

The Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Teaching and Learning English at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in teaching and learning English at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan. The study focuses on six key indicators of learning based on the standard process: interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, challenging, motivating students to participate actively, and providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method. The data were collected through observation and interviews involving an English teacher. The results indicate that the English teacher has successfully implemented most of the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. The learning process was interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, and challenging, supported by student participation and the teacher's efforts to create a positive classroom environment. However, the aspect of providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence was less implemented. The findings suggest that while the teacher applied the core values of the curriculum effectively, there is still a need for improvement in promoting student-centered learning through project-based and creative activities.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka dalam proses pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di SMK Negeri 1

Bulango Selatan. Penelitian ini berfokus pada enam indikator utama pembelajaran berdasarkan standar proses, yaitu interaktif, inspiratif, menyenangkan, menantang, memotivasi siswa untuk berpartisipasi aktif, serta memberikan ruang yang cukup bagi inisiatif, kreativitas, dan kemandirian. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi dan wawancara dengan guru bahasa Inggris. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru telah berhasil menerapkan sebagian besar prinsip dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. Proses pembelajaran berlangsung secara interaktif, inspiratif, menyenangkan, dan menantang, yang didukung oleh partisipasi aktif siswa serta upaya guru dalam menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang positif. Namun, aspek pemberian ruang yang cukup bagi inisiatif, kreativitas, dan kemandirian siswa masih kurang diterapkan secara optimal. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun guru telah menerapkan nilai-nilai inti kurikulum dengan baik, masih diperlukan peningkatan dalam penerapan pembelajaran berpusat pada siswa melalui kegiatan berbasis proyek dan kegiatan kreatif.

INTRODUCTION

The Curriculum is a critical element in education as it serves as the blueprint for the teaching and learning process. It outlines how the content of a subject is transformed into a comprehensive framework to achieve the expected learning outcomes (Richards, 2013). In Indonesia, the curriculum has undergone several changes since independence. Most recently, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced a new curriculum titled “*Kurikulum Merdeka*” as an effort to restore post-pandemic learning (Kemendikbud, 2022).

Merdeka curriculum according to Kurniasih (2023:17), is a curriculum with diverse intracurricular learning where the content is optimized to allow students have enough time to deepen the concept and strengthen competencies in learning. Teachers have the flexibility to choose various teaching tools so that learning can fit the learning needs and interests of student.

The Merdeka curriculum is developed with more flexibility and focuses on essential materials along with the development of character and competence. Teachers have flexibility to conduct differentiated learning according to ability of student and make contextual or local

content adjustments. Focusing on essential material allows for more in-depth learning of fundamental competencies. Additionally, the Merdeka curriculum employs project-based learning, enabling students' soft skills and character to develop in alignment with the *Pancasila* student profile.

The transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka curriculum brings quite significant changes even though there are several similar aspects. The *Merdeka* curriculum grants more freedom to teachers and students in determining the most suitable learning methods, whereas the 2013 Curriculum mandates a more scientific approach. Assessment in the Merdeka curriculum is also more holistic, utilizing various methods such as projects and portfolios, while the 2013 Curriculum is more structured with assessments based on cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Teaching materials in the Merdeka curriculum can be developed by teachers according to students' needs, unlike the 2013 Curriculum which is more centrally regulated by the government. Furthermore, the *Merdeka* curriculum emphasizes project-based learning and character development, with teachers acting as mentors, whereas in the 2013 Curriculum, teachers are positioned as facilitators with stricter guidelines (Widyastuti, 2022:198).

The presence of the Merdeka curriculum is expected to bring positive changes and further improve the previous curriculum. Additionally, it is hoped to address issues in the field of education, thereby necessitating each school to successfully implement the Merdeka curriculum through various developmental efforts. Professional development for teachers through training and skill enhancement is essential to ensure the effective implementation of the curriculum.

In the Merdeka curriculum, the teaching and learning process is one of the standard process elements that has been modified to achieve successful learning and the development of student competencies. The government, in the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia No. 16 of 2022 on Standards process for Early Childhood Education, Primary Education, and Secondary Education, explains that the implementation of the teaching and learning process in the Merdeka curriculum in educational units must be conducted interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, challenging, motivating student to participate actively, and providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence in accordance with students' talents, interests, and physical and psychological development.

From the explanation above, it can be said that the teaching and learning process is one of the crucial components for achieving successful learning and developing student competencies in learning activities. To achieve the objectives set in the curriculum, teachers must be able to design flexible, innovative, and collaborative learning. Meanwhile, students need to develop themselves to be responsible and proactive in their learning.

The curriculum in SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan is based on the level of the educational unit. The implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in this school is Independent Change option, which means the school has fully utilized the *Merdeka* Teaching platform prepared by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. However, the teacher has not received sufficient training to effectively implement the Merdeka curriculum. Additionally, the lack of access to computers and inadequate internet connectivity posed significant challenges to implementing this curriculum.

While in the concept of implementing the Merdeka curriculum as outlined in the Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 16, page 8 of 2022 on Process Standards, expected to be implemented in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka curriculum. These principles state that learning should be conducted in an interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, challenging, motivating student to participate actively and providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence in accordance with students' talents, interests, physical, and psychological development. The learning material includes character development, project-based learning, differentiated learning, and the use of technology to support the teaching and learning process.

SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan is one of the schools in Gorontalo that has implemented the *Merdeka* curriculum in its teaching and learning process. This study will be conducted in order to figure out the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan based

on principles of learning. The school is chosen due to its focus on student character development, which aligns with one of the main objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum. By prioritizing character development, the school creates a learning environment that supports active engagement and holistic growth of students.

The researcher took this study because the researcher wants to see how the *Merdeka* curriculum is implemented in English language teaching and learning based on the principles of learning. The principles learning of the Merdeka curriculum's implementation include six indicators: interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, challenging, motivating student to participate actively, and providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence in accordance with students' talents, interests, and physical and psychological development. This research aims to find out the implementation of Merdeka curriculum in the teaching and learning at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan based on the standard process.

METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, chosen by the researcher as the most suitable method to describe research findings. This research was carried out in SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan, researcher chose this location to find out the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in teaching and learning at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan.

The participant of this research is the English teacher in class X at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan. The researcher focused on the implementation of teaching and learning process in class X at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan. In this study, the researcher took class X to make observation because only class X has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. In accordance with procedure, the researcher employed three techniques of collecting data to gather the data for this study; observation, interview, literature review.

In this study, the data analysis process adopted the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), which consists of three concurrent activities: data reduction, data display, and drawing or verifying conclusions.

RESULTS

In this research, to answer the research question: "*How is the Merdeka Curriculum implemented in the teaching and learning process at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan?*", data were gathered and analyzed based on those six principles.

The researcher observed the teaching and learning process without participating in classroom activities. The goal was to objectively capture the practices that reflect or do not reflect the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Observational data were supported by interviews, and documentations which served to explore deeper insights into the rationale and strategies behind the classroom practices. Each section is categorized and analyzed of how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in the classroom setting based on those six indicators of learning principles.

The data finding obtained from observation

The findings in this section are derived from classroom observations conducted to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the English teaching and learning process at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan. The main purpose of the observations was to gather comprehensive data related to how the learning principles of Merdeka Curriculum are applied in real classroom practices.

The participant of this research is the English teacher of grade X at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan. This school is located in Bulango Selatan District, specifically in Huntu Selatan Village. The classroom observations were conducted over three meetings, starting from October 24th and ended to November 7th, 2024.

The researcher documented classroom activities and teacher-student interactions through observation sheet. The observations were guided by six indicators of learning principles including interactive learning, inspiring learning, enjoyable learning, challenging learning, motivating students to participate actively, and providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity,

and independence. Thus, in this section, the researcher explained the result of observation of six indicators of principles learning based on three meetings observed.

Meeting 1

The first meeting was conducted on Thursday, October 24th, 2024, in Class X. The lesson began at 10.00 and ended at 11.40, with a total of 23 students present. The researcher observed the teaching and learning process, with the teacher acting as the main participant. The topic of the lesson was procedure text, and the learning objective was for the students to understand its function, structure, and linguistic features. In this meeting, the teacher focused on building students' prior knowledge about procedure text, including their purposes, organizational structure, and language features. Based on the result of observation in the first meeting, the implementation of the six learning indicators could be identified.

No	Indicator	Description of Implementation
1.	Interactive	The teacher encouraged students' interaction through trigger questions and group tasks.
2.	Inspiring	The teacher used learning media examples from the school environment and related to students' daily lives.
3.	Enjoyable	The teacher created an enjoyable atmosphere by greeting the students warmly and being a good listener.
4.	Challenging	The teacher giving additional challenges with vocabularies interpretation and provide additional time to prepare their individual presentations.
5.	Motivating students to participate actively	The teacher adjusted the material to topics familiar to students to encourage their participation.
6.	Providing sufficient space for Initiative, Creativity, and Independence	This indicator was not implemented in this meeting.

The interactive learning indicator was reflected in several classroom activities. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher initiate interaction by using simple and relatable trigger questions to stimulate students' curiosity, such as asking about the definition of a procedure text. Furthermore, the teacher facilitated collaborative learning by assigning group tasks in which students jointly prepared and presented procedure text.

The inspiring aspect of the lesson appeared when the teacher utilized simple learning media examples taken from the school environment as discussion material. At this stage, students were asked to discuss procedure text related to familiar foods or drinks commonly found in the school canteen.

Enjoyable learning was demonstrated through the teacher's effort to fostered a positive atmosphere from the beginning of lesson by greetings to welcoming the students and also asking about their condition before starting the class. Furthermore, the teacher acted as an active listener and maintained a comfortable environment during the core activity. This appeared when the students presented, the teacher responded with encouragement and gentle corrections, particularly for those who were struggling.

The teacher also implemented the challenging learning principle by giving additional challenges with vocabularies interpretation, which tested their comprehension skills. Moreover, the teacher posed follow-up questions, such as asking about the terminology of the words they used during group presentations or discussions. Furthermore, the teacher provided additional time for students to complete assignments, adjusting the duration according to their needs.

To motivate students to participate actively, the teacher adjusting the learning activities to the students' real-life experiences, as the teacher related the material to daily contexts by having them learn procedure texts based on familiar foods or drinks to encourages students' participation.

However, the indicator related to students' initiative and creativity was not observed in this meeting. The teacher did not implement any activities reflecting this indicator throughout the lesson, from the beginning to the end, as recommended in the theoretical framework.

Meeting 2

The second meeting was conducted on Thursday, October 31st, 2024, continuing the previous topic of procedure text. The lesson took place in the library, starting at 10:00 and ending at 11:40, with a total of 23 students present. In this session, the learning objectives were extended from the previous meeting. Students were provided with a model or example of a procedure text as a reference for producing their own written work. Based on the result of observation in the second meeting, the implementation of the six learning indicators could be observed.

No	Indicator	Description of Implementation
1.	Interactive	The teacher facilitated collaborative learning by dividing the student into a group, using video-based learning, and conducting light games to increase interaction.
2.	Inspiring	The teacher conducted the lesson outside of the class and used a learning video relevant to students' daily environment.
3.	Enjoyable	The teacher created a cheerful classroom atmosphere by greetings, rearranging seating, and becomes actives listener for students.
4.	Challenging	The teacher assigned group presentations without allowing the use of written texts, provided stimulating guidance and additional time for students to prepare their group presentation.
5.	Motivating students to participate actively	The teacher related the lesson to students' real-life experiences and asked the students to give reflection.
6.	Providing sufficient space for Initiative, Creativity, and Independence	This indicator was not implemented in this meeting.

The interactive learning indicator was evident during the core activity, where the teacher facilitated group-based collaboration to encourage interaction among students. The teacher also maintained real-life relevance by linking the lesson to familiar topics such as foods and drinks, particularly through a video presentation on how to make iced tea. To make the class livelier, the teacher introduced a light game as an icebreaker, in which each group demonstrated version of iced tea following procedure text.

The inspiring learning aspect appeared when the teacher decided to hold the lesson in the library, allowing students to experience a different learning environment. Moreover, during the core activity, the use of a learning video showing how to make iced tea helped students connect the material to their everyday lives.

The enjoyable learning principle was reflected in the teacher's efforts to create a supportive classroom atmosphere. At the beginning of lesson, the teacher greeted the students warmly and asked about their feelings. Before the main activity, students were asked to form groups by counting off, which made the process more engaging. During the lesson, the teacher also acted as an attentive listener, providing assistance and constructive feedback, especially for students who struggled with pronunciation.

The challenging learning indicator was implemented during group presentations. Students were asked to present their work without relying on written texts or notes, which encouraged them to rely on understanding rather than memorization. The teacher monitored the groups actively and provided guidance to stimulate their ideas. Additional time was also given to groups that needed more preparation to ensure task completion.

To motivate students to participate actively, the teacher aligned the learning activities with their real-life experiences by asking them to create a procedure text about making iced tea. After the presentations, the teacher facilitated reflection by asking representatives from each group to summarize what they had learned.

However, the indicator of providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence was not observed this meeting. The teacher led most of the activities, leaving limited opportunities for students to explore their own ideas independently.

Meeting 3

The third meeting was conducted on Thursday, November 7th, 2024. The topic of the lesson was still procedure text. The lesson took place in the library, starting at 10:00 and ending at 11:40, with a total of 23 students present. The learning objectives of this meeting were for the students, under the teacher's guidance, to collaboratively produce a draft of a procedure text. Furthermore, the objectives emphasized enabling the students to demonstrate their understanding of procedure text through a speaking test. Specifically, the students were expected to orally present and explain a procedure in a clear and structured manner. Based on the result of observation in the third meeting, the implementation of the six learning indicators could be observed.

No	Indicator	Description of Implementation
1.	Interactive	The teacher encouraged student interaction by asking questions about vocabulary and terminology to stimulate curiosity and engagement.
2.	Inspiring	The teacher conducted the activity in the library and used simple media, such as a learning video and vocabulary lists from textbooks, to enrich the learning experience.
3.	Enjoyable	The teacher created a friendly classroom atmosphere through greetings and positive encouragement, especially during the speaking test.
4.	Challenging	The teacher provided challenging tasks by asking students to pronounce and explain vocabulary without relying on textbooks, while offering sufficient time for preparation.
5.	Motivating students to participate actively	All students participated in a speaking test, giving reflection or feedback to other, and motivated them through appreciation and applause after each presentation.
6.	Providing sufficient space for Initiative, Creativity, and Independence	This indicator was not implemented in this meeting.

The interactive learning indicator was reflected during the core activity when the teacher asked students about the meaning of words and terminology from the textbook to stimulate curiosity. Several students responded confidently, demonstrating successful two-way interaction between teacher and students.

The inspiring learning aspect appeared at the beginning of the lesson when the teacher invited the class to conduct the activity in the library, allowing students to experience a different learning environment. During the core activity, the teacher presented a simple learning video and vocabulary examples from the textbook as discussion material.

The enjoyable learning principle was evident when the teacher greeted the students warmly and asked about their condition, creating a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. During the speaking test, the teacher acted as an active listener, providing encouragement and gentle corrections to students struggling with pronunciation or meaning.

The challenging learning indicator was this was reflected in the speaking activity, where students were required to pronounce vocabulary and explain meanings without referring to their textbooks. The teacher provided attention and occasionally prompted students with guiding questions to stimulate their ideas. Additionally, students who needed more preparation were allowed to delay their turn, demonstrating the teacher's flexibility in supporting students to complete challenging tasks effectively.

The motivation to participate actively was clearly seen as every student took part in the speaking test, ensuring active engagement throughout the session. In the closing activity, the teacher applauded each performance, expressed appreciation, and encouraged students to reflect or giving feedback positively on their learning progress.

However, the indicator of providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence was not implemented during this meeting. The teacher determined the structure and tasks entirely, with no opportunities for students to design their own projects or explore creative alternatives.

The data finding obtained from interview

This section presents the findings obtained from interviews conducted with the English teacher at SMK Negeri 1 Bulango Selatan. A total of thirteen guiding questions were used to explore how principles of Merdeka Curriculum were implemented in the teaching and learning of English. A semi-structured interview format was chosen to allow flexibility in follow-up questions and deeper exploration of the participant's responses.

Based on the interview, the teacher provided several insights related to the learning indicators observed in this study.

The teacher explained that interactive learning was established through various classroom strategies. Each lesson typically began with simple and relatable trigger questions to spark students' curiosity and stimulate discussion, such as asking about the definition and function of procedure texts. The teacher also promoted student-to-student interaction by assigning group tasks where learners collaboratively wrote and presented procedure texts. In addition, learning materials were often related to students' daily lives, such as writing procedure texts about familiar topics like making to make learning more meaningful and engaging.

In terms of creating an inspiring learning environment, the teacher mentioned efforts to use topics close to students' lives to help them generate ideas and use their imagination. Although real-world issues were not yet integrated into the discussions, the teacher occasionally utilized the school library to provide students with access to additional resources and expose them to a new learning atmosphere. The use of videos and materials from the surrounding environment also served as tools to inspire students and enrich their experiences.

To foster an enjoyable learning atmosphere, the teacher stated that greeting students warmly before class and listening to their stories were effective ways to make them feel comfortable and valued. Light games were sometimes included to make the class more engaging, although these were not used consistently due to time constraints. Such efforts reflected the teacher's intention to maintain a positive classroom climate that supports students' confidence and enjoyment during learning.

Regarding challenging learning activities, the teacher described how tasks were designed to push students' abilities while still offering adequate guidance. Students were assigned to present, write procedure texts individually and in groups, and interpret vocabulary items found in the material. These activities encouraged them to develop multiple language skills simultaneously, with the teacher providing continuous support to help them succeed.

The teacher also emphasized the importance of motivating students to participate actively by linking lessons to their daily experiences. When students could relate the material to real-life contexts, they became more enthusiastic and willing to contribute. To assist those who

were less active, the teacher sometimes offered extra time for completing tasks and gave encouragement or light corrections during class discussions. These actions helped foster inclusivity and gradually increased student engagement.

With respect to providing students the space to show initiative, creativity, and independence, the teacher allowed them to select the topic of their written procedure texts based on personal interests. However, the structure and format of their work remained guided, as the teacher had not yet given students full freedom to choose alternative ways of presenting their ideas. Similarly, while students were occasionally asked to give feedback on their peers' presentations, opportunities for independent or project-based work were still limited.

Finally, the teacher mentioned that student reflection was sometimes conducted at the end of lessons, during which students were briefly asked to share what they had learned. However, this reflection activity was not implemented regularly. Overall, the teacher's responses indicated a strong effort to integrate several key principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in promoting interaction, motivation, and enjoyable learning experiences, although some aspects such as fostering creativity and independent learning were less consistently applied.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning at SMKN 1 Bulango Selatan is reflected through six key learning principles as regulated in the Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 16 of 2022 and further elaborated by BSKAP (2024). These principles include interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, challenging, motivating students to participate actively, and providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence.

Based on the classroom observations and teacher interviews, the first principle, interactive learning, was consistently evident throughout the three meetings. The teacher encouraged interaction by initiating lessons with stimulating questions, organizing group discussions, and assigning collaborative tasks that required teamwork. Games and question-answer sessions during the speaking test also created opportunities for students to communicate and stay engaged. This indicates that interaction was not treated as a supplementary activity but as an integral part of the learning process.

These findings align with BSKAP (2024), which asserts that teachers under the Merdeka Curriculum should act as facilitators who open space for discussion, dialogue, and collaboration. The results also support Maulida (2022), who emphasizes that collaborative activities and open-ended questions promote higher student participation and curiosity. In addition, the findings are consistent with the study by Hayatin Nisa et al. (2018:157), which found that collaborative can increase students' motivation and learning outcomes, further strengthening the importance of interactive and cooperative approaches in classroom activities.

Furthermore, the result also confirms the statement of Pandu and Nuvitalia (2023) that stimulating questions can strengthen students' cognitive skills and encourage them to share ideas. The different strategies used by the teacher showed that interactive learning is not limited to asking and answering questions, but also includes social cooperation, creativity, and emotional involvement. In this way, interactive learning in the classroom supported not only cognitive development but also students' social and emotional growth.

The second principle, inspiring learning, was also reflected in the teacher's strategies. The teacher conducted activities outside the classroom, such as in the library, and introduced real-life materials related to the school environment. The use of familiar examples, like food or drinks from the canteen, and multimedia resources such as instructional videos, successfully stimulated students' curiosity and imagination.

This finding aligns with BSKAP (2024), which highlights that inspiring learning is realized when teachers create meaningful and contextual learning experiences. It is also supported by Salsabila (2017), who states that meaningful and contextual learning encourages students to think critically, develop deep understanding, and apply their knowledge in real-life situations,

thus producing individuals who are prepared to face life's challenges wisely and meaningfully. In both the observation and interview data, the teacher showed awareness of this principle by selecting learning materials close to students' realities. However, the activities still focused on familiar contexts rather than broader, real-world issues, indicating an area for potential development in fostering critical exploration.

The third principle, enjoyable learning, was clearly evident throughout the teaching process. The teacher began lessons with greetings and light conversations, rearranged seating for group collaboration, and acted as an active listener to students' needs. During speaking activities, encouragement and appreciation helped students feel more confident and relaxed. These observations confirm BSKAP (2024)'s notion that enjoyable learning should provide students with a joyful, safe, and inclusive atmosphere. The interview data reinforced this by showing that the teacher intentionally maintained comfort and reduced anxiety, which are essential to sustain motivation.

Moreover, this also supported by Badu et al. (2023), who state that conducting the learning with enjoyable atmosphere can make students more confident and motivated, which in turn fosters interest and empowers their potential. Thus, enjoyable learning here not only enhanced emotional engagement but also supported the creation of a psychologically safe learning space that encouraged risk-taking in speaking activities.

The fourth principle, challenging learning, was reflected in the teacher's design of classroom activities. The teacher assigned tasks requiring students to interpret new vocabulary, deliver presentations without notes, and perform oral tests. These activities stimulated critical thinking and language production simultaneously. Furthermore, the teacher also provided differentiated time based on students' individual needs. This finding is consistent with BSKAP (2024), which states that challenging learning encourages students to improve their competence through appropriately difficult tasks. Similarly, Damiani et al. (2024) emphasize that challenges promote growth and achievement when supported by adequate guidance. In this context, the teacher's approach illustrates how challenges can coexist with scaffolding, allowing students to push their limits without frustration.

Challenging learning also means helping students believe in their potential and giving them opportunities to develop it further. The teacher's strategy of assigning demanding tasks, providing extra attention, and giving additional time based on necessary illustrates how students were supported to face challenges at their own level of development. These activities are also consistent with the components of teaching modules described by Maulida (2022). Learning objectives were not only focused on knowledge of vocabulary or procedures but also on higher skills such as reasoning, critical thinking, and communication. Assessment was carried out through performance tasks, such as oral presentations and speaking tests, which made the challenges more meaningful.

The fifth principle, motivating students to participate actively, was also evident across the observed meetings. The teacher connected classroom activities to students' daily experiences, such as writing or presenting about familiar topics. This contextualization helped students see the relevance of learning and, as the interview data confirmed, increased their willingness to engage. The teacher's motivational role was further demonstrated through constructive feedback and recognition given to each group. Moreover, reflection sessions and group discussions provided opportunities for every student to contribute, while the speaking test required full participation, ensuring that all students were actively involved in the process.

This practice aligns with the principle of motivating active participation as emphasized by BSKAP (2024), which states that teachers should create a learning atmosphere where students are encouraged to express opinions, experiment, set goals, and reflect on their learning. By designing tasks linked to students' real-life contexts, the teacher helped them see the relevance of learning, which according to Damiani et al. (2024), can increase students' attention and motivation to study seriously. The teacher also acted as a motivator by giving encouragement and feedback, which fostered confidence and willingness to participate. This is in line with Damanik (2019), who argues that the presence of a supportive learning environment simultaneously has a significant positive impact on students' learning motivation.

However, the sixth principle, providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence, appeared to be the least evident in the implementation. Both observation and interview data revealed that, although students were permitted to select familiar topics, they had limited autonomy in designing projects or expressing creativity beyond oral performance. This suggests that while opportunities for self-expression existed, they were still framed with teacher-directed structures, leaving little room for students to explore their full creative potential.

This finding reflects a discrepancy with BSKAP (2024), which stresses the importance of empowering students to develop new ideas and manage their learning independently. Similarly, Maulida (2022) emphasizes remedial and enrichment as avenues for fostering creativity. The limited opportunities for creative autonomy suggest that the learning process remains teacher-directed, leaving less room for exploration and innovation.

Nevertheless, some early indications of independence were observed during the speaking test, when students presented without written notes, demonstrating growing confidence and responsibility for their learning outcomes. To further align with Merdeka Curriculum principles, future implementation could integrate small project-based or creative tasks, such as creating procedural videos or designing posters. These activities would not only develop students' creativity but also embody the essence of *Merdeka Belajar* by promoting self-direction, initiative, and meaningful engagement.

In summary, the findings reveal that five out of six learning principles: interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, challenging, and motivating students to actively participation were implemented consistently. The teacher's practices largely reflected the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing active participation, contextual relevance, and student-centered learning. However, the limited implementation of creativity and independence indicates that while the learning process aligns with the spirit of *Merdeka Belajar*, it still requires further refinement to fully actualize its ideals.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning at SMKN 1 Bulango Selatan, as observed in this study, reflects six key learning principles regulated in the Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 16 of 2022 and elaborated by BSKAP (2024).

The findings show that interactive learning was consistently implemented through stimulating questions, group discussions, games, and collaborative tasks, which supported both cognitive and socio-emotional development. Inspiring learning was also evident when the teacher connected lessons with real-life situations and utilized simple, familiar media and resources. Enjoyable learning was fostered through greetings, light conversations, group seating arrangements, and encouragement, which helped create a safe and positive atmosphere.

Challenging learning appeared in activities that required critical thinking, recall of vocabulary, and performance tasks, with the teacher providing scaffolding and additional time to meet diverse needs. The teacher also actively motivated students by linking tasks to daily life, giving opportunities for experimentation, and requiring all students to participate in reflection and performance assessments. However, the principle of providing sufficient space for initiative, creativity, and independence was the least realized. While some independence was encouraged during oral tasks, there were limited opportunities for students to demonstrate creativity or initiative through project-based or product-oriented activities.

In sum, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English learning at SMKN 1 Bulango Selatan has shown strengths in terms of being interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, challenging, and motivating student participation, but still requires further development in promoting student initiative, creativity, and independence to fully align with the spirit of *Merdeka Belajar*.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this research, the researcher proposes several suggestions as follows:

1. For Teachers. Teachers are encouraged to create more opportunities for students to demonstrate initiative, creativity, and independence, for example through project-based learning and problem-based learning that align with students' vocational backgrounds.
2. For the School. The school is recommended to provide continuous professional development, such as training, workshops, and collaborative teacher discussions, focusing on the design and implementation of student-centered learning in the Merdeka Curriculum.
3. For Future Researchers. Future researchers may expand this study by exploring the long-term effects of the Merdeka Curriculum on students' language proficiency, creativity, and character development, particularly in relation to the Pancasila Student Profile. It is also recommended to employ diverse research methods or involve different grade levels to gain broader and comparative insights into the curriculum implementation.

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