

# An Analysis of the Merdeka Curriculum on Improving Students' English Speaking Skills: Teachers and Students Perceptions at SMAN 2 Mataram

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## Abstract

The study investigates the teachers and students' perceptions of the merdeka curriculum on improving english speaking Skills among students' at SMAN 2 Mataram. There were eight students and two teachers involved as samples. The research data were collected through interviews and classroom observation. The Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 2 Mataram has significantly improved students' English speaking skills through flexible learning approaches, teacher support, and active student participation in speaking activities. Data analysis was conducted in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Relevant data from observations and interviews were selected, organized, and interpreted to address the research objectives. Data show that the curriculum encourages a shift from standard teacher-centered learning to a more student-centered approach, using various teaching methods like discussions and presentations. Classroom observations support these findings, with students actively participating in speaking activities and becoming more comfortable using English in everyday situations. The curriculum's flexibility allows students to choose assignments that suit their interests and comfort levels, increasing motivation to participate. The study concludes that the Merdeka Curriculum is an ideal tool for improving English language growth in various educational contexts which also imply that English teachers have more rooms to create learning activities more flexibility.

## Keywords

Merdeka Curriculum, improving, speaking skill

## INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency is widely recognized as a crucial skill in today's globalized world. As the lingua franca of international communication, proficiency in English opens doors to various opportunities, both academic and professional (Budiman et al., 2023). In the context of education, the ability to communicate effectively in English is essential for students to engage in meaningful learning experiences and to prepare for future challenges (Haryadi & Aminuddin, 2023).. The important of English as one of main subjects at schools leads to the development of curriculum especially for English curriculum. Generally, every school has curriculum to accommodate the whole teaching and learning process. Therefore, the curriculum developers need to consider many aspects in designing curriculum. A bad curriculum affects to the result of education (Dikgale & Chauke, 2024). Indeed, the role of curriculum is very important as outline of whole aspects in education.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, as an institution that has authority in education, enforces a policy related to curriculum development, namely the Merdeka Curriculum, which is implemented in educational institutions as one of the choices or additional options for learning recovery in 2022 to 2024. Several programs support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum enacted by the government, including the movers school program and the vocational high school center of excellence (Kemendikbud, 2022; Nugraha, 2022).

There are two principles in the Merdeka Curriculum: "Merdeka Belajar" and "Kampus Merdeka". Merdeka Belajar means "freedom to think and to innovate" (Ainia, 2020). Concurrently, *Kampus Merdeka* s an extension of the higher education program Merdeka Belajar. Students are also trained to be able to stay up with the rapid advancements in

technology, the workplace, sociocultural shifts, and business. The purpose of Merdeka Belajar is to bring education back to the core of the rules, granting schools the autonomy to comprehend the fundamental skills of the curriculum as part of their assessment (Kusmaryono, 2020). In addition, this program also reflects the Indonesian government's commitment to increasing access to higher education for all citizens, so that everyone has the opportunity to get a quality education (Anis & Anwar, 2020).

However, while the Merdeka Curriculum aims to foster a comprehensive learning environment, its specific impact on improving students' in learning English, in the case of teaching English as foreign language (EFL) to young learners, the spoken language is the medium through which a new language is encountered, understood, practiced, and learnt. Speaking is one of the most difficult skills and need habit to master it (Murti et al., 2025). This is hardly surprising when one considers everything that is involved when speaking: ideas, what to say, language, how to use grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation as well as listening to and reacting to the person you are communicating with. Most of learners often found many problems like they are too shy and less confident in speaking English although they have studied English for long time. They also feel nervous and sometimes forget what they want to say in English because they rarely practice their English. The main reason is to increase self-confidence, the ability to speak in public or in groups can increase students' self-confidence. This also helps them overcome nervousness or fear of speaking in front of people. With a focus on speaking, the independent curriculum seeks to equip students with comprehensive and applicable communication skills in everyday life and the future (Muhammad, 2018).

Speaking is regarded as a crucial communication skill in the Merdeka Curriculum and needs to be actively developed. According to the growth of their abilities, this curriculum places a strong emphasis on how important it is for students to be able to express themselves both in English and other languages. It is regarded as a technique for conveying ideas, thoughts, and emotions in addition to being a crucial component of verbal communication and required during the presentation of learning projects in the Merdeka Curriculum. As a result, speaking instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes students' capacity to communicate ideas coherently, creatively, and clearly in addition to language skills like grammar and pronunciation (Kusmaryono, 2020).

Speaking is very important because speaking and human being cannot be separated from each other. Speaking is used to express people ideas and to communicate with others in their lives. The success of speaking is measured in terms of the ability to carry out conversation in an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information (Clarisha, 2020). English speaking skills remains a topic that warrants further investigation. Understanding the effectiveness of this curriculum in enhancing oral communication skills is imperative for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers to make informed decisions about its integration into the educational system.

The primary objective of the Merdeka Curriculum is to raise educational standards while taking into account the individual requirements and variety of each student (Wahyudin dkk., 2024). It is intended that by allowing for flexibility in curriculum design, students will be placed in a more pertinent, interesting, and realistic learning environment. As a result, when using the Merdeka Curriculum to improve students speaking skills, the English teacher faces some difficulties. According to earlier studies, the main difficulties faced by the teaching about what is needed to carry out the Merdeka Curriculum (Rizky et al., 2022) because speaking in the Merdeka curriculum is integrated as an important skill in language learning, both Indonesian and foreign languages. The main reason is to increase self-confidence, the ability to speak in public or in groups can increase students' self-confidence (Wulandari et al., 2023). This also helps them overcome nervousness or fear of speaking in front of people. With a focus on speaking, the independent curriculum seeks to equip students with comprehensive and applicable communication skills in everyday life and the future through the projects prompted to students. However, little is known about how Merdeka Curriculum affect students' English skills.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore and analyze teachers' and students' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum on improving students' English speaking skills. By examining the experiences and outcomes of students engaged in this curriculum, we aim to provide valuable insights into the strengths and potential areas of improvement. The findings of this research are hoped to contribute to the ongoing discourse on effective language education methodologies and support evidence-based decision-making in curriculum development and educational policy. Ultimately, the goal is to empower students with the linguistic tools they need to succeed in an increasingly interconnected and competitive global environment.

In this study, the researcher is interested in analyzing teachers' and students' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum on improving students' English speaking skills at SMAN 2 Mataram. Moreover, the teachers need to know which activities affect their students' speaking performance either positive or negative. The writer chooses SMAN 2 Mataram as the location of the research because SMAN 2 Mataram has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum since this Curriculum was replaced by the Governments and that will make it easier for the researcher to carry out the research.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive methodology, which was designed to analyze people or phenomena in their natural settings. Qualitative research focused on understanding processes and meanings. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research was a method used to investigate and comprehend the meanings that individuals or groups attached to societal or human problems. The goal of this approach was to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences.

The population of the study consisted of students and English teachers from the eleventh and twelfth grades at SMAN 2 Mataram. The subjects were selected using purposive sampling, which included two English teachers and eight students (six from the eleventh grade and two from the twelfth grade), four males and four females. The teachers were required to have attended a workshop on the Merdeka Curriculum and to have taught using the curriculum for at least two semesters. The students were selected randomly. The study aimed to investigate whether the Merdeka Curriculum impacted the improvement of English speaking skills and to identify the challenges faced by both teachers and students.

Data collection for this study involved various methods, including observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was a primary data collection technique that involved noting and recording observed phenomena. As Ary (cited in Nabilla, 2024) pointed out, observation was essential for gathering data in qualitative research. The researcher conducted observations at SMAN 2 Mataram to understand the learning environment and to observe how teachers managed the classroom and interacted with students. There were two forms of observation: one focused on the teaching and learning process in the classroom, and the other on out-of-class activities. In the classroom, the researcher observed a speaking class to assess the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on improving English speaking skills, using an observation checklist. Out-of-class activities were also observed to determine how school activities, including *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) and extracurricular activities, contributed to enhancing speaking skills in line with the Merdeka Curriculum.

Interviews were also conducted to gain insights into the experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding the Merdeka Curriculum. According to Adhabi and Anozie (2017), interviews were a method of gathering information by asking participants questions about a particular topic. Prihatien et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of communication skills in conducting interviews. In this study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with two teachers and eight students. The interview data were intended to

complement the data collected through observations and documentation. The interviews were conducted in-person, using a question-and-answer format to explore the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on English speaking skills.

Documentation, as described by Sugiyono (2017), involved recording previous events through texts, images, or other significant works. In this study, documentation was used to gather relevant materials, including images and printed records during classroom observations, as well as audio recordings of interviews with teachers and students. The researcher collected curriculum documents, including module outlines detailing objectives, learning outcomes, and assessments, as well as lesson plans used by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

Data analysis in this study was performed using descriptive qualitative methods, following the three main activities outlined by Miles and Huberman (2014): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved simplifying and focusing the information from observation sheets and interview transcripts, selecting relevant data, and excluding irrelevant information. Data display referred to organizing the data in a way that allowed the researcher to make decisions and draw conclusions. The researcher organized the data systematically, focusing on the role of speaking skills in learning English under the Merdeka Curriculum. Finally, conclusion drawing/verification was the last stage of data analysis, where the researcher drew inferences based on the data collected, ensuring that the conclusions were supported by the findings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

The researcher acquired and analyzed data derived from both observations and interviews to identify the Impact of Merdeka Curriculum on Improving students' English-speaking skill in learning English at SMAN 2 Mataram.

### Observation Result

The observation at SMAN 2 Mataram was done to see how the Merdeka Curriculum affects students' English speaking skills. The findings show several important changes in how English is taught and learned. By observing the activities in the classroom and how students and teachers interact, the researcher learned about the Impacts of the Merdeka Curriculum.

In order to know the classroom activity and interaction between teacher and students in speaking class, the researcher did participant observation 3 times on October 23 - 25, 2024. The observation was done by observing the teaching and learning process by using observation checklist. The observation checklist was used to observe eight aspects in teaching and learning. Students' participation in speaking, teaching methods that help speaking, using English in class, choice and flexibility in learning, time for speaking activities, students practicing speaking outside class, improvement in speaking skills, teacher support in speaking. These are eight aspects that helped the researcher to make a note from the classroom activity and out-classroom activity, included the interaction between teacher and students.

The researcher entered the classroom and observed the learning activities in Class XII Science 5 at SMAN 2 Mataram and did the observation. First, a teacher greeted the

class and took attendance. After assigning the textbooks, teacher presented questions to help the class review the material. In order to respond to the questions in front of the class, a few students raised their hands. After that, teacher instructed the class to read the material from their textbooks. A single text was read aloud to the class by each student. Some students exhibited their active engagement in the lesson by requesting to read and doing so with confidence. Students benefited from practicing spoken English using this method of teaching.

Table 1. Observation Checklist

No	Aspects to Observe	Indicators	Yes	No
1	Student Participation in Speaking	Students join in speaking activities and take part without needing to be asked.	[✓]	[ ]
2	Teaching Methods that Help Speaking	Teachers use activities like discussions, presentations, or storytelling to help students speak.	[✓]	[ ]
3	Using English in Class	Teachers speak in English and students answer in English when asked.	[✓]	[ ]
4	Choice and Flexibility in Learning	Students can choose which speaking activities they want to do, like storytelling or mini-dramas, based on their comfort level.	[✓]	[ ]
5	Time for Speaking Activities	There is enough time for students to practice speaking in class, even with fewer class hours.	[ ]	[✓]
6	Students Practicing Speaking Outside Class	Students practice speaking English outside of class, like in the "English Zone" or in informal conversations.	[✓]	[ ]
7	Improvement in Speaking Skills	Students speak more confidently and fluently, even if their grammar is not perfect.	[✓]	[ ]
8	Teacher Support in Speaking	Teachers give feedback and encourage students to speak more.	[✓]	[ ]

The observation checklist indicates that the students participated actively in speaking activities (Yes for Student Participation in Speaking). The teacher helped students practice speaking by using techniques like reading aloud and asking questions (Yes for Teaching Methods that Help Speaking). Each student answered in English when the teacher spoke in it (Yes for Using English in Class). Additionally, the students were able to select the components of the lesson that they wished to participate in, such as reading aloud in front of the class (Yes for Choice and Flexibility in Learning).

Students were given some opportunity to practice speaking with the short class period (No for opportunity for Speaking Activities). Given their active participation and readiness to speak in front of the class, some students also practiced speaking outside of the classroom (Yes for Students Practicing Speaking Outside Class). Even though their grammar wasn't flawless, the students' confidence in speaking improved during the lesson (Yes for Improvement in Speaking Skills). Students were encouraged to participate when the teacher provided comments and challenged them to speak up more (Yes for Teacher Support in Speaking).



When the teacher holds a group discussion, the students actively speak without having to wait for instructions from the teacher. The teacher uses the discussion method, where students appear more enthusiastic and talk more compared to when the lecture method is used. During the lesson, the teacher spoke in English, and the students responded in English when asked by the teacher, with an English usage rate reaching 70%.

Students are given the freedom to choose speaking activities, such as group tasks, storytelling, and other activities that make them feel more comfortable. However, in the learning process, only a few minutes are allocated for speaking activities. Outside the classroom, students continue to use English when communicating with their friends, including during breaks, which shows that they are applying speaking practice outside the classroom.

In terms of speaking skill development, students show improvement in fluency and confidence, although their grammar is still not perfect. Additionally, the teacher actively provides feedback after students speak, as well as encouragement, corrections, and constructive suggestions to help them improve their speaking skills.

The exercises encouraged speaking practice and kept the students interested. Throughout the short class period, the students tried to talk inside as well as out of the classroom, suggesting growth in their confidence and speaking skills. The findings show that the students' speaking abilities were improved by the Merdeka Curriculum.

### ***The Interview Result the local policy of Merdeka Curriculum for English speaking skills at SMAN 2 Mataram***

To answer the first question, namely the policy of merdeka curriculum for English speaking skill at SMAN 2 Mataram, the researcher used interview to gather the data. The interviews were carried out at SMAN 2 Mataram on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024. From the interview, the researcher could see there are impacts of Merdeka Curriculum on improving students' English-Speaking skill in learning English at SMAN 2 Mataram. The explanation can be seen below:

- ***Overview of Policies Related to English language learning***

Based on interviews with two teachers, it was found that school policies related to English language learning in the Merdeka Curriculum are not yet specific. The first teacher explained that the school only facilitates teaching materials for the Merdeka Curriculum, while the initiative to design English learning is entirely up to each teacher. Meanwhile, the second teacher mentioned that the school's general policies that support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly through the use of the Platform *Merdeka Mengajar* (PMM). This platform serves as the primary reference for teacher performance assessments, replacing previous systems like E-Kinerja. Although the platform appears promising as an all-in-one solution, the teacher admitted that not all of its features have been fully utilized.

Teacher 1: "If it's specifically the school's policy specifically for English, I don't think there is any, the school only facilitates teaching materials, the Merdeka Curriculum teaching materials for English learning." (Interview Datum 1 in App. 6)

Teacher 2: "If it's a specific policy, I don't know, but if it's a general policy, there are many supporters of the independent curriculum. For example, there is the PMM platform, the Independent Teaching platform, which is now also the main reference in teacher performance evaluation." (Interview Datum 2 in App. 7)

- ***Significant changes in teaching English Speaking on the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum.***

Based on interviews with two teachers, there are several significant changes and differing perspectives regarding the teaching of English-speaking skills since the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The first teacher explained that the Merdeka Curriculum provided a fresh approach to their teaching method, which focuses more on student involvement, with the teacher acting as a facilitator rather than the main instructor. Previously, many teachers still used a lecture-based approach, which made students more passive in class. With the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, students have become more confident in speaking, even though their grammar is not always perfect. Activities such as discussions and presentations are now a part of the curriculum across all subjects, including English, encouraging students to be more active in speaking. However, the second teacher stated that the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on improving English speaking skills in class has not been very significant. The teacher mentioned that while there are some students with good English skills, mainly due to their background in elite schools, the reduction in class hours has limited the opportunity to focus more on developing speaking skills. As a result, despite changes in teaching methods, the positive impact on students' speaking abilities has not been strongly felt in the classroom.

Teacher 1: "The difference is that before the Merdeka curriculum was implemented, not all teachers used the same teaching methods as I did, so automatically the students' character would follow that. At that time, most teachers used the lecture method, where the teacher's dominance was greater than the students' activity in the classroom, so their character would also be shaped that way. They tend to be more passive unless asked, then they speak up. Well, once the Merdeka curriculum is implemented, almost all teachers will inevitably teach with the Merdeka curriculum, so most teachers will certainly give children more freedom to be active." (Interview Datum 1 in App. 6)

Teacher 2: "I don't feel the impact is too significant, meaning aside from the earlier issue of reduced hours affecting performance. If observed, SMA 2, I might say, most of the students indeed come from top schools, although not dominantly, but those who are good at English are noticeable." (Interview Datum in App. 7)

- ***Students' participation in English Speaking activities before and after the implementation Merdeka Curriculum***

Based on interviews with the two teachers, student participation in English speaking activities has shown differences before and after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. According to the first teacher, previous teaching methods were dominated by lecture-based approaches, where students only spoke when prompted, showing minimal initiative or confidence in class. After the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers were encouraged to reduce their dominance in the classroom, providing students with more opportunities to actively engage

in speaking activities. However, the level of improvement in participation varies, with more significant progress observed in classes with students of medium to high ability levels. The second teacher noted that their teaching style has remained consistent, with a focus on flexibility and not strictly relying on government-provided books. While the Merdeka Curriculum introduced teaching modules designed to facilitate students in achieving learning objectives, the changes in student participation were not drastic. Activities are still planned around the use of textbooks and modules, maintaining structured yet goal-oriented learning to support student engagement in speaking activities.

Teacher 1: "If asked, there is definitely an improvement because on one hand, children have been given more freedom, and teachers have also been given the freedom to design their lessons so that students become more active in speaking." (Interview Datum 1 in App. 6)

Teacher 2: "The changes are not too drastic even though in this independent curriculum the main characteristic is the presence of modules, teaching modules, if in this case it is called RPP but in this independent curriculum there are teaching modules, yes, but actually it is not too different because these activities are also designed to facilitate students in achieving the goals planned by the teacher" (Interview Datum in App. 7)

### ***The Interview Result of Teachers' and Students' perception about the impacts of the Merdeka Curriculum on Improving Students' English-speaking skills at SMAN 2 Mataram.***

#### ***• Activities and methods supporting Speaking skill Improvement***

The researcher gives some questions to the students in order to get data and the answers is below:

Student 1: "And if the method is more about asking us to read the text like that. Not just being told to read, but being asked to read it out loud." (Interview Datum in App. 8)

According the interview of Student 1, reading texts or performing story-telling in front of the class is a helpful activity for improving both speaking and reading skills. The student also emphasized that being asked by the teacher to read aloud, rather than just silently, has a positive impact on their speaking abilities.

Student 2: "So there's activity called the English Zone. Where in that zone we have to speak English. Well, that is very helpful. Very helpful. So, we are forced to speak English." (Interview Datum in App. 9)

Student 2 highlighted that engaging in conversations in English, especially in daily activities or specific zones like "English Zone," where students are required to speak English, is highly effective in developing speaking skills. In class, answering the teacher's questions in English also helps to improve their speaking abilities.

Student 3: "Like the teacher asking questions in English. And we answer in English. So, it's better than answering in Indonesian." (Interview Datum in App. 10)

For Student 3, the most effective method involves interactions in English, such as teachers asking questions in English and students responding in English. This approach encourages students to practice speaking directly in English

and is perceived as better than using Indonesian for responses.

Student 4: "Sometimes I hear a word that is unfamiliar to me. And I always look it up, and it greatly improves my skills because I learn a lot from it by listening." (Interview Datum in App. 11)

Student 4 finds listening activities particularly beneficial. By hearing unfamiliar words, looking up their meanings, and learning from them, the student improves their speaking skills. Listening is described as a foundation for acquiring new vocabulary and enhancing speaking skills.

Student 5: "If the activity is mostly listening and repeating. So, it can be done by getting used to repeating the words that are heard." (Interview Datum in App. 12)

Student 5 mentioned that listening to words and repeating them aloud helps build familiarity and confidence in speaking. This practice is further enhanced when they apply the learned vocabulary in conversations with peers or teachers. The student also emphasized the importance of regular speaking practice with friends to improve fluency and confidence.

Student 6: "The teacher asks questions so that we answer the questions in English." (Interview Datum in App. 13)

Student 6 pointed out that classroom methods, such as teachers encouraging communication in English through questions and allowing students to respond in English, are highly effective. This interaction not only helps in practicing speaking skills but also builds confidence in using the language during class activities.

Student 7: "The effective learning method, in my opinion, is when we listen and then follow it with speaking practice; it enhances focus and language comprehension." (Interview Datum in App. 14)

Student 7 stated that listening followed by speaking practice is an effective activity for improving their focus and understanding of the English language. This combination allows students to internalize what they hear and actively practice expressing it verbally, which helps develop their speaking skills.

Student 8: "Listening speaking. So, the first thing we do is listening, then after we listen, we can take notes or not, it doesn't matter. After that, maybe the teacher will try to point to one of the students, asking what you heard, try to convey what you listened to, and then do the speaking." (Interview Datum in App. 15)

Student 8 emphasized the importance of listening and retelling activities, where students are prompted to articulate what they heard. This process improves their focus and comprehension while encouraging them to process and produce spoken English. Exposure to different English accents was also noted as beneficial, helping students adapt and refine their understanding, even when encountering misheard words. Additionally, they highlighted the value of teacher-led feedback and prompts during listening and speaking exercises, which push students to think critically and articulate their responses more effectively.

- *Teachers Perceptions of the Students' Speaking progress*

The researcher interviewed the teachers in order to get data of the Merdeka Curriculum on Students' speaking progress:

Teacher 1: "So there are aspects in the Merdeka curriculum that provide freedom for students to choose what suits them best, what doesn't, what makes them feel more capable of expressing themselves, especially in developing their speaking skills, and what doesn't." (Interview Datum in App. 6)

Teacher 1 highlighted that the Merdeka Curriculum has significantly contributed to improving students' speaking skills. They noted that the curriculum allows greater flexibility for students to choose activities that suit their interests and confidence levels, such as mini dramas or storytelling. This freedom helps students express themselves more effectively and develop their speaking skills according to their preferences and strengths. Additionally, the curriculum encourages personalized learning, enabling students to engage in activities that foster self-expression and speaking proficiency.

Teacher 2: "So the apparent obstacle is the lack of time to practice speaking, and that certainly impacts the achievement." (Interview Datum in App. 7)

Teacher 2 noted that speaking practice possibilities are restricted because to the shortened class hours, which were cut from four to three hours each week. While the curriculum stresses self-directed learning, they pointed out that this method might not work for some of students in the absence of sufficient teacher supervision. According to the teacher, students who are self-motivated and industrious typically perform better, whereas those who lack motivation find it difficult to advance. Under the Merdeka Curriculum, a major obstacle to attaining the best possible speaking skill progress is the classroom's limited speaking practice time.

## Discussion

Based on the interview findings, the policy regarding English language learning at the school is not fully clear, especially in terms of guidelines on how teaching materials should be delivered. The Merdeka Curriculum provides flexibility for educators to determine their teaching methods, although there are still limitations in the structured application of policies related to English language teaching (Wulandari et al., 2023). Nonetheless, this curriculum allows teachers to adapt their teaching methods according to the needs and characteristics of the students, although this may result in inconsistency in how teaching is carried out in different classes.

The findings reveal a significant transformation in the way English is taught following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The curriculum has shifted the focus toward greater student involvement, where teachers now serve as facilitators rather than being the sole providers of information (Rokayah et al., 2023). This approach has led to the prioritization of interactive teaching methods such as group discussions, presentations, storytelling, and activities in the "English Zone" that actively engage students in speaking English. These methods have been shown to enhance not only speaking skills but also reading and vocabulary development, ultimately boosting students' confidence in using the language.

However, a notable challenge identified in the study is the reduction in the number of class hours available for practicing speaking. This limitation restricts the intensity and frequency of speaking practice, which may slow the overall improvement in students' language proficiency. Despite the innovative and engaging strategies implemented under the Merdeka Curriculum, the constrained practice time continues to be a significant obstacle in the development of speaking skills.

The study's results align with previous research by Budiarti et al. (2022), which indicates that student perceptions of their learning environment are influenced by a mix of internal and external factors. Internal factors include individual motivation and prior language skills, while external factors encompass teaching methods, classroom management, and the availability of learning media. As noted by Walgito in Fristiviona et al. (2023), these external elements create a contextual backdrop that is essential in shaping how students experience and respond to the learning process. In this context, "student perceptions" refer to the attitudes, responses, and overall impressions that students form based on their classroom experiences.

Furthermore, the role of vocabulary in learning English is underscored by Amirzai (2021), who highlights that vocabulary development is critical to mastering various language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The study's findings suggest that interactive and activity-based learning methods such as reading aloud, storytelling, and mini dramas—not only foster speaking proficiency but also help expand students' vocabulary, thereby enhancing their overall communicative competence.

Additionally, the interviews conducted as part of the research provided further insights into the effectiveness of direct speaking activities. Methods that involve students engaging in discussions or conversations with peers and teachers were reported as highly effective in improving their speaking skills. Moreover, activities that combine listening and repetition were also found to be beneficial in helping students master vocabulary and build confidence in speaking. These findings highlight that while the Merdeka Curriculum offers more opportunities for interactive learning, the success of these opportunities heavily depends on how educators design and manage classroom activities.

In conclusion, while the Merdeka Curriculum has positively impacted English teaching by encouraging a more student-centered, interactive learning environment, challenges remain. The reduction in class hours limits the opportunity for intensive practice, and individual differences among students such as prior language background and intrinsic motivation continue to influence learning outcomes. Addressing these challenges will require not only innovative teaching methods but also a careful consideration of the diverse needs of students to fully realize the potential benefits of this new educational approach.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings from both the interviews and classroom observations, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 2 Mataram has had a significant impact on improving students' English speaking skills. The combination of flexible learning approaches, teacher support, and active student participation



in speaking activities has created a more engaging and supportive environment for language acquisition.

From the interviews with the teachers and students, it was evident that the Merdeka Curriculum encourages a shift from standard, teacher-centered learning to a more student-centered approach. Teachers have been able to employ various teaching methods such as discussions, and presentations, which have greatly contributed to fostering students' speaking skills. These activities allow students to practice speaking in a more relaxed and engaging manner, which is a key factor in building their confidence in using English. Observations in the classroom further supported these findings. Students were actively involved in speaking activities, such as answering questions, reading aloud in front of the class, and participating in small discussions. The classroom environment promoted the use of English in a natural and consistent way, with both teachers and students communicating primarily in English. This not only improved students' speaking skills but also helped them become more comfortable using English in everyday situations. The flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum, which lets students decide how they wish to participate in lessons on speaking, is one of its most impressive features. This ability to adapt increases students' motivation to participate by enabling them to choose assignments that suit their interests and comfort levels. Additionally, having the chance to practice speaking outside of the classroom,

In conclusion, the study has found that the Merdeka Curriculum works well on improving English speaking skills. Students' speaking confidence and fluency have increased as a result of the curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning and the active involvement of both teachers and students. The encouraging findings from the observations and interviews suggest that this curriculum offers an ideal basis for encouraging the growth of the English language and can be regarded as a useful instrument that improves speaking skills in different educational contexts.

It is recommended that teachers allocate additional time for students to engage in speaking exercises, as the current time constraints often limit the development of their speaking skills. By extending the duration of these exercises, students would have more opportunities to practice, build confidence, and enhance their communication abilities. For students, active participation in interactive exercises is encouraged, with an emphasis on maximizing available opportunities to strengthen vocabulary and pronunciation through a combination of speaking and listening activities. Collaborating with peers, seeking feedback from teachers, and utilizing the flexibility of the curriculum to select activities that align with personal needs and interests are also vital strategies for improvement. Overcoming the fear of making mistakes and committing to regular practice are essential to advancing speaking skills. For future studies, research could focus on the long-term effects of the Merdeka Curriculum on English-speaking proficiency, examine the potential role of technology in enhancing speaking exercises, and investigate the factors that motivate students to engage more actively in speaking activities, which could ultimately inform the development of more effective teaching strategies.

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