

Challenges and Experiences of English Teachers in Implementing *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum* in Rural Indonesia: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges and experiences of English teachers implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC) in rural Indonesian junior high schools. MBC introduces a flexible, student-centered approach to foster critical thinking and independent learning. However, rural teachers face significant challenges, including limited teaching resources, unreliable internet connectivity, and insufficient professional training. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from six English teachers who teach in rural junior high schools in South Buton Southeast Sulawesi to gain insight into their adaptation strategies and obstacles. Findings reveal that the scarcity of materials and lack of technological support severely limit curriculum delivery, while inadequate training forces teachers to rely on self-directed learning, which may not fully prepare them for MBC's demands. Despite these issues, teachers demonstrate adaptability by creating self-made resources and modifying lessons to meet student needs. This study highlights the importance of providing rural teachers with targeted resources, ongoing training, and community support to facilitate effective curriculum implementation. Addressing these needs is crucial to achieving MBC's educational goals and promoting equitable access to quality education in rural Indonesia.

Keywords: *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, rural education, English teachers.*

INTRODUCTION

Implementing educational reforms in developing countries often faces unique challenges, particularly in rural areas with limited resources and infrastructure (Briceño-Garmendia and Estache, 2004; Losch, Fréguin-Gresh and White, 2012). In Indonesia, introducing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC) represents a significant shift in the nation's educational approach, moving from the previous Kurikulum 2013 towards a more flexible and student-centered learning system. This transition has particularly impacted English language teaching in rural junior high schools, where teachers must navigate various challenges while implementing the new curriculum's requirements (JASRIAL, SYARIF, and ZAINIL, 2023).

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, introduced as part of Indonesia's educational reform initiative, emphasizes student autonomy, critical thinking, and experiential learning (Fauzan *et al.*, 2023; Simarmata and Mayuni, 2023; Hunaepi and Suharta, 2024). This curriculum transforms traditional teacher-centered approaches into more dynamic, interactive learning experiences. However, implementing such progressive educational policies in rural areas presents unique challenges that warrant careful investigation, especially in the context of English language teaching.

English teachers in rural Indonesian schools face multiple challenges adapting to the new curriculum requirements (Khulel, 2021). These challenges include limited access to technological resources, inadequate internet connectivity, and insufficient training opportunities. The situation is further complicated by the need to integrate technology-based learning methods in areas lacking basic technological infrastructure. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective support systems and solutions for rural education development.

The transition from Kurikulum 2013 to the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has necessitated significant changes in teaching methodologies, assessment practices, and classroom management approaches (Hadi *et al.*, 2023). English teachers must now facilitate more interactive and student-centered learning experiences while dealing with resource constraints and infrastructure limitations. This adaptation process requires professional development and creative problem-solving skills to overcome the unique challenges of rural education settings.

Community and school support play vital roles in successfully implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*, particularly in rural areas where resources are often shared, and

community involvement can significantly impact educational outcomes. The relationship between schools, local communities, and government authorities becomes crucial in creating an enabling environment for curriculum implementation (Blase and Blase, 2001). Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective strategies to support rural schools implementing the new curriculum.

The use of technology and media in English language teaching, as emphasized in the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*, presents opportunities and challenges in rural settings (Emawati, Taufiqulloh and Fadhly, 2024). While technology can enhance learning experiences, limited access to digital resources and internet connectivity in rural areas can hinder the effective implementation of technology-based learning activities. This situation requires teachers to develop innovative approaches to meet curriculum requirements while working within existing constraints.

Teacher preparation and professional development are critical factors in successfully implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* (Gurion, 2024). The extent to which teachers feel equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to implement the new curriculum significantly affects their ability to achieve its objectives. This aspect becomes particularly relevant in rural settings where access to training and professional development opportunities may be limited.

The impact of curriculum changes on student learning outcomes and motivation requires careful consideration. The shift towards more student-centered learning approaches may affect students' engagement with English language learning, particularly in rural contexts where exposure to English may be limited. Understanding these impacts is crucial for developing appropriate support mechanisms and teaching strategies.

The development of students' creativity and critical thinking skills, as emphasized in the *MBC*, presents unique challenges in rural settings. Teachers must find ways to foster these skills while working within local constraints and cultural contexts (Krishnapatria, 2021). This situation requires a delicate balance between implementing curriculum requirements and adapting to local realities.

This study explores the challenges and experiences of English teachers in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum* in rural Indonesian junior high schools. By examining their experiences, strategies, and adaptations, this research seeks to contribute to understanding curriculum implementation challenges in rural settings and provide insights for policymakers and educational stakeholders in developing more effective support systems for rural education.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore English teachers' challenges and experiences implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum* in rural Indonesian junior high schools (Yin, 2003). This approach was chosen to obtain in-depth insights into teachers' perspectives, experiences, and adaptation strategies in implementing the new curriculum within rural settings. The case study design allowed for a detailed exploration of the complex interactions between curriculum implementation and local contextual factors.

The study was conducted on six English teachers in rural junior high schools (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama*) in South Buton, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. The research sites were specifically selected based on their rural location and implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum*. The participants were English teachers with experience teaching with both Kurikulum 2013 and the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum*, ensuring they could provide comparative insights into the curriculum transition process.

The primary data collection instrument was an open-ended interview protocol via Google Forms to explore two main areas. Those are Teachers' challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum* and The impact of curriculum changes on teaching and learning processes.

The interview protocol in Google form consisted of 20 open-ended questions divided into two sections: (1) Section A consists of 10 questions focusing on implementation challenges, and (2)

Section B consists of 10 questions examining the impact of curriculum changes. Interviews were conducted via Google Form, where the lecturers filled in and described their perspectives and views.

The analysis employed an iterative coding and theme development process, using inductive and deductive approaches to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research objectives (Azungah, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Based on the research data, here are three findings related to teachers' challenges and experiences in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* in rural schools:

1. Limited Resources and Facilities.

Teachers face limited internet access, insufficient teaching materials, and a lack of comprehensive instructional content. Some teachers noted that the availability of books and technological tools is inadequate, creating significant obstacles in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*.

In implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* in rural areas, teachers often encounter substantial challenges related to limited resources and infrastructure. Unlike urban schools, rural schools typically have restricted access to essential teaching tools, such as comprehensive textbooks and digital learning platforms, which are fundamental to delivering curriculum content effectively. Internet connectivity, a critical component for accessing digital resources, is often unreliable or unavailable in these areas. Such limitations hinder obtaining necessary instructional materials and restrict teachers' ability to integrate modern pedagogical tools and techniques for implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*.

These constraints significantly impact teachers' ability to fully realize the curriculum's goals, especially in fostering an engaging and supportive learning environment for students. Teachers reported needing to adapt their methods by relying on limited resources, such as photocopied materials or self-developed content, to meet student needs. Despite these efforts, the lack of technological infrastructure and suitable learning materials remains a pressing issue. As a result, teachers in rural areas are often unable to provide the same quality of educational experience that the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* aims to deliver, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support to address resource gaps and enhance the curriculum's applicability in under-resourced settings.

These are some of the teacher's responses about the limited source and facilities:

- a. Response from Teacher 1: A teacher mentioned that one of the main challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* is the "limited teaching media (books)" and "internet constraints," which hinder their ability to download teaching materials.
- b. Response from Teacher 2: Another teacher identified that the "current teaching materials" and "utilization of T. PACK" (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) are challenging due to the lack of technological resources in rural areas, affecting their ability to provide engaging materials effectively.
- c. Response from Teacher 4: This teacher noted that "internet connectivity issues" significantly impact the curriculum's implementation and a general lack of understanding about the curriculum itself. These limitations reflect the broader resource shortages in rural areas.
- d. Response from Teacher 5: The teacher stated that they have "no prior experience teaching with the Independent Curriculum," the lack of "supporting infrastructure" makes it even more challenging to adapt to the new curriculum requirements without adequate resources.
- e. Response from Teacher 3: Another teacher highlighted the "lack of literacy materials" as a significant obstacle, as the limited access to varied resources impedes the development of a

resource-rich learning environment, which is essential for the curriculum's successful implementation.

These responses underline the impact of limited resources and facilities on teachers' ability to implement the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* in rural settings effectively.

2. Lack of Training and Knowledge about the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*

Many teachers feel inadequately trained to implement the KMB and resort to self-study through online platforms like YouTube and virtual workshops. They expressed the need for further training and guidance from the government to understand and apply the curriculum effectively.

In implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* within rural settings, teachers face significant obstacles due to limited resources and facilities. These challenges primarily stem from insufficient access to essential teaching tools and unreliable internet connectivity, which restricts teachers from utilizing digital resources or integrating modern educational technology into their classrooms. Educators often use makeshift solutions, like photocopied materials and self-made content, without the necessary infrastructure to bridge the gap. These limitations underscore the pressing need for improved resource provision in rural schools to support effective curriculum implementation.

These are some of the teacher responses about the Lack of Training and Knowledge about the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*:

- a. Response from Teacher 1: A teacher indicated they feel unprepared to implement the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* effectively. They stated they "have not received sufficient training" to grasp the curriculum's requirements, which has made it challenging to adapt teaching practices accordingly.
- b. Response from Teacher 2: Another teacher admitted they are "not yet sufficiently trained" and have resorted to self-learning via online resources, such as YouTube, and virtual workshops to better understand the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*. This highlights the lack of structured, formal training for teachers transitioning to the new curriculum.
- c. Response from Teacher 5: This teacher acknowledged that they "do not feel adequately prepared" to implement the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* in class. Their response suggests that without additional training, they lack the foundational knowledge necessary for applying *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* principles effectively.
- d. Response from Teacher 6: A teacher expressed "limited understanding and need for more guidance" regarding the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* implementation, underscoring the gap in knowledge and confidence among educators expected to adopt this curriculum without comprehensive preparatory training.
- e. Response from Teacher 4: Unlike others, one teacher felt "adequately trained" for the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*, but their response was an exception rather than the norm. Most teachers' responses reflect a significant need for more structured and accessible training programs to address the knowledge gap in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* across rural schools.

These examples underscore the general lack of formal training and support that rural teachers experience, making it difficult for them to understand and fully implement the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*.

3. Adaptation of Teaching Methods

Some teachers create learning materials to overcome resource limitations or use simple media, such as photocopying lesson content. However, they still encounter difficulties in providing relevant and suitable learning resources that meet the needs of students in rural areas.

In response to the challenges of limited resources in rural schools, teachers implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* have creatively adapted their teaching methods to bridge these gaps. Faced with shortages in instructional materials and inadequate technological infrastructure, educators have resorted to solutions such as creating self-made modules, photocopying essential materials, and using projectors for interactive presentations. These adaptations reflect teachers' resilience and commitment to providing meaningful learning experiences despite significant resource constraints, highlighting the need for tailored support to facilitate effective curriculum delivery in under-resourced areas.

These are some of the teacher's responses about the adaptation of teaching methods:

- a. Response from Teacher 1: A teacher reported adapting to the lack of resources by "photocopying materials" to ensure each student has access to the necessary learning content. This approach helps compensate for the limited availability of teaching materials in rural settings.
- b. Response from Teacher 4: To address the shortage of resources, another teacher created "self-made modules" to deliver lessons effectively. This adaptation reflects a proactive approach to overcoming challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* without adequate pre-made materials.
- c. Response from Teacher 3: Another teacher noted printing only "the essential parts" of lessons to make materials accessible for students. This selective approach shows the need to adapt teaching methods to suit the limited resources available in rural classrooms.
- d. Response from Teacher 2: One teacher mentioned presenting lessons using a "slide projector" as an alternative to printed resources, which are often limited. This method allows for a more engaging delivery despite the constraints of rural schooling environments.
- e. Response from Teacher 6: Another teacher adapted to the rural setting by "adjusting lessons to the local conditions," tailoring content and teaching methods based on available resources and the specific needs of the students. This flexible approach illustrates how teachers modify their methods to ensure learning continuity within their resource-constrained environment.

These examples highlight teachers' various strategies to adapt their teaching methods in response to the lack of resources, illustrating their resilience and creativity in overcoming these challenges.

DISCUSSIONS

The discussion surrounding the findings on teachers' challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* in rural areas reveals the depth of the issues affecting educational practice in under-resourced settings. These challenges—limited resources, inadequate training, and the necessity for adaptive teaching strategies—shed light on the barriers that restrict curriculum implementation and call for a nuanced understanding of their broader implications.

Firstly, limited resources are central to rural teachers' difficulties with the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*. Without sufficient teaching materials, digital tools, or reliable internet access, teachers cannot engage students in the active, resource-rich learning environment the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* aims to foster. This problem can be linked to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the importance of tools in learning. In Vygotskian terms, the absence of resources reduces students' opportunities for meaningful engagement with content, as they lack the "cultural tools" that facilitate learning (Pacheco, 2012; Liou, Martinez and Rotheram-Fuller, 2016; Borge, Ong, and Goggins, 2020). This lack significantly hinders the teacher's and student's ability to maximize their educational potential in the classroom.

Additionally, the issue of inadequate training in the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* represents a substantial gap in teacher preparation. Bandura's Social Learning Theory highlights that learning, including professional education, is often enhanced through modeling and observation (Bandura, 1969; Ladd and Mize, 1983; Dowrick, 2012). In this context, many rural

teachers lack access to structured, hands-on training, limiting their ability to observe the effective *implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*. As a result, they rely heavily on self-directed learning through online resources, which cannot fully replace structured, in-person training. This gap leads to lower teacher confidence and preparedness, highlighting the need for professional development programs that enable teachers to observe, practice, and refine their teaching skills in alignment with the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*.

Teachers in these rural settings also need adaptability in their teaching approaches due to resource constraints, a practice that aligns with Constructivist Learning Theory. Constructivism posits that learning is an active process where experience builds knowledge (Murphy, 1997; Scholnik, Kol, and Abarbanel, 2006). Teachers demonstrate this by creating self-made modules, photocopying materials, or adapting lesson plans to suit their unique classroom settings (Grossmann, 2008). However, while these adaptive practices enable students to access education within local constraints, they may not fully align with *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* goals, which intend for more interactive, technology-enhanced learning experiences. This mismatch highlights the challenge of maintaining curriculum fidelity when adapting teaching methods to fit resource limitations.

Further, teachers' adaptive strategies in response to resource shortages relate to Bloom's Mastery Learning Theory, which advocates for instructional adjustments to meet diverse learning needs (Cole, 2008; Orlich *et al.*, 2010; Westwood, 2018). Teachers in rural areas often tailor their materials to individual students, providing photocopies of crucial content and adjusting lessons to fit students' understanding levels. Such mastery-oriented practices underscore teachers' commitment to helping all students progress, regardless of resource limitations. However, the restricted resources still limit the effectiveness of these methods, underscoring that mastery learning can be challenging to achieve without equitable access to high-quality materials and technology.

Teachers' efforts to deliver quality education in resource-limited environments align with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. This theory suggests that a learner's development is influenced by multiple environmental layers, including immediate (microsystem) and broader (macrosystem) contexts (Renn and Arnold, 2003; Vélez-Agosto *et al.*, 2017; Smit, Preston and Hay, 2020). In rural settings, teachers are impacted by local limitations in school infrastructure and broader systemic challenges in rural education policy. This ecological perspective demonstrates how external factors—such as lack of governmental support or insufficient infrastructure—restrict teachers' capacity to implement the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* effectively, illustrating the need for systemic intervention to create a more supportive environment for rural education.

Teachers' resilience in overcoming these obstacles relates to Resilience Theory in educational settings, which underscores individuals' adaptability and problem-solving capacities when facing adversity (Masten and Obradović, 2006; Swanson and Spencer, 2013; Frydenberg, 2017). Teachers in rural areas often demonstrate resilience by improvising with limited materials and using innovative methods to deliver lessons, which reflects their determination to maintain effective teaching practices. Despite inadequate resources, these educators continue striving to provide quality education, showcasing resilience essential to navigating their environment's structural challenges.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a gap in teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), as proposed by Shulman. PCK refers to the knowledge required to teach specific content effectively, blending pedagogy with subject expertise (Park and Oliver, 2008; Chai, Koh, and Tsai, 2013; Gess-Newsome *et al.*, 2019). In rural settings, the lack of structured *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* training has left teachers struggling to adapt new pedagogical approaches within their limited resources, diminishing their ability to connect content with effective teaching methods. This gap calls for targeted professional development that addresses both content and pedagogy in ways that are accessible and relevant to rural teachers' specific needs.

Forming Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) could also be vital in supporting rural teachers as they adapt to the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*. PLCs provide a collaborative environment where educators can share resources, strategies, and support for implementing

curriculum goals (Linder, Post, and Calabrese, 2012; Teague and Anfara Jr, 2012; Buttram and Farley-Ripple, 2016). Given that rural teachers have limited opportunities for in-person professional development, a PLC could offer a community-driven platform for continuous learning and reflection. Teachers could build their confidence and skills through PLCs while collaboratively developing solutions to shared challenges, fostering a supportive network for sustained curriculum implementation.

Teachers' reflective practices and adaptations are consistent with Transformative Learning Theory, which emphasizes changing perspectives through critical reflection on experiences (Taylor, 2007; Cranton and Taylor, 2011; Kreber, 2012). As teachers in rural areas adapt to *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* demands, they engage in ongoing reflection, rethinking their roles and redefining their instructional methods. This reflective adaptation indicates that teachers are not merely following curriculum requirements but are actively transforming their approach to fit the realities of their environment. However, institutional support and consistent resources are essential to sustain such transformative practices.

Finally, Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory highlights the impact of these challenges on teachers' confidence in their ability to implement the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* effectively (Bandura and Wessels, 1997; Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2016). Due to the lack of resources and training, teachers' self-efficacy—belief in their capability to achieve teaching goals—is often compromised. However, their persistence and proactive measures to adapt to challenges show a resilient commitment to student learning, even when systemic barriers test confidence. Increasing support and resources would enhance their self-efficacy and enable them to apply the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* as intended, improving educational outcomes for students in rural areas.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the findings from this study highlight the significant challenges that rural teachers face in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* due to limited resources, inadequate training, and the need for adaptive teaching strategies. The lack of access to essential teaching materials and reliable internet constrains teachers' ability to deliver an interactive and resource-rich learning environment as the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* envisioned. Insufficient training further compounds this issue, as teachers rely heavily on self-directed learning, which cannot replace structured professional development. Despite these limitations, teachers demonstrate resilience and adaptability, employing creative strategies to modify their teaching methods and meet students' needs within a resource-scarce context.

These challenges underscore the need for systemic support to enhance resource provision, ensure comprehensive *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* training, and facilitate collaborative professional networks for rural teachers. Addressing these gaps would empower teachers with the tools, knowledge, and confidence necessary to effectively implement the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)*, ultimately contributing to more equitable educational outcomes across diverse schooling environments.

SUGGESTIONS

To enhance the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* in rural areas, expanding teacher training programs and establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are essential steps. Comprehensive *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* training tailored to the needs of rural educators, including online and in-person sessions, would equip teachers with practical strategies and a deeper understanding of the curriculum. Additionally, creating PLCs would foster collaboration, allowing teachers to share best practices, discuss challenges, and support each other, enhancing teacher confidence and curriculum delivery in isolated areas.

Furthermore, providing more flexible options for curriculum adaptation, improving access to digital resources, and offering ongoing support from educational authorities can significantly improve

rural education outcomes. Allowing localized curriculum adjustments would enable teachers to tailor content to available resources and community needs. Free or subsidized digital tools and resources would further empower teachers with effective instructional materials. At the same time, regular support and monitoring from educational institutions would ensure that rural teachers have the guidance needed to address challenges in real-time. Together, these recommendations aim to strengthen the support systems for rural teachers, making *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (MBC)* implementation more practical and impactful in diverse schooling environments.

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