



CHALLENGES IN DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING: PERSPECTIVE OF PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS UNDER THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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Abstract:

Pre-service teachers need to have a complete comprehension of the Merdeka Curriculum because they will use their pedagogical knowledge to utilize it effectively. The participants in this study are (pre-service teacher) from English Education Department students who have enrolled in teaching internship program. This study explores pre-service teachers' understanding and experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum through qualitative methods, using structured interviews to gather insights on its application during teaching practices. Findings reveal that while pre-service teachers gain practical knowledge through direct classroom experiences, they face challenges in lesson planning, time management, and differentiated instruction due to limited resources and experience. Teachers struggle with managing diverse student abilities and maintaining engaging learning environments, often relying on adaptive strategies and continuous professional development to overcome these obstacles. The study highlights the importance of tailored teaching approaches, effective lesson planning, and ongoing teacher support to ensure successful curriculum implementation. The Merdeka Curriculum aims to foster critical thinking and adaptability in students, while also enhancing teachers' ability to meet diverse learner needs in a flexible educational framework.

Keywords: *Differentiated Learning, Merdeka Curriculum, Perception, Pre-Service Teachers*

1. INTRODUCTION

A country's progress depends heavily on education, and the curriculum is the main pillar of the educational system (Maya Amarta et al., 2023). Education is always being updated that are appropriate for the nation. One of the government's efforts in advancing a nation is to try out various efficient curriculum structure, educational system, and teaching techniques. These initiatives include updating the curriculum, raising the standard of instructors and students, and strengthening the infrastructure. How schools are administered is significantly influenced by the curriculum (Wiyono, 2018). It serves as a guide for teachers in developing and carrying out lessons that are both successful and consistent with the objectives of the educational system.

The curriculum establishes explicit learning objectives and standards as well as the fundamental information and abilities that students should acquire (Ingthias et al., 2022). Curriculum is a basis for learning that is always being modified to meet the needs of the times and adapt to the competences that are required. A quality curriculum can provide a strong educational foundation for students, preparing them to face increasingly changing and challenging times (Anharuddin & Prastowo, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum (KURMER) is designed as a more adaptable curriculum structure that emphasizes key topics and helps students built their character and competency. The Pancasila learner profile's project-based learning approach for soft skills and character development, the curriculum's focus on essential materials to allow for the opportunity for in-depth instruction in basic competencies like reading and numeracy, and the flexibility for teachers to implement differentiated instruction based on student ability



and adapt to local contexts and content are all important components that support learning recovery (Nugroho & Narawaty, 2013).

Since the Merdeka curriculum is seen as an option for addressing students' learning challenges during the pandemic, it offers flexibility in how lessons are implemented. By making adjustments to school settings and teacher preparation to implement the IKM, the IKM option becomes available. As a result, schools have complete authority in creating and implementing a curriculum that best suits the needs of their students and the educational setting (Numertayasa et al., 2022).

However, nowadays, the phenomenon that happened in schools is that are still teachers who do not comprehend how the mechanisms of Merdeka Curriculum can work well. Current research stated that teachers face problems complexly such as limited access to supporting facilities, low levels of self-efficacy, lack of information technology skills and time management (Reza et al., 2023). According to study which conducted by Ningsih and Adnan (2023) stated that 13 college students who participated in the teaching practicum during micro teaching course reported having difficulties in creating lesson plans (teaching module) and managing the classroom. They viewed this Merdeka Curriculum is being fresh to them. While they practiced to teach, they concentrate too much on the K-13 curriculum rather than Merdeka Curriculum. In this study explores pre-service teachers' understanding and experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum through qualitative methods, using structured interviews to gather insights on its application during teaching practices. The next research by Ndari et al. (2023) which is conducted at SD Muhammadiyah Warungboto - Yogyakarta stated that teachers' readiness to adopt the merdeka curriculum cannot be effectively assessed because of many teachers at SD Muhammadiyah Warungboto haven't ability yet to arrange and complete teaching modules. The study by Asmahanah et al., (2023) showed that teachers are still not familiar with the new terminologies in merdeka curriculum such as: learning outcomes, objectives, lesson plans and teaching module.

This study explores pre-service teachers' understanding and experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum who already joined Teaching Assistance program through qualitative methods, using structured interviews to gather insights on its application during teaching practices. Schema theory, developed by Jean Piaget, is concerned with how information received from the environment is organized in the brain based on existing cognitive structures, or schemas. Schemas are mental representations of things we have learned from experience. Perception, according to this theory, is guided by pre-existing schemas. These schemas influence how we process new information and help us make predictions about the environment. For example, when a person sees a room full of books, a schema about a "library" may emerge, which then influences a variety of people.

Perception, according to Otter in Ghadirian et al., (2018), is a sequence of actions to get knowledge. Our response to the information is also a part of perception. According to Robbin and Judge (2008:175), referenced in Nurlailia (2018) stated that perception is the process by which people organize and interpret their own sensory experiences in order to provide meaning to their surroundings. Furthermore, Slameto



as stated in Damayanti and Irwan (2023), defines perception as the process by which information or data is transferred into the human brain. Additionally, Irwanto as cited in Farahdiba (2023) stated that the perception can be categorized into two types. Positive perception refers to all responses and knowledge that individuals retain and apply through their efforts, negative perception includes knowledge and reaction that conflict with the perceived object.

Perception in this study related to how pre-service English teachers understand and react to their experiences with Merdeka Curriculum-based differentiated instruction. It entails comprehending and interpreting the various requirements of students, classroom dynamics and instructional difficulties. Their approaches and preparedness to handle the challenges of successfully implementing differentiated education are shaped by these perspectives.

In 2020, Indonesia's Ministry of Education introduced Merdeka Curriculum as an educational program. A Merdeka Curriculum is one that includes a variety of extracurricular activities and has better material to provide students the opportunity to discover new ideas and develop their skills. Multiple teaching tools allow teachers to tailor their instruction to the interest and requirements of their students (Kemendikbudristek, 2022b). In addition to academic knowledge, it seeks to offers a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to education that prioritizes the growth of character, creativity and critical thinking abilities (Muhammad Rafi Zidan & Zaitun Qamariah, 2023). With a stronger focus on technology use and student-centered learning, the curriculum merdeka is made to be more flexible and responsive to the requirements of individual students.

Tomlinson (2003) defines a differentiated learning strategy as tailoring learning materials, procedures and outcomes to the individual requirements of students. Learning readiness, learning interest and learning profile are all connected to the learning needs. Teachers may create differentiated learning techniques based on the requirements of their students by determining those needs. Based on traits or learning requirements of interest or preparedness, teachers can design differentiated instruction by forming groups (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

2. METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative approach, which is deemed appropriate for addressing complex research problems, particularly when the variables are not predefined and need to be explored in depth (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research emphasizes gathering insights directly from participants, allowing the researcher to understand the participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations without imposing a rigid framework or predetermined hypotheses. In this study, the qualitative method was chosen to explore pre-service teachers' comprehension and experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia, given the novelty of the curriculum and the lack of extensive literature on its practical application in the field.

A descriptive qualitative design was employed to provide a detailed analysis of the pre-service teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and the challenges they face during its implementation. Descriptive analysis is particularly useful when seeking



to depict the phenomenon as it is, without manipulation, thereby enabling a rich and holistic understanding of participants' views. The research focuses on uncovering the experiences, opinions, and challenges encountered by pre-service teachers as they engage with the Merdeka Curriculum during their teaching practice.

The participants in this study were two pre-service teachers who had completed their teaching assistance program in their secondary school majoring on English Language Education Department. These teachers were selected because they had direct exposure to the Merdeka Curriculum through hands-on teaching practice, making them well-positioned to provide insights into its practical challenges and opportunities. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who had recently implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, ensuring that their experiences were relevant to the study's objectives.

The data collection method consisted of structured interviews, which were designed to obtain in-depth information on the pre-service teachers' understanding, experiences, and challenges related to the Merdeka Curriculum. Each interview was guided by a set of seventeen questions designed to explore various aspects of curriculum comprehension, classroom implementation, student characteristics, and the application of differentiated instruction. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to express their thoughts freely and provide detailed descriptions of their experiences, which is essential in qualitative research for capturing the complexity of real-life educational settings. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on the availability and preference of the participants. Each interview lasted 30 minutes for participants to elaborate on their answers. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data collected from the structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved systematically reviewing the interview transcripts to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the teachers' comprehension and application of the Merdeka Curriculum using six steps (Braun & Clarke, n.d.). The analysis focused on understanding the core challenges faced by the pre-service teachers, their strategies for overcoming those challenges, and their reflections on the effectiveness of the curriculum in fostering student learning.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1) What do you know about The Merdeka Curriculum?

R1 stated that Merdeka Curriculum was established after the existence of K-13 Curriculum. The more specific difference that arises is the learning outcomes (CP) are directly determined by the government, while the regulations of elaborating Tujuan Pembelajaran (TP) and Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran (ATP) is given back based on the policies arranged by each school or region. Meanwhile, the entire structure in K-13 has been determined by the Government, so the teachers only need to implement KI & KD (Kompetensi Inti & Kompetensi Dasar) directly during learning activities. R2 has her opinion that Merdeka Curriculum is the new curriculum applied for education in Indonesia. During the implementing of this curriculum has the characteristic to focus on students and teachers serve as facilitators, motivators, and supervisors for students.



2) Before the Teaching Assistance program was implemented, did you know the Merdeka Curriculum more deeply?

Before the teaching practice (Asistensi Mengajar) program, R1 was not familiar with the Merdeka Curriculum and had only limited theories. However, when conducting AM at school, she learned about its application through direct practice in the field. She added that she had gained many valuable experiences, for instance: the implementation of P5 directly, how to develop great teaching modules and applying teaching modules precisely during in the classroom. In addition, R2 told if she agreed with R1's opinion. She was aware of the "term" (Merdeka Curriculum) and considered that it's a new thing since she had just learned the theories in a college course. She haven't yet faced practical experiences during teaching practice program.

3) Is there any certain sources which you can use to comprehend more deeply about the Merdeka Curriculum?

R1 and R2 argued, In order to learn more about the merdeka curriculum we are able to access the Government website, like Kemdikbud website. Normally, if we want to check the main CP (Capaian Pembelajaran) and CP for each element that will be used based on the educational level, we can visit this website. Additionally, we also utilize several journal articles addressing Merdeka Curriculum to build more complete comprehension.

4) Do you know the different characteristics of the students you teach?

Those two respondents have the same argumentation. After carrying out observations and several teaching practice in the classroom, R1 stated that she only understood, but didn't really explore the students' characteristics she taught. She has possibility to identify their characteristics through observations, especially in cognitive and activeness aspect. Supported by R2 point of view, she explained that we can utilize the data from BK teachers (bimbingan dan konseling) regarding student cognitive level through pre-test which is conducted while in the first year.

5) Do you know the students' language acquisition level in your class?

Determining how well students are doing in language improvement is one of the evaluation goals in each meeting. R1 added, controlling learners' development is made easier by grouping them. Since have a teaching practice, she said that while this strategy assisted her. Then, she truly knows differences in her students' language proficiency.

6) Do you implement differentiated instruction for the students you teach? If so, what kind of differentiated instruction use?

R1 organizes students according to their language competency level determined by the results of the initial learning assessment and employs cognitive type differentiated learning. In order to support R1's opinion, R2 told that she apply differentiated learning based on students' readiness. Before the learning activities was carried out, she conducted a diagnostic test to find out which level the learners she will teach are at. After the test is over, she will split the students into many "learning groups" based on the findings of the diagnostic test that was given at the beginning of learning.

**7) Does the method you use suit the characteristics of your students?**

She considered that PBL (Project Based-Learning) method used was appropriate for the students' characteristics, the R1's opinion. PBL presents an attractive learning and grab students' attention because the flow of this method started by introducing a problem as a trigger for students to be discussed. This method is seen as teacher's strategy to gain students' involvement by integrating engaging game and their interest, such as K-Pop idols with learning activities. R2 understood if this method is matching with the abilities and characteristics of the students whom she teach, so that they can follow all the learning processes well.

8) During the implementation of the Teaching Assistance (AM) program, did you have any difficulties in understanding and applying the merdeka curriculum?

R1 has encountered difficulties in describing TP and ATP, but with the guidance and direction from pamong, we finally gain better comprehension of the process. However, in terms of implementation in classroom, pre-service teachers still often look at the notes or leaning activities sequence that has been arranged through the teaching module. Sometimes, she forgot the next learning step, perhaps due to a lack of teaching experience. Along with her statement, R2 said when she first started applying it into practice, she found trouble dividing her time between teaching the material I planned to present that day and observing the learners' involvement and engagement in the classroom. Thus, there are situations when my planned activities is contradict in classroom. Teachers are required to divide roles in order to facilitate all student needs.

9) Did you find any challenges to apply differentiated learning due to the lack of reading sources or references in designing differentiated instruction?

No problems were found in the application of cognitive type differentiated learning, because pamong also implemented the same type. R1 added, she is still confused when doing differentiated learning based on learning style. She had never met teachers who applied this type of learning. In addition, in terms of designing teaching modules, she said there were no learning modules with differentiation in the form of student learning styles. Agreed with her view, during interview, R2 has related opinion. It's not too difficult to crate differentiated learning, because she obtained the related theories and searched further information through internet and reliable sources like related journal articles talking about "differentiated learning".

10) Do you have difficulty in applying differentiated learning due to inadequate facilities?

There is no problems regarding the facilities. If the facilities are more fulfilled then the pre-service teachers will feel easier to create more innovative and attractive learning activities, such as using origami paper during in classroom, R1's opinion. So far, R2 don't have much trouble because in her opinion, the facilities provided by the school can accommodate the needs of teaching with differentiated learning. However, if she would like to teach material about listening, she feels a little difficult because sometimes the devices used are insufficient and not all classes have loudspeakers. Furthermore, there is very little information regarding listening in the audio version of the book which the school provided.



11) Do you face difficulties to create communicative and innovative learning activities? (Especially for core activities)

No significant troubles were found because students were told to write down what they like at the beginning of meeting, so it can be integrated with learning activities to make it more communicative and lively. However, R1 felt there was a lack of bounding between educators and learners, this situation happened because of short internship time. In addition, the statement which is given by R2 potentially supported R1's opinion. Seen, she has trouble to provide communicative learning by carrying out mii games occasionally so that students feel comfortable and enjoy the learning process. In other side, she have tried to solve this problem.

12) In your opinion, do you experience any challenges during differentiated learning implementation (especially in core activities) due to the inappropriate learning method used? And at the same time, how do you overcome the problem?

From the given statement, R1 didn't find any problems because the method she used were appropriate and in line with the learners' characters. Whereas the challenges during teaching practice were felt by R2. Sometimes she feels that what she teach that day is not in line with what she planned. The way she overcomes this is by understanding well about what she has planned before and trying to understand the condition of the class at that time and trying to do plan B in every implementation of learning that takes place because it could be that problems will always arise in the middle of learning. If unexpected things happen suddenly, she try to think calmly and think of other solutions so that the learning I do on that day continues to run conductively.

13) Do you experience difficulties when implementing differentiated learning (especially in the core activities) because you are not good at time management?

Despite implementing both regular and differentiated learning, time management is still an issue, stated by R1. Because there are possible obstacles that arise, such as students who are not conducive and technical problems (devices that are not supported) etc. However, learning is still attempted in accordance with the learning design that has been made. R2 delivered her opinion, when it comes to time, in almost every lesson, there is still not enough time to implement all the learning processes that have been planned, so sometimes she feel overwhelmed to divide the time at each step.

14) Do you think students are able to participate in your differentiated learning with good learning outcomes?

R1 argued the suitability depending on the ATP (Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran) or learning objective (C1-C6 based on Bloom Taxonomy). If higher cognitive level is employed, the students probably have any difficulties especially when completing the worksheet given. So, it is necessary to match the cognitive level used with the comprehension level of students. R2 added, students have been able to follow the learning because the results they get are not much different from her expectation before.

15) In your opinion, did the students participate the differentiation lesson enthusiastically in the class you taught?

By utilizing group discussion at the first meeting, learners were considered enthusiastically. But then slowly they got bored because they were only in groups with



the same students. R1 conclude if this phenomenon resulted decreasing in their enthusiasm. She makes an effort to give them awareness that once a group is chosen, it can't be changed since it will have an impact on the learning assessment system. R2 affirmed, the distribution of groups based on the students cognitive level can affect the level of students activeness, because they felt bored in grouping with the same students in one group from the initial week to the final week of the meeting.

16) Do you have any other troubles that you find when applying differentiated learning? (Especially in the core learning activities)

From the interview, R1 told that her difficulty in presenting learning activities always “fresh” and not boring. She added that every lesson should ideally make them feel interested. However, this problem occurs due to the short time of teaching practice at school. The evaluation aspect could be another challenge for R2. Sometimes it's hard for her to evaluate because the assignments that are usually given to the students aren't finished on the same day. If the lesson's assignment isn't finished, she can't assess or evaluate it right away that day, and the time allocated keeps getting delayed. From the perspective of the essentials of learning, the challenge she encounter is getting students to learn in a way that allows them to finish assignments on time.

17) Out of all the issues you have encountered, which one comes up regularly when integrating differentiated learning into core activities?

According to R1, one issue that arises frequently when learning in class is forgetting the learning steps or the learning flow. She frequently notices the flow of the lesson plan she created. Another common issue is time management, which R1 mentioned she enjoys as a "challenge." Another problem is knowing which techniques to employ and how to apply them to pupils in a limited amount of time. The issue R2 frequently run into is that there is occasionally not enough time to carry out the full learning process, and it can be challenging to divided the time and organize the class in a way that best serves the needs of the students.

In order to give a more sophisticated understanding, the researcher organized the 17 questions that the two interviewees had responded during interview session. The explanation is as follows:

3.1. Implementation and Teaching Practices

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum involves significant changes in teaching practices. Pre-service teachers learn about the curriculum through practical experiences during teaching practice programs. For instance, R1 stated that she was not familiar with the Merdeka Curriculum before the teaching practice program but gained valuable insights through direct practice in the field. She learned how to implement P5 directly and develop effective teaching modules. R2 also acknowledged the new nature of the curriculum, considering it a new thing since she had just learned the theories in a college course but had not yet faced practical experiences during teaching practice.

3.2. Access to Information and Student Characteristics

To learn more about the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers can access the Government website, such as Kemdikbud, and utilize journal articles for a comprehensive understanding. Teachers recognize the importance of understanding student characteristics, particularly in cognitive and activeness aspects, through



observations and teaching practices. R1 mentioned that she only understood but didn't really explore the students' characteristics she taught, while R2 emphasized that understanding student characteristics is crucial for effective teaching.

3.3. Language Acquisition and Differentiated Instruction

Determining how well students are doing in language improvement is one of the evaluation goals in each meeting. R1 added that controlling learners' development is made easier by grouping them, which helped her identify differences in her students' language proficiency. Both R1 and R2 implement differentiated instruction based on students' language competency levels and readiness. R1 employs cognitive type differentiated learning, while R2 conducts diagnostic tests to group students accordingly. Differentiated learning is seen as a strategy to match teaching methods with student abilities, making it more effective.

3.4. Challenges in Implementation

Despite the efforts to implement the Merdeka Curriculum, several challenges arise. R1 encountered difficulties in describing TP and ATP but gained better comprehension with guidance. She often forgot the next learning step due to a lack of teaching experience. R2 faced challenges in dividing her time between teaching material and observing learners' involvement, leading to situations where planned activities conflicted with classroom dynamics. Both teachers also experienced difficulties in applying differentiated learning due to inadequate facilities, particularly in listening activities where devices were insufficient.

3.5. Time Management and Student Participation

Time management remains a significant challenge for teachers. R1 mentioned that despite implementing both regular and differentiated learning, time management issues persisted due to obstacles like students who were not conducive and technical problems. R2 also felt overwhelmed by the lack of time to implement all planned learning processes, often resulting in divided time that did not best serve student needs. Student participation can also be affected by the grouping system. R1 noted that students became bored when grouped with the same peers for an extended period, leading to decreased enthusiasm.

3.6. Evaluation and Core Activities

Evaluating student assignments can be challenging when students do not complete their work on time. R2 mentioned that evaluating assignments was hard because students often did not finish their work on the same day, delaying the evaluation process. Another challenge is keeping learning activities fresh and interesting. R1 noted that every lesson should ideally make students feel interested, but this was difficult due to the short time of teaching practice. R2 also faced difficulties in evaluating assignments and getting students to finish them on time.

3.7. Common Issues

Common issues include forgetting the learning steps, poor time management, and knowing which techniques to employ within a limited time frame. R1 frequently noticed the flow of the lesson plan she created and struggled with time management and knowing which techniques to apply. R2 faced challenges in dividing time and



organizing the class effectively to serve student needs. These issues highlight the need for continuous professional development and effective lesson planning.

4. CONCLUSION

The Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia marks a shift toward student-centered learning, emphasizing teachers' roles as facilitators, motivators, and supervisors. It gives schools flexibility to adapt learning objectives and pathways based on students' needs. Pre-service teachers gain practical experience through the Teaching Assistance program, where they apply the curriculum's principles, supported by resources like the Kemdikbud website and academic journals. Despite its benefits, the curriculum presents challenges, including understanding diverse student abilities, managing time effectively, and dealing with limited facilities. Teachers must implement differentiated instruction, which involves tailoring lessons based on students' cognitive levels and readiness, but this is time-consuming and difficult to manage in resource-limited environments.

To address these obstacles, teachers rely on adaptive strategies, such as backup lesson plans and continuous professional development. Effective lesson planning and ongoing growth help teachers improve classroom delivery, ensuring smoother implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. In the long run, this approach aims to foster critical thinking, engagement, and adaptability in students, while supporting teachers in meeting the diverse needs of their learners.

Future studies might examine successful differentiated instruction methods that solve the problems of variable student skill levels and limited resources, providing useful tactics for educators working in a range of educational environments. In order to ensure the merdeka curriculum's flexibility and equality throughout Indonesia's educational landscape, it would be crucial to investigate how regional cultural and socioeconomic issues affect its implementation. Future research might improve and refine the curriculum's implementation by addressing these interrelated features, thereby assisting teachers and students in accomplishing its goals.

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