

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the research background, research questions, research purposes, significance of the research, research scope, conceptual framework, and previous studies.

A. Research Background

Curriculum is an organized plan that offers a variety of learning experiences to help learners achieve broad goals and specific targets. The curriculum is tailored to specific groups within an educational institution, aiming to support their educational development (Saylor, 1981). The curriculum continues to evolve according to the latest needs and innovations because it is a tool for organizing the education system (Oliver, 1977). Since Independence Day in 1945, the curriculum in Indonesia has undergone various changes, with the primary objective of raising the standard of education in this nation and bringing it into line with global standards.

The early 1947 curriculum prioritized character development and civic awareness. The 1950-1994 curriculum had a more structured approach with the inclusion of local content. The 2004-2006 curriculum shifted to competency-based learning and increased school autonomy, and the 2013 curriculum prioritized character education by integrating attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Alhamduddin 2016, as cited in Supriatna et al., 2023). In 2020, the Indonesian Minister of Education introduced the Merdeka Curriculum as the latest curriculum development to improve the learning system during the pandemic and continue the revision and refinement of the previous curriculum, the 2013 curriculum (Syahputra et al., 2022). In connection with this, the Merdeka Curriculum began to be implemented gradually in 2021 as a reference for learning at all levels of education.

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide flexibility to educators

and learners in the learning process, allowing adjustments to local needs and improving student competencies in facing 21st-century challenges, focusing on project-based learning, strengthening the Pancasila learner profile, and technology adaptation (Virijai et al., 2025). As a curriculum that brings innovative education in Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes adaptive and comprehensive teaching methods to support a student-centred approach and encourage the development of critical 21st-century skills (Latifa et al., 2023). Thus, Merdeka Curriculum aims to support and create a more creative and critical generation at the national and international levels.

Beginning in the 2027/2028 school year, the English subject will become compulsory in elementary schools in Indonesia as part of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. This decision is stated in the Minister of Education, No. 12 of 2024, article 33 (Kemendikbud, 2024). According to Caesaria (2024), an important change has occurred regarding the English subject in the Elementary School Education Curriculum. In the previous curriculum, English was an elective subject at the elementary school level. However, with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the Minister of Education requires English to be taught at the elementary school level. However, the Merdeka Curriculum provides a transition period for schools to prepare themselves to organize this compulsory English learning. Schools are given the flexibility to implement this policy based on their readiness, with a time limit until the 2026/2027 school year (Oktavia et al., 2023). This policy is expected to provide equity to all primary school students in Indonesia to learn English, as making English a compulsory subject means that schools must prepare everything, from facilities to competent English teachers.

Based on the preliminary observation, it was found that not all schools that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum immediately applied English as a compulsory subject. Some schools do not even have specific teachers for the subject, and some schools have not implemented the Merdeka Curriculum at all until now. Therefore, this research is focused on Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (SDIT) that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and also provide English as a subject. From this selection, four Integrated

Islamic Elementary Schools in Bandung Regency were chosen as the research sites.

In the world of education, especially in the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers have an important role in learning. Teachers are not only material providers, but also have a role as facilitators and motivators for students, guiding them to actively explore and build knowledge through critical thinking and collaboration, and making decisions based on their interests and talents (Adawiyah, 2024). Understanding Teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum is also important in its successful implementation. According to Kulsum et al. (2024), there are changes and differences to the previous curriculum, such as differences in learning structures and objectives, and updates to student-centred learning methods and project-based teaching methods that involve students in learning. Therefore, this will affect teacher perceptions.

Teachers' perceptions are shaped by their experiences, professional training, and teaching experience. These perceptions shape teachers' plans, implementation, and evaluation of learning (Richardson, 1996). Teacher perceptions regarding the curriculum can influence learning success. According to Rakhmat (2001) in Muslima (2020), perception is an experience of objects, events, and relationships obtained by inferring information and interpreting messages. Teachers can provide perceptions of the curriculum based on their experience implementing it and information obtained about it, so they can interpret the curriculum according to their understanding. Rakhmat (2001), also explains that perception is divided into two types: good perception and bad perception. Teachers must provide a good perception as curriculum facilitators because it can affect curriculum development. Good perceptions will impact the implementation of learning activities. Otherwise, bad perceptions will be an obstacle to the implementation of learning.

Teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, with understanding teachers' perceptions of implementing this

Curriculum is crucial, given their central role in applying the Merdeka Curriculum in English language subjects (Horikoshi, 2023). A previous study from Maret & Zai (2024) presents English teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning in one elementary school. Teachers' perceptions of this curriculum are positive, such as the Merdeka Curriculum being student-centred and allowing independent and creative students to form. Overall, teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum are considered to improve the quality of English learning through active, collaborative, and critical thinking approaches.

Divan and Adam (2023) also discussed that, based on teachers' perceptions of implementing an effective Merdeka Curriculum, teachers have flexibility in choosing materials to shape students' character, such as independence, self-confidence, and responsibility. In addition, the principles of independent learning are considered to have been internalized in the learning process, creating a learning atmosphere that is more flexible, enjoyable, and less mentally burdensome for students. However, teachers have a positive perception of the Merdeka Curriculum. In Telaumbanua (2024) this implementation still faces various challenges, such as a lack of socialization and training, limited internet access, low technology skills among teachers, and suboptimal school readiness. Some teachers also feel that this curriculum is being imposed without adequate follow-up training.

This research examines the perceptions of English teachers regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning within four integrated Islamic elementary schools in Bandung, West Java. These schools have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and are teaching English language learning, although the process is still one of gradual improvement. This research is expected to provide guidance for future English teachers when teaching elementary school students, particularly in relation to the curriculum. This research is also expected to help evaluate the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning and the future curriculum.

B. Research Question

English language learning in the Merdeka Curriculum brings essential changes, especially at the elementary school level, where English is planned to become a compulsory subject. As a curriculum that offers adaptive and flexible learning, the Merdeka Curriculum requires active student involvement and teacher readiness in its implementation. Teachers play a key role in the successful implementation of this curriculum. Therefore, it is essential to explore teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the context of English language learning in elementary schools. Based on this, this study focuses on:

"What are English teachers' perceptions towards the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum at the Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools level in Bandung Regency?"

C. Research Purpose

Based on the research question above, the purpose of this research is:

"To find out the English teachers' perceptions towards the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum at the Integrated Islamic Primary School level in Bandung Regency"

D. Significances of Research

The following are some theoretical and practical significances of this research:

1. Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the study of education in the field of English, especially in understanding teachers' perceptions of the new curriculum that provides flexibility to teachers. The findings of this study are also expected to be a reference for further research in the field of curriculum, English language learning, and teacher professional development.

2. Practical Significance

The findings and recommendations of this research are expected to:

- a. For English Teachers: Provide insights and images to teachers regarding implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning,

and helping teachers adjust to a more effective learning approach obtained from teachers' perceptions.

- E. To improve the quality of English learning in Elementary school: This study can provide insights into teachers' perceptions in the implementation of English language teaching activities and can be used as learning materials to prepare English teachers to be better prepared and understand the context of English language learning in the new curriculum, especially in elementary school.

F. Research Scope

This study examines teachers' perceptions of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning within several integrated Islamic elementary schools. One teacher from each of the four integrated Islamic elementary schools at the third-grade level in Bandung, West Java, that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum participated in this study.

G. Conceptual Framework

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide flexibility to educators and learners in the learning process, allowing adjustments to local needs and improving student competencies to face 21st-century challenges. With its focus on project-based learning, strengthening the Pancasila learner profile, and technology adaptation, the curriculum aims to foster creativity, critical thinking, and global competitiveness (Virijai et al., 2025). According to Latifa et al., (2023), as a curriculum that brings innovative education in Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes adaptive and comprehensive teaching methods to support a student-centered approach and encourage the development of critical 21st-century skills.

In this framework, English language learning plays a significant role. While English was originally an elective subject in the 2013 Curriculum (Aulia, 2024). However, according to Caesaria (2024), in the Merdeka Curriculum, English became a compulsory subject at the elementary school level. For now, some schools are preparing for English

language learning in elementary schools until the 2026/2027 school year and making it compulsory in the 2027/2028 school year. In English language learning, the curriculum encourages active student participation, adaptation to individual interests, and the integration of technology to support holistic development (Ulfiati, 2024; Masita, 2023)

Teachers have a central role in ensuring successful implementation. They act not only as knowledge transmitters, but also as facilitators and motivators who guide students to learn critically, collaboratively, and creatively (Adawiyah, 2024). However, teaching English to young learners (TEYL) presents unique challenges. Compared to adults, young learners are still in cognitive development, requiring more concrete, visual, and interactive learning experiences (Pinter, 2006). Several indicators of other challenges teachers face in the classroom include cognitive growth, motivation, attention, multi-level grouping, and evaluation (Putri et al., 2023). Therefore, teachers must apply appropriate teaching strategies to capture students' interest and keep them motivated throughout the learning process

Classroom management strategies play an important role in TEYL, facilitating an effective learning process and improving young learners' knowledge and skills (Putra, 2022). Effective classroom management—through setting rules, arranging seating, monitoring movement, and personal interaction—helps to create a productive and supportive learning environment (Qadri et al., 2022). A teacher's ability to organize the classroom and manage student behavior is critical to achieving positive educational outcomes. Effective learning can begin with creating a pleasant learning atmosphere.

Perception is how individuals organize and interpret their sensory impressions to give meaning to their environment. Perception is not only influenced by external stimuli, but also by personal characteristics such as experience, motivation, and emotions (Robbins & Judge, 2015). Teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum are critical to the program's success, especially in English language teaching, because teachers play an important role in implementing this curriculum (Horikoshi, 2023). According to Walgito (2003), perception comprises three interrelated

aspects: cognitive, which refers to the teacher's knowledge and understanding of the curriculum; affective, which refers to the teacher's feelings or attitudes toward the curriculum; and conative, which refers to the teacher's behavioral tendencies or actions in implementing the curriculum. Positive perceptions encourage creativity, adaptability, and alignment with curriculum goals, while negative perceptions may hinder the achievement of desired outcomes, even when resources are adequate.

Teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum, teaching methods, and student characteristics directly influence the planning and implementation of classroom learning. These perceptions are not just formed from personal opinions but are the result of professional experiences, training received, and social and professional interactions experienced by teachers throughout their careers. Teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum are crucial for the program's success, especially in teaching English in elementary schools, which must have creative classroom management strategies according to the students' needs. This study examined teachers' perceptions, particularly English teachers at the elementary school level, regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English lessons.

H. Previous Study

The following previous studies related to English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The first study by Law (2022). Focused on reviewing changes and innovations in the curriculum at higher education institutions, particularly in the context of the 4.0 curriculum, which is tailored to the demands of the 4.0 industrial era. This study discusses theories that support curriculum change. The approach used in this study is a literature review, using documents, scientific journals, and educational theories. This research's findings emphasize that complexity theory emphasizes the interconnectedness between the external environment and the education system, advocating adaptability and resilience in curriculum design. Similarly, critical theory underscores the importance of equitable access to education, addressing socioeconomic disparities, and empowering students. However, with a focus on holistic development, technology integration, and problem-

solving skills, Curriculum 4.0 offers opportunities to foster lifelong learning and global competitiveness, ensuring education remains relevant in an increasingly dynamic world.

The second study by Toraman et al., (2021). The focus of this study is to develop a measurement tool to assess teachers' perceptions of curriculum change and to collect data related to their perceptions. Using a quantitative approach and descriptive survey techniques, the study involved 238 teachers in Turkey using the Curriculum Change Perception Scale (CCPS) instrument. The results of this study show that teachers acknowledge positive impacts such as improved classroom management, a better learning environment, and more relevant content. This study emphasizes the importance of involving teachers in the curriculum change process to reduce resistance and enhance the success of implementation. However, teachers also tend to have negative opinions about curriculum changes due to reasons such as frequent updates, political influence, and implementation difficulties.

The third study by Fatmawati et al (2023). Which aimed to explain how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in English language learning and to identify the problems encountered by teachers during the process. The participant in this study was an English teacher in grade VII at SMPIT Insan Mulia Surakarta. This study used a descriptive qualitative method. There are three instruments used in this study: passive observation, structured interviews with English teachers, and documentation. The findings showed successful integration of the Merdeka Curriculum, with lesson plans tailored to students' needs, differentiated learning, and interactive methods like PowerPoint and videos to enhance engagement. Assessments combined attitudes, knowledge, and skills comprehensively. However, challenges included the time-consuming preparation of differentiated materials and difficulties maintaining student engagement during long block lessons, highlighting the need for better time management strategies.

The fourth study by Maret & Zai, (2024). This study aims to determine how English teachers perceive the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This study focuses on how teachers understand the philosophy of student-centered learning, as well as the challenges, opportunities, and their attitudes

toward this concept. The method used in this study is qualitative descriptive with interviews and questionnaires. Four English teachers participated in the study: two from junior high schools and two from senior high schools in the Idanogawo area. This study found that Merdeka's curriculum is generally viewed favorably by English teachers, mainly because of its student-centered approach, which they believe helps students develop into well-rounded people who can overcome various obstacles in the future. This study found that Merdeka's curriculum implementation faced several difficulties, including a lack of available teachers, inadequate facilities, and a diverse student population.

The fifth study by Telaumbanua, (2024). The focus of this study was teachers' perception on implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers in elementary schools were given questionnaires and interviewed as part of the qualitative data collection process. The results show that teachers generally have a good opinion of the program, and teachers see the curriculum as student-centred, focusing on interesting and relevant learning opportunities tailored to each student's needs. The study also concluded that, despite the great potential of the Merdeka Curriculum to revolutionize education, existing issues must be addressed. To ensure uniform implementation, recommendations include improving all teachers' access to technical training and professional development, especially in rural areas.

The sixth study by Lestari et al., (2024). The focus of this study is to determine English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning at SMP Negeri 6 Semarang. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach and involves three English teachers who participated in the study. The instruments used in this study are questionnaires and interviews. The results of this study indicate that teachers understand the basic principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. All teachers also stated that they are ready to implement the Merdeka Curriculum, although they are aware that further training and adaptation are still needed. This curriculum has had an impact on increasing student participation, although academic outcomes remain varied depending on classroom conditions and learning styles.

Based on existing studies, several previous studies have been conducted on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English subjects. However, this study specifically focuses on English teachers perception in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Unlike previous studies that only explain curriculum implementation, some previous studies did not specifically explore perceptions in depth and only focused on one school. Meanwhile, this study describes the experiences of elementary school teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English through a qualitative approach with the multiple case study method. This study provides a more comprehensive understanding of real practices in the field to support the improvement of curriculum implementation based on the conditions and direct experiences of teachers, as reflected in their perceptions.

