ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF 'KURIKULUM MERDEKA' AT SMA ASSA'ADAH BUNGAH GRESIK

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the English teachers' perceptions concerning *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* within the English subject at SMA Assa'adah Bungah, Gresik. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this research used questionnaires as an instrument for collecting the data. The research unveils English teachers' perceptions towards the implementation of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* at SMA Assa'adah including the general concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka,'* Project-Based Learning, teaching modules, and assessment. The findings exhibit an overall positive perception among teachers. They appreciate the curriculum's focus on students' independence, character development, and diverse assessment methods.

Keyword: perceptions, English teachers, 'Kurikulum Merdeka'

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi guru-guru Bahasa Inggris terkait *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* dalam mata pelajaran Bahasa Inggris di SMA Assa'adah Bungah, Gresik. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menggunakan kuesioner sebagai instrumen dalam pengumpulan data. Penelitian ini mengungkap persepsi guru-guru Bahasa Inggris terhadap penerapan *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* di SMA Assa'dah terrmasuk tentang konsep umum *'Kurikulum Merdeka,'* Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek, modul ajar, dan

penilaian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan respon positif secara keseluruhan dari para guru. Mereka mengapresiasi fokus kurikulum pada kemandirian siswa, pengembangan karakter, dan metode penilaian yang beragam.

Kata kunci: persepsi, guru Bahasa Inggris, 'Kurikulum Merdeka'

Introduction

Education is a diverse entity, comprising various elements integrated into the curriculum (Yunita and Widodo, 2023). Education and curriculum share a symbiotic relationship, with each area benefitting from the progress and development of the other (Campbell, 2020). In addition, the curriculum stands as a cornerstone in education, serving as the fundamental foundation, reference point, and guiding framework for educational institutions as they navigate the educational process (Asrifan et al, 2023). In essence, the curriculum serves as a crucial system for attaining educational objectives and shaping the path of the educational process.

Furthermore, in its formulation, the curriculum holds a central role in the educational process (Sugiana, 2019) and functions as a vehicle for achieving educational objectives and igniting the latent potential of individuals across affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains (Taufik, 2022). Besides, curriculum paradigms and viewpoints stand as essential guiding principles in the planning, implementation, and assessment (Lee, 2020). These principals play a vital role in shaping the subject-based and integrated curriculum.

Nonetheless, effective acquisition of education relies on the innovative design of the curriculum that cannot be separated from the dynamic demands of society (Ferdaus & Novita, 2023). Significant advancements in education often originate from the development of curriculum (Fındıkoğlu & İlhan, 2016). Curriculum development should follow two fundamental principles: a general principle that includes attributes like relevance, flexibility, sustainability, practicality, and effectiveness; and a specific principle that involves elements such as educational objectives, educational content, teaching and learning methods, media and technology utilization, and the evaluation process (Shofiyah, 2018). These guiding principles serve as the comprehensive development of a curriculum that ensures its alignment with broader educational objectives to meet the specific needs of the students.

However, the educational journey is often accompanied by challenges and obstacles (Imran et al, 2022). The challenges may lead to necessary changes in the education system particularly curriculum development to enhance the quality of education. The changes in the education system also occur in Indonesia. The evolution of the curriculum in Indonesia has witnessed a series of adjustments and improvements. Indonesia's education system has experienced a total of 11 curriculum revisions, commencing in 1947 with a foundational curriculum and progressing to the most recent one (Sumarsih et al., 2022). These changes cannot be avoided as they represent steps towards improving the education system, prompted by the recognition that the previous curriculum was suboptimal and faced difficulties in implementation. Additionally, these curriculum adjustments are anticipated to offer solutions to a variety of challenges facing Indonesia.

Currently, the most recent curriculum in Indonesia is known as *"MBKM."* It stands for *"Merdeka Belajar - Kurikulum Merdeka."* It is being implemented in a way that adapts to each school's unique conditions. *"Merdeka Belajar"* relates to the ability to have freedom of thought and creative thinking (Ainia, 2022; Indarta et al., 2022). It grants schools the freedom for both teachers and students to be creative during the learning process. *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* introduces a novel concept of "independence" which is characterized by its simplicity, and adaptability that encourages independence, flexibility, and improvisation throughout the teaching and learning process (Angga & Iskandar, 2022). This flexibility in achieving learning objectives is expected to make the program responsive to evolving educational indicators.

In addition, this latest curriculum facilitates students a more in-depth exploration of concepts and the enhancement of their learning abilities (Safarnaa, 2022). It places greater emphasis on the essential subject matter and fosters the development of students' character and competencies (Damayanti & Muhroji, 2022). Moreover, to enhance students' well-being and freedom, it is vital to establish a supportive learning environment free from excessive pressure in which students are encouraged to actively engage in the acquisition of knowledge (Zahro & Lutfi, 2021). Hence, *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* should promote a learning environment where students can experience enjoyment, meaningfulness, and empowerment, enabling them to continuously explore and expand their knowledge.

Envisioned as a program to revitalize the learning process, the curriculum is characterized by project-based learning, a focus on essential subjects, and character development to enhance students' autonomy (Wiguna & Tristaningrat, 2022). Those key features are expected to stimulate interdisciplinary knowledge integration and acceleration of innovative learning. Furthermore, the implementation of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* varies as it underscores the need for each educational unit to create a diversified curriculum suited to their distinctive environments, local resources, and students' particular needs (Bahriah et al, 2022). It gives students the liberty to present their talents, fosters their involvement, and enables teachers to guide the realization of these talents (Manalu et al., 2022). Thus, *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* can be used as a momentum for teachers and students to be able to innovate and be independent in improving the quality of learning as it allows teachers the flexibility to design and deliver subject matter based on individual needs and capacities.

Based on the provided information, it is evident that *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* is designed to empower students and foster an interactive and self-directed learning experience where the focus is on the student's individual needs. Besides, it encourages students to actively participate in the learning process, with teachers adopting roles as facilitators, guides, and mentors rather than being the sole source of knowledge (Pertiwi et al., 2022). Simultaneously, the objective of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* strives to actualize the concept of innovative and creative critical thinking, along with the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively (Yamin and Syahrir, 2020). Therefore, its primary goal is to unlock students' potential that needs serious efforts to achieve this goal. By emphasizing the development of students' potential, *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* aligns with the demands of 21st-century skills and societal needs that force students to adapt to a rapidly changing world (Indarta et al., 2022). It is expected that this present curriculum equips students with diverse career paths in the evolving landscape of the 21st century.

The *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* is preceded by the *"Sekolah Penggerak"* program. The program aimed to produce high-quality graduates capable of excelling in various fields (Sibagariang et.al., 2021). Moreover, the *"Sekolah Penggerak"* program focused on the holistic development of students' learning outcomes through the creation of *"Profil Pemuda Pancasila"* which covered cognitive as well as non-cognitive competencies (Patilima, 2021). Thus, the *"Sekolah Penggerak"* program was part of the effort to realize the vision of

Indonesian education in achieving an advanced, autonomous, independent, and personality development before the introduction of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'.*

SMA Assa'adah was part of the *"Sekolah Penggerak"* program at Gresik Regency. Notably, it is the sole school in the Bungah sub-district that has implemented *"Sekolah Penggerak"* since the 2021-2022 academic year. It indicates its early adoption of the *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* concept. Consequently, all subjects taught at this school, across all levels of classes, are based on this curriculum concept.

However, with differences from the previous curriculum, teachers at SMA Assa'adah may encounter challenges in adapting to the new curriculum. The introduction of new terms in the current curriculum may pose difficulties for teachers during this transition, including those at SMA Assa'adah. Despite being an early adopter of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* since 2021, it appears that some teachers, particularly English teachers, are still grappling with the transition. Therefore, the authors are interested in examining how the English teachers perceive the implementation of this latest curriculum.

Hatisaru et al. (2023) describe the concept of perceptions encompasses individuals' beliefs, thought, or feeling regarding a relevant construct. Meanwhile, teachers' Perceptions refer to a way of comprehending or contemplating the knowledge needed for teaching and how that knowledge is attained or developed (Hatisaru, 2023). Whereas in the context of this study, the term "English teachers' perceptions" refers to the viewpoints of English teachers concerning the implementation of *"Kurikulum Merdeka."* It is crucial to grasp how the English teachers perceive the implementation of the current curriculum as their beliefs and attitudes can shape their approach to the curriculum. It aligns with the statement from Buehl & Fives (2009) that teachers' perceptions about education forms their teaching and learning methods. It implies that by expressing a particular vision on education, teachers have potential to enhance the educational development in various ways.

Numerous prior studies have been conducted regarding the implementation of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* at various schools across Indonesia. Sutaris (2022) reported positive findings with a high level of acceptance rate of 74.79% and 74% of teachers expressed commitment to the *'Kurikulum Merdeka'.* Pratikno et al. (2022) underscore that, despite its theoretical ease of designing, excellence, and relevance, its practical success hinges on diverse factors including regional variations, specific challenges, and the active involvement of

educational stakeholders. Meanwhile, Susilowati (2022) reported that the implementation of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* in the Islamic Education subject has encountered challenges, including teachers' difficulties in fully grasping the concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka',* breaking old teaching habits, creating modules and assessing students.

Previous studies have overlooked a specific focus on the implementation of the *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* in English language learning. A gap in the existing research becomes apparent as there is no study addressing English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of *"Kurikulum Merdeka."* The researchers want to fill this void by investigating the implementation of the *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* in teaching English, which presents the novelty of this research. The objective is to explore English teachers' perceptions towards the implementation of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* at SMA Assa'adah Bungah Gresik

Research Methods

This is a descriptive qualitative study aimed at analyzing the English teachers' perspectives on the implementation of the *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* at SMA Assa'adah Bungah. It is located on Jalan Raya Bungah no 1 in the Bungah Sub-district, Gresik Regency. Five English teachers of SMA Assa'adah became the population of this study. The questionnaire was used to collect the data with 20 statements and was analyzed using Likert Scale with four options: SD (Strongly Disagree), D (Disagree), A (Agree), SA (Strongly Agree).

The results of the questionnaire then underwent qualitative analysis and interpretation. It involves efforts to comprehend the studied phenomenon, integrate information, elucidate relationships, formulate theories behind these relationships, and reconnect the newly acquired information with the existing ones (Ary, et al, 2010). Furthermore, Miles and Huberman model was employed in facilitating data analysis process. It encompasses data reduction, data display and drawing the conclusion (Sugiono, 2013).

Results and Discussion

This study used a questionnaire consisting of 20 statements to gather the data. Those statements were divided into four indicators, namely: the general concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'*, Project-Based Learning, *'Modul Ajar'* (teaching module), and assessment. The questionnaire used a Likert Scale with each

statement given four options: SD (Strongly Disagree), D (Disagree), A (Agree), and SA (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire is also completed with a Reason Column in each statement for the teachers to state their opinions about each statement. The explanation of each indicator is given below:

Table 1　　　General Concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'*

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	The concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* is better than the previous curriculum	40%	60%	-	-
2	The concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* can shape students character.	20%	80%	-	-
3	The concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* gives students more courage.	20%	60%	-	20%
4	The concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* makes students more active/responsive	20%	80%	-	-

Table 1 illustrates that a majority of respondents hold a positive perception on the concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka.'* The first statement highlighted that the teachers agreed that *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* is better than the previous curriculum as it provides students with the liberty to select subjects aligned with their interests, fostering the optimization of their abilities and enabling them to make meaningful contributions. Furthermore, aligned with statement number 2, respondents emphasized that *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* empowers students to shape their characters because students' character development is influenced by individual traits and their environment. Moving to statement number 3, majority of teachers agreed that *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* encourages students. This is attributed to the shift from a learning system solely reliant on teacher explanations to one that encourages independence, competence, and social interaction. Furthermore, this curriculum eliminates grade-based ranking, acknowledging the distinct intelligence levels of children across various fields. Despite this, teachers note that certain students still struggle with stage fright. In the final statement of the first indicator, respondents perceive that *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* encourages students' engagement. This approach not only allows freedom for both students and

teachers to innovate during the learning process but also ensures teachers continue to provide additional stimuli to enhance learning experiences."

Table 2   Project-Based Learning in *'Kurikulum Merdeka'*

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
5	Project-based learning is suitable for the students' needs	40%	60%	-	-
6	The learning process of Project-based learning can be conducted outside the classroom	40%	60%	-	-
7	Project-based learning allows collaboration between teachers and students in creating a comfortable learning atmosphere.	40%	60%	-	-
8	In project-based learning, the role of the teacher is only as a facilitator.	20%	80%	-	-
9	In project-based learning, the learning resources are not limited to textbooks only.	40%	60&	-	-
10	Project-based learning supports the implementation of the *'Profil Pelajar Pancasila'* program.	80%	20%	-	-

Table 2 depicts teachers' perceptions regarding Project-Based Learning in the context of *'Kurikulum Merdeka.'* Statement number 5 reflects teachers' agreement that Project-Based Learning aligns well with this curriculum. One reason cited is that *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* is designed to structure school activities around student-centered learning, promoting students' independence in the learning process. Consequently, learning activities are designed to individual needs, making Project-Based learning an appropriate method for fostering students' self-reliance and character development. In statement number 6, respondents affirmed that Project-Based Learning can extend beyond classroom boundaries, placing a growing demand on teachers to devise innovative and engaging teaching approaches. This shift aims to prevent student boredom in learning and allows for learning anytime, anywhere to enhance competence. Teachers further supported statement number 7, emphasizing collaborative efforts between teachers and students in creating a conducive learning

environment. They stressed that fostering innovation is not solely the responsibility of teachers or students but is a shared endeavor, necessitating mutual awareness. Agreement with statement number 8 persisted among teachers, emphasizing the curriculum's focus on student-centered learning, where teachers act as facilitators rather than primary presenters. Teachers are encouraged to prompt students with guiding questions, empowering them to seek answers independently. In line with statement number 9, teachers agreed that learning resources in Project-Based Learning need not be confined to textbooks. They cited the curriculum's emphasis on essential material and diverse learning resources as supporting deeper and broader learning experiences. Finally, in the last statement of the second indicator, teachers supported the idea that Project-Based Learning aligns with the goals of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila Program. They identified collaborative learning, independence, critical thinking, and creativity as qualities fostered through this approach."

Table 3   Modul Ajar (teaching module) in *'Kurikulum Merdeka'*

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
11	The teaching modules in the *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* are very helpful for teachers in the process of English language learning	40%	60%	-	-
12	The components in teaching modules are easy to create and implement.	80%	20%	-	-
13	The components in teaching modules are sufficiently detailed and comprehensive	20%	80%	-	-
14	The teaching modules in the curriculum *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* add the administrative burden of teachers	-	-	-	100%
15.	Lack of guidance on the curriculum *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* results in teachers having a limited understanding of its implementation.	20%	40%	-	40%

Table 3 presents teachers' opinions related to the 'Modul Ajar' (teaching module) in *'Kurikulum Merdeka'*. In statement 11, teachers expressed agreement

regarding the usefulness of teaching modules in the *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* for English language instruction. Moreover, it allows teachers to effectively manage diverse classes through differentiated learning strategies. Statement number 12 showed agreement among teachers, acknowledging that the components within teaching modules are easy to create and apply. Moving to statement number 13, teachers agreed that the components in the teaching modules are generally detailed and comprehensive, yet they sometimes encounter gaps that require to be reviewed before implementation. Contrary to statement number 14, teachers disagreed that the teaching modules in *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* add to the administrative burden. Teachers emphasized that such administrative responsibilities are essential to their role. In the final statement of the third indicator, a majority of teachers agreed that a lack of guidance on the 'Merdeka Belajar' curriculum limits their understanding of its implementation. Teachers emphasized the need for proactive engagement in seeking information to enhance their comprehension and capabilities.

Table 4   Assessment in *'Kurikulum Merdeka'*

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
16	Assessment in *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* is suitable with the students' abilities.	20%	80%	-	-
17	Minimum competency assessments and character surveys (Assesmen Kompetensi Minimum dan Survey Character) disrupt students' psychology.	20%	-	-	80%
18	The passing standard is decided by each school, rather than depending on the result of the National Exam	40%	40%		20%
19	It is advisable for the passing standard not to be solely based on written exams.	20%	80%	-	-
20.	Handing over the passing standard to schools leads to a decrease in the quality of the assessment.	-	20%	-	80%

Table 4 outlines the outcomes of the Assessment indicator. In statement number 16, teachers perceived that assessment within *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* aligns well with students' capabilities as it was designed to measure students' abilities based on their individual needs. Moving to statement number 17, the majority of teachers strongly disagreed that minimum competency assessments and character surveys adversely impact students' psychology. They emphasized that these assessments are customized to students' abilities and serve as tools to monitor their learning progress. Furthermore, in statement number 18, teachers agreed that setting passing standards should be determined by each school rather than solely relying on national exam results. This approach allows for adjustments considering the varying abilities of students. Statement number 19 revealed agreement among teachers regarding the passing standard not solely relying on written exams; instead, various forms of assessment can be employed to evaluate competencies, skills, and other abilities. Lastly, teachers strongly disagreed with the notion that handing over passing grades to schools compromises the quality of exams. They emphasized that many teachers possess qualifications in assessment creation, thus parents do not have to worry about the quality and credibility of assessments for students.

Some points can be highlighted from the above information presented in Tables 1 to 4. There is a predominantly positive perception among respondents toward *'Kurikulum Merdeka,'* with teachers highlighting its benefits in promoting student autonomy, character development, encouragement, and engagement. It aligns with a prior study conducted by Azzahra & Muhajir (2023) who stated that the concept of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* fosters a positive learning environment by integrating joyful learning methods and providing choices without burdening students as they have freedom of choice and preferences to recognize their diverse talents and intelligences.

Second, teachers' perceptions of Project-Based Learning within the framework of *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* exposed their agreement that it aligns well with the curriculum as it emphasizes student-centered activities. Moreover, the teachers agreed that Project-Based Learning fosters students' innovation through collaborative efforts and promotes diverse learning resources. Thus, Project-Based Learning effectively fosters students' learning interests and positively influences the students' development (Riani, 2023). Teachers also shared a common agreement that Project-Based Learning contributes to the development of students' qualities in the *'Profil Pelajar Pancasila'* Program. It

aligns with Dewi (2022) who stated that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) proves to be a highly fitting learning strategy for enhancing the *'Profil Pelajar Pancasila.'*

Third, teachers' perspectives on the *'Modul Ajar'* (teaching module) in *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* highlight their consensus on its utility for English language instruction, effectiveness in managing diverse classes, and ease of creation and application. It aligns with Yahya et, al., (2023) who state that *'Modul Ajar'* contributes to an enhanced understanding among teachers of students' needs so it enables them to create teaching materials that align more closely with the demands of the industrial world. While teachers generally find the components detailed and comprehensive, occasional gaps necessitate review before implementation. Moreover, the majority of teachers agree that a lack of guidance on the *'Merdeka Belajar'* curriculum hampers their understanding. It implies the importance of proactive engagement in seeking information to enhance their comprehension and capabilities.

The last point that should be addressed is related to the assessment in *'Kurikulum Merdeka.'* Teachers perceive that the assessment in *'Kurikulum Merdeka'* aligns with students' capabilities, emphasizing a customized approach based on individual needs. They strongly disagree that minimum competency assessments and character surveys negatively impact students' psychology, asserting these tools monitor learning progress. Teachers support the idea that each school should set passing standards, accommodating diverse student abilities. Additionally, the assessment process should not only be limited to knowledge-based evaluation but also encompass practical assessments of skills which are designed to holistically consider knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Yunita & Widodo, 2023). Therefore, the teachers agree on the need for varied forms of assessment beyond written exams to evaluate competencies and skills.

Overall, English teachers of SMA Assa'adah generally hold a positive perception of 'Kurikulum Merdeka' as they expressed favorable views on its alignment with student-centered learning, Project-Based Learning, teaching modules, and assessment practices. They highlight the curriculum's effectiveness in promoting student autonomy, character development, and engagement. While acknowledging certain challenges and areas for improvement, teachers emphasize the adaptability, comprehensiveness, and customization features of the curriculum. It indicates an overall endorsement of its impact on teaching and learning experiences.

Conclusion

The analysis of teachers' perspectives across the indicators—focused on the general perception of 'Kurikulum Merdeka,' Project-Based Learning, teaching modules, and assessment—reveals a predominantly positive reception. Teachers acknowledge the curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning, fostering independence, character development, and diversified assessment methods. While recognizing its benefits, challenges such as gaps in module content, the need for further guidance in implementation, and the variance in students' abilities emerged. Nevertheless, teachers affirmed the curriculum's capacity to simplify complex assessments, adjust standards to individual student capabilities, and diversify assessment approaches beyond written exams. Overall, these insights underscore the promising aspects of 'Kurikulum Merdeka' while highlighting areas for refinement and continuous support in its effective implementation.

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