Can the Merdeka Belajar curriculum really improve students' reading literacy?

[1]M. Zaim iD, [2]Muflihatuz Zakiyah iD

[1,2]*English Language Education Department, Universitas Negeri Padang, INDONESIA*
[1,2]*Jl. Prof. Dr. Hamka, Air Tawar, Padang, 25131*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Merdeka Belajar curriculum is the brand-new curriculum implemented in Indonesia in response to the low reading literacy of students. Many discussed the features and the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and claim that implementing the current curriculum is effective in improving students' reading literacy due to its features, such as simpler yet in-depth materials and flexible time for learning outcome accomplishment; however, there is not yet any empirical evidence provided to prove the claim. This descriptive research was undertaken to provide empirical evidence of that claim as the curriculum has just been implemented. Twelve teachers across senior high schools in West Sumatera were willingly involved in this study. The data were collected through a written interview, in which the teachers answered ten relevant questions. Their responses about the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum were analyzed qualitatively. The findings established new facts that answered the research question from the teachers' point of view. First, compared to the 2013 curriculum implementation, they did not only see the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum as advantageous but also disadvantageous. Even few of them found it run-of-the-mill. Second, when implementing the current curriculum, the teacher developed strategies to increase students' reading literacy and interest. They began by supplying multiple materials, designing fun but exhaustive learning instructional activities, varying the assessments, and building reading corners with captivating books to read. Third, after a year of implementation, the students' reading literacy tended to stay the same, even though it did improve a little for some students. These were because the teachers still experienced problems regarding curriculum, school, and time. In summary, implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum cannot improve students' reading literacy.
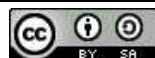
How to cite (APA Style):
Zaim, M. & Zakiyah, M. (2024). Can the Merdeka Belajar curriculum really improve students' reading literacy? *JOALL (Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literature)*, 9(1), 147-167. **https://doi.org/10.33369/joall.v9i1.32173**

The Ministry of Education, Culture Research and Technology launched a new Merdeka Belajar curriculum to mobilize in favour of changes required in the 21st century, including reading literacy improvement for Indonesian students. Reading literacy is a fundamental building component for students' learning. It represents someone's ability to read texts through higher-level cognitive and metacognitive processes. It uses the information obtained from the reading to secure his/her necessities of life dealing with text (Mo, 2019; OECD, 2000). Thus, readers should engage with written information presented in one or more texts for a specific purpose. Besides, they must understand and integrate the text with their pre-existing knowledge to engage with what they are reading. Further, they must examine the writer's point of view or opinion and decide whether the text is reliable, correct, and relevant to their purpose or intent.

Pratiwi (2019) found that PISA results contributed to this curriculum change from 2013 to Merdeka Belajar since The Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) results, an international literacy assessment, reveal that Indonesian students lack reading literacy and numeracy (Avvisati et al., 2019). Merdeka Belajar's curriculum liberates teachers and students in achieving learning goals by focusing on subject matter, character development, and student needs. In contrast to the 2013 curriculum, which is dense in material and teaching tools (Anggraena et al., 2022), teachers who apply the Merdeka Belajar curriculum can independently facilitate what students want to learn after they have deepened the essential material and develop soft skills and character (*Kurikulum Merdeka – Pusat Kurikulum Dan Pembelajaran*, n.d.; Peraturan Pemerintah RI, 2022). In other words, the implementation of this curriculum is adjusted to the needs and pace of students. With more straightforward materials and flexible learning, essential competencies such as reading literacy and numeracy can be acquired, used, and wanted as early as possible. For this reason, teachers must first be familiar with the characteristics of their students (*Latar Belakang Kurikulum Merdeka – Merdeka Mengajar*, n.d.) and have sufficient independence and creativity to become effective learning facilitators.

To analyze students' needs, teachers are encouraged to diagnose their respective students through diagnostic assessments undertaken before the new academic year begins. The diagnostic assessment is the approach of formative assessment that determines students' readiness to learn teaching materials and achieve the planned learning objectives. This diagnostic assessment measures students' cognitive (competency conditions) and non-cognitive aspects (such as learning strengths and weaknesses, socio-economic background, and learning environment).

Moreover, to support the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, the government also provides accessible digital platforms, namely the Merdeka Mengajar platform for teachers and schools and the Rumah Belajar platform for students. Digitalization is included for it can give opportunities for them to acquire, use, and get used to another type of literacy, namely digital literacy. Additionally, based on the case studies in the 2,500 Penggerak (driving) schools that projected to implement the curriculum, it successfully overcame learning loss and the learning gap due to the pandemic (Anggraena et al., 2022).

Considering the advantages of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum above, many stakeholders expect that Indonesian students will improve their literacy skills when the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is implemented (*Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Berpotensi Tingkatkan Skor PISA Indonesia*, 2022). Otherwise, some argue that curriculum change cannot improve students' reading literacy (Nurmuhaemin, 2022). Instead, variables should be considered so that the Merdeka Belajar curriculum's successful implementation can apply to superior and inferior (non-driving) schools. Such a variable is infrastructure support. Still, many schools in Indonesia lack proper learning facilities. Another variable is the availability of teachers who are well-informed about the curriculum and ready to implement it according to the standard. In sum, it is still debatable whether implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum can improve students' reading literacy.

Several studies have discussed the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. According to a survey on the school's readiness to implement the Merdeka Belajar curriculum conducted limitedly in the Year 2022/2023 to 32 SMAs/SMKs in Pekanbaru City, 81% of them were ready and have been implementing the curriculum. Even though the Merdeka Belajar curriculum has been widely implemented in schools, some of them faced obstacles when doing it. Ferdaus and Novita (2023) found that teachers had problems related to teaching methodology and students had a problem regarding their confidence in learning due to the switchover from teacher-centered to student-centered. In another study, it was revealed that the implementation became challenging when teachers had no adequate amount of understanding of how to design and use a teaching module correctly and how to assess students' abilities properly (Kamila & Agus RM, 2023). In addition, English language teaching and learning using the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is impeded by the strong influence of students' mother language (Zidan, 2023). Other researchers also investigated teachers' and/or students' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Mostly, it was found that they had perceived this new thing positively (Alfama Zamista et al., 2023; Fatma & Ratmanida, 2023; Latifah et al., 2020; Prakoso et al., 2021; Supriatna, 2023; Triskia et al., 2023; Ubay et al., 2023). This is because

some features that the curriculum offers, namely character education (Latifah et al., 2020), the use of portfolios (Prakoso et al., 2021) and projects (Fatma & Ratmanida, 2023), more opportunities given to the students based on their characteristics, ICT use (Alfama Zamista et al., 2023), and differentiated learning (Fatma & Ratmanida, 2023), etc.

However, there is not yet any research undertaken to verify the assumption that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum can or cannot improve students' reading literacy. Therefore, this research aims to fill the gap limitedly in exploring the teachers' perspective, whether or not the teacher finds that implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum could develop students' reading literacy nearing the end of compulsory education. To explore this topic, four research questions were stated.

1. How do English teachers perceive the Merdeka Belajar curriculum?
2. What are the teachers' strategies to improve students' reading literacy when implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum?
3. How is the students' reading literacy after implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum?
4. How is the students' reading motivation after implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum?

METHOD
Research Design
To answer the research questions above, this research used a qualitative method to better understand teachers' experiences implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum concerning students' reading literacy development.

Instruments and Procedures
The population of the study was teachers who have been implementing the curriculum in non-driving senior high schools because the driving schools have been set with good infrastructure and environment that can influence the result of the study. Ten English teachers from certain SMAs in representative cities and regencies in West Sumatera, such as Ampek Angkek, Tilatang Kamang, Banuhampu, Bukittinggi, and Padang were taken from the population using the purposive sampling technique because they have been teaching English subjects using Merdeka Belajar curriculum at least for 1 and/or 2 years in their school.

To gather the data, the sample was given a form and asked to write answers to 10 interview questions related to the issue being discussed in Bahasa Indonesia. The instrument was tested for its validity by an expert in the field of curriculum in the aspects of language and relevancy and it was considered valid to be used as the instrument of this research.

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data were analyzed following procedures by Creswell & Creswell (2018) thematic analysis. Since the respondents wrote their responses in Bahasa Indonesia, the researchers read the data carefully, translated them into English, and classified them into information segments. The segments were then coded. The first codes were developed utilizing the raw data generated from the teachers' answers in the written interview form, with a focus on the research questions. The researchers selected more detailed labels and sub-labels after carefully reviewing the codes and data. Consequently, the themes that informed the study's conclusions were recognized and investigated. The phenomenon under inquiry was explained using the newly created categories.

FINDINGS

The teachers' responses found that the respondents at least have been implementing the curriculum for a year. Eight teachers also conducted the diagnostic assessment and found that many students had difficulties understanding the following texts and questions; another teacher had not yet assessed because it had not yet been scheduled when the data were being collected. From the diagnosis, the teachers classified the students per phase, and there are sometimes two phases in one class.

Teachers' Perception of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum to Improve Students' Reading Literacy

Three themes emerged from the teachers' answers about how they perceive the reading literacy development in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Seventy percent of the teachers agreed that the curriculum is advantageous in five aspects. Besides, all of them agreed that the curriculum also has disadvantages in other aspects. However, twenty percent found no difference in reading literacy development between Merdeka and 2013 curricula and ten percent needed more time to understand the curriculum. The respondents' answers are explored below.

Theme 1: Advantageous

The teachers perceived the Merdeka Belajar curriculum as advantageous compared to the previous in terms of content, how long the learning outcomes should be achieved, student-centeredness, approach, skills, and methodology. First, it is because there are more resources. The Merdeka

Belajar curriculum lets the teachers use miscellaneous resources for reading materials. The following are some excerpts from the teachers' answers.

(1) "Students have more sources for reading material…" (Excerpt from T2)

(2) "…the teacher is allowed to search for text according to the abilities of the students being taught…" (Excerpt from T5)

(3) "…the difficulty levels of materials are low, medium, and high…" (Excerpt from T8)

In addition, the explanation of the learning is also considered in-depth.

(4) "…and the learning outcomes are more detailed." (Excerpt from T2)

(5) "For reading element in the Medeka curriculum again uses the text-based learning approach. By using this approach, learning to read is more meaningful and understood by the students." (Excerpt from T7)

Besides, determining the scope of material and learning targets is flexible because the learning outcome (LO) is designed for one-year achievement, and the minimum criteria of mastery (KKM) are absent.

(6) "Merdeka Belajar curriculum is more flexible for teachers in determining the scope of material and learning targets." (Excerpt from T3)

(7) "…it does not work on the number of target materials that must be taught but requires deep mastery of the learning material studied by the students." (Excerpt from T9)

Furthermore, the learning is designed following the student's pace. Thus, it uses a student-centered approach.

(8) " …according to their ability/readiness to learn." (Excerpt from T5)

(9) "…according to their learning style." (Excerpt from T9)

(10) "….adjusted … to the competence and characteristics of students." (Excerpt from T8)

Thereunto, it encourages HOT skills in reading.

(11) "Their understanding of written texts becomes deeper…" (Excerpt from T8)

(12) "Merdeka Belajar curriculum emphasizes developing students' critical reading skills, such as analysis, synthesis, comprehension, and evaluation." (Excerpt from T10)

Withal, reading activities are not only set up for finding information but also for pleasure.

(13) "…They read written texts to learn something/to get information and for fun." (Excerpt from T8)

Theme 2: Disadvantageous

Not only did the teachers perceive positively but also negatively toward the curriculum. They agreed that it also has disadvantages in content, time allocation, learning differentiation, and reliability. First, there is the repetition of material at the advanced level. The teacher found that some of the materials in Phase E were taught again in Phase F, confusing them about what else to teach at the advanced level.

(14) "The repetition of the requested text for each phase makes the teacher confused about how to implement it in class. Some of the material in phase E is the same as phase F, so the teacher experiences difficulties running the class." (Excerpt from T1)

Second, the lack of extracurricular learning hours caused the achievement of the learning outcomes to be hampered.

(15) "With many resources but fewer hours in class, the students lack time to learn reading." (Excerpt from T2)

(16) "…two hours a week in the required subjects is not enough to train students because the stretch from one week to the next is too long for them to practice and memorize what they learned." (Excerpt from T9)

Third, the teachers faced difficulty because they needed to provide materials with three difficulty levels (low, medium, and high). The students' low reading proficiency made it much more difficult.

(17) "Teachers are having a bit of a hard time coordinating materials and methods in teaching reading that can cover all levels of student abilities." (Excerpt from T3)

(18) "The conditions and abilities of the students encountered are still unsuitable for the expected stage (Level B1). Many students still at the basic level find it difficult to understand the existing text." (Excerpt from T6)

Fourth, the implementation requires both students' and teachers' active participation. The teachers should prepare diverse materials regarding difficulty level, form, topic, context, source, media, etc. Meanwhile, the students should do too because the activities centered on them.

(19) "Teachers are required to make three levels of difficulty of reading material given to students both for the process and assessment of formative and summative exams." (Excerpt from T8)

Fifth, the learning design was considered less reliable for every student. The teachers perceived it only applicable to students with high motivation and good learning environment support.

(20) "This curriculum is suitable only for students with a strong will to learn, good motivation within themselves, and strong support from their families. However, conversely, those who lack motivation will be confused." (Excerpt from T9)

Finally, demands to achieve high reading comprehension were absent from the curriculum.

(21) "In my opinion, the weakness is that students are not required to achieve high reading comprehension but according to the level of their abilities and interests." (Excerpt from T8)

Theme 3: No difference compared with the 2013 curriculum

Three teachers did not see any difference in implementing the two curriculums. They both use a genre-based approach (Kemendikbudristek BSKAP, 2022).

(22) "For the materials, in principle, they are the same. No difference." (Excerpt from T4)

(23) "Merdeka and 2013 curriculum for English subjects are not much different because the learning steps that are carried out are the same, namely using a genre-based approach. The BKOF steps are still followed. The advantage is only in applying differentiated learning written in the teaching module. Previously, we had applied differentiated learning for learning English but had not written it down yet." (Excerpt from T6)

Theme 4: Difficult to understand the curriculum

One of the teachers admitted to not understanding the curriculum fully and still learning it.

(24) "I don't understand because I'm still learning to understand the curriculum." (Excerpt from T1)

Teachers' Strategies to Improve Students' Reading Literacy

From the teachers' responses, three themes appeared, namely 1) using many learning resources, 2) carrying out learning that focuses on in-depth activities

with gamification, and 3) diversifying assessment tools. The answers to this second research question were explored as follows.

Theme 1: Using many learning resources
To support the implementation, the teachers used some learning sources, such as textbooks published by the government and private publishers and textbooks, modules, or LKS developed by the teachers according to their respective students' characteristics. They adapted the materials in four ways. First, they just took the whole materials from a single textbook published by a private publisher. One of the teachers said,

> (25) "Books published by Erlangga." (Excerpt from T2)

Second, they took some parts of the materials in the national textbook (such as text, task, or assessment only) to be joined with other parts of the materials in other existing textbooks published by Intan Pariwara, Oxford, Cambridge, Collin, and Spectrum, etc., which are relevant to the curriculum demands and students' characteristics. Some respondents reported that,

> (26) "I partially use books by the Ministry of Education and Culture, but for student practice, only… Some materials from Oxford, Cambridge, Collin or Spectrum and others support the material being studied". (Excerpt from T9)
>
> (27) "…for some parts, I use books by the Ministry of Education and Culture; for others, I use books from Intan Pariwara publication." (Excerpt from T5)

Third, they made material adaptations by combining the materials in the provided textbook(s) with teacher-made materials. The following are some of the responses:

> (28) "I used materials in books from the Ministry of Education and Culture and other publishers and then modified the exercises according to the class's needs." (Excerpt from Teacher3)
>
> (29) "I used a book published by the Ministry of Education and Culture and combined it with a module that I made myself…" (Excerpt from T6)

Fourth, they developed their teaching materials using relevant resources from the Internet in module and student worksheets and considering their respective students' competency. Here are some reports from the respondents:

> (30) "…I tried to develop my materials by searching the Internet and adjusting it to the curriculum". (Excerpt from T1)

(31) "…Some are self-made in the form of LKS or LKPD (student worksheet), which are arranged based on student's abilities." (Excerpt from T9)

In addition, considerations about the quality of the materials were taken into. The teachers selected the materials by seeing their newness and authenticity.

(32) "By providing up-to-date material and looking for authentic texts found in the speakers' environment so that students are more interested in reading because they gain new knowledge." (Excerpt from T1)

Other than these learning resources, the teacher also provided the students with materials to read for fun. One of the teachers outlined that,

(33) "Using other resources… (for example) English story books I bought." (Excerpt from T9)

Theme 2: Game-like-yet-in-depth learning
Aside from using various materials, the teachers also focus on using technology to mediate the materials. One of the respondents wrote:

(34) "Integrating digital literacy to the reading activities… that can assist students in understanding and evaluating information from digital sources and teach them how to interact with digital content. I am trying to make learning resources such as using AI media." (Excerpt from T10)

To bring excitement, the teachers gamified the learning activities.

(35) "Play games that support the activities." (Excerpt from T9)
(36) "Trying to implement fun and differentiated learning." (Excerpt from T7)

Further, the teachers applied a systematic procedure to develop the student's reading literacy. The following are the teachers' responses.

(37) "Students are tasked with reading English story books and materials on the internet to support their learning in the classroom." (Excerpt from T2)
(38) "Using the technique of determining topic and details and drilling vocabulary." (Excerpt from T3)
(39) "Displaying their literacy results according to the characteristics of an independent way of learning (for those with strong learning motivation)." (Excerpt from T9)

(40) "…asking them to reflect on the text they read inside or outside the classroom." (Excerpt from T6)

Theme 3: Diversifying Assessment Tools
The teachers in this research used various assessment tools from two approaches: formative assessment such as observation, performance in the form of reading aloud, written tests with multiple choice questions or essays, quizzes, final exams, assignments, and portfolios. One of the respondents wrote,

(41) "For formative assessments, I often create assessments in the forms of short 5-minute quizzes, crosswords, matches, etc. Meanwhile, the summative assessment is often called reading comprehension." (Excerpt from T6)

(42) "To measure learning achievement during the learning process (formative assessment), I give assignments in groups and individually related to the material presented, and after learning (summative assessment), I give quizzes on the material that has been taught to measure students' overall reading literacy skills." (Excerpt from T10)

(43) "Assign and give freedom to students to read texts according to their interests; provide LOTS, MOTS, and HOTS questions so that students can develop critical thinking skills and problem-solving; sometimes asking students to understand information in the form of diagrams, tables, graphs and then conveying the narrative both orally and in writing." (Excerpt from T8)

Teachers' Perception on the Extent to Which the Students' Reading Literacy Improves
Two themes come into view from the teachers' responses: not changed and improved.

Theme 1: Improved a bit
Sixty percent of the respondents had their students' reading literacy improved. This was due to the characteristics of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum that gives freedom to teachers to arrange the flow of learning objectives (known as ATP) and carry differentiated and student-based learning. These resulted in various materials (theme, text, media, context, and topic).

(44) "There are not too many changes …" (Excerpt from T1)

(45) "Increases student literacy because in the curriculum, reading sources, reading materials are listed a lot." (Excerpt from T2)

(46) "Because the teacher is given the freedom to prepare ATP for the achievement of learning outcomes for reading and viewing elements according to the conditions of the students." (Excerpt from T3)

(47) "…Because the first goal of learning English in the curriculum is to develop communicative competence in English with a variety of multimodal texts (oral, written, visual, and audio-visual), it is communicative skills that will increase students' oral and written, visual and audio-visual reading literacy…"(Excerpt from T6)

(48) "The themes and reading materials for students in the curriculum are varied, and the context is also related to students." (Excerpt from T8)

(49) "….for those …. who study and practice reading in detail or as detailed as possible." (Excerpt from T9)

Theme 2: Not changed
The other teachers found that their students' reading literacy had not changed. The reasons were that the type of texts to read was still the same, and there was not enough time to develop their proficiency and interest.

(50) "No (change), because the reading material is the same. It is just that Merdeka Belajar curriculum focuses on teacher's teaching methods based on various student abilities." (Excerpt from T4)

(51) "During the one-year implementation, there was no visible increase because the time allotted was only 2 hours per week…" (Excerpt from T5)

(52) "It is the same because the two curricula use the same concept." (Excerpt from T7)

Teachers' Perception on the Extent to which the Students' Motivation Improves
In response to whether the student's learning motivation increased when the Merdeka Belajar curriculum was implemented, most teachers found no change in their learning motivation. Nevertheless, the others found a yes. Therefore, two themes associated with the learning motivation of students appeared.

Theme 1: Not changed
There are reasons why no change was found, as follows.

(53) "During a year of the learning/teaching process of implementing the curriculum, no significant impact was seen; classes continued as usual." (Excerpt from T1)

(54) "It is normal because student motivation lies not in the curriculum but the learning environment." (Excerpt from T4)

(55) "Teachers have limited ability to present different types of texts…Text types are also limited, and the topics are less interesting." (Excerpt from T5)

(56) "No (change), because in my opinion, students are motivated not because of the curriculum but how the teacher brings the curriculum (whatever it is) to the class they teach." (Excerpt from T6)

(57) "No, because there is no significant difference from the previous curriculum." (Excerpt from T7)

Theme 2: Improved a bit

Differently, other teachers found that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum works for improving students' reading motivation because the students learned reading based on their level. Some reports were highlighted below from the teachers' answers to the same question.

(58) "Of course, yes. Students learn according to their abilities because the techniques are more varied and differentiated." (Excerpt from T2)

(59) "Yes, because in teaching reading, the teacher makes the basic ability of students a benchmark for implementing learning. Teachers can choose materials that match the abilities of their students." (Excerpt from T3)

(60) "Students are more motivated to learn English because learning is focused on student achievement according to their competencies, talents, and interests and pays attention to the varied student learning styles so that each student's learning needs are met. Besides, students are more independent in developing their potential; the teacher is a motivator and facilitator in guiding and guiding students to achieve learning goals in class." (Excerpt from T8)

(61) "Students are more motivated to learn English using the Merdeka Belajar curriculum than the 2013 curriculum because it applies to students who have a strong will to learn, good motivation within themselves, and strong support from their respective families." (Excerpt from T9)

DISCUSSION

The first result shows that the teachers perceived various toward the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum for reading literacy improvement. The majority of them perceived positively that it was advantageous to implement the curriculum to improve students' reading

literacy. This occurs because of five reasons, namely its learning resources wealth, more details, flexibility, HOT reading skills, the variety of reading purposes, and student-centeredness. This is in line with previous studies finding that English teachers had a positive perception toward the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in terms of its flexibility for it allows the teachers to design teaching modules (Fatma & Ratmanida, 2023).

Even so, the teachers also perceived that the curriculum also has some disadvantages. This occurs because they found certain content similarities between learning phases that lead to confusion, the lack of time allocation, the complexity of learning differentiation, and the low reliability for every type of student. Commonly, in differentiated learning, the students can choose what kind of project they use to show their competency (Bender, 2012), so teachers should be ready for many rubrics to assess various types of students' work, at least.

Besides, a minority of them perceived negatively that the implementation of Merdeka Belajar could not help in improving the reading literacy of students. This occurs because the teachers found the last two curriculums are not so different since they both use a genre-based approach. Therefore, when implementing the 2013 curriculum, the students' reading literacy scored low in PISA 2015 - 2018, and so will the next PISA test. This result is in line with several studies related to the use of genre-based approach for teaching reading which found that the genre-based approach can increase reading comprehension (Fitrawati, 2012; Gunawan, 2022; Montero-Arévalo, 2019; Muh. Said & Munawir, 2022; Nabella & Rini, 2023), yet, reading literacy is not about comprehension only but also how the comprehension from reading is used for various life purposes, dealing with text. That is why using the approach is not enough.

The second result shows the teachers used three strategies to improve students' reading literacy, including using materials from many resources. Some teachers use materials contained in a textbook published by Erlangga as a whole. This occurs because they considered this publisher to have a good record of accomplishment. This aligns with the previous research finding (Aulia, 2019; Serasi et al., 2021; Yuanovita, 2011) that English teachers in Indonesia are biased toward Erlangga English textbooks as their primary teaching resource. Aulia (2019) found that this was why such textbooks consisted of a significant number of exercises and a belief that the textbooks were better than those provided by the Ministry of Education without any proof. Later in the research, it was proved that one of the English textbooks Erlangga published was irrelevant to the implemented curriculum.

Besides, they also used game-like-yet-in-depth learning and diversified the learning assessment. This occurs because the teachers thought

the students like gamified things. This is accordingly with the previous studies on students' perception of the use of gamification in learning English that found the perceptions were positive (Abidin & Zaman, 2017; Aguilar-Cruz & Álvarez Guayara, 2021; Ariati & Iswahyuni, 2023; Putra & Priyatmojo, 2021; Zainiah et al., 2022). To make reading the students' routine, the teachers can also supply the students with exciting books. The books can be put on the bookshelves to build a reading corner in the classroom. It is a way of promoting a reading culture among students (Gusti Yarmi, 2022). This strategy effectively increased students' reading interest, learning motivation, creativity, excitement, and communicative confidence (Gusti Yarmi, 2022).

The third result revealed that 6 of 10 teachers found their students' reading literacy did not change, while some others said their students' reading literacy improved a bit. This occurs because the students were too lazy to read, the materials were the same as in the previous curriculum, and the learning hours were not enough. Yet, they thought it would be possible if the Merdeka Belajar curriculum was implemented optimally and focused on developing reading literacy. Still, the rest of the teachers found their students' reading literacy improved a bit. This occurs because of the flexibility given to the teachers, the differentiation, and the student-centeredness encouraged in the curriculum. This is in line with what Zens (2021) found that differentiated learning slightly improved students' motivation and engagement in doing assignments.

The fourth result of this research revealed that 7 of 10 teachers found that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum did not affect their students' reading motivation since the content and learning environment were similar and the teachers were not yet ready to provide diverse yet relevant materials. Dorman (2001) stated that the conditions in the classroom as one of the learning environments are a good indicator of students' performance. Since nothing changed in the classroom condition, so did students' motivation. This is different from what was found by Rakhmawati et al. (2022) from the interview with a kindergarten principal perceiving that implementing the curriculum makes children enthusiastic about learning.

However, the three of them found that differentiated learning contributed to the improvement of their students' reading motivation when the Merdeka Belajar curriculum was implemented. The same result was also found earlier in another research. Zens (2021) found a slight increase in students' participation when the activities were differentiated. Aside from differentiating instructional activities or processes, Tomlinson also encourages diversifying the presentation forms of content and types of products (see Bender, 2012). There were some main factors a teacher should consider to carry out differentiated learning effectively, namely curriculum (teaching support, textbook, and topic), instruction (teacher's teaching,

classroom activities, and classroom management), knowledge of differentiated learning, school (administration, size, and environment), time (teaching and preparation time), and workload (Lavania & Mohamad Nor, 2013). The teachers should ensure that these factors meet specific criteria perfectly. Unfortunately, in this research, the teachers reported that they had problems with the topic that was available limitedly, a school environment that has not yet promoted reading literacy, teaching preparation that kills time, and learning hours that are inadequate. Hence, it makes sense that the student's reading literacy and interest somewhat increased.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion above, some new facts emerged from the teachers' experiences. First, compared to the 2013 curriculum implementation, they did not only see the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum as advantageous but also disadvantageous. Even a few of them found it run-of-the-mill or did not have a good understanding of the curriculum yet. Second, when implementing the current curriculum, the teacher developed strategies to increase students' reading literacy and interest. They began by supplying multiple materials, designing fun but exhaustive learning instructional activities, and varying the assessments. Building reading corners with captivating books to read is not bad. Third, after a year of implementation, the student's reading literacy tended to stay the same, even though it did improve a little for some students. Fourth, the same goes for students' reading motivation in which many teachers found their motivation was unchanged. These were because the teachers still experienced problems regarding curriculum, school, and time. In summary, implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum cannot really improve students' reading literacy.

The results of this study give implications on providing empirical evidence of the claim saying that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum can improve students' reading literacy. The fact that it was found through this study that the 1-year implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum cannot improve students' reading literacy and motivation but a little, teachers should reflect on how the Merdeka Belajar curriculum should be better implemented in the aspect of knowledge, technology use, and learning syntax since it was delegated to the teachers. For example, teachers should learn more about the differentiated learning approach and the classification of students based on their level and pace because they were the novelty of the implementation of the current curriculum.

This study has some limitations. First, it was limitedly conducted in West Sumatera at eight non-driving schools to ten teachers only. Second, the teachers have implemented the curriculum only for 1 or 2 years. Third, the ten

teachers have different knowledge and skills in implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

For these reasons, it is suggested that future researchers on the same topic evaluate English teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum or investigate students' reading literacy after at least three years of implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Abidin, H. Z., & Zaman, F. H. K. (2017). Students' perceptions on game-based classroom response system in a computer programming course. *Proceedings of the 2017 IEEE 9th International Conference on Engineering Education, IEEE ICEED 2017, 2018-Janua*, 254–259. https://doi.org/10.1109/ICEED.2017.8251203

Aguilar-Cruz, P. J., & Álvarez Guayara, H. A. (2021). A Serious Game to learn English: The case of Bethe1Challenge. *International Journal of Serious Games*, *8*(4), 65–80. https://doi.org/10.17083/IJSG.V8I4.448

Alfama Zamista, A., Deswita UIN Imam Bonjol Padang Jl Yunus, P. M., Lintah, L., Barat, S., adeliazamista, I., & Author, C. (2023). Perceptions of Indonesian teachers on the implementation of the "Merdeka" Curriculum. *Jurnal Penelitian Dan Evaluasi Pendidikan*, *11*(1), 13–25. http://jurnal.ustjogja.ac.id/index.php/wd

Anggraena, Y., Felicia, N., Ginanto, D. E., Pratiwi, I., Utama, B., Alhapip, L., & Widiaswati, D. (2022). *Kajian Akademik: Kurikulum untuk Pemulihan Pembelajaran* (1st ed., Februari 2021). Pusat Kurikulum dan Pembelajaran Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi. https://kurikulum.kemdikbud.go.id/wp-content/unduhan/Kajian_Pemulihan.pdf

Ariati, S. D., & Iswahyuni, I. (2023). Students' Perceptions Towards the Application of Gamification in English Class. *ELLITE: Journal of English Language, Literature, and Teaching*, *8*(1), 20–28. https://doi.org/10.32528/ellite.v8i1.15297

Aulia, K. N. (2019). An Evaluation of English Textbook for Senior High School Students Grade X Published by Erlangga. In *Repository of UIN Jakarta* (Vol. 1, Issue 1). http://conference.unsri.ac.id

Avvisati, F., Echazarra, A., Givord, P., & Schwabe, M. (2019). *Indonesia Country Note PISA 2018 Result*. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_IDN.pdf

Bender, W. N. (2012). Differentiated Instruction: Then and Now. In *Differentiating Instruction for Students With Learning Disabilities: New Best Practices for General and Special Educators* (3rd ed., pp. 1–24). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.2753/RES1060-9393340173

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches*. SAGE Publications.

Dorman, J. P. (2001). Associations between classroom environment and academic efficacy. *Learning Environments Research*, 4(3), 243–257. http://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1014490922622%5Cnhttp://link.springer.com.nukweb.nuk.uni-lj.si/article/10.1023/A:1014490922622%5Cnhttp://link.springer.com.nukweb.nuk.uni-lj.si/content/pdf/10.1023/A:1014490922622.pdf

Fatma, & Ratmanida. (2023). English Teachers' Perception toward Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High Schools in Koto Tangah, Padang. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 12(4), 1089–1095. https://doi.org/10.24036/jelt.v12i4.125677

Ferdaus, S. A., & Novita, D. (2023). The Implementation of The Merdeka Curriculum in English Subject at A Vocational High School in Indonesia. *Briliant: Jurnal Riset Dan Konseptual*, 8(2), 297. https://doi.org/10.28926/briliant.v8i2.1201

Fitrawati, F. (2012). Improving Senior High School Students' Reading Comprehension through Reading Strategies Derived from Genre Based Approach. *Komposisi: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Seni*, 10(2). https://doi.org/10.24036/KOMPOSISI.V10I2.60

Gunawan, G. (2022). Teaching Reading Comprehension Through Genre-Based Approach (GBA) at Senior High School. *Acitya: Journal of Teaching and Education*, 4(1), 266–273. https://doi.org/10.30650/ajte.v4i1.3224

Gusti Yarmi, S. W. M. Z. E. (2022). Implementation of the Reading Corner Through the School Literature Movement in Increasing Students' Reading Interest in Elementary School. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pengajaran Guru Sekolah Dasar (JPPGuseda)*, 5(3), 90–96. https://doi.org/10.55215/jppguseda.v5i3.6475

Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Berpotensi Tingkatkan Skor PISA Indonesia. (2022). Gerakan Literasi Nasional (GLN). https://gln.kemdikbud.go.id/glnsite/implementasi-kurikulum-merdeka-berpotensi-tingkatkan-skor-pisa-indonesia/

Kamila, S. N., & Agus RM, A. H. (2023). Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Senior High School. *Jurnal Educatio FKIP UNMA*, 9(1), 394–401. https://doi.org/10.31949/educatio.v9i1.4591

Kemendikbudristek BSKAP. (2022). *[Salinan] Keputusan Kepala Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan,*

Riset, dan Teknologi Nomor 008/H/KR/2022 Tentang Capaian Pembelajaran pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Jenjang Pendidikan Dasar, dan Jenjang Pen (p. 149). https://kurikulum.kemdikbud.go.id/wp-content/unduhan/CP_2022.pdf

Kurikulum Merdeka – Pusat Kurikulum dan Pembelajaran. (n.d.). Retrieved January 7, 2023, from http://kurikulum.kemdikbud.go.id/kurikulum-merdeka/

Latar Belakang Kurikulum Merdeka – Merdeka Mengajar. (n.d.). Kemendikbudristek RI. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from https://pusatinformasi.guru.kemdikbud.go.id/hc/en-us/articles/6824331505561-Latar-Belakang-Kurikulum-Merdeka

Latifah, N., Ishlahiyah, M., & Furaida, A. (2020). Teachers' Perceptions: Implementation of Character Building in ELT toward Indonesian Millenial Generation. *The 1st International Conference on Recent Innovations (ICRI 2018)*, *50*, 553–563. https://doi.org/10.5220/0009911805530563

Lavania, M., & Mohamad Nor, F. (2013). Factors Influencing the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in English Language Instruction in Rural and Urban Secondary Schools of Johor Bahru. *Creative Education*, *12*, 1235–1246. https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2021.126093

Mo, J. (2019). How does PISA define and measure reading literacy? In *PISA in Focus* (No. 101; PISA). https://doi.org/10.1787/efc4d0fe-en

Montero-Arévalo, S. J. (2019). Effects Of Genre Based Approach (GBA) In EFL Reading Comprehension And Writing. *GIST – Education and Learning Research Journal*, *19*(19), 84–100. https://doi.org/10.26817/16925777.762

Muh. Said, D. R. S., & Munawir. (2022). The Use of Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in Teaching Reading Comprehension in Terms of Skimming. *Inspiring: English Education Journal*, *5*(1), 55–63. https://doi.org/10.35905/inspiring.v5i1.2621

Nabella, A. C. R., & Rini, S. (2023). The Effectiveness of Using Genre-Based Approach to Enhance Reading Comprehension in Narrative Text for Young Learners. *Jurnal Teknologi Pendidikan : Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Pembelajaran*, *8*(4), 758. https://doi.org/10.33394/jtp.v8i4.8643

Nurmuhaemin, W. (2022, May 27). Kurikulum Merdeka Nestapa "Sekolah Paria". *Kompas*. https://www.kompas.id/baca/artikel-opini/2022/05/25/kurikulum-merdeka-nestapa-sekolah-paria

OECD. (2000). *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the Adult International Survey*. https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/41529765.pdf

Peraturan Pemerintah RI. (2022). Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan Kebudayaan Riset dan Teknologi Tentang Standar Proses Pada Pendidikan Usia Dini, Jenjang Pendidikan Dasar dan Jenjang Pendidikan Menengah. *Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia Nomor 16 Tahun 2022 Tentang Standar Proses Pendidikan Dasar Dan Menengah*, *1*(69), 5–24.

Prakoso, B. H., Ramdani, Z., & Rahmah, B. (2021). Teacher's Perception on Merdeka Belajar Policy. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Assessment*, *3*(2). https://doi.org/10.26499/ijea.v3i2.84

Pratiwi, I. (2019). EFEK PROGRAM PISA TERHADAP KURIKULUM DI INDONESIA. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan*, 4(1), 51–71. https://doi.org/10.24832/JPNK.V4I1.1157

Putra, P. P., & Priyatmojo, A. S. (2021). Students' perception toward gamification applied in English language classroom. *ELT Forum*, *10*(1), 21–29. http://journal.unnes.ac.id/sju/index.php/elt

Rakhmawati, E., Kusdaryani, W., & Suyati, T. (2022). Teacher's Perception in Exploring the Merdeka Curriculum for Early Childhood Education. *Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Undiksha*, *10*(3), 352–359. https://doi.org/10.23887/paud.v10i3.55842

Serasi, R., Fatimah, L., Hakim, M. A. R., & Anggraini, D. (2021). A TEXTBOOK EVALUATION ON ENGLISH TEXTBOOK ENTITLED "GROW WITH ENGLISH" USED BY STUDENTS OF MI NURUL HUDA BENGKULU CITY. *Jurnal Al-Lughah*, *10*(1), 21–31.

Supriatna, D. (2023). Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Elementary Schools: How is Teachers' Perception? *International Journal Of Education*, *02*(02), 30–40. https://e-journal.citakonsultindo.or.id/index.php/IJEVSS/article/view/182

Triskia, M. D., Yulia, H., & Afifah, N. (2023). Teachers perception of the implementation of Merdeka curriculum at SMP IT Fathona Oku Baturaja and SMP IT Tunas Cendikia Baturaja. *Journal of Language Education (JOLE)*, *7*(1), 1–9. https://journal.unbara.ac.id/index.php/JoLE/article/view/2178

Ubay, S. N., Eldarni, E., Rayendra, R., & ... (2023). Teachers' Perceptions on the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 39 Padang City. *Jurnal Ilmiah …*, *9*(4), 2220–2226. https://doi.org/10.58258/jime.v9i1.5869/http

Yuanovita, P. F. (2011). The Content Analysis Of English Textbook Used By First Grader Of Senior High School Level "Look Ahead" Published By Erlangga [UIN SATU Tulungagung]. In *UIN SATU Tulungagung Institutional Repository*. http://repo.uinsatu.ac.id/id/eprint/1334

Zainiah, Z., Education, L., Negeri, U., Verina, N., Putri, W., Education, L., & Negeri, U. (2022). *Students ' Perception of Gamified Online Quizzes*. *5*(May), 98–108.

Zens, A. (2021). The impact of differentiated learning activities on student engagement and motivation in the English language arts classroom. *Dissertations, Theses, and Projects*, 611. https://red.mnstate.edu/thesis/611/%0Ahttps://red.mnstate.edu/cgi /viewcontent.cgi?article=1645&context=thesis

Zidan, M. R. (2023). A Literature Study On The Implementation Of Merdeka Curriculum. *Jurnal Riset Rumpun Ilmu Bahasa (JURRIBAH)*, 2(2), 153–167.

THE AUTHOR

M. Zaim is a professor of Linguistics and Language Teaching in the Department of English Language and Literature at Universitas Negeri Padang.

Muflihatuz Zakiyah is a former student of the Master's Program in English Language Teaching from Universitas Negeri Padang.