

## Navigating the Merdeka Curriculum in EFL Class at Islamic Junior High School: Teachers' Perception and Challenges

Abas Rosadi<sup>1</sup>, Condro Nur Alim<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> *Master Education of English Department, Muhammadiyah University of Purwokerto, Indonesia*

*abas.rosa82@gmail.com<sup>1</sup> & condronuralimcondronuralim@gmail.com<sup>2</sup>*

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### Abstract

*This research investigates EFL teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum (MC) in State Islamic Junior High Schools (SIJHS) in Purbalingga regency, focusing on implementation challenges and solutions. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from six EFL teachers through interviews, classroom observations, field notes, and document analysis. Findings indicate that (1) teachers held positive perceptions of the MC, but (2) faced challenges due to limited understanding of the curriculum, delayed implementation, and difficulties navigating the Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM), exacerbated by insufficient motivation and lack of mandatory regulations for its use. To address these issues, the study recommends teacher training on effective MC implementation, collaboration through district teacher study groups (MGMP), meaningful teaching processes, regular evaluations, and intensive guidance to engage with PMM. These measures can enhance self-directed learning, teacher professionalism, independent learning, webinar participation, and overall professional development, facilitating successful MC implementation.*

*Keywords: challenges; English as a foreign teacher; merdeka curriculum*

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## 1. Introduction

English has been a compulsory subject in Indonesian secondary schools since 2006 (Minister of National Education Regulation No. 23 of 2006). This makes English the third language for most Indonesians and the second language for those who only speak Indonesian (Zein *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, in Indonesia, teachers who teach English in the classroom are called EFL teachers. Consequently, the existence of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers is becoming increasingly important. EFL teachers are required to be able to create a conducive learning environment for students to master English effectively.

In pursuit of a conducive learning environment, the Indonesian government has consistently implemented curriculum reforms. This ongoing process of curriculum revision reflects a commitment to adapting educational practices to contemporary societal and technological advancements (Fakih Khusni *et al.*, 2022; Mardiana & Umiarso, 2020). Illustrative examples include the 2006 School-Based Curriculum (KTSP), the 2013 Curriculum, and the current Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) Curriculum, which is currently in effect (Fakih Khusni *et al.*, 2022; Mardiana & Umiarso, 2020). Each curriculum iteration represents a strategic effort to enhance educational outcomes in response to the dynamic and evolving global landscape.

With the recent implementation of the MC in Indonesia, all schools nationwide are mandated to adhere to its regulations. However, unfortunately, State Islamic Junior High School (SIJHS) is lagging behind in adopting this new curriculum. This delay has resulted in numerous challenges and obstacles faced by teachers at SIJHS. On the other hand, the MC's design, which emphasizes critical thinking skills (problem-solving, creativity) alongside emotional and social skills (Aditomo, 2024), must be effectively implemented in SIJHS.

Students need to be innovative and creative, as well as understand themselves and their emotions. To achieve this, the government needs to instill Pancasila values, strong communication skills, and prepare students to work with diverse cultures and learn from other countries. In short, teachers at SIJHS need to adapt to the MC because they must prepare students to face the challenges and opportunities of the future (Aditomo, 2024).

Furthermore, in light of the rapid advancements in technology, educators are increasingly expected to integrate technological tools seamlessly into their pedagogical practices. Given the dominance of English within the technological sphere, contemporary English language teachers are not only required to possess a comprehensive understanding of subject matter but also to demonstrate proficiency in harnessing diverse technological resources to cultivate engaging and effective learning experiences.

Teachers play a pivotal role in curriculum implementation (Nasution, 2022; Suryaman, 2020; Tedjokoemo *et al.*, 2021). They need to be dynamic, enthusiastic, and skilled in creating a positive learning environment (Hadi, 2021). Teachers must also be adept at classroom management and fostering positive relationships with students. They should leverage diverse technological tools to enhance their teaching methods. English language teachers, in particular, must have a thorough understanding of the implementation and objectives of the MC, which emphasizes the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration, as well as the integration of technology into learning. English teachers need to master various digital tools and platforms to support English language learning. By understanding the implementation of the MC, teachers can effectively integrate technology into the learning process.

Beyond technological proficiency, educators are also challenged to deeply understand their learners. The MC emphasizes a student-centered approach to learning. Aditomo (2024) further underscores that this student-centered approach makes learning more participatory, relevant, and engaging, thereby boosting student motivation. This curriculum prioritizes the holistic development of students' moral principles, preparing them to become individuals of both strong character and

intellectual prowess. This approach focuses on mapping students' learning styles and readiness through initial non-cognitive assessments. This can create a meaningful and enjoyable learning experience.

In addition to understanding students' learning styles, educators must continuously assess their own capabilities and adapt to the latest developments in education, particularly those driven by the Merdeka Belajar initiative (Jalinus *et al.*, 2021). Proactive, self-directed learning educators should instill moral principles in students, especially in the face of rapid technological advancements (Purnamawati *et al.*, 2019). Teachers must consistently evaluate their teaching practices and address any shortcomings or weaknesses (Fakih Khusni *et al.*, 2022). Subsequently, teachers can then create tailored learning plans and implement diverse learning strategies.

In implementing appropriate learning strategies within the MC, teachers at SIJHS face several obstacles. These include a low level of understanding of the MC concepts among teachers, coupled with inadequate preparation for the implementation of this new curriculum. This situation arises from the delayed adoption of the MC in SIJHS and the lack of mandatory regulations for accessing the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM). Consequently, teachers perceive the platform as difficult to navigate and lacking in motivational appeal.

Given the relatively recent implementation of the MC and the ongoing adaptation process among English teachers SIJHS, a significant number of EFL teachers encounter challenges in its practical application. Recognizing the pivotal role of English teachers in spearheading the implementation of 21st-century learning principles as embodied in the MC, this research seeks to delve into the perceptions, obstacles, and strategies employed by these educators. To this end, the following research questions are formulated:

1. What are the perceptions of English teachers in State Islamic Junior High School in Purbalingga regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum?
2. What challenges do English teachers in State Islamic Junior High School in Purbalingga face in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and how does such challenges affect student-centered approach to learning?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Concept of Merdeka Curriculum**

Merdeka Curriculum (MC) offers a variety of extracurricular learning opportunities, with content that is optimized to provide every student with the opportunity to hone their conceptual understanding and build their competencies. Teachers are able to choose from a variety of teaching approaches during the teaching process, allowing students to be tailored to fulfill their individual learning requirements and interest. Thus, in order to promote independence, adaptability, and improvisation in both teaching and learning, learning freedom is necessary (Aditomo, 2024). Zahro and Lutfi also added that point of "Freedom" in MC offers pressure-free learning to encourage students to gain information and optimize their experience in the learning process (Hadi, 2021). Similarly, a key component of MC is the opportunity to learn freely and creatively. In order to give their students the greatest educational possible, teachers are also obliged to employ a variety of teaching methods.

MC's program created a fun learning atmosphere. Merdeka Belajar refers to an educational process that must create a pleasant atmosphere for students, teachers, parents, and everyone (Mardiana, D. & Umiarso U., 2020). Students get changed to learn freely, calmly, relax and happily without stress and pressure (Fakih et.al, 2022). By allowing teachers to choose how to present the curriculum or teach using techniques that are in line with their students' competencies, Merdeka belajar aims to maximize the potential of both teachers and students while also improving the quality of learning. Moreover, realizing freedom for students and teacher to think creatively and innovative and have responsibility to make teaching and learning process in pleasant atmosphere.

## 2.2 English Learning Achievement in the Merdeka Curriculum

English is the most widely used international language in the world of business, education, trade, law, tourism, international relations, health and technology. Students who study English have the opportunity to interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds around the world. Such students will have more opportunities to interact with multiple literatures if they can speak and understand English. Therefore, students will pick up knowledge, learn a variety of abilities, and human behavior from these encounters that will enable them to function in a multicultural society.

Based on the Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning, Teaching Assessment (CEFR), students must exhibit a minimum of six English language abilities which consist of listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and presenting in an integrated manner in various types of text (Ormond, 2017). It reflects students' abilities to communicate in a variety of contexts and with clear articulation, to explain the major concepts in a complete manner, and to continue communicating even when there are occasional gaps in their English language skills. It is anticipated that studying English in secondary school will enable students to acquire the necessary life skills, including the capacity to communicate in English.

## 2.3 English as a Foreign Language

EFL is short for English as a Foreign Language. Frequently it is interchanged with ESL (Masic & Becivoric, 2021) which is short for English as a Second Language. In the particular school that was subject to the survey explored in the following chapters, English is taught as “the first living foreign language” (Lehrplan, 2018). Although this description might be found in the Merdeka curriculum, it does not have much to do with the reality of students, who are from diverse backgrounds and oftentimes speak at least two languages fluently before entering the school system. For them, English is sometimes the third, fourth, or fifth language that they learn. Therefore, the decision was made to go forward in using EFL as the target term.

## 2.4. Theoretical Frameworks

Recent studies (Kemendikbudristek, 2023; Fatma & Ratmanida, 2023; Rakhmah *et al.*, 2023) indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum (MC) is designed to support flexible, student-centered learning in the 21st century. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, MC emphasizes differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2017) and project-based learning (PjBL) (Rambe & Suganda, 2023). However, differentiated instruction remains challenging to implement due to limited resources, highlighting the need for teacher training and material development (Tomlinson, 2017). Meanwhile, the application of PjBL in EFL has been shown to foster positive student perceptions of MC implementation (Rambe & Suganda, 2023). Students become more motivated, engaged, and develop critical thinking skills through project-based tasks, while teachers actively facilitate the learning process with greater enthusiasm (Rambe & Suganda, 2023). Fatma and Ratmanida (2023) further note that teachers acknowledge the benefits of differentiated and project-based learning in aligning with the Pancasila Student Profile, demonstrating its positive impact on learners.

In addition to student-centered learning and PjBL, advancements in technology necessitate the integration of digital tools and internet-based learning to fully optimize MC implementation. Effective and strategic use of technology can enhance the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of instruction. Engaging digital media fosters a dynamic learning community in the classroom, boosting student motivation and teacher professionalism. Classrooms utilizing diverse multimedia resources exhibit greater interactivity and liveliness (Hanifah & Astuti, 2020).

However, recent research (Darwin *et al.*, 2024) reveals several challenges teachers face in implementing MC: (1) low student participation, negatively affecting literacy and numeracy development; (2) difficulties in integrating thematic materials; (3) obstacles in motivating students, selecting appropriate methods, and providing adequate learning media; (4) insufficient understanding of

MC's structural framework; and (5) limited access to digital resources such as the Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM). Additionally, teachers struggle with assessing student progress. To address these issues, educators independently develop teaching aids and adapt instructional methods to student needs despite resource constraints.

Given this theoretical framework, this study investigates teachers' perceptions of MC implementation in EFL instruction at Islamic junior high schools (MTs Negeri) in Purbalingga Regency. Recent findings (Telaumbanua, 2024) suggest that while teachers hold positive views of MC principles—such as teacher autonomy and student-focused learning—they often feel unprepared due to inadequate training. Teachers must possess the ability to design and implement curricula and lesson plans to enhance instructional quality. Currently, socialization and specialized training on integrating the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5)* within MC remain suboptimal. These findings align with the present study, wherein Islamic school teachers encounter adaptation challenges stemming from limited comprehension and motivation.

Merdeka Curriculum (MC)	
➔ Principles	: Student-Centered, PJBL, Differentiated Learning/ Instruction, ICT, Kompetensi Holistik
➔ Challenges	: Teacher Understanding, Digital Infrastructure, Regulations
➔ Solutions	: Teacher Training, MGMP Collaboration, PMM Mentoring
➔ Outcomes	: Enhanced Teacher Professionalism & Effective MC Implementation

### 3. Research Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of a subject based on the human perspective. Following Creswell (2014) and Suwartono (2014), this approach focuses on understanding participants' thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs through non-quantifiable means. Researchers develop questions, gather data, analyze inductively to build general themes and interpret the significance of their findings.

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study was descriptive qualitative. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a method for investigating and comprehending the significance that individuals or groups attach to a social human situation. The research process entails developing questions and processes, gathering data from participants, analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes, and creating interpretations of significant data.

In addition, this qualitative research uses purposive qualitative sampling, while purposive sampling is practical in this study since it takes into account subject and location, which are crucial for comprehending the primary issue that arises in the field. Afterward, the researchers applied homogenous purposive sampling techniques that are highly suitable for the current phenomenon.

#### 3.2 Participants

The researchers asked the respondents/ EFL teachers to collect and record lessons and lesson plans. The researcher contacted six English teachers by phone, recorded their teaching, and obtained their informed consent to participate. A meeting was convened to solicit the direct participation of the six teachers in the research and six English classes which consist of 35 students for each class. The total amount of students are 210 students. Following a thorough explanation of the research aims and the securing of informed consent, each teacher completed a formal participation consent form. In protecting their privacy, pseudonyms were used, and no identifying personal information was shared (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Table 1.** EFL teachers' Participation in the phases of data collection

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Practicum Placement (Pseudonym)	Teaching Experience	Teacher Certification (TC)
Anggita	F	MTs N A	19 years old	In-Service TC (PPG Daljab)
Bella	F	MTs N A	25 years old	In-Service TC (PPG Daljab)
Catur	M	MTs N B	30 years old	In-Service TC (PPG Daljab)
Denisa	F	MTs N B	20 years old	In-Service TC (PPG Daljab)
Enggar	F	MTs N C	12 years old	In-Service TC (PPG Daljab)
Falisya	F	MTs N C	3 years old	Pre-Service TC (PPG Prajabatan)

Table 1 explains that the selection of the six teachers was conducted through purposive sampling and recommendations from the chairperson of the English Subject Teachers' Working Group (MGMP) for State Islamic Junior High Schools (MTs Negeri) in Purbalingga.

### 3.3 Instruments

The data collection steps employed by the reserachers are as follows: 1) Classroom Observation with Field Notes: The researchers conducted classroom observations during the implementation of the MC, utilizing field notes to document significant events that occurred within the classroom. Additionally, the researchers take part in events and record the data. Due to, the researchers are concerned with observing and taking notes during the observation activities. Through observations, the MC's implementation in EFL lessons was noted. The data collected during observations was constrained by an observation sheet. Six English teachers participated in two rounds of observations to document how the MC was used in EFL classes. Additionally, a few things were considered crucial that should be noted, such as the researcher's initial. Secondly, the researchers saw how the teachers used the MC to teach English. Finally, the researchers observed how teachers used the MC to assess their students' English instruction. Thus, the observation activities provided the researcher's expected outcome.

2) Interviews: Data was collected through interviews to understand the perspectives and viewpoints of teachers regarding the MC. The interviews also aimed to gather information on the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the curriculum and how they addressed these challenges within the classroom. The researchers conduct an interview, which consists of asking participants an open-ended interview on a flexible rather than rigid form. Additionally, to make participants feel more relaxed when administering these questions, the researchers briefly pose a natural question during the interview portion. The researchers interviewed the teachers one-on-one to learn about their thoughts and expectations regarding the MC's implementation. Moreover, a cell phone was used to record the interviews, which were then transcribed.

The last is documents. The documents used in this study included not only photographs but also students' worksheets, teaching modules and lesson plans that were designed to provide the guidance for teachers on the implementation of the MC. The students' worksheets are collected to monitor their results, does the implementation of the MC combined with ICT utilization enhance students' learning outcomes in English language education. Additionally, the lesson plan outlines the teacher's strategy,

media, and teaching techniques for implementing MC in an EFL class. For researchers, these are incredibly beneficial.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Following a comprehensive data collection process encompassing classroom observations (with accompanying field notes), interviews, and document analysis, the researcher undertook data analysis. Thematic analysis was employed, a method involving distinct phases. Phases 1 and 2 comprised familiarization and coding of the data. Phases 3 through 5 focused on theme development, refinement, and nomenclature. Phase 6 involved the compilation of the written report (V. Braun *et al.*, 2016).

To fully understand and engage in the first phase, familiarization, the researchers read the content several times. Coding is the next level. The researchers then organized the data into numerous classifications. The final phase is writing up. Following the meeting, the researcher compiled and edited earlier written analytical work to provide a comprehensive report on the problems and methods for MC implementation.

Therefore, analyzing textual or paragraph-based data is the aim of qualitative data analysis. The process of interpreting textual and visual data is known as data analysis. It entails getting the data ready for analysis, performing several analyses, understanding the data better, presenting the data, and interpreting the data's broader significance. In administering this research, the researchers conducted the analysis a viewpoint on topics like classification and setting, data collection. Saldana & Omasta (2014) state that there are three processes involved in data analysis, including: 1) Condensation of Data; 2) Data Display; and 3) Drawing and Verifying Conclusions. Moreover, field notes, interview transcripts, publications, and other empirical concerns pertaining to the research topic were among the data that the researcher started to choose, simplify, abstract, alter, and refine during the data condensation process. Finally, the researcher condensed the summary result for use in the data display.

Furthermore, researcher conducted data display. The researcher then supplied the data content results, such as the implementation of the MC and English teachers' opinions and challenges for teaching English using this new curriculum. Finally, the researcher drew verification conclusions.

A conclusion is made after reviewing the data collection results and gaining a thorough understanding. The researcher then checked the data by comparing it to both new and previously disclosed data that were used to draw conclusions regarding the implementation of the new curriculum as well as English teachers' opinions and challenges for teaching English based on the MC.

### **3.5 Data Validity and Reliability**

The researchers employed triangulation data to ensure data validity in qualitative study. Triangulation is used in qualitative research to assure data validity. Moreover, the participants of this research are 210 students and six English teachers. The triangulation methodology involves combining data from observation, interviews, and document reviews.

The researchers employed triangulation to cross-check data from several sources and compare the results, verifying that the data yielded the same outcome. Overall, triangulation is an effective approach for assuring the authenticity of qualitative data (Cresswell, 2014).

Furthermore, the researchers employed various strategies to mitigate research bias during observation or interviews. These strategies include: 1) formulated specific and focused research questions prior to commencing observation or interviews; 2) developed a structured and consistent list of questions or observation points; 3) maintained neutrality by refraining from exhibiting personal attitudes or opinions that could influence the respondents or subjects of observation; 4) employed open-ended questions to allow respondents to answer without constraints; 5) meticulously recorded all relevant information with detail and accuracy; 6) used assistive tools such as audio or video recorders to ensure that no crucial information is overlooked; 7) reviewed the researchers' notes immediately after

the observation or interview to ensure no information is missed; 8) evaluated potential factors that may influence the researcher's interpretation of the data; 9) employed triangulation by comparing data from various sources (e.g., observations, interviews, documents). This multi-faceted approach provides a more holistic view of the phenomenon under study, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. By diligently implementing these strategies, researchers can minimize bias during observation or interviews, thereby enhancing the rigor and trustworthiness of their research outcomes.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 EFL teachers' perception towards the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum

Teacher perceptions, encompassing beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about their roles, responsibilities, teaching, and learning environment (Hung & Li, 2017), are influenced by personal background and beliefs, and subsequently impact teaching effectiveness and student engagement. Therefore, the researchers conducted the interview and got the data revealed by six EFL teachers regarding teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the MC in State Islamic Junior High School, the findings are as follows:



Figure 1. Teachers' creativity in conducting ICT in the classrooms

Figure 1 illustrates the difficulties encountered in implementing the MC. Teachers are expected to utilize technology in the classroom, yet internet connectivity in schools is often inadequate. Consequently, teachers are frequently compelled to use their personal data plans to facilitate the teaching process. Furthermore, teachers face challenges related to time efficiency. For instance, in classrooms lacking built-in projectors, teachers must take it to the office, set them up, and then search for a stable internet connection. This process can be difficult for older teachers. Therefore, it is hoped that in the future, the government will provide internet access for each school and equip every classroom with LCD projectors, thereby eliminating obstacles to effective classroom teaching and learning process.

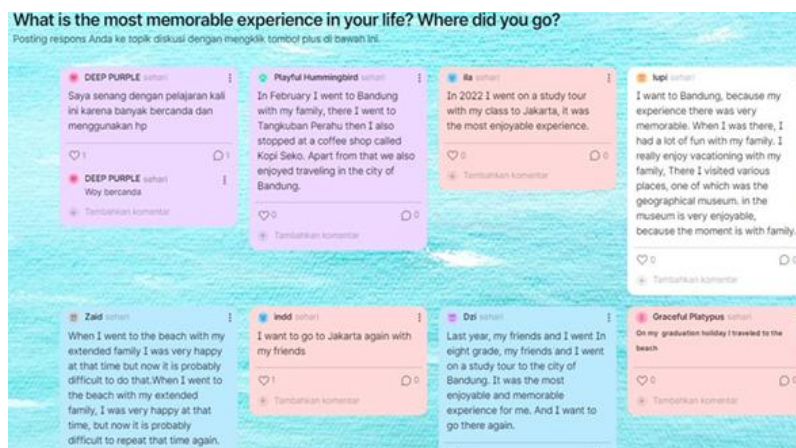


Figure 2. Students' response in implementing Merdeka Curriculum through ICT

Figure 2 describes students' initial introduction to the Padlet application and their experience learning to use it. They were asked to share their feelings about this learning method. The results indicate that students are highly enthusiastic about lessons that incorporate mobile phones or other ICT tools. They view mobile phones as a source of enjoyment, and integrating them into lessons that connect with their emotions and social-emotional development contributes to meaningful learning experiences.

However, the school's remote location poses a challenge, as it lacks a stable internet connection. This makes it difficult to fully implement MC through the use of Information and Technology Communication lessons.



**Figure 3.** Students' Centered Learning in Merdeka Curriculum implementation

Figure 3 explains that one of the characteristics of implementing the MC is student-centered learning. This approach prioritizes the needs, interests, and learning styles of students. It shifts the focus of learning from the teacher as the primary source of information to students as active participants in their learning journey. In a student-centered learning (SCL) environment, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, explore topics in depth, and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The student-centered approach has been the center of attention in teaching and learning as the emphasis to shift away from the teacher-centered approach is growing (Tang, 2023).

Based on the illustrations described in photos 1-3, the implementation of the MC has a positive impact on the learning environment, for both teachers and students. Examples of these positive impacts are: students experience more meaningful learning, teachers become more creative and innovative in delivering learning materials, both students and teachers implement ICT-based learning, and one more important thing is that learning in this MC is more student-centered. However, there are also many obstacles experienced by students and teachers, namely unstable internet connections, so students and teachers have to use their own internet data. There is also a lack of school facilities to support the implementation of the ICT-based MC, and a lack of training for older teachers in implementing the MC in the classroom.

On the other hand, by understanding teachers' perspectives, researchers can identify the specific challenges they face in implementing the MC. These include difficulties in understanding new material, lack of resources, or problems in adapting teaching methods to the MC approach. After the challenges are identified, researchers directly ask respondents about solutions that can be developed to overcome these problems. For example, if teachers find it difficult to understand new material, the government should provide training or additional resources. If the problem is a lack of resources, the government can provide the necessary materials or tools. Teachers who feel supported and have a good understanding of the MC will be more confident and motivated in teaching. This will ultimately have a positive impact on student learning outcomes.

In addition, teachers' perspectives are also important for evaluating and continuously improving the MC. Feedback from teachers can provide valuable information about what works well and what needs to be improved in the curriculum. Understanding teachers' perspectives allows readers or the government to provide professional support tailored to their needs. This support can take the form of training, mentoring, or discussion forums where teachers can share experiences and learn from each other. By understanding the perspectives of English teachers, teachers can create a better learning environment for teachers and students, and ensure that the MC is implemented effectively.

**Table 2.** EFL teachers' perceptions towards the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum

No	Perceptions	Participants
1	Enhanced teachers' creativity and development	Ang, Bel, Cat, Fal
2	Students-Centered learning	Ang, Bel, Cat, Den, Eng, Fal
3	Encouraged to use digital technology to enhance learning	Bel, Cat, Eng, Fal
4	More meaningful learning	Ang, Bel, Den, Eng, Fal

Enhanced teachers' creativity and development. The MC encourages teachers to think outside the box and find creative ways to teach. This could involve using audio or video, visual aids, or providing kinesthetic learners with opportunities to learn through movement and hands-on activities. Ilmi and Wuli Fitriati (2020) point out that teachers are very important and need to have a good understanding of their subject and be aware of what is going on in the classroom to do their job well.

Ang said that *"the implementation of the MC is a positive step because it enhances teachers' competence in delivering instruction. On the other hand, it also challenges teachers to be creative in presenting engaging learning experiences"*. *"Students also become highly creative when they have to compile portfolio or individual assignments"* added Bel. However, Fal as a new teacher with three years of experience said, *"I find it challenging to fully implement the MC. I'm still learning how to be a creative teacher in the classroom. I believe the MC is a good approach, but it needs to be accompanied by training and an assessment of teachers' readiness to implement it effectively"*.

Based on the statements explained in interview section, creative and well-developed teachers are essential for engaging learning. Encouraging innovation helps teachers adapt to students' diverse needs, creating a student-centered environment with interactive learning. This empowers students, leading to deeper understanding. In turn, student-centered learning provides teachers valuable insights, creating a mutually beneficial and more effective learning experience for everyone.

Students-Centered learning. To improve educational quality, the MC encourages student-centered learning, replacing traditional teacher-centered methods with active student participation and a focus on developing critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and self-reliance. A student-centered approach considers the entire learning environment—including content, culture, community, and teaching methods—and prioritizes individual learners and their unique learning styles, drawing upon constructivist learning theories (Hoidn, Sabine & Reusser, Kurt, 2021).

Den said that *"The MC encourages students to be more active participants in their learning. Teachers act as facilitators and guides, allowing students the freedom to choose their preferred learning styles and methods"*. Bel added that *"Learning with the MC is significantly different from the previous curriculum. I feel that it truly encourages students to learn independently, according to their own interests and learning styles"*. In the other hand, Cat believe that *"Traditional lecture methods are not always necessary. However, we also face the challenge of ensuring that students learn independently in a conducive environment. Since they learn according to their individual learning styles, teachers need to provide a variety of resources and support to ensure they receive the best possible learning experience"*.

Student-centered learning emphasizes active participation and personalized learning experiences. This approach can be significantly enhanced through the strategic integration of digital technology. Encouraged to use digital technology to enhance English language learning within the MC.

Encouraged to use digital technology to enhance learning. The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the MC is ideally suited for student-centered learning. As technology and digital information advance rapidly, the role of ICT in education becomes increasingly crucial, a trend that will continue to grow and evolve in the 21st century (Hidayat & Khotimah, 2019).

Bel believed that *“the integration of technology in the MC ensures that students stay current with the times, as we live in a world where everything is increasingly digital”*. Eng further emphasizes that *“to facilitate effective access to digital materials for both educators and learners, the government should prioritize the enhancement of internet connectivity throughout Indonesia”*. She highlighted that *“the internet infrastructure in Purbalingga, in particular, experiences frequent instability, which can impede the learning process due to time spent waiting for a stable connection”*.

Based on the interview responses, we know that encouraged to use digital technology to enhance learning, students actively engaged with the material in ways that led to a more meaningful learning experience. More meaningful learning. Meaningful learning encourages students to construct their own knowledge by building upon their prior knowledge and integrating it with new information they are learning. Ausubel’s learning theory stresses the importance of relating new information with existing knowledge. According to the theory, meaningful learning occurs once the learners are able to make sense of and integrate new information into the existing knowledge structures (Rahmah, 2018). Meaningful learning encourages students to analyze information, question assumptions, and form their own conclusions which one of characteristics in MC (Critical-thinking learner).

Fal stated that *“meaningful learning empowers students to grasp the subject matter taught by their teachers more deeply. Students who fully absorb the learning process gain confidence in expressing and presenting what they have learned”*. In the other side, Ang supported that *“enjoyable learning makes it easier for students to understand the material and can improve their academic performance”*.

While the MC fostered more meaningful learning experiences for many students, teachers also encountered significant challenges during its implementation. In conclusion, the teachers add that the implementation of the MC would be even better and more successful if it were accompanied by a strong sense of readiness and understanding from both teachers and students in embracing this new curriculum. This readiness implies that if the resources available to teachers at State Islamic Junior High School (SIJHS) were improved, it would minimize the challenges they currently face. The writer hopes that by highlighting the challenges in implementing the MC, this will draw the government’s attention to the need for greater support for its implementation in SIJHS.

#### **4.2 EFL teachers’ challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum**

This research revealed challenges encountered by teachers during MC implementation, they are:

No	Challenges	Participants
1	Lack understanding of Merdeka Curriculum	Ang, Bel, Cat, Den, Eng, Fal
2	Less preparation in facing Merdeka Curriculum	Ang, Cat, Den, Fal
3	The implementation of diverse assessment methods	Ang, Bel, Cat, Eng
4	Constraints in infrastructure and limited access to technology	Bel, Cat, Den, Eng, Fal

Based on Rizaldi and Fatimah, 2022 stated that MC has good characteristics and it is very supportive as a form of efforts by all parties to restore the quality of education. Lack understanding of MC. It also empowers adaptable curriculum design, driving project-based learning and focusing on essential content (Rizaldi & Fatimah, 2022). It means that their point of view in MC implementation has good impact on both of students and teachers. Fal said that *“actually my opinion about the implementation of MC is better than K-13 (13th Curriculum). In the MC, teachers are asked to continue to innovate so that learning can be fun, deep learning and meaningful learning. One of the innovations that I have done is to provide worksheets or activity sheets based on riddle questions that ask students to give their answers in groups. This, in my opinion, is also important to increase the sense of togetherness”*. Ang also supported Fal’s views, she said that *“the implementation of the MC is excellent for supporting the development of the current era, where learning is also recommended to use technology. This is actually what is a little hampered because school facilities and infrastructure are not yet complete or adequate. For example, to use an LCD, we have to bring it from the Administration room and it takes a long time. Not to mention the time to install the LCD. So according to us, the government must prioritize infrastructure or complete school facilities regularly so that the implementation of the MC can run smoothly and can support student learning to be more enjoyable.”*

On the other hand, the implementation of the MC at school A makes it difficult for teachers who implement the curriculum. in reality, the implementation of this curriculum has made EFL teachers confused, according to Bel. Bel stated that *“they need a handbook from the government, similar to the previous curriculum”*. Eng supports this, stating that *“she also needs a handbook because it greatly assists teachers in implementing the MC. Many teachers have expressed the opinion that if this curriculum is truly “Merdeka” (independent), does it mean that teachers are expected to find all their learning resources independently?”* Eng ultimately found a handbook for grade 8 but this presented a challenge for her. Ang added that *“this is now the second year of implementation, but she still finds herself carefully selecting which books to use in her teaching under the MC”*. *“Teachers are still very much in the process of adapting to the implementation of the MC”* Den said. Cat, a senior teacher, stated that *“it is more challenging for older teachers”*.

The findings of this research align with other studies. Many teachers remain uncertain about the Merdeka Belajar approach, largely due to a lack of understanding regarding its implementation. Despite their confusion, teachers are persistent in seeking solutions (Yuhastina, 2020). This new curriculum differs significantly from its predecessor, granting teachers greater autonomy in managing their own teaching materials. Moreover, a lack of understanding of the MC has led to less preparation among teachers when facing its implementation. This deficiency in preparation further exacerbates the challenges they encounter in adapting to the new curriculum.

Less preparation in facing MC. This school has been implementing the MC for two years now, but ideally, a new curriculum should be thoroughly prepared before being implemented in schools. This is especially crucial for English teachers, as they play a vital role in preparing young generations for a more successful and brighter future (Suwartono & Nitiasih, 2020).

*“To create a great generation, we need great teachers. In this regard, teachers also need thorough preparation in conducting the learning process”*, especially regarding Ang. Den added that, *“indeed, there is no such thing as a perfect change, even though the implementation of the MC has been running for two years now”*. Bel stated that *“the planning was late, with teachers only starting to create lesson plans after the new curriculum was already implemented”*. This statement is reinforced by Cat who said, *“we, as EFLteachers, were very surprised by the implementation of the MC. It was just discussed, then suddenly implemented. The limited time between the information and the implementation left us confused,”* Cat explained. On the other hand, Bel also added that *“teacher training was conducted after the MC was already in progress. There were even teachers who were unable to attend the training, meaning they have yet to participate in the training for the new curriculum. “So, I’m still learning how to implement the MC ideally,”* Bel concluded.

There are many factors that can influence the role of teachers in education. Both internal and external factors can affect teacher performance (Makovec, 2018). Previous research has documented that teachers' preparation in implementing the MC remains in the sufficient category (Apriatni *et al.*, 2023; Deta, 2023; Hamdi *et al.*, 2022). This is due to the lack of detailed explanations regarding the curriculum's implementation, leading to challenges for teachers in its implementation (Hulu *et al.*, 2023; Putra, 2022; Susilowati, 2022). In addition, teacher training on the MC falls under external factors that can significantly contribute to teachers' understanding and teaching quality. However, it is unfortunate that the implementation of the MC training was conducted when teachers were not fully prepared, which can lead to a decline in their enthusiasm.

The implementation of diverse assessment methods. The MC indeed implements diverse assessment methods, aiming to encourage more effective and student-centered learning. This aligns with the MC's goal of creating students who are independent learners, active, and capable of developing their potential (Sriwulandari, 2023). The focus is not just on final assessments, but also on the assessment of the learning process, as this is considered more important than the final assessment. Furthermore, various assessment methods can help teachers assess students comprehensively and maximally.

Next, the MC has empowered all school principals to manage the educational management system in their respective schools, including student assessments. Interview results also revealed that four teachers expressed difficulty in implementing diverse student assessment methods because not all teachers can easily create good assessment instruments. "This poses a unique challenge for older teachers like me," said Cat.

*"Initially, I thought there wouldn't be any complicated assessments, but it turns out that the assessment involves evaluating all aspects, from cognitive and skills to the learning process itself,"* Bel said. Cat added, *"in this curriculum, teachers have to map out the students at the beginning of the learning process by conducting initial assessments"*. Ang further explained, *"there's so much to do in terms of assessment, but until now, there haven't been any specific training sessions for SIJHS teachers regarding the implementation of the MC and its assessment stages"*.

The interview findings indicate that a considerable number of teachers encounter difficulties in implementing diverse assessment methods within the framework of the MC, compounded by constraints in infrastructure and limited access to technology. This presents a substantial challenge for educators, necessitating the identification of an appropriate solution to overcome these obstacles.

Constraints in infrastructure and limited access to technology. Good-quality infrastructure also requires significant investment (Wong and Tang, 2018). The insufficiency of school facilities, specifically the lack of LCD projectors and reliable internet connectivity, presents a considerable challenge for both teachers and students. Given these infrastructural limitations, the effective integration of technology into the teaching process is significantly hampered. This is particularly problematic given the expectation that teachers incorporate ICT into the implementation of the MC.

Interview data revealed the following challenges, Eng reported that *"I face difficulties in presenting PowerPoint presentations due to the absence of LCD projectors in the classroom"*. Cat added *"the challenges of integrating technology effectively, attributing some difficulties to an old teacher factors affecting his technological proficiency"*. Finally, Fal, a relatively less experienced teacher, highlighted *"the detrimental effect of unreliable internet access on student engagement in online quizzes and other technology-based learning activities, noting that connectivity issues frequently disrupt the use of online resources and technology-enhanced learning methods"*.

The analysis of the statements reveals several factors that hinder teachers from effectively integrating technology into their teaching practices. These include a lack of technological proficiency among teachers and inadequate school facilities. This study aims to identify these challenges and propose solutions to enhance the effectiveness of the MC implementation at SIJHS in Purbalingga regency.

## 5. Discussion

The implementation of the MC at State Islamic Junior High School continues to pose challenges for EFL teachers, many of them have lack of comprehensive understanding of the curriculum. Furthermore, the preparation for implementing the curriculum and the limited resources available to EFL teachers present significant obstacles. The challenges faced by teachers should be thoroughly evaluated and addressed with appropriate solutions to maximize the effectiveness of the MC implementation in schools. If teachers have a positive perception of the new curriculum, the next step is to address the specific challenges faced by English teachers at SIJHS in Purbalingga.

Several potential solutions can be considered to facilitate the effective implementation of the MC. One crucial step is to conduct comprehensive training programs specifically designed for EFL teachers. While the government has made available various platforms and resources related to the MC, their effectiveness is contingent upon direct supervision and implementation guidance. The combination of training and ongoing supervision can significantly enhance teacher professionalism in the context of the new curriculum. Professionalism encompasses a multifaceted structure that reflects an individual's professional conduct, commitment, and attainment of high standards in their teaching competence (Suwartono & Nitiasih, 2020).

Therefore, it is best for the government to address the problems faced by teachers so that learning will be more effective. Several obstacles faced by teachers include the difficulty of getting stable internet access because their school is located in a remote area of Purbalingga. This causes the integration of ICT use to be less than perfect due to the difficulty of getting a good signal. The next obstacle is the lack of government attention to infrastructure and school facilities. With the limited school facilities such as LCDs, projectors, school Wifi and supporting cables, students become less enthusiastic in learning. It is better if the school already has complete facilities as described, so as to create learning with the best ice breaking can build students' interest in starting learning. Another obstacle is that many teachers who are elderly or old who do not understand the use of integrated learning with ICT. Supported by the limited human resources possessed by teachers of this age, it makes the obstacles even more increasing. Because of the many obstacles experienced by teachers, there are also several solutions to participate in teacher training to deepen knowledge related to the implementation of the MC.

There are several types of teacher training that can be implemented to deepen the understanding of the implementation of the MC. They are: Merdeka Curriculum Implementation Training, this training focuses on understanding the concepts, structure, and principles of the MC. Teachers will learn about Learning Achievements (CP), Learning Objectives Flow (ATP), and Teaching Modules. This training also discusses assessment and learning evaluation that is in accordance with the MC. Next, is Differentiated Learning Training. This training will help teachers understand how to identify student needs, design flexible learning, and provide appropriate support for each student. The last but not least is the Training on the Use of Technology in Learning, technology is an important part of the MC. This training will equip teachers with the skills to use various digital platforms and applications to support learning in the classroom. Teachers will learn how to create interesting learning content, utilize technology features to interact with students and evaluate the effectiveness of technology use in learning.

Despite the availability of numerous learning resources related to the new curriculum including PMM (Merdeka Mengajar Platform), English teachers often require clarification and confirmation to address their specific concerns and uncertainties. The PMM provides various resources, such as teaching modules, examples of Learning Objective Paths (ATP), example teaching modules, and learning videos that can be accessed for free. Unfortunately, the internet at school is not supportive, hindering the learning of new things that are already available on the platform.

In addition, the approach and implementation of learning communities among teachers can also be improved. This can support teachers in discussing, sharing experiences, and learning from

colleagues. The availability of free webinars and seminars on this platform allows teachers to participate in webinars and seminars held by the Ministry of Education and Culture or other institutions to get the latest information about the Merdeka Curriculum. By participating in relevant training and utilizing various available resources, teachers can deepen their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and implement it effectively in the classroom. This will have a positive impact on the quality of learning and ultimately improve student learning outcomes.

To address the challenges and misperceptions among EFL teachers regarding the MC, it is essential for EFL teachers to gather and discuss the implementation of the curriculum within their schools. This aims to create uniformity and consistency in its application. The implementation of this curriculum still requires discussion among teachers, particularly those teaching the same subject. The establishment of an association or MGMP (Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran) can be a suitable solution.

In MGMP activities, expert EFL teachers can share their expertise and experiences with other teachers who may be struggling to understand the direction and implementation of the curriculum. They can also provide guidance on how to overcome challenges and encounter the obstacles during the implementation of the MC. Teachers benefit significantly from participation in English teacher associations (Atmoko & Kuswando, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to hold MGMP meetings at both the school and district levels. In addition, based on the challenges identified by the respondents, they revealed that the current eighth-grade students have significantly different characteristics. This is because they are the first cohort to experience curriculum change at this SIJHS. Eighth-grade are still at a moderate level of English proficiency. This can be attributed to a lack of teacher understanding and the less-than-ideal application of the curriculum. Consequently, we are implementing solutions that can be applied to the current seventh grade, namely, incorporating meaningful learning into the teaching process.

This research found that four out of six teachers have already implemented a safe, engaging, and meaningful learning environment for students. This positive learning atmosphere has fostered increased motivation and English proficiency among students. The learning environment has a significant impact on student academic performance (Ibem *et al.*, 2017). Teachers can incorporate games or icebreakers at the beginning of lessons or when the learning atmosphere becomes monotonous. Additionally, teachers can connect learning with everyday life, making learning more engaging and meaningful. This allows students to be free and not confined to monotonous learning methods. Students have the freedom to choose their own learning topics based on their interests, learning styles, and abilities throughout the learning process.

The implementation of the MC at SIJHS has been ongoing for almost two years, yet there are still areas that require improvement, particularly regarding the assessment aspect of this curriculum. EFL teachers are conducting evaluations with their peers and fellow teachers, as well as with students. This collaborative approach can significantly enhance the quality of teaching and learning within this new curriculum. Teachers are actively providing constructive criticism and feedback on existing policies related to the curriculum's implementation. Through the evaluation process, teachers can modify their lesson plans and teaching methods to align with student skill levels (Bangkara & Manullang, 2022). To achieve optimal student outcomes, teachers are not only assessing cognitive aspects but also psychomotor skills and attitudes. Furthermore, it would be more effective if teachers could address their organizational challenges related to the MC by providing practical materials related to assessment (Shadri *et al.*, 2023). Ultimately, English teachers still require guidance on the implementation of diverse assessments within the MC.

## **6. Conclusion**

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in State Islamic Junior High School (SIJHS) in Purbalingga hold a positive perception towards the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (MC).

They believe that this curriculum can enhance their creativity and foster students' creativity. The curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, empowering students to express their opinions and choose their learning methods. Importantly, the MC encourages teachers to embrace technology and stay abreast of 21st-century advancements. Students particularly appreciate the meaningful learning approach, which facilitates their academic achievements.

Despite these positive perceptions, teachers have also identified several challenges during the implementation of the MC in SIJHS in Purbalingga. English teachers, as the front line of education, face several obstacles, including a lack of understanding of the curriculum's implementation. This lack of understanding often leads to inadequate preparation for the curriculum's various components. Another challenge is the diverse assessment methods for students, which can be difficult for veteran teachers to navigate. Finally, limited school infrastructure and unreliable internet access pose significant challenges.

Despite these hurdles, English teachers are striving to implement the new curriculum to the best of their abilities. They are employing several solutions, including training programs for teachers to enhance their understanding of the MC and its implementation, particularly focusing on the intensive use of PMM (Platform Merdeka Mengajar). MGMP gatherings among teachers from different schools and districts in Purbalingga provide a platform for sharing best practices and strategies for effective implementation. Creating meaningful learning experiences in the classroom motivates students and improves their academic performance. Finally, peer evaluations and student-teacher evaluations are conducted to continually improve the learning process within the context of this new curriculum.

Throughout the implementation of the MC, teachers have gained valuable experience. Regardless of the challenges they face, EFL teachers are committed to effectively implementing this new curriculum. It is crucial to recognize that teachers are the cornerstone of education, acting as pioneers in student success. The educational landscape today is vastly different from the past. The introduction of the MC provides teachers with the flexibility to create high-quality learning experiences that meet the diverse needs of students. While the full implementation of the MC may not be perfect, all stakeholders are making their best efforts to achieve its goals.

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