

## INNOVATION AND CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING WITHIN THE *MERDEKA BELAJAR* FRAMEWORK

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the imperative for innovation in English Language Teaching (ELT) within the framework of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) curriculum in Indonesia. The background underscores the transformative nature of the educational landscape due to the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy, necessitating adaptation and innovation from English language teachers. The aim of this research is to bridge the gap in literature by examining how teachers respond to the policy, identifying innovations, exploring challenges, and providing recommendations. Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, data was systematically gathered from reputable sources and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal a pressing need for innovative teaching practices to align with the learner-centered approach advocated by the *Merdeka Belajar* policy. Despite the opportunities presented, challenges such as resistance to change, limited resources, and cultural barriers hinder implementation. The study contributes to the literature by providing insights into the innovative practices adopted by teachers and highlighting the challenges they face. Recommendations include focusing on professional development and addressing institutional and cultural constraints. In conclusion, this research underscores the critical need for ongoing innovation in English language teaching and calls for collective efforts to overcome challenges and maximize the benefits of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum.

**Keywords:** Educational Landscape, English Language Teaching (ELT), *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, Teachers' Innovation, Teaching's Challenges.

### INTRODUCTION

The background of this research encompasses the intricate dynamics of English language teaching in Indonesia amidst the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) policy (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). Since the inception of this policy, significant changes have occurred in the educational landscape of Indonesia, demanding innovation and adaptation from English language teachers in responding to these new demands (Suryadi, 2021).

English language teaching is no longer perceived solely as knowledge transfer but also as developing critical thinking, creativity, and innovation skills (Richards, 2019). Although some studies have examined the impact of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in various fields (Anwar, 2020), no specific research has investigated how this policy affects

English language teaching practices in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by examining how English language teachers in Indonesia respond to the *Merdeka Belajar* policy, identifying the innovations they employ, and exploring the challenges they face in the process (Suharmanto & Fatmawati, 2020).

The *Merdeka Belajar* policy, introduced in 2019, aims to provide more autonomy to schools and teachers, allowing them to design their own curriculum and teaching methods (Hadi, 2020). This shift towards a more learner-centred approach emphasizes the importance of personalized learning experiences tailored to the needs and interests of students (Sari & Sunarta, 2021).

This policy encourages teachers to adopt innovative and creative methods to engage students and enhance their language learning experience in the context of English language teaching (Darma, 2019). However, while the policy offers opportunities for innovation, it also presents challenges for teachers, such as the need to develop new teaching strategies, manage diverse learning needs, and navigate the complexities of implementing a personalized approach within the constraints of the existing education system (Sundari et al., 2021).

Previous research on English language teaching in Indonesia primarily focused on teacher training, curriculum development, and language proficiency (Widyastuti & Prayitno, 2018). While these studies have provided valuable insights into the state of English language education in the country, there remains a lack of research specifically addressing the impact of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy on English language teaching practices (Adnyani & Supardi, 2021). By filling this gap, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive understanding of how English language teachers in Indonesia adapt to the changing educational landscape brought about by the *Merdeka Belajar* policy (Adhani et al., 2020).

Moreover, this research aims to shed light on the innovative practices implemented by English language teachers in response to the *Merdeka Belajar* policy (Saputra, 2021). By identifying and documenting these practices, the study seeks to showcase teachers' creativity and resourcefulness in meeting their students' diverse learning needs (Syahputra & Abidin, 2020). Additionally, the research will explore the challenges English language teachers face in implementing these innovative practices, including resource constraints, institutional support, and cultural factors (Setiawan & Fitriani, 2022).

In terms of its novelty, this research represents one of the first attempts to systematically investigate the impact of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy on English language teaching in Indonesia (Astuti et al., 2021). By providing empirical evidence and insights from the field, the study aims to inform policy-makers, educators, and other stakeholders about the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing learner-centred approaches in English language education (Wahyuni, 2020). Furthermore, the findings of this research are expected to have practical implications for teacher training programs, curriculum development initiatives, and educational policy reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of English language teaching in Indonesia (Rahayu et al., 2019).

The significance of this research extends beyond the context of English language teaching in Indonesia to contribute to the broader field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) (Hartono & Fitriyani, 2020). By examining the *Merdeka Belajar* policy's implementation within Indonesia's specific cultural and educational context, this study offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of implementing learner-centred approaches in diverse linguistic and cultural settings (Wulandari & Rahmawati, 2020). Furthermore, by highlighting the innovative practices and strategies employed by English language teachers in Indonesia, the research adds to the growing body of knowledge on effective pedagogical approaches in TEFL, with potential implications for educators and researchers worldwide.

## METHODS

This study applied descriptive qualitative, which involved a meticulous process to identify and select relevant literature that aligns with the research objectives. Literature was systematically sourced from reputable academic databases, journals, books, and other pertinent sources. A set of predefined keywords associated with each research area was utilized for comprehensive searches to ensure thorough coverage. These carefully chosen keywords aimed to capture the essence of the study and encompass key concepts related to the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, which demands teaching innovation and challenges in implementing teaching innovations within the curriculum.

After identifying relevant literature, data extraction was conducted to gather pertinent information, methodologies, and findings relevant to each research area. This process involved synthesizing key concepts, theories, and empirical evidence from the literature. Thematic analysis was employed to discern common themes, patterns, and discrepancies across the literature concerning the demands and challenges of innovating teaching based on the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. The research presented a literature review to invite scholars to understand the pedagogical implementation, and the process culminated in presenting recommendations for future research.

Several validation measures were implemented throughout the research process to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Peer review, member checking, discussion, and triangulation of data sources were employed to validate the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the literature. By soliciting feedback from peers and experts in the field and cross-referencing data from multiple sources, efforts were made to enhance the credibility and robustness of the findings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Need for English Teaching Innovation in *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum

English language teaching in Indonesia has undergone significant transformations with the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) curriculum. This policy shift emphasizes the need for innovative teaching practices to cater to the diverse learning needs of students and to align with the goals of personalized learning

experiences (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

The traditional methods of English language instruction, which often relied on rote memorization and teacher-centered approaches, are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of the modern education system. Instead, there is a growing recognition of the importance of innovation in teaching to foster critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students (Richards, 2019).

Research has highlighted the benefits of innovative teaching methods in enhancing student engagement and motivation in the language learning process (Darma, 2019). By incorporating interactive activities, technology integration, and project-based learning approaches into their teaching, English language teachers can create dynamic and stimulating learning environments that cater to the diverse needs and interests of students (Anwar, 2020).

Moreover, the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum encourages teachers to adopt a learner-centered approach, where students take an active role in their own learning process. This requires English teachers to innovate and adapt their teaching methods to facilitate student-centered activities, collaborative learning experiences, and authentic language use opportunities (Sari & Sunarta, 2021).

Anwar (2020) conducted a comprehensive study exploring the impact of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy on English language teaching practices in Indonesian schools. The findings revealed a pressing need for teachers to innovate their pedagogical approaches to align with the objectives of the new curriculum. Teachers recognized the importance of incorporating interactive and student-centered activities to enhance engagement and facilitate meaningful learning experiences.

Similarly, Sari and Sunarta (2021) conducted research examining the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in English language teaching. Their study emphasized the need for teachers to adopt innovative strategies that promote critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration among students. The findings highlighted the role of technology integration, project-based learning, and real-world applications in fostering a dynamic learning environment conducive to student-centered education.

Darma (2019) delved into the innovations in English language teaching strategies necessitated by the *Merdeka Belajar* policy. The study identified a shift towards experiential learning, where students are actively engaged in authentic language use situations. English teachers were found to be exploring innovative methods such as flipped classrooms, gamification, and task-based learning to meet the diverse needs of learners and enhance language acquisition.

## **Challenges in Implementing English Teaching Innovation in *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum**

However, implementing innovative teaching practices in the context of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum comes with its challenges. English language teachers need to develop new pedagogical strategies, embrace technology as a tool for learning, and create

inclusive learning environments that accommodate diverse learners (Sundari et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers may face resistance to change from institutional structures, limited access to resources and training opportunities, and cultural barriers that hinder the adoption of innovative practices (Setiawan & Fitriani, 2022).

In a study by Sundari et al. (2021), the challenges faced by English language teachers in navigating the complexities of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy were examined. One of the key challenges identified was the need for teachers to overcome resistance to change and traditional teaching practices. The study underscored the importance of professional development initiatives and ongoing support to empower teachers to embrace innovation and adapt to the evolving educational landscape.

Setiawan and Fitriani (2022) investigated the challenges in implementing innovative practices among English language teachers within the *Merdeka Belajar* framework. The study highlighted issues such as limited resources, institutional barriers, and cultural constraints that hindered the adoption of innovative teaching methods. Despite these challenges, the study emphasized the imperative for teachers to innovate and adapt their practices to ensure the effective implementation of the curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

Previous research underscores the critical imperative for English teachers to revolutionize their teaching methodologies in response to the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum necessitates a fundamental shift in English language teaching towards heightened innovation and creativity. Through the embracement of innovative strategies and pedagogical approaches, educators can craft vibrant and interactive learning environments conducive to student-centered education, thereby fostering meaningful language acquisition experiences.

Moving forward, the weaknesses identified in this research should be our collective focus. Future researchers should delve deeper into this scope, elucidating the challenges encountered in its implementation within educational settings and proffering solutions to overcome these obstacles. The outcomes of this research are poised to serve as a reference point for teachers and stakeholders alike, encouraging ongoing innovation and the formulation of policies tailored to the educational context in Indonesia, particularly in the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction.

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