

Curriculum design for TEFL/EFL in Indonesia: A literature review of the Merdeka Curriculum and national education standards

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines curriculum design for TEFL/EFL within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. Twenty-five empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 were synthesized to explore teacher readiness, institutional constraints, and assessment practices. The review reveals persistent gaps between curriculum policy and classroom practice. These gaps are associated with uneven teacher preparedness, overcrowded classrooms, limited administrative guidance, and continued reliance on traditional, summative assessment. Evidence also shows that teachers struggle to translate competency-based standards into lesson planning and formative assessment strategies. The review argues that successful implementation requires sustained professional development, stronger instructional leadership, and context-sensitive guidance that helps teachers adapt curriculum documents to real classroom conditions. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of coordinated support among policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators in ensuring that Merdeka Curriculum principles can be enacted effectively in TEFL/EFL settings.

Keywords

Merdeka Curriculum;
curriculum design;
TEFL/EFL; teacher
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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's big move to the Merdeka Curriculum is part of a broader plan to update education by giving schools more say in designing their own curriculums, putting students at the center, and tying everything to competency standards (Mawaddah et al., 2023). For teaching English, this is a game-changer: educators are being nudged away from memorization and one-size-fits-all tests toward tasks that matter, real-world assessments, and building skills for global communication. That said, despite all the talk about reform, getting from policy to practice hasn't been easy.

A few recent studies really drive this home. Take Sephiawardani & Bektiningsih (2023), who looked at teacher preparedness in public elementary schools and found that while many got the basics of the Merdeka Curriculum, they worried about not having

enough resources, time, or guidance to make it work. In high schools, Andika and Yulia (2025) said English teachers face big problems like too many students in one class, students needing special help, and schools not giving enough support. In TEFL/EFL, these crowded rooms are bad because they make it hard for students to use English with others in class and to practice talking or writing with classmates, which are key parts of the Merdeka Curriculum (Astuti et al., 2024). When classes are too big, it gets close to impossible for teachers to give each student feedback on speaking or writing, which are two big skills in the new curriculum (Reza et al., 2023). Teachers also find it hard to make or change work from scratch to fit a big class of students at different skill levels (Waruwu, 2024). These problems and not having enough good places to learn make it hard to do what the curriculum wants: let students lead and be good at talking with others.

Plus, deeper dives like Karimatunisa & Sartika's (2024) qualitative study with English teachers at MTs Negeri 3 Banyumas show they're still figuring things out. They talked about not being comfortable with flexible lesson plans, struggling to match assessments to competency standards, and feeling unsure about guiding student growth step by step.

All in all, these findings suggest the Merdeka Curriculum opens up cool opportunities for TEFL/EFL in Indonesia, but there are still some deep-rooted practical and structural issues. With that in mind, this paper digs into research from 2021 to 2025 through a literature review, tackling these questions: (1) How do recent studies paint TEFL/EFL curriculum design under the Merdeka reforms? (2) What main roadblocks do teachers and schools hit when trying to apply policies in real life? And (3) How can curriculum creators and policymakers do a better job supporting effective, context-aware English teaching going forward?

2. METHOD

We went with a systematic literature review approach, zeroing in on peer-reviewed articles and real-world studies from 2021 to 2025. We scoured online databases like Google Scholar, Indonesian university archives, and national education journals. Search terms included things like "Kurikulum Merdeka," "teacher readiness," "English teaching," "assessment," and "curriculum implementation". To ensure the quality and relevance of the data, we applied specific inclusion criteria: selected studies had to be empirical (qualitative or quantitative) and explicitly discuss the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum or IKM within English language subjects in Indonesia, such as the qualitative exploration of teacher perceptions in classroom settings (Lestari, 2024). We pulled out both qualitative and quantitative data and coded it by themes. The identified themes were organized into three overarching categories: (1) teacher readiness and professional capacity, (2) challenges in curriculum implementation, and (3) assessment practices and pedagogical approaches. This thematic categorization emerged through an inductive synthesis of recurring patterns across the reviewed studies rather than being imposed a priori from an established theoretical framework. We also looked at how things differed across school levels (elementary, middle, and high school).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Teacher readiness and capacity

One recurring finding in the literature is that English teachers are unevenly prepared to implement Merdeka Curriculum-based instruction. Karimatunisa & Sartika (2024) reported that teachers at MTs Negeri 3 Banyumas generally possessed a solid conceptual understanding of the curriculum; however, this understanding did not consistently translate into implementation skills, particularly in the areas of lesson planning (*modul ajar*) and assessment practices.

With regard to lesson planning, teachers experienced difficulties in operationalizing the *Capaian Pembelajaran* into coherent and systematic *modul ajar*. This challenge is echoed in Lestari et al. (2024), who noted that teachers viewed lesson planning under the Merdeka Curriculum as an ongoing learning process rather than a stable professional competence. As one teacher stated, “This curriculum requires continuous learning from teachers when preparing the *modul ajar*” (Lestari et al., 2024). This suggests that teachers are still navigating the pedagogical shift from the procedural *RPP* format to the more flexible, yet demanding, *modul ajar* framework.

In terms of assessment practices, teachers also demonstrated uncertainty in aligning assessment with the competency-based and formative orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Although assessment was conducted, it was frequently positioned as an end-of-lesson activity. As one participant stated, assessment primarily took the form of “evaluations at the end of learning” (Lestari et al., 2024). This pattern indicates that summative assessment continues to dominate, while diagnostic and formative assessments (which are central to the Merdeka Curriculum) have not yet been fully embedded in classroom practice. These findings further suggest that some teachers lacked confidence in designing assessment components that are directly aligned with competency targets.

A similar tendency was identified in the study by Telaumbanua, Daeli, Zega, and Telaumbanua (2025) at SMP Negeri 4 Gunungsitoli. Drawing on surveys, interviews, and document analysis, the authors reported that teachers had begun to explore Merdeka-aligned teaching tools, such as the use of instructional media and independent planning. However, classroom practices largely remained teacher-centered, reflecting a reliance on conventional instructional routines.

In the context of elementary schools, Sephiawardani & Bektiningsih (2023) found that although teachers possessed a conceptual understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, limited training opportunities and the absence of sustained support hindered implementation. As a result, teachers perceived themselves as “ready in theory,” yet not fully equipped to enact the curriculum meaningfully in daily classroom practice.

3.2. Institutional and structural challenges

Beyond individual teacher prep, there are bigger structural and school-level barriers messing with TEFL/EFL under the Merdeka framework. Andika and Yulia (2025) elucidated that in numerous secondary schools, excessive class sizes and high student-to-teacher ratios render differentiated instruction increasingly difficult to execute. In the specific context of language pedagogy, such high ratios are particularly detrimental as they constrain the frequency of authentic communicative interactions and limit the teacher’s capacity to

provide the intensive, individualized feedback essential for developing students' productive skills in English (Astuti et al., 2024). They reported teachers struggling to create tasks that cater to different skill levels while staying true to competency goals.

On top of that, these educators mentioned weak oversight and technical help from school leaders. Without solid procedural backing, many just stuck to traditional teaching. In the same study, Andika & Yulia pointed out that assessing character traits (like Pelajar Pancasila values) was still a headache, with teachers unsure how to measure and track character growth properly.

3.3. Assessment practices and pedagogical innovation

Assessment is another hot spot. The Merdeka Curriculum specifically formative assessment and authentic assessment in literacy and numeracy standards-based assessments to underpin competency-based learning and student-centered classrooms. These types of assessment will aim to serve as the ongoing, process oriented formative tools that record students' actual communicative performance in meaningful situations and not merely as instruments to measure discrete knowledge. But it is the reality that, rather than facilitating this policy direction, many English teachers still heavily depend on traditional, summative paper-based tests. Andika & Yulia (2025) observed that while teachers saw the value in shaking things up, they griped about the lack of tailored assessment models for English classes especially for checking communication skills and character aspects.

From that study, participants said external help was scarce: not enough ready-made Merdeka-friendly assessments, and teacher groups for sharing ideas weren't always helpful or regular. This slowed down any real innovation.

At SMP N. 6 Semarang, Lestari, Lestari, & Nularsih (2024) looked into English teachers' take on the Merdeka Curriculum and found many were excited about giving students more independence and project work, but they still fretted over balancing content and assessment needs. These teachers wished for clearer assessment guides and regular check-ins to tweak their methods.

3.4. Discussion

The research we've reviewed makes it pretty clear that the Merdeka Curriculum has flipped the script on English education in Indonesia—but it's also laid bare some serious hurdles in making policies work in everyday classrooms.

First off, teacher readiness is a tricky, layered issue. Sure, many have bought into the Merdeka philosophy, but their ability to put it into action is patchy. Teachers in Banyumas (Karimatunisa & Sartika, 2024) talked about feeling lost on converting competency goals into useful lessons. In Gunungsitoli, the qualitative stuff suggests that while they started experimenting with media and planning, they often fell back on familiar routines when time got tight (Telaumbanua et al., 2025). This points to readiness being more about building skills, especially in designing modules and crafting assessments.

Second, school support is all over the place and often not enough. Andika & Yulia's (2025) work shows that in many schools, packed classrooms and poor admin guidance make it hard to keep up differentiated and student-focused teaching. Plus, school heads

might not have the know-how or tools to back formative assessments. This school-level gap undermines the Merdeka push for adaptable, competency-driven learning.

Third, assessment methods are dragging behind the reform vision. The literature indicates that although many teachers express strong enthusiasm for hands-on and performance-based evaluations, assessment practices in English classrooms frequently revert to conventional, standardized tests. This tendency is not solely caused by the absence of ready-made assessment instruments, but more critically by the lack of adaptable authentic assessment templates that can be contextualized to diverse classroom realities (Andika & Yulia, 2025). Teachers appear to require assessment frameworks that provide structural guidance without imposing rigid formats, allowing them to balance national competency expectations with local learner needs an essential principle of the Merdeka Curriculum. Without shared frameworks and mentoring, change stays slow. And teachers at SMP N. 6 Semarang (Lestari et al., 2024) voiced worries about workload, calling for standardized but adaptable assessment templates and chances to reflect on their approaches regularly.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance to mitigate such systemic barriers by fundamentally transforming the instructional leadership capacity of schools. It is, among other things, highly suggested that there be the creation of practical support instruments for the work of school principals and curriculum teams, e.g., observation rubrics and coaching protocols, that are not only aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum but also take into account the reality of large classes. By having these instruments at hand, school leaders can give pointed feedback to teachers so that through them students get really differentiated instruction and authentic assessment. This method genuinely empowers the school community thus it is the most feasible solution to the policy-practice gap as it makes teacher autonomy cohere with institutional guidance.

Putting it all together, these points say policies alone won't cut it. For Merdeka to deliver in TEFL/EFL settings, we need a multi-pronged strategy that pours into professional growth, fosters teacher networks, and arms admins with the tools to drive teaching shifts.

4. CONCLUSION

Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum is a bold shot at rethinking education by empowering teachers, boosting student ownership, and grounding learning in real skills. In English teaching, it holds a lot of promise. But as the 2021–2025 research shows, the path from policy to practice is bumpy: teacher prep varies, school backing is inconsistent, and assessments often revert to the old ways.

Based on the Andika & Yulia's (2025) findings, this implies that overcrowded classroom activity and lack of administrative supervision still remained factors in hampering implementation of consistently differentiated learning and student-centered teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum. To mitigate this systemic barrier, subsequent implementation efforts should focus on the creation of job embedded support mechanisms for school leaders/leadership teams, particularly those focused on leading peer observing and instructional coaching practices. These enables need to be situated within the framework of Merdeka Curriculum principles and can help school-based leaders to provide

reflective, non-evaluative classroom observation, formative feedback and guidance for instructional adjustment by teachers to meet diverse learner needs. Enhancing pedagogical leadership capacity of administrators via well-organized coaching structures might provide a bridge between curriculum policy and classroom practice by giving teachers autonomy, which is sequenced with coherent and continued institutional guidance (Telaumbanua & Zai).

To fix these gaps, key players policymakers, school leaders, teacher trainers need to team up more closely. Professional development initiatives under the Merdeka Curriculum should move beyond one off seminars or short-term workshops and be reoriented toward ongoing, school-based professional learning that emphasizes instructional coaching and sustained collegial support. Continuous, context-embedded coaching enables teachers to collaboratively develop *modul ajar*, refine assessment planning, and implement differentiated instruction in response to their specific classroom realities. Research consistently shows that professional learning is more effective when it is embedded in daily school practice, sustained over time, and focused on reflective dialogue rather than episodic training events (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018). Such a model aligns with the spirit of *Merdeka Belajar* by supporting teacher autonomy while ensuring consistent pedagogical growth through structured, school-level support systems. Teacher groups (like MGMPs) can be spots for sharing and learning from each other. Admins also need straightforward, practical tips to turn policies into real help for their staff.

In fact, to provide a better evidence base for these initiatives, future research should be about intervention studies (for instance, trials of specific coaching or training models) with the main goal of enhancing teachers' competencies not only in designing Merdeka-based learning modules and implementing authentic assessment but also in conducting the teacher's role.

In the end, the Merdeka Curriculum will only be able to bring a real change to TEFL/EFL in Indonesia if its promise of freedom and adaptability is supported by well-functioning systems and guided by thorough research. The vision will then be manifested in everyday classroom practices that nurture skilled, confident, and creative English learners.

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