

IMPLEMENTING THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN VOCATIONAL ELT: CHALLENGES, ENABLERS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS' EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing attention to curriculum reform in Indonesia, limited empirical research has examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching in tourism vocational schools in relation to students' employability. This study explores the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ELT at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School in Gorontalo. This research focuses on supporting factors, challenges and implications for students' work readiness. This research used a qualitative case study design involving three English teachers and five students. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, then analyzed thematically. The findings show that curriculum documents were complete and aligned with student-centered learning principles. However, classroom practices remained mostly teacher-directed and focused on theoretical instruction. Supporting factors included teachers' commitment and students' enthusiasm for practice-based learning, while limited professional training and inadequate facilities hindered implementation. In terms of employability, students demonstrated progress in technical service skills, work attitudes, and self-confidence through practical activities, although communicative and ESP-based learning opportunities remained limited. This study highlights the gap between curriculum expectations and classroom practices and emphasizes the need for ESP-oriented teaching to support students' employability.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, ESP, Merdeka Curriculum, Vocational Education, Work Readiness.

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education plays a strategic role in preparing competent human resources. In Indonesia, Vocational High Schools are expected to produce graduates who are technically skilled and communicate professionally in English (Natsir et al., 2022). However, English instruction in many vocational schools remains general and fails to address specific communication demands (Royyani & Gozali, 2025). This is problematic because ESP competency is closely tied to students' vocational fields (Rihatmi et al., 2025), yet the alignment between curriculum and industry needs is not always achieved, particularly in developing students' employability skills.

Nowadays, teaching English in vocational schools should align with the principle of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP is designed for a particular group of students in a specific context. In addition, Risantri et al. (2025) argue that vocational students are being prepared for the world of work. Thus, the selection of English teaching approaches must reflect occupational competencies. Similarly, Puspitaloka et al. (2024) emphasize that English instruction in vocational schools should focus on developing communication skills. It should align with the students' aptitude. Despite this, many vocational English teachers lack specific knowledge and experience in teaching ESP. They often rely on general methods that do not foster communicative competence (Muliyah & Aminatun, 2020). Additionally, Mahbub (2018) identified that some vocational English instruction focuses heavily on grammar. They rely on decontextualized reading exercises and limit students' opportunities to develop professional communication skills. This mismatch between teaching practice and vocational needs a systemic challenge for curriculum reform.

In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government introduced the Merdeka Curriculum. It is part of a major national education transformation which emphasizes flexibility in learning. This curriculum also focuses on developing student competencies, giving schools and teachers autonomy to adapt their teaching methods and curriculum to their students' needs and local contexts (Husna et al., 2025). Recently, the Merdeka Curriculum introducing a talent and interest-based approach to learning. This curriculum encourages students to learn through projects and to demonstrate understanding in contextually relevant ways. For vocational schools, the principles are meaningful and creates space for integrating ESP. Toyibah et al. (2024) group the challenges of implementing this curriculum into internal factors. It consists of teachers' ability to use ICT, select appropriate methods and manage time. On the other hand, the external factors include government support, student diversity in ability and the availability of learning facilities.

In addition, curriculum implementation is not a simple process. Fullan (2007) argues that curriculum change is fundamentally a social process. It involves the beliefs, habits, and readiness of educational actors particularly teachers. A well-designed curriculum will not have a significant impact if it is not consistently implemented in the classroom. This gap between the written curriculum and the enacted curriculum is a well-documented phenomenon in educational reform (Azahar et al., 2025; Ferdous et al., 2023). Likewise, Priestley and Drew (2019) add that teachers tend to use curriculum modules as flexible frameworks. It is adapting them to immediate classroom conditions. It produces considerable variation in implementation quality. Elfiyanto et al. (2025) also found that in vocational schools, teachers demonstrated varying levels of understanding and adaptation of the Merdeka Curriculum. It is constrained by limited digital infrastructure and insufficient professional development. Sujariati et al. (2025) similarly found the weak administrative support, limited professional development opportunities and inadequate resources especially in schools in remote areas further complicate implementation.

Furthermore, effective English teaching requires active student involvement. It also needs a constructivist approach to learning. Bruner (1977) argues that learning becomes more meaningful when students are given opportunities to explore, discover and construct knowledge. Biggs and Tang (2007) explain that learning objectives, activities and

assessments must be commonly aligned to support meaningful competency development. In vocational education, this alignment is especially critical. It is because outcomes are measured not only by knowledge but also by practical skills and professional attitudes. Mctighe & Wiggins (2012) reinforce this by arguing that authentic assessments like those modeled on real-world tasks and situations produce deeper and more contextually meaningful learning. The Merdeka Curriculum's constructivist orientation is also reflected in its recommendation of project-based learning, flipped classrooms and blended learning models. All of these are intended to foster active and self-directed student engagement (Haryono, 2024).

An effective learning must be grounded in real-world work situations. Billett (2022) explains that vocational learning must represent authentic workplace contexts. The students need to internalize not just technical procedures but also the professional values and habits of practice. Lucas et al. (2012) argue that vocational education should be designed around workplace needs. In the tourism sector, students must interact professionally with international guests in English. They also should be able to make communicative competence a core vocational skill. Similarly, Finch et al. (2013) emphasize that the world of work requires holistically competent graduates who possess both technical skills and professional attitudes. Jackson (2021) also defines work readiness as a combination of technical skills and professional characters. It includes self-confidence and responsibility. Moreover, Saryadi et al. (2024) note that participation in industry-linked classes helps students become familiar with real work situations. It can increase both their learning experience and employability.

The main central to preparing tourism vocational students for the workforce is the development of communicative competence. Hymes (1972, as cited in Whyte, 2019) argued that language learning must go beyond grammatical knowledge. It is because it can encompass the students ability to use language appropriately and effectively in real social situations. Michael & Merrill (1980) propose that communicative competence includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. All of that are essential for effective communication in service meetings. Richards (2013) states that effective English language teaching should engage students in authentic communication and meaningful use of language. Similarly, Akbar & Sulisty (2018) add that ESP programs must integrate vocational content that reflects students' future career contexts. However, as Barliana et al. (2020) found that many vocational graduates are not effectively prepared for the labor market. It was because the curriculum is not sufficiently aligned with industry needs. It means that the problem also manifests in English language instruction that remains disconnected from authentic professional communication.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High School settings has been examined in several recent studies. It reveals a consistent pattern of aspiration reality gaps. Ferdaus & Novita's study (2023) found that the Merdeka Curriculum was designed more flexible and student-centered English learning in vocational high schools. Its practical implementation remained constrained by ongoing obstacles and an inconsistent application of the freedom to learn principle. Azahar et al. (2025) also extended this picture by identifying that the most significant barriers center on human resource readiness,

curriculum transition turbulence and structural mismatches between school programs and industry requirements. Otherwise, Buana et al. (2023) also found that schools can reduce students' learning difficulties by applying project-based assessments and teaching methods that are adjusted to different student abilities. Haan et al. (2025) further add that teachers accustomed to prescriptive curriculum frameworks find the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on active learning, genre-based approaches and technology integration particularly challenging to implement consistently. In addition, Faisal and Hanifah (2025) note that both experienced and less experienced teachers share common struggles. Therefore, this includes limited time for effective instruction and student reluctance to participate actively in English classes.

Although the studies above provide important insights into Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Vocational High School contexts, they mostly examine general difficulties and policy level dynamics without deeply exploring how specific classroom ELT practices describe in tourism vocational settings. In this case, the tourism sector presents a distinct case because English functions not simply as an academic subject but as a core professional tool for interacting with international guests. Yet research specifically examining ELT implementation within the Merdeka Curriculum framework in tourism vocational schools particularly with attention to how classroom practices relate to students' employability remains limited. Rihatmi et al. (2025) emphasize that English learning outcomes in vocational education should be aligned with the enacted curriculum policies. It also should align with the specific needs of vocational students.

A clear understanding of the curriculum should not focus only on its intended goals. It also needs to include how the curriculum is interpreted and implemented in actual classroom practices. Therefore, context-relevant and empirically based research is needed to examine classroom practices and their impact on learning outcomes in vocational education at vocational high schools. However, previous studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational education mostly focus on general challenges and policy issues, with limited attention to actual English teaching practices in specific fields such as tourism. This is important because in tourism vocational settings English not only an academic subject but also a practical tool for real communication in the workplace. Therefore, the present research investigates how English teaching is implemented under the Merdeka Curriculum in a tourism vocational school and how it contributes to students' work readiness.

This study addresses that gap by specifically examining the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School in Gorontalo. This is focusing on classroom learning practices, enabling and inhibiting factors and their implications for students' work readiness. Unlike previous research that tends to address implementation at a general or policy level, this study focuses the ELT dimension within the vocational curriculum and situates it within the specific context of tourism education. Based on this background, the research questions are: (1) How is the Merdeka Curriculum implemented in English language teaching (ELT) practices at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School? (2) What are the supporting and inhibiting factors that influence the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in this vocational context? (3) What are the

implications of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation for the development of students' employability and work readiness?

Thus, this study offers a more complete picture of how curriculum policies are to be translated into meaningful learning realities. The novelty lies in its thoughtful focus on the relationship between ELT practices and employability outcomes. It is an aspect that has been mainly examined in previous studies of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian vocational settings. Thus, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical insights into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational English teaching and highlighting its implications for students' employability skills.

METHODS

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research aimed to deeply understand the implementation process of the Merdeka Curriculum in the real-life context of learning in a tourism vocational school. Additionally, case studies allow researchers to explore phenomena comprehensively by considering the characteristics of the context, actors and learning practices. This research focused on interpreting the learning practices taking place in the classroom. By using this design, researchers were able to describe the dynamics of curriculum implementation. This approach is also relevant for uncovering factors influencing the success and obstacles in curriculum implementation. The focus also includes English language teaching practices in vocational classrooms, particularly how teachers implement communicative and practice-based learning.

The research was conducted at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School which is located in Gorontalo Province. This school was selected because it has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in its tourism expertise program. The research subjects included three teachers and five students directly involved in the learning process. The small number of participants is appropriate for qualitative case study research, which focuses on depth rather than generalization. Data collection was stopped when no new information was found. Even though the number of participants is limited, the case study design allows for an in-depth exploration of contextual practices. Subject selection was purposive by considering their involvement in curriculum implementation. The participants were selected based on their active involvement in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The English teachers were chosen because they play the main role of implementing the curriculum in the classroom. On the other hand, students were selected to gain perspectives about their learning experiences and perceived work readiness. By involving these participants this study seeks to obtain a balanced and comprehensive picture.

In addition, the research data was collected through observation, interviews and document analysis. These methods were used to capture both classroom practices and participants' perspectives. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded manually. Similar codes were grouped into categories which were then interpreted into broader themes related to curriculum implementation, supporting and inhibiting factors, and students' work readiness. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns across

the data. Observations were conducted to observe classroom learning practices. This includes teaching strategies, student engagement and assessment methods used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students to explore their views about the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, supporting and inhibiting factors and the relevance of learning to work readiness. Document analysis included a review of curriculum documents, teaching modules, learning tools, and assessment documents. The use of various data collection techniques aimed to obtain rich and in-depth data. Furthermore, technical triangulation was conducted to increase the validity of the research data. This ensured that the data obtained was not dependent on a single source.

Moreover, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, including coding and theme development. The analysis process began with data reduction. It involves sorting and simplifying data relevant to the research focus. The next stage was presenting the data in descriptive narratives and thematic tables to facilitate understanding of emerging patterns. Afterward, the researcher drew conclusions based on the relationships between categories and themes. Analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the data collection process. This approach allows researchers to continually reflect on their findings. This ensures that the conclusions drawn are contextual and supported by field data.

To ensure data validity, this study employed triangulation techniques. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from observations, interviews, and documents. This was done to ensure the credibility of the findings. Furthermore, source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from teachers and students. The researcher also cross-checked the data and findings with the research subjects to ensure consistency of meaning. This step aims to minimize researcher bias in interpreting the data. By implementing data validity, the research results are expected to be academically accountable. Data validity is a crucial aspect in qualitative research to ensure the credibility of the findings. Therefore, these procedures ensured that the data were valid and trustworthy. Ethical considerations were applied in this study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and gave their consent. Their identities were kept confidential, and participation was voluntary.

RESULTS

This section presents the research findings based on the research objectives such as to examine the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, identify supporting and inhibiting factors, and analyze its relevance to students' work readiness. The findings are derived from classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis, and are presented thematically to provide a structured understanding of the implementation process.

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Tourism Learning

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English learning at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School demonstrates efforts to adapt learning to curriculum principles. This emphasizes flexibility and student-centered learning. Teachers already integrated practical activities and projects into lessons. However, the level of implementation differs across

classes. It is mostly influenced by the differences of teacher readiness and the availability of supporting facilities. As a result, while elements of student-centered and practice-based learning have been introduced, classroom practices remain largely dominated by conventional or teacher-directed instruction. This shows that the implementation is evident at the surface level. Despite this, it has not yet been fully internalized in everyday teaching practices. This suggests that teachers are still in the adaptation stage and have not fully implemented student-centered learning. The data are presented in the table below.

Table 1. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in learning

Implementation Aspect	Main Findings
Curriculum Documents	Merdeka Curriculum documents are available in full and systematically organized
Philosophical Alignment	The curriculum documents are aligned with the philosophy of student-centered learning
Lesson Planning	Teachers use Merdeka Curriculum teaching modules
Learning Strategies	practice-based and project-based learning
Student Role	Students are actively involved in service activities
Assessment	A combination of practical assessment and attitude assessment

The table above reveals that the Merdeka Curriculum documents at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School are complete and systematically organized. Document analysis reflects that the curriculum, including teaching modules and assessment tools have been developed in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum guidelines. In addition to administrative completeness, the curriculum documents also reflect alignment with the Merdeka Curriculum’s philosophical foundation. It emphasizes student-centered learning, competency development and learning flexibility. These findings reflects that the school is documentarily ready to implement the curriculum. However, this completeness and philosophical alignment do not guarantee optimal classroom learning practices. These findings suggest clear gap between curriculum readiness at the document level and its actual implementation in classroom. While the school demonstrates strong administrative readiness, this does not automatically translate into effective pedagogical change. This is indicating that implementation still procedural rather than fully instructional. The results of the interview are presented below:

“The teachers already use Merdeka curriculum in learning process. For example, the students practice but it will not optimal (teacher 1).”

“We are ready to use Merdeka Curriculum document but we face some difficulties to implement it in the classroom. The learning resources are still limited and we need it to make the teaching and learning process become successful (teacher 2).”

The excerpt 1 and 2 confirms the finding that teachers are aware of and making efforts to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in their learning. However, they also acknowledge limitations in implementation, particularly related to readiness and resources. This statement

indicates that the curriculum’s implementation is still regular. Thus, learning practices reflect a process of adjustment, not a fully developed change. These findings reflects that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is still at a surface level and has not yet fully transformed classroom practices.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School is influenced by various supporting and inhibiting factors. These factors originate from the teachers, students, and infrastructure. The findings indicate that not all factors have the same influence. Some factors play a significant role in supporting English learning, while others actually limit the freedom of movement of teachers and students. Therefore, factor analysis is essential for a more realistic understanding of the curriculum implementation.

Table 2. Supporting and inhibiting factors of implementation

Factor	Supporting	Inhibiting
Teachers	Commitment and motivation	Limited training
Students	Enthusiasm for practical activities	Differences in ability
Facilities	School environment	Limited practical equipment

Table 2 describes that English teacher commitment and student enthusiasm are key enablers in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Students demonstrate high interest when learning involves hands-on practice. Nevertheless, limited teacher training and practical facilities pose significant problems. This condition limits the variety and quality of learning activities that can be implemented in the classroom. This describes that curriculum implementation is influenced not only by teacher readiness but also by the availability of supporting facilities. As a result, the pedagogical potential of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in promoting active and practice-based learning, has not been fully realized. It can be seen from the result of the interview below.

“Actually, the students were motivated when they practiced, but media resources were limited sometimes. So, this is the problem that we face for example in using laboratory, we must wait for the other class finished” (Teacher 2).

“I am really enthusiastic with this new curriculum and already use it in my classroom. However, the students have different abilities to adapt with this and I need more training to use this curriculum like for assessment section. Otherwise, the school facilities like some practical tools are not available in the classroom. So, it is difficult for me to fulfil the learning goals” (Teacher 3).

This excerpts above presents the important role of facilities in supporting vocational learning. Student enthusiasm cannot always optimal if face limited resources. This describes that successful curriculum implementation depends not only on teachers and students but also infrastructure support. These results reflect indicate that the inhibiting factors are not only individual but also structural in nature, particularly related to resource availability and

institutional support. Therefore, addressing these obstacles requires not only teacher effort but also complete intervention at the school level. The findings reveals that both human and structural factors play an important role in determining the success of curriculum implementation.

Relevance of Learning to Students' Job Readiness

The English for specific purposes learning implemented at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School is expected to equip students with job readiness. Research findings indicate that students begin to understand the demands of the workplace through learning practices. However, the level of job readiness perceived by students varies. This difference is influenced by the intensity of the practice and the learning experience gained. Therefore, the relevance of learning to job readiness requires a more in-depth analysis. The results of document analysis are presented below.

Table 3. Relevance of learning to work readiness

Indicator	Findings
Technical Skills	Students understand basic service skills
Work Attitude	Discipline and responsibility are beginning to develop
Self-Confidence	Increasing through practice

Table 3 indicates that English for specific purposes learning contributed to the development of students' technical skills and work attitudes. Service practice helped students understand basic industry standards. Furthermore, students' confidence increased when they were directly in practical activities. However, the development of work readiness remains uneven and requires more consistent and continued practical exposure. This suggests that students still need more consistent and meaningful practice to be fully prepared for real workplace communication. It can prepare students for real workplace demands. These results indicate that the learning is relevant but still needs improvement. It is explained in from the interview result below.

"If we always practice, we will have self-confidence and know how to serve the guest. We only know how general service skills conversation. However, the teachers mostly teach theory to us. For example, the English teacher only writes the materials on the whiteboard and we do the task by answering questions. We need many real practice based on the materials" (Student 1).

"The teacher always teaches as theory like grammar. We obey and write the rules and make examples. We cannot practice as always and do not have chance to improve our English skill like Speaking about Hotel or tourism in real conversation." (Student 4).

"I always feel motivated in learning English, because it helps me to build my self-confidence and responsibility to learn and to practice like in real situation. I think, if the teacher always attends the class, we can build our self-confidence. Now, I always got higher score in this subject but I am afraid if it is just basic skills. I need more practice in real field like study tour and speak English with real guest." (Student 5)

These responses explains that limited communicative practice affects students'

confidence and ability to use English in real situations. The findings from the interview above tell that English language teaching has not been fully aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Some learning practices still focus on theoretical instruction rather than communicative and practice-based activities. As a result, students have limited opportunities to develop their speaking skills, self-confidence and communicative competence in real-world contexts. These results clearly demonstrate a mismatch between current English language teaching practices and the communicative competence required in the tourism industry. While students are exposed to theoretical knowledge, they are given limited opportunities to practice authentic communication, which is essential for real-world service interactions and their responsibility to enter the workplace after graduated from this school. While the students show progress in basic skills and attitudes, their communicative readiness for the workplace is still limited.

Therefore, the findings present the relationship between the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, supporting and inhibiting factors and student work readiness. Curriculum implementation is the starting point, influenced by various internal and external factors. These factors, determine the quality of English learning students receive. The quality of English learning directly contributes to the development of student work readiness. Thus, student work readiness is the result of the complex and contextual curriculum implementation process.

DISCUSSION

This study examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School. The present research focuses on three interrelated dimensions such as curriculum enactment in the classroom, the enabling and inhibiting factors shaping that enactment, and the implications for students' work readiness. The data from the findings were discussed below.

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational English Language Teaching

The first major finding of this study concerns the gap between curriculum documentation and actual classroom practice. At Bubohu Tourism Vocational School, curriculum documents were found to be complete. It was systematically organized and philosophically aligned with student-centered principles. However, the classroom observations showed that teaching continued mostly teacher-directed. Students tend to receive theoretical content rather than engaging in communicative or practice-based activities. This inconsistency is not spontaneous. It reflects a structural pressure that curriculum reform scholars have long recognized as the gap between the intended curriculum and the enacted curriculum (Azahar et al., 2025; Ferdaus & Novita, 2023).

Additionally, Fullan (2007) argues that curriculum change is fundamentally a social process. It cannot be reduced to administrative compliance or document preparation. This study's found that the English teachers at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School demonstrated awareness of the curriculum. One reason for this is that teachers may not be fully ready to turn the curriculum into more interactive and communicative teaching. In many cases, teaching still depends on textbooks, not on activities that make students actively use English. Based on the

findings, their classroom practices had not yet shifted in ways that reflect the curriculum's constructivist philosophy. This is not a failure of individual motivation. It is indicative of what happens when curriculum reform is introduced without acceptable structural support to help teachers internalize and enact new pedagogical principles.

This finding is also supported by Biggs and Tang (2007) concept of constructive alignment. Their theory explain that meaningful learning can only occur when learning objectives, instructional activities and assessments are mutually aligned. In the context of vocational education, this alignment is not simply technical substance of lesson design. It carries high risks because the outcomes being measured are professional competencies that students will need in real workplace interactions. In this school, the curriculum documents articulate student-centered objectives and practical competencies. However, the classroom activities mostly consist of grammar exercises and whiteboard instruction. When students receive instruction that focusses rule memorization over communicative use, the students develop declarative knowledge rather than functional ability. Biggs and Tang's framework help explain why students in this study reported feeling ill-equipped for actual service encounters even though they could describe the rules of English grammar. It was because they were being assessed on what they knew, not on what they could do.

From an English learning point of view, this condition limits students' chances to practice using the language in real situations. As a result, students may understand English in theory, but find it difficult to use it in real communication. Communicative competence in tourism requires more than grammatical accuracy; it demands sociolinguistic and strategic competence for real workplace interactions (Hymes, 1972 as cited in Whyte, 2019; Michael & Merrill, 1980). The students in this study received instruction that addressed only the first of these components. Sociolinguistic awareness is the ability to regulate language to context and speaker. In addition, the strategic competence is the ability to repair communication breakdowns. It is almost completely absent from the observed lessons. This is a significant gap, and this study deliberate focus on the tourism context. General studies of Merdeka Curriculum implementation have not attended to this sector-specific communicative dimension.

This also affects students' readiness for work, especially in vocational fields where communication skills are very important. Without enough real practice, students may struggle when they have to use English in the workplace. Priestley and Drew (2019) also found that teachers working within reformed curriculum frameworks typically use official modules. It as flexible scaffolding rather than fixed scripts. It is adapting them according to their reading of classroom conditions, student needs and available resources. This pattern was clearly evident in the present study. Teachers at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School were not simply ignoring the Merdeka Curriculum. They were interpreting and adapting it in ways that reflected the limitations of their situation. When the Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to design their own learning activities and contextualize content to local needs, it assumes a level of pedagogical creativity and professional confidence that many teachers, particularly those who were trained under more prescriptive curriculum frameworks, have not had the opportunity to develop. This study's findings spread those of Ferdaus & Novita (2023) and Elfiyanto et al. (2025) by showing that this challenge is not simply one of digital infrastructure or resource lack but of pedagogical readiness at a professional and conceptual level.

The ESP dimension of this gap is particularly significant. As noted in the introduction, the literature consistently identifies a mismatch between general English teaching practices and the specific communicative difficulties of vocational fields (Muliyah & Aminatun, 2020; Mahbub, 2018; Royyani & Gozali, 2025). This confirms the mismatch between general English instruction and vocational communication needs in the tourism context. The curriculum creates the possibility but not the reality. Richards (2013) argues that effective ELT must engage students in authentic communication rather than decontextualized exercises. Similarly, Akbar and Sulisty (2018) specify that ESP programs must integrate occupational content that mirrors students' future careers. Neither of these principles was consistently realized in the observed classrooms. This study's contribution here is not simply to add another data point to a known problem, but to identify the mechanism. The gap continues because the curriculum reform has provided structural permission for change without providing the professional development infrastructure that would make that change achievable for individual teachers.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The second findings of this study concern the factors that support and inhibit curriculum implementation. Teacher commitment and student enthusiasm were identified as the primary enabling factors. In other words, limited professional training and insufficient facilities were the main obstacles. Fullan (2007) explained that educational change requires not only willing participants but also the conditions that make meaningful change.

Teacher commitment was the most visible enabling factor. All three teachers demonstrated genuine commitment to implementing the curriculum as planned (Fullan, 2007). The teachers in this study showed variation in their ability to design communicative and practice-based activities. Additionally, Wardani (2024) observes that teachers function most effectively as facilitators when they have been equipped to exercise that role. Also, Fajri & Andarwulan (2023) similarly note that the dispositions and readiness of curriculum actors not just their motivation determine implementation quality. The implication is important such as investing in teacher training. In a tourism vocational context, this means specifically training teachers in ESP principles, vocationally relevant communicative activities and authentic assessment design.

Student enthusiasm for practical activities is the factor and finds theoretically consistent with Kolb's (2015). His experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance of direct experience in meaningful learning. When students at Bubohu were given opportunities for practical service activities, their engagement and motivation evidently increased pattern consistent with what Kolb's cycle argument. The direct experience creates the affective and cognitive conditions for deeper learning. This is an important observation because it suggests that the potential for more effective vocational English learning already exists within the student body. The barrier is not student disengagement. It is the relative infrequency of practice-based opportunities and the tendency for English lessons to remain attached in abstract grammar instruction. Yuliana et al. (2025) similarly found that learning materials connected to students' real-life context can enhance motivation.

Limited practical tools and shared laboratory access were as real problems. These are often framed simply as resource problems, but they represent something deeper. This is an institutional gap between the school's commitment to vocational learning and its capacity to support that learning materially. Billett (2022) argues that vocational learning must represent authentic workplace contexts so that students internalize not just technical procedures but the professional values and habits of practice. Addressing this requires policy attention to facility provisioning, not as an add-on to curriculum reform, but as an integral part of it.

Teacher commitment may buffer some of the effects of facility limitations, just as student enthusiasm may partially compensate for the absence of formal communicative instruction. But these buffers have boundaries. What this study suggests, and what previous research in Indonesian vocational settings has not adequately theorized, is that the interaction effects between human and structural factors create different kinds of ceiling effects in different schools. At Bubohu, the ceiling is relatively high in terms of teacher motivation and student engagement, but relatively low in terms of professional training and physical infrastructure. For this school, they must prioritize ESP-focused professional development alongside infrastructure investment.

Implications for Students' Work Readiness

The third dimension of this study's findings concerns the relationship between the implemented curriculum and students' work readiness. The data reveal that students have made measurable progress in certain dimensions of work readiness basic technical service skills. They also show improved discipline, professional attitudes, and growing self-confidence during practice; however, these gains are uneven and have not extended to the communicative competence required in tourism employment.

Jackson (2021) conceptualizes work readiness as a complex of technical skills and pre-professional identity. Also, the attitudes, and self-concept that graduates bring to their first workplace encounters. Finch et al. (2013) extend this by arguing that holistic employability requires both task competence and professional character. The development of discipline, responsibility, and self-confidence observed in this study aligns with this understanding of work readiness. The student who enters a workplace with a sense of professional responsibility and the confidence to engage with guests is meaningfully better prepared than one who has neither, regardless of grammar scores. The Merdeka Curriculum's practical orientation has created conditions for these attitudinal developments. This is a genuine contribution of the curriculum reform that deserves recognition. Lucas et al. (2012) argue that vocational education must be designed around workplace needs. It should cultivate not only technical procedures but professional values and habits. The attitudinal gains in this study suggest that the curriculum is beginning to serve this function, even if it has not yet served the communicative one.

The growth in students' self-confidence through practice is one of this study's most telling findings. Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory explains this phenomenon. When students engage in concrete experience, they activate a cycle of reflection and conceptualization that deepens their understanding. They build a sense of personal efficacy. The students in this study consistently reported feeling more capable and more confident after

hands-on service activities. The curriculum documents at Bubohu reflect that the classroom practices do not yet fully enact it. Closing this gap is the central pedagogical challenge the school faces.

The communicative readiness gap is where the study's findings are most theoretically significant. Students reported that English lessons did not prepare them to speak about hotels or tourism, to serve guests, or to navigate the kinds of conversations they expect to have in their future jobs. It is confirmed by the classroom observation data which showed an absence of communicative, role-play, or simulation activities in the observed English lessons. Billett (2022) argues that vocational learning must represent authentic workplace contexts because students need to internalize the professional values and communicative habits of their field not merely its technical procedures. In tourism, the authentic workplace context is an environment in which English functions as a primary professional medium.

This also affects students' readiness for work, especially in vocational fields where communication skills are very important. Without enough real practice, students may struggle when they have to use English in the workplace. This communicative readiness gap also raises a wider concern about alignment between the vocational school system and the labor market. Barliana et al. (2020) found that many vocational graduates are imperfectly prepared for employment. It was because the curriculum is insufficiently aligned with industry needs. Additionally, this misalignment is particularly acute in English language instruction that remains disconnected from professional communication. Saryadi et al. (2024) found that participation in industry-linked classes and link-and-match programs helps students become familiar with real work situations and significantly enhances their employability outcomes. The implication is the solution to the communicative readiness gap is not more classroom grammar instruction but more structured exposure to authentic vocational English use. For examples are stronger industry partnerships, simulated workplace activities, guest speaker programs from the tourism sector, or supervised practical placements.

In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School has been successfully implemented at the administrative level. However, it still needs improvement in teaching practices, especially by focusing more on real and practical English learning. Thus, it can better prepare students for future employment. Also, the findings suggest that improving vocational ELT requires stronger teacher capacity in ESP-oriented communicative instruction. Schools need to support teachers more, especially in improving their teaching methods. The teaching should move toward more real and practical English use so that students are better prepared for communication and future work. If this gap continues, the curriculum may not fully achieve its goal of preparing students for real-world communication and employment.

CONCLUSION

The Merdeka Curriculum implementation at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School is successful at the planning and documentation level. However, success also depends on classroom practices, where teacher commitment and student enthusiasm enable learning, while limited training and facilities hinder optimal implementation. Therefore, the success of the curriculum determined by the balance between human resource readiness and the

availability of facilities. Without balanced support, the potential of the curriculum cannot be achieved.

In addition, from a work readiness perspective, vocational learning implemented through the Merdeka Curriculum has proven relevant to the needs of the workforce. Students can acquire basic technical service skills. They also begin to develop work attitudes such as discipline, responsibility and self-confidence. Practice-based learning provides real-world experiences. It helps students understand job difficulties more concretely. The increase in student confidence through English practice shows that vocational learning plays important role to prepare students professionally and mentally. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to strengthen the link between school learning and student work readiness. Nevertheless, continuous and consistent practice is still needed to strengthen this competency.

To sum up, this study describes that implementing Merdeka Curriculum in English teaching at Bubohu Tourism Vocational School requires consistency, support and continuing evaluation. A well-designed curriculum must be complemented by reflective and adaptive learning practices. Supporting English teachers, enhancing professional training and providing practical facility are important steps to improve curriculum implementation. With the support, vocational education can produce graduates who are technically skilled. Also, it helps students be well-prepared to face workplace barriers with confidence and professionalism. Future research should focus on improving teacher development and learning resources to prepare students for the workforce. In addition, strengthening English language teaching, particularly through communicative and ESP-based approaches is essential to better prepare students for the demands of the tourism industry. Theoretically, this study contributes to the discussion of curriculum implementation by highlighting the gap between curriculum policy and classroom enactment in vocational ELT contexts. Practically, the findings emphasize the importance of ESP-oriented teacher training, communicative learning practices, and adequate vocational learning facilities to improve students' employability.

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