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## Implementation of the English Curriculum in North Toraja Elementary Schools: A Critical Review of the Merdeka Curriculum

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### Abstract

*This article examines how EFL teachers implement the English curriculum, particularly the Merdeka Curriculum, in elementary schools in North Toraja and the challenges that appear in classroom realization. The study used a qualitative design supported by classroom observation, document analysis, and thematic interpretation. The findings show that teachers implemented the curriculum through supportive classroom routines, clear learning objectives, contextual topics, communicative activities, integrated language skills, classroom-based assessment, and reflective feedback. The lessons connected English with familiar experiences such as fruits, shopping, quantities, money, and future plans, making learning meaningful for young learners. However, implementation also faced several challenges, including balancing grammar and communication, expanding spontaneous speaking practice, differentiating instruction for mixed-ability learners, increasing media variety, integrating Toraja local culture more explicitly, and developing broader communicative assessment instruments. The article concludes that curriculum implementation in the observed classrooms was practical and adaptive, but it still requires stronger support in resources, teacher development, local contextualization, and assessment practices.*

**Keywords:** EFL teachers, elementary school, English curriculum, Merdeka Curriculum, North Toraja

### INTRODUCTION

English has an important position in Indonesian education because it provides access to wider knowledge, communication, and global participation. At the elementary level, English is expected to introduce children to basic communication, pronunciation, vocabulary, and positive attitudes toward language learning. However, English teaching for young learners must be adjusted to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. It should not rely only on grammar explanation, but should include games, songs, stories, pictures, repetition, and meaningful interaction.

The Merdeka Curriculum gives schools and teachers greater flexibility to design learning that is contextual, student-centered, and relevant to learners' needs. In English language learning, this curriculum encourages activities that help students use language in real situations rather than memorize isolated rules. For elementary learners, this means that teachers need to connect English with concrete objects, daily experiences, local culture, and joyful classroom activities.

In North Toraja, English curriculum implementation is shaped by local educational realities. Teachers are expected to translate national curriculum expectations into classroom practice while also dealing with differences in student proficiency, limited learning resources, and the need for age-appropriate methods. These conditions make curriculum implementation a practical and contextual process rather than a simple application of written policy.

This article is based on a study of English curriculum implementation in elementary schools in North Toraja. It focuses on two objectives: to evaluate how EFL teachers implement the English curriculum, particularly the Merdeka Curriculum, and to identify the challenges faced by teachers in implementing it. The article is significant because it shows how curriculum principles are realized in classroom routines, lesson objectives, learning activities, assessment, and feedback.

## RESEARCH ELABORATIONS

### Research Objectives

This article addresses two research objectives: (1) to evaluate how EFL teachers implement the English curriculum, particularly the Merdeka Curriculum, in elementary schools in North Toraja; and (2) to identify the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the English curriculum in this context.

### Research Design

The study employed a qualitative design because it investigated classroom practices, curriculum interpretation, and contextual challenges rather than numerical measurement. The research focused on how teachers translated curriculum expectations into actual teaching and learning activities. Classroom practice was therefore treated as evidence of curriculum implementation.

### Data Sources and Analysis

The data were drawn from classroom observation and document-analysis evidence. Observation data provided examples of teacher routines, learning objectives, classroom interaction, assessment, and feedback. Document evidence supported the interpretation of curriculum expectations and classroom alignment. The data were analyzed thematically by grouping the findings into implementation practices and implementation challenges. The interpretation was also connected to a five-stage curriculum implementation framework: educational goals, formation of methods and language, implementation, evaluation, and feedback.

## RESULTS OR FINDING

The findings show that the English curriculum was implemented through a combination of structure, contextualization, communication, integrated skills, assessment, and reflection. Teachers did not treat the curriculum only as an administrative document. Instead, they translated it into daily classroom routines and activities that were observable in the learning process.

### 1. Supportive Classroom Management and Learning Readiness

The teachers began the lessons with greetings, attendance checking, prayer, cleanliness checks, praise, and applause. These opening routines prepared students emotionally and physically before the academic activities began. For example, students were praised for classroom cleanliness and invited to appreciate one another. Such routines created a safe and positive classroom

atmosphere, which is important because young EFL learners may feel shy or anxious when using English.

The student-led prayer also showed that classroom routines supported holistic development. Students were given opportunities to take responsibility and participate in classroom life. This indicates that the implementation of the curriculum was not limited to language content, but also supported character formation, discipline, confidence, and social responsibility.

### 2. Clear Learning Objectives and Curriculum Alignment

The teachers stated learning objectives clearly at the beginning of the lesson. The objectives were expressed in practical and measurable terms, such as pronouncing sentences correctly, engaging in question-and-answer activities, reading aloud, writing vocabulary, answering questions, and understanding quantities and money in English. This made the curriculum visible to students because they could understand what they were expected to do during the lesson.

The objectives also showed alignment between curriculum expectations, classroom activities, and assessment. In the future-plan lesson, students were expected to use the pattern “What will you do tomorrow?” in oral communication. In the fruit-shopping lesson, students learned fruit names, quantities, packages, kilograms, and money through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These examples show that the teachers used integrated-skills instruction rather than isolated vocabulary memorization.

### 3. Meaningful, Contextual, and Multimodal Learning

The observed topics were close to students’ daily experiences, including fruits, shopping, quantities, money, and future plans. The teacher introduced the “At the Shop” topic by asking students to observe pictures in the textbook and identify what they saw. This visual scaffolding helped students connect English words with familiar objects before using them in a transactional context.

The teachers also used multimodal learning through pictures, oral modeling, listening, repetition, reading aloud, and written exercises. Students processed the material through sound, image, text, and oral production. This is appropriate for elementary EFL learners because repeated and concrete exposure helps them remember vocabulary and understand meaning.

### 4. Communicative and Student-Centered Classroom Practice

Teachers provided speaking opportunities through guided question-answer practice, personal responses, and peer surveys. In the future-plan lesson, students used English to talk about their own plans, such as where they would study or what they would do tomorrow. This means grammar was used in context, not only explained as a rule.

The peer survey was an important example of communicative learning. Students were asked to interview five classmates using questions about future plans. Through this activity, students had to ask, listen, respond, and record information. The task increased student talk time and reflected the student-centered orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum, although the interaction remained guided by teacher-provided questions.

### 5. Assessment, Reflection, and Feedback

Assessment was integrated into classroom activities through written exercises, daily scores, oral monitoring, peer interviews, and student reflection. The fruit lesson included written sentence-completion tasks about fruit names and quantities, while the future-plan lesson included oral practice and reflection. This shows that teachers assessed both process and product: students' participation during learning and their written or oral outcomes.

Reflection also became part of the closing activity. Students were asked to explain what they had learned, including the use of "will" for future plans. This helped students become aware of the form and function of the language. Feedback, praise, correction, and motivational closure supported students' confidence and helped complete the lesson cycle.

## 6. Challenges in Curriculum Implementation

Despite positive implementation, several challenges were identified. First, teachers needed to balance communicative learning and grammar. Grammar was taught through contextual tasks, but activities such as identifying adverbs of time showed that form-focused instruction remained visible. The challenge is not to remove grammar, but to keep it connected to meaningful communication.

Second, student speaking opportunities need to be expanded. Guided questions and surveys supported speaking, but much communication was still highly scaffolded. Students need more pair work, role plays, games, mini-presentations, and projects so they can use English more spontaneously.

Third, differentiated instruction needs to be strengthened. The data showed whole-class repetition and shared activities, but limited evidence of task adaptation for different proficiency levels. Teachers need strategies such as sentence starters, picture prompts, word banks, flexible grouping, tiered worksheets, and varied output levels.

Fourth, learning resources and media need greater variety. The teachers used textbooks, workbooks, pictures, oral modeling, and written exercises, but digital media and locally produced materials were less visible. Low-cost materials such as flashcards, word cards, toy money, fruit cards, price tags, posters, and simple audio recordings could make learning more concrete and enjoyable.

Fifth, the Toraja local context needs stronger integration. The lessons were contextual, but explicit local cultural content was limited. Topics such as Toraja markets, tongkonan, local foods, tourism sites, ceremonies, family life, and community values could make English learning more relevant to students' environment and identity.

Sixth, assessment instruments need to become more communicative and systematic. Daily scores and written exercises were useful, but speaking rubrics, observation checklists, portfolios, project tasks, and reflection sheets would provide broader evidence of students' language development.

The findings of this study support Fullan's (2007) view that curriculum implementation is an active process in which teachers interpret and apply curriculum ideas in classroom contexts. The teachers in North Toraja did not simply follow the curriculum as a written document; they translated it into classroom routines, learning objectives, contextual activities, assessment, and feedback. This finding is also consistent with Naibaho et al. (2022), who explain curriculum implementation through stages

such as educational goals, method formation, implementation, evaluation, and feedback.

The findings are also consistent with Richards' (2001) explanation that curriculum development in language teaching involves goals, materials, teaching procedures, and evaluation. In this study, clear objectives helped connect curriculum outcomes with classroom activities, while contextual topics helped teachers transform the curriculum into meaningful classroom practice. This supports the view that effective language curriculum implementation requires alignment between objectives, materials, classroom procedures, and assessment (Richards, 2001).

The communicative and contextual activities found in this study are in line with Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasizes meaningful communication and realistic language use (Richards, 2006). They also support Nunan's (2004) view that language learning becomes more effective when learners are involved in tasks that reflect real-life use. The At the Shop lesson and the future-plan survey showed that students used English to express familiar meanings, although the interaction was still supported by teacher models and guided questions. This finding is also related to Septy Lesia and Petrus (2021), who emphasize that English for young learners should be supported by appropriate strategies, enjoyable activities, and opportunities for participation.

The assessment findings support Black and Wiliam's (1998) argument that formative assessment improves learning when teachers use classroom evidence to support student progress. The teachers used written exercises, participation monitoring, oral practice, and reflection. The feedback practices also support Hattie and Timperley's (2007) explanation that feedback helps learners understand their performance and what they need to improve. However, the present study shows that assessment could be strengthened further through speaking rubrics, portfolios, and project-based tasks so that communicative competence can be documented more systematically.

The challenges found in this study are similar to previous research on Merdeka Curriculum implementation, which reports issues of teacher readiness, limited resources, media constraints, and the need for contextualized learning materials (Pratiwi et al., 2024). The need to integrate Toraja local culture also supports Tandikombong et al. (2024), who argue that local wisdom can be explored as a meaningful topic for English materials in elementary schools in Toraja Utara. Therefore, compared with previous studies, this article contributes a specific North Toraja perspective by showing how curriculum implementation is already practical and contextual, but still needs stronger differentiation, communicative assessment, media variation, and local-cultural integration.

## CONCLUSION

This article concludes that EFL teachers in North Toraja implemented the English curriculum, particularly the Merdeka Curriculum, through practical and adaptive classroom practices. The implementation appeared in supportive opening routines, clear learning objectives, contextual topics, integrated language-skill activities, guided communication, classroom-based assessment, reflection, and feedback. These practices show that teachers attempted to make English learning meaningful and accessible for elementary learners.

The study also concludes that several areas still need improvement. Teachers need to balance grammar with communication, expand spontaneous speaking practice, differentiate instruction for mixed-ability students, increase learning media, integrate Toraja local culture more explicitly, and develop communicative assessment instruments. Therefore, curriculum implementation should be understood as a continuous process of adjustment supported by teacher creativity, institutional support, professional development, and locally relevant teaching materials.

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