



## PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING UNDER THE MERDEKA BELAJAR CURRICULUM IN UNDER-RESOURCED SCHOOL CONTEXT

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### Abstract

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has introduced a major shift in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia by emphasizing flexibility, learner-centered pedagogy, and contextual adaptation. However, empirical evidence on how these principles are enacted in under-resourced school contexts remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining pedagogical practices in ELT under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in an under-resourced junior secondary school. The study aims to describe how English teachers implement curriculum principles and how these practices are adapted to contextual constraints. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis involving an English teacher, school stakeholders, and students. Data were analyzed inductively through thematic analysis to identify recurring pedagogical patterns. The findings reveal that English teaching was characterized by learner-centered and adaptive practices supported by genre-based pedagogy, collaborative learning, and pragmatic differentiation. Teachers selectively integrated technology as a pedagogical support while relying primarily on printed and local learning resources. Pedagogical practices were extended beyond the classroom through the Pancasila Student Profile Project and an English Club, which enhanced communicative competence, character development, and learner confidence. These practices reflected a hybrid pedagogy balancing curriculum ideals with contextual realities. This study contributes empirical insights into classroom-level enactment of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in under-resourced ELT contexts, highlighting the critical role of teacher agency. Limitations include the focus on a single school context. Future research is recommended to adopt comparative or longitudinal designs to further explore curriculum implementation across diverse educational settings.

**Keywords:** Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, English Language Teaching, Pedagogical Practices, Under-Resourced School Context, Learner-Centered Pedagogy.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since its nationwide introduction, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has marked a major paradigm shift in Indonesian education by promoting flexibility, learner autonomy, and contextualized learning practices. Initiated as part of a broader educational transformation agenda, the curriculum responds to global educational challenges, rapid technological development, and learning loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Susilowati, 2022). By early 2026, the curriculum has moved beyond the pilot phase and entered wider implementation across diverse educational settings, making empirical examinations of its classroom enactment increasingly urgent.

In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum emphasizes communicative competence, multimodal literacy, intercultural awareness, and learner-centered pedagogy. English is positioned not merely as a subject of knowledge

transmission but as a tool for developing critical thinking, creativity, and global citizenship aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile (Aprianti et al., 2023; Sari, 2023). This shift requires teachers to redesign pedagogical practices that move away from rigid, textbook-driven instruction toward more adaptive and student-responsive learning environments.

Pedagogical practices under the Merdeka Belajar framework are characterized by student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and the integration of technology where possible (Darmayanti, 2023; Atikah et al., 2023). Teachers are expected to act as facilitators who design meaningful learning experiences based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Such expectations significantly reshape classroom dynamics and challenge traditional teacher-centered instructional models long embedded in Indonesian schools (Sihombing et al., 2021).

Despite its progressive vision, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is not uniform across contexts. Schools with limited infrastructure, restricted access to technology, and constrained professional development opportunities face distinct challenges in translating curriculum principles into effective pedagogical practices (Jasrial et al., 2023; Pratikno et al., 2022). These under-resourced school contexts demand adaptive strategies that reconcile curriculum ideals with on-the-ground realities.

Research on curriculum implementation consistently highlights the central role of teachers in mediating policy and practice. Teachers' pedagogical decisions, instructional strategies, and classroom management practices largely determine how curriculum reforms are experienced by students (Prakoso et al., 2021; Riskianto et al., 2023). In ELT, this mediation becomes even more complex due to language proficiency demands, learner affective factors, and the need for sustained interaction in the target language (Jon et al., 2021).

One of the defining pedagogical features promoted by the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is differentiated learning. Differentiation allows teachers to adjust content, process, and learning products to accommodate students' varying abilities and learning needs (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Shihab, 2020). While theoretically promising, differentiated instruction requires careful planning, diagnostic assessment, and instructional flexibility-resources that may be limited in under-resourced schools (Atikah et al., 2023).

Another prominent pedagogical orientation within the curriculum is the use of genre-based approaches in English instruction. Genre-Based Approach (GBA) emphasizes meaningful language use through structured stages of learning, including modeling, joint construction, and independent production of texts (Emilia, 2022; Zhai & Razali, 2023). This approach aligns well with the curriculum's emphasis on communicative competence and multimodal literacy but requires sustained instructional support and teacher expertise to be effectively implemented.

Technology integration is also encouraged within the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum as a means to expand learning resources and foster autonomous learning (Fahrudin et al., 2024; Ansori, 2025). However, studies indicate that limited access to digital infrastructure, unstable internet connectivity, and insufficient technological literacy among teachers and students often constrain the realization of technology-based pedagogy in under-resourced contexts (Novita et al., 2022; Jasrial et al., 2023).

Recent empirical studies have examined various aspects of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, including teacher perceptions, policy readiness, assessment practices, and curriculum alignment (Prakoso et al., 2021; Cantika et al., 2022; Sari, 2023). While these

studies provide valuable insights into curriculum adoption, many focus on administrative implementation or generalized teacher attitudes rather than detailed classroom-level pedagogical practices, particularly in ELT settings.

Moreover, existing research tends to concentrate on schools with relatively adequate resources or those designated as flagship implementation sites. Consequently, there remains limited empirical evidence on how English teachers in under-resourced schools operationalize Merdeka Belajar principles in daily classroom practices (Pratikno et al., 2022; Jasrial et al., 2023). This gap is critical, as under-resourced schools represent a substantial portion of Indonesia's educational landscape.

Understanding pedagogical practices in such contexts is essential for evaluating the practical feasibility of curriculum reform and identifying adaptive strategies that support meaningful learning despite structural constraints. Examining how teachers interpret curriculum guidelines, select instructional approaches, and engage students provides nuanced insights into the lived realities of curriculum implementation (Jain et al., 2025; McCloskey, 1999).

Within ELT, pedagogical practices shape not only language acquisition outcomes but also students' confidence, participation, and attitudes toward learning English. Learner-centered and context-sensitive instruction has been shown to enhance engagement and promote more sustainable language development, particularly in environments where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Deswalantri et al., 2024; Romadhon et al., 2024; Sulistiyo, 2020). Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the need for in-depth qualitative exploration of pedagogical practices in English Language Teaching under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum within an under-resourced school context. By focusing on classroom enactment rather than policy discourse, the study offers empirical insights into how curriculum ideals are translated into instructional realities.

Specifically, the study aims to describe how pedagogical practices aligned with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum are implemented in English language classrooms, including instructional approaches, learning activities, and teacher-student interactions. Through this focus, the study seeks to illuminate patterns of practice that reflect both curriculum alignment and contextual adaptation.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on curriculum implementation in ELT by providing context-sensitive evidence from under-resourced schools. The study offers practical implications for English teachers, school leaders, and policymakers by highlighting pedagogical practices that support meaningful learning under constrained conditions and informing more inclusive and realistic curriculum development and support strategies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review further discusses the concept of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and ELT Pedagogy and Pedagogical Adaptation in Under-Resourced School Contexts.

### *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and ELT Pedagogy*

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum represents a fundamental shift in Indonesian education toward learner autonomy, flexibility, and contextualized learning. Introduced as part of a national education reform, the curriculum emphasizes student-centered pedagogy, competency-based learning, and the integration of character education through the Pancasila Student Profile (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Ni'mah & Susanto, 2023). Rather than prescribing rigid instructional procedures, the curriculum grants teachers greater autonomy to design pedagogical practices that align with students' developmental stages, learning needs, and local contexts (Fahrudin et al., 2024). This orientation places pedagogical practice at the center of curriculum implementation, particularly in classroom-level decision-making.

This pedagogical orientation redefines the role of teachers as designers of learning experiences rather than mere implementers of prescribed content. Teacher autonomy under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is closely linked to the expectation that instruction be adaptive, responsive, and meaningful for learners in diverse educational settings. As a result, classroom practices become the primary site where curriculum intentions are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in daily teaching activities.

In English Language Teaching, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum promotes communicative competence, multimodal literacy, and learner-centered instruction. English learning is expected to foster not only language skills but also critical thinking, creativity, and intercultural awareness (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Sari, 2023). Pedagogical practices encouraged under this curriculum include student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and the use of authentic and multimodal texts (Darmayanti, 2023; Marwan, 2017). These practices require teachers to function as facilitators who guide students in constructing knowledge rather than as sole transmitters of content.

Differentiated learning constitutes a key pedagogical principle within this framework, enabling teachers to adjust content, learning processes, and learning products based on students' readiness and learning profiles (Atikah et al., 2023; Kemdikbudristek, 2022). In ELT classrooms, differentiated pedagogy is frequently operationalized through the Genre-Based Approach, which structures language learning through staged activities such as modeling, joint construction, and independent production of texts (Emilia, 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that genre-based pedagogy supports meaningful language use and student engagement when teachers provide adequate scaffolding and align instruction with curriculum objectives (Shihab, 2020).

### *Pedagogical Adaptation in Under-Resourced School Contexts*

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum also encourages the integration of educational technology to support autonomous and flexible learning. Digital tools are expected to expand access to learning resources and promote independent exploration (Fahrudin et al., 2024; Deswalantri et al., 2024). However, pedagogical practices in under-resourced school contexts

are often shaped by limited infrastructure, inadequate digital facilities, and unstable internet connectivity (Novita et al., 2022; Jasrial et al., 2023). These conditions require teachers to adapt curriculum ideals pragmatically by combining low-tech strategies with available resources while maintaining learner-centered instruction.

Recent empirical studies on the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum have largely focused on teachers' perceptions and institutional readiness, leaving limited insight into classroom-level pedagogical enactment, particularly in English teaching contexts (Prakoso et al., 2021; Cantika et al., 2022; Riskianto et al., 2023). Research conducted in rural and under-resourced schools highlights persistent challenges related to instructional facilities, assessment literacy, and teacher professional development (Pratikno et al., 2022; Jasrial et al., 2023;). These gaps underscore the need for context-sensitive investigations that examine how pedagogical practices are enacted in English Language Teaching under the Merdeka Belajar framework

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore pedagogical practices in English Language Teaching under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum within an under-resourced school context. The qualitative descriptive method as a research approach based on post-positivism philosophy (Sandelowski, 2000). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of classroom-level instructional practices rather than to test hypotheses or measure causal relationships. Qualitative descriptive research enables researchers to capture participants' perspectives, teaching practices, and contextual realities as they naturally occur in educational settings.

The study focused on describing how curriculum principles were enacted in English classrooms, emphasizing instructional approaches, learning activities, and teacher–student interactions. By adopting this design, the research sought to provide a rich and contextualized account of pedagogical practices that reflect both curriculum intentions and contextual adaptations.

### ***Research Context and Participants***

The study was conducted in a public junior secondary school implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum under the *Mandiri Berubah* (Independent Change) option in one of the school in Kutai Timur, Indonesia. The school is situated in an under-resourced context characterized by limited educational infrastructure and restricted access to digital learning facilities. Such contextual conditions made the site relevant for examining pedagogical practices under constrained circumstances.

Participants were selected purposively to ensure direct relevance to the research focus on pedagogical practices. The primary informant was the English teacher (T1), as she was directly responsible for planning and implementing English instruction under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Her central role enabled in-depth exploration of instructional strategies, differentiation practices, assessment approaches, and classroom decision-making processes.

To obtain a broader institutional perspective, two key school stakeholders were included: the Vice Principal of Curriculum (T2) and the Pancasila Student Profile Project Coordinator (T3). T2 was selected because of her involvement in curriculum planning and institutional decision-making regarding the adoption of the *Mandiri Berubah* option. T3 was included to provide insights into the implementation of co-curricular projects that extend

English learning beyond formal classroom instruction. Their inclusion allowed triangulation of classroom practices with school-level curriculum policies.

In addition, ten Grade 7 students (S1-S10) were selected to represent learner perspectives. Grade 7 was chosen because it marked students' initial formal exposure to English at the junior secondary level, making it a critical stage for examining early curriculum enactment. The students were selected based on variation in learning experiences and engagement levels to capture diverse responses to English instruction. Including students enabled the study to examine not only instructional design but also how pedagogical practices were experienced and interpreted by learners.

### ***Data Collection Techniques***

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques to ensure data richness and credibility. The primary data collection methods included classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis.

Classroom observation was conducted in three stages: preliminary observation (grand tour), informal observations, and focused classroom observation. The preliminary grand tour was carried out to obtain a general understanding of the school context, organizational structure, and the integration of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum into school culture, enabling the researcher to map institutional readiness and identify relevant instructional settings. This was followed by several informal observations conducted over a two-week period to familiarize the researcher with classroom routines and instructional patterns; during these sessions, field notes were taken without audio or video recording. The main classroom observation was conducted in Class VII C, consisting of two consecutive sessions of 40 minutes each (totaling 80 minutes). The observation focused on lesson structure (pre-, whilst-, and post-activities), instructional strategies, student engagement, differentiation practices, use of learning resources, and teacher-student interactions. An observation checklist complemented by detailed field notes was used to systematically document classroom practices while allowing flexibility to capture emergent pedagogical phenomena.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teacher and selected school stakeholders to gain insights into pedagogical decision-making, curriculum interpretation, and instructional challenges. Interviews with students were carried out to explore their learning experiences and perceptions of English instruction. The language used was Bahasa Indonesia. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining alignment with the research focus. While, documentation analysis included lesson plans, teaching modules, and curriculum-related documents to triangulate observed practices with planned instruction.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis followed an inductive qualitative process. All data from observations, interviews, and documents were organized and examined systematically. The collected data, obtained through the abovementioned techniques, was analyzed in stages recommended by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, including data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Matthew et al., 2014).

First, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, while observation data were organized from detailed field notes, and relevant documents were compiled for analysis.

These data sources were then categorized based on emerging themes related to pedagogical practices, such as instructional approaches, learning activities, differentiation strategies, and contextual adaptation. Next, the categorized data were displayed in narrative and thematic forms to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring patterns and relationships across interviews, classroom observations, and documents, with particular attention to how pedagogical practices reflected Merdeka Belajar principles in an under-resourced context.

### ***Trustworthiness of the Study***

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were systematically applied. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation by comparing evidence derived from interview transcripts, classroom observation field notes, and curriculum-related documents such as lesson plans and the School Operational Curriculum. This cross-source comparison enabled the researcher to verify the consistency of pedagogical practices across different forms of data.

Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with the primary informants, particularly the English teacher (T1) and the vice principal of curriculum (T2), to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's understanding of instructional practices and curriculum implementation. Their feedback was incorporated to refine emerging themes and clarify contextual meanings.

To enhance dependability, the researcher maintained consistent observation procedures and systematically documented all stages of the research process, including data collection schedules, field notes, transcription processes, and coding decisions. Confirmability was supported by revisiting raw data, interview transcripts, and observation notes to ensure that interpretations and conclusions were grounded in empirical evidence rather than personal assumptions. Together, these strategies ensured that the findings accurately represented pedagogical practices within the research context.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The research aimed to understand students' experiences, motivations, and challenges related to their participation in school-based English clubs. It also examined the impact of the school-based English Club on students' language skills. Data were collected through online questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) with 21 high school students who are active members of a combined English club at Benteng Rotterdam, Makassar.

### **FINDINGS**

This section presents the findings of the study on pedagogical practices in English Language Teaching under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in an under-resourced school context. The findings are organized to illustrate how curriculum principles were enacted through intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular practices, highlighting the ways teachers adapted instruction to contextual constraints while maintaining learner-centered and character-oriented learning.

### ***Curriculum Adoption and Pedagogical Orientation***

The findings indicate that English Language Teaching was implemented under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum through the *Mandiri Berubah* option. Document analysis of the School Operational Curriculum and interviews with school leaders revealed that this option was selected after careful consideration of school readiness, teacher capacity, student characteristics, and environmental conditions. As explained by a curriculum leader:

*“We chose Mandiri Berubah based on a study of school conditions, teacher human resources, student characteristics, and the surrounding environment.”* (T2, interview)

Supporting document analysis of the KOSP shows that the school had formally structured its curriculum into three interconnected domains, intra-curricular, co-curricular (Pancasila Student Profile Project), and extracurricular activities, indicating institutional alignment with national policy guidelines. The document also outlines the allocation of learning hours, project implementation schedules, and integration of character dimensions within subject instruction, demonstrating systematic curriculum planning rather than ad hoc adaptation.

Classroom observation data further confirm this orientation. Teachers explicitly communicated learning objectives derived from *Capaian Pembelajaran* at the beginning of lessons and linked them to character dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, such as independence, cooperation, creativity, and critical thinking. This indicates that curriculum principles were not merely administrative documents but were operationalized in classroom practice.

The *Mandiri Berubah* orientation granted teachers pedagogical flexibility, allowing them to adapt instructional practices to classroom realities rather than rigidly following centralized procedures. The curriculum was therefore enacted as a unified framework integrating academic learning, character development, and student interest exploration, reflecting context-responsive curriculum implementation.

### ***Intra-Curricular Pedagogical Practices in English Classrooms***

Classroom observation data show that intra-curricular English lessons followed a learner-centered instructional structure consistent with Merdeka Belajar principles. Lessons typically began with pre-activities such as greetings, prayer, attendance, and explicit communication of learning objectives derived from *Capaian Pembelajaran*. Document analysis of the teaching module (*modul ajar*) confirms that each lesson plan specified learning outcomes, success indicators, and targeted Pancasila Student Profile dimensions (e.g., independence, critical thinking, creativity, cooperation, and global diversity), indicating alignment between planning documents and classroom enactment.

As an opening activity, students were encouraged to observe visual materials, such as pictures or short videos, followed by guided question-and-answer sessions to activate prior knowledge. Observation notes recorded that students responded voluntarily to teacher prompts and related the topic to their own extracurricular experiences. The *modul ajar* also outlined staged learning procedures consistent with scaffolded instruction, including modeling, guided practice, and independent production.

Core instructional activities emphasized collaborative learning and gradual scaffolding. Students worked in pairs and small groups to match vocabulary with images, practice dialogues, and construct descriptive texts. Observation notes indicated that:

*Students actively discussed in groups, completed structured templates, practiced dialogues, and produced individual written texts.*

Document analysis further shows that structured worksheets and templates were prepared to guide text organization and language use, supporting students with varying proficiency levels. Assessment documentation indicates that teachers applied formative strategies, including observation checklists, performance tasks, and written products aligned with lesson objectives. Throughout the learning process, teachers monitored not only students' linguistic performance but also their attitudes, such as self-confidence, responsibility, curiosity, and cooperation. Post-activity stages involved sharing student work and reflective discussion, reinforcing both academic understanding and character development in accordance with curriculum expectations.

### ***Genre-Based Pedagogy and Differentiated Learning***

The findings reveal that the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) was consistently employed as the primary pedagogical framework in English instruction. Document analysis of the *modul ajar* and lesson plans shows that each unit was structured around staged learning cycles, including modeling of target texts, joint construction through guided practice, and independent text production. Classroom observations confirmed that teachers first provided sample dialogues or descriptive texts, highlighted key linguistic features, and explicitly explained text structure before asking students to construct texts collaboratively and individually. This staged process enabled students with limited vocabulary and grammatical control to gradually build confidence and textual competence.

Interview data further indicate that teachers intentionally relied on modeling and structured templates to support learners. One teacher explained that many students required clear examples and guided exercises before being able to write independently, particularly when producing descriptive paragraphs. Observation notes recorded that worksheets contained structured outlines to guide idea organization, suggesting deliberate scaffolding to bridge students' proficiency gaps.

Differentiated learning was implemented pragmatically rather than comprehensively. Document analysis shows that lesson plans included alternative task options and varied output formats, while classroom observations indicated that students were allowed to choose topics related to their interests, such as specific extracurricular activities, when writing descriptive texts. Interview data confirm that differentiation focused primarily on task complexity, topic selection, and product choice rather than fully individualized instruction. As stated by the English teacher:

*"Differentiated learning needs a lot of preparation. So, we usually adjust the task level and allow students to choose topics or products they feel comfortable with."* (T1, interview)

Observation data also indicate that higher-proficiency students were encouraged to elaborate their texts with additional details, while others were allowed to focus on basic text structure and essential vocabulary. This adaptive strategy enabled students to participate meaningfully across varying proficiency levels while remaining within practical constraints related to time, class size, and instructional resources. Collectively, these findings suggest that genre-based pedagogy and pragmatic differentiation functioned as complementary strategies to support equitable language learning in a context with limited resources.

### ***Integration of Technology, Learning Resources, and Assessment Practices***

Despite being situated in an under-resourced context, teachers integrated available technology selectively to support English learning. Observation data indicate that digital tools such as laptops, LCD projectors, speakers, Canva, and Google Forms were used to present visual materials, display model texts, and facilitate interactive activities. In several observed sessions, students were asked to create digital greeting cards or access shared links provided by the teacher, demonstrating the use of technology to enhance creativity and engagement rather than to replace traditional instruction.

Interview data further reveal that technology use was shaped by practical considerations. The English teacher explained that digital tools were primarily used when internet access was stable, while printed worksheets and textbooks remained the most reliable resources. As stated:

*“Technology helps, but internet access and facilities are limited. So we combine digital tools with printed materials and textbooks.”* (T1, interview)

Document analysis of the *modul ajar* and instructional materials confirms that government-issued textbooks and teacher guidebooks served as the primary learning references. These were supplemented by locally relevant materials, such as regional folklore texts, and curated online resources when feasible. Lesson plans also indicated blended instructional strategies, combining visual presentations with structured worksheets to ensure accessibility for all students.

Assessment practices under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum emphasized formative, performance-based, and observational approaches. Observation data show that teachers monitored students’ participation, collaboration, and task completion during classroom activities. Document analysis of assessment instruments revealed the use of observation checklists, performance rubrics, and project evaluation sheets aligned with learning objectives. Interview data indicate that teachers conducted initial diagnostic observations to identify students’ proficiency levels and learning preferences, followed by ongoing feedback during practice and project tasks. These practices reflect an emphasis on continuous assessment and instructional adjustment rather than reliance on summative, high-stakes testing, aligning assessment procedures with the curriculum’s learner-centered orientation.

### ***Co-Curricular Pedagogical Practices through the Pancasila Student Profile Project***

Findings from document analysis, classroom observations, and interviews indicate that English learning under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum was extended beyond formal classroom instruction through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project as a structured co-curricular activity. Based on the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP), the project was implemented three times within one academic year, each focusing on themes derived from the Pancasila Student Profile and contextual issues surrounding the school environment. These themes included anti-bullying, local wisdom, and environmental sustainability, which were selected to foster students’ social awareness, character development, and real-world problem-solving skills.

Document analysis revealed that the project was organized using a block system, with each theme implemented intensively over a defined period rather than being distributed in short daily sessions. This approach was adopted after reflective evaluation of earlier implementation models. As explained by the project coordinator:

*“At first, the project was conducted one hour every day, but it felt less effective. When we applied the block system, the project became more effective because students were fully involved and the learning ecosystem was formed.” (T3, interview)*

The block system allowed students to engage deeply in project activities, collaborate more consistently, and experience a cohesive learning process.

Observational data show that project activities were conducted both inside and outside the classroom and facilitated by a team consisting of homeroom teachers and subject teachers. These facilitators guided students through collaborative, project-based learning tasks such as creating anti-bullying campaign infographics and dramas, producing local cultural artifacts, and developing environmentally oriented products, including composters and school gardens. These activities emphasized cooperation, creativity, independence, and moral values aligned with the intended profile dimensions.

Differentiated learning was particularly evident in the project outputs and learning processes. According to interview data, students were given the freedom to choose the type of product they wished to create, such as liquid or solid composters, without rigid procedural constraints. As described by the project coordinator:

*“There was no compulsion to follow one guideline. Students were free to choose products, and facilitators also had flexibility in delivering the learning process.” (T3, interview)*

This differentiation enabled students to engage according to their interests and abilities while maintaining alignment with the project’s core objectives.

Student interview data further highlighted high levels of engagement and positive learning experiences. Students reported that the project-based activities were enjoyable, fostered collaboration, and strengthened peer relationships. One student stated:

*“It is exciting and fun. It can strengthen relationships between friends because it is project-based, so you can do it together.” (S10, interview)*

Other students expressed similar sentiments, noting that the projects allowed them to work in groups, interact with different facilitators and resource persons, and use digital devices in meaningful ways. These experiences contributed to students’ enthusiasm and sustained participation.

In addition, document analysis revealed that students’ progress in the Pancasila Student Profile Project was formally recorded through an annual Project Profile Progress Report. This report assessed students’ development across selected profile dimensions, such as creativity and critical reasoning, using descriptive performance scales. According to interview data, this assessment approach differed significantly from previous curricula by emphasizing character development alongside cognitive outcomes. As emphasized by the project coordinator, the ultimate goal of the project was not merely academic achievement but the formation of students with strong character, collaboration skills, and life competencies.

### ***Extracurricular Pedagogical Practices through the English Club***

Extracurricular English learning was facilitated through a weekly English Club designed to provide students with additional opportunities to practice English in a relaxed and interactive learning environment. Document analysis and observation data indicate that the English Club functioned as a complementary space to formal classroom instruction, emphasizing functional language use and communicative competence rather than rigid curricular targets.

Observation results show that each English Club session followed a structured yet flexible instructional sequence consisting of initial, main, and closing activities. At the beginning of the session, the teacher greeted students, recorded attendance, and clearly communicated the learning objective, which focused on the use of adverbs of time in written expression. The teacher also assessed students' prior knowledge through guided questioning to ensure conceptual understanding before proceeding to more complex tasks.

During the main activities, the teacher introduced key linguistic features by providing definitions and concrete examples of adverbs of time, such as *yesterday*, *today*, *tomorrow*, *later*, and *soon*. Students were actively involved in generating additional examples, asking questions, and analyzing a short narrative text containing multiple time adverbs. The teacher guided students to identify and highlight these adverbs and facilitated discussion on how they contributed to sequencing events in a text. Students then worked collaboratively to compose short stories or personal recounts using adverbs of time, after which each student produced an individual written paragraph. Peer review was incorporated by allowing students to exchange their work and provide feedback, particularly on the appropriate use of time-related adverbs.

Closing activities reinforced learning outcomes through reflective discussion and formative assessment. Students discussed selected texts collectively, and a brief quiz was administered to assess their understanding and ability to use adverbs of time accurately in sentences. As a follow-up task, students were assigned to write a diary entry incorporating multiple adverbs of time, allowing them to apply the target language feature independently. Throughout the session, observation data indicate high levels of student participation, confidence, and engagement. These extracurricular pedagogical practices provided meaningful additional exposure to English, strengthened students' writing skills, and supported learner-centered instruction beyond the formal classroom context.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

### ***Curriculum Flexibility and Learner-Centered Pedagogy***

The adoption of the *Mandiri Berubah* option highlights the role of school-level autonomy in operationalizing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. This option enables schools to transition toward curriculum reform based on institutional readiness rather than compliance alone. The findings demonstrate that curriculum decisions were shaped by school capacity, student characteristics, and environmental conditions, confirming that Merdeka Belajar functions as a context-responsive curriculum rather than a uniform mandate. This supports recent studies emphasizing that curriculum decentralization enhances instructional relevance, particularly in under-resourced or peripheral regions (Jasrial et al., 2023; Pratikno et al., 2022).

Within this flexible framework, intra-curricular English instruction was characterized by learner-centered pedagogical practices emphasizing active engagement, collaboration, and reflection. Lessons were structured around clear learning objectives, apperception activities, and scaffolded tasks, enabling students to gradually develop language skills. Consistent with prior research, learner-centered approaches were found to promote communicative competence and meaningful learning (Darmayanti, 2023; Marwan, 2017). However, the findings also reveal that learner-centered pedagogy in under-resourced contexts relies on structured scaffolding and guided interaction rather than full learner autonomy. Teachers functioned as facilitators while remaining actively involved in directing learning, resulting in a hybrid pedagogical model shaped by students' limited proficiency and learning confidence.

### ***Genre-Based, Differentiated, and Technology-Supported Pedagogy in Under-Resourced Contexts***

The consistent use of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) reflects alignment with national English curriculum guidelines and supports students' literacy development through structured learning cycles. Modeling, joint construction, and independent production were systematically applied, allowing students to engage with English texts despite limited exposure and vocabulary. This reinforces earlier findings on the effectiveness of genre-based pedagogy in Indonesian EFL classrooms (Shihab, 2020).

Although differentiated learning is a core principle of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, its implementation was found to be selective and pragmatic. Differentiation primarily occurred through task complexity, topic selection, and learning products rather than individualized instruction. This confirms previous studies indicating that differentiated learning is conceptually promoted but operationally challenging, particularly in large classes with limited resources (Atikah et al., 2023). Importantly, this study demonstrates that partial differentiation can remain pedagogically meaningful by reducing learner anxiety and increasing participation.

Technology integration further reflected adaptive pedagogical practices shaped by contextual constraints. Teachers selectively utilized available tools, such as Canva, Google Forms, and basic audiovisual equipment, to support visualization, creativity, and formative assessment. Rather than serving as the core instructional medium, technology functioned as a pedagogical supplement, aligning with recent studies on adaptive digital pedagogy in low-resource contexts (Fahrudin et al., 2024; Deswalantri et al., 2024). However, persistent limitations in infrastructure and internet access continue to constrain broader digital innovation, highlighting structural inequities in curriculum reform implementation (Jasrial et al., 2023).

### ***Extended Pedagogical Spaces for Language and Character Development***

In the participating public junior secondary school in Kutai Timur, which operates in an under-resourced setting with limited digital infrastructure and modest educational facilities, English learning was extended beyond formal classroom instruction through structured co-curricular and extracurricular programs. Within this context, the Pancasila Student Profile Project functioned as a central co-curricular mechanism for integrating language learning with character education. Given the school's peripheral location and students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom, the project provided meaningful experiential learning opportunities that connected language use with real-life and community-based issues. Implemented through a block system, the project enabled sustained engagement with socially relevant themes such as anti-bullying, local wisdom, and environmental sustainability, issues closely related to students' immediate social environment. These findings support existing research highlighting project-based learning as an effective approach for fostering collaboration, creativity, and character development under the Merdeka Belajar framework (Sari et al., 2023; Hadiansah, 2022)

Similarly, extracurricular English learning through the English Club provided a low-anxiety environment that emphasized functional language use, peer interaction, and confidence building. Activities such as storytelling, peer review, and reflective discussion allowed students to experiment with language beyond formal assessment pressures. Consistent with previous studies, these extracurricular practices enhanced affective

engagement and communicative confidence, particularly for EFL learners with limited exposure (Jon et al., 2021). Together, these extended pedagogical spaces illustrate how holistic curriculum enactment supports both linguistic development and character formation in under-resourced school contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated pedagogical practices in English Language Teaching under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in an under-resourced school context. The findings indicate that curriculum implementation was characterized by flexible and adaptive pedagogical practices rather than rigid procedural compliance. English instruction was predominantly learner-centered and supported by genre-based pedagogy, collaborative learning, and pragmatic differentiation. Teachers adjusted instructional strategies to accommodate students' varied proficiency levels and contextual constraints, while technology was integrated selectively as a pedagogical support rather than as the primary mode of instruction.

The study also found that pedagogical practices extended beyond the classroom through co-curricular and extracurricular programs. The Pancasila Student Profile Project and the English Club functioned as complementary learning spaces that supported communicative competence, character development, and learner confidence. These extended pedagogical spaces enabled a more holistic enactment of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum by integrating academic learning with social and affective development.

This study contributes empirical insight into how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is enacted at the classroom level in under-resourced contexts, highlighting the central role of teacher agency in mediating curriculum reform. It is recommended that policymakers and school leaders provide sustained, context-sensitive professional development to support realistic differentiated instruction and optimize co-curricular and extracurricular programs. Future research may explore longitudinal and comparative perspectives to further understand the diverse implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum across educational contexts.

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