

The Application of Independent Learning in English Learning in Vocational Schools

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Abstract. *The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia has initiated the implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum to improve the quality of national education. This policy aims to introduce a new, higher quality curriculum to the younger generation, in accordance with the thoughts of Ki Hadjar Dewantara who emphasized continuous learning innovation. The concept of Merdeka Belajar gives freedom to educators and students to innovate and learn independently and creatively. According to Nadiem Makarim, Merdeka Belajar frees schools, teachers, and students to innovate and create a fun learning atmosphere. The implementation of digital teaching media such as videos and PowerPoint in English learning aims to increase student creativity and make learning more interesting and easy to understand. Teachers at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Taman act as facilitators, getting closer to students and adjusting teaching methods to their learning styles and interests, in line with the independent curriculum. The utilization of online learning platforms such as Google Classroom and Moodle allows for structural and flexible delivery of materials and assessments. Game-based learning is implemented to improve English language skills in an interactive and fun way. Despite constraints in technology adaptation, the school actively organizes training and workshops for educators. Students' responses to the independent curriculum varied; some students felt more motivated and enjoyed the relevance of learning to real life, while others found it difficult to adapt to the independent and projectbased learning methods and needed more intensive guidance.*

Keywords: *Merdeka Learning, English, Vocational High School.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia to improve the quality of the Indonesian Education curriculum through the implementation of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum. This is aimed at introducing students to the new curriculum so that it is hoped that future generations will get quality learning. This is in line with the thoughts of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, the Father of Indonesian National Education, this curriculum emphasizes educators to always innovate learning every day in order to create a quality and enjoyable learning environment according to the characteristics, needs of the learning environment, and the stage of achievement of learner development supported in current technology. For the challenges faced by educators today, how to implement the Merdeka Curriculum into the practice of learning and teaching English. Educators and students are given independence in learning or what we know as the concept of “Merdeka Belajar”, the term independence in the context of the world of learning is the independence of students in the learning process that they think is best. According to Nadiem Makarim, the meaning of Merdeka Belajar is that schools, students, and teachers are freed to innovate, learn independently and creatively. This policy provides freedom for educators to innovate in creating a pleasant learning atmosphere (Anjelina et al., 2021) In addition, Merdeka Belajar has another meaning as a natural learning process to achieve independence. In Merdeka Curriculum, schools are given the right to explore relevant learning projects within the school environment (Yamin, 2017). The introduction of Merdeka Belajar will have a significant impact on various aspects of learning, because the division

of phases along with different learning outcomes helps to measure the development of students' abilities, including in English language learning at Vocational High Schools (SMK), the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum has the aim of preparing students to be able to compete globally, therefore vocational schools have experienced changes in the classification of maps where English is included in vocational maps, in this phase students are prepared to master level B2 in English language skills based on CEFR (Irawati, Deasy; Masitoh, Siti; Nursalim, Mochamad, 2022). Vocational schools are characterized by their emphasis not only on learning theory, but also on acquiring practical skills required in the world of work.

Before it was officially used, the Merdeka Curriculum had been implemented in nearly 2500 driving schools and 901 SMK Centers of Excellence under the name Prototype Curriculum (Setiawan, Nanang; Sofyan, Herminarto;, 2022). Triling and Fadel (2009) stated that in the 21st century humans need learning and innovation skills, career and survival skills, and digital literacy skills. (Kivunja, 2015). This statement is then in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum, which has the main characteristics of developing soft skills and deep literacy, in contrast to the previous curriculum (2013 Curriculum), which prioritizes education so that Indonesian people have the ability to live as individuals and good citizens, even in the implementation of rigid learning is limited in accordance with statutory regulations (Nugroho, Taufik; Narawaty, Dede;, 2022).

A quality education system will create innovative, creative, and productive human resources, in addition to the many factors that influence the success of education, the role of a teacher is certainly very influential regarding this matter. Student involvement in the teaching and learning process is very important and becomes a benchmark for a good teaching and learning process, therefore teachers continue to look for suitable strategies in order to involve students in the teaching and learning process (Mardhiyah, 2022). So far, the facts in the field are that there are still teachers who teach monotonously, using the lecture method and narrative explanations (Malik, 2021), for example in learning English, teachers focus on providing knowledge about grammar which is memorized, even though it would be better if learning English is done by interacting or talking with students. (Simbolon, 2014).

At SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Taman, which has implemented the Independent Learning Curriculum, currently almost all classes have implemented it and have had a positive impact on students. Learning using the Merdeka Curriculum makes students tend to be more active and participate in class which is reflected in student responses. With the Merdeka Curriculum, it really helps students have more opportunities to be able to communicate and interact using English in the future. The purpose of this article is to examine the application of Merdeka Belajar in learning English at SMK. This research investigates the various strategies and methods used and created by educators and their impact on students.

II. METHOD

The method we use is a descriptive qualitative method which aims to explore information and explain information in depth and clearly. Merdeka Curriculum is a curriculum with diverse intracurricular learning where content will be optimized so that learners have enough time to explore concepts and strengthen competencies. In its implementation, teachers have the flexibility to choose various teaching tools so that learning can be tailored to the learning needs and interests of students at each level of their education. The process of implementing the independent curriculum is easy and

difficult. According to the teachers who are there, the obstacle in implementing the independent curriculum is that there are several teachers who still have difficulty adapting to the independent curriculum. But for now the teachers have begun to adapt to the independent curriculum. To implement it, some teachers have their own characteristics, such as by holding ice breaking so that students are not easily bored, then the teacher gives freedom in delivering a presentation with the creativity of the students. Qualitative data can be collected through various means such as observation, interviews, document studies. Our research was conducted from April 29 to May 4, 2024, at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Taman Sidoarjo, East Java.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Learning using digital teaching media such as videos and power points aims to allow students to customize learning according to their interests and understanding. Digital teaching media also helps teachers to deliver material in a more interesting, innovative, not boring and easy for students to understand.

The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum from the students' point of view, namely, teachers can more easily approach students, evaluate learning about students' learning needs so that teachers can adjust learning models according to students' learning styles and interests, because teachers act as facilitators for students so that they play an active role in learning activities.

Teachers at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Taman make the most of online learning media to provide learning materials and assess student learning outcomes. The media allows teachers to provide material in a more structural manner and provide varied learning tasks according to the ongoing learning material. In addition, the existence of online learning media is very flexible and makes it easier for students to be able to access it anytime and anywhere. The implementation of online learning media not only improves the quality of learning, but also prepares students for the digital era.

Teachers at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Taman are encouraged to master and optimize the use of technology in learning. This can be realized in various ways, such as the use of digital platforms and interactive teaching media. The mastery of technology by educators is not only material, but includes the ability and management of virtual classes, then utilizing software educationally, and using digital evaluation tools. This aims to be more efficient and effective.

Digital platforms such as Google Classroom and Moodle allow teachers to provide learning materials, assignments, and assessment of student results online. This makes it very easy for teachers to provide learning materials and provides very easy access for students to learn materials wherever they are. Thus the integration of digital platforms not only improves the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching, but enriches students' learning experience making them active in technological development, and preparing them for the future.

For interactive learning media, it can be done with a game-based learning approach, which is specifically designed to hone students' English skills. So that they will indirectly feel comfortable learning English without feeling bored.

Although there are some teachers who are still not familiar with the existence of technology in supporting learning, teachers who are still lagging behind have efforts to catch up and improve their skills by attending training or seminars on several occasions. With the better implementation of technology, SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Taman hopes to create an adaptive, modern, and student-focused environment in anticipation of preparing students to be able to compete and be competent in the global era.

The school also often organizes teacher training and workshops for educators who want to develop various technologies in learning and facilitates access to online learning resources, so that teachers can learn and develop their skills. There were different responses from students, both agreeing and disagreeing. Students who expressed their agreement said that they seemed to get learning that was relevant to real life through projects and case studies that made learning more interesting. Then students also said that with this independent curriculum, students can further explore their interests and learning styles to be more motivated. However, from the side of students who disagree, they said that they need adaptation to new learning methods that emphasize independent and project-based and they feel they need greater tutoring.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Taman shows that it wants to improve the quality of learning in English in order to compete with others. The teachers act as facilitators who support students in learning, encouraging students to be more active and independent. Teachers are also expected to master technology and use interactive teaching media, including game-based learning, which makes learning English fun. For the response of some students about the independent curriculum, almost all of them gave positive feedback that students can further explore the students' abilities. Although there are some teachers who have a little trouble dealing with technology, the school facilitates the teachers to develop.

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