

**LOWER-GRADE TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING
OBSTACLES IN IMPLEMENTING INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM IN
INDONESIAN LANGUAGE SUBJECTS**

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Received 2 March 2026, Accepted 27 April 2026, Published 30 April 2026

Abstract

This study aims to examine the challenges faced by lower-grade teachers and the strategies used in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian language learning at SDS Ulumuddin. The research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving lower-grade teachers and the school principal. The findings indicate that challenges occur at the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. In the planning stage, teachers experienced difficulties in understanding the Merdeka Curriculum concepts, preparing teaching modules, and limited technological skills. During implementation, challenges included students' varied reading abilities, low reading interest, and limited use of learning media. In the evaluation stage, teachers encountered difficulties in applying assessment principles aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. To address these challenges, teachers implemented several strategies, such as participating in training programs, independently developing teaching modules, using varied media and project-based learning, providing additional support for students with reading difficulties, and conducting continuous assessment. These strategies contributed to increased student participation, motivation, and understanding, although literacy development still requires ongoing support.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, Lower-grade Teachers, Indonesian Language Learning

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji tantangan yang dihadapi oleh guru kelas rendah serta strategi yang digunakan dalam menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka pada pembelajaran bahasa Indonesia di SDS Ulumuddin. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan guru kelas rendah dan kepala sekolah. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tantangan muncul pada tahap perencanaan, pelaksanaan, dan evaluasi. Pada tahap perencanaan, guru mengalami kesulitan dalam memahami konsep Kurikulum Merdeka, menyiapkan modul pembelajaran, serta keterbatasan keterampilan teknologi. Selama pelaksanaan, tantangan meliputi kemampuan membaca siswa yang bervariasi, minat membaca yang rendah, dan penggunaan media pembelajaran yang terbatas. Pada tahap evaluasi, guru menghadapi kesulitan dalam menerapkan prinsip penilaian yang selaras dengan Kurikulum Merdeka. Untuk mengatasi tantangan ini, guru menerapkan beberapa strategi, seperti mengikuti program pelatihan, mengembangkan modul pembelajaran secara mandiri, menggunakan media yang bervariasi dan pembelajaran berbasis proyek, memberikan dukungan tambahan bagi siswa yang mengalami kesulitan membaca, serta melakukan penilaian berkelanjutan. Strategi-strategi ini berkontribusi pada peningkatan partisipasi, motivasi, dan pemahaman siswa, meskipun pengembangan literasi masih memerlukan dukungan berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka, Guru Kelas Rendah, Pembelajaran Bahasa Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Based on Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, national education aims to develop the potential of students to become people who believe in and fear God Almighty, have noble character, are knowledgeable, skilled, creative, independent, and responsible as citizens of the Republic of Indonesia (Nada et al., 2022). To achieve these objectives, the curriculum plays an important role as a guideline for implementing learning. The curriculum does not only contain a list of materials, but also includes planning objectives, selecting methods, developing learning activities, and evaluating learning outcomes in accordance with the development and needs of students (Retnosari et al., 2024).

As a form of improving the education system, the Indonesian government has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, which is oriented towards developing the potential and needs of students. This curriculum gives educational units and teachers the freedom to design flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning (Rif'adina & Fithria, 2024). The essence of the Merdeka Curriculum lies in the concept of independent learning, which allows students to develop holistically in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects while taking into account their individual talents and interests (Hidayatullah et al., 2023).

A number of studies show that the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to improve the quality of learning, particularly through an emphasis on essential material, project-based learning, and strengthening students' literacy skills (Rizaldi & Fatimah, 2022). Merdeka curriculum shifts from teacher-centered to student-centered, project-based, autonomy-oriented learning that develops critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Kumayas et al., 2025; Musringatin et al., 2025). These principles align with

global learner-centered and 21st-century education agendas (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Langoday et al., 2024)

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level, particularly in Indonesian language subjects, still faces various obstacles. Several studies reveal that teachers are not yet fully prepared to implement this curriculum due to limitations in understanding, training, and learning support facilities and infrastructure (Binggo & Liputo, 2025).

These obstacles are evident in the implementation of project-based learning, the delivery of essential material, and differentiated learning. Lower grade teachers face difficulties in managing learning time, motivating students to be active and creative, formulating basic questions, and mapping the diverse learning needs of students (Kopriansyah et al., 2024). This condition indicates that the success of the implementation of the independent curriculum is highly dependent on the ability of teachers to design and apply adaptive and contextual learning strategies, especially in Indonesian language learning, which is the basis for developing student literacy.

Existing studies predominantly focus on identifying general constraints in curriculum implementation, yet they provide limited insight into how teachers concretely navigate and resolve these challenges at the classroom level, especially in lower grades where foundational literacy development is critical. Moreover, prior research tends to treat Indonesian language learning in a broad sense, without sufficiently examining its unique pedagogical demands as a core domain for early literacy acquisition. There is also a lack of context-specific analysis that connects teacher strategies with real classroom conditions, student characteristics, and institutional constraints. Based on these conditions, this study aims to examine the strategies used by lower-grade teachers in overcoming the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian language lessons at elementary schools. This study offers a context-specific and strategy-oriented contribution by focusing explicitly on lower-grade teachers' pedagogical strategies in addressing real-world implementation barriers within Indonesian language learning

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. From the perspective of interpretative social science (ISS), qualitative research requires the direct involvement of researchers through personal interaction to understand how meaning is formed in social life ((Radianto, 2023). Case studies are selected to examine a "case" in depth in the context of real life today. Cases are selected using purposeful sampling, which involves selecting cases that are most relevant to the focus of the research, then analyzing them thoroughly through detailed descriptions of the patterns, contexts, and situations surrounding the case (Creswell, 2015). Case study research allows for detailed data collection through various techniques, although the results have limitations in terms of generalization and require a relatively long research period (Susanty et al., 2023).

The research was conducted on December 17, 2025, at SDS Ulumuddin which implementing Merdeka Curriculum on the lower grade since 2022. The research subjects including lower grade teachers and the school principal. Teachers were chosen as the main informants because they had in-depth experience and understanding of the obstacles and learning strategies in lower grades. The research data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained directly from the main informants, namely lower

grade teachers and the principal who played a role in policy and supervision of curriculum implementation. Secondary data was obtained through literature studies in the form of books, scientific journals, policy documents, and previous relevant research to reinforce the primary data.

Data collection techniques were conducted through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviews were used to explore information related to the obstacles and strategies for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Observations were conducted by directly observing the learning process and the interactions between teachers and students in the classroom. Documentation was used as supporting data in the form of learning tools, teaching modules, notes, photos, and relevant school documents. The data then analyzed using qualitative data analysis. According to Miles et al., (2014), there are three techniques for qualitative data analysis: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. This process takes place continuously throughout the research, even before the data has actually been collected.

In this study, data validity was ensured through triangulation techniques, specifically data source triangulation and theoretical triangulation. The data were collected comprehensively and then verified across multiple sources to establish their validity as a basis for drawing conclusions. This approach aims to ensure that the collected data meet the necessary constructs for inference. Furthermore, the combination of triangulation techniques was applied simultaneously during fieldwork, enabling the researcher to record data thoroughly. Thus, the data obtained are expected to be sufficiently robust for analysis and utilization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Types of Challenges Experienced by Lower Grade Teachers in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian Language Lessons

Challenges are conditions in the form of obstacles or difficulties that can hinder the achievement of a goal (Soewarno et al., 2016). Based on the interview results and supported by several studies, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian language subjects in lower grades still faces challenges in the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of learning.

a. Planning Stage

At the planning stage, teachers still experience difficulties in fully understanding the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum. These difficulties are particularly evident in the process of designing creative learning, compiling Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objective Flow (ATP), teaching tools, and understanding the principles of assessment (Wuwur, 2023). This shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has not been fully optimized because teachers still need more in-depth material and guidance.

In addition, obstacles were found in the preparation of teaching modules. Teachers' poor understanding of the correct systematic writing of modules resulted in the teaching tools being prepared not being optimal. This problem was further exacerbated by the fact that there were still teachers who had not mastered basic technological skills, such as using Microsoft Word, making it difficult for them to prepare learning tools (Faizah & Ramadan, 2024).

These obstacles are in line with the results of interviews with lower grade teachers, who revealed that many teachers still do not understand technology and still have difficulty in developing teaching modules. However, teachers continue to try to overcome these obstacles by learning independently through the internet. This opinion is also supported by the principal, who stated that the obstacles on the part of teachers stem from a lack of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. Thus, it can be understood that challenges at the planning stage are more influenced by factors such as uneven teacher understanding and limited skills in using technology as a support for planning learning tools.

b. Implementation Stage

In the learning implementation stage, the most dominant obstacles stem from the conditions of the students and the limitations of the learning media used by teachers. Based on the interview results, there are still low-grade students who are unable to read, which is influenced by the children's low basic abilities and lack of parental attention. This was conveyed by Ms. Alvirah, who said that some children experience reading difficulties due to slow development of their abilities and minimal family support.

This problem is reinforced by the results of the study (Ramadhani et al., 2025) which states that differences in students' cognitive abilities are the main factors that influence reading skills. Each child has a different level of development, so they need a variety of learning approaches. If not properly assisted, students who experience difficulties are at risk of falling behind and losing their motivation to learn

In addition, students' low interest in reading is also a serious obstacle. Students' interest in reading is still relatively low, both in textbooks and other reading materials, and this is exacerbated by a lack of parental guidance at home (Lili & Arsyfananda, 2025). This condition causes the strengthening of literacy, which should be carried out continuously, to be less than optimal.

From the teachers' perspective, obstacles in implementation also arise due to the limited variety of learning media. Ms. Yuli emphasized that the lack of variety in media makes it difficult to make learning interesting. Research by (Wantiana & Melisa, 2023) also shows that teachers often experience confusion in determining the appropriate learning media to use according to the needs of students. Therefore, challenges in the implementation stage of learning are not only sourced from students but are also influenced by the family environment, learning motivation, as well as creativity and the availability of learning media at school.

c. Evaluation Stage

In the evaluation stage, teachers face challenges in implementing assessments in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. These obstacles are related to teachers' limited understanding in determining the form of assessment, developing assessment instruments, and implementing assessments that are appropriate for the development of students. The principal emphasized that one of the main factors contributing to evaluation challenges is teachers' lack of understanding and the need for training so that teachers can carry out assessments appropriately. This is in line with the research by (R. Rahmadani et al., 2025)) which states that the lack of training on Merdeka Curriculum assessments, coupled with limited infrastructure and learning resources, hinders the implementation of diverse

assessments that are tailored to the needs of students.

As a solution, Ms. Yuli emphasized the importance of cooperation among teachers, mutual support, and teacher initiatives in creating creative learning media from simple materials. This shows that despite the obstacles, the school is making efforts to overcome them through collaboration and improving teacher competence.

2. Strategies of Lower Grade Teachers in Overcoming Obstacles in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian Language Subjects

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the concept of independent learning, which aims to develop students holistically, covering cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects, as well as paying attention to students' interests and talents (Hidayatullah et al., 2023). At SDS Ulumuddin, lower grade teachers' strategies in overcoming obstacles in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian language subjects are carried out in a planned manner so that the learning process remains effective. The school first strengthens teachers' understanding through workshops and training, both through KKG and K3S by inviting resource persons. This is in accordance with the research conducted by Janah et al., (2023) where in order to prepare the implementation of the independent curriculum, MIN 1 conduct trainings on the independent curriculum trough KKG. This strategy is important because training and mentoring can help teachers understand the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum and address challenges that arise during the learning process (Mujianto et al., 2025). Continuous strengthening of understanding is also necessary so that teachers are able to develop teaching tools, design learning strategies, and carry out assessments to the fullest extent possible in accordance with the requirements of the Merdeka Curriculum (N. S. Rahmadani et al., 2025).

Furthermore, teachers begin learning by planning through the preparation of Teaching Modules as the main guideline. Planning is carried out logically and systematically to determine learning objectives and utilize available learning resources (Nur Nasution, 2017). Teaching modules are prepared in an integrated and systematic manner to help students achieve the predetermined learning objectives (Salsabilla et al., 2023). In its implementation, teachers apply student-centered learning by creating a comfortable and enjoyable learning atmosphere, building closeness, providing motivation, and using various methods and media so that students are more active and involved. The implementation of this learning is a form of implementation of the plan that has been prepared previously (Fikariyah et al., 2024). To increase interest and motivation in learning, teachers also apply project-based learning through simple activities such as making crafts and decorating the classroom with words. This strategy is in line with the characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum, which is flexible, focuses on essential competencies, and supports character building through P5 and the Pancasila Student Profile (Hidayatullah et al., 2023).

In addition, teachers provide special assistance to students who are not yet able to read through gradual reading exercises in class and additional lessons after school with the principal. This assistance is considered effective because students receive more intensive guidance outside of class hours so that their reading skills can develop gradually (N. S. Rahmadani et al., 2025). Teachers also continue to involve students who are unable to read by giving them the opportunity to tell stories and express their opinions so that they remain active in learning. To support the success of this strategy, teachers collaborate with the principal and parents, with the principal providing additional

guidance and parents being directed to play a greater role in guiding their children at home. Finally, teachers implement continuous assessment by observing student activity, storytelling ability, courage to express opinions, and reading skill development throughout the learning process. Assessments are also conducted at the end of the learning process to determine the overall achievement of learning objectives, as assessment is a process of gathering information to determine the learning outcomes of students (Altika et al., 2023). With this strategy, lower grade teachers at SDS Ulumuddin are able to overcome the obstacles in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in a more focused manner while maintaining the effectiveness of Indonesian language learning.

3. The Impact of Teacher Strategies in Overcoming Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian Language Lessons

The implementation of learning strategies by lower grade teachers at SDS Ulumuddin has had a significant impact on the process and outcomes of Indonesian language learning. The strategy of using diverse learning media and project-based learning has proven to increase students' understanding, activity, and motivation to learn. This is in line with the results of an interview with Ms. Alvira, who stated that the use of learning media makes it easier for students to understand the material and be more interactive, thus increasing their enthusiasm for learning. These findings are reinforced by the study (Raudah et al., 2024) which explains that interactive learning media such as images and videos can create an engaging learning atmosphere, increase student involvement, and encourage interest and motivation to learn. With varied media, learning becomes less monotonous and students are more motivated to participate in learning activities.

In addition to learning media, learning strategies through simple projects also have a positive impact on students' attitudes and interest in learning. Students become more enthusiastic because they are directly involved in learning activities, as stated by Ms. Alvira that project-based learning makes students more enthusiastic about learning. From a motivational perspective, the integration of simple projects functions as an authentic learning mechanism, situating knowledge within meaningful tasks. The observed increase in enthusiasm aligns with self-determination theory, particularly the fulfillment of autonomy (active participation), competence (task accomplishment), and relatedness (collaborative interaction). This finding is in line with the research (S. N. Janah & Prameswari, 2024) which concludes that the application of Project Based Learning (PjBL) in Indonesian language learning can increase students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning because students are actively involved, making the learning process more interesting and meaningful. This strategy also supports the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes contextual, meaningful, and learner-centered learning.

However, these instructional gains are mediated by a critical structural tension: the automatic promotion policy embedded within the curriculum. While pedagogically progressive, this policy introduces a systemic contradiction when juxtaposed with the reality of uneven foundational literacy acquisition. Students who have not yet mastered basic reading skills are advanced to higher grades, creating a phenomenon akin to cumulative learning deficits, where gaps in early literacy propagate into more complex learning difficulties. This condition can be analyzed through a learning progression framework, which posits that literacy is a prerequisite competency; without it, subsequent knowledge acquisition becomes increasingly constrained. The resulting decline in

motivation, as observed, is not merely affective but structurally induced—students experience repeated failure due to misalignment between curricular demands and their readiness levels. This concern is substantiated Bella et al., (2025) and Bestari et al., (2025) who highlight the risks of declining learning quality and competency attainment under automatic promotion systems. This is also in line with Ms. Alvira's statement that this policy makes the situation of students who cannot read a cause for concern because they must continue to move up to the next grade.

To minimize these negative impacts, teachers and schools provide special assistance to students who are unable to read. Students continue to be involved in learning through storytelling and expressing their opinions, and are given additional lessons with the support of the school and in collaboration with their parents. These efforts demonstrate the school's commitment to helping students achieve basic reading skills, as the success of Indonesian language learning in lower grades is highly dependent on the ability to recognize letters and read. This is in line with the principal's statement that reading ability is a key indicator in Indonesian language learning in lower grades. This collaborative strategy is reinforced by the study (Irhamah et al., 2024) which states that cooperation between teachers and parents has a positive effect on students' motivation and reading learning outcomes, so that reading ability can improve gradually.

Overall, while the implemented strategies demonstrate high adaptive capacity at the classroom level, their effectiveness is partially constrained by macro-level policy structures. This suggests that improving learning outcomes requires not only pedagogical innovation but also policy coherence, particularly in aligning promotion policies with competency-based progression standards. Without such alignment, there is a risk that instructional improvements will yield only localized gains, while systemic issues continue to undermine long-term literacy development and educational equity.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in lower-grade Indonesian language learning remains suboptimal, constrained by structural and pedagogical factors across planning, instruction, and assessment. Core barriers include limited teacher pedagogical-content knowledge of the curriculum, insufficient capacity in instructional design and assessment development, low technological proficiency, and students' underdeveloped foundational literacy compounded by weak family support. These constraints highlight a systemic misalignment between curriculum demands and classroom readiness.

In response, teachers enacted adaptive, context-responsive strategies, including professional capacity building, collaborative practices, differentiated module design, student-centered and project-based learning, and targeted literacy interventions. These practices demonstrate emergent pedagogical adaptability aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. The implications are twofold. At the classroom level, these strategies contribute to improved student engagement and participation, indicating partial instructional effectiveness. At the system level, persistent issue particularly the progression of students without adequate literacy mastery signals the need for policy recalibration, sustained teacher professional development, and stronger school–family partnerships to ensure equitable and sustainable learning outcomes.

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