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# Exploring the Impact of Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach on English Language Teaching Practices in Indonesian Secondary Schools

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| article info | abstract |
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| | This study examines the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum combined with Deep Learning Approach on English Language Teaching (ELT) at the Indonesian secondary school level. The data in this study were collected using an exploratory mixed-method design. The quantitative data were collected by collecting responses from 11 teachers using a Likert-scale questionnaire, followed by the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with 3 teachers. The results of the study show that teachers consider the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach to be a more organized curriculum, particularly because of its simpler lesson planning framework and focus on conscious, enjoyable, and meaningful learning processes. Teachers also reported positive improvements in student participation and learning attitudes. However, there are still several major challenges related to the use of technology, self-learning, and self-discipline. In general, the shift from the Merdeka Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach shows positive progress in ELT at secondary schools in Indonesia. |

## INTRODUCTION

English serves as a bridge for communication between countries and has had a significant impact on the development of civilization around the world (Atasheva, 2024). In the world of education, English plays an important role in bridging the transfer of knowledge. Unfortunately, English language learning in Indonesia has not been optimal due to a lack of resources, interest, the absence of confirmation that English is recommended for study, and the government's lack of focus on channeling English language skills into education (Harlina & Yusuf, 2020).

These issues are reflected in the EF English Proficiency Index (2024), in which Indonesia ranks the 80th out of 113 countries with a score of 468, categorized as low proficiency, highlighting a gap between national aspirations and reality. To that end, efforts must be made to ensure that English can be learned appropriately and that interest in English can grow.

The education curriculum in Indonesia has changed several times since 2006, focusing on education units (KTSP), then changed to K13 or Kurikulum 2013 in 2013, and finally arrived at the Merdeka Curriculum in 2021, which does not focus anymore on strengthening memory, but rather on the 4Cs, the Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration, Creativity (Wildan, 2025). These skills are not only central to the Merdeka Curriculum but also crucial for equipping Indonesian students to compete in the globalized world. In addition to academic skills, the curriculum also emphasizes empathy, character-building, and social responsibility, and the research done by Voogt & Roblin (2012) has aimed to show how teachers attempt to foster these values in real classroom settings.

In the mid 2025, Merdeka Curriculum has been strengthened by a specific approach called deep learning approach. Specifically, in July 2025, Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education (Permendikdasmen) No. 13 of 2025 was issued, affirming that the Merdeka Curriculum remains the national curriculum framework, while emphasizing the deep learning pedagogical approach. Deep learning in this context places emphasis on deep conceptual understanding, critical thinking, reflection, and real-life application. In the context of English learning, deep learning encourages students not only to acquire linguistic competence but also to develop understanding towards certain things, self-regulation, and reflective-learning skills. Moreover, deep learning brings a new enlightenment for students, from memorization to encouraging students to connect ideas and engaging students in meaningful problem solving, so that the students are aware of how to deal if the situation comes into their life. In English classrooms, it could be the class that is designed to promote students' critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and integrate multidisciplinary skills which help students to deal with their problems in real life.

However, in fact, changes in the curriculum will also require adaptation from educators. This is because educators such as teachers are closely involved in curriculum changes. Teachers can be used as a reference for measuring the success of a policy's objectives. Teachers play an important role in the implementation of ELT. According to Hutchison & Walter in Sudrajat (2015), teachers must have three fundamental things, including: (1) a positive attitude towards the material and content to be delivered, (2) knowledge of the basic principles of teaching and teaching materials, and (3) awareness of their abilities. With these three fundamental principles, it is necessary for educators and curriculum developers to understand and evaluate the impact of the Merdeka curriculum, both positive and negative impact on ELT practices.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the extent to which the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach influences secondary school English teachers' ability to apply a flexible, innovative, and collaborative curriculum. The main objective of this study is to examine how secondary school English teachers view the change in curriculum from one that was initially in reality more teacher-centered to one that is now truly student-centered. This study also examines how these curriculum changes can affect teaching patterns in the classroom, as well as examining the challenges faced by English teachers when implementing the Merdeka curriculum.

Currently, there are many studies discussing curriculum, especially the Merdeka Curriculum. Several studies have investigated a wide range of topics, including the studies done on designing the curriculum and how it is implemented, students' and teachers' readiness, student-centered learning approaches, the use of digital media in learning, assessment methods, challenges schools face at different levels.

Across the 15 studies, those research consistently shows that the Merdeka Curriculum offers greater flexibility, teacher autonomy, and opportunities for student-centered and technology-based learning, leading to higher motivation, engagement, and communicative competence (e.g., (Efendi & Arijanto, 2025; Zahwannisa & Lubis, 2025). Teachers commonly implement project-based, game-based, and digital media strategies, which boost student interest (Novianti, 2023; Pade, 2024), though challenges such as limited resources, uneven digital literacy, inadequate teacher training, and sociocultural barriers persist (Rohmah, 2025; Lestari & Margana, 2024). Some studies emphasize teacher agency and reflective practice as keys to successful curriculum adoption (Surdiyantiningsih et al., 2025), while others highlight gaps in infrastructure, readiness, and material relevance (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Rakhmawati & Imaniar, 2024). The results of the study show that the Merdeka Curriculum has had a significant impact on renewing the way English is taught in Indonesia and encouraging critical thinking

skills among students. The impact of implementing this curriculum varies depending on the creativity of teachers, support from institutions, and conditions around the school.

However, there are still some imperfections that have not been addressed. Previous studies tended to focus more on project-based learning and student-centered learning. The majority of studies only explored teaching methods in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum and teachers' general opinions, rather than exploring the comprehensive application of English teaching methods in the Merdeka Curriculum with a Deep Learning Approach. There are still gaps in the research, such as the transition process from the Merdeka Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum with the Deep Learning Approach in English teaching at the secondary school level, the management of institutional support, and the challenges that may be encountered in secondary schools. This study aims to better understand and supplement the information that is still lacking by analyzing the experiences, strategies, and challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum using an in-depth learning approach in teaching English at the secondary school level.

Unlike previous studies that examined teachers' general views and the application of methods considered suitable for the Merdeka Curriculum, digital media in learning, project-based learning, the use of artificial intelligence (AI), and the development of specific skills that are learning objectives, this study specifically reviews English teaching practices in secondary schools in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum with a Deep Learning Approach. This study will directly explore the experiences, challenges, and strategies used by teachers, especially English teachers, in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach in classrooms in Indonesia, which has complex educational characteristics, including diversity in schools, students, and institutional support. This research is novel in the educational paradigm, which has shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered, and in how teachers adapt to institutional support and face real challenges in the field, which have rarely been studied.

Based on the background of the study, this research is guided by the following questions: (1) What challenges and strategies do English teachers experience in applying the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach in classroom settings? (2) What changes in English teaching practices are perceived by teachers after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum with the Deep Learning Approach?

## METHOD

This research used an exploratory mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative data collected through Likert-scale questionnaires were distributed to 11 English teachers in secondary schools in Indonesia (5 Junior High School and 6 Senior High School teachers). In addition, the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with 3 teachers who were selected using purposive random sampling. One representative is from Private Junior High School; another one representing Public Junior High School, and the other one as the representative of the Senior High School teachers. All the teacher participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) teaching English by implementing the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach currently, and (2) experiencing at least a year of implementation of the curriculum in classroom instruction.

The quantitative data were employed to collect general information about teachers' implementation strategies and perceptions, while interviews provided detailed explanation of their experiences, challenges, and expertise in greater depth and to support the quantitative findings. The selection of three interview participants was considered sufficient because the data collected had reached conceptual saturation and provided information that was broad and relevant to the research objective. The participants first completed the questionnaire, which

aims to gather general information on how they taught English, their perceptions, and their problems in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach. Out of 11 teachers, 3 teachers were selected and invited to participating in semi-structured interviews to dig deeper into their implementation strategies, classroom experiences, and views regarding the curriculum changes.

The questionnaire was used as the first tool to collect data on teachers' perceptions and experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching with Deep Learning Approach. This questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale questions to allow participants to provide detailed and reflective answers. Thus, this questionnaire could explore teachers' understanding, perceptions, and teaching practices in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and identify challenges, support, and changes in English teaching practices.

The semi-structured interview was designed based on Growth Mindset Theory (Dweck, 2006) and Deep Learning Framework (Fullan et al., 2018) as the main theories. This interview aimed to determine the level of understanding of English teachers in secondary schools regarding their perceptions and teaching practices within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach.

In data analysis, the quantitative data were revealed in percentage and the qualitative data were categorized using thematic analysis. The questionnaire results provided quantitative data that explained the general situation, while the interview results provided more detailed qualitative exploration. Finally, integrating the findings of quantitative and qualitative data could serve the data triangulation. The triangulation helped enhance the credibility of the findings. The triangulation method confirmed the consistency of findings, minimized potential bias, and offered a more comprehensive insight of the phenomenon, by comparing results from different methods (Bhandari, 2023; Atlas.ti, 2025).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Strategies Adopted by the Teachers

Based on the questionnaire and interview data, teachers had implemented a range of strategies that strongly support the Deep Learning Approach within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. The questionnaire results indicated that teachers consistently applied strategies promoting active learning, collaboration, reflection, and technology integration. These findings aligned with the qualitative interview data, which revealed five major strategic themes.

*Project-based and Collaborative Learning*
Based on the interview, teachers frequently applied project-based and group-learning methods, such as discussions and presentations. Mini research projects such as report video also had been mentioned by the teachers that claim the activity increases both communication and critical thinking skills.   The design of these activities was to improve cooperation, communication, and confidence among the students.

> *"We apply various methods such as project-based learning, group discussion, and presentation. Students are asked to analyze texts, make projects together with their classmates, and present the results."*
> *"Through these activities, students become more confident and collaborative in completing their tasks."*

The questionnaire that supported the interview data, from the likert scale questionnaire we found that 78% of teachers strongly agreed and 22% agreed that they encouraged students to work collaboratively through group projects. These findings confirmed that collaboration and project-based work were the most essential teachers' instructional strategies under the Merdeka Curriculum.

*Student-Centered Learning and Facilitation*

The Interview results indicated that the teacher adopted a student-centered approach, shifting the teacher's role to that of a facilitator. Students were given the autonomy to explore, analyze, and discuss the material on their own. The teacher also mentioned that learning English through a grammatical formula is less effective for students because many students feel bored when only memorizing a grammatical formula.

> *"Students are asked to analyze texts, then discuss them with their friends. From these activities, they can deepen what they have learned in class."*

The results from the questionnaire reinforced this finding, 92% of the teachers had items such as "encouraging students to be active and independent" and "building an open, respectful classroom environment." This demonstrates teachers' commitment to fostering independence and responsibility in learning, in line with the principles of inquiry-based and student-centered learning.

*The Use of Technology in Learning Activities*

The digital tools integration was mentioned as a consistent part of classroom practice. Not only for delivering materials digital tools integration is also used to enhance communication, resource sharing and review students' understanding. Gamify and Cloud-based data collection tools such as Google form, Padlet, Kahoot, and Quizizz are implemented to support learning activities and also increase student motivation in learning through a fun and competitive atmosphere, so the students feel more engaged with the learning process.

> *"We use digital technology to support the lesson, at least using infocus for presentations and sometimes online applications for discussions and sharing resources."*

The questionnaire results also showed a similarity that most of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they used learning technology to improve engagement. This reflects teachers' readiness and adaptation to digital tools integration, a key element of the Merdeka Curriculum.

*Developing Critical Thinking through Discussion and Presentation*

According to the teacher, activities such as discussion and presentation were designed to enhance critical thinking and deeper understanding of the students.

> *"Through presentations, students can develop critical thinking skills."*

The Likert data supported this finding, that 91-93% agreed and strongly agreed on items related to "creating activities that promote critical thinking" and "assessing the process, not only the results." These results confirm that teachers' strategies successfully integrated higher-order thinking skills into classroom practice.

*Reflection and Deep Understanding*

Project and discussion-based activities were emphasized by teachers, which allowed students to reflect on their learning and connected classroom content to broader real-life contexts.

> *"From those activities, students can deepen the lessons they have learned in class and discuss them more completely during presentations."*

This reflective element was mirrored in the questionnaire item "connecting materials to real-life contexts", which achieved a high mean score. 93% teachers also strongly agreed that they used the results of evaluation for improvement, indicating a strong culture of continuous reflection and formative assessment.

**Challenges in Implementing Deep Learning Approach under the Merdeka Curriculum**

Based on the interview, the researchers found that one of the main challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Deep Learning Approach in the Merdeka Curriculum was related to technology adaptation and continuous self-development of the teacher. Teachers realized that today's students were very familiar with advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and various digital media platforms and online learning. This requires teachers to continuously develop their digital literacy to keep up with students who are already highly proficient in technology. This was especially true for older teachers who had to start from scratch to become familiar with, learn, and utilize technology and digital media as tools to support learning activities. An English teacher shared in the interview session,

> *"The challenge is self-development; we cannot allow students to surpass us. So, whatever our abilities in using technology, we must strive to be equal to or above them. If students know more than their teachers, they will feel that 'our teachers are inferior to us.' Therefore, we must continue to keep up with the latest technological developments."*

This statement showed that teachers viewed technology not only as a teaching tool; technology had become a professional requirement that shaped their credibility in the eyes of students.

Other challenges mentioned in the interview session related to students' readiness to use certain websites or platforms and their access to technology. Teachers had to ensure that all students had adequate devices so that the use of technology could be felt equally by students and that they had the skills to participate in technology-integrated learning. As explained by the same teacher,

> *"We must ensure that students have smartphones, can download learning applications, and use them correctly. For example, when using Zoom, can they share their screen during a presentation?"*

She also explained that before introducing digital tools in the classroom, teachers had to first learn and understand the applications so that they could use them smoothly:

> "*We must learn the applications that will be used, starting from their functions and how to use them correctly. Once students understand how to use and how the media works, only then can we give instructions on how to use it in class.*"

This response showed that teachers faced a double challenge where they had to not only improve their own technological competence but also support students in using technology effectively and responsibly so that learning could proceed smoothly. Based on item number 15, "I use technology to support deep learning," which showed a high percentage of 88.9% (Very High), while item 14, "I adjust my teaching strategies to the needs of students," also showed a fairly high average with 55.6% of the students agree and 33.3% very agree.

Teachers demonstrated a commitment to integrating technology and adapting teaching methods to student needs, but data obtained from interviews revealed practical obstacles behind these positive figures. It was found that some teachers still had difficulty ensuring that devices were supportive and compatible with technology and maintaining a balance between pedagogy and digital tools. These results are consistent with Fullan (2007), which states that teachers' readiness and ability to adapt to change are factors in the success of a curriculum. In line with this, the deep learning framework (Fullan et al., 2018) also highlights that meaningful learning experiences can only be achieved when teachers have the ability to facilitate discovery, collaboration, and critical thinking through technology.

It can be concluded that although quantitative data showed a high level of commitment among teachers, the interview result revealed a more complex reality. Even though teachers actively used technological media in the classroom, this did not mean that they did not encounter difficulties and challenges. Teachers continued to face challenges in balancing technological mastery, pedagogical adjustments, and student readiness. These challenges were very important to overcome in order to ensure the successful implementation of the Deep Learning approach within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

**Curriculum Changes: Before and After the Integration of Deep Learning Approach**

The previous curriculum, that was K13, it was revealed that ideally K13 was student-centered. However, in fact, there were more teachers centered. Under K13, the teaching practices were more textbook driven, so the teachers were not feeling free to make their own learning and felt pressured because they had to complete the syllabus rather than students' understanding.

> "The K13 is more pressure because we have to complete the syllabus first," said the teacher from Tangerang.

In contrast, Merdeka Curriculum gave more freedom to the teacher also to the students, but there were still gaps the teacher had to fill in. For example, they must enroll some trainings, but the statement that came out from one speaker to another speaker was totally different. The teacher felt confused because of that and did not know what answer they had to implement to their English teaching practices.

*"In Merdeka Curriculum we are given freedom not like the previous curriculum that was structured, but still in previous Merdeka Curriculum, while I joined the training, some speakers brought different statements, and it was confusing."*

The shift from Merdeka Curriculum to Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach brought a good impact to the teacher, because few challenges towards the previous Merdeka Curriculum had finished. Moreover, the government facilitated the training for all schools in Indonesia, so it was easier for the teacher to join the training.

*"The government facilitates us to join the training, not only online training, which can be easily left like joining the meeting, then you can do other activities, but it is offline training. So, we can focus on Deep Learning training,"* one participant explained.

This shift also impacted the teacher's role in English class, shifting from instructor to facilitator. The teachers no longer dominated the classroom but guided the students. The teachers were encouraged to create spaces for inquiry and discussion rather than the delivery of information.

*"It is easier for me to teach with this curriculum, because we do not need to explain longer. I just give the topic to them, then set the time, and let them discuss and it is done."*

Overall, the teachers agreed that Merdeka Curriculum integrated with Deep Learning Approach gave a clearer structure and the teacher did not feel pressured because of the syllabus or administrative things. So do the students; because the teacher implemented mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning principles in Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach, they could feel much more easily acquire the knowledge from English learning.

This study found several important insights into how English teachers in Indonesian secondary school's experience and implement the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly when integrating Deep Learning principles. First, based on the obtained data, the strategies used by the teachers in implementing deep learning in the Merdeka curriculum included project-based and collaborative tasks, student-centered learning, technology use, critical thinking skills, and reflection related to real life. These findings aligned with previous literature, which noted that teachers under the Merdeka Curriculum commonly adopted project-based learning and technology-supported instruction to increase student motivation, engagement, and autonomy (Novianti, 2023; Efendi & Arijanto, 2025). In addition, according to the interview data, project-based tasks made students more engaged with the tasks which, according to the teacher concerned, with the application of project-based learning, students' grades at the end of the semester increased. This supported the existing studies that emphasize the positive learning gains associated with project-based and experiential learning models.

Furthermore, the interview results showed that shifting to a student-centered learning model increased students' sense of responsibility and ownership of their learning. Moreover, the findings are in line with previous research which suggests that the Merdeka Curriculum fosters greater student independence, self-regulation, and active participation when teachers intentionally reduce teacher-dominant instruction and provide space for learner agency (Surdiyantiningsih et al., 2025; Zahwannisa & Lubis, 2025). Overall, teachers' strategies in promoting Deep Learning in Merdeka Curriculum supported innovative, student-centered, and

active learning practices, its success ultimately depended on how teachers interpret and implement these strategies in real classroom contexts.

Second, the challenges faced by educators. In the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach, teachers still found it difficult to cope with the massive developments in technology and teachers got difficulties in keeping up with rapid technological developments. According to Fullan (2007), who stated that one of the major obstacles to change in the education system is the gap between policy plans and teachers' teaching abilities. The results of this study supported the view that digital thinking readiness and skills were important factors in the successful teaching of new curricula. The struggle of teachers, especially older teachers, in balancing their skills and abilities in using technology in accordance with the principles of Growth Mindset Theory proposed by Dweck (2006). This theory emphasized the importance of continuous learning and the willingness to develop new skills. For many teachers, this required them to continuously develop their abilities, thereby preventing teachers from feeling inferior to students who are more proficient in technology.

However, this technological challenge was not only felt by teachers, but also by the students. Many students had limited access to devices for using technology, so some students found it difficult to access the materials prepared by the teachers. In addition, deep learning, which involves fun learning, posed a new challenge for teachers to control their emotions and expressions even when they were facing personal stress and fatigue. This challenge directly reflected the Deep Learning Framework proposed by Fullan et al., (2018) which stated that deep learning required a strong relationship between teachers and students. This is related to how teachers could build emotional connections, maintain a positive classroom environment, and demonstrate enthusiasm in teaching. However, in practice, teachers often found it difficult to achieve this, especially when the emotional burden they faced was too heavy. This was an important point for teachers to maintain fun learning activities in the classroom so that they were more meaningful for students.

Third, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach resulted in significant changes in ELT Practices. Based on the interview data, teachers figured out that the Merdeka Curriculum facilitated by the Deep Learning Approach was perceived to be more organized and easier to work with. The structures of the lesson planning were simplified into three themes: mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning. According to the teachers, they did not experience confusion regarding the framework of the curriculum, which was more coherent compared to the previous models. Moreover, the training for the teacher opportunities had decreased compared to the past, although some improvements were identified. This was further complicated by an increased administrative workload related to the implementation of the curriculum, which required much time and attention.

Likewise, changes were seen to be positive at the student level, with increased engagement and learning behavior in English language clasrooms. Teachers noticed that students were now encouraged to explore topics, solve problems, and express ideas more autonomously. In line with the concept, that deep learning model emphasized on enhancing a deeper understanding of the subject through comprehensive learning experiences, where students' presence became more involved in their learning process (Arina & Herlambang, 2025). Overall, the changes from Merdeka Curriculum to Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach suggested a positive transformation toward ELT practices.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explored how teachers experience and practice in implementing the Deep Learning Approach in Merdeka Curriculum in secondary schools. The curriculum changes to the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approaches showed a development in teachers implementing several strategies related to immersive learning approaches, such as project-based learning, collaborative activities, student-centered classrooms, and technology integration, which increased student motivation, engagement, and autonomy. The curriculum's emphasis on mindful and meaningful learning also improved classroom organization and dynamics. Despite these strategies, the teachers faced challenges related to technological competency and emotional management, as both teachers and students struggled to access digital devices and adapt to new platforms. Moreover, teachers faced problems in maintaining a fun and meaningful learning environment.

Finally, this study focused on secondary schools in Indonesia with the small number of respondents, which may not fully represent all the English teachers on implementing the Merdeka Curriculum with Deep Learning Approach. Future research should involve a larger and more varied sample across different levels of schools and a larger number of regions in Indonesia to provide wide description and generalization.

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## DECLARATION OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

During the preparation of this paper, the authors used DeepL (V.24.4.3) and ChatGPT for optimizing language readability. ChatGPT was not involved in the research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or development of conclusions. All scientific decisions, arguments, and interpretation were conducted by the authors. The paper has been viewed and edited by the authors, and the authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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