

# THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA BELAJAR CURRICULUM AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH AT MAN PALOPO

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and its effects on the motivation of students in learning the English language at MAN Palopo 266-Revision. The research design used in this study was qualitative case study research. Two English teachers and ten eleventh-grade students were chosen as the subjects of this study using purposive sampling. The findings of this study indicate that the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has a positive effect on the motivation of students in learning the English language by developing the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of motivation. The intrinsic dimension of motivation was seen through the students' interest, enjoyment, and self-confidence in the choice of learning topics and methods, whereas the extrinsic dimension of motivation was seen through the encouragement of the teacher, parents, and the pursuit of academic achievement. The Project-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning, and Communicative Language Teaching approaches helped the students to become more active and autonomous in the learning of the English language, as well as to improve their speaking and writing skills. The conclusion of this study is that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum could increase the active and autonomous learning of the English language by enhancing the students' motivational orientations.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, Qualitative Study, Student Motivation.

## INTRODUCTION

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, aims to enhance student competencies, foster character development, and provide flexibility for schools and teachers to adapt learning activities to students' needs, the school environment, and specific learning objectives. In English language education, this approach is particularly relevant in the era of globalization, where English proficiency has become a key skill for academic, professional, and intercultural communication.

However, English learning in Indonesia where English is not the mother tongue often faces significant challenges, including limited resources, varying teacher readiness, and

inconsistent student engagement (Astuti, Shalawati, & Hadijah, 2022). While *Merdeka Belajar* emphasizes autonomy and personalized learning, the success of English acquisition within this framework depends heavily on student motivation.

In the context of language learning, motivation can be defined as the internal and external drive that initiates, sustains, and directs learners' efforts to acquire English as a second or foreign language. Motivated students are more likely to persist through difficulties, actively participate, and achieve higher proficiency levels. Research distinguishes between *intrinsic motivation* learning for personal satisfaction or interest and *extrinsic motivation* learning for practical benefits such as academic achievement or career advancement (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Several studies have examined the intersection of *Merdeka Belajar* and English language learning motivation. (Inayah Syah Putri Telaumbanua, 2024) explored teachers' perspectives on implementing *Merdeka Belajar* in English classes. They found that while teachers valued the curriculum's flexibility, challenges such as time constraints, varying student readiness, and limited access to learning resources often hindered optimal implementation. This finding suggests that curriculum flexibility alone may not guarantee improved learning outcomes without adequate teacher preparation and resource support. Similarly, Rohmah, (2025) investigated the influence of *Merdeka Belajar* on students' engagement in English learning. Their findings indicated that when students were given autonomy in selecting projects and learning materials, their intrinsic motivation increased significantly, although some struggled with self-regulation. This highlights that while autonomy can boost motivation, it also requires students to have strong self-management skills to fully benefit from the curriculum's flexibility.

Furthermore, Ahmad Chandra Jaya, et al., (2025) conducted a mixed-method study on the effect of *Merdeka Belajar* on EFL learners' motivation at the senior high school level. The study revealed a positive correlation between curriculum flexibility and student motivation, particularly for learners with strong self-directed learning skills. This indicates that curriculum reform can be effective in fostering motivation, but its impact may vary based on individual learner characteristics.

Despite these insights, empirical research directly linking *Merdeka Belajar* to sustained motivational improvements in secondary school EFL contexts remains limited. (Syofyan, et al., 2024) Most studies have focused on either teacher readiness or short-term motivational changes, leaving a gap in understanding how curriculum flexibility influences motivation over time and across different student profiles. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring that *Merdeka Belajar* not only provides structural autonomy but also effectively enhances students' engagement and proficiency in English.

Therefore, this study investigates students' motivation in learning English under the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, with the goal of identifying the motivational factors most influenced by curriculum flexibility and determining strategies to optimize English learning outcomes.

## METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and its impact on student learning motivation in English. The research was conducted at MAN Palopo. This design was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and motivations of both students and teachers in relation to the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, focusing on how the curriculum influences students' motivation to learn English.

The participants consisted of two English teachers selected through purposive sampling, based on their active use and prior experience with the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum and ten students at MAN Palopo who are directly involved in the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. The students selected are those who are currently learning English under this curriculum. These subjects are chosen purposively to ensure that the data collected reflect authentic experiences, perceptions, and motivational outcomes related to the curriculum. Data Collection was conducted 12 respondents and each respondents took about 15-20 minutes to answer question. By focusing on both teachers and students, the research aims to capture a comprehensive view of how the curriculum is implemented and how it affects students' motivation in learning English.

Data were collected using three primary techniques: (1) semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions, (2) observations employing an observation checklist developed by the researcher, and (3) documentation, including word documents, which refers to written items. Documentation method refers to the process of collecting data by documenting available data. The interview guide and checklist were reviewed by education experts to ensure content validity.

The research procedure included participant recruitment, interview scheduling and execution, classroom observations during English lessons, and collection of relevant documentation. The focus was on how the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum and how its impact on students learning motivation.

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun & Clarke, (2023) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Ethical clearance was obtained from the school administration, and informed consent was secured from all participants, with parental consent for minors. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through pseudonyms and secure data storage.

## RESULTS

### ***Impact of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum Implementation on Students' Learning Motivation at MAN Palopo***

The findings indicate that the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* at MAN Palopo in English language teaching is carried out through the application of methods that emphasize active student engagement. Teachers employ Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as the primary methods, in which students work on projects relevant to real-life situations, such as creating video presentations, conducting interviews, and

writing reports based on self-selected topics. These methods are considered consistent with the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* because they provide opportunities for students to develop creativity, critical thinking skills, and collaboration (Forrester, 2002). In addition, teachers integrate collaborative methods in the form of group discussions and peer feedback to enhance interaction and peer learning among students.

“I implement the Merdeka Curriculum by referring to learning outcomes (CP). Then, I compile my own teaching modules that I adapt to the context of students' daily lives. That way, the material becomes more relevant to them. I also often give students simple projects, such as creating dialogues, writing short reports in English, and doing homework that encourages them to seek learning resources independently”

“Interest-based projects are very effective in improving student focus. They appear more serious and enthusiastic when working on topics that match their interests. I have noticed that some students have become more confident when speaking in front of the class. However, I still need to encourage some other students to take more responsibility for their own learning process.”

The approach used is student-centered, with teachers acting as facilitators who guide the learning process without dominating classroom activities. In the context of English language learning, this approach refers to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which focuses on the ability to communicate in the target language through the use of authentic materials and context-based activities (Richards, 2006). This approach not only supports the mastery of language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) but also builds students' confidence in using English in various situations.

“I see students becoming more enthusiastic when they feel involved in the learning process. However, I still have to provide guidance to keep their motivation high and prevent it from declining.”

The implementation is guided by five key principles derived from the *Merdeka Belajar* framework. First, autonomy encourages students to set their own learning objectives, select relevant materials, and evaluate their progress. Second, differentiation ensures that lesson content and assessment tasks are tailored to accommodate varying proficiency levels, learning styles, and interests. Third, contextualization connects English instruction to students' immediate environment, cultural background, and daily life situations. Fourth, collaboration promotes cooperative learning strategies, such as peer assessment and group projects, to foster mutual support and shared responsibility. Finally, reflection engages students in self-assessment and reflective journaling to monitor and evaluate their learning journey (Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia, 2022).

Overall, the application of these methods, approaches, and principles demonstrates that MAN Palopo is striving to maximize the potential of *Merdeka Belajar* to enhance students' motivation and English language competence. However, the success of the implementation is highly dependent on teacher readiness, students' self-regulation skills, and the availability of adequate learning facilities.

Intrinsic motivation comes from within the student, such as the interest in mastering English in order to communicate with people from different parts of the world. The student expressed that they enjoy learning English because, aside from being an international language, the learning process itself is fun and engaging. In addition, students feel happy when they are able to understand English-language media, increase vocabulary, and use the language in real conversations. The following are the results of the interview with the students:

“I like learning English because it's an international language and learning is fun.”

“I think Learning English is very important because it is an international language.”

In addition, learners take the initiative to make colorful notes to help memory and understanding, and actively ask questions in class to deepen the material. The students feel when study English that they have the freedom to choose learning methods that suit their needs. The teacher gives students the opportunity to select their preferred way of learning, and this student prefers learning through songs and movies, which they find make the material easier to understand and less boring. The following are the results of the interview with the students:

“Yes, my teacher let us choose the learning method. I love learning through songs and movies. I also like to make my own notes and use colors to make them easier to remember. I also often ask the teacher if I don't understand the explanation.”

In the learning process, the student demonstrates an active and initiative-taking attitude. They often help classmates who are struggling and are not hesitant to ask the teacher questions when they do not understand the material. This shows a high level of engagement in the learning process and an awareness of the importance of deep understanding. The student also admitted that they feel responsible for their own learning outcomes. When they receive poor grades, they recognize it as a result of not putting in enough effort, rather than blaming external factors. The following are the results of the interview with the students:

“I often help my friends who have difficulty learning. Regarding my grades it will depend on my efforts to learn so far if I am diligent then the value must be good and vice versa.”

Extrinsic motivation arises from factors outside the student. One form of extrinsic motivation found is the initial encouragement from the teacher. Learners stated that their initial interest in learning English was fueled by the enthusiasm and support of teachers. This shows that the presence of an inspiring educator figure can influence students' learning attitudes and encourage them to pay more attention to lessons. The following are the results of the interview with the students:

“My initial impulse to learn English was from my teacher, but over time now I myself am excited because learning is also exciting.”

“Yes initially from the encouragement of teachers and can also support from parents but

after learning I think it is necessary to study seriously."

In addition, extrinsic motivation also appears in the form of the desire to obtain high grades in English subjects. Learners revealed that they learn with the aim of achieving good academic performance. This motivation reflects learners' orientation towards achieving concrete results that are formally recognized, such as test scores or report cards. The following are the results of the interview with the students:

"Yes, my main goal is to make the value not bad."

## DISCUSSION

This study found that the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum at MAN Palopo in English language learning is characterized by active, student-centered approaches primarily Project-Based Learning Bytyqi, (2021) and Problem-Based Learning De Simone, (2008) that emphasize relevance to real-life contexts. Teachers act as facilitators, aligning instruction with Communicative Language Teaching Richards, (2006) principles to foster authentic communication and confidence in English use. Five guiding principles autonomy, differentiation, contextualization, collaboration, and reflection were consistently integrated (Ministry of Education and Culture , 2024). Students demonstrated both intrinsic motivation (e.g., interest in English as a global language, enjoyment of the learning process) and extrinsic motivation (e.g., teacher encouragement, desire for high grades).

The strong emphasis on autonomy and contextualization appears to nurture intrinsic motivation, aligning with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are key psychological needs that enhance motivation. In this study, when students were allowed to choose learning methods such as learning through songs, movies, or personalized note-taking their engagement and enjoyment increased, indicating fulfillment of the autonomy and competence components of SDT. Similarly, collaborative activities and peer feedback contributed to relatedness, reinforcing students' willingness to participate actively.

Intrinsic motivation arises from drives within the student, such as personal interest, curiosity, and satisfaction in the learning process itself. emphasize that intrinsic motivation arises from individuals' basic needs for autonomy, competence, and connectedness. When students feel that they have control over their learning and can explore their personal interests, they are more likely to engage in the learning process with high curiosity and satisfaction. In this study, many students indicated that they enjoy learning English because they find it fun, useful and relevant to their lives. For example, they feel that learning English is important because it is an international language that opens up opportunities to communicate with people from different parts of the world. A fondness for English-language media such as songs and movies also reinforces the motivation to learn from within.

In addition, students showed initiative in learning, such as making their own colorful notes to strengthen memory and understanding, and actively asking questions in class. This



attitude shows a high level of engagement and a sense of responsibility for their learning outcomes. When they fail, they do not immediately blame external factors, but instead reflect and improve their learning strategies. This shows that intrinsic motivation is also closely related to growth mindset and the ability to learn independently.

Extrinsic motivation comes from external factors, such as encouragement from teachers and parents, and the desire to get high grades. The results of this research show that initial encouragement from teachers is very influential in fostering students' interest in English lessons. Teachers who are enthusiastic, supportive and give freedom to choose learning methods can create a positive learning environment and motivate students to engage more actively. For students, the presence of teachers who are able to understand their learning needs and characteristics is an important key in building confidence. When teachers provide freedom in choosing learning methods, such as learning through songs, games, group discussions, or the use of digital media, students feel more engaged because the approach matches their interests and learning styles. This makes students not only learn out of obligation, but also because they feel valued and given space to develop.

Students' attitudes towards English lessons also become more positive when they feel that teachers reward their efforts, not just the end result. This sense of appreciation strengthens their motivation to keep learning and improving. In other words, extrinsic motivation fostered by teachers is not just momentary, but can be an entry point for the growth of intrinsic motivation in students, which ultimately encourages them to become independent and active learners.

The integration of PBL and CLT also resonates with Gardner's socio-educational model Atay & Kurt, (2010), which highlights the role of meaningful social interaction in second language acquisition. By embedding learning tasks in authentic contexts and promoting cooperation, the curriculum fostered positive attitudes toward English learning and enhanced learners' integrative motivation.

These findings are consistent with Afriantoni, et al., (2025), who reported that autonomy in selecting projects and learning materials significantly boosted students' intrinsic motivation, though challenges in self-regulation remained. Similarly, Ahmad Chandra Jaya, et al., (2025) observed a positive correlation between curriculum flexibility and learner motivation, particularly for self-directed students—paralleling the present study's observation that students with higher self-regulation skills benefitted most from Merdeka Belajar. However, the present findings also reflect Zendrato, (2024), who noted that despite valuing flexibility, teachers often face time constraints and resource limitations, challenges also reported at MAN Palopo.

One point of divergence from prior literature is the relatively high level of intrinsic motivation observed among students in this study, potentially due to the strong integration of interest-based projects and localized, contextual materials Muslim, et al., (2021). Previous studies have often emphasized extrinsic drivers in Indonesian EFL contexts; however, here intrinsic and extrinsic factors coexisted and appeared mutually reinforcing.

The findings suggest that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, when implemented with student-centered, contextualized approaches, can significantly enhance both intrinsic and

extrinsic motivation in EFL classrooms. Teachers should continue to provide choice, real-world relevance, and opportunities for peer collaboration, as these elements appear to fulfill core motivational needs as outlined in SDT. Moreover, embedding CLT-based activities within PBL frameworks may accelerate communicative competence while sustaining motivation.

However, sustaining motivation over time requires targeted support for students with lower self-regulation skills. Structured scaffolding, formative feedback, and reflective practices could help such learners maintain consistent engagement. Additionally, investment in adequate resources both material and technological is essential to support the curriculum's innovative methods.

This study was conducted in a single institution, limiting the generalizability of results to other educational contexts. The reliance on self-reported motivation may also be influenced by social desirability bias. Furthermore, while qualitative data provided rich insights into learner experiences, it did not quantify the magnitude of motivational change over time.

Future studies could adopt a longitudinal mixed-methods approach to track changes in student motivation across multiple semesters and institutions. Comparative studies between schools with varying levels of teacher preparedness and resource availability could illuminate contextual factors that shape the success of *Merdeka Belajar* in EFL learning. Additionally, experimental designs testing specific combinations of autonomy-supportive teaching and CLT activities could offer deeper insights into causal mechanisms underlying motivational gains.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, when implemented through Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), can substantially enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in English language learning while fostering authentic communicative competence. The consistent integration of autonomy, differentiation, contextualization, collaboration, and reflection was found to align closely with Self-Determination Theory contributing to sustained learner engagement.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of sustaining project-based, contextualized instructional approaches through the allocation of adequate resources, technological support, and sufficient instructional planning time. Policies should also allow greater curricular flexibility so that schools can tailor materials and methods to local needs and learner profiles.

For teacher professional development, the results suggest a need for targeted training in the design of contextually relevant PBL, the effective integration of CLT principles, and the management of learner motivation with particular attention to varying levels of self-regulation. Scaffolding strategies and formative assessment practices should be emphasized to support long-term motivation, especially among students with lower self-regulation skills.

Future research should extend these findings by incorporating larger, more diverse institutional samples and employing longitudinal, mixed-methods designs to measure motivational changes over time. Further inquiry into the impact of scaffolding interventions and the integration of educational technologies within the *Merdeka Belajar* framework may yield valuable insights for optimizing both learner engagement and language acquisition outcomes.

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