

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains the background of the research, the research questions, the research purposes, the research significances, the conceptual framework, and previous studies related to the research.

A. Background

The *Merdeka* Curriculum, a curriculum that is widely recognized in Indonesia, introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, represents a major shift toward flexibility, inclusivity, and student-centered learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). While this approach encourages personalized learning, it presents various challenges for teachers. These challenges contribute to teachers' well-being issues, as they face increased workload, stress, and adaptation difficulties in implementing the curriculum (Lestari, 2023; Rohamh et al., 2024). Therefore, this research explores both the classroom challenges faced by an EFL teacher under the *Merdeka* Curriculum and the teacher's professional well-being, as separate but interconnected areas of focus, using a narrative inquiry method.

In actual classroom settings, the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum has presented various challenges. Teachers are required to engage students actively in the learning process through student-centered activities, yet many of them struggle to do so due to students' low participation or limited basic skills (Lestari, 2023). Differentiated learning is also a key aspect of the curriculum; however, Sianturi (2025) highlights that teachers face difficulties in effectively applying differentiated learning because of the wide range of English proficiency levels among students in the same class, limited instructional time, and insufficient support or training to manage such diversity. Moreover, the use of technology, which is heavily emphasized in the curriculum, becomes problematic when teachers do not receive adequate training or when schools lack proper facilities and reliable internet connections (Negara, 2024). These combined issues often make it hard for teachers to deliver lessons effectively and manage the classroom smoothly.

These ongoing teaching challenges are not only technical or instructional in nature but are also closely related to the well-being of teachers. Well-being is a state of balance between the resources individuals have and the challenges or demands they face (Dodge, 2012). When challenges become too great compared to the resources available, this balance is disrupted, leading to lower levels of well-being. In the classroom context, the daily demands of implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum can disturb this balance.

Professional well-being consists of five factors: job satisfaction, self-efficacy, motivation, aspiration, and authority (Yıldırım, 2014). Among the dimensions of professional well-being, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and motivation are most directly related to the immediate challenges faced by teachers in the classroom under the *Merdeka* Curriculum. These aspects reflect teachers' perceptions, confidence, and drive in managing daily instructional demands, making them central to understanding professional well-being in this context. Studies by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) show that teachers' job satisfaction is strongly influenced by classroom factors such as student behavior, recognition from students and parents, and availability of instructional support. Self-efficacy, as described by Bandura (1997), is shaped by a teacher's confidence in handling diverse abilities, motivating less active students, and managing classroom time effectively, all of which are central challenges in daily teaching practice. Motivation, as explained by Ryan and Deci (2017), can fluctuate based on the meaning teachers find in their work and their interactions with students, which are directly affected by classroom conditions.

Preliminary observations conducted in a public junior high school in Bandung revealed that the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in English classrooms is not without problems. Teachers admitted that student-centered learning often led to more questions, but many of those questions were driven by students' confusion due to low reading comprehension rather than genuine curiosity. The open structure of the curriculum also made it difficult for teachers to decide which materials to focus on, especially when they needed to adjust them to students' diverse learning

needs. Additionally, the use of technology was hard to manage, not only because of infrastructure limitations but also due to a lack of supervision, which made it difficult to ensure that students stayed focused. These challenges indicate that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in English learning in junior high schools requires attention and improvement in order to run well.

Previous studies have explored the challenges teachers face in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum. For instance, Gurion (2024) conducted a literature review to assess teacher readiness and found that many educators are not yet fully prepared for the curriculum changes. Similarly, Rohmah, Hamamah, and Junining (2024) discovered that while teachers recognize the benefits of the curriculum, they often feel uncertain and lack confidence in applying it effectively. These issues are often linked to high workloads and limited support, which can lead to stress and emotional strain. Norman (2024) further emphasizes that the *Merdeka* Curriculum brings a rise in administrative tasks, such as documentation and reporting which contributes to cognitive overload and emotional fatigue among teachers. However, although these studies highlight important concerns, most of them focus only on institutional challenges, without specifically examining how these difficulties affect teacher well-being in real classroom situations.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring both the classroom challenges and the professional well-being of an EFL teacher in a junior high school context, using a narrative inquiry approach. Unlike most previous research, this study not only considers teachers' self-reported experiences but also includes classroom observation to capture the realities of teaching practice. To support teachers in managing the demands of curriculum change, professional development support must go hand in hand. Therefore, successful implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum requires not only instructional readiness but also a strong support system that nurtures teachers' professional well-being.

B. Research Questions

Based on the problem stated in the background, the research investigates the following questions:

1. What challenges does the EFL teacher face in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in the classroom?
2. How is the state of the EFL teacher's professional well-being (in terms of job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and motivation) while teaching under the *Merdeka* Curriculum?

C. Research Purposes

Based on the research questions above. The aims of this research are:

1. To identify the challenges faced by the EFL teacher in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in the classroom.
2. To explore the state of the EFL teacher's professional well-being, specifically focusing on job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and motivation, while teaching under the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

D. Research Significances

Two implications are anticipated from the research's findings, as follows:

1. Practical significances

Practically, the research is expected to assist policymakers in designing psychological support programs and professional training programs by understanding the challenges faced by an EFL teacher in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Besides, it provides EFL teachers with practical insights into effective strategies for addressing the challenges of the *Merdeka* Curriculum while maintaining the well-being. Moreover, it serves as a reflection tool for teachers to understand their challenges, improve resilience, and enhance their teaching strategies.

2. Theoretical significance

Theoretically, the research is expected to provide a foundation for future research on the theoretical framework of curriculum implementation by examining the challenges EFL teachers face and the professional well-being under the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

E. Research Scope

This research focuses on an EFL teacher at a public junior high school in Bandung who teaches seventh-grade students. This study explores two interconnected but independently significant focuses. First, the classroom challenges faced by an EFL teacher under the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Second, the state of professional well-being of the teacher under *Merdeka* Curriculum. This study draws on the framework outlined by Yıldırım (2014), who identifies five factors of professional well-being: job satisfaction, self-efficacy, motivation, aspiration, and authority. However, this research will focus only on job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and motivation, as these factors are the most relevant with challenge in the classroom. Aspiration and authority are not included because they are more connected to long-term career goals and the teacher's autonomy in making school-wide decisions, which were not the main focus of this classroom-based narrative study. By focusing on an EFL teacher with experience across different curriculum frameworks, the study aims to explore the challenges in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in classroom practice and the teacher's professional well-being.

F. Conceptual Framework

The *Merdeka* Curriculum brings a major shift in how English teachers are expected to teach. The *Merdeka* Curriculum encourages teachers to implement student-centered learning, differentiated learning, and flexible teaching approaches, giving them more autonomy to adjust lessons based on students' needs (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). In English classes, they are expected to use interactive and communicative activities, help students become more active in learning, and sometimes use technology. These changes are meant to improve the learning

process, but they also create new responsibilities for teachers that require them to adjust their teaching styles.

These responsibilities are not always easy, especially for English teachers. For example, in one class, some students may already understand English, while others are still beginners (Reza et al., 2023). This makes it difficult for teachers to plan lessons that fit everyone's level. At the same time, many students are used to traditional, teacher-centered methods and may not be ready to engage in active learning (Lestari, 2023). Teachers have to balance different student needs, maintain engagement, and design flexible learning, even though many schools lack proper training and resources. Without enough support, this situation often leaves teachers feeling exhausted, uncertain, and less confident in their teaching ability (Reza et al., 2023). The pressure of handling diverse learning needs and limited tools becomes a daily challenge that affects how teachers manage their classrooms.

These teaching challenges are also connected to the professional well-being of the teacher. Teacher well-being is shaped by daily work experiences, including workload, classroom demands, and support systems (Hascher & Waber, 2021). When teachers are expected to meet high expectations without enough support, they may experience emotional exhaustion, lower motivation, and reduced confidence. These reactions are connected to three key aspects of professional well-being: job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and motivation (Yıldırım, 2014). Furthermore, the constant need to adapt, adjust materials, and personalize instruction in the *Merdeka* Curriculum can directly influence how teachers perceive their roles (Lestari, 2023). Thus, understanding teacher professional well-being becomes essential in examining the real-world implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, especially for EFL teachers who face diverse classroom conditions and changing instructional expectations.

This study looks at two main things: the problems an EFL teacher faces in the classroom with the *Merdeka* Curriculum, and the teacher's well-being, including how satisfied, confident, and motivated they feel. Although the two focuses are discussed separately, this research acknowledges that both experiences are closely

situated within the same teaching context. Through narrative inquiry, the study seeks to understand how an EFL teacher navigates these curriculum demands and how they experience their role professionally in the classroom.

The following figure describes how the relation between research variables is constructed.

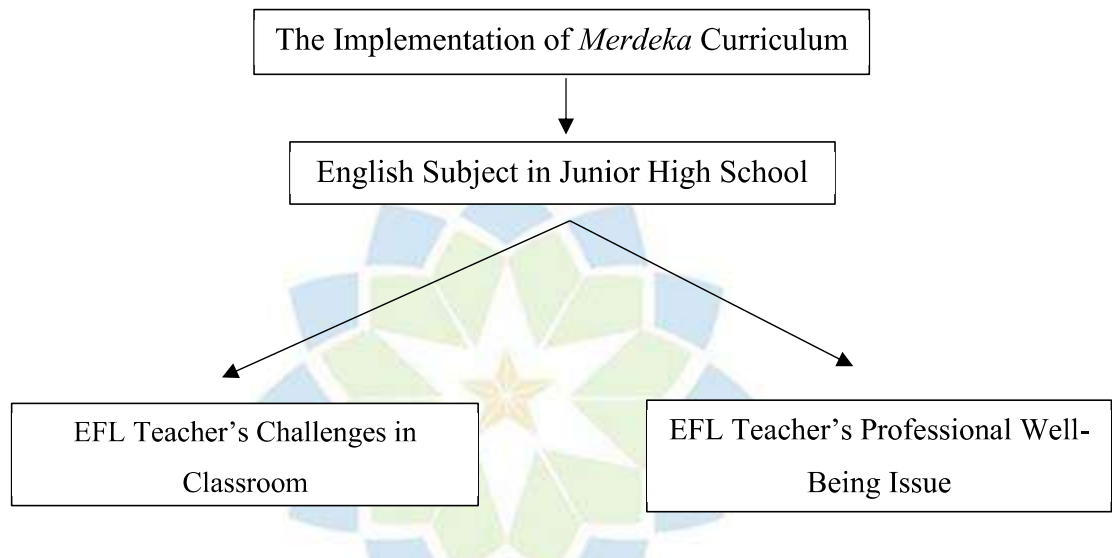


Figure 1. 1 Conceptual Framework

G. Previous Studies

The challenges of *Merdeka* Curriculum have been explored in earlier studies. Research by Rohmah, Hamamah, and Junining (2024) conducted a qualitative study using interviews and document analysis with several EFL teachers. Their findings showed that while teachers recognized the benefits of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, they struggled with low self-efficacy and lack of confidence in implementing it. The study highlighted the importance of continuous professional development, particularly in syllabus design, to help teachers adapt. However, this research did not specifically explore how these challenges impact teacher well-being, which my study aims to address.

Similarly, Gurion (2024) conducted a study using a literature review method to examine teacher readiness in facing the curriculum shift. The study revealed that many teachers are still unprepared for the major changes required by the *Merdeka*

Curriculum, including adjustments in teaching preparation, assessment techniques, differentiated learning, and the implementation of *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* development projects. One of the main findings was that teachers lack full understanding of the new curriculum's paradigm and its more flexible, student-centered learning approaches. Gurion concluded that overcoming these obstacles requires strong communication and collaboration among schools, parents, and government stakeholders. However, while the study highlighted important institutional and pedagogical challenges, it did not explore how these issues affect teacher well-being in actual classroom settings. This is the area that the present study aims to investigate more deeply.

Another research by Lestari (2023) carried out a qualitative study exploring English teachers' perspectives on the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Through interviews and classroom observations, the researcher found that teachers appreciated the curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning but faced difficulties in addressing different learning styles and selecting appropriate teaching methods. The study pointed out that teachers with limited experience in differentiated learning found it especially challenging to engage passive learners. However, her research focused mainly on instructional strategies and classroom practices rather than the well-being of the teachers.

In the other research, Norman (2024) conducted a quantitative study using the NASA-TLX (Task Load Index) framework to examine the impact of administrative workload on teacher performance and well-being under the *Merdeka* Curriculum. The study analyzed data from teachers across several Indonesian schools and found that the increased documentation, reporting duties, and bureaucratic tasks required by the curriculum significantly contributed to cognitive and emotional overload. Teachers reported feeling mentally fatigued and less focused on instructional tasks, which affected their job satisfaction and overall well-being. While the research highlights important insights into how workload influences teacher well-being, it did not explore instructional strategies or classroom interactions directly. However, this study provides strong evidence of the institutional pressures faced by teachers

during curriculum transitions and their psychological consequences, which aligns with the well-being issues explored in this research.

The previous studies have explored various challenges faced by teachers in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum. However, despite the growing research on the challenges of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, there is limited research specifically investigating how these challenges connected to the professional well-being issues of EFL teachers. Most studies focus on general difficulties but do not directly examine the issue on teachers' well-being. To fill this gap, this research aims to explore the experiences of an EFL teacher in dealing with curriculum challenges and to examine their professional well-being in relation to those experiences.

