

Aligning Teacher and Student Perceptions on the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English Language Teaching in Kayong Utara

Kartika Yoga Eka Pratiwi Negara 1¹

Author Affiliations
SMP Negeri 1 Sukadana, Indonesia

Abstract. This study explores the perceptions of both English teachers and junior high school students regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Kayong Utara, a rural district in Indonesia. Utilizing a quantitative approach, data were collected through two Likert-scale questionnaires distributed to 21 teachers and 250 students across several schools. The instruments were designed around seven key indicators: clarity of instruction, teaching method effectiveness, learning engagement, relevance of materials, feedback and assessment, learning independence, and classroom atmosphere. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed generally positive perceptions from both groups, particularly in terms of instructional clarity and classroom climate. However, the findings also indicated several perception gaps. Teachers tended to underestimate the effectiveness of their teaching methods and feedback practices, while overestimating students' autonomy and the relevance of materials. Correlational analysis showed moderate alignment between teacher and student responses, suggesting the need for greater feedback mechanisms and contextual alignment in teaching strategies. This study highlights the importance of professional development and support systems in ensuring the success of a flexible, student-centered curriculum in under-resourced regions.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, teacher perception, student perception, English instruction, rural education.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesia has undertaken significant educational reforms to enhance the relevance and quality of learning, most notably through the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum was designed to provide a more flexible framework that allows students to engage in learning experiences tailored to their individual interests, needs, and developmental stages. Supriyanto et al. (2021) note that the Independent Curriculum encourages teachers to adopt pedagogical strategies that prioritize student engagement and relevance, ultimately fostering a more personalized and meaningful learning environment.

The emphasis on student-centered learning within the Independent Curriculum reflects a growing body of research suggesting that such approaches can enhance motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (2020), the implementation of student-centered strategies has been associated with improved learning outcomes and greater student satisfaction. This aligns with global educational trends advocating for learning that prepares students for real-world challenges. Hattie (2019) underscores that effective teaching strategies focused on student agency not only increase engagement but also promote lifelong learning and adaptability, skills essential for thriving in the 21st century.

In addition, the Independent Curriculum represents a shift toward a more holistic and transformative educational model, where students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning. The World Bank (2021) highlights that this paradigm shift is essential for developing competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, which are increasingly vital in today's knowledge-driven society.

While curriculum design plays a foundational role, its successful implementation is largely dependent on the perceptions and practices of teachers. Fullan (2007) emphasizes that educators who believe in the value and goals of a curriculum are more likely to engage actively and adapt their teaching methods accordingly. Teachers' buy-in is critical, as it influences both the fidelity of implementation and the willingness to innovate and collaborate. Penuel (2009) found that when teachers perceive a curriculum as relevant and beneficial for their students, they are more likely to implement it consistently, leading to improved student outcomes.

Moreover, how teachers interpret curriculum materials and policy directives significantly affects classroom practices. Spillane et al. (2002) argue that teachers' sense-making processes influence

how resources are utilized, shaping instructional approaches and student learning experiences. A positive perception also fosters professional collaboration; as noted by Guskey (2002), teachers who support a curriculum are more inclined to share best practices and build a supportive teaching community. However, the success of these reforms also hinges on how teachers perceive their roles within the implementation process. Desimone (2009) asserts that professional development initiatives must not only build technical competence but also address teachers' concerns, thereby enhancing their confidence and commitment to the reform.

In this context, understanding teachers' perceptions of the Independent Curriculum becomes critical, particularly in underdeveloped areas where systemic challenges may further complicate implementation. Exploring how teachers interpret, accept, and enact the curriculum can offer valuable insights into both the opportunities and barriers within these settings, ultimately contributing to more effective and equitable educational reform. Equally important is the student perspective, which plays a crucial role in evaluating the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and teaching strategies. Students' views directly influence their engagement, motivation, and overall academic success. As Hattie (2009) notes, when students perceive that their teachers care about their learning and well-being, they are more likely to engage actively in classroom activities, which in turn leads to improved learning outcomes. This underscores the importance of recognizing students not merely as passive recipients of instruction but as active participants in the educational process.

Understanding student perceptions enables educators to better tailor their pedagogical approaches to meet learners' needs. Jansen et al. (2020) argue that when students feel their voices are acknowledged and their feedback is genuinely valued, they are more likely to invest in their learning experiences. This sense of being heard enhances their intrinsic motivation and fosters a more responsive and student-centered classroom environment. Furthermore, the alignment between teaching policies and students' perceptions is critical in building a positive and productive learning atmosphere. Policies that incorporate student feedback have been associated with greater levels of satisfaction and achievement. According to the National Education Association (NEA, 2018), educational practices that are informed by student input tend to correlate with increased academic performance and improved school climate. This feedback loop provides educators with meaningful insights into what works and what requires adaptation or refinement. Furlong and O'Leary (2019) emphasize that student perspectives serve as an invaluable mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of instructional strategies, offering real-time data that can inform ongoing pedagogical development.

The significance of student perceptions becomes even more apparent in the context of inclusive education. Recognizing the diverse experiences and viewpoints of students can lead to more equitable and differentiated teaching practices that address a wide range of learning needs. Florian and Beaton (2017) stress that inclusive classrooms must be built upon a deep understanding of student perspectives to ensure that every learner feels valued, supported, and capable of success. Hence, incorporating student voices is not only beneficial for enhancing instructional quality but also imperative for promoting equity and inclusion in education. While much of the existing educational research has significantly advanced our understanding of either teacher practices or student experiences, a substantial gap remains in studies that integrate both perspectives. Research indicates that many educational investigations tend to isolate either the teacher or the student viewpoint, often neglecting the dynamic interaction between the two, a critical element in understanding and improving learning outcomes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This separation limits the ability to capture the full complexity of the educational process, especially in classroom environments where reciprocal influence is at play.

For instance, Hattie's (2009) meta-analysis reveals that teacher feedback has a strong impact on student learning; however, many studies fail to investigate how students perceive and act upon such feedback. This oversight underscores a significant gap in the literature where the voices of students remain underrepresented, despite being key actors in the learning process. Similarly, Dörnyei (2001) argues that in the context of language education, both teacher and student perspectives are crucial for fostering meaningful engagement. Yet, most research continues to focus on only one side of this pedagogical relationship.

Formative assessment practices provide another example where both perspectives are essential. As noted by Black and Wiliam (1998), formative assessments are most effective when they involve active input from both teachers and students, creating a feedback loop that enhances learning. Nonetheless, such bidirectional approaches are still underexplored in empirical studies. Kahu (2013) further reinforces this need by illustrating that student engagement is shaped by the interplay between student attitudes and teacher practices, calling for a more holistic approach in educational research that accounts for both actors simultaneously.

The implementation of national curriculum reforms in underdeveloped regions presents distinct challenges, particularly in areas categorized as 3T—Tertinggal (disadvantaged), Terdepan (frontier), and Terluar (outermost)—such as Kayong Utara in West Kalimantan. These regions are often marked by limited access to essential educational resources and inadequate infrastructure, which significantly hinder the effective delivery of the curriculum (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2019). Despite efforts to standardize education across Indonesia, the contextual realities of 3T areas demand more flexible and localized approaches.

Studies have shown that schools in remote areas like Kayong Utara frequently struggle with issues such as insufficient teacher training, low student enrollment, and a lack of continuous professional development, all of which negatively affect the quality of teaching and learning (Mulyasa, 2020). Moreover, the limited integration of technology in these regions further exacerbates educational inequality. As Suharto (2021) notes, the absence of technological tools in 3T schools makes it challenging to implement modern and relevant curricula that align with national education goals.

The complex socio-cultural landscape of Kayong Utara, characterized by linguistic and ethnic diversity, also calls for a more context-sensitive curriculum. However, the rigidity of national curriculum standards often impedes efforts to adapt learning content to local needs (Halim, 2022). This misalignment between policy and context risks marginalizing students whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are not adequately represented in the curriculum. In addition, challenging working conditions in 3T areas have been found to affect teacher motivation and retention, further undermining curriculum implementation and student learning outcomes (Prasetyo, 2023).

Given these intertwined geographical, infrastructural, and socio-cultural factors, it is imperative that curriculum policies are examined within the realities of 3T contexts to ensure they are both feasible and impactful. Therefore, this study aims to identify the alignment between teacher and student perceptions regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in English language learning, particularly in the context of Kayong Utara as a representative 3T area. By integrating both perspectives, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how educational reforms are experienced at the ground level, and to inform more inclusive and context-sensitive curriculum development strategies moving forward.

METHODS

Respondents

This study involved two distinct groups of respondents: English teachers and junior high school students from Kayong Utara Regency, West Kalimantan. The teacher group consisted of 21 English teachers from various public and private junior high schools across the region. Meanwhile, the student group comprised 250 students from grades 7 to 9 who were enrolled in the same schools where the teacher respondents taught. Participants were purposively selected to ensure the relevance of their experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum in the context of English language learning.

The purposive sampling technique was employed to gather rich, detailed, and contextually relevant data about the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Creswell (2014) highlights that purposive sampling allows researchers to deliberately select participants who are most knowledgeable and directly involved in the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enhancing the depth and validity of the findings. By involving both teachers and students from the same schools, this study captured a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of their shared experiences with the curriculum implementation.

The role of teachers in the curriculum implementation process is critical, particularly in the domain of language education. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), trained and experienced teachers serve as essential facilitators who can deliver more effective and responsive instruction tailored to students' needs. Therefore, the inclusion of English teachers from diverse schools across Kayong Utara was instrumental in identifying the challenges and successes encountered in applying the Merdeka Curriculum within English language classrooms.

In addition to teachers, student participation was integral to the study, providing direct insight into their learning experiences and perspectives. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) argue that student engagement in learning activities is positively correlated with academic achievement and motivation. By including students from grades 7 through 9, the study explored how the Merdeka Curriculum influenced their motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes in English language learning.

Moreover, this research acknowledged the diversity of learning contexts by recruiting respondents from both public and private schools, thus reflecting the heterogeneous educational environment in Kayong Utara. Gay and Airasian (2000) emphasize the importance of understanding the

specific contexts in which learning occurs to identify factors affecting educational outcomes. The variation in school types and backgrounds among the participants provided broader insights into the effectiveness and adaptability of the Merdeka Curriculum across different institutional settings.

Instruments

Data for this study were collected through two structured questionnaires—one administered to English teachers and the other to junior high school students. Both instruments were carefully developed to capture perceptions and experiences related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language learning. Structured questionnaires are widely recognized as effective tools for collecting quantifiable data in educational settings. As Creswell (2014) notes, “structured questionnaires enable researchers to collect measurable and comparable data, facilitating analysis and interpretation across respondent groups.” The use of this method allowed for comprehensive data collection from both teachers and students, thus offering a more holistic understanding of classroom practices under the new curriculum.

Each questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The Likert scale is particularly suitable for measuring attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions in educational research. Allen and Seaman (2007) emphasize that “the Likert scale provides a simple yet robust framework for gauging respondent sentiment, which is crucial when assessing teaching effectiveness and student learning experiences.” Its application in this study enabled the quantification of subjective responses into analyzable data points, thereby enhancing the rigor and clarity of the findings.

The items in both instruments were constructed around seven indicators, each derived from the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum and fundamental theories of English language pedagogy. These indicators included: (1) Clarity of Instruction, (2) Teaching Method Effectiveness, (3) Learning Engagement, (4) Relevance of Materials, (5) Feedback and Assessment, (6) Learning Independence, and (7) Classroom Atmosphere. According to Suyanto (2021), “clearly defined and curriculum-aligned indicators are essential for evaluating the effectiveness of instructional approaches.” By grounding the instrument in these indicators, the study ensured that the data collected were both valid and relevant to the goals of curriculum evaluation.

To enhance the instrument’s capacity to reflect real classroom dynamics, each indicator was measured through three items that addressed observable and experience-based practices. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), who argue that “capturing observable classroom practices through direct measurement offers deeper insights into the pedagogical and interactive dimensions of teaching and learning.” The design ensured that each item corresponded with concrete classroom realities, thereby increasing the reliability of the data and the applicability of the findings to educational practice.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was conducted entirely online using Google Forms. This platform was selected due to its practicality, accessibility, and efficiency in educational research contexts. According to Bhalerao (2015), Google Forms enables researchers to collect data efficiently and manage respondents more effectively, particularly in educational settings. Its user-friendly interface and compatibility with multiple devices made it an ideal tool for reaching both teachers and students across diverse school environments in Kayong Utara.

Survey links were distributed through established school communication channels, including school group chats and teacher networks, to ensure wide accessibility. This method of dissemination was intended to enhance response rates by utilizing familiar and trusted communication platforms. As highlighted by Biber (2018), effective communication between schools and stakeholders can improve participation in data collection activities. The strategic use of institutional networks allowed for timely and structured outreach to both respondent groups.

Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Prior to completing the questionnaire, all respondents were provided with a clear explanation of the study’s purpose, including assurances of confidentiality and the use of data solely for academic purposes. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the data collection process. As emphasized by Hammer (2017), researchers must ensure that participants feel safe and comfortable in providing their information, which can be achieved through guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. These measures were critical to building respondent trust and fostering honest responses.

Moreover, transparency regarding the academic purpose of the research was communicated explicitly to all participants. Clarifying the intended use of the data helped to alleviate potential

concerns regarding privacy and data misuse. As noted by Tourangeau (2018), providing clarity about how data will be used can increase respondent participation and reduce apprehensions about privacy. By adhering to these ethical and procedural standards, the study ensured that the data collection process was both methodologically sound and ethically responsible.

Data Analysis

The data collected from both teacher and student questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were applied to identify the central tendencies and variations in responses for each of the 21 Likert-scale items, which were organized under seven key indicators: Clarity of Instruction, Teaching Method Effectiveness, Learning Engagement, Relevance of Materials, Feedback and Assessment, Learning Independence, and Classroom Atmosphere. As Creswell (2014) emphasized, descriptive statistics play a critical role in educational research by providing a clear summary of the data, enabling researchers to make sense of complex patterns and responses.

The descriptive analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel, and the results were presented in the form of mean and standard deviation values for each item. These item-level scores were then grouped according to the relevant indicator, and average scores per indicator were computed separately for teacher and student respondent groups. This approach aligns with Hattie's (2009) assertion that analyzing perceptions through mean scores offers a valuable lens to evaluate instructional effectiveness and the overall educational experience.

To explore the degree of alignment between teacher and student perceptions, inferential analysis in the form of correlational testing was employed. Specifically, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to assess the strength and direction of relationships between the average scores of teachers and students across the seven indicators. According to Field (2018), correlational analysis is essential in educational research as it facilitates the identification of patterns and associations that may otherwise remain hidden.

In cases where the assumptions for Pearson correlation—such as normal distribution and linearity—were not fully met, Spearman's rank-order correlation was considered as an alternative. This non-parametric test is appropriate for smaller samples or non-normally distributed data and yields statistically valid insights in such conditions (Norman, 2010). Dancey and Reidy (2017) also emphasize that correlation coefficients, whether parametric or non-parametric, are powerful tools for uncovering relational dynamics within educational datasets.

This analytical process enabled both a detailed examination of individual group perceptions and a comparative perspective that identified areas of convergence and divergence between teachers and students. As highlighted by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), such comparative analyses are critical in educational studies to inform the refinement of instructional strategies and curricular implementation, particularly within the evolving framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

FINDINGS

Teachers' Perceptions on the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The analysis of teacher responses, gathered from four English teachers in Kayong Utara, revealed generally positive perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation across seven indicators. Teachers expressed the highest agreement on statements related to instructional flexibility, such as selecting methods based on initial student assessments ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.15$), utilizing relevant supplementary materials ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.58$), and accepting student input in classroom dynamics ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.58$). These responses suggest strong teacher agency and responsiveness to student diversity.

Teachers also indicated high levels of confidence in creating a supportive classroom atmosphere ($M = 4.00$ – 4.33 across related items) and in using various types of assessment ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$). However, the lowest mean score was found in the item stating that the methods used were effective in helping students understand English material ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.00$). This suggests a degree of self-reflection or uncertainty among teachers regarding the pedagogical impact of their strategies, despite generally positive responses in other domains.

Moderate scores were reported on indicators of student engagement and learning independence. Teachers agreed that they involved students in class activities and encouraged autonomous learning, but the standard deviations indicate varied practices or differing levels of confidence in those areas.

Students' Perceptions on English Language Learning

Data from 125 junior high school students across Kayong Utara showed generally positive experiences with English language learning under the Merdeka Curriculum. Students gave the highest rating to the statement "The assessments given by the teacher help me understand my progress" ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.73$), suggesting that formative assessment and feedback mechanisms were well-received and clearly communicated.

Instructional clarity also received high ratings, particularly in the item "The teacher explains the material clearly and understandably" ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.90$). Students appreciated how teachers explained steps and learning objectives and perceived the learning environment as enjoyable and engaging ($M = 3.97$ – 3.99 across classroom atmosphere items).

However, the lowest score was recorded in the item "The teacher encourages me to study on my own outside class" ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.31$), indicating that while in-class engagement may be strong, promotion of out-of-class learning autonomy was lacking. This suggests a potential area for development in helping students become more self-directed learners.

Other indicators such as learning engagement and relevance of materials received moderate scores ($M = 3.51$ – 3.68), indicating that while students were generally involved in classroom activities, they were not always able to relate the content directly to their lived experiences.

Alignment Between Teacher and Student Perceptions

A comparative analysis of teacher and student responses revealed several areas of both alignment and misalignment across the seven indicators examined in this study. In terms of alignment, both groups demonstrated similar perceptions in several key areas. Clarity of instruction received high ratings from both teachers and students, with mean scores ranging from 3.99 to 4.15. Likewise, the overall classroom atmosphere was perceived positively by both groups, with scores averaging around 4.00. Additionally, both teachers and students expressed similar levels of agreement regarding how interesting and enjoyable the instruction was, suggesting a shared understanding of the engaging nature of classroom activities.

Despite these areas of alignment, several points of divergence were also evident. One form of misalignment appeared in the form of teacher underestimation. For instance, teachers rated the effectiveness of their teaching methods relatively low ($M = 3.00$), while students gave significantly higher ratings to the same aspect ($M = 4.00$). A similar pattern was found in assessment feedback, where students strongly valued the feedback provided ($M = 4.29$), while teachers rated their own practices more moderately ($M = 3.67$). These gaps suggest that teachers may not fully recognize the positive impact of their methods and assessments on students' learning experiences.

Conversely, instances of teacher overestimation were also identified. In the domain of learning independence, teachers believed they had successfully encouraged student autonomy, with mean scores between 3.67 and 4.00. However, students rated these items considerably lower, with scores ranging from 2.81 to 3.94. A similar pattern was observed in perceptions of material relevance. While teachers viewed their instructional materials as highly relevant ($M = 4.33$), students provided only moderate evaluations of the same items ($M = 3.62$). These findings indicate that some teacher intentions may not be fully perceived or experienced by students, highlighting the need for better alignment between instructional strategies and student realities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insight into how English teachers and students in Kayong Utara, a rural district in Indonesia, perceive the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Both groups generally reported positive experiences, especially in aspects of instructional clarity and classroom atmosphere. This aligns with Dewi (2021), who asserts that positive perceptions of curriculum implementation can foster greater teacher motivation and student engagement, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes. The consistency in how teachers and students viewed classroom clarity and supportiveness further underscores the effectiveness of a learning environment built on clarity and care—key elements that the Merdeka Curriculum promotes. This finding reinforces the notion that a clear and emotionally supportive classroom climate is essential for successful teaching and learning processes. Clarity in instruction has been widely recognized as a significant contributor to student comprehension. As Hattie (2009) stated, *teacher clarity is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement*. When teachers present learning objectives, instructional steps, and explanations in a structured and explicit manner, students are better able to internalize information and construct meaningful understanding.

In addition to clarity, emotional and social support within the classroom plays a vital role in shaping positive and effective learning experiences. According to Berman (2017), *a supportive learning environment enhances student motivation and engagement, which in turn contributes to academic achievement*. This is consistent with the values embedded in the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes attention to student well-being and the importance of human-centered, adaptive instruction. When students feel emotionally supported and valued, they are more likely to participate actively and confidently in the learning process.

Moreover, the presence of both clarity and support in the classroom helps foster stronger relationships between teachers and students, an essential component in cultivating a positive classroom climate. Pianta (2006) noted that *positive teacher-student relationships create a better classroom climate, which supports more effective learning*. When teachers provide clear guidance while showing care for their students' emotional and academic needs, meaningful connections are formed that enhance student engagement and comfort. This relational dynamic strengthens students' willingness to express themselves, ask questions, and become active participants in their own learning.

Classrooms characterized by clarity and supportiveness contribute not only to students' academic success, but also to the development of their social and emotional competencies. As Marzano (2011) emphasized, classrooms that are clear and supportive improve academic performance and help build students' social and emotional skills. Thus, the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on the teacher's role as a facilitator and mentor reflects a broader vision of education that goes beyond knowledge transmission and aims to support students' holistic growth.

Instructional clarity emerged as one of the strongest areas of alignment. Both students and teachers rated highly the ability of teachers to communicate lesson objectives and guide learning processes effectively. This supports Hattie's (2009) claim that teacher clarity is among the most significant influences on student achievement. The capacity of teachers to structure learning in clear, step-by-step formats has evidently facilitated a learning environment in which students feel oriented and supported in their academic tasks. The capacity of teachers to structure learning in clear, step-by-step formats has evidently facilitated a classroom environment in which students feel oriented, confident, and supported in completing their academic tasks. This clarity in instructional delivery is not only beneficial for cognitive understanding but also foundational for building student confidence and engagement.

Hattie (2009) emphasizes that teachers who can present instruction in a clear and systematic manner significantly enhance student comprehension. He notes that targeted feedback and structured guidance are essential in helping students gain clarity and confidence in approaching academic tasks." When students understand what is expected of them and can follow a logical sequence of activities, they are more likely to feel capable of succeeding. Marzano (2007) reinforces this idea, stating that well-organized teaching strategies, such as the use of concept maps, visual aids, and clearly defined steps, contribute to improved student engagement and learning outcomes. These strategies provide students with a cognitive framework that enables them to organize information, set learning goals, and overcome academic challenges more effectively. Similarly, Rosenshine (2012) found that explicit instruction, where teachers provide detailed and guided steps for learning, helps students better grasp complex concepts. His research indicates that "structured teaching practices help students develop a clearer understanding of content and increase their sense of direction in the classroom." This instructional clarity supports not only knowledge acquisition but also the development of learner autonomy.

Furthermore, the Cognitive Load Theory proposed by Sweller (1988) highlights the psychological importance of instructional structure. He argues that when information is presented in a sequential and logically organized format, students experience reduced cognitive load, allowing them to focus more effectively on concept comprehension and task performance. This suggests that instructional clarity directly supports learning efficiency by minimizing unnecessary mental effort and maximizing cognitive resources for higher-order thinking. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that instructional clarity is not simply a pedagogical preference—it is a critical factor in student success. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, where flexibility is granted to teachers to design learning experiences, this clarity becomes even more essential. It enables students to navigate diverse and potentially unfamiliar instructional approaches with confidence and purpose.

However, not all areas demonstrated such alignment. A significant discrepancy was identified in perceptions of teaching method effectiveness. While teachers expressed uncertainty regarding the impact of their chosen instructional methods, students responded more positively, indicating that they found those methods helpful in understanding the material. While teachers expressed uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of their chosen instructional methods, students responded more positively,

suggesting that these methods were indeed helpful in enhancing their understanding of the material. This discrepancy highlights a crucial dynamic in classroom practice: teachers' self-perception may not always align with student experiences, particularly in terms of instructional impact. Hattie (2009) emphasizes that teaching strategies significantly influence student achievement, with some approaches leading to better learning outcomes than others. He notes that the effect of teaching strategies on student achievement is significant, with some methods leading to better outcomes than others. This suggests that even if teachers express doubt about the methods they employ, students may still benefit from those approaches in ways that are not immediately evident to the teachers themselves.

Supporting this perspective, Marsh et al. (2017) found that students often hold more favorable views of interactive and collaborative teaching methods. Their study revealed that students reported a greater understanding of the material when engaged in active learning environments. This aligns with the idea that student-centered, engaging pedagogies can lead to deeper comprehension, even when teachers remain cautious or self-critical in evaluating their own practice. Similarly, Freeman et al. (2014) reported that active learning significantly improves student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics disciplines. Their meta-analysis concluded that active learning increases student performance, underscoring the value of participatory learning environments over traditional lecture-based instruction. While such methods may be perceived as challenging to implement or evaluate by teachers, students often experience them as more meaningful and effective.

Finally, Bransford et al. (2000) argue that teachers' uncertainty about instructional strategies does not necessarily reflect their actual impact. According to the authors, effective teaching requires an understanding of how students learn, indicating that responsiveness to student feedback and learning processes is key. Teachers may underestimate their influence simply because they are focused on areas for improvement, whereas students directly experience the benefits of intentional instructional design. This perceptual gap reinforces the need for structured feedback mechanisms in classrooms. Black and Wiliam (1998) emphasize that formative assessment and feedback are essential for understanding the effectiveness of teaching. When student voices are formally incorporated into reflective teaching practices, it can help teachers better align their instructional intentions with actual student experiences.

A similar mismatch was observed in perceptions of assessment feedback. Students strongly agreed that assessments helped them monitor their learning progress, whereas teachers rated their own practices in this domain more modestly. This suggests a missed opportunity for teachers to recognize the value students place on feedback. As noted by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), effective feedback must be timely, learner-centered, and oriented toward improvement, characteristics that may be present but under-acknowledged by the teachers themselves. Such underestimation may point to the need for more explicit training in assessment literacy and feedback design, especially in the context of student-centered reforms like the Merdeka Curriculum. This perceptual gap highlights a common disconnect between instructional intention and learner reception, particularly in how feedback and evaluation are understood and utilized in classroom settings.

Research by Black and Wiliam (1998) emphasized the pivotal role of formative assessment in helping students become more aware of their learning objectives and the strategies required to achieve them. They argued that students who are actively engaged in formative assessment processes tend to have a better understanding of learning goals and how to reach them. This underscores the idea that effective assessment is not merely about grading but about empowering learners to take ownership of their academic progress. Hattie and Timperley (2007) also stressed the importance of constructive feedback, noting that effective feedback helps learners identify their strengths and weaknesses, which in turn facilitates self-monitoring and goal-setting. From the students' perspective, the feedback received through regular assessments was likely perceived as valuable, guiding them in making adjustments and improving their performance. In contrast, teachers may have underestimated the impact of these practices, possibly due to a lack of visible or immediate learning gains. Supporting this notion, Sadler (1989) found that teachers often undervalue the effectiveness of their own assessment practices. This suggests that teachers' reflective practice concerning assessment may benefit from more robust feedback mechanisms, including student input. Moreover, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) emphasized the need to involve students more actively in the assessment process. They stated that when students feel a sense of control over assessment, they are more likely to monitor and evaluate their own learning progress. This aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on learner agency, and highlights the value of fostering metacognitive skills through student-involved assessment designs.

Recent findings by Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) further support this argument, demonstrating that self-assessment and reflection not only help students track their own progress but also enhance their intrinsic motivation. This reinforces the idea that when students feel empowered to participate in their own evaluation, learning becomes more personalized, targeted, and meaningful.

Taken together, these findings reveal that although teachers may modestly perceive their own effectiveness in assessment, students experience these practices as impactful and essential to their learning journey. Bridging this gap requires not only reflective teaching practices but also greater student involvement in the assessment process, which has been shown to significantly enhance learning outcomes and motivation.

The data also revealed that teachers may overestimate their success in promoting learning independence and providing contextually relevant materials. While teachers believed they were encouraging autonomy and tailoring content to students' realities, students reported more moderate agreement, especially concerning studying independently outside of class and seeing material as relevant to their daily lives. These findings reflect the argument made by Ladson-Billings (1995), who emphasized the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy. Simply localizing materials is not enough; the content must resonate with students' lived experiences and identities to be genuinely engaging. This disparity highlights a recurring challenge in educational practice: the misalignment between teacher intention and student perception.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), autonomy is a fundamental psychological need that fosters intrinsic motivation and deeper engagement in learning. They argue that the more learners feel autonomous in their learning, the more motivated and self-regulated they become. However, despite teachers' belief that they are encouraging such autonomy, students in this study did not strongly perceive themselves as being supported to study independently beyond classroom hours. This indicates that autonomy-supportive practices may not be sufficiently visible or accessible to students, particularly in under-resourced or traditionally teacher-centered learning environments.

The perceived relevance of learning materials also plays a critical role in student motivation. Hattie (2009) identified relevance as a significant factor in student engagement, stating that when students see connections between the curriculum and their real-life experiences, they are more likely to participate actively and learn independently. Conversely, if students view the material as disconnected from their context, they may lose interest and be less inclined to take ownership of their learning. Zimmerman (2002) similarly emphasized the importance of perceived support in developing independent learning skills. He noted that students who feel encouraged and equipped to engage in self-regulated learning tend to perform better academically. In this study, however, students' lower ratings on items related to learning autonomy suggest that they may not feel adequately prepared or supported to engage in such practices. This highlights the need for more explicit instructional strategies that teach students how to plan, monitor, and reflect on their own learning processes. Furthermore, Bruns (2018) argues that teachers must actively incorporate student perspectives when designing and delivering instruction. Without a clear understanding of how students experience the curriculum, efforts to contextualize content or foster autonomy may fall short. If students perceive the teaching approach as misaligned with their learning needs or realities, it can hinder the very self-directed behaviors that the curriculum aims to promote.

In essence, these findings call for a deeper dialogic process between teachers and students, in which learners' voices inform instructional design, and autonomy is not only encouraged but scaffolded through meaningful, relevant tasks and ongoing support. Bridging this perception gap is especially vital in implementing transformative curricula like *Merdeka*, where flexibility and student-centeredness are core values. Such gaps in perception are especially critical in rural and underdeveloped regions like Kayong Utara, where socio-economic conditions may exacerbate challenges in curriculum delivery. According to Aikens and Barbarin (2008), limited resources and lower socio-economic status significantly affect learning opportunities. In such contexts, efforts to implement a flexible curriculum must be accompanied by deliberate strategies that address infrastructural and pedagogical limitations. While the *Merdeka Curriculum* encourages teacher agency and innovation by granting greater autonomy in curriculum design and instructional choices, this autonomy must be matched with sustained support and well-defined mechanisms for professional growth. Without such structures, teacher autonomy risks becoming an overwhelming burden rather than an empowering opportunity.

Research highlights that continuous professional development is essential to help teachers navigate and make meaningful use of curricular flexibility. Darling-Hammond (2017) asserts that professional development should be continuous and embedded in the daily work of teachers, allowing them to refine their practices and innovate in their classrooms. This type of sustained and context-sensitive support enables educators not only to implement new policies effectively but also to adapt them to their students' unique needs and learning environments. Moreover, clear mechanisms for professional growth are necessary to ensure that autonomy translates into improved instructional practices. Hattie (2012) underscores the importance of feedback in this process, noting that feedback and professional development are essential components that help teachers to understand their impact on

student learning and to make necessary adjustments. In the absence of reflective feedback loops, teachers may be left without the guidance needed to continuously improve or validate their pedagogical decisions.

Teacher autonomy can indeed foster innovation in instruction, but such innovation must be supported by appropriate resources and a safe environment for experimentation. Fullan (2016) emphasizes that sustainable change in education requires a combination of autonomy and support systems that enable teachers to experiment and innovate without fear of failure. This insight is particularly relevant in under-resourced or remote contexts, where professional risk-taking often lacks structural backing. Importantly, the alignment between autonomy and institutional support must be deliberate. Timperley (2008) found that teacher agency is enhanced when there are robust systems in place that provide teachers with the necessary resources and support to take risks and implement new ideas in their teaching. This indicates that autonomy alone is insufficient; it must be embedded within a culture of support, coaching, and collaboration.

In addition to structural supports, the role of professional learning communities (PLCs) is critical. Collaboration among teachers creates a space for shared inquiry, reflection, and mutual encouragement. As Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) explain, professional learning communities foster collaboration among teachers, which can enhance their capacity for innovation and improve student outcomes. When teachers are connected to peers with similar challenges and goals, they are more likely to sustain innovation and remain engaged in professional growth. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that granting autonomy to teachers, as envisioned by the *Merdeka Curriculum*, must be accompanied by intentional, continuous, and collaborative professional development. Only when support systems are as strong as the freedom offered can teacher agency truly flourish and lead to meaningful transformation in student learning.

Indeed, the need for professional development emerges as a central concern in ensuring the effective implementation of the curriculum. Without adequate training and ongoing feedback, teachers may rely on assumptions about their students' needs and experiences that do not reflect reality. Indeed, the need for professional development emerges as a central concern in ensuring the effective implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Without adequate training and ongoing feedback, teachers may fall back on assumptions, intuition, or personal experience—approaches that do not always reflect the actual needs and learning contexts of their students. This misalignment can result in instructional decisions that, although well-intentioned, fail to meet learners where they are. Desimone (2009) emphasizes that high-quality professional development can significantly improve teaching practices and student outcomes. She argues that sustained, content-focused training enables teachers to better understand student learning processes and tailor their instruction accordingly. This highlights the importance of equipping teachers with the tools and frameworks they need to respond meaningfully to diverse classroom challenges. Guskey (2002) further points out that in the absence of structured training, teachers are likely to rely on their own interpretations of what students need—interpretations that may be shaped more by personal teaching history than by current student realities. As he notes, “without adequate professional development, teachers tend to rely on personal experience rather than evidence-based approaches, which can lead to gaps between instructional delivery and student learning needs.” Moreover, Hattie (2009), through his extensive meta-analysis, found that ongoing feedback and targeted professional learning have a significant effect on teaching effectiveness. Teachers who receive consistent input on their instructional strategies are more likely to adapt their methods in ways that support differentiated learning and inclusive pedagogy—critical elements in classrooms that vary widely in student ability and background. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reinforce this view by demonstrating that teachers involved in sustained professional learning programs are better positioned to adapt curricula and pedagogical strategies to suit the lived experiences of their students. In doing so, they not only enhance the relevance of learning but also increase student engagement and achievement. Particularly in the context of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, where teacher autonomy is high, professional development becomes an essential counterbalance—ensuring that autonomy does not lead to isolation or stagnation, but rather to reflective, evidence-based, and context-responsive innovation.

Taken together, these findings underscore that professional development is not a supplementary element but a foundational component of curriculum reform. For the *Merdeka Curriculum* to achieve its goals of student-centered and context-sensitive education, teachers must be supported with continuous opportunities to grow, reflect, and adapt their practice in line with emerging educational challenges and opportunities.

Furthermore, the moderate levels of student engagement reported by both groups point to untapped potential for pedagogical innovation. The *Merdeka Curriculum* grants teachers increased autonomy to explore diverse instructional strategies, including project-based, collaborative, and active

learning approaches. While this flexibility is a progressive shift toward student-centered education, translating such freedom into effective classroom practice requires more than policy statements. Implementation depends on a range of contextual factors, including teacher readiness, institutional support, and access to relevant professional development. Suyanto (2021) notes that the Merdeka Curriculum provides space for teachers to innovate in their instructional methods, which in turn can enhance student engagement in the learning process. This curricular openness encourages teachers to tailor instruction based on classroom dynamics and student needs, ideally resulting in more interactive and meaningful learning experiences. However, flexibility alone is insufficient if not accompanied by actionable guidance and capacity building. As Ali (2022) points out, the success of Merdeka Curriculum implementation does not solely rely on the policy itself, but on the ability of teachers to translate that policy into daily classroom practices. In practice, teachers often face challenges in bridging the gap between aspirational curriculum goals and the realities of diverse classroom environments. Without structured support and a clear understanding of how to operationalize innovative methods, implementation may remain superficial or inconsistent.

To effectively carry out active learning strategies, teachers must be equipped with both pedagogical knowledge and technical skills. Rahmawati and Sari (2023) argue that ongoing professional training is essential to ensure that teachers can implement innovative learning strategies within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. This implies that flexibility must be supported by systematic efforts to strengthen teacher competencies through targeted training that is both context-specific and sustainable. Furthermore, the successful implementation of such a flexible curriculum also requires strong institutional and leadership support. Sutrisno (2021) emphasizes that managerial support and teacher collaboration are crucial in creating a conducive environment for the application of the Merdeka Curriculum. This suggests that school leaders and educational administrators play a key role in fostering collaborative cultures, allocating resources, and reinforcing pedagogical shifts envisioned by the curriculum. In addition, Brundrett (2006) notes that innovation in teaching practices can significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, particularly when strategies are aligned with student interests and cultural contexts.

In sum, while this study affirms the promising direction of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in Kayong Utara, it also reveals key areas where greater alignment between teacher intentions and student experiences is necessary. Strengthening this alignment requires fostering authentic learning independence, deepening the contextual relevance of instructional materials, and enhancing teacher awareness of their instructional and assessment practices through reflective tools and feedback. As Fullan (2001) aptly states, aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment is vital to improving student learning. For the Merdeka Curriculum to achieve its transformative goals, it must be supported by collaborative efforts between educators, policymakers, and school communities to ensure that pedagogical practices reflect the diverse realities of students across Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the perceptions of English teachers and students regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools across Kayong Utara, a rural district in Indonesia. Through the analysis of quantitative data collected via Likert-scale questionnaires, the study revealed generally positive views from both groups, particularly in the areas of instructional clarity, classroom atmosphere, and engagement. These results indicate that the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially those emphasizing clarity, autonomy, and student-centered learning, are being recognized and partially realized in classroom practice.

Nevertheless, the study also identified significant perceptual gaps between teachers and students, particularly in relation to the effectiveness of teaching methods, the relevance of learning materials, the value of assessment feedback, and the promotion of student independence. While teachers often rated their practices moderately or highly in these areas, students offered responses that suggest either a greater appreciation (as in the case of assessments) or unmet expectations (as in learning independence and material relevance). These misalignments suggest that teachers may benefit from greater access to structured student feedback and ongoing professional development that helps them translate curriculum autonomy into more accurately perceived and experienced classroom strategies.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of fostering stronger alignment between teacher intentions and student experiences, especially in the unique sociocultural and economic contexts of rural regions. For the Merdeka Curriculum to be effectively implemented, especially in 3T (underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost) areas like Kayong Utara, efforts must extend beyond policy

design to include practical supports such as teacher training, access to relevant learning resources, and school-level reflection mechanisms.

Future research could expand on this study by incorporating classroom observations, longitudinal designs, or qualitative insights to further explore the nuances of curriculum implementation. By continuing to bridge the gap between policy and practice, educators and stakeholders can ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum fosters meaningful, inclusive, and contextually relevant learning experiences for all students.

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