



SCOPE

Journal of English Language Teaching

| p-ISSN 2541-0326 | e-ISSN 2541-0334 |
<https://journal.lppmunindra.ac.id/index.php/SCOPE/>



Research Article

Merdeka Belajar Curriculum: EFL Teachers' Preparations and Practices at *Sekolah Penggerak* Kota Jambi

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KEYWORDS

Merdeka Belajar Curriculum;
 EFL Preparation and Practice;
 Sekolah Penggerak.

A B S T R A C T

This study aimed to explore EFL teachers' preparation and implementation for the inclusion of English course in Junior High School at Program *Sekolah Penggerak*. A qualitative method was applied in this study. To obtain the data in this study, a semi-structured interview and observation were employed. The interview was conducted with 5 English teachers at different junior high schools in Jambi city. Then, the observations were conducted with the teachers after the interview session. The data were analyzed by using 3 sequences phases; data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions. The result of this study revealed the preparation of teachers in teaching was in form of training, teachers' development, facilities, and material for teaching. However, *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum has been implemented by teachers which had been through the analysis of the learning achievements, implementation of diagnostic assessment, and development of teaching modules, implementation of differentiation learning, teaching evaluation and assessment. As finding presented, this study provides the implication in pedagogy such as the reference for future researchers and for improvements in the implementation of English language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is regarded as a core element to direct on the road of teaching and learning in institutions. Curriculum is also seen as a set of educational programs that has been prepared and implemented to achieve educational goals in which the components are interrelated and support each other. Curriculum is the content of learning to assist the students to achieve and gain the learning experience. In Indonesia, curriculum has been developed every decade due to the society's needs, new insight into the learning process, political issues, the development of industry and technology (Pajarwati, Mardiah, Harahap, Siagian, &

Ihsan, 2021). It is aimed to improve the quality of teaching-learning process and learning design, as well as being determinant.

Last year in 2021, *Kemendikbudristek* launched a new educational system in Indonesia, called *Merdeka Belajar* episode 7. One of its programs is *Sekolah Penggerak* and it has been implementing since the school year 2021/2022 for 2.500 schools in 34 provinces and 111 cities (Rahayu, Rosita, Rahayuningsih, Hernawan, & Prihantini, 2022). Program *Sekolah Penggerak* is the newest program in Indonesia and only some schools all over Indonesia are implementing this program. *Sekolah Penggerak* focused on the development of students' learning outcome holistically

by creating a profile of *Pancasila* students that includes competence and character which starts with well human resources. It can be said, Program *Sekolah Penggerak* is a refinement of the previous school transformation program and it will accelerate public/private schools in all school conditions to move 1-2 stages further.

Then, to implement Program *Sekolah Penggerak*, the school has to pass the test that was conducted by *Kemendikbudristek*. For the schools that have passed the test, they can implement *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for the school year 2021/2022. Furthermore, Program *Sekolah Penggerak* is one of the methods for school to implement *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. "*Merdeka Belajar*" is a term used by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture to describe a set of educational policies which aimed to modernize the country's education system. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is a key component of these policies and designed to promote student-centered learning, digital literacy, and the development of 21st-century skills.

Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Culture aimed the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum as the solution for Indonesian education which has been slow-down for almost 2 years. Then, by implementing this curriculum, *Kemdikbudristek* is allowing the school to compile and implement the learning process and develop a curriculum based on the students' need (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). In line with this, Mustaghfiroh (2020) explained *Merdeka Belajar* has the same direction and purpose with John Dewey's concept of progressivism education philosophy. Both of these concepts offer the independence and freedom for the educational institutions to explore the students' potential by adjusting the interest, talents, and tendencies of students. By using the concept of independence and freedom, the Indonesian minister of education expects the Indonesian education system will be more advanced and more qualified.

Interestingly, a number of scholars have studied deeply about the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum: (1) Endang, Triayomi, & Modestha (2022) have studied the readiness of teachers in implementing *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum at Xaverius 1 Elementary School. Through the research, the researchers found out the readiness of teachers has been carried out well since the competency of the teachers is suitable to the competency indicator standards. The other related research was studied by (2) Rahayu et al. (2022) entitled *Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di Sekolah Penggerak Jenjang Pendidikan Menengah* that found out the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum was optimal although there were still deficiencies and obstacles.

On the other hand, (3) Suryani, Muspawi, & Aprillitavivayarti (2023) carried out a research entitled *Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di Sekolah Penggerak*. In this research, the researchers found out the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum* at Program *Sekolah Penggerak* is starting from planning which consists of compiling the Education Unit Operational Curriculum, making teaching modules, then the implementation stage starts with intra-curricular learning, and learning through strengthening projects *Pancasila* students profile, and finally from the implementation of the independent curriculum, namely the evaluation which consists of assessment, grade promotion criteria, and graduation criteria.

Referring to what has been done by the previous researchers, departing from the problems mentioned above and remembering that this curriculum is the latest policy from the Ministry of Education and Culture, the researchers concern the teachers have to prepare themselves to facilitate the English language in teaching. They also have to be able to conduct English teaching effectively in the classroom. To respond this concern and to investigate the teachers' preparation and implementation for the implementation of this regulation, the researchers intended to explore teachers' preparation and implementation on *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Program *Sekolah Penggerak*. Moreover, the researchers believe this study will provide the implication to the preparation and implementation of English course in Junior High School especially at Program *Sekolah Penggerak*. Therefore, the researchers intended to answer the research questions such as 1) How do English teachers prepare for the inclusion of English courses at Junior High School?, 2) How do the teachers' implement English courses at Junior High School?. Furthermore, considering the gap provided above the researchers believe that this research brings different findings.

METHOD

A qualitative research was employed in this research since it concerns on understanding a specific case and focusing on developing an in-depth understanding of the case. The study examined the English teachers' experience in implementing *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum therefore the researchers implemented phenomenology research design. The study was carried out with 5 English teachers from different Junior High School. In selecting the participants, the researchers used purposive sampling. The researchers used some criterion such as English teachers at Program *Sekolah Penggerak* who have taught English based on *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in different regional coordination. The data obtained through interview and observation with the participants by using interview

protocol and observation notes. In the interview session, the researchers used Indonesian and the researchers translated into English when condensing the data. The data were analyzed by implementing 3 sequences phases; data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018). After the researchers obtained the data, the researchers coded in order to select and simplify the data. Then, the researchers displayed the data into the theme. Finally, the researchers concluded the result based on the research problem.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to answer the question of the research regarding the teachers' view and implement *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum at Program *Sekolah Penggerak* in the teaching and learning practice. The discussion carried out corresponding to the main questions; 1) How do English teachers prepare for the inclusion of English courses at Junior High School?, 2) How do the teachers' implement English courses at Junior High School?. Therefore, the data of this study classified into two sections as follows:

English Teachers' Preparation in Teaching English

KemendikbudRistek issued Program *Sekolah Penggerak* in 2021 through *KemendikbudRistek* No. 162 Tahun 2021 as the legal basis of the implementation of the program. Then, it was introduced to the institutions in the school year of 2021-2022. In the first theme of this study, the researchers tried to explore the teachers' preparation in teaching *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum at the program. In order to understand the finding comprehensively, the researchers divided the main theme into some sub-theme. The finding of this section is shown in the explanation below:

1. Teachers' Responses of the Inclusion of English Course

Through the results of the interview, the teachers warmly welcome and support this program because there are many things that can be learned from this program and the teacher can be the pioneer for other teachers to be innovative in teaching since it is also supported by the institution. *Teacher W* stated that:

"The teacher can be a pioneer to move other teachers to create a learning material which more effective for the students and we are also supported by the school"

It can be said, the school support on the program can lead to the teachers to become the example for the other teacher in creating the materials. Similarly, Supriatna, Nadirah, Rahman, Aina, and Saefudin (2023) found out the introduction of *the Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in primary

schools is seen favorably and with appreciation by elementary school instructors.

2. Teachers' Preparation of Teaching English

In Program *Sekolah Penggerak*, training was held for school supervisors, principals and teachers where this was combined to strengthen school human resources. *Kemdikbudristek* in 2021 stated the training included in-house training, workshop, learning community, and coaching program with the facilitators. However, the training was not focused on the implementation of the English course but it was focused on the Program and Curriculum inclusion for the process of teaching and learning. For instance, as stated by *Teacher R* and *Teacher L*:

"At first there are few, there are webinars, yes, webinars that are often held by the Ministry of Education and Culture specifically for Program Sekolah Penggerak, so later they will be told what to do directly from the school itself, usually there is In House Training, which is also to increase knowledge and skills again since we are a driving school, and lastly, there are also trainings from BGP itself, which are also conducted"

"For the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, it is combined with other subjects. There are class teachers and religion teachers. There is the way to create the grades, then there is project right, what do we call for the project commonly integrated for all of the subjects"

As stated above, the training was conducted to the teachers from the Ministry of Education and Culture and from the schools in any forms to increase the teachers' knowledge and skills regarding to the curriculum implementation. However, it is not specifically for the English teachers. According to Supriatna et al. (2023) teachers' training is an essential part in this curriculum since a comprehensive understanding of teacher is needed for the teacher to carry out the quality of learning process.

3. School Support for Teaching English

Better teachers foster better learning since they are in charge of carrying out the curriculum in the classroom and have more expertise of teaching strategies. Moreover, in this research, the researcher found out to foster the better learning, the teachers are supported by the schools since the schools' support teacher activities in providing teachers' development activity, learning material and utilities to teach.

“For the school facility, especially in English, mainly English subject, it is helped by the arrival of many latest published Merdeka curriculum books”

As stated by *Teacher A* above, for instance, the school provided English teaching by facilitating many books published related to the new curriculum.

To sum up the finding of teachers’ preparation, the researchers created a table which explains about the preparation of the teachers in the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. In the table there was a theme such as Teachers’ Preparation, in the theme there were some sub-themes such as Program Response, Teaching Preparation, and School Support. For further information, it can be seen in the Table 1.1 below:

Table 1 Data Display of Teachers’ Preparation

Theme	Findings
Teachers’ Respond of the Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing new things to learn • Being a pioneer for other teachers • Entertaining teaching program
Teachers’ School Assistances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing the latest published book • Providing technological tools and devices (Laptop, wifi, projector, etc) • Preparing teaching tools and media

The Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Teaching English

According to Suryani et al. (2023) the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum at Program *Sekolah Penggerak* is starting from planning which consists of compiling the Education Unit Operational Curriculum, making teaching modules, then the implementation stage starts with intra-curricular learning, and learning through strengthening projects *Pancasila* students profile, and finally from the implementation of the independent curriculum, namely the evaluation which consists of assessment, grade promotion criteria, and graduation criteria.

Furthermore, in terms of implementation of English course at Program *Sekolah Penggerak* based on *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, Inayati (2022) stated *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum has three different types of learning such as learning intracurricular activities are carried out differently, co-curricular learning in the form of

strengthening the *Pancasila* Student Profile which is based on interdisciplinary learning oriented to character and general competence and extracurricular learning is carried based on the interests of students and the resources available in the education unit.

In line with the statement above, *Kemdikbudristek* in 2021 issued the guidelines related to the planning and the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. In the planning, it includes analyzing the learning achievement to arrange the learning objectives, implementing diagnostic assessment, and developing teaching modules. In the teaching process, it focused on the learning based on the achievement stage and students’ characteristics or differentiation learning. Lastly, it is about the teaching evaluation and assessment.

The second objective in this research is to discover the teachers’ implementation of English course at Junior High School. In order to understand the finding comprehensively, the researchers divide the main theme into some sub-theme. To obtain the data the researchers through observation and interview with the participants. The finding of this section is shown in the explanation below:

1. The Teachers Preparation for the Implementation

Kemdikbudristek in 2021. The teaching planning, first of all, the teachers have to implement diagnostic assessment. Diagnostic assessment aimed to identify the competence, strength, and the weakness of students as reference in learning. It could be cognitive and non-cognitive diagnostic assessment. As the subject teachers, the teachers do the cognitive diagnostic assessment in order to know the students’ understanding and non-cognitive in order to know the students’ learning style. The assessment is commonly done by observing the students and giving diagnostic tests. As stated by *Teacher R* and *Teacher N* in the statement below:

“For me, maybe using a simple diagnostic assessment, that's what I usually apply, using the quiz earlier, for example, we want to teach about animal vocabulary in English. Later in the quiz I will ask questions about that, later at the end I can find out”

“Yes, that's right away, see firsthand how he is interested, where his interests are... in my case, first see where his interests are and then we can determine”

It can be said that by holding the diagnostic assessment, the results of the tests can be utilized to implement successful interventions for students either individually or in a group setting in an effort to assess the learning process (Endang

et al., 2022). Diagnostic tests explain student mastery of specific sub-abilities in addition to provide information in the form of numbers as markers of student skills. Therefore, it plays a major role in teaching and learning activities since the teachers know the suitable method and materials for the students. It is also useful to develop teaching modules and learning materials.

2. The Teachers Teaching Process

In the teaching process, the teachers have to prepare the strategy to teach the students although there is no best method to teach the student but it depends on the students and situation. The teachers, therefore, implement the teaching strategy based on the situations in the class. The implementation of the school curriculum is heavily influenced by teachers. Therefore, in order to make the students understand, the teachers have their ways like utilizing the real media or multimedia, approaching the students, and group study. It was stated by *Teacher N* and *Teacher W* below:

“As for my strategy for teaching, I prefer to joke around with students, my hobby is telling funny jokes like that”

“For example, if we learn about money, I have to prepare the objects that are visible to the student, then I will bring the money”

Afterwards, the students have to be classified based on their interest and necessity, it is called differentiation learning (Fitra, 2022). Differentiation learning is divided into four which are process, content, product, and learning environment as affirmed by *Kemdikudristek* in 2022. Furthermore, the researchers found out the teachers tend to do the differentiation in product and content which the decision is based on the students' interest and learning style. *Teacher R* stated:

“For example, in one class, commonly there are 40 students. Then, 15 students turn out to have a kinesthetic learning style. Later I will use differentiation learning for kinesthetic by arranging vocabulary and the rest turns out visual, later I will give content differentiation by using PowerPoint, so I differ it in the content”

By using differentiation, teachers can address the diverse needs and abilities of their students. Moreover, the differentiated learning can help the students to achieve the learning objective and help the students become the independent learner.

3. The Teachers' Teaching Evaluation

In *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum*, the teaching evaluation is qualitatively or in form of the feedback. The information

of evaluation is holistic as a feedback for teacher, students, and parents to determine strategy for another learning then it is as the reflection to enhance the learning quality as outlined by *Kemendikbudristek* in 2022. The instrument used to evaluate the students in the form of presentation, products, and multiple choice or essay. As stated by *Teacher A* and *Teacher N* below:

“For elementary school children it is usually in the form of multiple choices or essays with short answers only”

“For assignments, it can be verbally, it can be written, if they don't understand, they can still write it, but if they understand and memorize it, then it will be verbal”

Through the interview and observation, the teachers give the feedback to the students related to their performance in the class. According to Yulianto (2022) in this curriculum, assessment used to evaluate not only whether learning objectives were met, but also—and more importantly—how assessment may help students become better learners. Thereafter, in sake of the continuity of the learning process, the teachers asked the students about the teacher teaching process and it can be written and oral feedback. It was stated by *Teacher R* below:

“I ee give them assignments later I give feedback and I ask for their feedback about the assignments I give and ask whether it is too difficult, too easy, or anything”

4. Teachers' Obstacle in Teaching English

In the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum* started from the planning, process, and evaluation, the teachers found the obstacle in the process of teaching. The obstacle comes from the students' ability in language and the students' stereotype in language. *Teacher A* stated:

“For this elementary school, because this is the first time, of course the challenges don't only come from myself as a teacher but also to the students I teach, it's so difficult to instill the importance of learning English to students, so in this case, it's not a problem in the application of the curriculum but learning English itself”

As an alternative to the obstacle, the teachers have to create a friendly environment for the students, measure the students' learning span, and the teacher does not push the students by giving other topics while they do not understand the materials yet. It was stated by *Teacher R* in the interview:

“Creating learning in favor of students, for example, providing space for them to be involved,

so it's not just being fed, oh, this is English, but they have to build their own knowledge and continue to make learning English fun, for example, today's children can't be separated from technology and we can use quiz-based learning”

To sum up and form the understanding comprehensively, the researcher created a table which explains about the teaching implementation in the Program Sekolah Penggerak. In the table there was a theme such as Teachers’ Preparation, in the theme there were some sub-themes such as *Preparation (Diagnostic Assessment), Preparation (Teaching Module), Process (Learning Differentiation), Process (Teaching Strategy), Evaluation (Instrument), Evaluation (Students’ Feedback), Evaluation (Teachers’ Feedback), Obstacle, Obstacle Alternative*. For further information, it can be seen in the Table 2 below:

Table 2 Data Display of Teachers’ Implementation

Theme	Findings
Teachers’ Teaching Preparation (Diagnostic Assessment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting quiz based diagnose • Organizing observation based diagnose
Teachers’ Teaching Preparation (Teaching Module)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting from diagnostic assessment • Conducting classroom observation
Teachers’ Teaching Process (Learning Differentiation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching differentiation in content • Teaching differentiation in product
Teachers’ Teaching Process (Teaching Strategy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varying teaching media • Applying real-object media
Teachers’ Teaching Evaluation (Instrument)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple choices questions • Essay short answer • Presentation
Teachers’ Teaching Evaluation from Students’ Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral direct feedback • Written anonymous feedback
Teachers’ Teaching Evaluation to Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral direct feedback • Written feedback through the assignment
Teachers’ Obstacles of the Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less English exposure • Students’ diverse competence • English difficulty stereotype

Moreover, the result of this study is consistent with the previous research by (Supriatna et al., 2023; Suryani et al., 2023). Supriatna et al. (2023) found out the teacher had the positive attitude towards this curriculum, the teachers play

important role in the process of teaching, and in this curriculum the teacher can select and compile the curriculum design that suitable to the students’ needs.

On the other hand, Suryani et al. (2023) revealed the implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at Program *Sekolah Penggerak* is starting from planning which consists of compiling the Education Unit Operational Curriculum, making teaching modules, then the implementation stage starts with intra-curricular learning, and learning through strengthening projects Pancasila students profile, and finally from the implementation of the independent curriculum, namely the evaluation which consists of assessment, grade promotion criteria, and graduation criteria. Those researches above have the similarities in finding since both of it allude the teachers’ readiness towards the implementation and the aspects of the implementation in accordance to the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum.

Furthermore, according to the findings, *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum has been implemented by the schools which have been included at Program *Sekolah Penggerak*. The findings show the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. It is found out some of the participants have already implemented the course based on *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. On the other hand, the other participants need to comprehend more about the implementation of the English course at Program *Sekolah Penggerak* which is based on *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum.

On the other side, the comprehension among the teachers has quite a big gap since some of the teachers still implement the old paradigm of teaching. In the old paradigm, the teacher was the centre in the class where they actively took the parts in the teaching process. However, in this era, it is demanded to implement the new paradigm of *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum where it is oriented to the students’ in solving their problems faced. Since this curriculum is still new, therefore on the implementation, the teachers may face some obstacles or challenges in the process that eventually help them to learn more over time and it is as their alternative in the teaching process.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore EFL teachers’ preparation and implementation for the inclusion of English course in Junior High School at Program *Sekolah Penggerak*. The Program *Sekolah Penggerak* implements *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum within some limitations which commonly regarded to the teachers’ understanding on the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. However, in order to implement the course, the Ministry of Education provided the training and guidance which was focused on the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. As preparation for teaching, the schools

provide the teachers' needs like the teachers' knowledge development, facilities, and materials for teaching. Therefore, since the enough of guidance and suitable facilities the teachers felt ready to teach and also followed by their educational background. However, in the teaching practice, some of the teachers have already implemented the course based on *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum* which was through the analysis of the learning achievements, implementation of diagnostic assessment, and development of teaching modules, implementation of differentiation learning, teaching evaluation and assessment. The comprehension among the teachers has quite a big gap since some of the teachers have not done the curriculum provisions. Since this curriculum is still new, the teachers face some obstacles that come from the students' ability and stereotype in language. Hence, the researchers suggested prospective researchers to conduct a research in this area regarding to the exploration of teachers' obstacles in curriculum implementation.

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