
EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Challenges and Strategies in Implementing Kurikulum Merdeka During Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges and strategies experienced by EFL pre-service teachers in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka during their teaching practicum, particularly in rural elementary schools in Landak Regency, Indonesia. The research was conducted in five rural elementary schools involving ten EFL pre-service teachers who were actively engaged in their practicum under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data and identify recurring challenges and strategies. The findings revealed that pre-service teachers encountered several major challenges, including limited teaching resources and infrastructure, difficulties adapting to student-centered approaches, and struggles in designing flexible and authentic assessments aligned with the curriculum's principles. Despite these obstacles, the participants employed various strategies, including attending workshops on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), collaborating with senior teachers, and seeking additional learning resources independently. These strategies helped them adapt their teaching practices and improve their readiness to implement the curriculum. The study highlights the importance of institutional support, professional development, and mentorship in ensuring the successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka by pre-service teachers. It concludes that addressing these challenges is crucial for preparing competent English language educators and recommends further research into long-term impacts of curriculum implementation on teacher identity and student outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of education in Indonesia encompasses a series of reforms aimed at improving the quality, accessibility, and relevance of the national education system. This shift responds to the urgent need to prepare students with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability in an increasingly globalized world. Over the decades, Indonesia's curriculum has undergone continuous development—from the Curriculum of Lesson Plans (1947) to Kurikulum Merdeka (2022)—each reflecting the nation's attempt to stay aligned with societal and technological changes. The current Kurikulum Merdeka places strong emphasis on flexibility, contextual relevance, and student-centered learning. It promotes project-based learning and formative assessment while empowering teachers to innovate in delivering content tailored to the learners' diverse needs. However, the implementation of this curriculum also presents practical challenges, especially in rural areas and schools with limited infrastructure, such as the lack of projectors, audio devices, and other supporting facilities.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of curriculum implementation and teaching practicum, particularly in urban and secondary education settings. Researchers such as Fadillah et al. (2024), Agnia et al. (2024), and Wiediantin et al. (2023) have examined the experiences of EFL pre-service teachers in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka, focusing on challenges like teacher preparedness, adaptation to student-centered methods, and assessment practices. However, limited attention has been given to EFL pre-service teachers who are still developing their teaching identity and pedagogical skills, particularly those teaching in elementary schools in rural contexts. Moreover, teaching English as a foreign language to young learners presents additional difficulties, as students may struggle with both cognitive development and language unfamiliarity. These issues are compounded by the need for pre-service teachers to understand and apply more flexible, formative assessments as promoted by Kurikulum Merdeka—an area where many new teachers feel uncertain and underprepared.

This research aims to explore the challenges and strategies experienced by EFL pre-service teachers in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka during their teaching practicum, particularly in elementary schools located in rural areas. It focuses on how pre-service teachers adapt to the demands of project-based learning, student-centered instruction, and formative assessment while teaching English—a subject that is not the students' first language. The study also seeks to understand how these novice teachers overcome contextual limitations such as limited resources, unfamiliar curriculum structures, and lack of prior teaching experience. Through this exploration, the study hopes to identify practical insights that can improve pre-service teacher training programs and better prepare them for modern classrooms.

This research is conducted in response to the real and growing need to support EFL pre-service teachers as they transition from theory to practice. Their experiences during the teaching practicum are not only foundational to their professional development but also crucial in determining their confidence, motivation, and readiness to become effective educators. Given the shift in mindset required by Kurikulum Merdeka—from rigid, exam-oriented teaching to dynamic, student-centered learning—this study is important to help bridge the gap between curriculum expectations and classroom realities. Additionally, the findings may provide guidance for teacher education institutions, policy makers, and mentors in designing responsive training and support systems that align with the evolving educational landscape in Indonesia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. EFL Pre-Service Teachers

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) pre-service teachers are students in teacher education programs who are training to become English teachers for learners whose first language is not English. These pre-service teachers undergo both theoretical coursework and practical training to develop their pedagogical and linguistic competence (Alshahrani, 2020). Theoretical coursework typically covers topics related to language acquisition, teaching methodologies, classroom management, and assessment techniques. Meanwhile, practical training often includes observations of experienced teachers, student teaching placements, and the development of lesson plans that are implemented in real classroom

settings. This combination of theory and practice is designed to equip pre-service teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective educators. However, the process of becoming a competent teacher goes beyond just acquiring knowledge; it requires the ability to apply this knowledge in the complexities of the classroom environment.

The transition from theory to practice is a crucial phase where pre-service teachers experience real classroom conditions for the first time. According to Rahimi & Fadaei (2021), EFL pre-service teachers often face difficulties in adapting to diverse student needs, managing classrooms, and implementing effective language teaching methodologies. While the theoretical aspects of their training provide them with a solid foundation, the reality of teaching in a classroom presents challenges that are often not fully addressed in their coursework. Classroom environments are dynamic and unpredictable, where no two days are the same. Pre-service teachers are required to quickly adapt to the various needs of their students, including differences in language proficiency, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. This can be especially difficult for those who are not accustomed to managing the range of student behaviors and emotional responses that can arise in a classroom.

In addition to adapting their teaching to suit the needs of individual students, EFL pre-service teachers also face the challenge of maintaining classroom discipline and ensuring a positive and productive learning environment. Classroom management is a crucial aspect of teaching, as an environment of respect and order is essential for effective learning. Pre-service teachers often find it challenging to strike a balance between being authoritative and supportive, as they must establish clear expectations while also fostering a nurturing atmosphere. Moreover, they must develop strategies to engage students who may struggle with motivation or have difficulty with the English language. This requires a deep understanding of how to tailor lessons to meet the needs of diverse learners, while also keeping students actively engaged and interested in the material.

The implementation of effective language teaching methodologies also poses significant challenges for EFL pre-service teachers. While they may have studied various teaching strategies and techniques during their coursework, the application of these methods in real classrooms often requires a level of flexibility and creativity that can be difficult to master.

Pre-service teachers must learn to adapt their lessons to the needs and interests of their students, while also incorporating new technologies and instructional tools that enhance learning. In some cases, they may need to modify their teaching approach when certain methods do not yield the desired results or when students do not respond as expected. This requires an openness to experimentation, reflection, and continuous improvement in their teaching practices.

As Rahimi & Fadaei (2021) highlight, EFL pre-service teachers often struggle with balancing the demands of lesson planning, classroom management, and student assessment while still trying to develop their own teaching style and identity. The pressure to perform and meet the expectations of both their mentors and their students can be overwhelming, and it is common for pre-service teachers to experience feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty during this phase of their training. The realization that teaching is a dynamic and evolving practice can be both exciting and daunting, as pre-service teachers come to understand that there is no single “correct” way to teach. Instead, they must continually refine their skills, adapt their methods, and learn from their experiences in the classroom.

Ultimately, the transition from theory to practice is an essential period of professional growth that shapes the future effectiveness of EFL teachers. Through hands-on experience, reflection, and support from mentors and peers, pre-service teachers gradually develop the competence and confidence necessary to become skilled educators. As they navigate the complexities of classroom life, they learn to make thoughtful decisions about how to approach various teaching challenges, engage students effectively, and create positive learning experiences. Alshahrani (2020) emphasizes the importance of this phase in helping pre-service teachers integrate theory and practice, as it is through this integration that they are able to build their pedagogical expertise and cultivate a deeper understanding of their role as teachers. The skills and insights gained during this transition ultimately form the foundation for their continued development as educators in the years to come.

2.2 *Teaching Practicum*

The teaching practicum is an essential component of teacher education programs, where pre-service teachers apply their theoretical knowledge in real teaching settings (Zeichner & Liston, 2020). This period allows pre-service teachers to transition from the classroom learning environment to actual teaching practice, giving them a firsthand experience of the challenges and rewards of teaching. The teaching practicum serves as a critical bridge between theory and practice, offering opportunities for professional development that help pre-service teachers refine their skills and gain confidence in their ability to manage a classroom and deliver effective instruction. It is during this time that pre-service teachers not only put their theoretical knowledge into practice but also develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching, including how to adapt lessons to meet diverse student needs, manage classroom behavior, and assess student learning.

Teaching practicum provides opportunities for professional development, helping pre-service teachers improve their classroom management skills, instructional strategies, and confidence in teaching. The real-world teaching environment enables pre-service teachers to test out different instructional strategies and classroom management techniques to see what works best with their students. They also receive feedback from mentor teachers, who offer guidance and suggestions for improving their teaching practice. This feedback is invaluable as it helps pre-service teachers reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement. Moreover, the practicum setting encourages pre-service teachers to experiment with various teaching styles and methods, fostering creativity and flexibility in their approach to teaching. Over time, they develop their own teaching identity, learning how to engage and motivate students effectively while ensuring that lessons are aligned with curriculum standards.

However, implementing a new curriculum during a practicum period can be challenging, especially when pre-service teachers are still adapting to basic teaching skills. The process of integrating curriculum requirements into lesson planning, instructional methods, and assessment strategies can be overwhelming, particularly for those who are not yet comfortable with the logistics of lesson delivery. As Setiawan (2021)

notes, many pre-service teachers struggle with integrating the full scope of the curriculum into their lesson plans. Curriculum design is complex, and it requires pre-service teachers to not only align lessons with learning objectives but also to consider factors such as student engagement, pacing, and differentiation. The pressure to meet curriculum standards while also keeping students interested and motivated can be daunting for new teachers, especially when they are still trying to master the basics of classroom management and instructional delivery.

The practicum period often involves a steep learning curve as pre-service teachers are expected to manage multiple aspects of teaching at once. They must balance lesson planning, student engagement, assessment, and classroom management, all while adapting to the unique needs of their students. This multitasking can be overwhelming, especially when pre-service teachers are still developing their teaching routines and strategies. Many struggle with finding the right balance between adhering to curriculum guidelines and responding to the immediate needs of their students. For example, pre-service teachers may find that their carefully planned lessons need to be modified on the fly due to unforeseen classroom dynamics or student behavior. In these moments, they must rely on their developing skills and intuition to make adjustments and ensure that learning continues effectively.

Pre-service teachers often face challenges in implementing assessment strategies that accurately reflect student progress. Assessing student learning is a vital part of teaching, yet it requires teachers to be thoughtful and intentional in their approach. Pre-service teachers must learn how to design assessments that are both meaningful and aligned with their lessons, as well as how to use assessment data to inform future teaching. This requires a deep understanding of how to assess different types of learning, whether it be through formal tests, informal observations, or student projects. Setiawan (2021) highlights that integrating assessment strategies into the practicum experience can be particularly challenging, as pre-service teachers must learn to balance formative and summative assessments while ensuring that all students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in ways that are fair and equitable. In this case, providing pre-service teachers with guidance on how to effectively manage these assessments could help

them develop more balanced and equitable approaches to evaluating student performance.

Despite these challenges, the teaching practicum is an invaluable experience for pre-service teachers. It offers a unique opportunity to learn and grow as educators, enabling them to refine their teaching techniques, enhance their classroom management skills, and build the confidence needed to succeed in their future careers. The hands-on experience gained during the practicum is crucial for helping pre-service teachers understand the complexities of teaching and the various factors that influence student learning. With guidance from experienced mentor teachers and ongoing reflection on their practice, pre-service teachers can develop the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the challenges of teaching and make a meaningful impact on their students' lives.

2.3 Curriculum Changes in the Past Decade in Indonesia

Over the past decade, Indonesia has undergone significant changes in its national curriculum, each designed to address evolving educational needs and the demands of a globalized world. These curriculum changes reflect the country's ongoing effort to improve the quality of education and prepare students for future challenges. The first major shift came with the introduction of the Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan (KTSP) in 2006. This curriculum was notable for offering schools more flexibility in tailoring their educational programs to the local context and student needs. KTSP allowed schools to develop their own syllabus, but it also resulted in inconsistencies across the nation in terms of implementation and quality of education. Despite its flexibility, the KTSP had some limitations in ensuring equal standards of education in both urban and rural schools.

In 2013, the Kurikulum 2013 (K13) replaced KTSP, focusing on the holistic development of students. K13 was designed to improve students' competencies in three key areas: knowledge, skills, and character. It emphasized a more integrated and thematic approach to learning, encouraging active participation and critical thinking. K13 also highlighted the importance of character education, preparing students not just academically, but also ethically and socially. However, the implementation of K13 faced several challenges, including the insufficient training of teachers, lack of proper resources, and an overloaded curriculum. To address these issues, a revised version of K13 was

introduced in 2016, which simplified some content and made the learning objectives clearer, but challenges in uniform implementation across the country persisted.

The culmination of these ongoing adjustments came with the introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka in 2022. This new curriculum marks a significant departure from the previous ones by emphasizing greater flexibility for schools, teachers, and students. The Kurikulum Merdeka offers a more personalized approach to education, allowing schools to adapt learning to their specific contexts and the needs of their students. It focuses on improving literacy and numeracy, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration through project-based learning and inquiry. Additionally, the curriculum emphasizes character education, aiming to nurture well-rounded individuals with strong moral values. One of the key features of the Kurikulum Merdeka is its focus on competency-based assessments, which allows for a more holistic evaluation of students' progress, beyond traditional exams.

The introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka reflects a broader global trend in education towards more flexible, student-centered learning, and it is a response to the dynamic and diverse needs of Indonesia's educational system. It provides teachers with the autonomy to tailor lessons, fosters a deeper connection between students and their learning process, and ensures that education is more aligned with the challenges of the modern world. Ultimately, the changes over the past decade illustrate Indonesia's commitment to continuously adapting its education system to better prepare students for the future, while also addressing local and national educational goals.

2.4 Curriculum Changes in the Past Decade in Indonesia

The Kurikulum Merdeka, introduced in Indonesia, marks a significant shift toward a more flexible and student-centered approach to education. This curriculum was designed to move away from the rigid, standardized educational practices that characterized earlier systems, such as Kurikulum 2013. The core objective of Kurikulum Merdeka is to offer greater autonomy to educators, enabling them to tailor their teaching strategies and learning experiences to the diverse needs and interests of students (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). By emphasizing flexibility, teachers are encouraged to create personalized learning experiences, fostering an environment where students can take

greater responsibility for their learning and actively engage in projects and activities that reflect their interests and passions. This approach is especially beneficial in a country like Indonesia, where there is a wide variety of regional, cultural, and social contexts that can influence educational outcomes. One of the key features of Kurikulum Merdeka is its strong focus on project-based learning (PBL), an educational approach that promotes active learning through the completion of real-world projects. PBL encourages students to work collaboratively, think critically, and apply knowledge to practical problems. This method not only helps students develop essential skills for the future but also aligns with the global shift toward skills-based education. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021), project-based learning allows students to explore topics in depth, develop problem-solving skills, and cultivate teamwork abilities. This also helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, preparing students for future challenges in both their personal and professional lives.

Despite these advantages, the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka comes with its own set of challenges, particularly for pre-service teachers—those who are still undergoing training to become professional educators. As these teachers begin to navigate the realities of teaching, they must adapt to new methods while simultaneously managing their own learning and development. According to Rahman & Hidayati (2023), many teachers, particularly those who are new to the profession, face difficulties with the flexible teaching methods promoted by the Kurikulum Merdeka. Unlike traditional teaching methods, which often rely on fixed instructional practices and standardized assessments, Kurikulum Merdeka demands that teachers continuously adapt their approach based on the needs and interests of their students. For many pre-service teachers, understanding how to balance the flexibility of the curriculum with the need for structured teaching can be a complex task.

Another challenge identified by Rahman & Hidayati (2023) is the difficulty teachers face in managing classrooms with diverse learning needs. The Kurikulum Merdeka encourages teachers to create inclusive classrooms where all students, regardless of their background or abilities, can learn at their own pace. However, for pre-service teachers, this can be particularly overwhelming. They may not yet have the classroom management skills or experience necessary to effectively address the wide

range of learning styles, abilities, and interests that they encounter in a diverse classroom setting. Classroom management, a critical skill for any teacher, becomes even more essential when trying to facilitate a student-centered learning environment. Ensuring that each student is engaged, motivated, and actively participating in the learning process is challenging, especially for those who are still refining their teaching practices.

Furthermore, designing student-centered lesson plans that align with the principles of Kurikulum Merdeka presents an additional hurdle for many pre-service teachers. This involves creating lessons that are not only flexible and adaptable to individual students' needs but also engage students actively in the learning process. Teachers must move away from traditional lecture-based teaching and instead facilitate an environment where students take more ownership of their learning through hands-on projects, discussions, and collaborative activities. As Rahman & Hidayati (2023) observe, this shift requires pre-service teachers to rethink their approach to lesson planning, assessment, and instructional design, which can be daunting for those who have not yet fully developed their teaching styles or have little experience with project-based learning. In this case, it is crucial for pre-service teachers to receive adequate support and professional development to navigate this transition and effectively implement the principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka.

For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) pre-service teachers, these challenges are even more pronounced. They must navigate not only the intricacies of adapting to the Kurikulum Merdeka but also the complexities of teaching a second language. Language instruction requires careful consideration of how to engage students while simultaneously developing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. EFL pre-service teachers must integrate the flexibility of the Kurikulum Merdeka with effective language teaching strategies that can meet the needs of students at varying levels of language proficiency. This balance between curriculum adaptation and language instruction can be particularly challenging for pre-service teachers who are still honing their skills and understanding of language acquisition.

Moreover, for pre-service teachers, the transition from theory to practice—especially in the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka—requires both confidence and flexibility. While theoretical coursework may

provide them with the knowledge of pedagogical principles, applying those principles in real classroom settings presents a steep learning curve. As Rahman & Hidayati (2023) point out, pre-service teachers often face feelings of uncertainty and anxiety as they try to implement what they have learned in their training programs into actual teaching situations. This sense of uncertainty can be exacerbated by the demands of Kurikulum Merdeka, which requires them to be adaptable, innovative, and creative in their teaching methods, especially when faced with diverse classrooms that may lack resources or have students with different learning needs.

Kurikulum Merdeka provides significant opportunities for innovation and personalized learning, its implementation presents several challenges, particularly for pre-service teachers. These challenges include mastering flexible teaching methods, managing diverse classrooms, and designing student-centered lessons that align with the curriculum's principles. For EFL pre-service teachers, these challenges are further compounded by the need to integrate language instruction with curriculum adaptation. As the education system in Indonesia continues to evolve, ongoing support for pre-service teachers—such as professional development, mentorship, and more hands-on practice—will be essential to ensuring the successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka and fostering a more effective, dynamic learning environment for all students.

2.5 Curriculum Changes in the Past Decade in Indonesia

The Kurikulum Merdeka is a significant change in Indonesia's education system that aims to provide more freedom in teaching methods. Its main goal is to create a more flexible learning environment where students can be more actively involved in the learning process, with a focus on the development of students' character. However, the adoption and implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka are not without challenges. According to Warsihna et al. (2023), the challenges faced in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka are primarily related to the difficulties in integrating the new approaches in the curriculum into the existing education system. This includes various aspects such as project-based teaching, the use of technology in learning, and more flexible assessments that are focused on student development. Another challenge is how to shift the mindset of both teachers and students regarding learning, from a teacher-centered approach to a more student-centered

one. According to Fullan (2020), there are several significant challenges experienced by EFL pre-service teachers in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka:

1. Challenges in Adapting to Student-Centered Teaching Approaches

Pre-service teachers often face difficulties in shifting from traditional teacher-centered methods to student-centered approaches. The Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes active student participation through collaborative, project-based, and inquiry-driven learning. However, pre-service teachers, especially those teaching in elementary schools, struggle to implement these methods effectively due to limited teaching experience and uncertainty in managing such activities (Setiawan, 2021). This issue becomes more complex when applied to elementary school students, who may not yet possess the cognitive maturity or independent learning habits required for student-centered learning. The researcher believes that this challenge highlights the importance of equipping pre-service teachers with training that is not only theoretical but also practical and contextualized, particularly for teaching young learners who still require a high degree of teacher guidance.

2. Limited Resources and Infrastructure

Pre-service teachers placed in rural schools frequently encounter a lack of essential infrastructure, such as internet access, computers, or even basic teaching aids (Agnia et al., 2024). These limitations hinder the implementation of technology-enhanced learning and project-based activities promoted by the Kurikulum Merdeka. For elementary school students in under-resourced schools, this situation severely restricts their exposure to creative and interactive learning experiences. Without sufficient materials or support, pre-service teachers find it difficult to engage students in dynamic, real-world problem-solving tasks, which are key to the Kurikulum Merdeka philosophy (Rahman & Hidayati, 2023). The researcher assumes that to overcome this issue, greater institutional and governmental support is needed to provide equitable access to learning facilities and resources, especially in rural elementary schools where the gap is most evident.

3. Challenges in Designing Flexible and Authentic Assessments

The Kurikulum Merdeka encourages formative, process-based assessment methods rather than relying solely on summative evaluations.

However, pre-service teachers often struggle to design assessments that genuinely reflect the learning process and are tailored to individual student needs (Widiarti, 2021). This is especially challenging in elementary education, where students' varying literacy levels, attention spans, and comprehension skills require highly differentiated and age-appropriate assessment tools. Pre-service teachers, lacking experience, often default to simpler forms of evaluation that do not align with the curriculum's intent, thereby limiting the holistic development of their students (Mutmainah et al., 2024). The researcher believes that continuous mentorship and reflective practice are necessary to help pre-service teachers develop more adaptive, age-appropriate assessment strategies that support the individual growth of young learners.

These challenges highlight the urgent need for more comprehensive training, ongoing support, and practical experience for pre-service teachers to effectively implement the Kurikulum Merdeka. Given the diverse and often resource-limited nature of many educational environments, it is crucial that future educators are not only equipped with theoretical knowledge but also gain hands-on experience that prepares them for the realities of teaching in such contexts. Pre-service teachers must be trained to adapt their teaching methods to meet the varied needs of their students, particularly in settings where access to resources like technology, teaching materials, or professional development opportunities may be limited. Furthermore, they require continuous mentorship and professional support throughout their teaching practicum to refine their skills, navigate challenges, and ensure that they can create an inclusive and student-centered learning environment that aligns with the principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Only through such extensive preparation can pre-service teachers be truly prepared to foster meaningful learning experiences for their students and contribute to the success of this transformative curriculum.

2.6 Curriculum Changes in the Past Decade in Indonesia

The implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka is a major effort to transform the educational system in Indonesia, focusing on freedom of learning, the development of individual potential, and adjustments to the needs and interests of students. This curriculum provides more space for students to actively engage in learning but also presents significant challenges for teachers and educators who must implement this concept

in practice. These challenges involve various aspects, from adjusting the learning materials to developing more flexible teaching methods. Therefore, careful planning and strategies are required to ensure the effective implementation of this curriculum.

In the context of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, the researcher believe that every step taken by educators should be based on a deep understanding of the challenges at hand and readiness to adapt to the changes that are taking place. As explained by Dwi Fachriani Astuti (2024), strategies for implementing the curriculum involve systematic and planned actions to overcome the identified challenges. The researcher believe that good planning and precise execution are key to overcoming these obstacles, ensuring that the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka can be achieved successfully. The use of structured and adaptive strategies will help educators navigate this major change while maintaining optimal learning quality for students.

in the process of implementing the curriculum, of course, each teacher has its strategy, according to Latifah Hanum and Ahmad Amin Dalimunte (2025) there are three strategies used by pre-service teachers in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, namely:

a. Attending Workshop on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Pre-service teachers participate in workshops to improve their teaching skills, especially regarding CLT and TBLT methods, which align with the Kurikulum Merdeka principles. These workshops help them understand the new teaching approaches and equip them with practical skills.

b. Collaborating with Senior Teachers

Pre-service teachers collaborate with experienced teachers to gain guidance and share experiences. This strategy is beneficial as it accelerates the adaptation process, helping them understand the practical aspects of curriculum implementation.

c. Independently Seeking Additional Resources

Many pre-service teachers independently seek additional resources, such as journals, articles, and online materials, to enhance their teaching strategies and align them with Kurikulum Merdeka principles. This self-directed learning supports their growth and helps them tackle challenges effectively.

In conclusion, the strategies employed by pre-service teachers demonstrate a proactive approach to overcoming the challenges of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. Through professional development, collaboration with senior teachers, and independent resource-seeking, pre-service teachers are working towards successfully adapting to the new curriculum. Therefore, it is critical to continue providing them with opportunities for training, collaboration, and access to educational resources, which are essential for ensuring the successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in their teaching practices.

3. METHODS

This research was conducted using a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges and strategies experienced by EFL pre-service teachers in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka during their teaching practicum. The research was conducted in five rural elementary schools in Landak Regency which have adopted the Kurikulum Merdeka. The participants of the study were ten EFL pre-service teachers who were selected using purposive sampling, as they had direct teaching experience in rural elementary schools in Landak Regency that had adopted the Kurikulum Merdeka.

Data were collected through three main instruments: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements categorized into two sections challenges and strategies designed using a Likert scale, and aimed at capturing participants' perceptions regarding the implementation of the curriculum. Based on the questionnaire results, three participants representing different score categories (high, medium, and low) were selected for interviews to gain deeper insights into their experiences. Furthermore, document analysis was conducted on lesson plans and reflection journals to validate and enrich the data collected through other instruments.

The data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Source triangulation was used to ensure the credibility of findings by comparing information from multiple participants and instruments. To deepen the findings derived from the questionnaire, the researcher selected 3 out of 10 pre-service teachers who had completed the instrument for follow-up interviews. These three participants were chosen based on their

consistently high responses to a set of items that reflected significant challenges in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka during their teaching practicum.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the findings from questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis, focusing on the challenges and strategies experienced by EFL pre-service teachers in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka during their teaching practicum in rural elementary schools in Landak Regency. The data reveal key challenges, including the application of student-centered learning, flexible assessment design, and limited facilities and technological support. In response, pre-service teachers employed strategies such as collaborating with mentor teachers, attending workshops, and independently seeking additional resources.

This research presents a summary of the key findings related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by EFL pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum in rural elementary schools in Landak Regency. The data includes insights on how these pre-service teachers managed their classrooms, applied student-centered learning, and faced both pedagogical and contextual challenges during the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka.

The interview with the three EFL Pre-service teachers' became carried out of approximately one hour. Researcher have pondered and reviewed the technique of re-listening, re-reading, and re-checking the facts.

The findings were analyzed using a theoretical framework relevant to curriculum implementation and teacher development.

Three pre-service teachers were selected for in-depth interviews based on their questionnaire responses. During the interviews, the researcher focused on the participants' experiences, reflections, and strategies as they navigated these challenges. The purpose of the interview was to gain deeper insight into how these future educators implemented classroom management and curriculum strategies in a resource-limited context.

A questionnaire was distributed to 10 EFL pre-service teachers to assess their perceptions of the challenges and strategies related to the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. The analysis of the responses is summarized in the charts below.

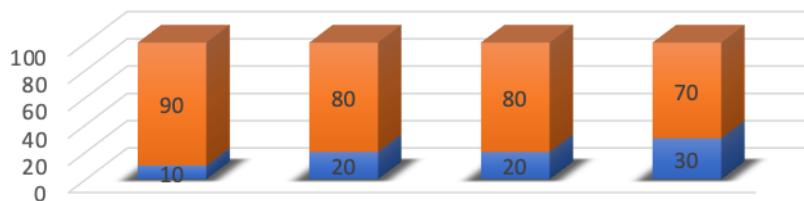
Tabel 1.
Strategies employed by EFL Pre-service Teachers

Challenges Faced by EFL Pre-service Teachers



Tabel 2.
Strategies employed by EFL Pre-service Teachers

Strategies employed by EFL Pre-service Teachers



Collaborating and consulting with senior/mentor teachers. Independently seeking additional resources (e.g., online materials). Modifying lesson plans to suit the learning conditions and limitations. Attending workshops or school's training related to Kurikulum Merdeka journals.

■ Disagree ■ Agree

The next section presents a detailed analysis of their responses. The interview results summarized in the below.

1. Challenges while teaching in implementing the kurikulum merdeka

From the interviews, all three participants expressed initial difficulties when facing the changes brought by the Kurikulum Merdeka. Mrs. D stated, *"Of course, there were challenges, especially in remote areas."* Similarly, Mrs. G emphasized the difficulty of adjusting in such settings, saying, *"Yes. There was no electricity there, and they had just transitioned from the old curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. English was also new and had just been implemented when we started."* Mrs. E added her perspective, reflecting on her limited prior exposure to the new curriculum: *"Definitely, and many. It was difficult because it was the first time using the Merdeka Curriculum, and my previous school experience was with a different curriculum, so I had to learn a lot."* These statements suggest that the teachers not only had to adapt pedagogically but also struggled with the systemic and environmental changes that accompanied the implementation.

2. Encounter any obstacles while implementing collaborative activities, group discussions, and project-based learning

All participants admitted facing significant obstacles when implementing collaborative activities such as group discussions and project-based learning as promoted in the Kurikulum Merdeka. Mrs. D explained that one of the main issues was the language barrier, stating, *"Some couldn't speak Indonesian, so they didn't understand when group tasks were explained and asked, 'Miss, how is that? Why is it in a foreign language?'"* She also added that *"students were allowed to use their local language, so many weren't proficient in Indonesian, some not at all."* Mrs. G supported this by sharing her experience, *"The children didn't understand what group work and projects were, so we had to explain it first."* Likewise, Mrs. E remarked on the students' lack of exposure to collaborative learning, saying, *"There were many obstacles because the children apparently had no experience with such activities. Only a few teachers taught group discussions and presentations, so they were not used to it and were still in the adjustment phase."* These reflections highlight that implementing student-centered learning strategies required not only pedagogical adaptation but also cultural and linguistic adjustments from both teachers and students.

3. Implementing collaborative activities, group discussions, and project-based learning as part of a student-centered teaching approach during teaching practice with the Kurikulum Merdeka

The implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in rural elementary schools also presented notable challenges in classroom management and communication. Mrs. D shared that the digital-based nature of the curriculum made it difficult to deliver interactive learning due to the lack of infrastructure, stating, *"Firstly, the Merdeka Curriculum is digital-based, but it's difficult there because there's no projector and no network. There are even classes with no network at all, and in the office, it's very limited. So it's difficult to provide interactive digital learning."* Mrs. G added that managing students under this new curriculum was especially challenging, saying, *"This Merdeka Curriculum was new to them, so we had to repeat explanations. The challenge was managing them, especially elementary school children."* Similarly, Mrs. E emphasized the struggle of communicating lessons to students unfamiliar with both English and the new curriculum, explaining, *"Everything had to be explained in as much detail as possible, and sometimes they didn't remember. There were also children with different abilities who often said, 'I can't, Miss,' which was a challenge."* These difficulties reveal how the lack of student readiness and limited infrastructure often hindered the intended interactive and student-centered learning process.

4. Obstacles regarding resources in the implementation of learning

One of the most prominent challenges faced by the participants in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka was the lack of infrastructure and technological resources in the teaching locations. Mrs. D emphasized the limitations by stating, *"Very lacking, because the area is remote. It's difficult to implement digital-based learning. Only conventional media could be used."* Similarly, Mrs. G described the extreme conditions in her placement area, saying, *"There's no signal. No electricity either, because it's a 3T area – disadvantaged, frontier, outermost – where the roads are bad, no signal, and no electricity. To turn on the electricity, we had to start a generator, which was very difficult."* Mrs. E also echoed these struggles, explaining, *"The PLP location was quite remote. There was electricity, but facilities were difficult. There was no network, or if there was, it was only in certain places and difficult to reach at school. So, we couldn't implement modern learning using projectors or sound. What was implemented was only flashcards because they were the most*

supportive and didn't require a network." These testimonies clearly demonstrate how inadequate infrastructure significantly limited the ability of pre-service teachers to implement the curriculum as intended, forcing them to rely on traditional, low-tech teaching methods.

5. The resource-related challenges faced during teaching practice, especially in terms of technology and teaching materials

The use of technology and teaching materials during the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka was significantly limited due to environmental and infrastructural constraints. Mrs. D explained that technology was particularly challenging to use, saying, "*Technology was definitely very difficult, one of them being limited network. For example, I had downloaded videos on my laptop, but in class, the children were less enthusiastic about the videos.*" She also mentioned the cultural limitations, "*I couldn't be too strict there because the teachers had already warned me, and some parents were less supportive, so it was considered rude. So it was difficult to implement digital-based learning media.*" In contrast, she added that *teaching materials went smoothly* and were not a major issue.

Mrs. G reiterated the technological difficulty in her brief response, "*As I said, no signal and no electricity,*" indicating that access to even basic digital tools was non-existent. Meanwhile, Mrs. E adapted by using low-tech resources, stating, "*I only used flashcards and printed materials. It required effort because I had to go to the city to print. The school didn't have a printer.*" However, she noted that some English-related posters were available at the school, which helped her align the materials with the Merdeka Curriculum when time constraints prevented her from making new ones. These experiences underline how technological barriers forced pre-service teachers to find alternative, often labor-intensive methods for delivering curriculum content in resource-limited environments

6. Difficulties when designing assessments

Mrs. D explained the challenge of accommodating students with diverse needs, saying, "*There were some children with special needs. Assessments couldn't be uniform, so I had to think of appropriate assessments for those children, to be fair and according to their abilities.*" Mrs. G, on the other hand, faced technical constraints, explaining, "*There was no electricity, so it was difficult to turn on the laptop to create assessments. Writing by hand was also*

tiring." Meanwhile, Mrs. E described her struggle to balance varied student abilities with assessment demands, stating, "*Sometimes some could answer with understanding, and some didn't understand at all. We couldn't apply the same assessment to all students.*" She also shared that attempts to seek guidance from senior teachers were often unhelpful as "*they were also still learning the Merdeka Curriculum.*" These accounts illustrate that assessment under the new curriculum requires not only technical preparation but also pedagogical flexibility, especially in diverse and low-resource classroom environments.

7. Formative and diagnostic assessments

Mrs. D described how she used contextualization to support student understanding, stating, "*I tried to make sure the children could understand, for example, by linking it to their daily lives, so they could say it, especially in English.*" Mrs. G indicated that she practiced both types of assessments by incorporating reflective activities, explaining, "*Like asking for reflection at the end of the lesson and having a Q&A again.*" Meanwhile, Mrs. E focused more on observational formative assessment, noting, "*I usually observed their activeness, for example, during group discussions.*" However, she admitted not applying diagnostic assessment in her practice. These responses show that while the concept of formative assessment was relatively familiar and applied in varied ways, diagnostic assessment was less commonly implemented, likely due to a lack of understanding or exposure to its structured methodology in the field.

8. Formative and diagnostic assessments design

Mrs. D focused more on the purpose rather than the structured design of the assessment, stating, "*I tried to make sure the children could understand. One example was linking it to their daily lives.*" This approach reflected her intent to ground language learning in meaningful, familiar contexts. Mrs. G adopted a more practical and straightforward strategy by relying on existing resources, explaining, "*Taking it from the teaching module.*" Meanwhile, Mrs. E utilized performance-based observation, sharing, "*For example, when making teaching media about body parts, each group had two vocabularies, and from that, I saw who was more active and could explain. So the assessment was mostly from themselves.*" These responses reveal that while participants had diverse ways of assessing learning, a structured understanding of formative and diagnostic assessment design was still

developing, and many relied on either pre-existing materials or informal observations.

9. Difficulties creating project-based assessments and questions relevant to real-life student activities, such as projects or practical tasks, while teaching with the kurikulum Merdeka.

Mrs. D explained that many students had limited proficiency in Indonesian, which significantly affected their ability to understand learning materials and complete tasks. She shared, *"Sometimes it was too complicated for them because they didn't know. It was difficult to guide children who didn't understand and couldn't speak Indonesian. The assignments were difficult."* Mrs. G emphasized the challenge of level adjustment, stating, *"We had to think about what was suitable for their level, because the level of first, second, third graders there was different from here."* While Mrs. E found the practical exams manageable due to prior rehearsals, she acknowledged that understanding remained an issue for some students, explaining, *"Some still didn't understand, so the main difficulty was having to re-explain, having to be patient."* These reflections underscore that successful implementation of project-based assessment in remote schools requires sensitivity to language barriers, differentiated instruction, and sustained guidance to accommodate diverse learning needs.

10. Attend any workshops before or during the PLP

Mrs. D shared that there was no workshop provided by the school and that even school staff questioned whether she had learned about the Kurikulum Merdeka at the university. She explained, *"There was no introduction to the Merdeka Curriculum. They even asked if we had received Merdeka Curriculum material in college."* She further noted that while her campus provided a seminar, the school did not allow her to participate in community-based forums like KKG (Kelompok Kerja Guru), saying, *"We were not included because the school where KKG was held did not allow students to participate."* Mrs. G mentioned briefly, *"Yes, there was one at the beginning,"* indicating that she had access to at least one form of workshop. In contrast, Mrs. E stated plainly, *"No,"* signifying she did not attend any workshops at all. These responses reflect a lack of consistent access to structured training, leaving many pre-service teachers to enter the field without formal preparation for implementing the new curriculum.

11. Training supports mastery of teaching methods.

Mrs. D explained the value of these sessions, stating, *"We were definitely given an understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, its basis, its assessment, and how to make learning student-centered. That was very helpful."* Similarly, Mrs. G found the information she received during a university-based workshop to be directly applicable in her teaching practice, sharing, *"For example, like being given an understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum during the fifth semester. I adapted and applied it."* However, Mrs. E did not attend any relevant workshops, and therefore did not experience this form of institutional support. These responses show that while workshops can effectively equip pre-service teachers with the foundational knowledge and confidence to implement curriculum reform, access remains inconsistent, leaving some participants without adequate preparation.

12. Guidance from mentor teachers or senior teachers in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka

Mrs. D expressed that she received minimal support, explaining, *"Perhaps because none of them majored in English, so it was their limitation and difficult to provide guidance. I was even closer to the principal than the mentor teacher."* She added, *"There should have been guidance, but we didn't have it, we just jumped straight in."* In contrast, Mrs. G reported a more supportive experience, stating, *"Yes, I received guidance from both mentor teachers and senior teachers."* However, Mrs. E shared a mixed experience—while she acknowledged being trusted to manage classes independently, the mentoring she received was limited and outdated, saying, *"From the mentor teacher, no, rarely. At most, there were a few questions they could answer."* She added that many senior teachers were using traditional methods, and some of the advice given contradicted what she had learned, *"Their advice was actually the opposite of what we learned. We had to be firm with them [the students]."* These responses reveal that although mentoring can be valuable, in practice it was often inconsistent, lacking relevance to the curriculum reform, or even reinforcing outdated pedagogical approaches.

13. Guidance or collaboration with senior teachers in student-centered learning during teaching practice with the Kurikulum Merdeka.

Mrs. D shared that her interaction was more with the principal than the mentor teacher, saying, *"One of them was discussing teaching materials –*

whether they were appropriate for the students' abilities or needed improvement. We also asked for input from senior teachers, that's all." Mrs. G received practical advice about teaching expectations in rural elementary settings, recounting, "They told us what the Merdeka Curriculum was like, different from others. If you teach in elementary school, especially in remote areas, don't aim for too much. Teach the basics first, like vocabulary, don't practice communication because that's not their level." Meanwhile, Mrs. E reflected on how guidance from senior teachers helped her manage classroom behavior, especially considering the age and behavior dynamics of the students. She said, "At first I was afraid to be strict, but if I was gentle, the students didn't respect me at all. With their advice, we learned how to handle them." These accounts show that while not always structured, contextual advice and shared experience from senior educators helped the participants navigate practical challenges, from managing expectations to asserting classroom authority.

14. Teaching resources, such as online materials or workshops, to enhance teaching practice during the PLP, especially in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka

Mrs. D shared that she turned to online platforms, stating, "I searched on the internet, one of them being TikTok and YouTube. There are many learning resources there, such as suitable learning for elementary school children, including games." To compensate for the inability to use advanced technology in class, she made learning interactive through simple activities, explaining, "Every meeting, I always held games so that learning would be interactive... For example, games about body parts, naming and demonstrating them." Mrs. G's efforts were even more demanding due to the severe limitations in her teaching location. She recalled, "I went to the signal point in the village, sometimes turning on the generator... I had to climb a hill to get a signal, looking for journals and articles because it was important for my teaching performance." Meanwhile, Mrs. E focused on adapting content from TikTok and official curriculum documents, saying, "Mostly from TikTok for creative learning... I adjusted from ATP and so on, as long as the theme was in line with the Merdeka Curriculum." These reflections highlight the resilience and adaptability of the pre-service teachers, who actively sought out and customized teaching materials despite being in highly constrained environments.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the challenges and strategies experienced by EFL pre-service teachers in implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* during their teaching practicum in five rural elementary schools in Landak Regency, West Kalimantan. The two main objectives were to identify the specific obstacles faced in applying the curriculum and to analyze the strategies employed to overcome them.

After collecting data, the researchers found that the challenges experienced by EFL pre-service teacher are unfamiliarity with student-centered learning, infrastructural limitations (such as unreliable electricity and internet), low digital access, difficulty designing differentiated and formative assessments, and limited professional guidance. These findings reflect a complex interplay between curriculum demands and contextual limitations in rural school settings.

These findings are consistent with those of Fadillah et al. (2024), who found that pre-service teachers struggled with lesson planning under *Kurikulum Merdeka* due to a lack of familiarity with student-centered learning approaches. In line with this, the pre-service teachers in this study reported difficulties in facilitating group discussions and project-based learning because students were unfamiliar with collaborative methods and lacked basic readiness.

The infrastructural limitations described in Agnia et al. (2024) – such as the lack of teaching materials, internet, and electricity – were clearly evident in the participants' accounts. For instance, reliance on generators, absence of projectors, and weak internet signals significantly hindered efforts to integrate digital learning into the classroom.

Differentiated instruction, a pillar of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, was also difficult to implement. This aligns with Achadiyah et al. (2024), who highlighted that pre-service teachers struggled to tailor their teaching to accommodate students with diverse academic backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles. In this study, participants expressed difficulty in addressing the wide range of student abilities, including those with special needs, particularly when conducting assessments.

Regarding assessment, Widiarti (2021) and Mutmainah et al. (2024) emphasized that flexible assessments often require prior training and experience. This was confirmed in the study, where participants defaulted

to informal or observational techniques and struggled with aligning assessment practices to the curriculum's formative principles.

Strategically, the participants demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness. This mirrors the findings of Mutmainah et al. (2024), who noted that peer collaboration, lesson adaptation, and digital resources play an essential role in helping pre-service teachers overcome implementation barriers. All participants in this study, particularly Mrs. G and Mrs. E, made independent efforts to download materials, climb hills for internet signals, or utilize platforms like TikTok and YouTube to access teaching inspiration—supporting the importance of self-directed learning when institutional support is lacking.

Moreover, the study supports the model by Hanum & Dalimunte (2025), who emphasized the importance of teacher training workshops (CLT, TBLT), collaboration with senior teachers, and proactive resource-seeking. Mrs. D and Mrs. G benefitted from workshops and guidance from senior teachers, while Mrs. E, who lacked institutional mentorship, depended entirely on personal initiative to design lessons and manage classrooms.

Finally, the theoretical lens of Fullan (2020) helped contextualize the findings: curriculum implementation requires teacher readiness, strong mentorship, and adaptive capacity. This study demonstrates that in remote regions, structural constraints such as lack of facilities and limited training amplify the challenges. Even with high motivation, curriculum ideals cannot be realized without localized adaptations and continuous, supportive infrastructure.

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay between contextual limitations and pedagogical demands in the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* by EFL pre-service teachers in rural settings. All three participants—Mrs. D, Mrs. G, and Mrs. E—reported experiencing significant challenges due to the geographic and infrastructural conditions of their assigned schools, which were characterized by limited resources, unreliable electricity (relying on generators), and a general lack of internet connectivity or teaching media. These constraints made it extremely difficult to implement the curriculum's core components such as technology-integrated instruction and student-centered learning.

Collaborative and project-based learning approaches—key to *Kurikulum Merdeka*—proved particularly difficult to implement, as

students were unfamiliar with such pedagogical models and required continuous instruction and scaffolding. Student-centered learning itself was impeded by students' low English proficiency and the absence of digital tools that could support engagement. Pre-service teachers had to rely on printed materials or create conventional learning aids, which limited innovation in lesson delivery.

Assessment practices also posted significant challenges, especially in designing tools aligned with flexible, formative principles while accounting for students' diverse needs. Mrs. D reported specific difficulties in conducting inclusive assessments, given the mixed abilities of her students. While all three pre-service teachers implemented formative assessment strategies through observation, only Mrs. G reported the use of diagnostic assessment to identify students' learning needs early on. Interestingly, each participant adopted different strategies in designing assessments: Mrs. D contextualized tasks to everyday life, Mrs. G followed official teaching modules, and Mrs. E focused on measuring observable classroom engagement.

Efforts to implement real-life and project-based assessments were hindered by limitations in students' language ability and cognitive development, which reduced the feasibility of aligning curriculum expectations with learners' actual readiness. This reflects a wider concern in implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* in rural elementary contexts, where learners may need a longer transition period to fully benefit from more advanced pedagogical shifts.

Professional development opportunities also varied significantly. Mrs. D and Mrs. G attended university-facilitated workshops on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which helped them apply more student-centered strategies. In contrast, Mrs. E did not attend any training and was not included in school-based professional communities such as the *Kelompok Kerja Guru* (KKG), limiting her exposure to collaborative learning. This discrepancy in training access underscores the importance of ensuring equitable professional development for all pre-service teachers.

Mentorship from senior teachers was inconsistently provided. While Mrs. G received substantial guidance and reported improved ability to simplify lessons, Mrs. D relied primarily on support from the school principal, and Mrs. E had to independently develop her classroom

management skills. These differences suggest that the presence of active, engaged mentors plays a crucial role in shaping the success of curriculum implementation during the practicum.

Despite the challenges, all three participants demonstrated strong independent learning efforts. Mrs. D and Mrs. E creatively utilized platforms such as TikTok and YouTube to find teaching ideas and adapt to their students' needs, while Mrs. G went to great lengths—such as climbing hills to find internet signal—to access academic journals. These self-directed efforts highlight the resilience and adaptability of pre-service teachers working in rural education systems and suggest the potential for leveraging informal learning tools to support professional growth where institutional support is limited.

In sum, the findings emphasize the need for structural support, equitable training access, and contextual sensitivity in preparing EFL pre-service teachers for successful implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, especially in rural and underserved areas.

These findings are consistent with existing research. Fadillah et al. (2024) highlighted that pre-service teachers often struggle with lesson planning under *Kurikulum Merdeka* due to its demand for student-centered and flexible instruction. Similarly, the participants in this study found that creating lessons for students unfamiliar with group work and collaboration was particularly demanding. Agnia et al. (2024) confirm that infrastructural limitations, especially in remote areas, hinder effective project-based learning, a point clearly reflected in Mrs. G's teaching context.

Moreover, the difficulty of differentiated instruction emphasized by Achadiyah et al. (2024) aligns with the experiences of the participants in this study, who taught students with varying levels of ability, motivation, and language readiness. This variation made it difficult to design uniform assessments or deliver standardized materials. As Widiarti (2021) observed, flexible assessments are rarely feasible without training and support, leading participants to rely on simplified or observational tools.

In the other hand, the researcher found several strategies. First, the rural context of the teaching practicum greatly amplified existing challenges. Without reliable electricity or internet, many pedagogical tools and strategies promoted in *Kurikulum Merdeka* were simply impractical. Second, the pre-service teachers' limited teaching experience meant they

had few ready strategies to draw upon. Instead, they relied on improvisation, informal mentorship, and digital self-learning. Third, the inconsistency in mentorship and institutional support played a role in the varying degrees of success among participants.

On the strategic side, this study confirms the findings of Hanum & Dalimunte (2025), who found that peer support, workshops, and independent learning play a key role in teachers' ability to adapt to new curricula. The creative use of social media as pedagogical inspiration (e.g., TikTok, YouTube), which emerged in this study, resonates with Mutmainah et al. (2024), who noted the value of digital communities in shaping young teachers' practices.

Several explanations may account for these findings. First, the rural context of the teaching practicum greatly amplified existing challenges. Without reliable electricity or internet, many pedagogical tools and strategies promoted in *Kurikulum Merdeka* were simply impractical. Unlike urban-based studies, this research reveals an intensified version of curriculum implementation under constrained conditions.

Second, the pre-service teachers' limited teaching experience meant they had few ready strategies to draw upon. Instead, they relied on improvisation, informal mentorship, and digital self-learning. This supports Fullan's (2020) view that curriculum reform requires more than enthusiasm—it depends on sustained support structures and capacity-building systems.

Third, the inconsistency in mentorship and institutional support played a role in the varying degrees of success among participants. While some benefitted from school leadership support (e.g., Mrs. D's collaboration with the principal), others navigated their practicum without structured guidance, making trial-and-error their main method of adaptation.

Finally, the findings reaffirm that while *Kurikulum Merdeka* is well-intentioned, its success in rural settings hinges on local adaptation, school readiness, and ongoing collaboration between higher education institutions and practicum schools. Without addressing the real-world challenges faced by pre-service teachers, curriculum ideals may remain theoretical rather than practical.

5. CONCLUSION

This study found that EFL pre-service teachers faced significant challenges in implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* during practicum in rural schools, particularly in adapting to student-centered approaches, flexible assessment design, and limited infrastructure. Despite these obstacles, they employed context-driven strategies such as simplifying tasks, seeking mentorship, and utilizing informal resources. The findings highlight the need for teacher education programs to provide hands-on, context-sensitive training, especially in assessment practices and low-tech teaching. Stronger collaboration between universities and schools, along with structured mentoring and involvement in professional communities, is essential. Future research should explore broader contexts, include mentor perspectives, and examine long-term impacts on teacher development.

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