

Curriculum Reform in Practice: Novice English Teachers' Adaptation and Challenges under the Merdeka Framework

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences of novice English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian public school. Using a qualitative method through case study approach, data were collected from three early-career English teachers through interviews and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: implementation challenges, support systems, and effective teaching techniques. Teachers faced obstacles such as limited technical skills, inadequate facilities, and passive student behavior. However, they adapted by modifying tasks, using multimedia, grouping students flexibly, and using assessments to plan lessons. Support came mainly from digital platforms and peer groups, while formal mentoring was lacking. The study concludes that successful curriculum implementation requires strong institutional support, sufficient infrastructure, and teacher readiness. These insights provide practical guidance for new teachers facing curriculum reform.

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Introduction

The curriculum plays a crucial role in the educational process. It must be designed to align with the nature of the subject, the learners' needs, and the context of the learning environment. Nevertheless, even a well-structured curriculum may fall short of achieving its goals due to unforeseen issues in the classroom, individual differences among students and teachers, or technical challenges (Karakuş, 2021). For new teachers, navigating these challenges while trying to meet curriculum demands can be especially overwhelming. Teaching is a profession that is both exciting and challenging, and new educators often find themselves struggling with classroom management, lesson planning, and curriculum implementation. These pressures can significantly influence both teacher development and student achievement (Labib et al., 2024).

Despite graduating from teacher education programs, many new teachers face difficulties transitioning from theory to practice. In classrooms, they encounter unexpected issues such as overcrowded classes, lack of time, and diverse student needs (Dlamini & Zulu, 2024). In particular, large student numbers in primary schools make it challenging to offer individual attention, especially to students with learning difficulties or those who require

enrichment (Apriliana, 2021). In some situation, learners with special educational needs such as those with disabilities or gifted students often do not receive the support they require, potentially widening the achievement gap (Thapliyal et al., 2022). A significant factor contributing to this issue is the mismatch between teaching methods and student needs, which highlights the necessity of adopting more responsive and inclusive teaching approaches. Therefore, supporting early-career teachers with practical solutions is essential to help them overcome barriers and implement curriculum effectively.

Previous studies have suggested differentiated instruction as a promising solution to these problems. This approach encourages teachers to design learning experiences that match students' individual needs, preferences, and abilities (Dirgantari & Cahyani, 2023 & Hakiman et al., 2021). Differentiated learning has been found to enhance motivation, engagement, and performance by providing multiple ways for students to access content and demonstrate understanding (Gheyssens et al., 2022 & Asriadi et al., 2023). Especially in elementary education, this strategy offers a practical method for managing diverse classrooms and addressing various learning challenges. However, implementing differentiated instruction requires strong curriculum knowledge, flexible lesson planning, and sufficient training factors that many new teachers find difficult to master (Dirgantari & Cahyani, 2023). Thus, providing accessible guidance for novice teachers on how to implement such strategies is both timely and necessary. Not only does this promote equity in learning, but it also strengthens teachers' confidence and professional capacity.

In addition, study by Watana et al. (2019), shows that in Indonesia and other countries undergoing curriculum reforms, studies have shown that teachers often face recurring challenges related to new policies and insufficient training. For instance, the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum in Indonesia posed problems due to unclear assessment models and minimal support structures. Teachers reported that without proper planning and guidance, instructional practices often diverged from intended curriculum goals, causing confusion and frustration (Mufanti et al., 2019). Although initiatives like Curriculum Merdeka were introduced to promote autonomy and student centered learning, many teachers found the transition difficult due to a lack of preparation (Asrifan et al., 2023). Additionally, the shift toward more independent learning requires significant changes in pedagogy, which some educators struggle to implement effectively (Fikni et al., 2024). These studies suggest that the gap between curriculum design and classroom realities continues to be a major concern. Addressing this issue requires not only reform in policy but also support mechanisms that empower teachers on the ground.

This topic is important because improving curriculum implementation can significantly impact teacher development, student learning, and overall school success. Research highlights that new teachers who receive proper mentorship, peer collaboration opportunities, and institutional support are better equipped to meet curriculum demands (Sudirman & Haling, 2020). Instead, a lack of such support often results in burnout, low instructional quality, and even early career attrition. By studying these trends, education policymakers and stakeholders can design more effective systems to nurture early-career teachers. Such improvements not only benefit teachers themselves but also lead to better academic outcomes for students and stronger educational institutions (Taye & Hika, 2024).

Bridging the gap between ideal curriculum frameworks and real classroom practice should therefore be a shared priority among educators, trainers, and policy designers.

While previous studies have largely focused on identifying implementation challenges, fewer have explored holistic strategies that reflect everyday classroom experiences (Labib et al., 2023). The benefit of this study to equip new teachers not only with theoretical tools but also with practical, adaptable solutions. This study, aims to offer a realistic survival guide that combines research insights with actionable steps to help new teachers implement curriculum effectively. It brings together findings from diverse educational contexts including Indonesia and South Africa to ensure relevance across different settings (Karakuş, 2021; Muhtadi et al., 2023 & Dlamini & Zulu, 2024). Lastly, this study hopes to inspire confidence and competence in the next generation of educators, helping them not just survive but thrive in their early teaching careers.

Method

This research employed a qualitative method using a case study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018 & Yin, 2018) to examine the experiences of new teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary public schools in Katingan and Palangka Raya. A total of three English teachers with less than three years of teaching experience were selected through purposive sampling, following the view that qualitative case studies emphasize information-rich participants for in-depth understanding (Patton, 2015). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a technique widely supported by qualitative experts for eliciting nuanced and contextually grounded accounts from participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Additional sources such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and classroom artefacts were also reviewed to strengthen contextual interpretation.

Thematic analysis was employed as the analytical strategy, guided by established procedures of iterative coding, pattern identification, and constant comparison (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis focused on teachers' challenges, available support mechanisms, and adaptive instructional strategies within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

To ensure research trustworthiness, several strategies were implemented, including triangulation across interviews and document analysis, member checking to confirm interpretive accuracy, and maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions, in line with the criteria of credibility and dependability in qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 & Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants' identities were kept confidential, and both ethical approval and informed consent were secured prior to data collection.

Results and Discussion

Results

Three new teachers' experiences implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in public school were investigated in this study using thematic analysis. Three key themes emerged from the examination of learning materials and semi-structured interview data:

1. Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Table 1.
Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Sub-theme	Core Finding	Narrative Quotation
Limited technical knowledge	Educators do not possess the necessary skills to develop differentiated lesson plans.	“I’m not really sure how to modify the material for students with varying abilities.”
Inadequate facilities	Classrooms are missing crucial resources like projectors and laboratories.	“We don’t even have a projector, so I rely solely on the whiteboard for everything.”
Passive learning habits	Students are used to a one-sided, teacher-led approach to learning.	“They’re not accustomed to being asked questions; they prefer to remain silent.”

Table Description:

Table 1 outlines the primary obstacles encountered by novice teachers when trying to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. The sub-themes were derived from interview responses and are reinforced by direct quotes from the participants. These insights emphasize the technical, infrastructural, and pedagogical challenges that hinder effective implementation of the curriculum.

2. Support Systems

Table 2.
Support Systems Utilized by New Teachers

Sub-Theme	Core Finding	Narrative Quotation
Use of digital platforms	Educators utilize the Merdeka Mengajar platform for resources and self-development.	“I frequently check Merdeka Mengajar for teaching examples or inspiration.”
Peer support through communities	Teachers participate in discussion groups for informal exchanges and advice.	“At times, we chat in WhatsApp groups about how others create their lesson plans.”
Lack of structured guidance	There is an absence of formal mentorship or coaching within the school.	“No one really provides step-by-step guidance. We mostly try to learn independently.”

Table Description:

Table 2 highlights the types of support systems accessed by novice teachers while implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Although digital platforms and peer communities provide assistance, the absence of formal mentoring or institutional support remains a major challenge.

The most accessible form of support for novice teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is through digital tools and informal communities. Effective Teaching Techniques

Table 3.
Effective Teaching Techniques Used by New Teachers

Sub-Theme	Core Finding	Narrative Quotation
Task modification	Teachers adapt tasks to suit varying student abilities.	“For students who struggle, I give simpler tasks, while others get extension activities.”
Use of multimedia	Teachers incorporate videos to engage students.	“Sometimes I use short YouTube videos to help explain the material more clearly.”
Flexible grouping	Students are grouped based on learning needs and performance.	“I try to mix students by their level, so the stronger ones can help the others.”

Assessment-based planning	Lesson plans are developed based on initial student assessment results.	“I check their understanding first, then plan the next activities according to the results.”
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Table Description:

Table 3 presents the various instructional strategies employed by novice teachers to meet students' diverse needs. Despite limited experience and resources, they show creativity in modifying tasks, utilizing media, grouping students flexibly, and basing lesson plans on initial assessments.

Discussion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the school level is not without challenges, especially for novice teachers. One of the main obstacles they face is the difficulty in implementing differentiated learning. Teachers admit that they do not yet have sufficient technical competence to design lesson plans that can accommodate the diversity of students' abilities, interests, and learning styles. As stated by one informant, *“I am still confused about how to modify the material for students with different abilities.”* This finding is in line with research conducted by Setiyadi et al. (2025), which states that most teachers do not yet have the pedagogical skills necessary to develop learning models that are adaptive to the individual needs of students.

In addition to technical limitations, infrastructure and facilities also pose significant barriers. Many schools, especially those in areas with limited budgets, lack adequate supporting facilities such as projectors, proper lighting, and laboratories to support the learning process. One teacher remarked, *“We don't even have a projector, so I rely solely on the blackboard for all explanations”*. This statement reinforces the findings of Azzahra et al. (2025), who highlight that inadequate infrastructure is one of the main obstacles to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. In the same context, Yudistira et al. (2025), also identify that the lack of physical facilities in the school environment is a crucial challenge in driving the learning transformation envisioned by this curriculum. The paradigm shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning also poses its own challenges. Many students still tend to be passive in the learning process. This poses a challenge for teachers in creating an interactive and participatory classroom environment. One teacher stated, *“They are not used to being asked questions or participating in discussions; they usually just remain silent.”* This phenomenon is supported by the findings of Amalia & Haryadi (2025), who concluded that the long-standing one-way learning pattern makes it difficult for teachers to build meaningful interactions in the classroom. Furthermore, Maulidin et al. (2025), emphasize that changing learning habits requires a gradual approach and consistent psychosocial support to enable students to adapt and actively engage in the learning process.

New teachers who have begun implementing the Merdeka Curriculum have demonstrated their adaptability by applying various learning strategies tailored to the characteristics of their students. One notable approach is the adjustment of assignments based on the ability level of the students. One teacher stated, *“For students who are struggling, I give them simpler assignments. But for those who already understand, I challenge them with additional assignments.”* This strategy exemplifies the concrete implementation of differentiated instruction aimed at accommodating students' individual

learning needs (Suriyah et al., 2024). In addition, the use of digital media such as educational videos from YouTube is also widely used as a supporting tool to explain complex concepts while increasing learning motivation. One respondent revealed, "Sometimes I use short videos from YouTube so that students can understand the material more easily, especially abstract concepts." This approach not only helps convey the material visually but also engages students' interest in learning more actively (Purwanti et al., 2024 & Shobah et al., 2025).

Flexible grouping strategies are also being implemented, where students are grouped based on their level of understanding or learning style. This encourages a collaborative learning environment, as one teacher explained, "*I group students based on their understanding. Usually, those who understand better can help their peers.*" This practice demonstrates an effort to create mutually supportive interactions in the learning process (Sulaiman et al., 2024). In addition to these strategies, teachers also develop lesson plans based on the results of initial assessments conducted before learning activities begin. In this way, the materials and methods used can be tailored to the students' readiness. One teacher explained, "*Before creating the lesson plan, I usually look at the results of their initial assignments first, so I know who already understands and who needs more help.*" This approach reflects the use of assessment data as a basis for designing targeted learning (Hidayat et al., 2024).

The Merdeka Mengajar platform is the main reference for finding teaching materials, learning videos, and online training that can be accessed independently. One respondent said, "*I often visit Merdeka Mengajar, usually to find inspiration or examples of lesson plans from other teachers.*" This statement indicates that the platform has become an important tool for teachers in enhancing their professional capacity. This aligns with Kusuma (2024), findings, which state that the use of Merdeka Mengajar has proven effective in strengthening teachers' understanding of differentiated and project-based learning.

Additionally, informal support from peers through online discussion groups like WhatsApp plays a significant role in teachers' adaptation to the new curriculum. One teacher said, "*Sometimes we discuss in the WhatsApp group, asking how other colleagues prepare lesson plans or assess student projects.*" Such interactions serve as a practical and contextual means of sharing experiences. According to Haq (2024), communication among teachers through digital forums contributes to the creation of a collaborative learning environment, even though it is not yet officially facilitated by educational institutions.

However, the absence of a formal mentoring system at the school level remains a real obstacle. Most teachers admit that they do not receive direct technical guidance in developing teaching materials in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. One teacher even said, "*There is no special mentoring at school. Usually, we learn on our own or ask questions if there are those who understand better.*" This statement highlights the importance of more systematic institutional intervention emphasize that structured and sustained mentoring is essential to support the successful implementation of the curriculum, particularly for teachers who are still in the early stages of their careers (Prastikawati et al., 2024).

In general, although still in the early stages and not yet widespread, novice teachers have shown initiative and creativity in adapting learning strategies aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. This is evident in lesson plans that begin to incorporate diagnostic assessment elements, differentiated learning, and the contextual use of digital media. According to these results, new teachers continue to encounter conceptual and technical difficulties when attempting to comprehend and apply the Merdeka Curriculum. In keeping with the findings of Reza et al., (2023), which demonstrate that many teachers are unable to develop teaching modules because they do not fully understand the learning process, challenges in converting learning outcomes into teaching practices are evident.

This problem is made worse by inadequate school facilities. According to Astuti et al. (2024), despite project-based learning and technology being essential components of Merdeka Curriculum, schools in underdeveloped areas find it difficult to adopt this practice. In this study, learning that should have been dynamic became rigid and out of line with curriculum expectations due to poor classroom conditions and lack of instructional aids.

However, teachers' inventiveness in modifying resources demonstrates significant promise for curriculum implementation. Based on preliminary assessments, teachers create lesson plans and attempt to come up with a range of approaches to suit the needs of their students. This supports the findings of Suryati & Ratih (2023), who found that teachers' preparedness to design and modify lesson despite time and resource constraints plays a major role in the success of differentiated learning.

Teachers' inventiveness, however, cannot be disregarded. Systemic support is required in the form of organized instruction, ongoing oversight, and the supply of suitable facilities. Since teachers are the primary implementers in the classroom, the Merdeka Curriculum as a progressive idea will only be successful if it tailored to the actual circumstances in the field. Therefore, it can be said that the balance between infrastructure readiness institutional support, and individual competence is essential for new teachers to successfully implement the Merdeka Curriculum. The curriculum's idealism won't be fully realized in the classroom without this synergy.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by novice English teachers in Indonesian public schools revealed a complex interplay of challenges and creative responses. Despite facing limited technical knowledge, inadequate school infrastructure, and passive student learning habits, the teachers demonstrated adaptability through differentiated instruction, multimedia use, flexible grouping, and assessment-based planning. While digital platforms and peer communities offered some support, the lack of formal mentoring highlighted a critical gap in institutional guidance. Therefore, the successful realization of the Merdeka Curriculum requires synergy between teacher competence, infrastructure readiness, and structured institutional support. These findings emphasize the need for practical, context-sensitive strategies to empower new teachers in navigating curriculum reform effectively.

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