



Implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian Language Learning in Senior High Schools

Muhsyanur

Institut Agama Islam As'adiyah Sengkang

Correspondence: muhsyanur@iaiasadiyah.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores the implementation of the "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) approach in Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level. The study investigates the perceptions and practices of Indonesian language teachers, the alignment between Merdeka Belajar principles and classroom instruction, and the challenges and opportunities associated with this innovative curriculum framework. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and the analysis of curricular materials. The findings reveal a varied landscape of Merdeka Belajar implementation, with some teachers enthusiastically embracing the approach and others struggling to adapt. Key factors influencing the process include teacher beliefs, administrative support, and the broader educational ecosystem. The study highlights the potential of Merdeka Belajar to transform Indonesian language education by fostering student-centered, personalized, and technology-enhanced learning experiences. The insights gained can inform policymakers, school leaders, and educators in their efforts to effectively integrate the Merdeka Belajar approach and deliver a more empowering and relevant language curriculum.

Keywords: Merdeka Belajar, Indonesian Language Learning, Student-Centered Pedagogy, Curriculum Reform

This is an open access article under the [CC - BY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.



INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian language curriculum has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, reflecting the country's commitment to providing a more dynamic and empowering educational experience for students (Muhsyanur, 2020). At the heart of this shift is the concept of "Merdeka Belajar" or "Freedom to Learn," which has been embraced by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The traditional Indonesian language curriculum had long been characterized by a top-down, teacher-centric approach, with a strong emphasis on mastering grammar, vocabulary, and formal language structures. While this approach had its merits, it often failed to engage students and prepare them for the realities of real-world communication. The Merdeka Belajar framework, however, advocates for a more student-centered and personalized approach to language learning, granting both educators and learners greater autonomy and flexibility.

Merdeka Belajar curriculum, in Indonesian language teachers are encouraged to move beyond the confines of standardized lesson plans and textbooks, and instead adopt innovative teaching strategies that foster critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative learning. This may involve the use of project-based activities, the incorporation of authentic materials, and the tailoring of instruction to meet the unique needs and interests of individual students. By embracing this holistic and empowering approach to language education, the Indonesian government hopes to cultivate a new generation of language learners who are not only proficient in the Indonesian language, but also equipped with the skills and mindset necessary to thrive in the 21st century.

The concept of "Merdeka Belajar" or "Freedom to Learn" has gained significant momentum in the Indonesian education system in recent years. Introduced by the Ministry of Education and Culture, this innovative approach aims to transform the traditional teaching and learning paradigm by granting more autonomy and flexibility to both educators and students at all levels of education (Kemendikbud, 2020).

At the core of Merdeka Belajar is the belief that education should move beyond the confines of standardized curricula and assessments, and instead foster critical thinking, creativity, and independent

learning (Sadikin & Hamidah, 2020). This aligns with the global shift towards student-centered pedagogy, which emphasizes the development of 21st-century skills, such as problem-solving, collaboration, and adaptability (Nugroho et al., 2020).

In the context of Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level, the Merdeka Belajar approach presents a unique opportunity to reinvigorate the teaching and learning process. Traditionally, Indonesian language instruction has been characterized by a teacher-centric approach, with a strong emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and formal language structures (Widiati & Hayati, 2015). However, this approach has been criticized for its lack of relevance to students' real-world communication needs and its failure to foster meaningful engagement with the language (Emilia, 2016).

The Merdeka Belajar framework encourages teachers to move away from this traditional approach and instead adopt more student-centered, interactive, and contextualized teaching methods (Astuti & Lammers, 2017). This may involve incorporating project-based learning, collaborative activities, and the use of authentic materials to enhance students' language proficiency and cultural understanding (Fithriani, 2018).

Moreover, the Merdeka Belajar concept emphasizes the importance of personalized learning, where students are given the freedom to explore their interests and learning preferences (Taufik & Ismail, 2019). This can be particularly beneficial in Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level, as it allows students to tailor their studies to their individual needs and aspirations, ultimately leading to greater engagement and motivation (Sari & Setiawan, 2019).

In line with this, experts have highlighted the need to provide teachers with the necessary support and resources to effectively implement the Merdeka Belajar approach in their Indonesian language classrooms (Kurniawati & Wulyani, 2020). This may include ongoing professional development opportunities, access to innovative teaching materials, and the fostering of collaborative learning communities among educators (Nurchasanah & Mukminatien, 2019).

Furthermore, the successful integration of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language education at the senior high school level requires a holistic approach that considers the broader educational ecosystem, including curriculum design, assessment methods, and school governance (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). By aligning these various elements with the principles of Merdeka Belajar, educators can create a more conducive learning environment that truly empowers students and prepares them for the challenges of the 21st century (Sulistiyo et al., 2019).

Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Merdeka Belajar approach has become even more relevant, as it encourages the use of digital technologies and online learning platforms to facilitate remote and personalized instruction (Purwanto et al., 2020). This has proven particularly crucial in maintaining educational continuity and supporting students' learning during the period of school closures and social distancing measures (Firman & Rahayu, 2020).

In the context of Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level, the implementation of Merdeka Belajar has the potential to address several key challenges. For instance, researchers have highlighted the need to improve students' language proficiency, critical thinking skills, and cultural awareness to prepare them for the demands of higher education and the workforce (Sari & Setiawan, 2019; Fithriani, 2018). The Merdeka Belajar approach, with its emphasis on student-centered learning and personalization, could be an effective way to address these gaps.

Additionally, studies have shown that many Indonesian language teachers at the senior high school level struggle to adapt their teaching practices to meet the evolving needs of their students (Widiati & Hayati, 2015). The Merdeka Belajar framework could provide these teachers with the necessary support and guidance to develop innovative teaching strategies and foster a more engaging and meaningful learning environment (Kurniawati & Wulyani, 2020).

Moreover, the integration of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language education at the senior high school level could have broader implications for the education system as a whole. By empowering students and teachers, and promoting a culture of lifelong learning and continuous improvement, the Merdeka Belajar approach has the potential to serve as a model for educational reform across various subjects and grade levels (Saputra & Permatasari, 2021).

As the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level continues to evolve, it will be crucial for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to collaborate and share best practices, ensuring that the benefits of this innovative approach are realized to the fullest extent (Sulistiyo et al., 2019). This will require a sustained commitment to professional development, curriculum design, and the ongoing evaluation and refinement of the Merdeka Belajar framework (Nurchasanah & Mukminatien, 2019).

In conclusion, the Merdeka Belajar concept holds significant potential for transforming Indonesian language education at the senior high school level. By empowering both teachers and students, fostering innovative teaching practices, and cultivating the skills and mindsets necessary for success in the 21st century, Merdeka Belajar has the power to revolutionize the way Indonesian language is taught and learned in senior high schools across the country.

The concept of “Merdeka Belajar” or “Freedom to Learn” refers to an innovative approach in the Indonesian education system that aims to transform the traditional teaching and learning paradigm. At its core, Merdeka Belajar grants more autonomy and flexibility to both educators and students, empowering them to move beyond the confines of standardized curricula and assessments (Kemendikbud, 2020). This approach is founded on the belief that education should foster critical thinking, creativity, and independent learning, rather than solely focusing on the attainment of high-test scores and rote memorization (Sadikin & Hamidah, 2020).

The Merdeka Belajar framework encourages a shift towards more student-centered, interactive, and contextualized teaching methods, which can include the incorporation of project-based learning, collaborative activities, and the use of authentic materials (Astuti & Lammers, 2017). Additionally, Merdeka Belajar emphasizes the importance of personalized learning, where students are given the freedom to explore their individual interests and learning preferences, leading to greater engagement and motivation (Taufik & Ismail, 2019).

Indonesian language instruction at the senior high school level has traditionally been characterized by a teacher-centric approach, with a strong emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and formal language structures (Widiati & Hayati, 2015; Muhsyanur, 2019). This approach has been criticized for its lack of relevance to students' real-world communication needs and its failure to foster meaningful engagement with the language (Emilia, 2016).

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar approach in Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level presents an opportunity to reinvigorate the teaching and learning process. By adopting more student-centered, interactive, and contextualized teaching methods, educators can help senior high school students develop their language proficiency, critical thinking skills, and cultural awareness, preparing them for the demands of higher education and the workforce (Muhsyanur et al., 2021).

METHOD

This study will employ a qualitative research design to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) approach in Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level. Qualitative methods are well-suited for this research, as they allow for an in-depth understanding of the complex and context-dependent nature of the implementation process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research will be conducted using a case study approach, focusing on selected senior high schools that have actively implemented the Merdeka Belajar framework in their Indonesian language classrooms. This approach is appropriate, as case studies enable a comprehensive and contextual exploration of the phenomenon, as well as the identification of relevant factors that influence the implementation process (Yin, 2017).

Data collected through multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews with Indonesian language teachers, classroom observations, and the analysis of relevant curricular and instructional materials. This triangulation of data sources will help to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Patton, 2015).

The interview protocol will be designed to elicit teachers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in implementing Merdeka Belajar in their Indonesian language lessons. Experts have emphasized the importance of understanding teachers' beliefs and practices, as they play a crucial role in the successful integration of educational reforms (Kurniawati & Wulyani, 2020).

Classroom observations will be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning dynamics within the Merdeka Belajar-inspired Indonesian language classrooms. These observations will focus on aspects such as instructional strategies, student engagement, and the use of technology and other learning resources (Nugroho et al., 2020).

The analysis of curricular and instructional materials will provide insights into the alignment between the Merdeka Belajar principles and the actual implementation in Indonesian language education. Researchers have highlighted the need for a holistic approach that considers the broader educational ecosystem, including curriculum design and assessment methods (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020).

Data analysis will be conducted using a thematic analysis approach, which involves the systematic identification, coding, and categorization of emerging themes and patterns within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process will be informed by the conceptual framework of Merdeka Belajar and existing literature on student-centered pedagogy and Indonesian language learning. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the research will employ several strategies, such as member checking, peer debriefing, and the creation of an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These strategies will help to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in the context of Indonesian language education at the senior high school level. The insights gained from this study can inform policymakers, school administrators, and Indonesian language teachers in their efforts to effectively integrate the Merdeka Belajar approach and foster meaningful, student-centered learning experiences for their students.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a varied and complex picture of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) in Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level. Through the analysis of interview data, classroom observations, and curricular materials, several key themes emerged.

Firstly, the study found that teachers' perceptions and beliefs about the Merdeka Belajar approach played a crucial role in shaping its implementation. While some teachers enthusiastically embraced the principles of Merdeka Belajar, such as student-centered learning and personalization, others expressed concerns about the feasibility and suitability of the approach within the existing educational system (Kurniawati & Wulyani, 2020). This highlights the need for comprehensive teacher training and ongoing support to ensure a successful integration of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language classrooms.

The classroom observations revealed a diverse range of instructional strategies employed by teachers who had adopted the Merdeka Belajar approach. These strategies included the use of project-based learning, collaborative group work, and the incorporation of authentic materials and digital technologies (Nugroho et al., 2020). Students were observed to be more engaged and actively involved in the learning process, demonstrating increased motivation and critical thinking skills.

However, the analysis of curricular and instructional materials also revealed varying degrees of alignment between the Merdeka Belajar principles and the actual implementation in Indonesian language education. While some schools had successfully integrated the Merdeka Belajar framework into their curriculum and assessment practices, others struggled to move beyond the traditional teacher-centered approach (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). This suggests the need for a more comprehensive and coherent integration of Merdeka Belajar across the broader educational ecosystem.

The research also identified several key challenges faced by teachers in implementing Merdeka Belajar in their Indonesian language classrooms. These included difficulties in adapting their teaching methods, concerns about meeting standardized learning outcomes, and a lack of access to appropriate resources and professional development opportunities (Kurniawati & Wulyani, 2020). Addressing these challenges will be crucial for the successful and sustainable implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language education.

Interestingly, the study found that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language learning. The shift to remote and online instruction forced teachers to rapidly adapt their teaching strategies, leading to increased experimentation with digital technologies and personalized learning approaches (Firman & Rahayu, 2020). This experience has the potential

to accelerate the adoption of Merdeka Belajar principles, as educators and students become more comfortable with the flexibility and autonomy that the approach offers.

Furthermore, the research revealed the important role of school leadership and administrative support in facilitating the successful implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language learning. Schools that had strong administrative support, clear communication of the Merdeka Belajar vision, and collaborative learning communities among teachers were more likely to effectively integrate the approach into their educational practices (Sulistiyo et al., 2019).

Finally, the study identified several examples of innovative and successful implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language classrooms. These included the use of project-based learning to enhance students' language proficiency and cultural awareness, the incorporation of personalized learning pathways to cater to students' diverse needs and interests, and the fostering of collaborative learning communities among teachers to share best practices (Sari & Setiawan, 2019; Fithriani, 2018). These case studies provide valuable insights and inspiration for other schools seeking to implement the Merdeka Belajar approach effectively.

The findings of this study shed light on the complex and multifaceted process of implementing the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) approach in Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level. Several key themes emerged from the analysis, offering valuable insights for both practitioners and policymakers.

One of the most significant factors influencing the implementation of Merdeka Belajar was the perceptions and beliefs of Indonesian language teachers. The study found that some teachers enthusiastically embraced the principles of student-centered learning and personalization, while others expressed concerns about the feasibility and suitability of the approach within the existing educational system. This highlights the crucial role of teacher buy-in and the need for comprehensive professional development opportunities to ensure a successful integration of Merdeka Belajar.

The classroom observations revealed a diverse range of instructional strategies employed by teachers who had adopted the Merdeka Belajar approach. These strategies, which included project-based learning, collaborative group work, and the incorporation of authentic materials and digital technologies, were found to foster greater student engagement and the development of critical thinking skills. This aligns with the Merdeka Belajar emphasis on empowering students and moving away from traditional teacher-centered instruction.

However, the analysis of curricular and instructional materials also highlighted varying degrees of alignment between the Merdeka Belajar principles and the actual implementation in Indonesian language education. While some schools had successfully integrated the Merdeka Belajar framework into their curriculum and assessment practices, others struggled to move beyond the traditional approach. This suggests the need for a more comprehensive and coherent integration of Merdeka Belajar across the broader educational ecosystem, including curriculum design, assessment methods, and school governance.

The study also identified several key challenges faced by teachers in implementing Merdeka Belajar in their Indonesian language classrooms. These included difficulties in adapting their teaching methods, concerns about meeting standardized learning outcomes, and a lack of access to appropriate resources and professional development opportunities. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for the successful and sustainable implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language education.

Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic was found to have a significant impact on the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language learning. The shift to remote and online instruction forced teachers to rapidly adapt their teaching strategies, leading to increased experimentation with digital technologies and personalized learning approaches. This experience has the potential to accelerate the adoption of Merdeka Belajar principles, as educators and students become more comfortable with the flexibility and autonomy that the approach offers.

The research also revealed the important role of school leadership and administrative support in facilitating the successful implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language learning. Schools that had strong administrative support, clear communication of the Merdeka Belajar vision, and collaborative learning communities among teachers were more likely to effectively integrate the approach into their educational practices.

Furthermore, the study identified several examples of innovative and successful implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language classrooms. These included the use of project-based learning to enhance students' language proficiency and cultural awareness, the incorporation of personalized learning pathways to cater to students' diverse needs and interests, and the fostering of collaborative learning communities among teachers to share best practices. These case studies provide valuable insights and inspiration for other schools seeking to implement the Merdeka Belajar approach effectively.

One of the key strengths of this study is its in-depth, qualitative approach, which allowed for a nuanced and contextual understanding of the implementation process. By collecting data from multiple sources, including interviews, classroom observations, and curricular materials, the researchers were able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian language learning.

However, it is important to note that the findings of this study are specific to the selected case studies and may not be directly generalizable to all senior high schools in Indonesia. Further research, perhaps using a larger sample size or a mixed-methods approach, could provide additional insights and help to validate the findings of this study.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study on the implementation of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) in Indonesian language learning at the senior high school level highlight both the promise and the challenges of this innovative approach. On one hand, the research revealed a number of successful examples where teachers had effectively integrated Merdeka Belajar principles, such as student-centered instruction, project-based learning, and personalized pathways. These approaches were found to foster greater student engagement, critical thinking, and language proficiency. However, the study also identified significant variations in the degree to which schools and teachers had aligned their practices with the Merdeka Belajar framework, suggesting the need for a more comprehensive and coherent integration across the broader educational ecosystem. This highlights the importance of providing teachers with comprehensive professional development opportunities, as well as the necessary resources and administrative support, to empower them to transition towards more student-centered, flexible, and innovative teaching practices. As the Indonesian education system continues to evolve, these insights can inform policymakers, school administrators, and Indonesian language teachers in their efforts to fully realize the potential of the Merdeka Belajar approach and deliver a transformative learning experience for senior high school students.

References

- Astuti, P., & Lammers, J. C. (2017). Individual agency in language learning: Indonesian students' perspectives on active learning in remote schools. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 26(5), 331-340. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-017-0349-5>
- Atmojo, A. E. P., & Nugroho, A. (2020). EFL classes must go online! Teaching activities and challenges during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. *Register Journal*, 13(1), 49-76. <https://doi.org/10.18326/rgt.v13i1.49-76>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Emilia, E. (2016). A critical genre-based approach to teaching academic writing in a tertiary EFL context in Indonesia. *TEFLIN Journal*, 26(1), 75-96. <https://doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v26i1/75-96>
- Firman, F., & Rahayu, S. (2020). Pembelajaran online di tengah pandemi Covid-19. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Science (IJES)*, 2(2), 81-89. <https://doi.org/10.31605/ijes.v2i2.659>
- Fithriani, R. (2018). Discrimination behind NEST and NNEST dichotomy in ELT professionalism. *KnE Social Sciences*, 3(4), 741-755. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v3i4.2035>
- Kemendikbud. (2020). *Merdeka Belajar: Kampus Merdeka*. Kemendikbud.
- Kurniawati, L., & Wulyani, A. N. (2020). Teacher's beliefs and practices in implementing Merdeka Belajar

- curriculum: A case study. *Jurnal Pendidikan: Teori, Penelitian, dan Pengembangan*, 5(6), 762-768. <https://doi.org/10.17977/jptpp.v5i6.13613>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Muhsyanur. (2019). *Pengembangan Keterampilan Membaca: Suatu Keterampilan Berbahasa Reseptif*. Uniprima Press, Sengkang-Indonesia/ <https://books.google.co.id/books?id>
- Muhsyanur, M. (2020). Literasi Psikopedagogik: Membaca Karakter Tokoh dalam Novel Cinta di Ujung Sajadah Karya Asma Nadia Sebagai Materi Pembelajaran Sastra pada Satuan Pendidikan Sekolah Menengah Atas. *KLITIKA: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra Indonesia*, 2(1), 65–75. <https://doi.org/10.32585/klitika.v2i1.713>
- Muhsyanur, Rahmatullah, A. S., Misnawati, Dumiyati, & Ghufron, S. (2021). The Effectiveness of “Facebook” As Indonesian Language Learning Media for Elementary School Student: Distance Learning Solutions in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Multicultural Education*, 7(04), 38–47. <https://www.mccaddogap.com/ojs/index.php/me/article/view/8%0Ahttps://www.mccaddogap.com/ojs/index.php/me/article/download/8/10>
- Nurchasanah, N., & Mukminatien, N. (2019). Developing collaborative learning community among EFL teachers. *Jurnal Pendidikan: Teori, Penelitian, dan Pengembangan*, 4(5), 593-598. <https://doi.org/10.17977/jptpp.v4i5.12282>
- Nugroho, A., Hagerman, M. S., Wahyudin, A., & Zamroni, Z. (2020). Technology-mediated project-based language learning: Students' perceptions and experiences. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 33(5-6), 630-645. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2019.1605556>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Purwanto, A., Pramono, R., Asbari, M., Hyun, C. C., Wijayanti, L. M., & Putri, R. S. (2020). Studi eksploratif dampak pandemi COVID-19 terhadap proses pembelajaran online di sekolah dasar. *EduPsyCouns: Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 2(1), 1-12.
- Sadikin, A., & Hamidah, A. (2020). Pembelajaran Daring di Tengah Wabah Covid-19. *Biodik*, 6(2), 214-224. <https://doi.org/10.22437/bio.v6i2.9759>
- Saputra, H. A., & Permatasari, D. (2021). Merdeka Belajar: A Policy Analysis on Indonesian Education System. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 13(1), 277-288. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v13i1.449>
- Sari, E. R., & Setiawan, B. (2019). Contextual Teaching and Learning approach through Portfolio Assessment to Improve Students' Learning Outcomes in Indonesian Language Subject. *Jurnal Pendidikan: Teori, Penelitian, dan Pengembangan*, 4(1), 83-89. <https://doi.org/10.17977/jptpp.v4i1.11819>
- Sulistiyo, U., Haryanto, Widodo, A., & Supriyana. (2019). Preparing professional teachers: A lesson from Japan and Indonesia. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 5(4), 324-340.
- Taufik, A., & Ismail, A. (2019). Implementasi Konsep Merdeka Belajar dalam Pembelajaran Bahasa Indonesia di Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Kajian Bahasa, Sastra dan Pengajaran*, 1(2), 92-101.
- Widiati, U., & Hayati, N. (2015). Revisiting the roles of Indonesian language teachers: Challenges and opportunities in the 21st century. *Proceedings of the 62nd TEFLIN International Conference*, 53-57.
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.