Revisiting Indonesia's English Curriculum: Policy Gaps and Classroom Realities

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Abstract

This study examines the gap between Indonesia's national English curriculum policies and actual classroom practices in two distinct secondary school contexts: an urban vocational school and a semi-urban general school. While the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes communicative competence and active learning approaches, classroom realities reveal a clear misalignment between policy intentions and pedagogical practices. Employing a qualitative descriptive–interpretative approach through a multisite case study design, the research was conducted at SMKN 7 Surabaya (urban, vocational) and SMAN 5 Tegal (semi-urban, general). Data were collected through policy document analysis, classroom observations, and in-depth interviews with six English teachers and thirty students. Thematic and contextual comparative analyses were applied to identify patterns of policy–practice gaps and their underlying factors. Findings indicate that teachers at SMKN 7 Surabaya tend to adapt the curriculum to vocational needs but face constraints of time and workplace competency demands, resulting in suboptimal communicative teaching. In contrast, teachers at SMAN 5 Tegal face limited resources and training, leading to lecture-based and exam-oriented instruction. Across both sites, teachers demonstrate limited understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum principles, while exam orientation and institutional structures hinder communicative implementation. The study's novelty lies in its cross-contextual analysis and policy–practice interface approach. It contributes to language education policy studies in developing contexts and recommends context-sensitive teacher training, flexible policies, and more responsive curriculum implementation mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

English has long been recognized as a global language that plays a crucial role in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. In the Indonesian context, English proficiency is viewed as an essential asset for enhancing individual competitiveness in the global labor market, expanding access to knowledge, and strengthening cultural diplomacy (Abidin et al., 2023; Astuti et al., 2024). Consequently, national English curriculum policies have consistently served as an integral component of Indonesia's educational development strategy. However, beneath these seemingly ideal policy formulations lies a persistent and fundamental problem: the wide gap between curriculum policy and classroom reality. The English curriculum, particularly within the framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Freedom Curriculum), emphasizes communicative competence and student-centered learning. Yet, in daily classroom practice, many teachers continue to rely on conventional methods such as

grammar-translation and exam-oriented approaches (Mukhibat et al., 2024; Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022). This discrepancy raises a critical question: to what extent are national curriculum policies truly implemented in classrooms, particularly within Indonesia's diverse social and institutional contexts?

Empirical evidence reveals significant disparities in curriculum implementation among different types of schools in Indonesia. Vocational schools in urban areas, such as SMKN 7 Surabaya, are expected to produce work-ready graduates with professional English communication skills (Fauzan et al., 2023; Pratikno et al., 2022). In contrast, general high schools in semi-urban regions, such as SMAN 5 Tegal, are more focused on academic achievement and national examinations. In both cases, policy demands often fail to align with the capacities and realities of teachers and students. Limited resources, inadequate training on the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka, and structural as well as cultural pressures within schools all contribute to the persistent gap between policy objectives and pedagogical outcomes. This situation underscores that curriculum formulation alone is insufficient without a deep understanding of its contextual application within classrooms.

The literature on English language policy and curriculum implementation in Indonesia has grown substantially over the past decade. Several studies highlight the disjunction between language education policy and classroom practice, particularly within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Prabandari (2020) and Tai and Chen (2023) emphasize that English language policies in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, are often top-down in nature and fail to adequately consider local diversity. In the Indonesian context, Prabandari (2020) and Septiana (2020) show that students' motivation to learn English is heavily influenced by socioeconomic conditions and school institutional structures, suggesting that successful curriculum implementation cannot be separated from these contextual factors. Research by Hikmawati and Hosnan (2022) and Rohiyatussakinah (2021) further indicates that, although curriculum policies promote communicative learning, teachers still struggle to shift their pedagogical practices due to limited pedagogical understanding and lack of supporting resources.

Other studies reveal that the communicative approach in English language teaching is often inconsistently applied. Ndari et al. (2023) and Zidan and Qamariah (2023) note that many teachers across Asia perceive communicative approaches as abstract and difficult to implement in large classes with limited resources. Rossiter (2020) and Z. P. Sari et al. (2022) found that, in developing countries, English curricula often experience a "policy–practice gap" resulting from the lack of alignment between national policy and institutional realities at the school level. Similarly, Kamila and Agus (2023) and Kosim et al. (2023) point out that, despite the recognized importance of English within Indonesia's educational policy, in practice, English teaching at the secondary level remains heavily reliant on examinations and rote grammar learning.

Furthermore, emerging studies on the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka reveal intriguing dynamics. Madhakomala et al. (2022) found that English teachers often experience confusion in interpreting the curriculum's flexibility, leading many to revert to older, more

structured, and familiar teaching methods. Meanwhile, Wahyuni et al. (2023) highlight that insufficiently contextualized teacher training remains a major obstacle to communicative teaching at the secondary level. Teachers frequently lack sufficient space to innovate due to administrative pressures and examination-related expectations from both schools and parents. These findings reinforce the idea that English curriculum implementation is not merely a technical issue, but a complex structural and cultural challenge.

Internationally, the gap between language policy and pedagogical practice is not unique to Indonesia. F. F. K. Sari et al. (2023) demonstrate that language policies are often politically and ideologically driven, while teachers and students must interpret and adapt them within their own realities. In developing country contexts, Amalia and von Korflesch (2021) and Cirocki and Anam (2024) observe that English language policies frequently overlook the social, economic, and cultural contexts of schools, resulting in ineffective implementation. Similar patterns have been reported in other Asian countries such as Vietnam and Thailand, where Mulang and Putra (2023) and Permanasari et al. (2021) describe how teachers face dilemmas between adhering to policy directives and accommodating the practical constraints of their classrooms. This broader pattern suggests that Indonesia's challenges in implementing its English curriculum are part of a wider phenomenon within language education policy in developing nations.

In the local context, research by M. Hidayat et al. (2021), Khotimah et al. (2021), and Noboru et al. (2021) reveals that teacher-centered mindsets remain a major barrier to adopting communicative approaches. Many teachers perceive communicative learning as too complex to implement in large classes with limited time. Meanwhile, the exam-oriented culture that still dominates Indonesia's education system reinforces grammar-focused and memorization-based teaching practices. Studies by Astuti et al. (2021) and Farwati et al. (2021) show that resource-limited schools often lack adequate institutional support for optimal curriculum implementation. Conversely, even well-resourced schools may fail to achieve success without relevant and context-sensitive teacher training.

Considering these various findings, it is evident that prior research has extensively discussed the mismatch between English education policy and classroom practice, both in Indonesia and internationally. However, most of these studies tend to focus on a single school type or on policy issues in general, without offering a comparative analysis across different educational contexts. In reality, the social and institutional differences between an urban vocational school and a semi-urban general high school can be stark. These differences not only reflect variations in resources but also distinct learning cultures, student motivations, institutional expectations, and social pressures. Understanding these contextual differences is thus essential for designing more responsive educational policies.

This is where the significance of the present study lies. By examining the implementation of the English curriculum across two contrasting school contexts, SMKN 7 Surabaya and SMAN 5 Tegal, this research aims to provide a sharper depiction of how national policies are enacted and interpreted at the classroom level. Such an approach allows for the revelation of micro-level details that are often overlooked in macro-policy analyses. It is

within these classroom spaces that policies are truly "tested" by everyday realities, by teachers' capacities, students' motivations, and the structural dynamics of schools.

Furthermore, this study not only aims to describe the gap between policy and practice but also to understand the social, cultural, and institutional dynamics that shape this gap. The cross-contextual approach adopted here contributes a new dimension to the study of English curriculum implementation in Indonesia while enriching the international discourse on the policy–practice interface in language education. In doing so, this study not only fills an underexplored gap in the literature but also offers a more contextual and realistic perspective on English curriculum reform efforts in Indonesia.

Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how English curriculum policies are enacted in practice, why the gap between policy and classroom implementation persists, and what factors either reinforce or hinder their realization. Accordingly, the findings are expected to inform policymakers in designing more adaptive and sustainable curriculum implementation strategies. Moreover, the study's insights contribute to broader discussions in the fields of language policy, vocational education, and comparative education, particularly within the context of developing countries striving to balance global demands with local realities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive–interpretative approach with a multisite case study design because its main objective was not to quantitatively measure the effectiveness of the curriculum, but to deeply understand how English curriculum policy is translated and implemented in different school contexts. The qualitative approach was chosen because it provides space for researchers to explore the experiences, perceptions, and practices of educational actors, especially teachers and students, in a more contextual, holistic, and interpretive way (Land, 2024; Yani et al., 2025). The multisite case study design was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to compare the dynamics of curriculum implementation in two contrasting school contexts, urban vocational and semi-urban general, to reveal similarities, differences, and the underlying factors behind them (Khan, 2019; Lim, 2025; Mohajan, 2018).

The selection of research locations was carried out purposively, namely SMKN 7 Surabaya and SMAN 5 Tegal. These two schools were chosen because they represent two common but contrasting types of institutional contexts in Indonesia's education system. SMKN 7 Surabaya represents a vocational school in an urban area with high pressure on job readiness and the need for professional communication. Meanwhile, SMAN 5 Tegal represents a general school in a semi-urban area with a stronger academic orientation and limited resources. These contextual differences provide rich analytical opportunities to understand how a single national curriculum policy is translated differently in local practice, in accordance with the policy–practice interface framework.

Research informants were selected through purposive sampling by considering the relevance of their experiences and roles in implementing the English curriculum. There were

six English teachers, three from SMKN 7 Surabaya and three from SMAN 5 Tegal. These teachers were selected because they have direct experience teaching English in grade XI, a level considered crucial in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. In addition, a total of thirty students were involved, fifteen from each school. Grade XI students were chosen because they are in a transition period toward the school's final examination and the world of work or higher education, making them the group most affected by curriculum policy. The combination of teachers and students as informants was expected to provide a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of curriculum implementation from both the teaching and policy recipient sides.

Data collection was carried out through three main techniques: document analysis, classroom observation, and in-depth interviews. Document analysis focused on national curriculum policy (the Kurikulum Merdeka), lesson plans (RPP), and school syllabi. This step was important to understand textually how the policy and curriculum were formulated. Classroom observations were conducted to capture actual teaching practices, teacher–student interactions, and the learning approaches applied. These observations were non-participant so that researchers could naturally record the learning process without disrupting classroom dynamics. In-depth interviews were then conducted with teachers and students to explore their subjective experiences, perceptions of curriculum policy, the strategies used, and the obstacles faced in the implementation process. This interview method allowed the emergence of reflective narratives and real experiences that could not be captured only through observation (Stanley, 2023; Yani et al., 2025).

The data analysis process was carried out through a thematic analysis approach to identify thematic patterns related to the gap between policy and practice, both emerging from documents, observations, and interviews. This analysis was conducted inductively and iteratively, starting with initial coding, thematic categorization, and then interpreting deeper meanings. In this process, the researcher actively compared data from the two schools to reveal similarities and contextual differences, as well as how these differences shaped the way the curriculum was implemented.

To ensure data validity, triangulation was carried out in three ways. First, source triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from teachers and students to see the consistency of experiences and perceptions. Second, method triangulation was conducted by matching the results of document analysis, classroom observation, and in-depth interviews so that one finding could be verified through various types of data. Third, contextual triangulation was carried out by comparing the results from SMKN 7 Surabaya and SMAN 5 Tegal to obtain a sharper understanding of contextual factors shaping curriculum implementation practices. This triangulation effort is important to increase the validity and credibility of the findings and to minimize interpretive bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Policy–Practice Gap in English Curriculum Implementation

The policy–practice gap in the implementation of the English curriculum in Indonesia illustrates one of the most evident paradoxes in education: the striking distance between ideal policy intentions and pedagogical realities in the classroom. Normatively, the Kurikulum Merdeka was designed to strengthen students' communicative competence, emphasizing activity-based and student-centered learning. However, when this curriculum is translated into everyday practice, it often loses its communicative character and transforms into a series of conventional teaching routines dominated by lectures, memorization, and exam drills. This phenomenon indicates that educational policy is never implemented linearly from top to bottom, but is always negotiated, interpreted, and adapted to the social and institutional contexts in which it operates.

In this study, two different school contexts, SMKN 7 Surabaya (urban, vocational) and SMAN 5 Tegal (semi-urban, general), served as sites to observe how national policy on English language teaching undergoes a process of "filtering" (enactment) at the school level. Field observations revealed that rather than becoming a space for communicative interaction, English classrooms in both schools operated within a traditional pedagogical framework. At SMKN 7 Surabaya, teachers tended to use class time to explain grammatical structures or vocabulary relevant to the world of work, followed by structured exercises oriented toward certification or job competency exams. In several sessions, classes began with frontal instruction from the teacher standing at the front, while students sat neatly in fixed rows, demonstrating a hierarchical and one-directional pedagogical relationship. Spoken English activity was almost nonexistent, except when students were asked to repeat certain vocabulary items or give short, pre-prepared answers.

A similar situation was found at SMAN 5 Tegal. The classroom contained about thirty students, with desks and chairs arranged neatly facing the front. Teachers began the lesson by providing lengthy explanations of grammar or reading topics, while students diligently took notes. During observations, teacher–student interaction was limited to closed-ended questions, whose answers were predictable and mechanical. Activities such as role plays, group discussions, or communicative simulations, as recommended in the Kurikulum Merdeka implementation guidelines, were absent. When asked about the teaching strategies used, one teacher at SMAN 5 Tegal stated that lecture and drill methods were chosen because they were "easier to control and aligned with national and school examination targets." This statement illustrates how structural pressures such as exams and rigid assessment standards have shifted pedagogical orientations from communicative to exam-oriented practices.

From the perspective of policy enactment theory, educational policies are never implemented as written. They undergo complex interpretive processes depending on institutional conditions, resources, and the understanding of implementing actors (Hasanah et al., 2022; Prihanto et al., 2021; Siahaan et al., 2023). In this case, teachers, as policy actors, interpreted the Kurikulum Merdeka through the lenses of their teaching experiences, resource limitations, and institutional pressures. At SMKN 7 Surabaya, for instance, teachers

attempted to adapt the national curriculum to vocational demands. However, these efforts often resulted in narrower and more functional teaching practices, such as drilling technical vocabulary or writing job application letters, rather than engaging in holistic communicative learning.

Meanwhile, teachers at SMAN 5 Tegal faced a different challenge. Limited training and learning resources led them to revert to conventional methods deemed safest and most familiar. During interviews, one teacher mentioned that "the new curriculum is good, but we still don't really understand how to apply it in large classes with limited time." This statement illustrates what Sakban and Sundawa (2023) refer to as structural misalignment, the gap between the ideal design of policy and the structural capacity of schools to realize it.

Students' experiences also reinforced these findings. At SMKN 7 Surabaya, students reported that they rarely engaged in spoken English during class. They were more often asked to memorize vocabulary and complete written exercises. Several students even associated English lessons solely with "exam readiness for certification," rather than as a means of global communication. Meanwhile, students at SMAN 5 Tegal described English lessons as "theoretical" and "boring," citing the lack of active interaction. This shows how students' perception of the curriculum has shifted, from a participatory learning arena to a standardized academic routine.

Classroom conditions further underscore the gap between policy intentions and field realities. The Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes collaborative, participatory, and student-centered learning. Yet rigid classroom structures, hierarchical pedagogical cultures, and exam pressures remain major obstacles. When students are seated in fixed rows, with the teacher as the central authority and sole director of activity, communicative learning becomes difficult to realize. For instance, in one observation session at SMAN 5 Tegal, the "group discussion" activity listed in the lesson plan (RPP) turned out to consist only of dividing students into small groups to quietly answer multiple-choice questions, without any meaningful English interaction.

This analysis demonstrates that the implementation gap is not simply due to teacher resistance, but rather the result of a complex negotiation between a generic policy design and the limited institutional structures within schools. Teachers operate within what Rasmitadila et al. (2022) call a "context of practice", a space where policy must be adjusted to the realities of resources, time, and administrative pressure. When policy is overly general and lacks sufficient flexibility, teachers will seek shortcuts by interpreting the curriculum according to their minimal available capacity.

Furthermore, this condition shows how national policy often fails to account for disparities between school contexts in Indonesia. Urban vocational and semi-urban general schools differ significantly in needs, resources, and institutional orientations. Yet the national curriculum is designed with a uniform approach that overlooks such contextual diversity. As a result, a policy intended to be communicative and progressive often becomes an administrative burden that is difficult to implement effectively.

Institutional Context and Teaching Practice Dynamics

In curriculum policy implementation, institutional context is not a passive background but an active actor that shapes how policy is enacted at the practical level. Although the curriculum is designed nationally with the same structure and guidelines, it will ultimately be interpreted differently depending on the institutional characteristics of each school, from vision and mission, resources, and organizational culture, to expectations of student outcomes. This dynamic is clearly visible in the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in English teaching at two schools with contrasting institutional characteristics: SMKN 7 Surabaya as an urban vocational school, and SMAN 5 Tegal as a semi-urban general school.

The institutional context of SMKN 7 Surabaya is strongly oriented toward the world of work. The school is known as a structured vocational institution, where every subject, including English, is encouraged to align with industrial needs. Field observations showed that each classroom was equipped with digital whiteboards, but these were mostly used to display slides of technical vocabulary and sentence structures directly related to vocational fields. When class began, the teacher immediately directed students' attention to workplace terminology, such as words commonly used in job interviews or administrative documents. The learning activities proceeded at a fast and structured pace. Students sat in fixed rows, with little space for discussion or project-based activities. The teacher delivered one-way instructions, occasionally asking students to repeat key words before moving on to written exercises.

In interviews, one teacher at SMKN 7 Surabaya explained that time constraints and job competency targets compelled them to "condense" English learning into more practical forms. The teacher noted that communicative approaches are ideal but difficult to implement when students must achieve work readiness in a short period. The teacher also acknowledged that while the national curriculum provides flexibility, "the most urgent thing is to ensure that students can use English for work purposes, not for long discussions." This statement reflects how institutional expectations shape pedagogical orientations, shifting teaching from broad communicative competence to the mastery of specific functional vocabulary.

The institutional context at SMAN 5 Tegal shows a different dynamic. As a semi-urban general school, its institutional orientation is primarily toward academic achievement and national examinations. Unlike vocational schools, there is no direct pressure from the labor market, but there is institutional pressure to maintain school reputation through test results. Classroom observations showed conventional learning environments with blackboards, infrequently used projectors, and minimal interactive learning facilities. Teachers taught from the front of the class using lengthy lectures. Teacher–student interactions were limited, and most of the time was spent taking notes, explaining grammar, and practicing exercises. Activities such as conversational simulations or group discussions were almost nonexistent.

In interviews, teachers at SMAN 5 Tegal stated that limited training and learning resources were major obstacles. One teacher admitted that "we have not received enough practical training on how to apply communicative teaching in large classes with limited facilities." Another teacher mentioned that students themselves tend to focus on exam scores

rather than communicative skills, making the lecture method the fastest way to achieve targets. These statements indicate that institutional context is not a static condition but a space that shapes teaching practices through collective expectations, learning culture, and resource structures.

The sociocultural theory of policy implementation emphasizes that institutional context plays a mediating role in policy enactment. Schools, as institutions, are not merely policy recipients but interpreters and re-definers of policy meanings according to their needs, capacities, and organizational cultures. In the case of SMKN 7 Surabaya, the curriculum policy was interpreted instrumentally to support students' job competencies. The Kurikulum Merdeka, which should provide room for communicative approaches, was narrowed into a set of technical materials. Conversely, at SMAN 5 Tegal, the policy lost its communicative orientation not due to rejection of its principles, but because of limited teacher training and academic pressures that redirected classroom practices toward lectures and exam drills.

Interview data from students reinforced this pattern. Students at SMKN 7 Surabaya stated that English lessons were considered important for "job applications" or "interviews," rather than for daily communication. They were accustomed to memorizing standard expressions such as "I can operate Microsoft Word" or "I have good communication skills," but not to engaging in spontaneous conversations in English. On the other hand, students at SMAN 5 Tegal reported memorizing grammar and vocabulary for tests rather than using them in communicative practice. Some students mentioned being "afraid of making mistakes" because classroom learning offered no room for open interaction. This shows that institutional dynamics not only affect how teachers teach but also shape how students perceive the meaning of learning English itself.

Field observations revealed that these two types of schools created very different learning ecosystems. At SMKN 7 Surabaya, classes ran at a fast pace, focusing on functional outputs with almost no participatory activities. Although digital facilities were available, their use was mechanical and non-interactive. Conversely, at SMAN 5 Tegal, classroom rhythm was slower yet rigid, with minimal technology use and a strong dependence on the teacher's central role. In both cases, classroom settings reflected the dominant institutional logic, productivity in vocational schools and academicism in general schools, both of which restricted the space for communicative learning practices envisioned by the Kurikulum Merdeka.

This analysis shows that educational policy cannot be understood without considering how it is mediated by institutional contexts. Budiarto and Salsabila (2022) argue that the success of policy implementation depends largely on how local institutions rearticulate policy. In this case, SMKN 7 and SMAN 5 each represent different forms of rearticulation, both of which shift the original meaning of the curriculum. Institutional context, with its expectations, structures, and organizational cultures, thus creates new boundaries for how teachers and students understand and enact the learning process.

Understanding and Teacher Capacity toward the Kurikulum Merdeka

One of the key findings of this study lies in teachers' limited understanding and capacity to implement the Kurikulum Merdeka, particularly in integrating communicative approaches into English language teaching practices. In policy terms, the Kurikulum Merdeka is designed as a flexible instrument that allows teachers to innovate, choose teaching strategies according to context, and foster student autonomy. However, the field reality shows that this flexibility is often interpreted ambiguously, even confusingly, especially for teachers accustomed to uniform and tightly structured learning approaches.

In the context of SMKN 7 Surabaya and SMAN 5 Tegal, the two types of schools that served as research sites, teachers' understanding of the core principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka varies but is generally shallow. When asked about the main principles of the curriculum, some teachers mentioned "freedom to teach" and "enjoyable learning" but found it difficult to concretely explain how these principles are translated into communicative English teaching activities. One teacher at SMKN 7, for instance, expressed confusion about how to balance the demands of the national curriculum with the specific needs of the vocational sector. The teacher explained that the flexibility offered by the curriculum left them with "no clear guidance," leading them to revert to old patterns: grammar explanations and vocabulary memorization.

A similar situation was observed at SMAN 5 Tegal, where teachers admitted confusion in interpreting "project-based learning" and "learning differentiation," two core elements of the Kurikulum Merdeka. In interviews, one teacher stated that they often felt "unsure whether their teaching methods aligned with what the policy intended." The lack of contextual training led teachers to rely on conventional teaching models they were already familiar with. This condition indicates that although the policy provides autonomy, such autonomy cannot be fully utilized without sufficient interpretative and pedagogical capacity.

Classroom observations reinforced this picture. At SMKN 7 Surabaya, English lessons remained heavily textbook-oriented, focusing on technical vocabulary and sentence structure exercises. Teachers stood in front of the class, delivering material in a one-way manner, occasionally asking students to repeat pronunciation of job-related terms. Communicative activities such as discussions, role-plays, or conversation simulations, supposed to be central to communicative approaches, were rarely seen. When asked why such methods were seldom used, one teacher admitted to being "unaccustomed and never properly trained on how to integrate communication within vocational contexts."

A nearly identical condition was found at SMAN 5 Tegal. Although the pressure of workplace relevance was not as strong as in vocational schools, teachers still preferred lecture-based and drill methods because they felt these were more "safe" and "structured." In one observed session, the teacher spent nearly 30 minutes explaining tenses, followed by individual written exercises. There was no meaningful interaction between teacher and students beyond short instructions. By the end of the session, most students were taking notes without understanding how to use English communicatively. This reflects a limitation not merely in technical skills but in how teachers internalize the pedagogical meaning of the

curriculum itself.

According to Nasir (2020), successful curriculum implementation depends greatly on teacher agency, teachers' capacity to act reflectively, creatively, and professionally in interpreting policy. Teacher agency does not emerge automatically; it is shaped by a combination of understanding, professional experience, and structural as well as institutional support. In this study's context, such capacity appeared underdeveloped. Teachers tended to adopt a "waiting for direction" stance rather than becoming active agents of pedagogical change. In several interviews, teachers mentioned that "the new curriculum is too open-ended" or "we are not sure how to teach it correctly," revealing a dependency on rigid instructional guidelines.

This issue is further compounded by a lack of relevant training. Most teachers reported that Kurikulum Merdeka implementation workshops they attended were too general and theoretical, failing to address the practical realities of English language teaching. The training sessions tended to focus on administrative aspects, such as preparing lesson modules or aligning lesson plans with the Pancasila Student Profile, rather than developing teachers' pedagogical capacity to integrate communicative approaches. As a result, teachers lacked the confidence to experiment with new strategies, reverting instead to familiar traditional methods, even when they recognized these methods as inconsistent with the spirit of the new curriculum.

Moreover, structural factors at the school level further reinforced this pattern. Teachers had little room for innovation because learning outcomes continued to be measured by exam results, both school-based and national. At SMKN 7, teachers faced pressure to ensure students' English competence matched industry needs, while at SMAN 5 Tegal, teachers had to prepare students for academic exams that defined school success. In such contexts, communicative approaches were seen as less "efficient" in meeting short-term targets. Thus, teacher capacity concerns not only knowledge and skills but also the ways teachers negotiate policy under institutional and structural constraints.

Field observations also revealed how limited teacher capacity directly affected students' learning experiences. Students at SMKN 7 Surabaya were more accustomed to memorizing standard work-related expressions than engaging in spontaneous conversations. At SMAN 5 Tegal, students were trained in written exercises but became hesitant when asked to speak in English. This created a pedagogical reproduction cycle that sustained the status quo: teachers did not change their methods due to lack of capacity, and students did not develop communicative competence due to limited opportunities.

Within the theoretical framework of teacher agency, this condition reflects weak professional capacity, which should serve as the driving force of curriculum implementation. Teachers were positioned as policy takers rather than policy makers within their own practice spaces (Asvial et al., 2021; Azhari & Fajri, 2022). Consequently, a curriculum intended as a space for innovation instead operated under a conservative logic that preserved traditional methods. Without interventions to strengthen teachers' interpretive capacity, the Kurikulum Merdeka risks remaining an appealing policy on paper but ineffective in the classroom.

Exam Orientation and Institutional Structures as Constraints

In the dynamics of Kurikulum Merdeka implementation in Indonesian secondary schools, examinations and institutional structures emerge as crucial factors shaping the direction and practices of classroom teaching. Although the Kurikulum Merdeka normatively emphasizes communicative, flexible, and student-centered learning, field realities reveal that examination pressure and rigid evaluation systems instead reinforce conventional teaching practices. This context reflects what is known in language policy studies as the washback effect, the backward influence of examinations on teaching and learning behavior (Latief et al., 2021). In situations where the success of schools and teachers continues to be measured primarily by exam results, both school-based and the new form of national exams, teachers tend to prioritize the most "safe" and "effective" teaching strategies to prepare students for exams, even if this means neglecting the innovative principles promoted by curriculum policy.

Observations at SMKN 7 Surabaya showed that most English learning sessions were dominated by drills and grammar exercises considered relevant to exam materials. Teachers typically began the class with a brief introduction to the topic, then distributed multiple-choice worksheets for students to complete individually while they monitored the class with minimal communicative interaction. During class discussions, activities were teacher-centered, focusing on explaining correct answers, while students provided minimal responses. The classroom itself was arranged in traditional rows with the whiteboard as the focal point. There were no role-plays, group discussions, or communicative simulations as envisioned in the Kurikulum Merdeka implementation guide. Teachers appeared more concerned with ensuring all exam materials were covered on time, considering tight academic schedules and institutional demands that students meet minimum passing standards.

A similar pattern was observed at SMAN 5 Tegal, albeit within a different institutional context. This public high school faced strong pressure from parents and the school committee to produce competitive exam results, ensuring students could enter public universities. In several interviews, teachers expressed that although they understood the importance of communicative learning, they felt they lacked the space to experiment with such methods. One teacher, coded SRT, revealed a dilemma between pedagogical idealism and evaluative reality. She stated that if too much class time were allocated for discussions or project-based activities, students would not have enough practice mastering grammar structures and vocabulary commonly tested in exams. This statement illustrates how exam structures act as a "hidden compass" that determines the direction of teaching, regardless of the curriculum's progressive intentions.

In another interview, a student from SMKN 7 Surabaya expressed that English learning in class felt more like a "test preparation class" than a space for speaking practice. Students worried that spending too much time on speaking activities would leave them unprepared for exam questions. This concern was reinforced by the school's emphasis on high test scores as indicators of success. Consequently, not only teachers but also students became "trapped" in the exam-oriented logic. This aligns with findings by D. N. Hidayat et al. (2022), which emphasize that exams affect not only teachers' behavior but also shape students' perceptions

of what is important in language learning.

Institutionally, this pressure is reinforced by the evaluation system and educational bureaucracy, which continue to prioritize test outcomes as measures of success. The hierarchical and target-oriented structure of the education system leads schools to treat the curriculum as a normative document to be fulfilled administratively rather than as a flexible guide for developing classroom practice. School principals and curriculum coordinators often focus more on achieving quantitative indicators than on supporting pedagogical innovation. Within this context, teachers lose their professional autonomy to innovate, constrained by graduation targets and institutional pressures.

Further observation at SMAN 5 Tegal revealed that the school's exam schedule was tightly structured, compressing regular learning periods. Classrooms were filled with exam timetables and quick-study strategies for final tests. Teachers tended to present materials in summary form rather than developing communicative contexts. Even in classes intended to enhance speaking skills, activities were reduced to written test simulations. Teachers appeared more focused on teaching "test-taking strategies" than on developing students' communicative competence. In other words, teaching practices were reduced to survival strategies under evaluative pressure.

This condition can be analyzed through the lens of the washback effect and systemic pressures within educational institutions. Manuputty (2022) asserts that examinations function as powerful policy instruments due to their tangible social effects on teaching behavior. Rather than serving as tools of evaluation, exams become the primary purpose of learning. In Indonesia's educational context, institutional structures reinforce this effect because the success of schools, teachers, and students depends heavily on test results rather than on learning processes. Therefore, curriculum reforms such as Kurikulum Merdeka, despite their progressive vision, are often hindered by conservative evaluation structures.

The situation becomes even more complex because many teachers perceive learning success as being measured by students' exam scores. In an interview, a teacher from SMAN 5 Tegal, coded RYD, stated that she felt she had failed as a teacher if her students' average scores fell below the school's targets, even when her teaching process was varied and communicative. This statement reflects the tension between pedagogical idealism and structural reality. Teachers are not merely policy implementers but actors navigating contradictory expectations, between a flexible curriculum policy and a rigid exam structure.

On a deeper level, exam pressure has long-term implications for pedagogical culture. The reliance on drills and memorization trains students to view English as a test subject rather than as a means of communication. Consequently, even when students achieve high exam scores, their communicative competence remains low. Teachers, in turn, lose motivation to innovate because there are no institutional incentives to support communicative learning. In this sense, institutional structures are not neutral backdrops but systemic actors that actively maintain the conservative status quo of classroom teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the gap between national curriculum policy and actual English teaching practices does not merely reflect weak technical implementation but results from the complex interaction between institutional contexts, teacher capacity, and evaluative system pressures. The Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes communicative competence and active learning, undergoes processes of negotiation and adaptation at the school level, ultimately producing an implementation form far removed from its original policy intentions. At SMKN 7 Surabaya, time constraints and orientation toward vocational demands limited the application of communicative approaches, while at SMAN 5 Tegal, limited resources and insufficient teacher training led to lecture-based and exam-oriented instruction. This phenomenon demonstrates that a curriculum is never "implemented purely" but mediated by specific social and institutional structures in each context. These findings highlight the need for educational policies that are more adaptive to local realities, strengthen teacher capacity as key agents of change, and reform evaluative structures to align with the spirit of communicative curriculum design. Accordingly, this research contributes both theoretically and practically to the study of education policy in developing countries by underscoring the importance of a policy–practice interface approach in understanding curriculum implementation gaps.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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