



Teacher Perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum in English Teaching in Rural Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

The continuous shifts in Indonesia's educational curriculum have raised significant concerns about the effectiveness of English language teaching at the elementary school (ES) level, particularly in rural areas. While the Merdeka Curriculum (MC) emphasizes early language acquisition, its implementation faces challenges due to gaps in teacher preparedness, limited resources, and disparities between urban and rural schools. This study explores English teachers' perceptions of the MC and the challenges they encounter in its implementation in rural elementary schools. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis from eight English teachers in five ES in Baubau, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data analysis involved data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that while teachers recognize the potential of the MC, their understanding remains superficial, primarily acknowledging it as a new policy. The challenges identified include a lack of professional development opportunities, inadequate resources, and insufficient facilities, hindering the curriculum's effective application. Teachers often rely on internet-based resources that are not tailored to local contexts and struggle with the student-centered, differentiated learning approach promoted by the curriculum. The study suggests that successful implementation of the MC requires support at both the central and local levels, including teacher training, infrastructure improvements, and appropriate resources. Further research should explore strategies to enhance teacher competencies and address infrastructural barriers, ensuring the full potential of the MC in rural education settings.

KEYWORDS

Teacher perceptions, merdeka curriculum, English teaching, Rural elementary schools.

ABSTRAK

Perubahan terus-menerus dalam kurikulum pendidikan di Indonesia telah menimbulkan kekhawatiran signifikan tentang efektivitas pengajaran bahasa Inggris di tingkat sekolah dasar (SD), terutama di daerah pedesaan. Meskipun Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) menekankan pentingnya akuisisi bahasa sejak dini, implementasinya menghadapi tantangan akibat kurangnya kesiapan guru,

KATA KUNCI

Persepsi guru; Kurikulum Merdeka; Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris; Sekolah dasar pedesaan.

keterbatasan sumber daya, dan ketimpangan antara sekolah di perkotaan dan pedesaan. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi persepsi guru bahasa Inggris terhadap KM dan tantangan yang mereka hadapi dalam penerapannya di SD pedesaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, dan analisis dokumen dari delapan guru bahasa Inggris di lima SD di Baubau, Sulawesi Tenggara, Indonesia. Analisis data dilakukan dengan melalui kondensasi data, tampilan data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun guru mengakui potensi KM, pemahaman mereka masih bersifat dangkal, lebih mengakui KM sebagai kebijakan baru. Tantangan yang diidentifikasi meliputi kurangnya kesempatan pengembangan profesional, sumber daya yang tidak memadai, dan fasilitas yang terbatas, yang menghambat penerapan kurikulum secara efektif. Guru sering bergantung pada sumber daya berbasis internet yang tidak disesuaikan dengan konteks lokal dan mengalami kesulitan dalam menerapkan pendekatan pembelajaran yang berpusat pada siswa dan terdiferensiasi yang dipromosikan oleh kurikulum. Penelitian ini menyarankan bahwa keberhasilan implementasi KM memerlukan dukungan di tingkat pusat dan lokal, termasuk pelatihan guru, perbaikan infrastruktur, dan penyediaan sumber daya yang sesuai. Penelitian lebih lanjut perlu mengeksplorasi strategi untuk meningkatkan kompetensi guru dan mengatasi hambatan infrastruktur, memastikan potensi penuh KM dapat terwujud di lingkungan pendidikan pedesaan.

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INTRODUCTION

The continuous shifts in the curriculum have significant implications for English language teaching at the elementary school (ES) level. The classification of English as a local content or elective subject has, in some cases, overlooked the urgency of teaching foreign language skills as a second or third language to elementary school students, despite the critical role of the elementary age range in language acquisition. Learners must reach a minimum level of linguistic competence in their first language before they can successfully acquire a second language, and early exposure supports this development when adequate instructional support is provided (Cummins, 2000). This theoretical perspective aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's (MC) aims to introduce English learning at an early stage to build cognitive and linguistic foundations that support later academic success. Since the introduction of the MC, various aspects of English language teaching have been considered, particularly in regard to enhancing communicative competence. However, the successful implementation of this policy

depends on teacher preparedness to translate curriculum goals into effective classroom practices.

The new policy requiring English language instruction in schools represents a significant step in advancing the MC. Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 12 of 2024 concerning the curriculum for early childhood, basic education, and secondary education outlines the planned transition of English into a mandatory subject. Initially, English will be offered as an optional subject with gradual implementation through the 2026/2027 academic year, with full implementation as a compulsory subject by the 2027/2028 academic year. According to Article 33 of Minister of Research and Technology Regulation Number 12 of 2024, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) is responsible for providing adequate support during this transition. Local governments are also expected to contribute by ensuring the availability of qualified English teachers in ES, madrasah ibtidaiyah, and other equivalent educational institutions. In this context, **Mulyono & Sartini (2022)** emphasize the role of local governments in supporting curriculum transitions and ensuring adequate teacher training to meet national educational standards.

The MC places a strong emphasis on English language learning in elementary education. Its implementation spans both rural and urban settings, though rural schools face unique challenges. While urban schools benefit from modern facilities and resources that facilitate the application of the MC, rural schools often struggle with limited access to essential services, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure, such as transportation and internet connectivity. This disparity can significantly hinder the effective implementation of the curriculum in rural areas. Additionally, rural schools frequently experience financial constraints, limiting their ability to offer quality English language instruction. As noted by Febriana et al. (2018), rural schools face considerable difficulties in implementing the MC due to the lack of internet access and inadequate learning materials. These contextual challenges are compounded by limited opportunities for teacher professional development, which restricts teachers' capacity to translate policy intentions into effective classroom practices.

Regulation No. 20 of 2003 defines the curriculum as a structured plan that outlines educational objectives, subject matter, and learning materials. It also includes methods that serve as guidelines for carrying out educational activities to achieve specific learning outcomes. The curriculum is considered a legal document that specifies the educational standards students must meet through the learning process (Prihantoro, 2014).

In Indonesia, the development of curricula has resulted in the establishment of four distinct curricula: KTSP 2006, the 2013 Curriculum, the Emergency Curriculum, and the MC. Curriculum development plays a crucial role in education, providing a comprehensive framework for teaching and learning activities designed to achieve specific educational goals (Richards in Sari, 2023).

A key aspect of the MC is differentiated learning, which emphasizes adapting the learning process to meet the diverse needs of students. Differentiated learning considers various factors, including students' needs, learning styles, backgrounds, and character. The approach involves four key aspects: content, process, product, and learning environment. Implementing differentiated learning helps students engage with the material in a way that is tailored to their needs, fostering independent, creative, and innovative thinking.

The shift from the 2013 Curriculum to the MC has had an impact on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning. While the previous curriculum focused on

teacher-centered learning, the MC mandates a student-centered approach. Teachers are now expected to prioritize student engagement, innovation, and creativity. This change is in line with the National Education Standards Agency's emphasis on providing greater autonomy to both teachers and students in selecting and enhancing their competencies. Furthermore, the introduction of new terms, such as *Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran (ATP)*, *Modul Ajar (MA)*, *Capaian Pembelajaran (CP)*, *Kriteria Ketercapaian Tujuan Pembelajaran (KKTP)*, *Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P3)*, diagnostic assessments, student reflections, and teacher reflections, all aim to strengthen the competencies of both students and teachers (Sari, 2023).

The MC offers flexibility, enabling teachers and schools to tailor learning to the specific needs and contexts of their communities. Teachers play a central role in the successful implementation of the curriculum, and their perceptions of the curriculum significantly influence its effectiveness (Mudhakomala, 2022).

According to the Ministry of Education and Culture's official website (KEMDIKBUD, 2022), several interventions have been proposed to support the implementation of the MC, including:

a. **Consultative and Asymmetric Assistance:** A collaborative initiative between the Ministry of Education and Culture (KEMDIKBUD) and local governments to support the Schools of Movers program.

b. **Strengthening Human Resources in Schools:** This intervention focuses on enhancing the capabilities of school principals, supervisors, inspectors, and teachers through targeted one-on-one training and coaching sessions.

c. **Learning with New Paradigm:** A student-centered approach that aims to strengthen competencies and foster character development in alignment with the values of Pancasila, through both classroom and extracurricular activities.

Teacher Perceptions

Perception, as defined by Otara (2011), refers to the cognitive process in which individuals recognize, organize, and interpret sensory stimuli to produce meaningful responses. Fatmiyati (2022) further elaborates that perception is the process through which individuals select, organize, and interpret information to form meaningful concepts. Teacher perception specifically refers to how educators interpret and respond to their teaching experiences, guided by their beliefs and feelings (Maba, 2017). Positive perceptions can motivate teachers to implement the curriculum with enthusiasm and commitment, whereas negative perceptions may hinder effective implementation (Sulasmiati et al., 2021).

Conditions of English Learning in Rural Areas

One of the significant challenges in Indonesia's education system is the geographical disparity between urban and rural areas, which complicates the equitable distribution of educational resources. Rural schools often face limited access to essential educational services, making it difficult to ensure that educational facilities are evenly distributed (Luschei & Zubaidah, 2012, as cited in Febriana et al., 2018). Additionally, rural schools generally have smaller student populations and are located far from urban centers (McCracken et al., 1991). These schools often lack essential infrastructure, such as transportation, electricity, and access to modern technology, further hindering the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Moreover, du Plessis (2014), drawing on the UNESCO 2005 framework, identifies several critical characteristics of rural areas, including geographical isolation from urban centers, challenging topographical conditions (such as inadequate roads and bridges), and insufficient access to modern information technologies. In rural areas, transport infrastructure such as buses and taxis is generally inadequate, and essential services, including electricity, water, sanitation, healthcare, and education, are often lacking or suboptimal. The socio-economic status of the population in rural areas is frequently below the poverty line, further exacerbating the challenges faced by rural schools. The rural schools involved in this study are located in an area where resources or media to support English language learning are scarce. Additionally, the lack of awareness regarding the importance of learning English among students is compounded by a lack of support from their families and the surrounding community.

Challenges faced by English Teachers in Rural Area

Teachers in rural areas face unique challenges in teaching English due to the socio-economic conditions of these communities. Despite these obstacles, teachers must strive to overcome these challenges to achieve educational goals. Rural teachers often experience difficulties due to a lack of qualified teachers, limited resources, and insufficient professional development opportunities. These challenges are compounded by low salaries, limited access to updated teaching materials, and a teacher-centered approach that reduces student engagement. Teachers in rural schools require additional training to effectively implement the curriculum and address the needs of their students. According to Nunan (1999), teachers are integral to the curriculum implementation process, as they must design effective learning activities and assess student progress. A well-structured lesson plan based on the curriculum helps guide this process (Richard, 2001, as cited in Nurfuadah, 2014).

English teachers for young learners in rural areas face unique challenges due to the specific socio-economic conditions of these communities, in addition to the general difficulties of teaching foreign languages to young students. Despite these obstacles, a professional teacher must be able to confront these challenges in order to achieve educational goals in the classroom. Teachers are expected to educate and guide students, particularly those with low motivation to learn English, as they carry the responsibility of nurturing, instructing, guiding, evaluating, and assessing students in formal education (Sadulloh, 2018). However, teachers' abilities can vary, leading to different educational outcomes. Consequently, it is essential that English teachers possess a broad base of knowledge to guide students in developing their English language skills.

The quality of education in rural schools tends to be lower than in urban schools, primarily due to the scarcity of qualified teachers and limited access to learning resources. As reported by the OECD and Asian Development Bank (2015), rural and remote areas in Indonesia “frequently suffer from a lack of qualified teachers” (p. 271). Wang (2006) notes that rural teachers often maintain strict control over their classes, with lectures consuming the majority of class time. Some studies suggest that urban teachers have more opportunities for professional development and access to updated teaching resources, whereas rural teachers often lack such opportunities. This limitation causes the classroom focus to remain centered on the teacher (Hargreaves et al., 2009, as cited in Febriana et al., 2018).

The teacher-centered approach in rural classrooms results in students lacking the necessary motivation and ability to learn independently. Barley & Beesley (2007, as cited in du Plessis, 2014) further argue that the limited success of English learning in rural schools is attributed to a shortage of qualified teachers and inadequate learning resources. The recruitment of qualified teachers in rural schools is hindered by several factors, including limited access to professional development journals, lower salaries compared to urban schools, and insufficient school resources and facilities (du Plessis, 2014; Knoblauch & Chase, 2015). Biddle & Azzano (2016) highlight teacher recruitment and training as common issues in rural schools.

Therefore, teachers in rural schools require further training and preparation. A qualified teacher is expected to design learning activities within a well-structured lesson plan, which serves as a guide for the learning process, derived from the educational curriculum. According to Nunan (1999), the curriculum plays a pivotal role in the learning process, with teachers being central to its implementation in the classroom. Richard (2001, as cited in Nurfuadah, 2014) explains that the educational curriculum encompasses all learning activities, including how students learn, how teachers support learning, the methods and materials used, and how student work is assessed. Learning activities should be carefully planned and should include clear objectives, indicators, and assessment criteria to measure whether the learning goals have been met (Jabbarifar, 2009; Looney et al., 2018). The aim of this research is to examine English teachers' perceptions of the MC and the challenges they face in implementing English language teaching in rural elementary schools in Baubau, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.

METHOD

Research Design

The design of research used a qualitative approach with a qualitative descriptive design. Qualitative research is an understanding-based inquiry process that examines a social or human problem using many methodological traditions of inquiry (Creswell, 2014). This research applied a descriptive qualitative method using observation, interview and field document, which aims to know the English teachers' perceptions towards MC and how was teachers deal with the challenges happened in implementing MC. This research was conducted on in 2025, in 5 ES of Baubau, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.

Research Variable.

The research used two variables, which were English teachers' perceptions towards MC and the challenges of English teachers in implementing MC.

Research Instrument

In this research, researchers applied qualitative method which researchers act as the main instrument. This method conducting multiple tasks, identifying the research focus, selecting informants as data sources, collecting data, evaluating the data quality, analyzing the data, interpreting the findings, and drawing conclusions (Sugiyono, 2013). Participants in this study comprised eight teachers from 5 ES in Baubau. Data were collected through interviews with each teacher, utilizing a structured set of questions. Specifically, nine open-ended questions and three closed-ended questions were administered to address the research objectives, organized as follows:

Table 1. Research Instrument

No	Indicators	No	Research Questions
1	Consultative and Asymmetric Assistance	1	Do you know about English learning in Merdeka Curriculum? Yes/No What is your opinion about that?
		2	How were schools and teachers preparation in implementing English learning based on Merdeka Curriculum?
		3	How about teachers' documents in teaching English such as syllabus and lesson plan ((ATP and Moduls)? Do you have any documents of those in teaching English now?
		4	Are there any obstacles in implementing English learning based on Merdeka Curriculum? (Schools and Teachers)
		5	How was school overcoming the obstacles in implementing English learning based on Merdeka curriculum?
		6	Does the school provide facilities such as learning tools (textbooks, infocus, etc)?
2	Strengthening Human Resources in Schools	7	Have you participated in training aimed to enhance the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum? Yes/No
		8	In your opinion, should training for the development and implementation of Merdeka Curriculum be conducted? Yes/No
3	Learning with the New Paradigma	9	Is English a mandatory/local content or an elective subject in your school?
0		1	In what class English started to be taught in your school?
		1	Does English learning in ES currently focus on the application of students' communication skills? Which of the 4 language skills (listening, writing, speaking, reading) is most often taught?
		1	In your opinion, what needs to be improved in English learning in this digital era?

Technique of Data Collection

Reserachers did observation related with the process of teaching learning in the classroom, and schools environment before doing interview. Furthermore, researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with eight English teachers. Interview guide was used to ensure consistency, and researchers took notes and recorded participants' responses using a mobile phone as a backup for interpretation. The final data collection method involved documentation, which included gathering information from school records and relevant articles related to the research.

Technique of Data Analysis

According to Miles et al. (2014), data analysis can be performed using an interactive model comprising several stages, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verifying.

1) Data Condensation

In this stage, researchers focused on understanding the data by selecting the most relevant elements, including identifying key aspects related to the data obtained from the field, which facilitated data reduction while ensuring the findings from the interviews were fully represented.

2) Data Display

At this stage, data were presented in a clear and structured format using language and sentences. That allowed researchers to manage the data effectively and use it to derive meaningful findings. Data was organized systematically to facilitate the drawing of conclusions and the development of strategies. Narrative essays were employed as the method of data display, as this format is commonly used in qualitative research.

3) Conclusion: Drawing/Verifying

During this final stage, the researchers interpreted the data to provide analysis. The objective was to draw conclusions and verify the perceptions of English teachers regarding the implementation of English language teaching within MC.

FINDINGS

Researchers presented data analysis and discussion which have been collected from interview, observation, and field document. The results of research were presented as follow;

A. Consultative and Asymmetric Assistance

In line to this indicator, the researchers found 3 findings, which were: English teachers' insights and opinion regarding MC, schools and teachers readiness in using MC, schools and teachers obstacles in using MC.

1). English teachers' insights and opinion about MC.

Extract 1.

Question 1; Do you know about English learning in MC? Yes/No.

What is your opinion about that?

R1; Yes. Totally agree because there is a basis for learning to the next level (Junior High School).

R2; Yes. It's good because children are introduced to English lessons from an early age.

R3; Yes. Because English is an international language used in many countries, wherever speaking English can open up opportunities for children to expand their study opportunities and insights and knowledge about the world.

R4; Yes. It is very good because of the advancement of technology today English is very much needed and also adds to the basic knowledge of English for ES children.

R5; Yes. English lessons in ES have many benefits and have a positive impact on students. Learning English from an early age helps build a strong foundation for English skills in secondary school, as students at an early age are more likely to absorb and remember new language and provide access to a variety of learning resources including books, educational videos and online learning resources that use English instructions

R6; Yes. It's quite good, because some young children find it easier to grasp learning, one of which is language, and some students are more interested in language learning because some of the games on their cellphones use English.

R7; Yes. Very good, because English should be introduced as early as possible.

R8; Yes. It's great that there is an English lesson in ES, because it can teach children from an early age to learn and memorize a lot of English vocabulary, so that later when they are in junior high school they won't be surprised anymore and will have memorized a lot of vocabulary.

The result of interview about teachers' insight and their opinion of English learning teaching in ES based on MC implies that all teachers already knew the MC of English learning as the curriculum which was very good to be implemented in ES since English from ES have many benefits. Learning English from early age helps students to build strong foundation and basis for learning to the next level, besides, students are more likely to absorb and remember new language and provide access to a variety of learning resources that use English instructions, and also can open up opportunities for children to expand their insights about the world.

2). Schools and Teachers Readiness in using MC

In line with the readiness of schools and teachers in implementing English learning based on MC could be derived as follow;

Extract 2.

Question 2; How were schools and teachers preparation in implementing English learning based on MC?

R1; The school is very ready to provide English teachers and supporting books.

R2; Full support.

R3; Both schools have the flexibility to design a more relevant and interesting curriculum according to the needs and potential of students in their environment.

R4; Very supportive and very helpful to me as a teacher

R5; Alhamdulillah, the process of improving the availability of books, especially English lessons, has begun. .

R6; So far, the school's readiness to support English learning is not too much, only providing English learning companion books, which are currently available for classes 3 and 5, there may be additional ones, but it is not yet known when.

R7; English in this ES prepares books, but there are still not enough teaching aids and other teaching aids.

R8; The school is very ready.

Based on the result above, the researchers concluded that the readiness of school in conducting English learning based on national curriculum could be seen from supporting fully this curriculum, providing English teachers and supporting books, schools have the flexibility to design a more relevant and interesting curriculum according to the needs and potential of students in their environment, the process of improving the availability of books, especially English lessons, providing English learning companion books, which are currently available for classes 3 and 5. However, there was any school still lack of teaching aids.

Extract 3.

Question 3; How about teachers' documents in teaching English such as syllabus and lesson plan ((ATP and Moduls)?Do you have any documents of those in teaching English now?

R1; Ready, because before the new semester the principal always checks the learning devices before you start entering the class.

R2; Good and complete.

R3; Educators will provide coaching and development in making syllabuses, lesson plans.

R4; -

R5; For MC related to learning devices such as syllabus and lesson plans/teaching modules, they are already available according to the guidebook used.

R6; -

R7; Ready with lesson plans and syllabuses, for now the teaching modules are prepared but last year I prepared them myself, here we already know which ones are taught first, but now we are pursuing learning so that it is finished, even though the children do not understand yet.

R8; We are very ready in making lesson plans

3). Schools and Teachers Obstacles in using MC

Extract 4.

Question 4; Are there any obstacles in implementing English learning based on MC?

(Schools and Teachers)

R1; There are no significant obstacles as long as teachers are able to adapt quickly.

R2; A little overwhelmed because it has not been completely completed and has been replaced again.

R3; Many problems that occur in the field of education arise due to changes in the curriculum changes that cause problems such as the complexity of compiling lesson implementation plans (RPP), adjusting service lesson schedules and difficulties in determining learning methods and strategies.

R4; There was no obstacle so far.

R5; The obstacle to the curriculum changes that occur is related to guide books such as printed books that change according to the curriculum so that teachers are a little troubled in terms of supporting the learning process which is still very minimal, especially in the implementation of MC which is mostly technology-based.

R6; Some students have started to adapt, students implementing English from grade 1 who may still find English learning is a new language, because the way of pronouncing vocabulary is still difficult such as the way of writing and pronouncing its different.

R7; The obstacle is the lack of media. (Books, guides, and other teaching aids).

R8; Yes, there are some obstacles in early implementation.

Based on the results above, it could be seen that most of schools faced some obstacles from

English learning implementation. The obstacles due to some issues were complexity of compiling lesson implementation plans (RPP), adjusting service lesson schedules and difficulties in determining learning methods and strategies, besides, the obstacle to the curriculum changes that occur is related to guide books such as printed books that change according to the curriculum so that teachers are a little troubled in terms of supporting the learning process, which is mostly technology-based. There was also school has unadequate learning media

(books, guides, and other teaching aids).

Extract 5.

Question 6; How was school overcoming the obstacles in implementing English learning based on MC?

R1; The school pays close attention to matters related to teacher development so that it always facilitates by holding training for teachers.

R2; Adapting to the situation

R3; With the socialization and adaptation activities before implementing the new curriculum, so that school administrators, educators, gain knowledge, to use the new curriculum.

R4; For now there are no obstacles.

R5; To overcome the obstacles and challenges above, the school has begun to improve by budgeting the procurement of books, both teacher's handbooks and student books, and has begun to improve the availability of facilities and infrastructure that support the learning process, such as the procurement of infocus in each.

R6; So far, the school has suggested training students with interesting things such as providing topic numbers through pictures or connecting writing through dotted lines after connecting slowly taught the correct pronunciation

R7; Lack of facilities, limited time, schools should support and make policies that English is not a local subject. And don't look down on it.

R8; Schools are looking for solutions and ways to overcome it.

From the results of interview above, researchers found that the way school overcoming the obstacles during the implementation of English learning based on Merdeka Curriculum were trying to adapting the situation, in the matter of teacher development, school holding training for teachers, do socialization and budgeting for some facilities.

Extract 6.

Question 6; Does the school provide facilities such as learning tools (textbooks, infocus, etc?

R1; Yes, the school has prepared the best facilities.

R2; There are printed books.

R3; Yes, they are prepared.

R3; Yes.

R5; The school has started to prepare facilities, although the number has not been fully met. For books, sometimes students still have to share 1 book to be used for 2 or 3 students, while infocus still has to take turns with other classes.

R6; For now, not all of them have received English textbooks, only a few classes, class 3 and class 5.

R7; Yes, only books but still lacking infocus, there is none. I prepare other teaching aids myself,

R8; Yes, the school has prepared everything.

Based on the data above, it could be seen that although school has prepared the facilities, but some of schools still lack of books and infocus.

B. Strengthening Human Resources in Schools

This indicator refers to strengthening school principals, supervisors, inspectors, and teachers through intensive one-to-one training and coaching programs held by the facilitators.

Extract 7.

*Question 7. Have you participated in training aimed to enhance the implementation of MC?
Yes/No*

R1; only from school

R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8. No one of teachers join any kinds of training.

The result shows that there was no any kinds of training which was developed by government either the government center or local one. The schools also did not developed any socialization or training about this.

Extract 8.

Question 8; In your opinion, should training for the development and implementation of Merdeka Curriculum be conducted? Yes/No

R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8. All teachers agree.

All the teachers agree if development training implementation of the MC should be implemented. All the teachers believe that they need training in order to maximize the teachers' role in teaching English.

C. Learning with the New Paradigm

This indicator refers to learning oriented towards strengthening students' competence and developing character in accordance with the values of Pancasila, through learning activities inside and outside the classroom.

Extract 9.

Question 9; Is English a mandatory/local content or an elective subject in your school?

R1; Yes, it is mandatory.

R2; Mandatory subject

R3; Mandatory subject

R4; Electives subject

R5; Elective subject.

R6; Local content

R7; Local content. It should be mandatory like other subjects so that children do not take it lightly.

R8; Mandatory subject.

Based on the result of interview above, it could be seen that only 4 schools which took English as mandatory subject, the others were still elective and local content subjects.

Extract 10.

Question 10; In what class English started to be taught in your school?

R1; Starting from first grade, the reason is as I said above so that when they move on to a higher level, first graders already have a strong foundation.

R2; Starting from grade 1 because of the demands of the CM.

R3; Starting from grade 1 (one) so that students can get to know basic vocabulary.

R4; 2,3,4,5,6. why because the basis for the future of learning. English from an early age helps students build a strong foundation.

R5; English in this school begins to be taught in phase B, namely grade 3 because in that phase students are already fluent in writing and reading so you start introducing English lessons in this phase.

R6; Starting from grade 1 of elementary school.

R7; Starting from grade 1, because of the principal's request

R8; starting from grade 1 because it has become a compulsory subject.

Based on the result of interview, it could be seen that there were 6 schools conducted English learning from grade 1, there was one school from grade 2, and one school from grade 3.

Extract 11.

Question 11; Does English learning in ES currently focus on the application of students' communication skills? Which of the 4 language skills (listening, writing, speaking, reading) is most often taught?

R1; Yes, we teach all four, but for now we prioritize reading or practicing speaking in front of the class, to train self-confidence in appearing in front of friends.

R2; Not really because we teach according to learning achievement (CP)

R3; Yes, (listening, reading, writing and speaking).

R4; The most important thing is reading and writing

R5; For English learning in ES, you still emphasize the introduction of the alphabet and mastery of simple vocabulary used everyday.

R6; So far, for English learning in ES, it is more about listening, not too demanding in terms of writing, pronouncing what is important is close to what is said and written is good enough, because so far, when students are too monotonous, they will quickly get bored. But little by little, they are guided to correct what is wrong.

R7; Yes, writing, reading

R8; reading, writing and listening

The result above indicated that English learning currently already focus on the application of students communication skills (reading, speaking, writing and listening), but the most often taught was reading.

Extract 12.

Question 12; In your opinion, what needs to be improved in English learning in this digital era?

R1; In my opinion, what needs to be improved is the children's self-confidence to dare to come forward to read or answer questions in English. Because no matter how many vocabularies we tell them to memorize, if they can't pronounce them correctly and out loud, you feel like you haven't succeeded.

R2; In my opinion, what needs to be improved is learning achievement of students so that they focus more on communication.

R3; Write and how to read.

R4; What needs to be improved is increasing vocabulary and focusing on writing.

R5; In my opinion, what needs to be improved in English learning in elementary schools is the availability of facilities and infrastructure that support the learning process, such as the availability of printed books, lesson plans/Ajat modules that are in accordance with learning and support the learning process.

R6; What needs to be improved in English learning in ES was the provision of English textbooks or printed books.

R7; English pronunciation.

R8; The learning that needs to be improved was how to read and write.

From the result above, it could be concluded that there were many things that should be improved in English learning which were self confidence, the ability to write and read, increasing vocabulary, English pronunciation, focus on communication ability, and the provision of English textbooks and printed books.

Challenging in English Teaching Learning in ES

Teachers were experiencing many challenges in implementing MC due to standard of human research in organizing socialization and trainings for schools and teachers. In fact, there was no teacher take any trainings at all. From interview, most teachers need to have socialization and trainings in order to have abilities on how to implement MC. there was no school In addition, teachers still rely on internet to gain learning source and without revising it.

The findings indicate that while teachers were aware of the MC as a new educational policy, their understanding was limited to its designation as a new curriculum introduced at the national level. However, teachers did not have a clear understanding of the ideal substance or how this curriculum should be implemented at the ES level. Several factors contributed to this lack of implementation, including the absence of specific training programs for English teachers, which left them without the necessary guidance or skills to effectively implement the curriculum. Furthermore, the schools faced significant challenges due to insufficient facilities and resources, which hindered the teachers' ability to fully engage with and apply the MC in the classroom. As a result, despite recognizing the MC, the teachers lacked the practical knowledge and support required to implement it effectively in their schools.

DISCUSSION

This section offers a comprehensive analysis of the research question: "What were teachers' perceptions of English learning based on MC , and what challenges did teachers encounter in English learning?" The discussion of the research was presented in detail as follows:

The findings of this study reveal that while teachers in rural ES recognize the MC as a new national educational policy, their understanding of its substantive meaning and how it should be implemented in practice remains limited. This gap aligns with prior research showing that teachers in rural contexts often encounter similar challenges when adapting to new curriculum standards, including insufficient socialization, lack of professional development, and limited instructional resources (Halawa, 2024). These challenges directly affect teachers' ability to design and deliver effective English language instruction that aligns with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

A central issue identified in this study is the absence of formal, structured training for English teachers on the MC. Teachers reported having no access to government-led training programs that focus on curriculum content, assessment strategies, and differentiated instruction. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Saputri and Sukarno (2024), which highlights that limited professional development opportunities in rural areas significantly impede teachers' curriculum understanding and implementation capacity. Competence and autonomy are essential for teachers to internalize and apply new curriculum demands. Without ongoing training and professional support, teachers are left to adapt independently, resulting in inconsistent application of curriculum principles (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The study also found that teachers frequently rely on internet-based resources to support their teaching. While internet resources can offer supplemental materials, these are often generic, not aligned with local curriculum standards, and lack adaptation for age-appropriate or context-specific classroom use. Recent research by Priyanto and Widodo (2021) similarly noted that English teachers in Indonesian rural schools depend heavily on online sources due to the absence of locally relevant materials and the lack of teacher training in curriculum adaptation. This reliance underscores the need for structured instructional resources that are contextually appropriate and professionally vetted.

In addition, rural schools face substantial infrastructural and resource constraints that further hinder effective curriculum implementation. Many rural schools lack access to adequate learning materials, textbooks, technology, and stable internet connectivity, all of which are crucial for facilitating English language instruction. These findings are consistent with Febriana et al. (2018), who reported that rural schools struggle to implement the MC due to limited access to essential infrastructure and instructional materials. Van Lier (2004) suggests that external environmental factors strongly influence language learning outcomes. In rural settings where supportive infrastructure is lacking, teachers are less able to create rich, communicative learning environments that the curriculum encourages.

Furthermore, although the MC promotes student-centered and differentiated instruction, teachers in rural areas continue to face significant barriers in adopting these approaches. Tomlinson (2001) emphasizes the importance of tailoring instruction to diverse student needs, yet the limited availability of instructional resources and professional guidance prevents teachers from doing so. This constraint results in a predominantly teacher-centered approach that does not fully support communicative competence or student autonomy in language learning.

The findings also indicate that while the curriculum provides flexibility for teachers to adapt content and methods locally, this flexibility is not sufficient on its own. Local government support remains crucial to facilitating meaningful curriculum adoption. The role of local authorities in providing necessary infrastructure, learning resources, and structured teacher development programs to enable effective curriculum transitions (Mulyono and Sartini, 2022). Their findings support the current study's observations that without such systemic support, teachers are unable to translate curriculum policy into classroom practice successfully.

In summary, while the MC provides a valuable opportunity for enhancing English language education through early exposure, differentiated instruction, and greater teacher autonomy, its success in rural elementary schools is constrained by gaps in teacher preparation, limited resources, and insufficient systemic support. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that includes structured professional development, improved infrastructure, and continuous support from both central and local educational authorities. Future research should explore scalable interventions that strengthen teacher competencies and contextualized instructional resources to support effective curriculum implementation in rural settings.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant implications of the MC introduction for English language teaching in Indonesian rural ES. While teachers acknowledge the MC potential, their understanding remains primarily superficial, limited to its status as a new educational policy. However, practical implementation challenges persist, largely due to insufficient professional development, lack of training, and inadequate resources in rural areas. These issues hinder teachers' ability to effectively implement the curriculum and meet its objectives, which is compounded by the limited availability of instructional materials and technology in these settings. The findings suggest that although the MC promotes a student-centered approach and aims to enhance language proficiency from an early age, the lack of structured teacher training and professional development opportunities poses a critical barrier. Teachers' reliance on internet-based resources further underscores the need for curriculum-adapted, locally relevant instructional materials. Moreover, the disparity in infrastructure between urban and rural schools exacerbates the difficulty of effective implementation, as rural schools often lack the necessary facilities and resources to support high-quality English language instruction.

To address these challenges, it is essential that local governments and educational authorities play a more active role in providing targeted support. This includes enhancing teacher training programs, improving the availability of teaching resources, and ensuring that both teachers and students have the tools necessary for successful curriculum implementation. Moreover, the MC flexibility should be complemented with robust systemic support to ensure that teachers are not left to navigate these changes independently. While, the MC presents a valuable opportunity for advancing English language education in Indonesia, its successful implementation in rural ES requires comprehensive, sustained support at both the central and local levels. Future research should explore effective strategies to strengthen teacher competencies, provide contextually appropriate resources, and overcome infrastructural barriers to ensure that the curriculum's potential is fully realized in rural education settings.

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