Exploring English Teachers' Pedagogical Strategy in Implementing Merdeka Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this research was to explore the pedagogical strategies of English teachers in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka at MTsN 3 Pekanbaru. A qualitative research methodology was employed to examine these strategies. Data was collected through interviews and observations. The subjects of this study were the English teachers at the school, with two teachers selected through purposive sampling. Despite various challenges, the teachers utilized several pedagogical strategies, including discovery learning, technology integration, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction.

KEYWORDS: pedagogical strategies, Merdeka curriculum implementation, English teachers

1 INTRODUCTION

Education is a series of lessons designed to help individuals understand concepts and develop critical thinking, which is one of the key standards. According to the National Education System Law Number 20 of 2003, education is defined as "a conscious and planned effort to create a learning atmosphere and process so that students actively develop their potential to have religious spiritual strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and the skills needed by themselves, society, the nation, and the state."

Indonesia has experienced numerous curriculum changes and adjustments influenced by government policies aimed at preparing future generations to meet evolving national educational standards. One of the recent curriculum changes is the Kurikulum Merdeka, introduced by Nadiem Makarim, the Minister of Education and Technology. Kurikulum Merdeka focuses on enhancing educators' competencies and addressing the low literacy and numeracy skills among students. Additionally, it emphasizes the integration of technology in education, reflecting the demands of the technological era (Rohimajaya et al., 2022).

The concept of "Merdeka Belajar," which translates to "freedom to learn," signifies that educators are encouraged to experiment, learn independently, and be creative within the classroom and its environment (Indarta et al., 2022). The shift towards student-centered learning aims to meet students' needs more effectively. In this curriculum, teachers act as facilitators, helping students develop their understanding and adapt the curriculum to fit each student's unique requirements. English teachers, in

particular, are expected to modify their pedagogical approaches and adopt new strategies to enhance student learning.

Adapting to the Merdeka curriculum involves implementing technology-based learning and conducting holistic assessments to determine students' learning styles and strategies. Teachers face challenges in identifying appropriate pedagogical strategies tailored to students' needs in the context of the independent curriculum.

Numerous studies have explored teachers' strategies in English teaching under the Kurikulum Merdeka. Examples include "Teachers' Strategies in ESP Learning Program in Indonesia: A Comparative Study" (Arias Rodríguez, 2020), "Teacher Strategies in a Large EFL Classroom" (Pungki & Suwartono, 2019), "Merdeka Curriculum Learning Strategy in Effort Building Student Potential" (Sulaiman W., Muhammad Nur, 2024), "The Pedagogy of English as an International Language: Indonesian Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs" (Ubaidillah, 2018), "Strategies for Mentoring Pedagogical Knowledge" (Hudson, 2013), and "Strengthening English Language Learning Through an Independent Curriculum Approach" (Rintaningrum et al., 2023). Despite the extensive research, a gap exists regarding studies focused specifically on the pedagogical strategies applied in the Kurikulum Merdeka.

This research aims to describe the pedagogical strategies employed by English teachers and their implementation within the Kurikulum Merdeka at MTsN 3 Pekanbaru.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Saadullah (2014), pedagogical strategy is essential for teachers, not only for teaching and conveying knowledge but also for developing the personalities of their students in an integrated manner. Similarly, Hiryanto (2017) defines pedagogical strategy as the techniques and methods teachers use to convey knowledge, stimulate supervision, and facilitate student development. These strategies aim to achieve learning objectives that support intellectual engagement and connect with the broader world, fostering an inclusive classroom environment.

From the above explanations, pedagogical strategy refers to the methods and approaches used in teaching and learning, including procedures and techniques teachers apply in their instruction.

Types of Pedagogical Strategies:

1. **Discovery Learning**: This strategy involves students actively engaging in the learning process through self-exploration, observation, and problem-solving. With minimal guidance from teachers, students discover new concepts, which enhances their thinking and learning skills, arouses curiosity, and promotes active participation (Lase, 2023).
2. **Problem Solving**: This approach confronts learners with problems to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It involves observing problems, collecting and analyzing data, forming hypotheses, and drawing conclusions to solve problems (Isjoni, 2016).
3. **Problem-Based Learning (PBL)**: Emphasizing critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration, PBL involves presenting students with questions that provoke thought and conclusion. Dewey (2004) outlines five steps for problem-solving: defining the problem, formulating hypotheses, collecting data, interpreting and evaluating data, and testing conclusions.
4. **Project-Based Learning (PJBL)**: Similar to PBL, this approach involves students working on extended projects that require research, creativity, and

application of knowledge to address specific challenges. Harrigan (2014) emphasizes the importance of a constructive learning environment where students gain knowledge through meaningful, authentic experiences.

5. **Cooperative Learning**: This model involves students working in groups to achieve common goals. Tibahary (2018) describes collaborative learning as activities designed for pairs or small interactive groups, facilitating appropriate implementation.

6. **Inquiry-Based Learning**: Focused on student-driven exploration and investigation, inquiry-based learning promotes critical thinking without prior knowledge of the concept. According to Prayogi (2018), this involves orientation, exploration, analysis, inference, evaluation, and reflection.

7. **Differentiated Instruction**: Teachers adjust their instruction to meet individual students' needs by considering their readiness levels, interests, and learning styles. Barlian et al. (2023) state that teachers can modify content, learning processes, products, and the learning environment.

8. **Technology-Based Learning**: Technology serves as a medium and tool to facilitate the learning process, allowing both teachers and students to explore learning in depth. Subhan (2023) and Nursyam (2019) emphasize that technology supports all activities to create better and more enjoyable learning conditions, motivating students to participate actively.

Teaching English for Junior High School in Kurikulum Merdeka

In the Kurikulum Merdeka, English learning focuses on strengthening the ability to use English in six areas: listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing, and presenting in an integrated manner across various text types (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). The text-based approach involves four stages: building knowledge, modeling and deconstructing text, joint construction of text, and independent construction of text. The objectives of English subjects in Kurikulum Merdeka include developing communicative competence, intercultural competence, confidence, and critical and creative reasoning skills.

Implementation of Pedagogical Strategies in Kurikulum Merdeka

Implementing a curriculum requires appropriate teaching strategies. The Kurikulum Merdeka aims to provide a holistic and inclusive approach to education, emphasizing character development, creativity, and critical thinking alongside academic knowledge. This curriculum is designed to be flexible and adaptable to individual students' needs, with a focus on student-centered learning and the use of technology.

The Impact of Kurikulum Merdeka on Teaching English

Aryati (2023) identifies several factors when evaluating the impact of a curriculum on English language teaching:

1. The Kurikulum Merdeka has improved English language teaching by providing flexibility, emphasizing practical skills, and integrating technology.

2. It focuses on a student-centered approach, encouraging active participation and opportunities for students to ask questions, express opinions, and contribute to discussions.

3. The curriculum promotes project-based learning, developing communication, leadership, and collaboration skills.

4. It emphasizes teacher development through training and professional development to improve teaching quality.

5. Teachers have the flexibility to choose relevant materials, focusing on vocabulary and communication in international business or tourism contexts.
6. Competency-focused evaluation measures students' ability to apply knowledge and skills effectively in real-world situations.

In summary, the literature highlights the importance of diverse pedagogical strategies in enhancing the educational experience. Various approaches such as discovery learning, problem-solving, project-based learning, cooperative learning, inquiry-based learning, differentiated instruction, and technology-based learning contribute to developing critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration among students. The Kurikulum Merdeka, with its student-centered focus and integration of technology, aims to create a flexible and adaptive learning environment that meets individual student needs. The impact of this curriculum on English language teaching is significant, as it emphasizes practical skills, teacher development, and competency-focused evaluation, ultimately aiming to prepare students for real-world challenges. These insights underline the necessity for teachers to continuously adapt their methods to foster an inclusive and effective learning atmosphere.

3   METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative approach is employed. Qualitative research aims to understand phenomena experienced by research participants (Moleong, 2017). This research utilized a case study design, which is commonly used in various fields, particularly evaluation, to develop an in-depth analysis of a case, such as a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Yin, 2009). The study was conducted at MTsN 3 Pekanbaru, located on Unggas Street, Simpang Tiga, Kec. Bukit Raya, Pekanbaru. The participants were two English teachers who taught seventh grade at MTsN 3 Pekanbaru.

Participants were chosen using purposive sampling, a method that selects individuals based on specific criteria to best understand the main phenomenon. This approach was employed to explore the English teachers' pedagogical strategies in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka. According to Fauzy (2020), purposive sampling involves selecting samples that meet predetermined criteria, qualities, or attributes, rather than choosing randomly.

Data collection methods included interviews and observations. Then, a qualitative analysis of the collected data was conducted. During the interviews, the questions to ensure the data's credibility were analyzed. Important points related to the research were marked through coding of the transcripts (Mayring, 2000).

4   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Discovery Learning

Based on the interviews with Teacher 1 (T1), it is evident that T1 applies discovery learning as part of the Merdeka Curriculum. This approach helps T1 facilitate problem-solving among students through tasks and by sparking questions before the start of lessons. T1 observed increased student engagement, transitioning from passive to active participation, although the change was not significant.

"Inquiry or discovery-based learning models are based on students' own discoveries." (T1-interview)

Observation of T1 showed that in the opening phase of English lessons, after routine preparations, the teacher asked problem-based questions related to previously learned material. During core activities, T1 was more dominant in teaching, using problem-based questions in both oral and written forms.

"After the assignment, T1 explained the next material about 'am' and 'pm'. This time, T1 used the blackboard, and students answered questions while T1 was explaining. After the explanation, T1 gave an assignment from the material." (T1-observation)

Teacher 2 (T2) also employed discovery learning, starting lessons with questions relevant to students' daily lives to help them connect the material to their experiences. T2 used various learning methods, including problem-based learning, tailored to students' abilities and focused on essential literacy materials.

"Before getting into the lesson, T2 asks questions related to everyday life. For example, 'Where do you go if you want to buy books?' and 'Where do you go if you want to buy fruits?'" (T2-observation)

"Students are given a task to complete sentences with the right preposition of place based on a map activity." (T2-observation)

In both cases, after completing tasks, the material was discussed collectively in class through a question-and-answer session.

2. Integrating Technology

During the core activities of English lessons, T1 used a projector to present material, making the lessons more engaging and less monotonous. However, despite the use of technology, some students remained unfocused.

"I have prepared the material using PowerPoint. Technology-based presentations are more interesting for students compared to traditional board teaching." (T1-interview)

Observations confirmed T1's use of a projector and laptop to present material, though managing student focus remained a challenge.

"T1 uses a projector to display teaching materials in the form of PowerPoint slides. Students are invited to answer questions from the slides, though some remain distracted." (T1-observation)

T2 also utilized technology for finding reference materials, which facilitated teaching and learning. T2 emphasized the need for teachers to master technology to effectively use laptops and projectors in class.

"Teachers must master technology to find external sources and present material in class." (T2-interview)

Observation showed T2 using a projector to display material and engaging students through technology by providing links to additional resources.

"T2 uses a projector for material presentation and instructs students to participate in technology-based learning activities." (T2-observation)

3. Project-Based Learning

T1 incorporated project-based activities, in line with Kurikulum Merdeka's focus on real-world problems and critical thinking. Students worked on mini projects, such as asking and answering questions about time-related activities.

"I usually apply project-based learning with both group and individual assignments. Kurikulum Merdeka often involves group work and discussions." (T1-interview)

Observations showed T1 facilitating mini projects that encouraged practical application of English skills, critical thinking, and teamwork.

"T1 assigns mini projects where students discuss and present on time-related activities, fostering language practice and collaboration." (T1-observation)

4. **Cooperative Learning with Problem Solving**

T1 implemented cooperative learning to encourage collaboration and problem-solving among students. However, managing group dynamics and ensuring participation from less active students proved challenging.

"The pedagogical strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum involves cooperative learning. As a facilitator, the teacher must guide students who struggle to find solutions." (T1-interview)

Observations during the P5 P2RA project highlighted the difficulties T1 faced in implementing structured group learning methods.

"In group tasks, T1 struggled to instruct less active students to collaborate. Managing diverse opinions from active students was also challenging." (T1-observation)

5. **Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiated instruction involves tailoring teaching strategies to meet individual student needs. T2 conducted diagnostic assessments to understand students' learning styles and needs before determining the appropriate strategy.

"Before teaching, we assess students' learning needs and styles. This helps in tailoring the material and activities to each student's preferences." (T2-interview)

Observations showed T2 using audiovisual aids and group tasks to facilitate learning, adjusting material and activities to match students' learning styles.

"T2 uses pictures and group tasks to teach English, adjusting activities to students' learning styles." (T2-observation)

The findings indicate that both teachers utilized pedagogical strategies aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum, though not all recommended strategies were employed. Sulolipu (2023) identifies eight strategies in Kurikulum Merdeka: discovery learning, problem-based learning, cooperative learning, project-based learning, problem-solving, inquiry-based learning, differentiated instruction, and integrating technology.

In discovery learning, T1 and T2 used different approaches to engage students and foster problem-solving skills, leading to more active learning environments (Lase, 2023). Both teachers integrated technology to maintain student interest and enhance learning experiences, consistent with Subramanian & Kelly (2019) who note the positive impact of technology on student motivation.

T1 emphasized project-based learning to develop practical skills and critical thinking, aligning with Kartikasari (2018) who highlights the benefits of project-based learning for student engagement. Cooperative learning posed challenges for T1 in managing group dynamics, while T2 effectively used differentiated instruction to tailor learning to individual needs, as suggested by Sulolipu (2023).

Overall, the teachers' strategies reflected a mix of traditional and innovative

approaches, aiming to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes within the framework of Kurikulum Merdeka.

5   CONCLUSION

This study highlights the pedagogical strategies employed by English teachers at MTsN 3 Pekanbaru under the Kurikulum Merdeka, emphasizing the importance of varied and adaptable teaching methods. The findings reveal that teachers effectively use strategies such as discovery learning, technology integration, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction, each contributing uniquely to student engagement and learning outcomes.

Discovery learning is consistently applied to promote problem-solving and critical thinking, transitioning classes from passive to active participation. The integration of technology, such as projectors and smart phones, enhances the presentation of materials and supports student engagement, though maintaining focus remains a challenge. Project-based learning aligns with the curriculum's emphasis on real-world applications, fostering critical thinking and teamwork. Differentiated instruction is employed to cater to diverse learning styles, ensuring personalized and effective learning experiences.

Despite the effective use of these strategies, the study also identifies areas for improvement, particularly in managing group dynamics and ensuring all students are equally engaged. The research underscores the need for continuous adaptation and flexibility in teaching approaches to meet the varied needs of students.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that a combination of discovery learning, technology integration, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction can significantly enhance student learning. By embracing these diverse strategies and remaining adaptable, teachers can better meet the objectives of the Kurikulum Merdeka and support students' overall educational development.

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