

The Challenges of Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic Language Learning: Perspectives from Indonesian Lecturers and Students

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify and explain the issues or challenges faced by the Sunan Kalijogo Islamic Institute in Malang, especially the Arabic Language Education program, in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The focus of this research includes the learning process using the Merdeka curriculum, inhibiting factors, and solutions to overcome challenges in implementing the Merdeka curriculum in Arabic language learning. Data collection is conducted through observation, interviews, and documentation. This research is a qualitative, descriptive study, where the method used involves describing and analyzing a phenomenon by describing a number of variables related to the issues and the unit under study. The next step is to analyze qualitative data from the research results related to the challenges of Arabic language learning. Based on the research findings, it is concluded that the challenges of implementing the Merdeka curriculum in Arabic language learning at the Sunan Kalijogo Islamic Institute in Malang are divided into three aspects: institutional, student-related, and lecturer-related. The researcher also found several solutions and alternatives that can help overcome and address the challenges of implementing the Merdeka curriculum in Arabic language learning.

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Introduction

Education is a crucial human activity in life. The government consistently prioritizes education, and current educational policies continuously evolve to anticipate globalization developments and enhance quality. The learning process lies at the core of education. The twenty-first-century learning, widely used today, represents a shift in education. This shift is due to curricula designed by schools transitioning from a teacher-centered approach to a

student-centered approach (Fitriana et al., 2023; Hamzah, 2018; Linur & Mubarak, 2022; Wahdah et al., 2023).

Learning involves a curriculum, a highly significant component. The curriculum is a tool used to achieve educational goals and serves as a guide for educators in implementing learning at all educational levels and types (Bahtiyar et al., 2022; Lanvers & Graham, 2022; Ma'ali et al., 2022). It is also an essential means in every learning process, uniting various subjects to be taught to students (T. V. S. Nguyen & Laws, 2019; Nurbayan et al., 2021). Curricula such as Curriculum 2013, KTSP (School-Based Curriculum), and the Merdeka Curriculum are currently in use.

Over the years, the education curriculum in Indonesia has undergone changes, depending on the education minister. In 2006, the KTSP curriculum was implemented in the Indonesian education system, referring to the National Education Standards as a reference for curriculum development, educational personnel, facilities, management, and financing (Susanti, 2013). The next change was to the K13 curriculum, which replaced KTSP in 2013, focusing on relevant learning to the present era and prioritizing the development of student character and diversified assessment methods, then moving on to the Merdeka curriculum (Amalia, 2022; Hamzah, 2023; KEMENDIKBUD RI, 2020; Qomaruddin, 2022; Sibagariang et al., 2021).

The Merdeka Curriculum is a non-formal curriculum not regulated by the government and implemented by various institutions such as Course and Training Institutions (LKP), media institutions, or school alumni focusing on learning and self-development not taught in formal schools. In this discussion, the Merdeka curriculum has been applied at IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang, especially in Arabic language learning at IAI Sunan Kalijogo. The implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in Arabic language learning at IAI Sunan Kalijogo aims to create intelligent human resources by emphasizing the practical implementation of character values for more creative thinking (Mohammad Jailani, 2022).

The goal of the Merdeka curriculum is to allow free learning, providing students with the freedom to choose courses, especially in Arabic, based on their interests and talents. Additionally, students are given the freedom to develop innovative ideas without campus-related problems. One of the programs created by the Ministry of Education and Culture is to observe students' profiles in the Merdeka curriculum. The transition from K13 to the Merdeka curriculum will run smoothly if all parties work together to implement it, enabling the maximum application of the Pancasila student profile (Hamidah et al., 2023; Ulinniam et al., 2021).

According to Baarid and Yusuf (2021), research related to the curriculum has been conducted with various objectives, such as a) developing Arabic language curriculum teaching

materials to improve language skills, b) conducting a comparative study of curricula between Islamic boarding schools, c) conducting a descriptive evaluative analysis of Arabic language education curriculum based on pragmatic and functional perspectives (Baarid & Yusuf, 2021). Based on research by Qomaruddin (2022), discussing the challenges of implementing the Merdeka curriculum in Arabic language subjects indicates that the implementation is not fully realized due to several internal and external factors (Qomaruddin, 2022). However, research related to the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in Arabic language subjects is still limited. Therefore, the researcher aims to delve deeper into how the Merdeka curriculum is applied and its challenges in Arabic language subjects.

Based on the above background, this research aims to comprehensively examine the challenges faced in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum at the Sunan Kalijogo Islamic Institute in Malang, particularly in Arabic language learning. Additionally, the research seeks to find potential solutions to address the challenges currently faced.

Method

Research Design

This research is a qualitative descriptive study, presenting the study results in the form of narrative descriptions (Danuari & Maisaroh, 2019). The aim of this research is to narrate the problems faced by lecturers and students at the Sunan Kalijogo Islamic Institute in Malang in implementing the Merdeka curriculum.

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection techniques used include interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviewees represent various parties involved in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, including the Head of the Arabic Language Education Study Program, lecturers, and students. Observations are conducted during active learning processes in the classroom. Additionally, an examination of supporting documents and required references is carried out.

Data Analysis Techniques

The method of data analysis employed is qualitative analysis with non-statistical analytical descriptive methods. This analysis is used to reveal research results related to the problems of implementing the Merdeka curriculum at the Sunan Kalijogo Islamic Institute in Malang, as well as the solutions applied to address these problems. The data analysis process involves several stages, starting from data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and verification or drawing conclusions. These steps are chosen based on the qualitative research theory according to Miles and Huberman (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Result and Discussion

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic Language Learning at IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang

The challenges in implementing the Merdeka curriculum in Arabic language learning at IAI Sunan Kalijogo are quite diverse and faced by various stakeholders, including:

Educational Institutions

Curriculum changes pose a significant challenge for educational institutions. When a curriculum changes, institutions need to rearrange guidelines for each learning session. According to interviews with institution administrators, IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang faced difficulties in formulating guidelines for the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, especially since they started implementing it for the first time this year, specifically for first-semester freshmen. As this is a new implementation, significant adjustments are needed between lecturers and students. Consistent with this challenge, Akhsan & Muhammadiyah found in their research that the application of the Merdeka curriculum in Arabic language learning shifts the characteristics of learning from a curriculum-centric authoritarian approach to a humanistic and free-based curriculum (Akhsan & Muhammadiyah, 2020).

Lecturers

Curriculum changes also present challenges for lecturers, who must rearrange the courses to be taught due to the reduction of certain courses from the previous curriculum. Based on observations and interviews, lecturers faced difficulties in formulating guidelines for each study program due to the reduction of the number of courses. Given this, each study program is required to have guidelines for planning learning. In the Indonesian educational context, teachers play a crucial role in helping the government meet the needs of young and skilled human resources effectively. Teachers are expected to demonstrate effective pedagogical practices in the process (Rido et al., 2016). Additionally, the shift from the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to Society 5.0 is a consideration in designing the Merdeka curriculum (Amalia, 2022).

Students

According to institutional documents, in the first semester of the 2023 academic year, there were 13 students in the Arabic language education study program. Five out of thirteen students faced difficulties in Arabic language learning due to the demand for active participation in every teaching and learning activity. The predominant challenge for students was in speaking, as speaking in front of peers or lecturers requires high self-confidence. Since these students are freshmen, they need time to adapt to their new environment. This challenge may be due to the diverse backgrounds of students, requiring adaptation to be more active in the

Arabic language learning process. In line with this, Mubarak et al., in their research, revealed that differences in backgrounds could pose difficulties for students to adapt to the Arabic language learning process in class (Mubarak et al., 2020). Therefore, lecturers need to consider students' backgrounds to determine representative material for all students in the class.

Solutions to Address Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic Language Learning at IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang

Despite challenges, solutions have been identified to address the issues:

Maintaining Collaborative Efforts

Collaboration is crucial for addressing curriculum changes. Effective collaboration among the university administration, vice chancellor, lecturers, and other stakeholders facilitates the formulation of guidelines aligned with the Merdeka curriculum. Such collaboration accelerates the guideline formulation process and minimizes difficulties in learning.

It's not only the responsibility of the rector, vice rector, and lecturers to collaborate effectively. Students and lecturers also need good collaboration in each learning session. Effective collaboration among various stakeholders in educational institutions can help improve the quality of the institution (Amin, 2021). Thus, strong collaboration serves as a solution to challenges in transitioning from one curriculum to the Merdeka curriculum.

Adopting Engaging Learning Models

The choice of learning models is crucial for capturing students' interest in the learning process. The selection of learning models should align with the material and the students' conditions (Ainiy et al., 2022). When lecturers use engaging learning models, students find it easier to understand and stay motivated in their learning. Lecturers must carefully choose and consider the models to be used, as learning models significantly impact student engagement. The Merdeka curriculum transformation is characterized by the use of digital platforms (Bahtiyar et al., 2022). Therefore, lecturers are encouraged to implement innovative, digital-based learning models to enhance students' interest and skills. Moreover, the Learning Management System (LMS) employed by lecturers is a crucial tool for knowledge acquisition and learning management in the digital era (N. Nguyen, 2021).

Establishing Study Groups and Student Discussions

Considering the challenges faced by new students, especially during curriculum transitions, creating study groups outside class hours can help them adapt. These gatherings allow students to become more familiar with each other and engage in discussions about the learning process. Such group activities are not only beneficial for adaptation but also make it easier for students to adjust. Additionally, small group activities can enhance collaboration and communication (Anggraini et al., 2021; Hamidah et al., 2022; Suryapermana, 2016). Learning

is not just about receiving knowledge in the classroom. To truly understand and acquire knowledge, students need to solve problems, discover new things from their environment, and constantly engage with ideas, innovations, and inspirations from various sources (Herppich et al., 2018; Kaefer, 2020; Yusuf & Suardi, 2015).

Conclusion

In Indonesia, recent curriculum changes, including KTSP, Curriculum 2013, and the Merdeka Curriculum, present challenges for educational institutions. IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang encounters hurdles in implementing the Merdeka curriculum, particularly in formulating guidelines for all study programs, rearranging courses for lecturers, and students adapting, especially in public speaking. Researchers propose solutions: a) Maintaining Collaboration: Continuous collaboration among stakeholders, including administration, vice-chancellor, and lecturers, is crucial. Effective collaboration streamlines the creation of Merdeka curriculum-aligned guidelines, reducing implementation difficulties. b) Changing Learning Models: Introducing engaging and innovative learning models is essential, tailored to material and student conditions. These models enhance understanding and motivation among students. c) Establishing Study Groups: Creating study groups and encouraging student discussions outside class hours fosters community and helps students adapt to the new curriculum.

Recommendations include conducting in-depth studies on Merdeka curriculum challenges in other institutions, particularly in Arabic language learning, and exploring alternative solutions for addressing implementation challenges in higher education institutions.

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