ADAPTING TO CHANGE: THE EXPERIENCES OF EFL TEACHERS WITH CURRICULUM REFORM

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Abstract

In the realization of education, it is necessary to regularly update and revitalize the curriculum due to the dynamic nature of knowledge and evolving educational needs. This applies to the domain of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, the process of curriculum reform poses several challenges, particularly for teachers who play a vital role in its implementation. This research aims to explore the difficulties encountered by EFL teachers in adapting to the transition from the Curriculum 13 (K13) to the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum) in Indonesia. Through a phenomenological case study, three EFL teachers in the North Sumatra province share their perspectives and experiences in incorporating the new curriculum into their teaching practices. Despite facing essential obstacles such as limited access to ICT resources and inadequate training, the insights gathered underscore the importance of teachers cultivating creativity and adaptability in their teaching methods. Additionally, the study emphasizes the significance of a serious understanding of the subject matter and the integration of 21st-century skills. The diverse viewpoints presented offer current insights into addressing the challenges associated with the development and implementation of EFL at different levels and in various types of schools.

1. Introduction

Reformation of curriculum are a customary practice in the field of education (Gerrard & Farrell, 2014; Law, 2014), as the landscape of knowledge and educational needs constantly evolves. To enhance the educational approach of nation and ensure that it remains relevant and effective, curriculum changes need to be implemented (Gouëdard et al, 2020; Cheung & Man Wong, 2021; Law, 2014). These changes are aimed at aligning educational needs with the changing times, with the ultimate objective of uplifting the quality of education (Qoyyimah, 2018; Hopmann 2003; Mcculloch, 2005; Suprapto et al., 2021). Curriculum changes reflect the evolving needs of learners (Schleicher, 2018) and aim to equip them with practical skills for real-life situations, foster critical thinking, and nurture creativity, innovation, and adaptability (Cone et al., 2016). By responding to learners' needs, it is ensured that the education system remains effective in meeting future challenges.

The advantages of a modernized curriculum cannot be overstated, as they lead to greater student engagement, increased retention rates, and more successful learning outcomes (Alfauzan & Tarchouna, 2017; Altbach et al., 2005). However, in order to accomplish this, a successful reform plan must be put in place, which necessitates cooperation among educators, policymakers, and other interested parties. To that extent, Indonesia has undergone several curriculum changes (Prihantoro, 2015; Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022; Istiqomah, 2016, Wahyuni, 2016). Most recently in 2022, Indonesia launched the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, which is an intra-curricular learning curriculum where the content will be more optimal so that students have enough time to delve into concepts and strengthen competencies. Teachers have the flexibility to choose various teaching tools so that learning can be tailored to the learning needs and interests of students.

These frequent changes in the curriculum have created both opportunities and challenges for all stakeholders (Aydin et al., 2017; Heifetz et al., 2009; Pak et al.., 2020), including teachers in Indonesia. As, in every curriculum change, the party who is most affected is the teacher (Adu & Ngibe, 2014; Jenkins, 2020; Priestley, 2011), as they are the front line in the implementation process. As the direct implementers of the curriculum, teachers face many challenges, which vary depending on their position. Teachers who teach in cities face different challenges than those in rural areas or border regions. Teachers in state schools with complete facilities certainly face different challenges than teachers in schools with limited facilities. Similarly, teachers who have sufficient compensation will face different challenges than those with salaries below the standard.

As instance, changes in the curriculum have enabled teachers to incorporate new teaching strategies and technologies into their classrooms (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Erstad & Voogt, 2018), enhancing the quality of education for students. On the other hand, these changes have also required teachers to adapt quickly to new teaching methods and to undergo extensive retraining, which can be time-consuming and challenging. In addition, implementing a new Merdeka curriculum can be particularly challenging for teachers. They must not only understand the new content and teaching methods but also ensure that the curriculum is delivered effectively to students. This may require additional resources, including time and support, which may not be readily available in some schools.

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Independent Curriculum, hereinafter: IC) in the field of English has brought both positive and negative impacts on teachers. One of the positive impacts is that it encourages teachers to be more creative and innovative in designing their lesson plans and teaching strategies. The IC emphasizes the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, and technology implementation which require teachers to adopt new and innovative teaching methods. However, the implementation of the IC has also posed some challenges for teachers. The new curriculum requires teachers to have a deeper understanding of the subject matter and to be able to integrate different learning experiences into their lessons. This can be a daunting task, especially for those who are not familiar with the concept of 21st-century skills. Moreover, the implementation of the IC curriculum has also increased teachers' workload as they need to create more interactive and engaging learning activities that require more preparation time.

Except those challenges, there are also other challenges faced by the teachers in implementing the new curriculum (see: Erstad & Voogt, 2018; Aydin et al., 2017). According to Erstad and Voogt (2018), educators encounter pedagogical difficulties when incorporating

21st-century skills into their teaching. These challenges encompass their professionalism and professional development (Voogt & Pareja Roblin, 2012) and integration in curriculum (Erstad and Voogt, 2018). They also face the challenges of creating technology-enriched learning settings. Proficiency in these competencies, the utilization of diverse approaches with students, comprehending subject matter and interdisciplinary content integration, and employing a range of evaluation instruments, the involvement of stakeholders from various sectors, are other challenges arise (Erstad and Voogt, 2018). Additionally, Aydin et al (2017) added that some barriers in the implementation of new curriculum for teachers, they are: lack of training, demographic changes, policy changes, emerging technologies, globalization, and refugee and immigration issues.

Previous studies have investigated the impact of curriculum to EFL teachers, both in global scale (Wang & Cheng, 2005; Wang, 2007; AlAmin & Greenwood, 2018; Harris & Graham, 2019), and in Indonesian context (Riadi, 2019; Pajarwati et al., 2021; Ahmad, 2014; Nur & Makdur, 2014). Those studies investigated various perspectives (include teachers' point of view) related to previous curriculum, which jumped into various conclusions. However, there is still limited evidences on the perspective of EFL teachers in the change of curriculum into IC, as this curriculum is relatively new in Indonesian education practice. Understanding the perspectives of EFL teachers on the implementation of the IC is essential to ensure its success. Teachers are the key stakeholders in the implementation of the curriculum, and their experiences and perceptions can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with this new approach.

Thus, this study is aimed to explore the challenges faced by the teachers, regarding to the reformation of curriculum from *Kurikulum 13* to IC. This study is significances for some rationales. Firstly, it provides insights into the issues that teachers encounter in adopting the new curriculum, which can help inform policies and practices that facilitate its implementation. Secondly, the study highlights the importance of providing teachers with the necessary support and resources to help them adapt to the new curriculum. By identifying the specific challenges that teachers face, policymakers and school administrators can provide targeted assistance that addresses these issues and promotes effective teaching practices. Thirdly, the study can contribute to the professional development of teachers by providing them with a platform to share their experiences and perspectives on the challenges of implementing the MBKM curriculum. This can help create a community of practice where teachers can collaborate and learn from one another, improving their teaching skills and enhancing their effectiveness in the classroom. Lastly, the study can ultimately contribute to improving the quality of education for students. By identifying and addressing the challenges that teachers face in implementing the IC, policymakers and school administrators can help ensure that students receive high-quality education that prepares them for the demands of the 21st-century workforce. To that extent, this study brings the research questions: how are the teachers' perspective on the change of curriculum from *Kurikulum 13* to IC?

2. Literature Review

Curriculum change is necessary to meet the changing needs of children and prepare them for the world (Jorgenson, 2006; Broyles et al., 2007). However, implementing meaningful and sustainable changes is a challenging task that requires careful planning,

ongoing evaluation, and revision (Inandi & Giliç, 2016; Tracey et al., 2016; Gouědard et al., 2020). Resistance to change in schools is normal and necessary, but there needs to be a balance between a long-lasting, predictable ethos that transcends generations and the healthy adaptations that acknowledge different needs from one generation to the next. Teachers' readiness for change is crucial for successful curriculum implementation (Endot et al., 2021). Teachers' level of participation in decision making, school culture, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation are positively related to their cognitive and intentional readiness for change. Curriculum change cannot succeed unless people are ready and willing to implement it. Individual change is difficult if the organization is not supportive of the change. Curriculum reform is a significant approach to prepare schools to be effective in meeting contemporary societal needs and imperatives, but implementing change following a curriculum reform is often complex.

The readiness of teachers for change is a crucial factor in the successful implementation of a new curriculum. Research suggests that teachers' readiness for change is influenced by their participation in decision-making and school culture (Inandi & Giliç, 2016). In addition, factors such as beliefs, abilities, and motivations play a significant role in determining teachers' readiness for pedagogical transformation (Jones & Swanson, 2022). A study also emphasizes the predictive value of context (trust) and process (collaboration) in determining teachers' readiness for change (Kondakci, 2017). Therefore, assessing teachers' readiness for change and addressing factors that influence it is essential for the effective implementation of a new curriculum.

3. Research Method

The study focused on three experienced English teachers from North Sumatera province in Indonesia. Both of the teachers were female and 29 years old. With a teaching experience of 4 to 5 years and 10 years, they brought valuable insights and perspectives to the study. As informants, their first-hand knowledge and practical expertise in teaching English provided a solid foundation for the research. Their experience in the field allowed them to express strong perspectives on various aspects of English language instruction, including the researched curriculum design, classroom management, and student engagement. Through their involvement, the study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and successes encountered by English teachers in the region.

This study adopts phenomenological case study, a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals involved in the case of the study (Neubauer et al., 2019; Tuffour, 2017). This research method aims to explore the essence of the phenomenon under investigation from the perspective of the participants themselves, which is in this context: the teachers who involved in the implementation of curriculum 13. The researchers examine the actual actions, convictions, conduct, and individual characteristics of the subjects from various perspectives to emphasize and investigate the intricate nature of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008), specifically, the study aims to understand how the teachers adapt and adopt the curriculum. Meanwhile, the data collection for this study relied on two sources of information, which involved conducting in-depth interviews with both subjects and focused group discussion (FGD). The in-depth interviews and FGD provided an opportunity to cultivate the teachers' thoughts and reflections, enabling a deeper understanding of their decision-making processes, challenges faced, and strategies employed in applying the curriculum. The use of

this data collection method ensured a focused and personalized approach, enabling the researchers to capture the nuanced teachers' perspectives of the subjects.

3.1 Technique of Analyzing Data

The data collected in this study was analyzed a method known as thematic analysis, which is widely utilized for identifying, analyzing, and presenting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis process consisted of several stages: first, becoming familiar with the data; second, generating initial codes to label and categorize segments of data; third, searching for recurring themes or patterns that emerged from the coded data; fourth, reviewing and refining these themes to ensure accuracy and relevance; and finally, using the identified themes to produce the research report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allowed the researchers to explore and understand the complexities of the teachers' lived experiences and perceptions related to the implementation of curriculum 13. The use of thematic analysis ensured a systematic and comprehensive examination of the qualitative data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the teachers' perspectives and enriching the study's findings.

4. Results and Discussion

The research enlisted the involvement of four English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers residing in the North Sumatera province. The demographic details of these teachers are outlined below.

Name	Age	Gender	School Level Being Taught	Year of Teaching Experience	Occupation Status
Teacher 1	29	Female	Junior High School	4-5 years	Private School Teacher
Teacher 2	29	Female	Senior High School	4-5 years	Private School Teacher
Teacher 3	36	Female	Senior High School	> 10 years	Civil Servant

Table 1. Participants Data

4.1 Adaptability to the Changes of Times

This question is addressed to gather information about the teachers' perspectives regarding the time required for curriculum reformation. It aims to explore how the EFL teachers perceive the timeline and process involved in updating or reforming the curriculum they are implementing. By examining their viewpoints, the study seeks to understand if teachers consider the current curriculum to be flexible and responsive enough to meet the changing needs of language learners and the demands of the modern educational context. The three participants express similar awareness's related to this issue.

"The transition from the 2013 curriculum to the Merdeka (independent) curriculum is very appropriate for the current era." -Teacher 1

"Curriculum changes always present challenges, demanding educators to be prepared to face these changes." -Teacher 2

"In my opinion, the shift to the Merdeka curriculum represents the latest innovation for schools, teachers, and students. Its purpose is to provide schools and teachers with the freedom to develop curriculum and teaching methods that cater to students' needs." -Teacher 3

The three participants similarly agree that the transition from the 2013 curriculum to the Merdeka curriculum is highly relevant in the current era. They acknowledge that curriculum changes come with challenges, and educators must be ready to face and adapt to these changes. Moreover, they collectively view the shift to the Merdeka curriculum as a starting innovation that empowers schools and teachers to design curricula and teaching approaches that align with the various needs of students. These shared perspectives underline the potential of the Merdeka curriculum to bring positive transformations to the educational field, bring an environment of flexibility and autonomy that can enhance the overall learning experience for students.

4.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Merdeka Curriculum

This question is addressed in order to seek the perspective of teachers regarding to the Merdeka curriculum. The three respondents stated important points.

"In my opinion, one of the advantages of the Merdeka Curriculum is that teachers can independently formulate learning objectives according to predetermined Learning Outcomes (LO) in each phase. Furthermore, the Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes the students' learning needs." -Teacher 1

"Another noteworthy aspect of the Merdeka Curriculum is when teachers can assign different tasks to students, enabling them to understand the material according to their abilities." -Teacher 2

"These advantages of the Merdeka Curriculum, in my view, are Relevant and Interactive. Through the Project-Based Learning approach, it is hoped that the Merdeka Curriculum can provide broader opportunities for students to actively explore current issues. Additionally, this curriculum can also support the development of character and the competency of the Pancasila Student Profile." -Teacher 3

The three perspectives collectively conclude that the Merdeka Curriculum offers significant benefits, such as teachers having the autonomy to design learning objectives aligned with predetermined Learning Outcomes (LO) for each phase. Moreover, the curriculum's emphasis on addressing students' learning needs is notable. Additionally, another notable feature highlighted by the participants is the flexibility for teachers to assign different tasks based on students' abilities, which facilitating better comprehension of the subject matter.

However, the participants express their feeling related to the disadvantages of the Merdeka curriculum. Their viewpoints collectively conclude that careful attention must be given to addressing the unpreparedness of educators, students, and parents during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. One notable drawback identified is the weaknesses of human resources. The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum necessitates comprehensive awareness-raising and accurate planning to establish a powerful and organized framework. Additionally, the curriculum relies on proficient human resources, especially skilled educators, to effectively carry out its implementation. However, the concern is that the current human resources is insufficient to meet these demands.

"In my opinion, the lack of preparedness among educators, students, and parents is something that needs to be considered during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum." -Teacher 2

"One of its shortcomings, in my view, is the insufficiency of human resources. The recently launched Merdeka Curriculum requires thorough socialization and preparation to establish a well-structured system. Furthermore, this curriculum demands experienced human resources, particularly capable educators, to ensure its smooth execution. In this regard, the available human resources are still inadequate." -Teacher 3

4.3 Changes in Approaches, Strategies, or Teaching Methods Contained in the Merdeka Curriculum

This specific question is made to dig the perception of teacher regarding to technical implementation issue of the curriculum.

"Teachers must continuously learn to determine the appropriate approaches, strategies, or teaching methods for English language instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum." -Teacher 1

"The shift in English language teaching strategies under the Merdeka Curriculum, which feels different during content delivery, presents its own unique challenges." -Teacher 2

"In my opinion, all the methods and stages within the Merdeka Curriculum reflect an advanced learning system that prioritizes the outcomes achieved by students." -Teacher 3

The three perspectives concern that teachers must engage in continuous learning to identify suitable approaches, strategies, or teaching methods for English language instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, all three participants acknowledge that the change in English language teaching strategies within the Merdeka Curriculum, leading to a special experience during content delivery, brings about its own set of different challenges. Additionally, all three opinions align in recognizing that the various methods and stages incorporated within the Merdeka Curriculum exemplify an advanced educational system that places a strong emphasis on prioritizing the outcomes achieved by students.

4.4 The Challenges Teachers Experience on the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum

This question is addressed to dig deeper related to the teachers' experience in the challenges of the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. They express comprehensive experiences.

"In implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English language classes, there are undoubtedly challenges to be faced. This is because during its execution, teachers need to gradually acclimate to and apply the Merdeka Curriculum, starting from preparation, classroom implementation, to learning evaluation." -Teacher 1

"One of the challenges that arises during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language classes is selecting and applying strategies that align with the standards of the Merdeka Curriculum." - Teacher 2

The two viewpoints contend that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language classes indeed presents certain challenges. This is attributed to the additional process that teachers must go through to familiarize themselves with and incorporate the Merdeka Curriculum, encompassing initial preparation, classroom execution, and learning assessment. Moreover, both perspectives highlight a specific challenge emerging during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language classes – the task of identifying and utilizing strategies that are in harmony with the established standards of the Merdeka Curriculum.

4.5 What Should Be Added to Successfully Implement the Curriculum?

"In my opinion, there is a need for specialized training on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum specifically tailored for English language teachers. Within this training, it is recommended to provide examples of module creation (analyzed collaboratively), demonstrate its application in the classroom (including the selection of appropriate media, approaches, strategies, or methods), as well as methods of evaluation." - Teacher 1

"The enhancement of motivation among English language teachers to continuously learn and adhere to the standards of the Merdeka Curriculum throughout the teaching and learning process." -Teacher 1

"By expanding the array of learning resources for students and conducting training sessions for teachers to effectively implement this Merdeka Curriculum." -Teacher 1

The three teachers argued that specialized training to facilitate the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly addressed for English language instructors. This training, as suggested by Teacher 1, should bring the outline of collaborative examples for module development, practical demonstrations of classroom application involving the selection of media, approaches, strategies, and methods, along with comprehensive guidance on evaluation techniques. Additionally, they collectively emphasized the significance of increasing the motivation levels of English language teachers. All three teachers noted, as stated by Teacher 1, that developing a continuous commitment to learning with the Merdeka Curriculum's standards is crucial throughout the entire teaching and learning process.

The three participants agree that the transition from the 2013 curriculum to the Merdeka curriculum is highly relevant in the current era (Aydin et al., 2017; Heifetz et al., 2009; Pak et al., 2020). They acknowledge that curriculum changes come with challenges, but they also see the shift to the Merdeka curriculum as an opportunity for innovation (Adu & Ngibe, 2014; Jenkins, 2020; Priestley, 2011). They collectively view the shift to the

Merdeka curriculum as a starting innovation that empowers schools and teachers to design curricula and teaching approaches that align with the various needs of students (Aydin et al., 2017; Heifetz et al., 2009; Pak et al., 2020; Adu & Ngibe, 2014; Jenkins, 2020; Priestley, 2011). These shared perspectives underline the potential of the Merdeka curriculum to bring positive transformations to the educational field, and bring an environment of flexibility and autonomy that can enhance the overall learning experience for students (Aydin et al., 2017; Heifetz et al., 2009; Pak et al., 2020; Adu & Ngibe, 2014; Jenkins, 2020; Priestley, 2011).

The three teachers argue that specialized training is needed to facilitate the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly for English language instructors. This training should include collaborative examples for module development, practical demonstrations of classroom application, and comprehensive guidance on evaluation techniques (Erstad & Voogt, 2018; Voogt & Pareja Roblin, 2012). They also emphasize the importance of increasing the motivation levels of English language teachers and developing a continuous commitment to learning with the Merdeka Curriculum's standards (Aydin et al, 2017; Jenkins, 2020).

The participants also stated other challenges they face in implementing the new curriculum. As Erstad and Voogt (2018) argue that educators encounter pedagogical difficulties when incorporating 21st-century skills into their teaching, these three participants meet these challenges. These challenges encompass their professionalism and professional development (Voogt & Pareja Roblin, 2012; Erstad & Voogt, 2018), and integration in curriculum (Erstad & Voogt, 2018). They also face the challenges of creating technology-enriched learning settings.

The statement by one of the teachers suggest that English language teachers need specialized training on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This training should focus on the following areas: creating technology-enriched learning settings, proficiently utilizing diverse approaches with students, comprehending subject matter and interdisciplinary content integration, employing a range of evaluation instruments, and involving stakeholders from various sectors. The training should also provide examples of module creation, its application in the classroom, and methods of evaluation. This will help English language teachers to be better equipped to implement the Merdeka Curriculum and meet the challenges of 21st century education. Previous studies mentioned in the prompt support the need for specialized training for English language teachers. Kereluk et al. (2013) argued that teachers need to be equipped with the skills to create technology-enriched learning settings. Erstad and Voogt (2018) also emphasized the importance of proficiency in diverse approaches, comprehension of subject matter, and interdisciplinary content integration. Additionally, they argue that teachers need to be able to employ a range of evaluation instruments and involve stakeholders from various sectors.

In addition, curriculum changes, as stated by one of the teachers, have led in opportunities for teachers to integrate innovative teaching strategies and advantage emerging technologies within their classrooms (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Erstad & Voogt, 2018). These adaptations not only reflect the dynamic nature of education but also hold the potential to significantly enhance the overall quality of education provided to students. However, among these advancements, one notable challenge emerges during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language classes: the task of selecting and applying teaching strategies that align consistently with the curriculum's standards. This

challenge underscores the need for a balance between embracing innovative methods and fulfilling to the specific requirements and expectations set by the Merdeka Curriculum.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the shift from the 2013 curriculum to Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum brings both complexity and promise. Teachers see its relevance and its potential to give schools and educators more freedom and flexibility. Yet, they also acknowledge the challenges it brings, like being unprepared, having limited resources, needing continuous learning, and aligning teaching methods with the curriculum's standards. To overcome these challenges, specialized training for English language teachers is essential. Furthermore, this curriculum change allows for the integration of new teaching methods and technology, improving education quality. Success relies on collaboration and commitment from all stakeholders, especially teachers, to benefit the educational field and students' learning experience. Then, the study highlights the potential benefits of curriculum changes, such as the integration of innovative teaching strategies and technologies, urging educators and policymakers to seize these opportunities for improved educational quality. Lastly, it emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts among all stakeholders, including teachers, policymakers, educational institutions, students, and parents, to ensure the successful and sustainable implementation of educational reforms like the Merdeka Curriculum.

However, the limitations of this study encompass a small sample size comprising only three participants, potentially restricting the representation of diverse viewpoints in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. The study's focus on English language instruction within Indonesia may limit the generalizability of findings to other educational settings or subjects. This limitation underscores the need for caution when interpreting the findings and suggest areas for further investigation.

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