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Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English Language Teaching: A Study of Teacher Learning Steps

Abstract

The Merdeka curriculum, a pivotal element in contemporary Indonesian education, encapsulates three key learning components: objectives, steps, and assessment. This study investigates into one of these components namely the learning steps in the context of English language instruction. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the research focuses on two English teachers at a junior high school in Central Java, aiming to illuminate the practical implementation of the learning steps. Data collection encompassed classroom observations, in-depth interviews with the teachers, and comprehensive documentation, including visual records from the classes. This multifaceted approach yielded rich qualitative insights into the pedagogical practices and experiences of these educators. The findings reveal a tripartite structure of the learning steps: the 'Opening' phase, where teachers connect new content with students' prior knowledge and motivate them towards the lesson; the 'Core Activities' phase, involving exploration, elaboration, and confirmation of the subject matter; and the 'Closing' phase, which includes summarizing key points, reflective activities, and preparing students for future lessons. Significantly, these structured phases highlight the holistic and effective methodology of the Merdeka curriculum in teaching English, offering valuable insights into its practical implementation and impact on educational outcomes.

Keywords: Merdeka curriculum, teaching English, learning steps, EFL.

INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum represents a transformative shift in Indonesian education, emphasizing holistic and flexible learning approaches (Irawati et al. 2022). As a key component of Indonesia's educational reform, this curriculum aims to equip students with essential 21st-century skills and competencies (Ingthias et al. 2022). Contrasting traditional educational models focused on rote learning and standardized testing, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages a student-centred approach, fostering critical thinking and creativity. Furthermore, the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum is guided by the Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 56 of 2022, which outlines guidelines for implementing the curriculum in the context of learning recovery, known as 'Kurikulum Merdeka.' This decree serves as a complement to the existing curriculum framework (Nugraheni & Siswanti, 2022). The Merdeka curriculum introduces several policy changes and new terminologies, although its core concepts bear similarities to those found in the 2013 Curriculum. This article aims to delineate and explain the policy transitions from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka curriculum, shedding light on the evolution and rationale behind these educational reforms (Puspita & Atikah, 2023).

Besides, significant changes have been introduced in the Merdeka curriculum, extending beyond mere terminological updates to encompass fundamental alterations in classroom learning dynamics. Learning, at its core, is an interactive process involving students and their environment, leading to positive behavioural changes. Within this process, the role of the teacher is paramount, particularly in creating a conducive learning environment that fosters these behavioural changes (Mulyasa, 2003).

The learning process is intricately tied to its components, which are crucial for successful educational outcomes in schools (Supena et al., 2021). A notable distinction exists between the components of the 2013 Curriculum and those of the Merdeka

curriculum. The latter is characterized by its focus on learning objectives, steps, and assessment. This shift in components prompted a research exploration into one specific element – the learning steps (Angga et al., 2022). The learning steps are a vital component, significantly influencing students' comprehension of the material presented. These steps are systematically divided into three phases: the opening, main activities, and closing, each playing a critical role in the educational process.

Numerous studies have previously explored the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in educational settings. A significant body of research, including works by Rosadi and Andriyani (2020), Zidan & Qamariah (2023), Kharimah and Qamariah (2023), Rokhyani (2022), Aranggere (2022), Jannah et al. (2022), Hasibuan et al. (2022), Defrizal et al. (2022), Hadi et al. (2023), and Yaelasari et al. (2022), has documented the successful implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in schools. These studies collectively underscore the curriculum's effectiveness in various educational contexts. Additionally, the aspect of teacher preparation for the Merdeka curriculum has been comprehensively examined by Juliani (2022) and Muhafid and Retnawati (2023), offering insights into the readiness and adaptability of educators. Furthermore, Janah et al. (2023) delved into the implementation of specific learning components within this curriculum, while Martyastuti et al. (2022) focused their analysis on the learning steps. All these research endeavours collectively contribute to a broader understanding of the various facets involved in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum.

The Merdeka Curriculum, in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), presents both unique opportunities and challenges (Solihin, 2021). With English serving as a global lingua franca, its role in the Indonesian education system is increasingly crucial, especially as Indonesia integrates further into the global community. The curriculum advocates for methodologies that extend beyond mere linguistic proficiency, emphasizing English as a tool for broader educational and personal development (Kim, 2020). This approach positions the Merdeka Curriculum's ELT strategies as a vital area for research, offering insights into effective educational practices in a rapidly evolving global landscape. While there has been extensive research on the overall implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, much of it has concentrated on general aspects of success, failure, or obstacles in its application across various subjects.

However, a detailed examination focusing specifically on the learning steps within the English component of the curriculum, particularly in junior high schools, remains underexplored. This research gap is significant, as the implementation of the curriculum encompasses a broad spectrum of elements that merit thorough investigation. Therefore, the primary aim of this research is to elucidate the specific learning steps employed in teaching English under the Merdeka curriculum in junior high schools. By doing so, it seeks to contribute a new perspective to the existing body of research on the Merdeka Curriculum, enriching our understanding of its application in the context of English language education

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing phenomenology as the primary methodological approach. Phenomenology is chosen for its effectiveness in exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals, particularly as it pertains to their interactions with and perceptions of phenomena

(Tuffour, 2017). In this case, the phenomenon under investigation is the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, with a specific focus on the learning steps involved in English language teaching. The aim is to delve into the essence and structure of the experiences that teachers have with the curriculum, thereby uncovering the inherent dynamics and nuances of this educational approach. The subjects of this study are two English teachers from a junior high school in Central Java, who have experience teaching seventh-grade students under the Merdeka curriculum. To gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences, three main data collection methods are employed: document analysis, observations, and interviews.

Document analysis involves a thorough review of teaching materials such as textbooks, teaching modules, and curriculum outlines that detail learning objectives (Richlin, 2023). Classroom observations provide direct insights into the application of the Merdeka curriculum in teaching practice. Through these observations, the researcher notes teaching methods, student-teacher interactions, and the overall classroom environment. Interviews with the English teachers offer an in-depth perspective on their experiences with the curriculum, focusing on aspects such as learning steps, instructional strategies, and material selection.

The data analysis process in this study is methodical, involving careful examination and interpretation of the collected data. This includes identifying themes, patterns, and key insights that emerge from the documents, observations, and interviews. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study adheres to established qualitative research criteria. This involves evaluating the transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), to guarantee the study's integrity and relevance.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Learning steps in the educational process are a series of actions from start to finish, influenced by learning objectives, methods, materials, and any utilized models. Typically, these stages include an opening, main activities, and closing. In the Merdeka curriculum, these steps are predefined in teaching modules (MA) provided by the government, simplifying the lesson planning process for teachers. This research focuses on how English teachers implement these structured learning stages under the Merdeka curriculum. It examines the adaptations and applications of the prescribed opening, main activities, and closing phases in English language teaching.

Opening Phase: Classroom Observations

During the observational phase of this research, distinct patterns emerged in the opening stages of the lessons for both Teaching 1 and Teaching 2. Common elements included a greeting, inquiries about recent news, questions regarding absent students, a review of the material covered in the previous week, and an introduction to the current lesson's material. Key phrases and approaches used by Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 at the beginning of their lessons were noted. Examples of these opening statements are as follows:

In class, Teacher 1 begins with a warm greeting, "Assalamu'alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh, Good morning, everyone!" followed by engaging with students about

their news and checking on absentees. After a brief review of last week's grammar topic, Teacher 1 introduces today's focus on English vocabulary. (Teacher 1 Observation)

Teacher 2 initiates the class with an upbeat, "Good to see you all! Ready for English?" This is followed by a moment to acknowledge absent students, "I hope those not here are well." Then, Teacher 2 briefly revisits the core ideas of the previous lesson on English composition before smoothly transitioning to the new lesson, saying, "Today, let's delve into conversational English. (Teacher 2 Observation)

The study's observations during the opening phase of English language lessons, as implemented under the Merdeka curriculum by two junior high school teachers, revealed varied and personalized approaches. Each teacher displayed unique strategies to engage their students at the start of the class, setting the tone for the lesson ahead. Teacher 1 emphasized creating a warm, welcoming atmosphere, beginning each session with a friendly greeting. This approach was complemented by a smooth transition into the academic focus of the lesson, demonstrating an effective balance between personal connection and educational objectives.

In contrast, Teacher 2 opted for a more dynamic and energetic start, immediately drawing students into the learning process. This method was effective in capturing student attention and swiftly transitioning them into the mindset for the day's lesson. Both approaches, while distinct, showcased the flexibility and adaptability inherent in the Merdeka curriculum, allowing teachers to tailor the start of their lessons to their teaching styles and student needs. This variety in the opening phase is indicative of the curriculum's emphasis on personalized and engaging teaching methods, catering to diverse learning environments and student groups. Teachers 1 and 2 states:

"I believe starting the class with a personal touch helps students feel more connected and ready to learn. I always try to link the new material with what we've previously covered for better continuity." (Teacher 1 Interview)

"The opening minutes are crucial for setting the tone of the lesson. I focus on creating an inviting atmosphere and bridging the old and new topics seamlessly." (Teacher 2 Interview)

Core Activities

The core activities phase of the English lessons, as observed under the Merdeka curriculum, further exemplified the diverse teaching strategies employed by the two junior high school teachers.

In Teacher 1's classroom, core activities were predominantly centred around interactive and collaborative learning. Students were often grouped for discussions or project-based activities, emphasizing peer-to-peer learning and active engagement with the material. Teacher 1 facilitated these activities with a focus on applying English language skills in practical contexts, such as role-playing exercises or group presentations. This method not only encouraged language practice but also fostered critical thinking and teamwork among students. (Teacher 1 Observation)

Conversely, Teacher 2's approach to core activities was more varied, combining traditional teaching methods with innovative practices. Lectures and individual assignments were interspersed with multimedia presentations and language games. Teacher 2 frequently used technology as a tool for enhancing language learning and integrating videos and interactive software into lessons. This blend of activities catered to different learning styles, keeping students engaged and allowing for a multifaceted approach to language acquisition. (Teacher 2 Observation)

In both cases, the core activities were carefully aligned with the Merdeka curriculum's goals of fostering a comprehensive and engaging learning experience. Teachers leveraged a range of instructional techniques to facilitate language mastery while ensuring that lessons remained student-centred and interactive. These practices underscore the curriculum's emphasis on adaptable and dynamic teaching methods, tailored to meet the diverse needs and interests of students in modern language education.

Furthermore, the core activities of English language teaching observed in this study encompassed a variety of elements, including the use of materials and teaching methods. Teachers implemented a series of instructional steps that involved explaining tasks, organizing students into work groups, and posing pertinent questions. Central to these activities was the utilization of the "Bright an English" textbook. This resource, aligned with the Merdeka curriculum, was used extensively by the teachers to provide comprehensive and appropriate English material. The subjects taught, as per the curriculum, are consistent with those in the previous program, a fact that was evident from classroom observations.

Teacher 1 observed thrice, the focus was on teaching basic English grammar and structure, such as 'Has', 'Have', 'Is', 'Am', and 'Are', primarily through the context of descriptive texts. Teacher 1 engaged students in activities like arranging sentences into coherent texts and describing familiar objects or people. During the interview, Teacher 1 elaborated on the subjects taught, including simple present tense, adverbs of frequency, and descriptive texts, which are foundational at this educational level. As Teacher 1 expressed, "The material, like the simple present tense and descriptive texts, is revisited over 2-3 weeks, aligning well with what is outlined in the 'Bright an English' textbook for 7th grade. (Teacher 1 Observation)

Teacher 2's approach mirrored these themes. In their interview, Teacher 2 highlighted, "The material in the Merdeka curriculum, such as 'has', 'have', 'there is', 'there are', descriptive texts, and procedural texts, are essentially the basics we start with at the junior high level. The shift from grammar-translation to genre-based learning emphasizes differentiated instruction." (Teacher 2 Observation)

Furthermore, in the exploration of the core activities within English language teaching under the Merdeka curriculum, a significant emphasis was placed on understanding the methodologies adopted by the teachers, particularly their application of Project-Based Learning (PBL).

"I use project-based learning as it encourages students to be more active and engage deeply with the material. Although some students may be passive, the majority actively participate, making this method effective." (Teacher 1 Interview)

"Our learning model is consistent but adaptable to the student's needs. We emphasize practical, easy-to-understand activities. The method varies from individual to group tasks, and discussions, tailored to the material and the students' understanding." (Teacher 2 Interview)

These findings demonstrate that both teachers effectively implemented PBL in their English classes. Their approaches, though varied, shared a common goal of enhancing student engagement and understanding. This adaptability and focus on active learning align well with the Merdeka curriculum's emphasis on practical, student-centred education.

The Closing Phase

The final part of the learning steps, as observed in this study, is the closing phase. This phase plays a crucial role in concluding the learning activities in the classroom. The observations revealed a consistent pattern in how the teachers concluded their lessons:

"I always make sure to revisit the key points of the lesson at the end. It's essential for reinforcing what we've covered and addressing any lingering confusion. I also encourage students to ask questions, which helps me gauge their understanding. If there's a need for further practice, I assign relevant homework. Closing the lesson with a greeting is my way of ending on a positive note, making sure the students feel acknowledged and valued." (Teacher 1 Interview)

"The closing is as important as the opening. I briefly summarize the day's material to help students consolidate their learning. Asking if they have questions is crucial; it allows me to clarify doubts on the spot. Homework is given based on the day's progress and the need for reinforcement. Finally, a respectful farewell greeting helps maintain a respectful and friendly classroom environment, which I believe is key for effective learning." (Teacher 2 Interview)

In the closing phase of the lessons, the teachers employed a structured approach to ensure a comprehensive wrap-up of the learning activities. Initially, they revisited the day's material, offering a summary or conclusion that reinforced the key points covered. This review was followed by a dedicated question time, allowing students to raise any inquiries or clarifications they had regarding the lesson, thereby ensuring their understanding. In cases where further practice was deemed necessary, homework was assigned, extending the learning process beyond the classroom. Finally, each lesson concluded with a farewell greeting, a practice that maintained the friendly and respectful atmosphere established at the beginning of the class and left the students with a positive end to their learning experience.

DISCUSSION

The research findings on the implementation of structured learning stages under the Merdeka curriculum in English language teaching at the junior high school level shed light on the adaptive and diverse approaches adopted by teachers. The study focused on three key phases: opening, core activities, and closing, unveiling distinctive teaching methodologies and practices within these phases. In the opening phase, observations revealed that both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 initiated their classes with personalized

approaches. Teacher 1 prioritized creating a warm and inviting atmosphere, fostering a sense of connection among students. In contrast, Teacher 2 opted for a dynamic start, engaging students immediately to capture their attention. Both teachers seamlessly transitioned from personal interaction to introducing the lesson's focus, demonstrating the curriculum's flexibility in accommodating varied teaching styles.

Furthermore, in the core activities phase showcased diverse instructional strategies by the teachers. Teacher 1 predominantly focused on interactive and collaborative learning, emphasizing peer-to-peer engagement and practical language application. Meanwhile, Teacher 2 employed a mix of traditional and innovative methods, integrating technology to cater to diverse learning styles. Both teachers aligned their activities with the Merdeka curriculum's goals, emphasizing comprehensive learning experiences and adaptable teaching methodologies. Additionally, both teachers extensively utilized the 'Bright an English' textbook, aligning their lessons with the curriculum's outlined subjects. The observed lessons covered foundational English topics, emphasizing grammar and structure within the context of descriptive texts. As well, the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) was noted, showcasing an active and engaging approach to learning, as endorsed by both teachers.

Moreover, in the closing phase, the conclusion of lessons followed a structured pattern in both classrooms. Teachers summarized key points, addressed questions for clarification, assigned relevant homework, and closed with a farewell greeting, ensuring a comprehensive wrap-up of learning activities. This phase reinforced learning, clarified doubts, extended learning beyond the classroom, and maintained a positive classroom environment. Furthermore, interviews with the teachers highlighted their beliefs in the significance of the opening phase for setting the tone of the lesson, the adaptability of teaching methods, the importance of comprehensive wrap-ups, and maintaining a positive learning environment.

However, the findings from every step in this research narrow down some insights that this research investigates the components of learning within the Merdeka curriculum at the junior high school level, with a specific focus on learning steps in English teaching. The implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in English language instruction encompasses distinct phases: opening, main activities, and closing, as outlined in the teaching modules. This structure aligns with the concept articulated by [Kimbly and Garnezy \(1963\)](#), who posited that learning is a relatively permanent change in behavioural tendencies resulting from increased practice. In the context of the Merdeka curriculum, this study reflects the guidelines of Permendikbudristek number 262/M/2022 Point V.B. This directive emphasizes the autonomy of teachers to creatively adapt and modify teaching modules to suit the specific context, characteristics, and needs of their students.

Supporting this finding, [Martyastuti et al. \(2022\)](#) also observed that teachers effectively implement these learning steps as per the Merdeka curriculum, encompassing opening activities, core activities, and closing activities. This highlights the practical application of the curriculum's flexible framework, allowing for tailored educational experiences that cater to diverse learning environments and student needs. Thus, the research underscores the significance of well-structured learning steps in facilitating effective English language teaching under the Merdeka curriculum, reflecting its adaptability and responsiveness to contemporary educational demands.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum offers educational institutions the freedom to tailor their operational curriculum to align with their specific vision and mission, as well as the learning requirements of their students (Nurzen, 2022). This adaptability fosters a more effective teaching and learning environment, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of education. In addition, The Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing core content and the development of students' characters and competencies, is adept at accommodating diversity and meeting the distinct learning needs of students. It is also tailored to suit the context of educational units and to harness the unique potential of different regions (Wiguna & Tristaningrat, 2022).

The investigation into the learning steps within the Merdeka curriculum, particularly in the context of English language teaching, highlights the importance of a structured approach to the educational process. The delineation of teaching into the opening, core activities, and closing phases demonstrates a clear and organized method, crucial for setting a conducive learning environment and ensuring student preparedness. Central to the core activities is the implementation of project-based learning, a method that actively engages students in collaborative and critical thinking exercises (De Oliveira Biazus & Mahtari, 2022). This approach not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the material but also fosters essential skills such as communication and teamwork. The closing phase, with its focus on summarizing lessons and encouraging student inquiries, plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the day's learning and addressing any residual misunderstandings. However, the study also unveils a limitation in the diversity of teaching methods employed, suggesting a potential area for introducing varied instructional strategies to accommodate different learning styles.

These findings bear significant implications for future educational practices and policies, underlining the need for adaptable teaching approaches within the Merdeka curriculum framework across various educational contexts. This research thus offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers, indicating pathways for enhancing teaching effectiveness and student learning experiences in the evolving landscape of education.

Additionally, the successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in English language teaching at the junior high school level hinges on addressing challenges through targeted teacher training, adequate resource provision, and innovative assessment methods. If executed effectively, this curriculum reform has the potential to empower students with not just language proficiency but also valuable life skills necessary for their future endeavors in a globalized world.

CONCLUSION

The study of learning components within the Merdeka curriculum, specifically focusing on English language teaching at the junior high school level, has highlighted that these components are broadly categorized into objectives, learning steps, and assessments. A critical element among these is the learning steps, which are structured into three distinct phases: opening, core activities, and closing. In the opening phase, teachers engage with students through greetings, inquiries about absentees, and briefings on the day's material. The core activities predominantly involve the implementation of project-based learning, a method fostering active discussion and collaboration. Teachers guide this

process by outlining tasks, forming student groups, and facilitating group exercises. This phase culminates with students presenting their work, followed by teacher feedback.

The closing phase is marked by a summary of the lesson content, providing an opportunity for students to ask questions and a concluding greeting. This structure not only ensures a comprehensive learning experience but also allows teachers to closely monitor and understand the effectiveness of each step in the curriculum. However, a noted limitation is the reliance on a singular type of learning step. Future research could explore the integration of diverse methodologies to enrich the learning experience. Additionally, this study can serve as a valuable reference for future investigations into the Merdeka curriculum's application in different educational levels and subjects across Indonesia. Overall, this research underscores that the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum extends beyond merely gauging success in classrooms. It involves a deep understanding of the crucial learning components that significantly contribute to the curriculum's effectiveness. This insight is instrumental for educators in enhancing their teaching practices and for policymakers in refining educational strategies under the Merdeka curriculum.

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