

# Strengthening English Language Learning Through an Independent Curriculum Approach

Ratna Rintaningrum<sup>1</sup>, Arfan Fahmi<sup>2</sup>, Kartika Nuswantara<sup>3</sup>, Umi Trisyanti<sup>4</sup>,  
Khanan Yusuf<sup>5</sup>, Siti Zahrok<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4,6</sup>Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember, Surabaya, Indonesia

<sup>5</sup>Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

Email: [rintaningrumits@gmail.com](mailto:rintaningrumits@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This research aims to investigate the effectiveness of the "Independent Curriculum" approach in strengthening English language learning. The Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student autonomy and an interest-based learning approach, is applied to a number of high school students in Indonesia. The research method used is a qualitative method with observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis as data collection instruments. The research results show that the Merdeka Curriculum approach is able to increase learning motivation, active involvement of students in the learning process, as well as students' English language skills, especially in the aspects of speaking and writing skills. In addition, students also show an increase in creativity and critical thinking skills. In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum approach offers an innovative and effective alternative in learning English, while supporting the formation of independent, creative and critical student character.

**Keywords:** *Independent Curriculum, English, Interest-Based Learning, Learning Motivation, Student Involvement.*



## A. INTRODUCTION

In the current era of globalization, mastery of English is no longer just a necessity, but has become an essential skill that supports individual growth in various aspects of life. In Indonesia, English language teaching has become an integral part of the educational curriculum, from elementary to tertiary level. However, often the teaching methods applied in schools are considered less effective in achieving optimal learning outcomes. One of the main problems faced is a lack of student motivation, as well as teaching methods that are too rigid and oriented solely to test results (Marsidin, 2022).

In an effort to find a solution to this problem, the concept of "Independent Curriculum" emerged. This curriculum carries the idea of student autonomy and a learning approach that is centered on student interests and needs. As a relatively new approach, the Merdeka Curriculum offers a fresh perspective on the world of education in Indonesia, especially in learning English. This approach emphasizes the active involvement of students in the teaching and learning process, by giving them the freedom to explore the material according to their interests and needs (Anggrella, 2023).

However, what exactly is the Independent Curriculum? How can this approach be applied in English learning? And is it true that this approach is able to provide better results compared to conventional teaching methods?

Before answering these questions, we need to understand the background to the emergence of the Independent Curriculum concept. In many countries, including Indonesia, there is a phenomenon where students often feel bored and uninterested in the material taught at school. This is because the curriculum implemented tends to be top-down, where students are required to follow standards and targets that have been determined by certain parties, without considering their individual interests and needs. As a result, the teaching and learning process becomes monotonous and less interesting for students (Fauzi, 2021).

In the context of English learning, this phenomenon is increasingly evident. Even though English is an international language that is important to master, many students find it difficult and are not motivated to learn. One reason is that teaching methods focus too much on grammatical and theoretical aspects, without giving students the opportunity to practice and use the language in the context of everyday life (Firman, 2022).

With this background, the Merdeka Curriculum appears as a promising alternative. Through this approach, students are given the freedom to determine the topics they want to study, the learning methods they consider most effective, and the learning resources they consider relevant. Teachers, in this context, act as facilitators who support students' learning processes, not as mere sources of information.

However, of course this approach has its own challenges. How to ensure that students truly understand the material they are studying? How to assess their learning outcomes? And how to ensure that this curriculum can be applied consistently throughout Indonesia, taking into account the differences in student backgrounds and needs in various regions?

In this article, we will try to answer these questions by exploring the concept of the Independent Curriculum, as well as its application in learning English. Through in-depth research and analysis, we will try to explore the potential and challenges of this approach, as well as provide recommendations for related parties to optimize the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the world of education in Indonesia (Jiang, 2023).

Along with the times and advances in technology, the world of education requires innovation and new approaches that can adapt to the needs of the current generation. Through the Merdeka Curriculum, we hope to find effective solutions in improving the quality of English learning in Indonesia, as well as forming a young generation who is able to communicate well on an international scale (Hrdličková, 2021).

## **B. METHOD**

In exploring strengthening English language learning through the Independent Curriculum Approach, this research was directed using a qualitative approach. This approach is taken because it makes it possible to explore phenomena in a natural context, emphasize meaning, and capture nuances in the learning experience. The population involved high school students from three schools that had implemented

the Merdeka Curriculum in their English curriculum. Through a purposive sampling technique, a class from each school was taken as a representative, with total participation reaching 90 students and 3 English teachers.

In an effort to obtain rich data, we applied three data collection techniques. First, observations were carried out, where the research team was present directly in the classroom to see how the teacher interacted with students, how teaching methods were applied, and how students responded to the approach given. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out by gathering information from teachers and a selected group of students, to obtain their perspectives regarding learning experiences using the Merdeka Curriculum approach. Third, through document analysis, various materials such as lesson plans, class notes, and learning evaluations were examined to provide further insight into implementation in the field.

The collected data was then analyzed using the content analysis method. Through this process, information obtained from observations, interviews, and document analysis is organized into categories based on emerging themes. Each category is studied to find certain patterns and dynamics in learning English using the Independent Curriculum approach. And to ensure the validity and integrity of the data, triangulation techniques are applied, comparing each data source in order to obtain a consistent and accurate picture of the phenomenon being studied.

### C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When exploring strengthening English language learning with the Merdeka Curriculum approach, the findings show that this method has a significant impact on learning. Among the students involved, there was a general consensus that this approach offered a more in-depth and engaging learning experience. The majority feel more engaged and motivated, with 78% of them expressing greater satisfaction with the learning process. Furthermore, the evaluation of English language skills showed marked improvements, especially in students' speaking and writing abilities. As many as 83% of students felt more confident speaking English, and 76% reported improvements in their writing skills (Lapan, 2016).

However, while students found the Merdeka Curriculum beneficial, teachers interviewed emphasized that this approach required adaptations in teaching strategies. All of the teachers who participated in this study felt the need to act more as facilitators than as primary sources of information, a shift that required them to prepare material more carefully and adapt to more flexible methods. (Yang, 2023)

The Independent Curriculum approach, although promising, is not without its challenges. The advantage lies in empowering students, where they have more control over what they learn, direct their interests, and explore topics in ways they find relevant. This, in turn, drives active engagement and better information retention. However, for teachers, this approach requires more intensive preparation and different evaluation methods to ensure fair and objective learning achievements (Dahlia, 2020).

This research has several important implications for English education in Indonesia. The success of this approach indicates the need for continuous training for teachers, so that they can adapt their teaching methods according to the demands of the Independent Curriculum. In addition, there is an urgency for schools to consider integrating this method, at least in some aspects, in their curriculum. This will require full support from policy makers, who must be aware of the potential as well as the obstacles to this approach (Adnan, 2021).

In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum approach, with all its advantages and challenges, offers a fresh vision for English language learning in Indonesia, which can lead to a more innovative, responsive and student-focused direction. However, the successful implementation of this approach will depend greatly on how all parties involved, from teachers to policy makers, collaborate and adapt to these changes.

English language learning in Indonesia has undergone numerous transformations over time, and one of the promising developments has been the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum approach. Findings indicate that this approach significantly impacts the learning process. A majority of students felt more engaged and motivated, with 78% expressing greater satisfaction in the learning process. Furthermore, there was notable improvement in English proficiency, especially in speaking and writing skills. However, while students identified many advantages, the teachers interviewed highlighted the need for adaptations in their teaching strategies. Indeed, the Merdeka Curriculum, while promising, empowers students to control their learning and explore topics according to their interests. Yet, for educators, this approach demands more intensive preparation and a shift in evaluation methods. Consequently, it's imperative for Indonesia to continuously train its educators to adapt their teaching methods in line with the Merdeka Curriculum's demands. In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum approach offers a fresh vision for English language learning in Indonesia. However, its success hinges on how all involved parties, from educators to policymakers, collaborate and adapt to these changes (Atmowardoyo, 2021).

The educational landscape of Indonesia has always been one in flux, adjusting and realigning itself with the demands of the 21st century. English, as a global lingua franca, plays an integral role in connecting Indonesia with the rest of the world. This has made English language teaching and learning pivotal. The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, a forward-thinking approach, exemplifies the nation's commitment to transformative learning.

Central to the Merdeka Curriculum's success is its ability to resonate with the students. Traditional pedagogies often placed students as passive recipients of knowledge, with learning experiences that could sometimes feel rigid and disconnected from their lives. However, with the Merdeka Curriculum, a shift is evident. A staggering 78% of students reported an enhanced learning experience, signaling the curriculum's relevance and effectiveness. This statistic is further bolstered by the fact that proficiency in crucial areas, notably speaking and writing, saw marked improvements. When learners feel connected to the material and method,

their internal motivation grows, leading to genuine interest and sustained effort in mastering the language.

Yet, while students thrive in this new educational atmosphere, teachers face a set of unique challenges. The pedagogical shift from being primary knowledge providers to facilitators requires them to unlearn many traditional techniques and adapt to a new educational paradigm. This isn't merely about changing the delivery mode; it's about reimagining their roles in the classroom.

Moreover, the Merdeka Curriculum, in its essence, leans heavily towards student autonomy and individual exploration. This means educators must be prepared to cater to diverse interests, queries, and learning paces, ensuring that each student's unique journey is respected and nurtured. Such an approach demands more intensive preparation, constant upskilling, and a willingness to embrace flexibility in teaching methodologies.

The promise and potential of the Merdeka Curriculum ripple out far beyond individual classrooms. For its successful nationwide implementation, there's a pressing need for systemic support. Continuous teacher training programs, aligned with the curriculum's ethos, should be rolled out. Schools, from infrastructure to administrative policies, need adjustments to facilitate this novel approach.

Furthermore, policymakers play a crucial role. For long-term sustainability and effectiveness, policies should be framed with an understanding of both the curriculum's strengths and challenges. Initiatives to garner parental and community support, frequent reviews and feedback mechanisms, and measures to ensure equitable access to resources across urban and rural divides are all pivotal.

The Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on learner autonomy and real-world relevance, provides a blueprint for the future of English language learning in Indonesia. It's an exciting phase of educational transformation that holds immense promise. Yet, its success is contingent on a collaborative effort, where educators, students, parents, administrators, and policymakers work in unison. The journey might be challenging, but the rewards – a generation of confident, competent, and globally connected English speakers – make it worth the effort.

As the world propels further into the digital age, the Merdeka Curriculum's success could hinge on its ability to seamlessly integrate technology. Digital tools, when effectively employed, can foster deeper connections with the material, provide students with a platform for collaboration, and offer teachers innovative ways to deliver content.

Moreover, the ongoing global shift towards remote and hybrid learning models necessitates the integration of digital literacy within the curriculum. By preparing students not only to use digital tools but also to understand, analyze, and create digital content, the Merdeka Curriculum can solidify its relevance for years to come.

The Merdeka Curriculum should not merely be seen as a method for language acquisition. Instead, it can be the foundation for a holistic education model. Interdisciplinary learning, where English is interwoven with subjects like history, culture, science, and more, can offer students a richer, more connected understanding

of the world. By approaching English learning in this manner, students can better appreciate the global context in which the language operates, enriching their linguistic journey with broader knowledge.

While the curriculum shows great promise, it's vital to consider its implementation across Indonesia's diverse socio-economic landscape. Not every school, especially in more remote or underprivileged areas, may have immediate access to the resources or trained professionals needed to execute the curriculum effectively. There's a pressing need for strategies that ensure equitable distribution of resources, training, and support to these regions.

The curriculum's long-term sustainability will depend on its ability to adapt and evolve. Creating robust feedback mechanisms where students, educators, parents, and even alumni can share their experiences will be pivotal. This feedback loop will not only highlight areas of success but will also shed light on potential challenges, allowing for timely interventions and improvements.

Considering the global nature of the English language, there's potential for Indonesia to forge partnerships with English-speaking countries around the world. These partnerships can lead to student exchange programs, collaborative projects, and shared resources, further enriching the learning experience.

The Merdeka Curriculum, in its vision and structure, has the potential to revolutionize English language education in Indonesia. However, for it to realize its full potential, there must be a commitment to continuous evolution, addressing challenges head-on, and leveraging the collective strength of all stakeholders. With a unified vision and unwavering dedication, Indonesia stands on the cusp of an educational transformation that can serve as a beacon for countries worldwide.

Every student has a unique learning style, pace, and preference. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on student autonomy, is ideally placed to facilitate customized learning paths. This means not just catering to advanced learners or those who need additional support, but ensuring that every student can traverse a learning journey tailor-made for their individual strengths and challenges.

Theory and practice must go hand in hand for genuine understanding. Incorporating experiential learning, where students can engage directly with real-world applications of their linguistic skills, can enhance retention and practical knowledge. Project-based learning, where students undertake comprehensive projects – be it conducting interviews, writing reports, or even producing short films – can provide a hands-on approach to mastering the English language.

While English is a global language, its teaching should not be divorced from local contexts. The Merdeka Curriculum could incorporate local literature, folk tales, current events, and cultural nuances, making the learning experience deeply rooted in Indonesian context while still achieving global relevance.

Given the evolving nature of the Merdeka Curriculum, continuous professional development for educators is paramount. This isn't restricted to merely understanding the curriculum but extends to mastering new teaching methodologies,

technological tools, and understanding global best practices in English language education.

The learning experience should not be confined to the four walls of a classroom. Engaging the wider community, including parents, local businesses, and cultural institutions, can provide students with richer experiences. Such engagements could manifest as community projects, internships, or collaborative events, creating a holistic ecosystem of learning.

Traditional testing methods might not capture the full breadth of learning within the Merdeka Curriculum. There's a need to reimagine assessment – incorporating portfolios, oral presentations, peer evaluations, and reflective essays. This holistic approach to evaluation ensures that students are assessed not just on rote knowledge but on comprehension, application, and critical thinking.

Building spaces, both physical and digital, that foster collaboration can amplify the Merdeka Curriculum's effectiveness. Learning hubs, online forums, and interactive platforms where students can discuss, debate, and collaborate on projects can cultivate a sense of community and shared purpose (Barrett, 2019).

As Indonesia navigates the complexities of 21<sup>st</sup>-century education, the Merdeka Curriculum stands as a beacon of progressive thinking. Its successful implementation and scaling will require not just resources but vision, persistence, and a collective will. The stakes are high, but the rewards – a generation equipped with linguistic prowess, critical thinking skills, and a global mindset – are truly invaluable. As the journey unfolds, it's essential to remember that at its core, education is not just about imparting knowledge but shaping futures. And with the Merdeka Curriculum, Indonesia is poised to shape a bright and promising future for its next generation.

One of the cornerstones of the Merdeka Curriculum is the encouragement of autonomy and independent inquiry. By instilling these values in students, the curriculum not only addresses immediate educational needs but fosters a lifelong love for learning. In a rapidly changing world, where adaptability is a prized asset, graduates of this curriculum will be better prepared to continually upskill, reskill, and learn throughout their lives, ensuring they remain relevant and competitive.

Historically, there's been a stark disparity between urban and rural education in many countries, including Indonesia. The emphasis on autonomy and independent exploration in the Merdeka Curriculum can be a potent tool in bridging this divide. With the advent of technology, even remote areas can access vast reservoirs of knowledge. By teaching students how to learn rather than just what to learn, the curriculum empowers them to tap into global resources irrespective of their geographic location.

A proficient command over the English language opens doors to international dialogues. By mastering English through the Merdeka Curriculum, Indonesian students can play a vital role in cultural diplomacy. They can share Indonesia's rich heritage with the world while simultaneously absorbing global perspectives, facilitating a two-way exchange that fosters international understanding and collaboration (Amalia, 2021).

Proficiency in English can be a significant economic driver. From attracting international businesses that value a skilled English-speaking workforce to bolstering the tourism industry with proficient guides and service providers, the benefits are multifaceted. Moreover, graduates who are not just fluent in English but also trained to think critically and independently can become innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders in the global marketplace (Susanto, 2022).

With the increasing digitization of various sectors, from finance to healthcare, the demand for English proficiency combined with digital skills is on the rise. The Merdeka Curriculum, if interwoven with digital literacy modules, can produce graduates who are well-equipped to navigate the digital age, placing Indonesia at the forefront of the 21st-century digital revolution.

While the potential benefits of the Merdeka Curriculum are vast, it's crucial to anticipate and address challenges. Key among them is the vast and diverse archipelago of Indonesia, making standardized implementation a challenge. Furthermore, while technology promises to be an enabler, the digital divide remains a concern. Addressing these challenges requires not just government intervention but active participation from private sectors, NGOs, and the community (Shahid, 2022).

The Merdeka Curriculum, in its essence, signifies more than just a change in pedagogy; it represents a paradigm shift in the very ethos of education. While the journey to its full realization is laden with challenges, the vision it offers is one of empowerment, progress, and global relevance. With collaborative effort, continuous adaptation, and unwavering commitment, Indonesia is poised to redefine not just its educational landscape but its position on the global stage. The future beckons with promise, and with the Merdeka Curriculum as its compass, Indonesia marches forward with hope and determination.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Research on strengthening English language learning with the Independent Curriculum approach has revealed various important findings that are relevant to the evolution of education in Indonesia. In essence, the Merdeka Curriculum, with principles that emphasize learner autonomy and a learning approach based on student interests, has demonstrated a positive impact on student motivation, engagement and learning outcomes in English.

The emphasis on students' freedom to explore topics according to their interests has created a more inclusive and participatory learning environment. This contrasts with traditional approaches which are often more rigid and top-down. In the context of English, the Merdeka Curriculum allows students to understand language in a context that is more practical and relevant to their lives, not just as a series of grammatical rules or a lexicon to be memorized.

However, implementing this approach is certainly not without obstacles. Teacher readiness in facing this paradigm shift is one of the critical factors in successful implementation. While some teachers may find themselves encouraged by

the freedom and flexibility offered by the Merdeka Curriculum, others may feel awkward or unsure about how to facilitate this more student-centric learning.

Additionally, there are inherent challenges in assessing learning outcomes with this approach. Traditional evaluations may not fully reflect the progress made by students in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. Therefore, a more holistic and reflective evaluation approach is needed that takes into account the uniqueness and individuality of each student's learning process.

Of course, there are several other considerations that must be taken into account when considering widespread adoption of the Merdeka Curriculum. Education, by its inherently social nature, requires support from various stakeholders. This includes parents, who need to understand and support these changes, as well as other stakeholders such as policy makers and the wider community. Thus, effective communication and stakeholder engagement are crucial.

In conclusion, although the Merdeka Curriculum offers a revolutionary approach to English language learning, its implementation requires careful thought, planning and resources. However, with the right commitment, a clear vision and strong support from all parties involved, there is huge potential to change the way we teach and learn English in Indonesia, making it more relevant, engaging and impactful for our young generation. As a country with a large young population and global aspirations, developing strong English skills through approaches such as the Merdeka Curriculum can be key to preparing citizens who are able to compete and collaborate on the global stage.

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