



Navigating challenges and strategies in implementing The Independent Curriculum: A multi-site case study of English language instruction in junior and senior high schools in Palopo

Husnaini ⁽¹⁾*

⁽¹⁾ Institut Agama Islam Negeri Palopo

* husnaini@iainpalopo.ac.id

Abstract

The Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) represents a significant shift in Indonesia's education system, promoting competency-based learning and student-centered instruction. However, its implementation has posed various challenges for English teachers, particularly in junior and senior high schools. This study explores the obstacles faced by teachers, the strategies adopted to overcome these challenges, and the impact of these strategies on student learning outcomes in five junior high schools and three senior high schools in Palopo. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with English teachers and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers struggle with limited access to resources, inadequate professional training, increased workload, and student difficulties in adapting to independent learning. To address these issues, teachers implemented project-based learning, differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and digital learning integration, which enhanced student engagement, motivation, and critical thinking skills. However, many students, particularly in junior high schools, continued to struggle with self-directed learning due to lack of preparation for autonomous study habits. The study highlights the importance of ongoing teacher training, sufficient resource allocation, and gradual adaptation strategies to ensure effective curriculum implementation. These findings contribute to discussions on curriculum reform and English language teaching, emphasizing the need for stronger institutional support and instructional flexibility. Future research should explore longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of these teaching strategies.

Keywords

Independent Curriculum, English language instruction, teacher challenges, curriculum implementation, student-centered learning

Introduction

Education reform is an essential process in improving learning outcomes and adapting to students' evolving needs. One of Indonesia's most significant educational reforms in the past decade is the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), introduced to provide greater flexibility in learning, emphasize competency-based education, and promote student-centered teaching approaches. Unlike previous national curricula, the Independent Curriculum allows schools and teachers to design instructional strategies that cater to their students' unique needs and interests (Pandia et al., 2023; Utami, 2024). However, the transition to this new curriculum has posed significant challenges, particularly in junior and senior high schools (Ginanjari et al., 2024). Teachers at both levels must adjust their pedagogical approaches, develop new assessment methods, and implement classroom strategies that foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and independent learning (Dasmo et al., 2023). These challenges are particularly pronounced in English language instruction, where communicative competence and language acquisition require interactive and differentiated learning strategies (Isnaniah et al., 2021). This study explores the challenges and strategies employed by English language teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum across multiple junior and senior high schools in Palopo.

The Independent Curriculum necessitates a shift from traditional content-based instruction to competency-based learning, which requires teachers to adopt interactive, student-centered approaches (Anggini et al., 2024). However, research suggests that teachers at both junior and senior high school levels face difficulties in this transition due to insufficient training and unclear implementation guidelines (Harmanto et al., 2022). The complexity of this transition is further compounded by differences in cognitive development and language acquisition between junior and senior high school students (Veliganio et al., 2024). Junior high school students often require stronger foundational language skills, while senior high school students need more advanced communicative competence (Bituin, 2024). These variations highlight the need for context-specific teaching strategies that align with the objectives of the Independent Curriculum. Therefore, investigating how English teachers adapt their instructional methods at different school levels is crucial to understanding the broader impact of curriculum implementation.

Several recent studies have examined the implementation of competency-based curricula and student-centered learning approaches in Indonesia. The role of teacher training programs in supporting the Independent Curriculum and found that many educators struggle due to limited professional development opportunities (Herlina et al., 2024). Similarly, another research found that the success of the Independent Curriculum depends largely on teachers' ability to facilitate active learning (Okrianti & Aufa, 2024). However, both studies primarily focus on general teacher challenges without addressing specific subject areas such as English language learning, which presents unique instructional demands. Given the distinct nature of language acquisition—where communicative competence, vocabulary building, and interactive engagement are

crucial—it is necessary to explore how English teachers navigate this curriculum reform in both junior and senior high schools.

The availability of resources and infrastructure also plays a critical role in curriculum implementation. Many schools, particularly in non-urban areas, lack adequate teaching materials, technological tools, and access to digital resources, all of which are crucial for supporting the Independent Curriculum (Stenly et al., 2024). Similarly, another research also argue that the absence of technological integration in schools creates a gap between curriculum objectives and actual classroom practices (Husnul & Wakidi, 2024). The limitations in learning materials and technology access disproportionately affect English language teachers, as modern language instruction often relies on multimedia-based learning, online language platforms, and digital communication exercises (Jon et al., 2021; Susidamaiyanti et al., 2023). Moreover, junior and senior high schools face different resource challenges: junior high schools often struggle with a lack of interactive materials, while senior high schools require more specialized resources to support advanced language skills (Waloyo et al., 2023). These findings confirm that systemic barriers exist, but they do not provide an in-depth analysis of how teachers develop coping strategies to overcome these issues in their classrooms.

The effectiveness of curriculum implementation is also influenced by institutional and administrative factors. Successful curriculum reform requires a structured transition process, which appears to be lacking in the Indonesian education system (Edi et al., 2023). Many teachers report that they were expected to immediately adapt to the Independent Curriculum with minimal guidance and inadequate instructional materials (Ekantini & Damayanti, 2023; Ndari et al., 2023). The lack of clear assessment standards and learning objectives often results in inconsistent curriculum application across different schools (Kusnawan, 2019; Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). This inconsistency is particularly problematic in English language learning, where assessment should measure not only content mastery but also language proficiency, communication skills, and cultural understanding. Additionally, differences in student engagement and motivation between junior and senior high school students require differentiated assessment strategies, which are often not well-defined in current curriculum guidelines (Ndari et al., 2023). These findings highlight the need for a more structured and well-supported transition in curriculum implementation.

While recent studies have identified key challenges in curriculum reform and teacher adaptation, there remains a significant gap in understanding how English language teachers in both junior and senior high schools implement the Independent Curriculum in practice. Much of the existing research focuses on policy analysis, general teacher challenges, and macro-level implementation barriers (Saputra et al., 2024). However, there is limited empirical evidence on the specific pedagogical strategies teachers use to navigate the complexities of teaching English under this new curriculum framework. Furthermore, most studies do not consider the local context of smaller cities like Palopo, where schools may face unique constraints compared to major urban centers. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by investigating the specific challenges and

strategies employed by English teachers across multiple junior and senior high schools in Palopo.

The primary research question guiding this study is: What are the key challenges and strategic adaptations in implementing the Independent Curriculum for English language instruction in junior and senior high schools in Palopo? The research objectives are:

1. To identify the obstacles faced by teachers in aligning their English language instruction with the Independent Curriculum
2. To analyze the strategies adopted by teachers to overcome these challenges
3. To assess the impact of these strategies on student learning outcomes

This study provides a novel contribution by offering a multi-site case study on English language teaching under the Independent Curriculum, thus bridging the gap between macro-level policy discussions and micro-level classroom realities. The findings will offer practical insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers working to refine and enhance the effectiveness of curriculum implementation in Indonesia.

By addressing these issues, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on curriculum reform in Indonesia and provides empirical evidence on how teachers navigate and adapt to educational policy changes. The results will be useful for educational institutions, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing more effective professional development programs and ensuring better alignment between policy and classroom practices.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges and strategies in implementing the Independent Curriculum in English language instruction at junior and senior high schools in Palopo. The case study approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of real-world experiences of English teachers as they navigate the curriculum reform. The study was conducted in eight schools: five junior high schools (SMP) and three senior high schools (SMA) that voluntarily participated in the research. The selection of schools was based on willingness to participate and variations in school conditions, ensuring diverse perspectives on curriculum implementation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with English teachers from each school. The interview protocol was developed to cover key themes, including teachers' challenges, instructional strategies, resource availability, and assessment methods. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at the respective schools. To ensure accuracy, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. The transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring themes

related to challenges, adaptations, and instructional outcomes. To enhance credibility and validity, triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data with field observations and school policy documents. This methodological approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how teachers at different school levels experience and respond to the Independent Curriculum in Palopo.

Results

This section presents the findings based on interviews conducted with English teachers from five junior high schools (SMP) and three senior high schools (SMA) in Palopo. The results are structured into three key areas: (1) obstacles faced by teachers in aligning their English language instruction with the Independent Curriculum, (2) strategies adopted by teachers to overcome these challenges, and (3) the impact of these strategies on student learning outcomes. The findings highlight both systemic and practical challenges in implementing the curriculum, as well as various strategies employed by teachers to address these issues.

Obstacles faced by teachers in aligning English language instruction with the Independent Curriculum

The transition from the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) to the Independent Curriculum has posed multiple challenges for English teachers at both junior and senior high school levels. The most commonly reported obstacles include limited teaching resources, insufficient teacher training, infrastructure constraints, and student-related difficulties. One of the major challenges identified by teachers is the limited availability of teaching resources, particularly textbooks and digital learning materials. Many teachers reported that printed English textbooks were scarce, forcing them to rely on online materials. However, limited internet access and student digital literacy hindered the effective use of these resources. A teacher mentioned:

"The lack of textbooks forces us to rely on digital materials, but many students do not have access to stable internet at home, making it difficult for them to complete assignments." (UT)

Another critical challenge is insufficient teacher training on how to implement competency-based learning and differentiated instruction. Many teachers admitted that they received only basic training on the new curriculum, leaving them uncertain about how to assess students effectively or integrate student-centered teaching approaches. One informant expressed concern:

"We were not provided with in-depth training before implementing the Independent Curriculum. Most of us had to figure things out through trial and error." (AN)

Infrastructure limitations also emerged as a significant barrier, particularly in schools that lack modern facilities such as language laboratories and digital learning tools. Some schools have poor internet connectivity, preventing teachers from fully utilizing online resources and interactive learning platforms. This issue is especially challenging in junior

high schools, where students lack personal devices to support technology-based learning. A teacher commented:

"We want to integrate digital learning, but not all students have devices, and internet access at school is unreliable." (NH)

Additionally, teachers faced student-related challenges, particularly in adjusting to self-directed learning. The Independent Curriculum encourages students to take ownership of their learning, but many students, especially in junior high schools, struggle with independent study habits. A teacher noted:

"Many students are not used to independent learning. They expect the teacher to provide all the answers instead of finding solutions themselves." (NS)

These findings indicate that the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum requires stronger institutional support, improved teacher training, better resource allocation, and strategies to enhance student autonomy.

Another significant obstacle in implementing the Independent Curriculum is teacher workload and adaptation difficulties. Many educators reported that the increased administrative tasks associated with the new curriculum, such as preparing customized learning modules, conducting differentiated assessments, and managing student-centered learning activities, significantly added to their responsibilities. This issue was particularly noted by teachers who were accustomed to the previous teacher-centered approach and had difficulty transitioning to facilitator roles. One teacher expressed concern:

"The workload has increased significantly because we are required to design individualized learning plans, conduct ongoing assessments, and provide feedback regularly. This is overwhelming, especially for teachers who handle multiple classes." (RH)

Moreover, some teachers, particularly senior educators, struggled with the digital aspects of the curriculum. The Independent Curriculum relies heavily on technology, requiring teachers to use digital learning platforms, online assessments, and interactive teaching materials. However, not all educators were proficient in using these tools. A teacher mentioned:

"Older teachers, including myself, find it difficult to keep up with the digital learning requirements. We were not trained extensively on how to integrate technology into our lessons." (ND)

These findings suggest that without proper support, training, and workload management, the effectiveness of the Independent Curriculum may be hindered. Providing structured teacher development programs and reducing excessive administrative burdens are crucial steps in ensuring a smoother transition for educators.

Strategies adopted by teachers to overcome these challenges

Despite the challenges, English teachers in Palopo have implemented various instructional and institutional strategies to align their teaching practices with the Independent Curriculum. The most commonly adopted strategies include project-based learning, problem-based learning, differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and the use of digital resources.

Project-based and problem-based learning

Many teachers have shifted their instructional approach from traditional lecturing to active learning strategies such as project-based learning (PBL) and problem-based learning (PrBL). These methods promote student engagement and allow learners to explore real-world applications of English. A teacher shared their experience:

"We often assign students real-life tasks, such as creating digital presentations or conducting short interviews in English. This helps them practice language skills in an applied setting." (NW)

Teachers also reported the successful use of problem-solving tasks in language instruction. Students were encouraged to collaborate and analyze case studies, enhancing their critical thinking and communication skills.

Differentiated instruction

To address diverse student learning needs, teachers implemented differentiated instruction, grouping students based on their English proficiency levels. A teacher described their approach:

"I divide students into groups according to their language abilities. Advanced learners are given more complex assignments, while beginners receive additional support to build their confidence." (AS)

This method allows teachers to tailor their instruction to each student's level, ensuring that no student falls behind.

Collaborative teaching and peer learning

Collaboration among teachers has played a crucial role in overcoming challenges. Many schools formed teacher learning communities (Kombel) or professional development groups where educators shared best practices and developed innovative teaching strategies together.

Additionally, peer learning was encouraged, where high-performing students assisted struggling classmates. A teacher stated:

"We encourage students to work in teams. More proficient students help their peers, fostering a cooperative learning environment." (RM)

Leveraging digital tools

To compensate for the lack of textbooks, teachers increasingly relied on digital learning platforms and audiovisual materials. Many schools integrated online quizzes, multimedia-based exercises, and educational applications to supplement traditional teaching methods.

A teacher mentioned:

"Since we do not have enough physical textbooks, we use digital tools like interactive videos and language learning apps to engage students." (UT)

These strategies have helped teachers adapt to the Independent Curriculum, creating a more engaging and effective learning environment.

The impact of these strategies on student learning outcomes

The implementation of innovative teaching strategies has led to both positive and challenging outcomes for students. The findings suggest that while students benefited from greater autonomy and engagement, some still struggled with the increased academic demands and self-directed learning expectations.

Increased student motivation and engagement

Many teachers reported that students became more motivated and engaged when learning activities were designed to be interactive and relevant. A teacher observed:

"Students are more interested in English lessons when they can relate them to their daily lives. Project-based learning has made classes more exciting for them." (NS)

This suggests that incorporating real-world applications in English learning encourages students to participate more actively. By making lessons more relatable, teachers can foster intrinsic motivation, helping students see the relevance of English beyond the classroom.

Development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills

Students exposed to problem-based learning and real-world case studies demonstrated improved analytical and critical thinking skills. According to a teacher:

"Students now ask more questions and try to analyze problems on their own. This shift is essential in developing independent learners." (AN)

When students are encouraged to find solutions rather than simply memorizing answers, they develop higher-order thinking skills. This aligns with the core objective of the Independent Curriculum, which seeks to nurture students who can think critically and make informed decisions.

Challenges in self-directed learning

Despite positive outcomes, some students struggled with self-directed learning. Many were accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and found it difficult to adapt to independent study habits.

"Some students still prefer being told exactly what to do. They need more guidance in developing independent learning strategies." (NW)

This indicates that not all students are ready to transition into fully independent learning without structured guidance. Teachers may need to implement gradual scaffolding techniques to support students in becoming more self-reliant.

Improved language proficiency

Overall, the new teaching strategies have enhanced students' English proficiency, particularly in communication and comprehension skills.

"We have seen significant improvement in students' speaking confidence. They are more willing to engage in discussions and express their ideas in English." (RH)

This suggests that the shift toward interactive and communicative approaches has positively impacted students' language fluency. Regular oral practice in collaborative activities has helped students build confidence and apply their language skills in real-life situations.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that while the Independent Curriculum promotes student-centered learning, its implementation presents significant challenges for English language teachers in junior and senior high schools in Palopo. The results align with previous studies indicating that educational reforms often encounter barriers related to teacher preparedness, resource availability, and student adaptability (Jon et al., 2021; Stenly et al., 2024; Waloyo et al., 2023). In this study, teachers identified limited infrastructure, insufficient training, and the struggle to transition from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches as primary obstacles. This is consistent with research found that Indonesian educators frequently experience difficulties in shifting pedagogical strategies due to a lack of structured professional development programs (Herlina et al., 2024). Furthermore, teachers in this study expressed concerns about students' ability to engage in self-directed learning, which aligns with the broader discourse on student readiness in competency-based curricula (Bituin, 2024). These findings suggest that while the Independent Curriculum holds potential for improving language instruction, its effectiveness depends on comprehensive support mechanisms for both teachers and students.

In response to these challenges, teachers in Palopo adopted various instructional strategies to facilitate curriculum implementation, including project-based learning (PBL), problem-based learning (PrBL), differentiated instruction, and digital resources.

These approaches have been widely recognized as effective in fostering active student participation and critical thinking skills (Anggini et al., 2024). However, findings from this study indicate that while PBL and PrBL enhance student engagement, their success is contingent on resource availability and teacher readiness. As one teacher noted, *"The workload increases significantly because we have to design customized learning plans for each student group, which is time-consuming and challenging without proper training"* (NH). This aligns with the perspective who argue that competency-based learning models require extensive teacher preparation to be effective (Okrianti & Aufa, 2024). Additionally, some educators found differentiated instruction beneficial, yet difficult to implement consistently due to varying levels of student motivation and engagement.

The study also highlights the role of digital resources in compensating for the lack of physical teaching materials (Jon et al., 2021). In the current study, teachers reported that multimedia tools and online learning applications helped students develop communication skills, although limited technological access in certain schools restricted their full potential. One participant stated, *"We use interactive videos and language apps, but internet access issues make it difficult to integrate these tools effectively in every class"* (UT). This supports previous studies suggesting that technology-enhanced learning is most effective when schools have stable infrastructure and students possess adequate digital literacy skills (Stenly et al., 2024). Despite these obstacles, students generally demonstrated increased engagement in lessons when digital tools were utilized, reinforcing the importance of technological integration in modern language instruction.

While these strategies positively impacted student learning outcomes, challenges remain, particularly in terms of student autonomy and adaptability. Some students still rely heavily on teacher guidance, which contradicts the Independent Curriculum's objective of fostering self-directed learning. According to one teacher, *"Some students still prefer being told exactly what to do. They need more structured guidance to develop independent learning habits."* (NW). This is in line with research who found that students in competency-based curricula often struggle with independent study due to prior exposure to rigid instructional models (Harmanto et al., 2022). Furthermore, despite increased student participation in class activities, teachers reported that not all students developed the ability to apply critical thinking skills independently, a challenge also noted in previous research on learner-centered pedagogies in Indonesia.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on curriculum reform in Indonesia by offering empirical insights into how English teachers navigate the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. While the findings align with previous studies emphasizing the need for adequate training, infrastructural support, and gradual pedagogical transition, they also highlight unique contextual challenges faced by schools in non-urban areas like Palopo. The study suggests that future policy revisions should focus on enhancing teacher training programs, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and providing structured student support systems. By addressing these issues, the Independent Curriculum can be more effectively implemented, ultimately leading to improved language proficiency and critical thinking skills among students.

Conclusion

This study examined the challenges and strategies in implementing the Independent Curriculum for English language instruction in junior and senior high schools in Palopo, revealing key obstacles such as limited resources, insufficient teacher training, infrastructure constraints, and student difficulties in adapting to self-directed learning. Despite these challenges, teachers employed project-based learning, differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and digital learning integration, which enhanced student engagement and critical thinking but still posed difficulties for independent learning, particularly in junior high schools. The findings align with previous research on curriculum reform, reinforcing the importance of teacher preparedness, institutional support, and gradual student adaptation in education policy implementation. However, the study is limited to eight schools, relies on qualitative data, and does not measure long-term learning outcomes, necessitating further quantitative and longitudinal studies. Recommendations include improving teacher training, providing better resource allocation, supporting student adaptation, reducing teacher workload, and conducting further research to assess the long-term impact of the Independent Curriculum. This study contributes to curriculum reform discourse in Indonesia by providing practical insights into real-world challenges and adaptation strategies, highlighting the critical role of training, infrastructure, and pedagogical flexibility in ensuring successful curriculum implementation.

Acknowledgments

The author sincerely expresses gratitude to the principals, vice principals, and English teachers from the participating junior and senior high schools in Palopo for their invaluable contributions to this research. Their willingness to share insights and experiences played a crucial role in shaping the study's findings. Special thanks are also extended to the English Education students who assisted in data collection and fieldwork, ensuring the accuracy and depth of the research. Finally, appreciation is given to all individuals and institutions that provided support, facilities, and constructive feedback, contributing to the successful completion of this study.

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Author's Biography

Husnaini is a lecturer at the English Language Education Study Program, Education and Teacher Training Faculty, State Islamic Institute of Palopo. She specializes in English language teaching with a particular focus on curriculum and material development. Her research interests include English language curriculum design, instructional materials development, and innovative teaching methodologies. She has been actively involved in various studies related to language learning and instructional material effectiveness. Correspondence regarding this article can be directed to husnaini@iainpalopo.ac.id