



## Implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in the Indonesian Language Learning Process at Vocational High Schools (SMK)

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### **Abstract**

The effectiveness of the educational process is shaped by both internal (individual) and external factors, with the curriculum being a key external element that significantly influences learning outcomes. This research focuses on the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in Indonesian language instruction at vocational high schools. To evaluate its success, a descriptive quantitative approach was applied, with data collected through questionnaires distributed via Google Forms. The study targeted a population consisting of three vocational high school principals, their administrative staff, and three Indonesian language teachers. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who were directly involved in implementing the curriculum. Microsoft Excel was utilized to analyze the data, assessing the extent of the curriculum's application and highlighting any obstacles faced during its execution. The findings of this study aim to offer meaningful insights that can assist both educators and policymakers in improving the educational process, particularly in vocational high schools. This research is crucial in understanding how the Merdeka Belajar curriculum affects the teaching of the Indonesian language and will contribute to the refinement of teaching practices and curriculum development. Key terms for this research include Merdeka Curriculum, vocational high schools, and Indonesian language teaching.

**Keywords:** *Merdeka Curriculum; Vocational High School; Indonesian Language*

### **Introduction**

Since the dawn of civilization, humanity has continuously evolved, both physically and psychologically. The potential for human growth is largely driven by intellectual capacity, and education plays a crucial role in fostering this development (Triwiyanto, 2014:1). Education is perceived as a vital process that shapes moral values, norms, and traditions. According to the National Education System Law No. 20 of 2003, the primary objective of education is to fully optimize the potential of each individual. Broadly speaking, the success of the educational process is influenced by two key factors: internal or individual factors, and external factors. The curriculum, as outlined in Law No. 20 of 2003, is a significant external factor that directly impacts the effectiveness of education.

The curriculum holds a central role in determining learning outcomes. It is defined as a structured plan that organizes learning materials, content, and methods used as guidelines for the teaching and

learning process. In essence, curriculum development entails determining the lessons that need to be taught and selecting the appropriate methods to ensure effective learning.

Developing a curriculum is a complex and demanding task, as it must align with the broader goals, vision, and mission of the education system (Sanjaya, 2015: 32). There are two critical aspects of curriculum development: the written curriculum itself and its implementation as a learning system. In Indonesia, curriculum revisions are frequent, reflecting the government's continuous effort to adapt the education system to the changing needs of society. Since gaining independence, Indonesia has consistently focused on improving its curriculum. Over the decades, numerous curriculum revisions have been made, including those in 1947, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1994, 2004 (Competency-Based Curriculum), 2006 (School-Based Curriculum), and 2013 (K-13). Currently, the Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) curriculum, previously known as the "Driving Teacher" curriculum, is being implemented. This curriculum is part of a new policy introduced by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. Starting from the 2022/2023 academic year, educational institutions have had the option to implement the Merdeka curriculum based on their readiness, ranging from early childhood education to higher grade levels such as grades 1, 4, 7, and 10.

The Merdeka curriculum was introduced by the Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Anwar Makarim, in response to the poor performance of Indonesian students in the 2019 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In this assessment, Indonesia ranked 74th out of 79 countries in literacy and mathematics (Khoirurrijal et al., 2022: 17). To address these concerns, the Merdeka curriculum includes minimum competency assessments focused on literacy, numeracy, and character-building surveys. In this context, literacy refers to the ability to read and comprehend written material (Sari, 2019: 28).

The Merdeka curriculum incorporates a variety of teaching methods designed to promote independent thinking among students. It emphasizes essential learning materials, allowing students ample time to explore key concepts and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Additionally, the curriculum places a strong emphasis on the role of teachers as facilitators of learning (Khoirurrijal et al., 2022: 18). The curriculum is intended to address the shortcomings of previous education systems and aims to support students in reaching their full potential. One example of this is project-based learning, which engages students in solving real-world problems and encourages active participation (Khoirurrijal et al., 2022: 20).

The Merdeka curriculum is designed to prepare students for future challenges by helping them maximize their potential. It is aligned with Indonesia's national education standards and objectives, emphasizing the development of student profiles grounded in the values of Pancasila, the nation's philosophical foundation. Key characteristics of the curriculum include flexibility for both teachers and students, a project-based and character-driven approach, and a focus on essential learning content (Kemendikbud, 2022: 16–24).

The implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in high schools is guided by the Minister of Education and Culture Decree No. 56/M/2022, which outlines the guidelines for curriculum implementation as part of learning recovery efforts. These guidelines emphasize the importance of curriculum development across all levels of education, from early childhood to secondary education, with a specific focus on implementing the Merdeka curriculum. In high schools, similar approaches are adopted, including school-based projects designed to strengthen student profiles based on Pancasila (Hasanuddin, 2022: 183). However, the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum is not without challenges. These challenges include teacher readiness, the ability to integrate digital technology into the learning process, communication infrastructure, collaboration with stakeholders, and the effective execution of learning assessments (Direktorat Kepala Sekolah, Pengawas Sekolah, dan Tenaga Kependidikan, 2023).

Continuous improvement of the curriculum is essential to ensure that the national education system remains relevant and capable of addressing both present and future needs. The Merdeka curriculum differs from its predecessor, the 2013 curriculum, which was largely centered on the goals of the national education system and standards. The 2013 curriculum grouped basic competencies into four core areas: spiritual attitudes, social attitudes, knowledge, and skills. In contrast, the Merdeka curriculum takes a more holistic approach, integrating knowledge, attitudes, and skills to foster the development of student profiles based on Pancasila values (Kemendikbudristek, 2022: 31). Given the significant changes introduced by the Merdeka curriculum, it is crucial to study its implementation across various subject areas, particularly in Indonesian language instruction. While previous research has examined its application in subjects such as physical education (Wahyu Subandrio & Dwi Cahyo Kartiko, 2021; Ketut Okta Pradipta Jaya et al., 2021), there has been little research investigating its impact on Indonesian language teaching. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by evaluating the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in Indonesian language instruction at vocational high schools.

### **Methodology**

The data collection for this study employed a descriptive quantitative approach, utilizing surveys to gather information from respondents. The survey involved the distribution of questionnaires to the teaching staff at SMK Negeri 1 Jember, including the principal, three staff members, and three Indonesian language teachers. The primary focus of the study was the "Evaluation of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian Language Teaching at SMK Negeri 1 Jember." Data were collected using questionnaires distributed via the Google platform to assess the implementation of the curriculum.

The study utilized purposive sampling, a method that selects participants based on specific criteria (Sugiyono, 2012:68). A Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 4, was used to measure respondents' level of agreement, with options of "strongly agree" (4), "agree" (3), "disagree" (2), and "strongly disagree" (1). Data collection occurred over four days, from August 10 to August 14, 2024, with thirty multiple-choice questions designed to evaluate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Microsoft Excel was employed to analyze the data, focusing on the predetermined indicators. The results are presented as narrative conclusions, supported by tables showing percentages for each indicator. Descriptive analysis was used to measure the percentage of curriculum implementation, categorized into four levels.

Table 1: Interval Scale

No	Interval	Category
1.	81,25% - 100%	Very Good
2.	62,50% - 81,25%	Good
3.	43,75% - 62,50%	Satisfactory
4.	25,00% - 43,75%	Poor

### **Result and Discussion**

Based on responses from Indonesian language teachers and administrative staff at SMK Negeri 1 Jember, gathered via Google Forms, the data was organized for easier analysis. The questionnaire was structured according to specific indicators to facilitate data processing. The research focused on three key areas for Indonesian language teachers: 1) evaluating teacher performance in the classroom, 2) understanding and applying the Merdeka Curriculum, and 3) the effectiveness of instruction based on developed teaching modules.

For administrative staff overseeing curriculum and student affairs, the indicators included: 1) school readiness for the Merdeka Curriculum, 2) the application of assessments replacing the National

Examination (UN) and National Standardized School Examination (USBN), and 3) the zoning system and teaching module usage. The Google Forms survey at SMK Negeri 1 Jember provided comprehensive data for further analysis.

Table 2: Overall Data

<b>Implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in Indonesian Language Education</b>	Mean	Standard deviation	Variant
	3,21	0,44	0,20

The analysis results from the 30 questions answered by the school principal and Indonesian language teachers yielded an average score of 3.21, with a highest possible value of 4 and a lowest value of 1. The standard deviation of the data is 0.44, while the variance is 0.04. To facilitate data analysis according to the previously established categories, the results can be presented in percentage form as follows.

Table 3: Percentage of Implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in Indonesian Language Instruction

No	Category	Teacher of Indonesia language	School Administration Staff	presentation
1.	Very Good	1	1	33,33%
2.	Good	2	2	66,73%
3.	Satisfactory	0	0	0%
4.	Poor	0	0	0%
Total		6		100%

Based on the table above, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum at SMK Negeri 1 Jember is categorized as "good," with a percentage reaching 66.67%. This data indicates that the Indonesian language teachers, along with the school principal and their staff, are adequately prepared for the application of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. The results from the questionnaires demonstrate that this new curriculum has been effectively integrated into Indonesian language teaching.

The percentage analysis reveals that the Merdeka Belajar curriculum positively contributes to the learning process, enhancing students' communication skills and reasoning abilities in accordance with social, academic, and workforce needs. This achievement reflects the commitment of educators and administrative staff to foster an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning. However, despite these promising results, certain weaknesses remain in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum at SMK Negeri 1 Jember. Notably, the curriculum has not yet been implemented in the eleventh and twelfth grades, as its application is currently limited to the tenth grade. Therefore, it is essential for the school to expand the implementation of this curriculum across all grade levels, ensuring its availability not only in grade X but also in grades XI and XII. This expansion will facilitate a more comprehensive educational experience and better prepare students for future academic and professional challenges.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the survey regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in Indonesian language teaching at SMK Negeri 1 Jember were obtained through the distribution of questionnaires to the research subjects. Based on data processing using Microsoft Excel, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in Indonesian language instruction falls into the "Good" category, with a percentage of 66.67%. This indicates that the curriculum has been implemented in the school's Indonesian language teaching; however, it has not yet reached its maximum potential.

This situation arises from the fact that the new curriculum has only been applied in grade X, while grades XI and XII have not yet been included. Consequently, a noticeable shortcoming is that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum at this vocational school is currently limited to grade X. Therefore, it is hoped that the school will expand the implementation of this curriculum across all grade levels, not only in grade X but also in grades XI and XII. This expansion will enhance the overall educational experience and ensure that all students benefit from the advantages of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum

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