

THE CHALLENGES FACED BY ENGLISH TEACHERS AT VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS IN KARANGLEWAS IN IMPLEMENTING MERDEKA CURRICULUM AND RELEVANT SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This research is aimed to find out the English teachers' challenges in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum at vocational high schools and the solutions or ways the teachers addressed those challenges. This research used descriptive qualitative research method. The subjects of this research were two English teachers from two vocational high schools in Karanglewas District. The techniques for collecting the data of this research were interview, observation, and documentation. In analyzing the data, the researcher used three steps called data reduction, data display, and conclusions. The results of the study showed that English teachers at Karanglewas Vocational Schools have challenges in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum. The challenges were categorized into two, they were internal challenges which originated from the teachers themselves, and external challenges which originated from students, government, and learning or school facilities. The internal challenges were teachers' ability in using ICT tools, teachers' capability in determining methods, and adjusting the time allocation and learning activities. While the external challenges were related to practical curriculum given by the government, students' ability and skills, inadequate learning facilities and resources, and the school proximity to the railways. The results of this study also describe solutions that teachers have taken to overcome these challenges, such as learning by doing, using exciting learning method, motivating students, keeping students focused in learning, conducting listening session with an audio speaker in classroom, and providing e-books as students' handbook.

Keywords: *challenges; merdeka curriculum; vocational high schools; solutions.*

INTRODUCTION

Merdeka Curriculum was launched in 2020 by Ministry of Education in Indonesia. According to Zidan & Qamariah (2023) *Merdeka* Curriculum provides a more holistic and inclusive education approach that emphasizes in developing academic knowledge alongside other aspects such as; character, creativity and critical thinking skills. The curriculum is made to be more flexible and adaptable to the students' needs

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with emphasizing more on students-centered learning and technology use. Teachers might face challenges in implementing the curriculum. Therefore, the research aims to explore the challenges faced by teachers and their solution in overcoming the challenges.

According to Keputusan Menteri Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia tentang Program Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Pusat Keunggulan (2021), Vocational High School the Center of Excellence (*SMK-PK*) Program is a program that focuses on development and improving the quality and performance of SMK with priority areas that are strengthened through partnerships and alignment with the world of work. The world of work as referred to includes the world of business, industry, state-owned company or regional-owned business entity, government institutions, other institutions

In line with the SMK-PK program which aims to produce graduates who are absorbed in the world of work or become entrepreneurs, Kemendikbud encouraged SMK teachers, especially English teachers to improve the quality of their professionalism in order to improve the performance of *SMKs* (Kementerian Pendidikan, 2022). Hidayat & Muharizal (2023) conveyed teachers are supposed to master the ability in utilizing technology to support the teaching and learning activities at schools. Moreover, Daulay in Hidayat & Muharizal (2023) also emphasizes the importance of mastering technology in learning that can make teachers skilled and reliable with update information so teachers will not be inferior to students and the times. In Merdeka Curriculum, teachers can utilize education tool provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture called Merdeka Mengajar Platform which is easily accessed by teachers to teach students according to their abilities, providing training to improve competence and working to inspire colleagues (Hidayat & Muharizal, 2023).

However, Prihantini (2021) in Hehakaya & Pollatu (2022) stated that in the implementation of K-13, teachers are not sufficient in developing contextual learning. According to Suyanto (2018), the K-13 promotes scientific approach through 5 teaching and learning activities (5M), namely Observing (*Mengamati*), Questioning (*Menanya*), Experimenting (*Mencoba*), Reasoning (*Menalar*) and Communicating (*Mengkomunikasikan*). This structure claimed to be inflexible. Moreover, the lesson hours are determined per week, then the material is too condensed so that there is not enough time to do in-depth learning and in accordance with the developmental stage of

students and the learning materials available are not varied. However, this is also due to digital technology which has not been used systematically to support the teacher's learning process through various practices.

In contradiction to the role of teachers in implementing K13, which conducts learning based on the curriculum including materials, learning resources and learning tools, in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum, teachers have the flexibility to choose various learning tools so that learning can be tailored to students' needs and interests. Thus, in teaching and learning process, teachers have bigger role in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum than in implementing K13. It happens because in *Merdeka* curriculum, learning English is focused on strengthening the ability to use English in six language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing and presenting in an integrated manner in various types of text. According to Zidan & Qamariah (2023), *Merdeka* Curriculum is designed to be more flexible and adaptable to the students' needs with emphasizing more on students-centered learning and technology use. Yet in practice, it needs more in-depth study since the area, problems and roles of educational parties possibly affect the success of its implementation (Ferdaus & Novita, 2023).

As one of education parties, teachers might face challenges in implementing *Merdeka* curriculum. According to Supini (2021) the challenges often faced by teachers vary in aspects such as lack of teaching preparation, diverse student behavior and student absorption, students' interests and talents, lack of student concentration, dull and uninteresting teaching, lack of interaction in teaching, self-righteous, not being a role model, technology stuttering, and undisciplined students. On the other hand,

According to Rohmah (2019), teachers may face two types of challenges, namely internal and external challenges. The internal challenges come from teachers including teachers' ability to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT), teachers' ability in adjusting between the time allocation, indicators and learning methods, the implementation of scientific approaches and other methods, and teachers' ability in selecting media and materials. On the other hand, the external challenges are coming from government, students and facilities, such as; lack of practical curriculum training conducted by the government, lack of time allocation for English learning process, students' different abilities, students' difficulties in working on several *Merdeka* curriculum programs, such as; Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), creativity,

critical thinking, collaboration, and communication (4C) and Literacy, and inadequate facilities and books.

According to the result of pre-interview with English teachers in Karanglewas High Schools, teachers mentioned various challenges in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Therefore, the researcher conducted the study at two vocational High Schools in Karanglewas to investigate the challenges faced by English teachers at vocational High Schools in Karanglewas in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum in the classroom teaching and learning process and the teachers' strategies in addressing those challenges.

METHOD

This research used qualitative research method as the research design. While the research method of this study was classified into descriptive qualitative research in reference to Creswell's (2012) theory. In collecting the data, the researcher used interview, observation, and documentation. In details, the researcher conducted semi-structured interview to find out the challenges of implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum and its solutions. Then, the researcher conducted frank or disguised observation to support the results of interviews with participants regarding teachers' challenges and solutions in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum. To compose the data in this study, the researcher also conducted a document study by analyzing pictures.

In analyzing the results of the interview in this study, the researcher used three steps according to Miles & Huberman in Fadli (2021) namely data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. In data reduction, the researcher summarized the results from the interview and chose the necessary data. In data display, the data reduced was performed in the form of narrative descriptions. In conclusion drawing, the researcher concluded all research results about challenges faced by teacher and its solutions in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research are in the form of interview results that answer the research questions about the challenges faced by English language teachers in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum and relevant solutions to overcome these challenges. The challenges are categorized into two types of sources: Internal

(Teachers), and External (Government, facilities, and students). The teachers have different ways of dealing with these challenges.

Challenges faced by English teachers in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum

The result shows that English teachers faced challenges in different aspects coming from both internal and external sides.

1. Internal Challenges (Challenges coming from the English teachers)

Internal challenges faced by teachers are coming from the English teachers themselves. The first challenge is the teachers' abilities in using the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools especially dealing with the *Merdeka Mengajar* as teaching platform. They need to update their ability in regarding the ICT development. Second, teachers need to be able to manage time allocation with the indicators and learning methods well, especially for students practice. The next challenge is teachers experienced problems in determining suitable methods used to make students activeness in the classroom. The last challenge is related to limited LCD projector as learning media.

2. External Challenges

The external challenges found varied in different aspects, such as from government, students and facilities. The challenges coming from government are mostly on adapting with the change of curriculum administration and applying the learning model taught into the classroom. The second challenges are coming from the students. Students' different abilities and behavior in classroom is really challenging. Some students don't understand when the teachers use English in explaining material and some students lack motivation in learning. The other challenge is some proficient students disturb other students which cause chaotic classroom.

Another challenge is students experience in working on HOTS, 4C and literacy program. HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills), 4C (critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration skills, creative skills and communication skills) and literacy become the focus in implementation of *Merdeka* curriculum. However, students still experienced difficulties in doing HOTS questions. One of teachers seemed not really applying the 4Cs because students' ability levels are in the lower middle level. While the other one tried to accustom the 4Cs implementation into

practices, group discussions, presentations and projects. Regarding literacy program, students lack interest in reading.

The last external challenges are coming from the school facility. This aspect is related to learning facilities and limited books provided by the schools. In learning facilities, the two teachers both experienced obstacles such as the limited LCD Projector. Here is evident from the classrooms that had no LCD projectors installed when the researcher made observations.



Figure 1. T1's classroom has no LCD Projector



Figure 1. T2's classroom has no LCD Projector

From the observation, the researcher also found that T1 experienced obstacles in the learning process due to the proximity of the school to the railroad tracks which are exactly behind the school. The rumbling of trains as they cross the tracks certainly disrupts the learning process.



Figure 3. SMK of T2 is close to railway

In addition to the passing train, having no language laboratory also adds to the problem of learning in Listening session. So, listening sessions are still conducted in the classroom using a sound salon or audio system brought into the classroom. T2 also had no language laboratory for listening classes, but T2 said that she could use the computer laboratory to conduct listening sessions. Instead of using headphones, they used audio speakers because of the limited headphones.



Figure 4. a computer laboratory used in T2's listening session

In terms of challenges coming from learning resources, T1 and T2 said in the interview that the challenge they faced is no textbooks for students.

Relevant Solutions

Responding to the second research question, which is " What do the English teachers do to address the challenges in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum in the classroom teaching and learning process?", the researcher interviewed two English teachers at two vocational high schools in Karanglewas who had challenges in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. Based on these interviews, the researcher obtained information about the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. This information is used as a foundation for obtaining information about how English teachers overcome these challenges.

To overcome internal challenges which are coming from the teachers, teachers have to be up to date to ICT tools and understanding the mastering *Merdeka Mengajar* platform by always never-ending learning and practicing or learning by doing. In overcoming the lack of time, T2 said English teachers can swap schedules with other subject teachers, or combine students' practice with the implementation of P5 or turn the practice into an assignment or project that had to be completed outside of class. Dealing with problems in determining a suitable method to make students active in learning English, T1 said that he usually slipped ice breaking in every learning session to get rid of their tensions so that they could be active and focused on learning. T1 also said that he often makes the exercises into games, like crosswords puzzle, board games,

and others. Meanwhile, T2 said that she tends to encourage students to be active, motivated, and excited to learn English. She also decided to speak Indonesian rather than English so that students would actively participate the class and understand the material more easily.

For external challenges, each teacher has different ways to overcome students' different abilities. T1 said in the interview that he used method recommended by the government, which is to make learning varied and also attract students to be active. However, when the researcher did observations, the teacher did not implement this method in the ELT process. T1 also said that he sometimes grouped students based on their level of ability. This aims to make all students to be active in learning. In the meantime, T2's way of dealing with this aspect of challenge is quite similar to T1, which is by grouping students, however, this grouping is made based on their ability levels. T2 also said that she frequently made some exercises or assignments based on their ability levels. Next, to overcome students' lack motivation, T2 always motivates students to learn English seriously and persistently considering the importance of English in real life through stories, pictures, and videos in the middle of learning. T2 also usually conduct the learning in Indonesian more than in English and provide more vocabularies. In addressing students' problems in applying the 4Cs (Critical thinking and problem-solving skills, Collaboration skills, Creative skills, and Communication skills), T1 provides extra support or follow-up for students who are still struggling even though they have been helped by their friends. While T2 made the students accustomed to working on HOTS questions. To overcome students' lack of interest in reading, teachers gave motivation about the importance of reading and the purpose of reading in the literacy program and provided reading activities.

Dealing with the challenges coming from learning facilities, both teachers hoped the school can complete the learning facilities such as LCD projectors for each class, language laboratory, students' handbooks, and audio speakers. Dealing with the learning resources, teachers can produce the e-book or material in soft files and share it to the students.

DISCUSSION

Challenges faced by English teachers in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum

Internal challenges

The first challenge is in using ICT that are increasingly developing. In this case, the challenge faced by teachers is using ICT in learning *Merdeka* Curriculum. The challenge is the problem of using *Merdeka Mengajar* as a new curriculum teaching platform. Nugraha (2022) stated that *Kemendikbudristek* develop *Merdeka Mengajar* Platform which becomes a tool enriched with several features such as “Belajar”, “Mengajar” and “Berkarya” for implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum. Thus, understanding and mastering *Merdeka Mengajar* platform and other ICT tools is very important for teachers.

The second challenge that comes from the teacher is teacher's ability to adjust between time allocation, indicators, and learning methods. In a related study, Rohmah (2019) found a problem faced by English teachers related to this aspect, which was the problem of handling remedial programs in the learning process. The next challenge coming from teachers is determining suitable methods to make students active. Like the previous study, the challenge found was the difficulty of getting students to follow directions and activities. Teachers were challenged when they decided to choose one method in the lesson plan, but the actual classroom situation did not match the method.

External Challenges

In accordance with previous research, Rohmah (2019) reported that some teachers had difficulty in understanding the rules in implementing the curriculum in this research, the researcher also found teacher having difficulties in implementing *Merdeka Curriculum*. The teacher has received a lot of training on the implementation of *Merdeka Curriculum* from many sources, however regarding the administration system, she still felt unable to understand much because it is a new curriculum. she needed more time to fully understand and implement it. The teacher also experienced difficulties in implementing the curriculum in the classroom. This is also proved by Dirwan et al. (2023) that some teachers did not understand the teaching method used in *Merdeka* Curriculum, so they did not implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum in the class.

Another external challenge comes from the students are two aspects. They are students' different abilities and students' difficulties in working on HOTS, 4C, Literacy and PPK questions. The first challenge here is teaching many students with different

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levels of ability and activeness in the same classroom. In line the previous research from Muthmainnah (2019) explained that activeness in learning is important to be raised because students with high activeness can involve learning activity including evaluating their own learning outcome, doing exercise individually or structured and preparing own progress report toward learning outcome. The next challenge faced by the teacher in this aspect was some students who were arrogant about their abilities and would sometimes bother their friends who were struggling.

The next challenge that comes from students is the lack of student motivation. This is a challenge for teachers because it can have an impact on students' willingness and activeness in learning which is a factor in students' learning success. As Rohmah (2019) wrote in her research that dealing with students who lack self-motivation in learning English can be a challenge because it can prevent teachers from carrying out activities in the English learning process. The next aspects of the external challenge which is originated from the students was the students' problem in working on HOTS, 4C, literacy and PPK. Laili et al. (2020) mentioned that the level of Indonesian students' performance in dealing with HOTS problems is still relatively low. It is also written that Indonesian students are good at working on memorized problems, however, in applying and reasoning is still low. The other challenge of this aspect is students' different reading interest. As with her previous research, Rohmah (2019) found that when teachers asked students to read a book at the beginning of the lesson, students who had a low interest in reading did not want to comply with the teacher's request.

Another external challenge comes from learning facilities. are limited learning facilities and lack of learning resources. Previous research conducted by Rohmah (2019) found the learning facilities used in the classroom were inadequate. The first challenge was the limited LCD Projector. In Kompasiana (2024) its mentioned that the use of LCD projectors as learning media has made the teaching and learning process more effective and efficient, learning objectives will be easier to achieve, students will more easily understand the material presented, the class situation becomes conducive because students' attention is focused on the subject matter displayed on the projector screen, and learning enthusiasm becomes higher than the lecture method.

The next challenge found by the researcher is the location of the school which is very close to the railroad tracks. The noise caused when the train passes is certainly disrupting the teaching and learning process, not only English but all existing lessons.

Mahardika (2021) in his research on the Relationship of Train Noise with The Concentration Level of Students in The Learning Process in Class said, that schools should create a calm and conducive environment for the creation of a maximum learning process.

Relevant Solutions

Relevant Solutions for Internal Challenges

The first solution is keeping up with developments and learning about the use of ICT from various sources. The other solution is by taking part in training/workshops. This solution is in accordance with Rohmah's findings that the way teacher address it is by learning about the use of ICT from other people or video tutorials on YouTube, or by self-study(Rohmah, 2019). The next challenge was dealing with practice time. The teacher lacked time for students' practice. To overcome this problem, the teacher said that she usually did a swap of hours with other teachers to extend the learning hours so all students can do practice. Besides that, the teacher also sometimes turned the practical that should be performed in front of the class into an individual or group project that could be carried out after class hours and then collected in the form of a soft file.

The next challenge coming from teachers is determining suitable methods to make students active. In overcoming this challenge, teachers commonly insert ice breaking in their learning sessions to break their tension so that they can be active and focused in learning. Another solution is to encourage students to be active and excited by motivating them. This is in accordance with the results of research byBuldani et al. (2023), that Ice Breaking method can increase student activeness in learning.

Relevant Solutions for External Challenges

Dealing with these challenges, teachers should "learn by doing". Teachers must be diligent and attentive in learning the curriculum implementation guidelines, then they apply them in the classroom. This was conveyed by regarding suggestions for teachers who experience obstacles in implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum, that is, it is better if the teacher can take part in teacher training, national and international seminars, and workshops related to the implementation of *Merdeka* Curriculum.

Another external challenge comes from the students. Dealing with this, the teacher made exercises and assignments based on students' ability levels. Students who are more capable are provided with high level exercises and students with lower

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capability are provided with their level exercises. These are in accordance with Hehakaya and Pollatu's result in their research on teacher problematics in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum, in order to accommodate the needs of different students' abilities, a variety of ways are needed. In addressing students' lack interest in reading, the teacher gives students motivation through stories, pictures, or videos on the importance of English, so they have to learn English seriously and persistently. This aligns with Linda findings (2022) on strategies to deal with students who consider English less important, which is giving students a lot of motivation by telling motivational stories that can make students feel interested and enthusiastic about learning (Linda, 2023).

The last challenge of this aspect is students' difficulty in speaking English. In handling this challenge, the teacher still teaches in English but also in Indonesian so that students get used to listen English and could understand the lessons more easily. This is as written by Brevik & Rindal (2020) that the use of any language resource in teaching learning process can reflect authentic language use.

Another external challenge comes from learning facilities. The challenges faced are limited learning facilities and lack of learning resources. Dealing with this, the teachers hopes that the school will immediately have more LCD Projectors or even facilitate each with it and complete the learning facility to support students need in learning. The next challenge found by the researcher is the location of the school which is very close to the railroad tracks. Dealing with this condition, the teacher said that he cannot do anything even ask the government to move the railway tracks. So, the way he does is raising his voice when the train pass in order the students can listen to him. In listening session, the teacher pauses the audio and continue after it pass. The teacher also hopes the school can provide a soundproof classroom for the listening class. This is in line with what was published by My Studio that in order to create a comfortable learning environment and without noise that can interfere with the learning process of students, school managers need to make classroom soundproofing (My Studio Art Work, 2023). According to Tri Astari (2022), one of the main supports in the learning process is the availability of textbooks consisting of teacher handbooks (teacher's books) and student handbooks (student books).

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the researcher grouped the challenges into two main points. These are internal challenges that come from the teachers and external challenges that come from the government, students and learning facilities. Internal challenges originating from teachers are related to teachers' ability in using ICT tools, teachers' capability in determining methods, selecting material, and adjusting between time allocation, indicators, and learning activities. The next challenges are external challenges that come from the government. This challenge relates to practical curriculum given by the governments, students' different abilities and skills, students' capability in working with HOTS, 4Cs, and literacy programs, learning facilities provided by schools, and school's neighborhood/ School proximity to railways.

The solutions to overcome challenges originating from teachers are; Keeping up to date and learning by doing, exchanging lesson hours with other teachers or making the practice into project, slipping ice breaking in the learning, motivating students, teaching in bilingual, making varied and attractive learning, making students focused in learning, making students accustomed in working with HOTS, 4Cs, and literacy programs, providing learning resources and facilities, and raising their voice train is passing by the ELT, and conducting listening session with audio speakers.

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