

UNPACKING THE *KURIKULUM MERDEKA* IN ACEHNESE SCHOOLS: IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: January 2025 Revised: May 2025 Accepted: September 2025 Published: October 2025	<i>This study investigates the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka to improve students' foreign language proficiency and examines the challenges faced by language teachers in its application within Acehnese schools. The selected schools represent diverse geographical contexts, including urban, suburban, and boarding schools, allowing for a comparative analysis of implementation strategies. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten foreign language teachers (English and Arabic), school principals, and staff provided qualitative data, supplemented by field notes, class discussion transcriptions, and textbook reviews. Findings show disparities in curriculum implementation by school type and location, with challenges including limited resources, insufficient training, and complexity, especially in under-resourced schools. However, the curriculum's student-centered, goal-oriented approach is seen as transformative for language classrooms. This study contributes to the literature on curriculum implementation and language education as well as providing insights for educational policymakers. It also provides practical recommendations for improving the integration of the Kurikulum Merdeka in Acehnese schools and ensuring its successful adoption in language education.</i>
Keywords Kurikulum Merdeka; Language learning; Language proficiency; Acehnese schools; Innovative education;	
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INTRODUCTION

Education and the curriculum go hand in hand. The success of a school in achieving national education goals depends on the effective implementation of its curriculum (Abdullahi, 2022; Okojie et al., 2022). This implies that the curriculum should be seen not just as a document but as a tool for reaching educational objectives which is designed to enhance the teaching process (Gouëdard et al., 2020). Indonesia's educational curriculum has progressed since 194. The latest version, *Kurikulum Merdeka*, addresses 21st-century educational demands by focusing on literacy, numeracy, critical and creative thinking, communication, and collaboration as key skills for the digital age (Dewi & Arifin, 2024; Sibuea et al., 2023). Its implementation relies heavily on teachers, who play a vital role in adhering to the prescribed curriculum and adapting it to meet the specific needs of their classrooms, or making modifications based on the enacted curriculum (Bümen & Holmqvist, 2022; Charalambous & Hill, 2012).

In Indonesia context, the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, drawing from the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework of backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), aims to empower educational units, teachers, and their primary students by fostering a sense of independence (Dari et al., 2024). Under this curriculum, students have the freedom to choose subjects that

align with their personal interests, talents, and potential (Krishnapatria, 2021). Wiggins and McTighe (2014) further identified three critical steps that must be fulfilled in backward design. First, the teacher determines the lesson, unit, or course's targeted learning objectives. Teachers might reflect at this point by considering what information and skills students should acquire. The next step is to look for indications of learning. This proof of learning may be gained by evaluating student learning, either directly (evaluation of student portfolios using a rubric) or indirectly (focus groups and student surveys). Following these two steps, the instructor may design learning activities and lessons.

New curriculum initiatives often bring rapid changes but neglect the need for a gradual process to improve teaching practices, which depends on understanding teachers' beliefs, values, and work environments (Assunção Flores, 2005). Similarly, the introduction of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia has presented challenges, including confusion and complexities during execution, as teachers work to understand and adapt to the changes (Supianto et al., 2024). This includes the extent to which teachers are effectively implementing the intended innovations as directed by the developers and government, how they adapt these innovations to suit their own unique circumstances, the strategies they employ during the implementation process, and the response of their students to these innovations (Sofiana et al., 2019). Furthermore, the implementation for each activity lacks a detailed explanation (Krishnapatria, 2021). As a result, teachers are encouraged to modify and seek appropriate learning activities that align with the learning objectives in creating a conducive teaching and learning environment (Mathura, 2019; Pertiwi & Pusparini, 2021). Therefore, in this situation, teachers must possess the flexibility to adapt to these changes. This can be achieved by providing training to ensure teachers are well-trained, confident, and pedagogically skilled, enabling them to effectively convey the material to students (Thompson et al., 2013).

According to Emawati et al. (2024) a key challenge in the current curriculum is inadequate teacher training, especially in rural and under-resourced areas. Similarly, Sibuea et al. (2023) emphasize in evaluating the curriculum through CIPP (context, input, process, and product) evaluation model highlights the importance of ongoing teacher development and curriculum refinement to achieve long-term effectiveness. Additionally, limited resources, such as teaching materials and infrastructure, further hinder the curriculum's integration of project-based and technology-enhanced learning (Aslan & Zhu, 2017; M Francom, 2016). Resistance from teachers who are used to traditional methods also creates a barrier and is often due to a lack of proper training and support (Howard et al., 2021; Warsi & Rani, 2024). Therefore, evaluation of a curriculum is crucial to ensure its effectiveness and relevance. This evaluation will undoubtedly help define clear criteria for assessing its value, quality, and benefits while identifying its strengths and areas for improvement (Hakan & Seval, 2011; Harris & Graham, 2019). Without regular evaluation, it would be difficult to determine the curriculum's performance and significance in meeting educational objectives.

Further, the CIPP evaluation model as suggested (Hakan & Seval, 2011; Sibuea et al., 2023) provides a comprehensive framework for assessing language curricula. For example, context evaluation examines whether the curriculum aligns with students' linguistic development, balances language skills, establishes measurable criteria, allocates adequate instructional time, and incorporates materials that are both engaging and appropriate for students' levels. Similarly, input evaluation assesses the resources and strategies used in the program, focusing on the effectiveness of visual, auditory, and written materials in facilitating learning and engaging students. It also evaluates whether teachers dedicate sufficient time to addressing students' challenges, thus ensuring that instructional materials and teaching practices positively impact language skills.

Considering the background presented earlier, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How is the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* impacting the enhancement of language proficiency in classrooms?
2. What are the challenges faced by language teachers in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach

This study adopts a multiple-case study design to explore the implementation of foreign language teaching within the *Kurikulum Merdeka* across four selected schools in West and North Aceh. Creswell (2007) describes, case study is both a methodology and a tool for in-depth exploration, while Yin (2018) identifies it as an effective research strategy for investigating complex phenomena within real-life contexts. This study includes both English and Arabic language teachers, as both subjects are taught as foreign languages in Indonesian schools. By examining the experiences of teachers across these two language domains, we aim to understand how the *Kurikulum Merdeka* supports foreign language instruction more broadly. We decided to study multiple cases across different sites to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions and their experiences with the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in the classroom. While taking this broad perspective, we understand that it has reduced our ability to fully engage with the richness of each individual site.

This multiple-case study methodology integrates qualitative data collection and analysis in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the contextual nuances in different geographical regions (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Then, each school represents a unique case, thus allowing for comparative analysis of implementation strategies and challenges across different schools. The selected schools are located in diverse regions (West Aceh and North Aceh), offering variation in socio-economic and cultural contexts. This purposeful sampling ensures that the findings capture a broad spectrum of experiences and practices. It is also worth noting that in this case study we are more focused on examining the process rather than analyzing the outcome (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection Methods

In this study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 10 foreign language teachers, specializing in English and Arabic, from a selection of schools across North and West Aceh. The aim was to explore how these educators implement the *Kurikulum Merdeka* framework in their teaching practices. To ensure the relevance and accuracy of the interview questions, the research team conducted a thorough review of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* framework, relevant curriculum literature, and consulted with educational experts. This preparatory work led to the creation of interview questions that were both reflective of the current educational landscape and aligned with the objectives of the study. To enhance the robustness of the data analysis, the study employed triangulation, a method that involved cross-referencing data obtained from interview transcripts, field notes, classroom discussions, and textbook reviews. This approach helped to create a more comprehensive understanding of the teachers' perspectives. The selected schools are situated in districts along the western and northern coastlines of Aceh, providing a diverse sample from different educational contexts. In North Aceh, all participating schools are at the high school level, including a vocational school, a private boarding school, and a public school. Meanwhile, West Aceh was represented by a mix of educational settings, including a boarding school, a junior high school, and senior high schools. To maintain participant anonymity, all individuals and schools were assigned abbreviations, ensuring confidentiality.

in the reporting of the results. The demographic of the foreign language teachers in Aceh is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Foreign Language Teacher Demographics

No	Teacher (Pseudonym)	Gender	Experience (Years)	School (Pseudonym)	Locations
1	IYS	F	10	AU Vocational School	North Aceh
2	AU	M	9	AU Islamic School	North Aceh
3	JM	F	2	AU Islamic School	North Aceh
4	UA	F	8	AU Islamic School	North Aceh
5	AGT	F	14	SMT High School	North Aceh
6	ZR	F	5	MTIG Islamic School	West Aceh
7	IR	M	5	RH Islamic School	West Aceh
8	TK	F	6	IHS School	West Aceh
9	NB	F	19	IJH School	West Aceh
10	RM	F	15	IJH School	West Aceh

Participants were chosen to reflect varying years of teaching experience, ensuring diverse insights into the *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s implementation. Interviews also included school principals and other staff to gain a holistic understanding of institutional practices and challenges. The primary data sources for this study were recorded interviews with teachers, which were then transcribed for analysis. The interview protocol guided these wide-ranging conversations, allowing flexibility for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and clarify understanding. Secondary data sources included field notes, transcriptions of audiotaped class discussions, site descriptions, and textbook (Yin, 2018). These secondary materials were shared among the researchers at each site as data collection and analysis progressed, helping to deepen the understanding of the teachers' perspectives on the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Data Analysis

This research employed a structured approach, consisting of three distinct phases of data collection and analysis. The initial phase focused on addressing preliminary design considerations, which included the creation of the first draft of interview questions and coordinating with schools to obtain permission to conduct the study. This stage ensured that the necessary logistical arrangements were in place, laying the groundwork for the research process. In the second phase, teachers were interviewed, and the researcher worked on developing an individualized timeline for each case study. This phase allowed for the collection of in-depth, qualitative data that could inform the analysis. The final phase involved drafting the initial findings based on the collected data, followed by a thorough review of each case to ensure that the results were both accurate and comprehensive.

The data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, which helped to identify recurring patterns and key themes relevant to the research focus. The researchers chose to manually code the data to allow for an in-depth engagement with the material. The coding process began with the generation of initial codes based on emerging ideas, which were then refined throughout the analysis. To ensure credibility and consistency, the identified themes were validated through peer review and collaborative discussions within the research team. This collaborative approach enhanced the reliability of the findings.

The analysis of the four school cases followed a two-step approach. Initially, each case was analyzed individually to understand the unique practices, challenges, and outcomes related to the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in that particular school. This within-case analysis provided rich insights into the individual contexts. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted, comparing and contrasting the findings from all four cases. This

comparative analysis helped to uncover both common experiences and distinct practices, offering broader insights into how Kurikulum Merdeka is being implemented across diverse educational settings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

In analyzing patterns within our data, we observed notable differences among the studied sites based on the type and location of schools. For example, boarding schools found it significantly easier to implement the Kurikulum Merdeka compared to non-boarding schools. Similarly, schools located in urban areas had better access to support and opportunities for discussion regarding the implementation of this new curriculum, unlike schools in suburban areas, which faced greater challenges due to limited resources and accessibility. We then categorize the themes from the interview according to the categories adopted from Hakan and Seval (2011) and Sibuea et al. (2023) in the following table.

Table 2
Comparison of *Kurikulum Merdeka* Implementation Across Different Sites

Category	Boarding school		Non-Boarding			
	North Aceh	West Aceh	Urban		Suburban	
	North Aceh	West Aceh	North Aceh	West Aceh	North Aceh	West Aceh
Implementation	The projects and key elements of the Kurikulum Merdeka had been implemented even before its formal enactment. It has shown an impact on language skills.	The Kurikulum Merdeka has been implemented for several years, but it still requires further strengthening for greater effectiveness.	Implementation requires adjustment due to factors such as limited time allocation for language classes, teacher readiness, and school preparedness.	To some extent, the curriculum fosters language skills. However, further adjustments are needed due to factors such as limited time allocation	The curriculum has not yet shown a noticeable impact on language skills. However, although it is being implemented.	The implementation for 1st graders feels almost identical to the previous curriculum, just rebranded as <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> .
Differentiated learning	Teachers interact closely with students even after school hours in the dorm, and students often engage in real-world projects, allowing teachers to become familiar.	Because of their boarding school setup, the language teacher frequently interacts with students during dorm activities, which makes assessment more practical	Teachers attempt to conduct diagnostic assessments, but managing large class sizes presents challenges.	Challenges in conducting diagnostic assessments arise from an overwhelming workload and large class sizes.	Challenges arise in conducting diagnostic assessments due to an overwhelming workload and confusion	There are challenges in conducting diagnostic assessments due to an excessive workload, and teachers are unsure whether the assessments are on the right track
Support and Collaboration	Boarding schools benefit from their strategic locations, which allow them to access	With the growing quality of boarding schools and their strategic location within the	It is relatively easier to foster discussions and collaborations between teachers and	The implementation becomes much easier when working with university lecturers or	It is somewhat difficult to find people to discuss with due to the location being quite	Being in the suburbs with fewer students makes it difficult for the school to access

Category	Boarding school		Non-Boarding			
			Urban		Suburban	
	North Aceh	West Aceh	North Aceh	West Aceh	North Aceh	West Aceh
	support from nearby provinces, such as consultations with experts or additional resources.	city, access to resources and experts is ample.	university lecturers, supported by educational department programs.	members of the education department, who have also provided support for schools.	far from the city center, especially during training sessions.	training opportunities
Learning Resources and Infrastructure	The boarding school reports that their facilities are 90% ready to support the curriculum's implementation. However, more textbooks are needed, as the current number is limited.	The boarding school reports that their facilities are 90% ready to support the curriculum's implementation. The textbooks are from a well-known publisher.	Facilities are available but not fully optimized or evenly distributed. Some technological support is in place for learning, and textbooks are available, though the number is limited for now.	Facilities are available but not optimal and are unevenly distributed. Technology supports learning, but textbooks are available, though they are considered too advanced for the students.	Facilities are limited, and students often need to share textbooks with their peers	Facilities are scarce, textbook must be shared by students with their friends

The implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka across North and West Aceh shows varying levels of success, influenced by school type and location. Boarding schools, for example, demonstrate stronger implementation. These schools had adopted key curriculum elements even before formal enactment. Their structured environment and extended learning hours enable deeper focus on language skills and project-based learning. Teachers interact with students beyond class hours in order to allow for more personalized instruction and continuous assessment. In contrast, non-boarding urban schools show moderate implementation.

While the curriculum is in place, challenges such as large class sizes, time limitations, and teacher workload hinder its full effectiveness. Differentiated learning is attempted but often falls short due to limited capacity. The most critical challenges appear in non-boarding suburban schools. Teachers face confusion over curriculum goals, struggle with diagnostic assessments, and work in under-resourced environments. In many cases, the new curriculum feels like a rebranding of the old one, thus lacking meaningful transformation. Additionally, access to training, expert support, and modern learning tools is severely limited and further widening the implementation gap. Meanwhile, in term of facilities, boarding schools report nearly full readiness, though some still lack sufficient textbooks. Urban non-boarding schools have partial technological support, while suburban non-boarding schools face textbook shortages and minimal infrastructure.

In summary, boarding schools regardless of urban and suburban settings are generally better equipped to implement Kurikulum Merdeka due to their structural advantages, including extended learning hours, continuous student-teacher interaction, strategic locations, and more complete facilities. Urban non-boarding schools show moderate success that is often dependent on individual initiative and partial access to support. Meanwhile, suburban non-boarding schools face the most significant challenges, struggling with geographic

isolation, scarce resources, unclear assessment practices, and a lack of readiness in applying the curriculum effectively.

Kurikulum Merdeka Implementation

Implementation. The interview results highlight valuable insights into the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in language classrooms. With its focus on differentiated instruction and project-based learning, the curriculum is believed to effectively enhance students' language skills.. One notable strategy highlighted by the interviewee in one site is the grouping of students according to their proficiency levels.

"...then, we use the results from the diagnostic assessment to group the students. For example, we group them by their level of understanding, low, average, or high. This way, we know where to focus more, usually on the group that needs more help. Meanwhile, the students who are already capable can work independently." (IYS)

This strategy, according to her, ensures that all students receive the support they need. The students who require more support receive targeted attention, while advanced learners can continue to progress without being held back by a one-size-fits-all curriculum. In this way, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* fosters a more inclusive learning environment where each student's individual needs are addressed. Another teacher in West Aceh, RM added,

"Kids from rural areas and cities are different. Some students can learn vocab on their own at home, while others need to be given the vocab before they start learning."

However, in other sites, interviewees expressed similar concerns about the challenges of grouping students according to their proficiency levels. As one interviewee, TK noted,

"In Merdeka Belajar, we need to understand not only the child's character at the start, but also their kinesthetic and visual styles. So, there is an initial assessment, which is difficult. With crowded classrooms, how can we teach listening or reading effectively?"

The statement makes sense from her perspective, as she is the only English teacher with civil servant status at the school. With 11 classes spanning from first to third grade while each requiring at least 2 hours of instruction per week, her workload is undoubtedly overwhelming.

The initial diagnostic assessment required to identify students' learning styles can be a daunting task for teachers, particularly in schools with limited resources and oversized classrooms as hers.

However, at boarding schools, there is little difficulty in conducting initial assessments or implementing differentiated learning. This is because students reside on campus, allowing language teachers to frequently interact with them through language programs after class. This consistent interaction helps teachers better understand students' proficiency levels and identify areas for improvement. As AU explained:

"In fact, we always meet students after school. They participate in an intensive foreign language program, which allows us to discuss and develop school projects such as in Kurmer further during these sessions."

The emphasis on project-based learning is another critical aspect of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. AU elucidated his view:

"Yes, in the curriculum, there are projects, and we've already been working on them. For instance, in the boarding school, we have an end-of-semester event called PENSI, which features an Arabic-English drama. This drama is a higher-level project that showcases the results of the students' work."

Such projects provide students with practical opportunities to apply their language skills in engaging and meaningful contexts, ultimately enhancing their fluency and confidence. Additionally, the project reflects the curriculum's focus on developing various dimensions of learning aligned with Indonesia's cultural and religious values, as exemplified in the *Projek*

Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila dan Rahmatan lil Alamin (P5PPRA). One teacher emphasized:

"In that project, there are five dimensions, such as being faithful and pious, having noble character, being critical, embracing global diversity, and being creative." (IYS)

However, the successful implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka largely depends on the readiness of schools and the creativity of teachers. According to AU, a teacher at a boarding school, it is easier to motivate students to learn foreign languages in the school setting. Since students live in dormitories and are closely monitored, they consistently practice both English and Arabic. Their language learning is also integrated into various projects, such as cultural performances. In line with IYS, AU agrees that the projects under the Kurikulum Merdeka, particularly the P5PPRA initiative, are thoughtfully designed to integrate language learning seamlessly into students' experiences. Additionally, she explained that the concept of aligning learning outcomes with a structured flow of activities particularly effective for reaching educational goals. This approach reinforces the principles of backward design, where the focus is on end goals to inform the planning and execution of lessons

Support and Collaboration. Support and collaboration influence the success of the Kurikulum Merdeka's implementation. The results reveal that boarding schools benefit from a strategic location which provides convenient access to external support from nearby cities and provinces. A teacher from a boarding school in North Aceh, JM, admitted,

"We often communicate with teachers from nearby schools. Occasionally, lecturers and experts from North Sumatra provide materials about the curriculum. Because this school is not too far from the neighboring province."

In other urban areas of North Aceh, schools have opportunities to foster discussions and collaborations between teachers, university lecturers, and educational department programs. These initiatives enable teachers to engage in constructive dialogue and receive the necessary support to enhance their teaching practices. On the other hand, in suburban areas of West Aceh, collaboration with external experts is more difficult due to the geographic conditions of these schools. The distance from the city center creates barriers to finding partners for discussions and training sessions. NB stated, *"...since we are not located in the city center, there are times when I can't attend meetings with the MGMP teachers. It's also a bit difficult to consult with someone who understands the topic or a university lecturer."*

As a result, teachers in these areas have fewer opportunities to collaborate, which limits their ability to enhance their teaching practices and implement the curriculum effectively.

Learning Resources and Infrastructure. The availability and quality of learning resources and infrastructure are crucial to the success of any curriculum. In boarding schools at both sites of study, the facilities are reported to be 90% ready to support the Kurikulum Merdeka. However, there is a need for more textbooks, as the current number is insufficient to meet the demand. Textbooks from well-known publishers are available to ensure high-quality learning materials. While the facilities in boarding schools are largely prepared, the limitation in textbooks remains a challenge. In urban areas of North Aceh, while facilities are available, they are not fully optimized or evenly distributed across schools. Some technological support for learning is present, but textbooks remain limited.

"Schools provide technological tools for learning. Each classroom is equipped with an infocus projector, which we often use to watch videos, view PowerPoint presentations, and access other resources."

Selecting textbooks aligned with the curriculum is crucial for effective learning and achieving educational goals. The use of textbooks in schools can be tailored to class needs

and conditions. According to ZR, an English teacher from an urban school, there is a digital classroom at her school.

"In IT or digital classes, each student usually has a personal laptop, and learning materials are accessed via specialized applications such as Jelajah Ilmu."

In non-digital classes, teachers use various learning media, such as projectors, picture cards, and other creative tools to support student learning activities. Adequate school facilities, such as computer labs, science labs, and libraries, are crucial in supporting both theoretical and practical learning processes. However, in some suburban schools in West Aceh, facilities are limited, and students have to share textbooks. This results in a lack of learning materials and makes it harder to implement the curriculum effectively in this site.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka

Although new curriculum initiatives are often designed to complement and enhance the strengths of previous ones, challenges still remain. One of the major concerns of the implementation in Acehese schools are the readiness of teachers to implement this new approach. Furthermore, suburban schools in West Aceh site face even more significant challenges. For instance, while technology to support learning is available, it is not widely accessible for students due to the quantity is limited. Similarly, textbooks are available, but they are often limited in number or considered too advanced for students. This, in turn, makes it challenging for teachers to provide adequate learning materials.

TK and NB later expressed their frustration about the challenge, noting that the newly introduced textbooks are overwhelming because the material is too advanced. For them, the textbooks provided in schools under the previous curriculum (K-13) were easier to understand, included more pictures, and were more colourful, as TK stated,

"I use this new book, but sometimes I have to create and design my own materials because it's a bit difficult for my students. When I compare it to the textbook from the previous curriculum, the material was easier to understand."

Additionally, UA emphasizes that the use of textbooks that are not well-suited can widen the gap between urban and rural schools.

"Students from rural and urban areas often have different learning environments, abilities and this disparity can hinder the uniform implementation of the curriculum. Without using proper textbooks, the benefits of the curriculum may not reach all students."

Another challenge lies in the assessment methods required for the new curriculum. Moving away from traditional exams and standardized tests, this curriculum may require the development of new tools to measure competency and skill development. Schools may lack the resources or expertise to implement such assessments which makes it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum and, at the same time, to track students' progress. This issue is particularly pronounced in regions with limited educational support, where teachers may not have access to experts or professionals who can suggest the adoption of these new assessment techniques. Finally, the implementation of Merdeka Kurikulum highlights concerns related to equity. While the curriculum is designed to accommodate different learning styles and paces, disparities in resources and teacher readiness across regions could result in unequal educational outcomes.

Nevertheless, although all schools in both rural and urban areas are implementing the same curriculum and resources, the competency of teachers in foreign language teaching must be also taken into account. Teachers in rural areas benefit less from training and capacity-building opportunities compared to their urban counterparts, especially regarding the proper implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in relation to foreign language teaching. As NB states, *"We are in the early stages of implementation, so we need more discussion and*

guidance on applying it in schools. But we don't have the same access as our colleagues in the city." Therefore, ensuring that all schools, regardless of their location, have the necessary support to implement the curriculum effectively is crucial to achieving the goals to equip students with the necessary skills for the 21st century.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings in relation to the research questions of the study. Specifically, the first part examines the impact of the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka on enhancing language proficiency in classrooms, addressing the first research question. It explores how the new curriculum has influenced teaching strategies, learning activities, and students' language development. Following this, the discussion moves to the second research question, which investigates the challenges faced by language teachers in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka.

The findings of this research reveal that the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka varies across different schools. These differences largely depend on factors such as school type, location, available resources, and teacher preparedness. For instance, boarding schools at both sites, with their extended learning hours and close teacher-student interactions, have shown positive impacts, particularly in fostering students' language skills. Furthermore, they have made significant strides in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* since these type of schools have the advantage of extended learning time, especially through after-school programs. The boarding schools setup also allows for more personalized attention to students. In contrast, many non-boarding schools, especially in suburban areas, face significant challenges due to limited resources, large class sizes, and inadequate teachers' training opportunities. There is still also a need to continuously strengthen the curriculum's impact.

The findings of this research also support the idea that *Kurikulum Merdeka* gives teachers the freedom to adapt and modify materials to suit the unique needs of their students. This approach offers students opportunities tailored to their specific learning requirements. (Krishnapatria, 2021; Lestari & Margana, 2024). At the same time, it emphasizes learner-centered approaches by encouraging teachers to not only plan around desired outcomes but also continuously assess students, even at the beginning of the learning process. This early assessment helps to adjust instruction based on real-time feedback, creating a dynamic learning environment that accommodates diverse learning paces and styles. Therefore, teachers will better understand students' current level of understanding and at the same time map areas for improvement. Furthermore, by giving teachers more autonomy in designing learning activities, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* fosters creativity and encourages them to integrate project-based learning and other engaging instructional strategies that cultivate important skills, namely critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration.

Similarly, McTighe and Thomas (2003) argue that when teachers begin with clear objectives for what students should achieve by the end of a course, they can more effectively tailor their teaching methods to meet those goals. This approach shifts the focus away from traditional content delivery toward a more outcome-oriented method of teaching. At the end, the learning process is not just about covering material but about ensuring that students truly understand and can apply what they have learned.

The findings from the interviews also illustrate that the Kurikulum Merdeka effectively enhances foreign language proficiency through differentiated instruction and project-based learning (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). By addressing individual student needs and providing authentic language use opportunities, the curriculum fosters a comprehensive learning environment that nurtures both linguistic and personal development. Meanwhile, project-based learning enables students to apply their knowledge in practical ways by fostering creativity and innovation. Through hands-on projects, students engage in meaningful, real-

world tasks that prepare them for the demands of future careers and societal challenges (Bell, 2010).

It is also important to recognize the critical role teachers play in ensuring the successful implementation of the curriculum. In the urban areas of North Aceh, for instance, teachers have emphasized the need for further adjustments to enhance the curriculum's effectiveness, particularly in addressing challenges such as limited time for language classes, teacher preparedness, and school readiness. Without these considerations, the curriculum may not reach its intended goals. Similarly, in some schools in suburban area, the overwhelming workload combined with confusion regarding the right approach to assessments makes it difficult for teachers to effectively identify and address students' needs. These challenges hinder the implementation of differentiated learning which is crucial for student success in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

However, although the overall impact on student learning was positive, a study conducted by Korotchenko et al. (2015) revealed that there are some difficulties in adjusting to this new approach, particularly regarding the need for careful planning and assessment. This challenge was also experienced by TK, a young English teacher working in a less urban school setting. With a large number of students and a heavy workload, TK is the only English teacher responsible for 11 classes in Phase E and F. The pressure of managing this load has made it difficult for her to implement the learning differentiation that *Kurikulum Merdeka* encourages. Additionally, the reduction of English class hours from four to two per week further exacerbates her struggle to fully embrace the backward design model and achieve optimal learning outcomes.

Despite these challenges, the advantages of the backward design remain evident. Korotchenko et al.'s (2015) research, which involved 3rd, 4th, and 5th-year students, further supports the strengths of the backward design approach by demonstrating how it allows educators to better address specific learning outcomes. This was also recommended by IYS, a teacher and a technology ambassador from Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi (Kemdikbudristek) in Aceh. She believes that continuous learning and staying optimistic are essential because this curriculum design is highly effective and should be adopted. While it may require more upfront effort in planning (Reza et al., 2023; Yusa et al., 2023), this model ensures that teachers can provide a coherent and focused learning experience. Insights from teachers like IYS and TK underscore the importance of addressing these issues to ensure that the curriculum can be successfully implemented across the country. By providing teachers with the necessary training and resources, and ensuring equitable access to educational tools, Indonesia can maximize the potential of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* to prepare students for the demands of the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* presents a flexible approach to education, which empowers schools and teachers to tailor their teaching methods and curriculum according to the needs of their students and the local context. For this approach to be truly effective, policy-makers must ensure that the necessary resources, training, and support systems are in place to facilitate its implementation across diverse educational settings. By enabling schools to focus on clear, desired learning outcomes, the curriculum fosters intentional planning and alignment of teaching methods, which ultimately enhances students' language proficiency and overall skill development. For teachers, the curriculum offers the freedom to adapt lessons based on individual student needs, promoting a student-centered learning environment.

Teachers are encouraged to incorporate innovative practices, such as project-based learning, that engage students in real-world tasks. However, to fully embrace this flexibility and innovation, teachers need continuous professional development and training to navigate the challenges that come with such a transformative approach. Meanwhile, curriculum

designers play a critical role in ensuring that the framework of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* supports the integration of backward design principles while addressing the practical constraints of the classroom, such as limited teaching hours and heavy teacher workloads. By focusing on clear learning goals and providing space for flexible teaching methods, curriculum designers can create a system that not only meets educational objectives but also allows teachers to adapt their lessons to better serve their students. Ultimately, the collaboration between policy, teacher development, and curriculum design is key to the success of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. With the right resources and support, this curriculum has the potential to bridge educational disparities and prepare Indonesian students for the demands of an increasingly globalized world.

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