
The Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Challenges Faced by English Teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya

*Munasikin*¹

*Natalina Asi*²

*Misrita*²

¹ Corresponding author, University of Palangka Raya, Indonesia;
mumunmumun906@gmail.com

² University of Palangka Raya, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explored the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya, focusing on how concept character was integrated, the challenges faced by teachers, and the strategies used to overcome them. The curriculum emphasized student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, and contextual integration. Teachers used methods such as project-based learning, essential material focus, and flexible classroom practices to meet students' diverse needs. However, the implementation process presented several challenges. These included varied student proficiency levels, limited access to teaching materials, difficulty integrating local content, lack of professional development, time constraints, and low student motivation. To investigate this process, a qualitative case study design was employed, involving classroom observations, in-depth interviews with English teachers, and analysis of teaching documents and student work samples. Findings revealed that teachers adopted various pedagogical approaches aligned with the curriculum, including project-based learning, flexible classroom practices, and an emphasis on essential material tailored to students' diverse needs. However, several implementation challenges emerged, such as varying student proficiency levels, limited access to appropriate teaching materials, difficulty in integrating local cultural content, insufficient professional development opportunities, time constraints, and low student motivation.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, English teaching, Merdeka curriculum, project-based learning



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1. Introduction

The Merdeka Curriculum is a transformative national initiative introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbud, 2022) to reform the country's educational paradigm. It aims to shift teaching practices from rigid, exam-oriented approaches toward a flexible, student-centered model that emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, independence, and character development. Unlike traditional curricula, which often rely on uniform instruction and standardization, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages schools and teachers to design learning that is contextual, meaningful, and relevant to students' lives. Key features of this curriculum include project-based learning (PjBL), a focus on essential material mastery, and the integration of local wisdom alongside global perspectives (Andriyanto et al., 2023). At its core, the curriculum promotes the Pancasila Student Profile, which includes values such as faith and devotion, global citizenship, cooperation, critical thinking, creativity, and independence. These character values are not only expected to be taught but to be embedded in everyday learning experiences across subjects, including English.

This study draws on several foundational theories to interpret the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching. The first is Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that students build knowledge actively through experience and social interaction. Constructivist Learning Theory provides a strong theoretical foundation in this research on the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in English classrooms. It validates the shift toward flexible, inclusive, and contextualized learning practices and underscores the importance of social interaction, scaffolding, and cultural relevance in effective teaching. This theory supports the use of collaborative learning and contextual projects, which are central to the Merdeka approach (Simbolon & Fitia, 2023). By engaging in meaningful, real-world tasks, students are expected to internalize not only cognitive knowledge but also moral and civic values—as outlined in the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. This study analyzes how project-based learning, peer teaching, and collaboration help English teachers scaffold learning in a semi-rural context with limited English exposure, highlighting the importance of contextualized, constructivist practices.

Complementing this is Differentiated Instruction Theory (Tomlinson, 2014), which emphasizes that effective teaching must respond to students' diverse needs, interests, learning profiles, and readiness levels. Tomlinson emphasizes that effective instruction must

be responsive to students' readiness levels, learning profiles, interests, and cultural backgrounds. Differentiation involves proactive planning to offer multiple paths for students to access content, engage with learning processes, and demonstrate understanding. In the context of this study, tiered instruction, flexible grouping, and student choice in learning topics are examined as strategies aligned with Tomlinson's principles. For instance, the observed use of multilevel instruction directly reflects differentiation by readiness, where tasks are designed at varying degrees of complexity to suit learners' English proficiency levels. This theory is crucial in the Merdeka Curriculum context, where inclusion and equity are prioritized. English teachers are expected to differentiate their teaching strategies, tasks, and assessments to ensure that every student, regardless of ability or background, has equitable access to learning.

While both theories are discussed conceptually in the introduction, also serve as analytical lenses in interpreting the implementation process: Constructivist Learning Theory will inform the analysis of how social interaction (e.g., peer learning, collaboration) and contextually grounded tasks support student engagement and knowledge construction, especially in a multilingual and culturally rich environment. Differentiated Instruction Theory will guide the interpretation of strategies used to handle classroom diversity, such as tiered tasks, choice-driven projects, and grouping strategies. These approaches will be analyzed to understand how teachers address students' varying levels of English proficiency and diverse learning needs. Both theories guide the analysis: Constructivism explains how peer learning and contextual tasks support engagement, while Differentiated Instruction helps interpret how teachers address diverse student needs. These frameworks reveal how and why certain strategies work—or fall short—in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

This study took place at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya, a nature-based, inclusive junior high school that integrates environmental and cultural values into learning. English instruction aims to build language skills while promoting character and local awareness, aligning with the Merdeka Curriculum. However, challenges such as mixed proficiency levels, limited materials, and insufficient teacher training hinder effective implementation, especially in a semi-rural context.

Despite challenges, English teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam adapted through tiered tasks, peer teaching, digital tools, and local project-based learning. These practices align with Constructivist and Differentiated Instruction theories, supporting inclusive and contextual English teaching which support active, learner-centered, and personalized approaches to education. The study specifically examined how they navigated the challenges of multilevel instruction, addressed the diverse needs of students, and incorporated local content to meet both linguistic and character development goals. In the field of ELT, this setting illustrates the crucial role of localized pedagogical adaptation and teacher effectively implementing the objectives of Indonesia's curriculum transformation.

By addressing these three dimensions—character development, implementation challenges, and teacher-driven solutions—this study seeks to contribute valuable insights into how the Merdeka Curriculum is translated into practice in an ELT context within a unique educational setting.

1.1. Research questions

- 1) To what extent is the concept character of the Merdeka curriculum implemented at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya?
- 2) What challenges are faced by English teachers in implementing Merdeka curriculum in SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya?
- 3) How do the English teachers solve the challenges in implementing Merdeka curriculum in SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya?

2. Method

This study used a qualitative case study approach (Heale & Twycross, 2018) to deeply investigate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching. The setting was SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya, an inclusive and nature-based junior high school that integrates local wisdom (Misrita, et.al, 2024), environmental values, and concept character into its curriculum.

The participants included three English teachers across different grade levels (VII, VIII, and IX). These teachers had experience with the Merdeka Curriculum since its early implementation and were actively involved in lesson planning, project-based instruction, and curriculum adaptation. This study involved three English teachers from SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya who were purposefully selected based on their active involvement in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Each teacher contributed significantly to lesson planning, project-based instruction, and curriculum contextualization. To provide richer context, the following table presents relevant demographic information about the participants:

Table 1. Participants of this study

Participant	Gender	Grade Level(s) Taught	Years of Teaching Experience	Years Implementing Merdeka Curriculum	Role in Curriculum Implementation
Teacher A	Female	VII	8 years	3 years	Lead in project-based learning design
Teacher B	Female	VIII	7 years	3 years	Responsible for contextual material development

Participant	Gender	Grade Level(s) Taught	Years of Teaching Experience	Years Implementing Merdeka Curriculum	Role in Curriculum Implementation
Teacher C	Female	IX	10 years	3 years	Coordinator for lesson planning and assessment

These participants were well-positioned to provide deep insights into the curriculum's implementation, including how they addressed challenges and incorporated concept character into English instruction. Their collective experiences offered a comprehensive view of instructional practices across lower secondary grade levels under the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

2.1. Data collection techniques

2.1.1. Classroom observations

Classroom observations were conducted over a period of three weeks, involving a total of nine observation sessions—three sessions per teacher. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes, amounting to a total of 13.5 hours of classroom observation. These sessions covered teaching across Grades VII, VIII, and IX and aimed to capture the real-time implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within English language classrooms.

The observations were guided by a semi-structured observation checklist, adapted from Misrita et al. (2024), and aligned with the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, including: Student-centered and differentiated instruction, integration of local and cultural content, use of project-based learning (PjBL), promotion of character values (e.g., independence, cooperation, and critical thinking), classroom interactions and student engagement, and teacher flexibility and responsiveness to student needs.

This instrument allowed for both descriptive field notes and focused coding on specific pedagogical behaviors and curriculum elements. Observational data were triangulated with interview and document analysis results to enhance validity and provide a well-rounded understanding of classroom practices.

2.1.2. Semi-structured interviews

Interviews with the three teachers explored their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, how they designed lessons, addressed classroom diversity, managed assessments, and perceived student responses.

2.1.3. Document analysis

To complement the classroom observations and interviews, various documents were reviewed to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum's character values and pedagogical goals were embedded in everyday teaching practices at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya. A total

of 18 documents were purposively selected based on their relevance to English language instruction and curriculum implementation. These included:

Table 2. Document type analysis

Document Type	Quantity Reviewed	Selection Criteria	Focus of Analysis
Lesson Plans (RPP)	6	Developed by the observed English teachers for Grades VII, VIII, and IX	Integration of character values, differentiation strategies, and PjBL structure
Teaching Materials	4	Materials used during observed lessons	Use of local content, student-centered tasks, alignment with Pancasila values
Student Projects	3	Final products from recent PjBL units	Evidence of character development, creativity, contextual relevance
Assessment Rubrics	3	Used for evaluating student performance in projects or presentations	Assessment of soft skills (e.g., collaboration, critical thinking), fairness, clarity
School Policy Documents	2	Documents outlining curriculum implementation and school vision	Institutional support for Merdeka Curriculum values, teacher autonomy, character focus

These documents were analyzed using thematic content analysis, focusing on how well they reflected the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in promoting character education, differentiated learning, project-based instruction, and contextual learning. Findings from the document review were cross-checked with observational and interview data to ensure consistency and deepen the understanding of curriculum implementation practices.

2.2. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which consists of three concurrent and iterative components: data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions.

During *Data Condensation* phase, all raw data—primarily from teacher interviews, classroom observations, and relevant documents—were transcribed and organized. Initial coding was performed inductively by reading through transcripts line-by-line to identify recurring words, phrases, and ideas. Descriptive codes such as “lack of materials,” “local context,” “peer assessment challenges,” and “teacher isolation” were assigned to relevant segments of text. These codes were refined through several rounds of reading, resulting in a set of focused codes grouped into broader categories (e.g., instructional practices, curriculum implementation challenges, formative assessment strategies).

Data Display organized into visual matrices and tables, allowing for systematic comparison across participants and data sources. For example, a matrix was developed to align teacher responses with specific themes such as resource availability, assessment practices, and professional development. This visual display facilitated the identification of patterns and outliers, helping to clarify connections among different aspects of curriculum implementation.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification, that emerging themes were synthesized from the displayed data and continuously compared with the raw data to verify accuracy. Themes such as “limited resources,” “integration of local context,” “professional development gaps,” and “formative assessment difficulties” were derived through this process. Triangulation was achieved by cross-checking interview data with observational notes and teaching documents (e.g., lesson plans, rubrics), enhancing the credibility and confirmability of the findings. Member checking was also employed with selected participants to ensure that the interpretations accurately represented their experiences.

The use of Miles and Huberman’s model allowed the researcher to iteratively refine codes, identify core themes, and validate findings through systematic comparison and triangulation, ultimately leading to a robust understanding of the challenges and strategies in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in an under-resourced school context. The methodology section provides the information, allowing the reader to critically evaluate a study’s overall validity and reliability. Therefore, it requires a clear and precise description of how a research design was done and the rationale for why specific procedures were chosen.

Additionally, this structure should describe the materials or subjects involved in the study, explain how the materials were prepared for the study, describe the research protocol, explain how measurements were made and what calculations were performed, and state which statistical tests and specific theory(s) were used to analyze the data. Once all elements of the methods section are written, subsequent drafts should focus on presenting those elements as clearly and logically as possible. The description of preparations, measurements, and protocol should be organized chronologically.

All participating teachers were provided with a clear and detailed informed consent form, which explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all three participants prior to the commencement of interviews and observations.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in place of real names, and any identifying information related to individuals or the school was removed from the final report. All data, including observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents, were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. These ethical measures ensured that

participants were treated with respect and that their rights and dignity were fully protected throughout the research process.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings presented based on data collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis conducted at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya. A total of four English teachers were interviewed, focusing on their experiences, challenges, and strategies in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure clarity and comfort, then translated for analysis. Classroom observations were carried out over a period of two weeks to gain firsthand insight into teaching practices, student engagement, and curriculum enactment. Additionally, relevant documents—such as lesson plans, students’ project work, and assessment rubrics—were analyzed to triangulate the data and enrich the interpretation. Direct quotes from teachers are integrated into the findings to provide empirical grounding and amplify their professional voices in this study.

3.1. Implementation of the Merdeka curriculum

At SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya, English teachers actively implemented the Merdeka Curriculum by adopting Project-Based Learning (PjBL), an approach that emphasizes student-centered instruction, collaborative learning, and real-life application. In accordance with Wulandari and Nawangsari (2024:41), PjBL encourages students to engage in learning experiences that are not only relevant to the subject matter but also connected to their everyday lives and local cultural context. This method aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum’s emphasis on flexibility, creativity, and contextual learning. Here is the description from classroom observation.

3.1.1. Project-based learning (PjBL)

Teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam designed and facilitated projects that allowed students to explore English through authentic tasks embedded in local values, environmental awareness, and character-building themes. According to Eswaran (2024), PjBL fosters both language competence and 21st-century skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, and communication. At this school, students were not passive recipients of knowledge but active creators of content. Some of the notable classroom applications included:

1. *Creating Flyers on Healthy Lifestyles*: Students researched topics related to personal hygiene, balanced diets, and mental well-being. They then designed English-language health awareness flyers, which were displayed in the school environment. This activity helped students develop writing, vocabulary, and grammar skills while promoting public health literacy.
2. *Developing Multimedia Presentations on Local Traditions*: Inspired by Ratri et al. (2024), students used tools like PowerPoint or Canva to present Dayak cultural

practices, traditional festivals, or local ceremonies in English. These projects nurtured cultural pride, improved speaking and presentation skills, and encouraged digital literacy.

3. *Group Discussions and Mini-Campaigns on Environmental Issues*: Students conducted English discussions and debates on topics such as deforestation, river pollution, and plastic waste in Kalimantan. The outcomes included posters, video campaigns, and class exhibitions that reflected environmental awareness and character values like responsibility and mutual cooperation (gotong royong).

Throughout these projects, teachers acted as facilitators and mentors. They provided scaffolding, rubrics, and feedback, guiding students in both language use and soft skill development. Assessment was conducted formatively through observations, peer feedback, and reflection journals, in line with the Merdeka Curriculum's holistic vision. Moreover, these project-based activities were often interdisciplinary, integrating science, civic education, and local knowledge with English language learning. This integration allowed students to see the relevance of English not just as a school subject, but as a tool for communication, advocacy, and personal expression. In conclusion, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through PjBL at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya demonstrated that when learning is contextualized and purposeful, it fosters deeper understanding, meaningful engagement, and the embodiment of character values alongside academic growth. Teachers implemented Merdeka through Project-Based Learning (PjBL), emphasizing real-life relevance (Wulandari & Nawangsari, 2024:41) and local themes. The teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam applied Merdeka Curriculum principles through learning activity.



Figure 1. Learning Activity

3.1.2. Local context integration

One of the distinctive features of SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya is its commitment to contextualizing learning materials within local cultural and environmental realities. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages this contextual learning approach, where lesson content is

adapted to reflect students' surroundings, traditions, and community values. This practice not only makes learning more relevant and engaging but also supports the preservation of local wisdom and strengthens students' sense of identity and belonging. According to Misrita et al. (2024), local content integration enhances students' comprehension, motivation, and cultural pride. At SMP Sahabat Alam, English lessons frequently included themes such as:

1. *Panjat Pinang*: A traditional Indonesian Independence Day competition where students learned descriptive vocabulary, wrote recount texts about the event, or role-played participants' experiences in English.
2. *Dayak Ceremonies*: Students explored cultural practices such as Tiwah or Manyanggar, writing essays, crafting presentation scripts, or translating ritual explanations into English. These activities helped students relate abstract language structures (like past tense and sequencing) to tangible cultural experiences.
3. *Conservation of Kalimantan's Forests*: Learners discussed real issues such as deforestation, orangutan protection, and eco-tourism. They created posters, flyers, or short persuasive texts in English to raise environmental awareness.

These activities not only taught vocabulary and grammar in meaningful contexts but also encouraged cross-curricular connections with Social Studies, Science, and Civic Education (PPKn).

3.1.3. Concept character

The Merdeka Curriculum is aligned with the development of the Pancasila Student Profile, which defines the ideal values and competencies of Indonesian learners. At SMP Sahabat Alam, concept character is not a separate subject (Figure 2) but integrated across lessons, especially in English learning projects and group activities.



Figure 2. Student Concept Character

Through Project-Based Learning (PjBL), students had opportunities to practice and internalize key values such as:

1. *Teamwork (Gotong Royong)*. In group tasks—such as creating flyers, conducting surveys, or preparing presentations—students learned to collaborate, divide responsibilities, and support one another. For example, in a project on environmental conservation, one student might write content, another design the visuals, and another act as the group presenter—all in English.
2. *Respect and Tolerance*. When discussing local cultures and traditions, students were taught to value diversity within their community. Teachers guided discussions in a way that honored each student's background. English role-plays and presentations often required active listening, polite disagreement, and use of respectful language—reinforcing social harmony.
3. *Responsibility*. Students were accountable for their group roles, deadlines, and the quality of their English output. They also reflected on their own learning through journaling or self-assessment, promoting self-awareness and personal responsibility.
4. *Integrity*. Teachers emphasized honesty in group work, respecting intellectual property, and giving credit to sources—especially in projects involving research and reporting.
5. *Critical Thinking and Creativity*. Tasks like writing persuasive essays on saving Kalimantan's forests or proposing eco-tourism ideas in English encouraged independent thinking and innovation. Students were asked to solve real-world problems through English, merging language skills with critical life competencies.
6. *Faith and Moral Values*. Many lessons included themes on gratitude, caring for the environment, and helping others. These were embedded in reading texts, writing prompts, and classroom discussions.

By embedding local context and concept character into English learning, SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya not only aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's goals but also cultivates well-rounded students who are linguistically competent, morally grounded, and culturally rooted. This integrated approach reinforces the belief that language learning is not only about communication, but also about shaping identity, values, and civic responsibility.

3.1.4. Differentiation

Differentiation is a central component of the Merdeka Curriculum, aimed at ensuring that every student—regardless of their background, ability, or learning profile—has access to meaningful and achievable learning experiences. At SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya, English teachers applied differentiation by modifying tasks, content complexity, groupings, and assessment methods to accommodate students' varying levels of proficiency, readiness, and learning needs. In practice, teachers designed activities and assessments with tiered levels of difficulty, enabling all students to engage with the same topic but at levels suited to their language abilities (Table 1).

Table 3. Students' English activity in differentiated classroom

Task Type	Advanced Student	Intermediate Student	Struggling Student
Writing Task	Full paragraph with transitions and vocabulary variety	Basic paragraph with few errors	Sentence frames with key vocabulary
Speaking Task	Formal oral presentation using PowerPoint	Group discussion using simple notes	Role-play using dialogue template
Reading Task	Summarizes main idea and gives personal reflection	Answers comprehension questions	Matches words with pictures or fills blanks
Assessment Focus	Content depth, fluency, structure	Accuracy, idea flow, participation	Basic understanding, effort, growth

This aligns with Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Theory (2014), which emphasizes adapting teaching based on student readiness, interest, and learning profiles. Teachers designed projects that integrated language development with Pancasila-based character values, using content rooted in local culture and real-life issues. These tasks promoted collaboration, problem-solving, and student voice.

School Flyers: Promoted responsibility and creativity while improving vocabulary, writing structure, and persuasive skills. *Multimedia Presentations*: Reinforced teamwork, confidence, and digital literacy, with content themes like Dayak ceremonies, Independence Day, or environmental campaigns. *Role-Plays*: Simulated real-world situations (e.g., asking for directions, giving health advice, or presenting cultural facts) to enhance communication, empathy, and ethical thinking.

Students created school flyers, multimedia presentations, and participated in role-plays that reflected both English language use and concept character. The curriculum promoted collaboration, critical thinking, and communication, with content often based on local traditions, environmental issues, and health awareness campaigns. To support struggling students fairly, assessment methods were also differentiated, focusing on progress, effort, and skill development rather than uniform achievement. Below is a simplified representation of how assessments were adapted.

The impact of Differentiation was inclusion: every student could participate meaningfully regardless of proficiency level. Confidence: struggling learners gained confidence and engagement through achievable tasks. Challenge: advanced students remained challenged and were sometimes used as peer mentors (Figure 3). Character Growth: students practiced responsibility, teamwork, and empathy by supporting one another.



Figure 3. Different Assessment with Struggling Students

Through differentiated instruction and assessment, English teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam ensured that the Merdeka Curriculum's goals—personalized learning, character development, and contextual relevance—were realized. By offering varied levels of task complexity and embracing student diversity, teachers created an inclusive and empowering learning environment that honored both academic success and personal growth.

3.2. Challenges faced by teachers

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya revealed several practical challenges experienced by English teachers. While the curriculum promotes contextual learning, creativity, and differentiated instruction, its execution in a real-world school environment faced limitations. The following are the core challenges:

3.2.1. Limited resources and materials

One of the most significant challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya was the limited availability of relevant and contextualized teaching materials, particularly for English language instruction. Unlike other schools that adopt nationally standardized textbooks and teacher handbooks, SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya operates without these conventional resources. As explained by one of the English teachers:

At SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya, there are no teacher guidebooks like those used in other schools that follow official textbooks. As a result, students also do not have standard textbooks as their primary learning source. Instead, teachers and students rely on alternative learning resources, such as English books from the library and materials from the internet. (Teacher interview)

This lack of structured guidance posed a considerable burden on teachers, who had to independently curate or create instructional materials that aligned not only with the curriculum's competencies but also with the students' interests and the local cultural context. Many available English textbooks were developed to support the national curriculum but did

not integrate local content, such as environmental topics relevant to Kalimantan or the socio-historical background of Palangka Raya.



Figure 4. Students' Activity in Library

This created a disconnect between the materials and students lived experiences, which is contrary to the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes contextual and meaningful learning.

To address this gap, teachers often turned to digital platforms and online communities for support. One teacher noted:

Nowadays, access to learning materials is becoming easier with digital platforms like Cakap Guru.id. Teachers can ask about effective teaching methods and even request assistance in creating teaching modules. (Teacher interview)

While these digital tools offered valuable support, they were not without limitations. Not all teachers were equally proficient in digital literacy, and inconsistent internet connectivity in some areas further hindered access. Moreover, creating customized teaching materials from scratch or adapting online resources to fit local needs demanded significant time and effort, often beyond what a typical teaching schedule allowed.

The limited resources also affected the implementation of diverse teaching strategies envisioned by the Merdeka Curriculum, such as project-based learning, integrated literacy practices, and authentic assessment. For instance, the lack of adequate listening materials and reading texts restricted students' exposure to authentic English usage. This, in turn, affected their engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers found it challenging to provide varied and stimulating content that could sustain student motivation while meeting curriculum standards.

In summary, the scarcity of suitable and localized English teaching materials emerged as a critical barrier to fully realizing the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya. It required teachers to be resourceful and innovative, but also placed

considerable strain on their time and energy. Without systemic support in the form of localized textbooks, digital infrastructure, and professional development, the burden of curriculum implementation fell disproportionately on individual educators.

3.2.2. Integration of local context in English lessons

A key principle of the Merdeka Curriculum is the promotion of contextualized and meaningful learning. This approach encourages teachers to connect lesson content with students' everyday lives, cultural heritage, and the local environment. In the English language classroom, this means designing activities and materials that reflect local realities while simultaneously developing language skills.

At SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya, teachers made deliberate efforts to implement this approach. As one teacher described:

For example, students learn English through relevant topics such as healthy food, sports, and hygiene. They also learn through projects, such as creating posters about healthy eating habits in English. (Teacher interview)

These learning activities not only aligned with students lived experiences but also allowed them to engage with the language in practical and creative ways. Project-based tasks such as poster-making or group presentations helped foster collaboration, critical thinking, and the ability to use English for real communication.

However, despite the positive intent, teachers faced several challenges in meaningfully integrating local content into English instruction. One significant issue was the mismatch between students' English proficiency levels and the complexity of the local themes being introduced. While topics such as traditional Dayak customs, local environmental issues, or regional history were rich in cultural value, translating them into simple English that students could understand and work with required substantial pedagogical adaptation.

Additionally, many teachers expressed uncertainty about how to incorporate such content within the framework of language learning objectives. For example, a lesson on traditional food or customs needed to be carefully scaffolded with appropriate vocabulary, grammar structures, and relevant communicative functions. Without sufficient training in content-based instruction or task-based learning methods, some educators struggled to bridge the gap between content and language development.

Another limitation was the lack of localized teaching materials that modeled how to contextualize English learning. Teachers often had to develop their own worksheets or visual aids to introduce culturally relevant themes. While this fostered creativity, it also increased their workload and sometimes led to inconsistencies in instructional quality across classrooms.

Moreover, linguistic limitations among students posed additional constraints. Many students came from rural or under-resourced backgrounds with limited prior exposure to English. As a result, lessons that incorporated local topics often had to be simplified to basic vocabulary and sentence structures, which risked superficial engagement with the content. Teachers needed to strike a delicate balance between ensuring language comprehensibility and preserving the cultural depth of the material.

In spite of these challenges, the efforts to integrate local context into English lessons represented a valuable pedagogical shift under the Merdeka Curriculum. Students were encouraged to see English not as a detached or foreign subject, but as a tool to express their identity, share their experiences, and engage with the world around them. With stronger institutional support, teacher training in content and language integrated learning, and access to model resources, such practices have the potential to significantly enhance both language learning and cultural awareness.

3.2.3. *Lack of professional development*

One of the critical barriers to the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya was the limited access to continuous professional development (PD) opportunities for English teachers. The curriculum demands significant pedagogical shifts—particularly toward differentiated instruction, project-based learning (PBL), student autonomy, and the integration of digital tools into instruction. However, many teachers found themselves unprepared to meet these new expectations.

As one teacher remarked:

So far, my teaching experience comes from my background in English education. I have participated in several activities organized by the Department of Education, but I have never collaborated with other teacher communities. (Teacher interview)

This response highlights two major concerns: the insufficiency of formal training aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum and the absence of collaborative professional learning networks. Many teachers relied primarily on their undergraduate education and limited in-service training, which often did not cover the new curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning or 21st-century skills. A summary of specific challenges faced by teachers is presented in the following table.

Table 4. *Specific challenges faced by teachers*

Challenge	Description	Example	Impact
Limited training	Teachers struggle to design project-based lessons	Relying on traditional methods	Low engagement

Challenge	Description	Example	Impact
Difficulty in differentiated instruction	Lack of strategies for multilevel classes	Mixed ability classrooms	Unequal learning
Limited tech use	Teachers hesitant to use digital tools	Avoiding platforms like Google Classroom	Missed opportunities
Isolation	Lack of collaboration with other schools	No sharing of best practices	Stagnant teaching practices
Time constraints	Limited time for PD activities	Unable to attend workshops	Slow adaptation to change

Teachers often expressed the need for more structured, ongoing, and collaborative forms of professional development that could help them not only understand the curriculum but also apply it effectively in their unique classroom contexts. Limited training in differentiated instruction and project-based learning led to uniform teaching methods that overlooked students' diverse needs. Challenges such as low digital literacy, lack of access to technology, and professional isolation in rural schools further hindered instructional innovation. To address these issues, structured support through workshops, peer mentoring, and online learning communities is essential to build teacher confidence and ensure successful curriculum implementation.

3.2.4. Challenges with formative assessment

One of the key pedagogical shifts introduced by the Merdeka Curriculum is the emphasis on formative assessment over traditional summative evaluations. Teachers are encouraged to assess students' progress through reflective practices, peer assessment, self-evaluation, and process-focused feedback. However, this transition has presented several challenges at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya, primarily due to the lack of teacher training and students' unfamiliarity with formative practices.

A teacher described their current practice:

In the assessment process, I created my own rubric... Students assess their classmates as well as themselves. (Teacher interview)

While the use of custom rubrics and peer/self-assessment tools shows initiative, in practice, these assessments often fell short of their intended goals. Many students struggled to provide meaningful or constructive feedback. Instead, they resorted to general comments such as "Good job!" or gave inaccurate scores due to low self-esteem or a desire to please their peers.

There is a student who always practices speaking in front of a mirror... But when asked to assess herself, she gave herself a low score. (Teacher interview)

On the other hand, there are also students who give high scores because they find it amusing, even though it may not necessarily meet the indicators.” (Teacher interview)

These examples reveal the emotional and cognitive barriers that students face in accurately evaluating their own or their peers’ work. Some students underestimated themselves, driven by a lack of confidence or fear of appearing boastful, while others overestimated their peers out of friendliness or humor, compromising the reliability of formative data.

Moreover, group-based assessments—a core component of the project-based learning encouraged by the curriculum—posed a particular challenge. Teachers reported difficulty in distinguishing individual student contributions within collaborative tasks, which led to inconsistent or unfair grading. Without clear documentation of roles or individual reflection components, the assessment often failed to capture each student’s actual performance.

Compounding these issues was the lack of professional development in formative assessment strategies. Many teachers were unfamiliar with effective techniques for facilitating peer feedback, designing reflective prompts, or integrating assessment seamlessly into instruction. Consequently, there was an over-reliance on summative testing, particularly toward the end of units or semesters. The table below summarizes key challenges and proposed solutions.

Table 5. Key challenges and proposed solutions

Challenge	Impact	Proposed Solutions
Teacher untrained in formative strategies	Over-reliance on traditional exams	Provide PD on rubric design, formative tools, and feedback models
Time constraints	Limited personalized feedback	Use peer-assisted feedback or short individual conferences
Student inexperience	Superficial, biased, or inaccurate feedback	Conduct scaffolded training in self- and peer-assessment practices
Difficulty in group assessment	Unclear individual contributions	Include reflection journals or peer-evaluation components

To address these issues, systematic capacity-building for teachers is needed—focusing on how to scaffold formative assessment within ongoing instruction. This includes designing rubrics that are student-friendly, training students on how to give and receive feedback, and structuring group tasks with accountability measures such as role assignments, learning logs, or individual reflections.

Additionally, formative assessment should not be viewed as a one-time activity but as an iterative and integrated process that helps students become more aware of their learning journey. Embedding mini-conferencing sessions, encouraging learning portfolios, and

leveraging technology tools for feedback (e.g., Padlet, Google Forms, or Flipgrid) could help improve both the quality and efficiency of assessment.

Ultimately, building a culture of formative assessment requires both pedagogical and cultural change—empowering students to see assessment not as judgment but as a tool for growth, and equipping teachers to facilitate this transformation effectively.

3.3. Teacher strategies and solutions

To address the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum—particularly related to students' varied proficiency levels, engagement, and access to resources—English teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya adopted a variety of adaptive strategies that aligned with the curriculum's principles of inclusivity and personalized learning. Teachers responded to these challenges through several strategies.

1. Using Tiered Tasks and Visual Supports for Low-Proficiency Students

To accommodate varying levels of English proficiency (Putra, et.al, 2024), especially among basic-level learners, teachers designed tiered tasks—assignments with multiple levels of complexity tailored to students' readiness. Visual aids such as pictures, charts, and vocabulary flashcards (Intansari, 2013) were used to support comprehension and vocabulary acquisition for struggling students. This approach allowed all students to participate in the same lesson while working at a level appropriate to their abilities, promoting inclusion without lowering learning goals.

2. Grouping Students Flexibly and Assigning Roles to Support Peer Learning

Teachers implemented flexible grouping strategies (Arlinwibowo, et.al, 2021) to facilitate cooperative learning and mutual support among students of different abilities. Stronger students naturally took on mentoring roles, helping peers with grammar and vocabulary while reinforcing their own learning through teaching. This method not only encouraged peer learning but also promoted social emotional development, teamwork, and a sense of responsibility among students.

3. Collaborating with Shadow Teachers for Students with Special Needs

To support students with learning disabilities (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia), teachers collaborated with shadow teachers or teach companions (Apriliyanti, 2022) who provided individualized assistance during lessons. During English writing and speaking tasks, shadow teachers sat next to students who had difficulty staying focused or decoding text, helping them interpret instructions and stay on task. The figure below illustrates the shadow teacher in the classroom.



Figure 5. Illustrated Shadow Teacher

Adapted learning materials, such as audio supports or simplified worksheets, were sometimes prepared in collaboration (Khakim & Septianto, 2021) with the special needs teachers. This collaboration ensured that students with special needs were not excluded from classroom activities (Cahyan, et.al, 2024) and could engage meaningfully in line with the principles of inclusive education.

4. *Conducting Formative Assessments Through Reflection Journals, Peer Feedback, and Project Rubrics*

Teachers shifted from summative assessments to more formative and reflective approaches, in alignment with Merdeka's emphasis on personalized, process-based learning. After completing a group project (Eswaran, 2024) or individual assignment, students filled out reflection journals responding to prompts like, "What did I do well?", "What did I learn?", and "What can I improve?" *Peer feedback* sessions were organized where students exchanged drafts and gave suggestions based on rubrics provided by the teacher. This strategy encouraged metacognitive skills, accountability, and self-evaluation, helping students grow as independent learners.

These concrete strategies reflect the adaptive and student-centered philosophy (Vygotsky, 1978) of the Merdeka Curriculum and illustrate how teachers successfully navigated real classroom complexities (Lamkin, 2025) while maintaining curriculum integrity.

The Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya promotes a flexible student-centered (Mat & Jamaludin, 2024), and competency-based learning environment (Marcellis, et.al, 2024), integrating English proficiency (Putra, et.al, 2024), character development (Ratnawati, et.al, 2024), and 21st-century skills, despite challenges (Andrian & Ernati, 2023; Hanayanti, et.al, 2023). The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya has faced numerous challenges for English teachers. The curriculum, designed to promote critical thinking, creativity, and contextual learning, faces

challenges (Agung, 2019) due to diverse student needs, limited resources, and the need to adapt instruction to local contexts.

Teachers face difficulties in managing students' English proficiency levels (Putra, et.al, 2024), which range from basic to advanced, influenced by differences in prior English instruction (Ghafar, 2023) and home language environments. The curriculum also requires a high level of pedagogical skill in differentiation, which many teachers find difficult due to limited preparation time and instructional support. Additionally, the scarcity of appropriate English learning materials, limited resources, and the need for culturally relevant materials further complicate the implementation process. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes contextualization, integrating local wisdom, culture, and environment into learning. However, English teachers struggle to merge local cultural content with standardized English competencies. SMP Sahabat Alam faces challenges in incorporating local traditions and environmental issues, linguistic and pedagogical limitations, and adopting new pedagogical approaches. Teachers need targeted training in listening instruction, innovative speaking activities, and technology use.

English teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya successfully implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, overcoming challenges like diverse student proficiency and limited resources. They used differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014), peer teaching, digital resources, professional development (Sahin, et.al, 2024), and motivational strategies to enhance academic skills. English teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya encountered multiple challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, such as diverse student proficiency levels, limited learning resources, lack of formal training, time constraints, and difficulties in formative assessment.

To overcome these barriers, teachers employed a variety of adaptive strategies grounded in educational theory and supported by empirical research. *Differentiated instruction* was a key solution, allowing teachers to tailor tasks based on students' proficiency. Basic-level students received structured supports such as sentence starters, while advanced learners engaged in paragraph writing and oral presentations. This approach aligned with Tomlinson's differentiation framework, enabling inclusive and equitable instruction. *Peer teaching* was another highly effective method. By involving students in peer support and correction during collaborative tasks, teachers promoted confidence, participation, and a sense of shared responsibility—reflecting Vygotsky's social constructivist theory.

To address *resource limitations*, teachers utilized digital platforms, mobile-assisted tools, and free online materials such as YouTube videos, grammar sites, and interactive reading content. This form of blended learning helped compensate for the absence of textbooks and formal language labs. Continuous *professional development* was pursued through peer mentoring, online forums, and collaborative learning communities, allowing teachers to exchange best practices and enhance skills in project-based learning, differentiation, and

assessment. Teachers also adopted innovative practices such as *formative assessment* strategies (self-assessment, peer feedback, and portfolio-based evaluation), flipped classrooms, gamified learning, and topic personalization, which increased student motivation and engagement. These strategies aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum's goal of fostering critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and character development.

While the teachers' responsive and innovative approaches demonstrate that effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is possible through creativity, collaboration, and context-sensitive pedagogy, it is important to critically acknowledge the underlying tensions between the curriculum's ideals and classroom realities. The Merdeka Curriculum promotes autonomy, contextualization, and differentiated learning; however, these aspirations are often constrained by systemic limitations such as unequal teacher capacity, limited resources, and rigid institutional structures. For instance, the expectation for teachers to independently design flexible, student-centered instruction may conflict with their lack of access to localized training or relevant English materials. Similarly, the curriculum's emphasis on project-based learning and character development is often challenged by time constraints, large class sizes, and insufficient technological infrastructure—especially in semi-rural contexts.

To bridge these gaps, this study recommends not only expanding localized and continuous professional development for teachers, but also investing in infrastructure (e.g., multimedia tools and language laboratories), developing culturally relevant English materials, and institutionalizing sustainable peer mentoring systems. These efforts must be accompanied by policy-level adjustments that recognize the contextual constraints teachers face. Ultimately, the success of the Merdeka Curriculum depends not only on teacher innovation, but also on systemic support that aligns philosophical goals with practical realities.

4. Conclusion

English teachers at SMP Sahabat Alam Palangka Raya implemented the Merdeka Curriculum through project-based learning, integrating local culture, environmental themes, and character education into English instruction. By contextualizing content and applying differentiated instruction, they created inclusive and engaging learning experiences that supported both language development and the Pancasila Student Profile.

Despite these successes, teachers faced challenges such as limited culturally relevant materials, diverse student proficiency levels, low digital literacy, and minimal training. The school's remote setting further hindered collaboration and access to resources. Formative assessments like peer and self-evaluation were also underutilized due to lack of familiarity.

To address these issues, teachers employed tiered tasks, visual aids, and flexible groupings to support varied learning needs. Collaboration with shadow teachers ensured inclusion for

students with special needs, while formative tools like reflection journals and peer feedback encouraged student autonomy and continuous learning.

Overall, the case of SMP Sahabat Alam illustrates how the Merdeka Curriculum's goals can be achieved through adaptive, student-centered strategies, even in resource-limited settings—though sustained support, training, and resource development remain essential for long-term success.

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