

# IMPLEMENTATION OF ENGLISH TEACHING METHODS UNDER THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM: A CASE STUDY OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN PALOPO

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the application of English teaching methods based on the Merdeka Curriculum at the junior high school level in Palopo City. The main focus of this study is to identify the methods used, the barriers faced by teachers, and their perceptions of these methods. This study employs a mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design. Data were collected through observations, questionnaires, and interviews with English teachers at four schools, two public and two private. The results indicate that private schools tend to be more proactive in implementing methods such as Project-Based Learning and Communicative Language Teaching, whereas public schools remain dominated by conventional methods. The barriers faced by teachers are divided into three categories: internal, external, and contextual. However, teachers have a positive perception of the Merdeka Curriculum and demonstrate a willingness to develop more contextual teaching methods. This study recommends the need for ongoing training, improved infrastructure, and policy support to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

*Keywords:* Merdeka Curriculum, English teaching methods, barriers, teacher perceptions

## INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian education system has been undergoing significant transformation, particularly with the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, a policy designed to promote student-centered, flexible, and contextual learning (Abdul Fattah Nasution, Setia Ningsih, Mona Febrica Silva, Leli Suharti, & Jekson Parulian Harahap, 2023). This curriculum encourages schools and teachers to design instructional activities that suit students' characteristics, learning goals, and real-life contexts (Widodo et al., 2023). In English language teaching (ELT), this opens opportunities for teachers to move beyond traditional models and integrate more interactive and authentic teaching methods. As a result, methods such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are promoted as effective alternatives to lecture-based approaches.

Recent studies emphasize that the success of curriculum innovation lies not only in the design of the policy but also in its implementation at the classroom level, where

teachers serve as the key agents of change (Gumus et al., 2018). In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), teachers are expected to shift their roles from knowledge transmitters to facilitators who support students in constructing meaning through contextual, dialogic, and interactive activities (Darasawang, 2006). However, such transformation requires not only a change in mindset but also strong institutional support, continuous professional development, and adequate access to resources (Mart, 2013).

Furthermore, the integration of active learning methods within national curricula has become a global trend, as evidenced by curriculum reforms in countries such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea (Khromchenko & Shutilo, 2021). These countries have placed increasing emphasis on student agency, collaborative learning, and problem-solving abilities to meet the demands of the 21st century. Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum reflects a similar aspiration, but its success depends on how effectively teachers in diverse school contexts—particularly in under-resourced or rural areas—can implement the intended pedagogical shift. Thus, investigating the actual practices of teachers in public and private junior high schools becomes essential to understand the readiness and challenges in adopting active learning frameworks in English instruction.

These methods are rooted in constructivist theory, which sees learning as a social and contextual process (Wali et al., 2022). In practice, however, not all teachers are fully ready or equipped to implement such approaches. Many teachers still rely on direct teaching due to limited training, lack of confidence, and institutional constraints. Additionally, public and private schools differ in terms of infrastructure, professional development support, and cultural readiness to adopt more dynamic classroom practices (Purwani & Budiraharjo, 2024). This situation raises concern about the real extent of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in English classrooms, particularly in junior high schools.

Previous studies have highlighted both opportunities and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Aini et al., (2022) found that while teachers generally support the curriculum's principles, they often struggle to translate them into concrete lesson activities. Ela Komala et al., (2025) showed that private school teachers are more likely to adopt PjBL and IBL, supported by internal school initiatives and leadership. Maulana et al., (2025) emphasized that although teachers demonstrate positive attitudes toward student-centered learning, barriers such as limited digital literacy and lack of time hinder effective implementation. However, these studies rarely focus on English language teaching specifically, and few compare implementation across school types (public vs private) within a single local context.

The implementation of English teaching methods under the Merdeka Curriculum is complex and multidimensional. It involves teacher knowledge, beliefs, and external support systems (Abdallah, 2024). Moreover, teachers' perceptions, including their cognitive understanding, emotional attitudes, and behavioral intentions, influence how they adopt and adapt new teaching methods (Gumartifa et al., 2023). Understanding how teachers in different school environments respond to curriculum innovation is essential for ensuring more equitable and effective language education practices.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the implementation of English language teaching methods based on the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools in Palopo.

Specifically, it explores (1) the teaching methods used in public and private schools, (2) the internal, external, and contextual barriers faced by teachers, and (3) teachers' perceptions toward the methods they apply. By identifying these factors, the study seeks to contribute to the improvement of ELT practices and support more effective curriculum implementation.

## METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design, where quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to provide deeper understanding (Othman et al., 2020). This approach was chosen because it allowed the researcher to explain the phenomenon of implementing English teaching methods based on the Merdeka Curriculum not only through numerical data but also through the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers in the field. The research was conducted at four junior high schools in Palopo City, consisting of two public schools (SMPN 3 and SMPN 4) and two private Islamic schools (SMPIT Insan Madani and SMPIT Ibnu Sina). These schools were selected purposively, considering that their varying institutional statuses and characteristics could reflect different levels of readiness and institutional support for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Each school was represented by one Grade VIII English teacher, resulting in a total of four teachers as the main informants in this study.

Data were collected using three main techniques: classroom observation, questionnaire distribution, and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted twice at each school using a checklist containing 19 observation aspects, developed from constructivist theory by Vygotsky and Piaget, the language teaching approach by Richards & Rodgers, and key principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as active learning, differentiation, reflection, and project-based learning (Siregar et al., 2024). These observations were then analyzed qualitatively by narrating the findings descriptively and linking the observed teaching patterns with relevant theories and principles. Meanwhile, the questionnaire was used to explore the barriers faced by teachers in implementing teaching methods. It was developed in the form of a Likert scale and analyzed quantitatively using descriptive analysis. Items in the questionnaire were grouped into three main categories of barriers: internal barriers (related to teachers' readiness and competence), external barriers (such as management support, facilities, and training), and contextual barriers (including student characteristics, classroom conditions, and school socio-cultural context). To deepen the findings from the questionnaire and observation, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with all teachers. These interviews aimed to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the implementation of English teaching methods, and were analyzed through three dimensions: cognitive (teachers' understanding of methods and the curriculum), affective (attitudes and beliefs toward implementation), and conative (intentions or behavioral tendencies), based on attitude theory from Triandis and Fishbein & Ajzen (Manickavasagam & Surwade, 2017). The interview guide was developed by the researcher and validated by an English language teaching expert from a public university in South Sulawesi.

In analyzing the data, the researcher used data source triangulation by combining the results from observations, questionnaires, and interviews to ensure accuracy and richness of information. The findings from all three instruments were compared to identify consistencies, complementarities, or even discrepancies between what teachers practiced and what they thought or felt. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain a more comprehensive picture of how English teaching methods were implemented under the Merdeka Curriculum in both public and private school settings.

## RESULTS

### *The Implementation of English Language Teaching Method under Merdeka Curriculum in Public and Private School.*

This study aims to analyze the implementation of English teaching methods in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. The research subjects are English teachers in grade VIII at four junior high schools in Palopo City, namely SMPN 3 Palopo, SMPN 4 Palopo, SMPIT Insan Madani, and SMPIT Ibnu Sina. Observations were conducted twice in each of the four schools to assess the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum-based English teaching method. A total of 19 learning aspects were observed, but for the purposes of this article, only the main aspects representing the principles of active, contextual, and reflective learning are presented. These aspects also reflect the application of approaches such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), as well as the use of digital media and differentiation practices.

Table 1. Summary of learning aspect implementation based on observation

Key Aspects of Learning	SMPN 3	SMPN 4	Insan Madani	Ibnu Sina
Active participation of students in asking/answering questions	√	√	√	√
Project-based learning, discussions, or presentations	X	√	√	√
Use of digital media (LCD, video, applications)	X	√	√	X
Providing space for reflection and student feedback	√	√	√	√
Variations on lecture methods (discussions, demonstrations, CLT)	X	√	√	√
Adjusting tasks or materials to students' needs	X	X	X	X
Mention or use of CP and ATP	X	√	X	X

Note : √ = Visible, X = Not Visible

Table 1 shows that that private schools are more active in implementing innovative learning methods in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as the use of digital media, reflective activities, and project-based learning. Meanwhile, public schools show limitations in terms of method variation and differentiation, and are not yet optimal

in using CP and ATP as learning references.

***Challenges Barriers by Teachers in Implementing Teaching Methods***

The questionnaire was used to identify the barriers faced by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum-based English teaching method. This instrument consisted of 18 statements with a Likert scale and was grouped into three categories of obstacles: internal, external, and contextual. The results were analyzed descriptively based on the average scores for each category in four schools.

Table 2. Average teacher barrier scores in teaching method implementation

School	Internal Barriers	External Barriers	Contextual Barriers
SMPN 3 Palopo	4.00	3.50	3.33
SMPN 4 Palopo	3.25	2.88	2.67
SMPIT Insan Madani	2.25	2.00	2.00
SMPIT Ibnu Sina	2.00	2.25	2.17

Likert scale: 1 (strongly disagree) – 5 (strongly agree)

The data in Table 2 shows that internal barriers, such as limited understanding of innovative methods and low confidence in applying them, are most commonly faced by teachers in public schools. External barriers, such as lack of training, limited technological facilities, and weak managerial support, were also found to be quite high in the two public schools. Meanwhile, private schools showed relatively lower scores in all three categories, indicating better readiness and support in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka learning approach.

***Teachers’ perceptions of the Implementation of English Teaching Methods Based on the Merdeka Curriculum.***

Interviews were conducted with four English teachers from each school to explore their perceptions of the implementation of English teaching methods in the Merdeka Curriculum. The interviews were analyzed based on three dimensions: cognitive (understanding), affective (attitude), and conative (intention/action). The interview results showed variations in understanding, emotional responses, and readiness between teachers in public and private schools.

Table 3. Summary of interview themes based on perception aspects

Aspect	Findings
Cognitive	Most teachers were familiar with PBL, IBL, and Discovery Learning, although to varying degrees. Some had read about them or attended webinars, but only a few had fully implemented them in class. Teachers acknowledged the flexible and student-centered nature of the Merdeka Curriculum, but many still relied on traditional methods like lecturing due to limited understanding and experience. Teachers from private schools appeared more confident in applying active and contextual methods.
Affective	Teachers expressed a positive attitude toward the implementation of new teaching

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	methods, considering them effective for improving students' English skills. They noted increased student engagement and enthusiasm during project-based activities. However, some teachers still felt uncertain due to lack of consistent results and limited support. Teachers from schools with stronger institutional backing (e.g., MGMP or in-house training) felt more prepared and motivated.
Conative	All teachers showed a strong intention to continue using innovative methods, even if not mandated. They emphasized the importance of making learning enjoyable and participatory. Some adapted the methods to suit time constraints, infrastructure, and student diversity, such as simplifying projects or using local collaborative models. Teachers also reported conducting informal reflections to evaluate and improve their teaching strategies.

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The table above shows that teachers from private schools have a stronger and more practical understanding of innovative teaching methods such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Project-Based Learning (PjBL), and Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL). Teachers from SMPIT Insan Madani stated:

"I have used PjBL before, for example when students made introductory videos. It was very effective."

This shows that they have already been practicing the Merdeka Curriculum approach, even before it was implemented nationally. On the other hand, teachers from public schools are still in the process of learning and understanding innovative methods. A teacher from SMPN 3 said:

"I have heard and read a little about PBL and IBL, but in practice I don't really understand it yet."

This confirms that there is a gap between concept and practice in public schools that needs to be filled with more practical training. From an affective perspective, all teachers showed a positive attitude toward the Merdeka Curriculum.

However, teachers from public schools felt confused about how to get started and were constrained by facilities, as expressed by a teacher from SMPN 4:

"It's positive, but sometimes I don't know where to start."

Meanwhile, teachers from private schools feel that active methods are in line with the characteristics of their students and school culture. In the conative dimension, all teachers expressed their intention to implement innovative methods, but with conditions.

Teachers in public schools mentioned the importance of training and support from the principal. Teachers at SMPIT Ibnu Sina stated:

"If I am given examples of lesson plans and modules, I will definitely try them."

Meanwhile, teachers from private schools emphasized that they will continue to apply innovative approaches, even if the curriculum changes.

Overall, the interviews showed that readiness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum-based teaching method was influenced not only by teachers' conceptual understanding, but also by their attitudes, beliefs, and the institutional support available.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of English language teaching methods under the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools varies significantly between public and private school. Data collected through classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews show that although some instructional practices align with the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum namely active, reflective, differentiated, and contextual learning. The implementation remains inconsistent across different school contexts.

Teachers in private schools, particularly at SMPIT Insan Madani and SMPIT Ibnu Sina, were more confident in applying methods such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), and collaborative learning. These schools successfully integrated creative student projects, open discussions, and the use of diverse learning media to promote engagement (Darmawanti, 2021). In contrast, teachers in public schools such as SMPN 3 and SMPN 4 primarily relied on Direct Teaching with limited student interaction. This discrepancy suggests a significant gap in implementation readiness between public and private schools, likely influenced by differences in institutional support, leadership autonomy, and access to resources.

The questionnaire results revealed several challenges in implementing English teaching methods aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. These barriers were categorized into internal, external, and contextual aspect. Internal barriers included limited understanding of innovative methods such as PjBL and IBL, reliance on traditional approaches, and low teacher confidence in designing reflective and student-centered learning (Bachtiar & Puspitasari, 2024). These issues were especially pronounced in public schools, with SMPN 3 reporting the highest average score for internal barriers.

External barriers related to inadequate professional development, limited access to learning media, and weak school leadership support (Ng, 2018). Many teachers stated they had never received formal training on the Merdeka Curriculum and had to rely on independent learning. This lack of systemic support creates a disconnect between curriculum expectations and the actual instructional capacity of teachers. Meanwhile, private school teachers reported stronger support systems, such as regular in-house training, collaborative teaching forums, and access to digital tools.

Contextual barriers arose from student characteristics and classroom realities. For example, some students were unaccustomed to group collaboration or lacked access to digital devices for project-based tasks (Lestari, 2023). Teachers also cited time constraints and dense schedules as challenges to implementing more exploratory activities. As one teacher remarked, "Not all students have smartphones, so I modified the project into a poster instead." This highlights the teachers' willingness to adapt active learning principles to fit local realities.

Interviews with teachers provided deeper insights into their perceptions, responses, and intentions regarding the implementation of teaching methods based on Merdeka Curriculum. In terms of cognition, private school teachers demonstrated stronger understanding of student-centered approaches such as PjBL and IBL. They were able to describe practical classroom applications, such as having students create brochures,

perform dialogues, or carry out culturally contextualized activities. Public school teachers, however, were still exploring these methods and expressed a need for more structured guidance.

In the affective domain, most teachers expressed a positive attitude toward the Merdeka Curriculum, noting increased student engagement and confidence when using interactive methods. However, teachers from public schools also expressed hesitation, citing inconsistent results and a lack of habitual use of reflective practices.

In the conative dimension, all teachers expressed a willingness to continue implementing innovative teaching approaches, even if institutional support was limited. Teachers reported adapting methods to match student needs, available resources, and instructional time. Some simplified projects or substituted alternative activities to maintain student engagement while still fostering active learning.

These findings reinforce the core of constructivist learning theory, particularly the need for scaffolding not only for students, but also for teachers (Siregar et al., (2024). Without sufficient support through professional development, learning communities, and technical mentoring, teachers may struggle to internalize and apply student-centered pedagogy in meaningful ways. Additionally, Fullan (2007) theory of educational change highlights that curriculum reform requires more than structural policy it requires equipping practitioners with the capacity to implement innovations effectively. When teacher autonomy is granted without parallel investment in pedagogical mastery, reversion to conventional methods becomes inevitable (Dakhalan & Tanucan, 2024).

The study has several practical implications. First, it underscores the importance of strengthening institutional support, particularly in public schools, through targeted training, access to learning tools, and supportive leadership. Secondly, contextual adaptation such as integrating local cultural practices and flexible project formats should be encouraged to ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum remains inclusive and relevant to diverse classroom realities.

Lastly, the results highlight the critical role of reflective teaching, digital literacy, and contextual sensitivity in bridging the gap between curriculum design and classroom implementation. As such, this study contributes to a growing body of knowledge that calls for integrative, teacher-centered strategies to ensure the success of curriculum transformation in English language teaching.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the implementation of English language teaching methods under the Merdeka Curriculum across four junior high schools in Palopo, consisting of two public and two private institutions. The findings from classroom observations, questionnaires, and teacher interviews revealed significant variation in teaching practices, with private school teachers demonstrating greater readiness and innovation in applying student-centered, contextual, and active learning methods. Meanwhile, public school teachers were found to rely more on conventional approaches, often due to internal barriers such as limited understanding of alternative methods and external constraints like inadequate training and facilities.

The results also indicated that teachers generally held positive attitudes toward the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in terms of its potential to increase student engagement and learning relevance. However, the successful implementation of this curriculum was found to be highly dependent on the interplay between individual teacher competence, institutional support, and classroom realities. Internal, external, and contextual barriers must be addressed in a systemic way to ensure that policy expectations translate effectively into classroom practice.

Given these findings, it is essential for educational stakeholders particularly curriculum designers, school leaders, and policymakers to provide ongoing training, mentoring, and access to teaching resources that support the development of innovative pedagogical practices. Encouraging reflective teaching and context-sensitive adaptation will further enable teachers to meet the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum and foster more meaningful, participatory English language learning experiences.

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