend heavily on informal peer discussions. While beneficial, these interactions could not fully replace sustained professional support that offers feedback and models of effective implementation.

To address these challenges, policymakers should focus on strengthening existing school-level mentoring systems, providing hands-on coaching, and designing workshops that explicitly tailored to the needs of English classrooms within Islamic school contexts. Such measures may ensure the goals of Kurikulum Merdeka translate more consistently into daily teaching.

Responding to student diversity also proved challenging. Teachers had to design multiple activity versions to accommodate different skill levels and manage mixed-ability groups, increasing their workload. Hymel & Katz (2019) and Rogahang et al. (2024) highlighted that supporting student diversity requires both instructional resources and emotional support to maintain inclusive learning environments.

Assessment practices posed additional difficulties. Although the curriculum promotes formative and reflective evaluation, teachers found it hard to develop fair and consistent tools in the absence of clear institutional guidelines. Olson & Krysiak (2021) and Panadero et al. (2023) need for transparent rubrics and standardized assessment protocols to avoid inconsistency. In their absence, teachers risk relying on subjective judgments, leading to variations in grading and feedback.

Despite these barriers, the study identified several best practices. Teachers effectively used real-world materials and adjusted instruction based on students’ learning styles, which helped create dynamic and engaging classrooms. Informal collaboration between teachers was another strength. By sharing experiences and strategies, they addressed challenges creatively and built confidence in trying new approaches. Baltzersen (2023) and Coppe (2024) found that peer networks play an important role in helping teachers navigate curriculum change.

Teachers also demonstrated strong personal initiative toward professional growth. They participated in webinars, joined online communities, and independently sought new teaching resources. Germuth (2018) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) emphasized that

ongoing learning enables teachers to stay reflective and responsive during educational transitions. The teachers in this study exemplified this proactive attitude.

Student-centered instruction was also consistently applied. Both teachers allowed learners to choose activities based on their interests and abilities, promoting autonomy and motivation. This encouraged active participation, collaboration, and communication. Wu & Albert (2024) and Schoots-Snijder et al. (2025) argued that student agency, combined with relevant tasks, is essential for meaningful language learning, particularly in learner-centered environments like *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

In conclusion, this study offers insights into the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* within English language classrooms at an Islamic secondary school. The findings highlight that the curriculum holds strong potential to enrich student engagement, foster authentic communication, and encourage flexible instructional practices that align with learner needs. However, successful implementation relies on addressing ongoing barriers related to teacher readiness, insufficient technological infrastructure, and inconsistent interpretations of assessment criteria. Therefore, priority actions include strengthening practical teacher training programs, expanding access to classroom technology, and establishing structured school-based professional development to encourage collaborative learning among educators.

Future research should involve larger samples and multiple school contexts to examine how institutional differences influence implementation outcomes. Longitudinal studies may also be valuable in evaluating the long-term development of learner autonomy and English language proficiency under *Kurikulum Merdeka*. With continued support and policy refinement, the curriculum can more effectively achieve its goals and contribute to sustainable improvement in English language teaching.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explored the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English language teaching at an Islamic secondary school. The findings showed that the curriculum supports student engagement, promotes student-centered learning, and enables teachers to adjust lesson objectives based on learner needs. Students became more motivated when learning activities matched their interests, as Teacher 1 noted that even those who “usually sleep in class now want to learn,” especially during interactive tasks. The integration of real-life themes and authentic materials also helped students participate more confidently. Teacher 2 explained that students are more active when lessons allow them to talk about “issues happening around us”. Technology tools such as games and videos encouraged excitement and collaboration, making English more meaningful and relevant in daily life.

Despite these strengths, challenges such as limited teacher training, infrastructure gaps, and unclear assessment practices affected implementation. Some reliance on traditional methods also persisted. Even so, teachers employed effective strategies, including differentiated instruction, informal collaboration, and ongoing professional development, which demonstrate their commitment to curriculum goals. This study contributes context-specific evidence from Islamic secondary education, showing how curriculum principles are adapted to promote active learning in ELT.

Based on these findings, this study recommends improving context-based teacher training, strengthening school infrastructure, and providing clearer assessment guidelines. Teachers expressed that support must be practical and tailored, as Teacher 1 explained that she still “needs more guidance to apply it into real classrooms” despite attending online training. Reliable technological facilities are also required to sustain interactive English

lessons, since Teacher 2 noted he sometimes had to “replace activities with what is available” when facing equipment limitations. These insights emphasize the importance of school-level policies that ensure both professional development and appropriate learning tools are consistently accessible.

Future research should explore implementation practices across different regions, school levels, and Islamic education contexts to offer a more comprehensive national picture. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine how teachers’ instructional strategies and students’ independence develop over time, particularly in relation to integrating religious and language learning goals within *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

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