

Teachers' Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in English Teaching: A Focus on Social Emotional Development

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Abstract

This study explores the strategies and challenges faced by English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum with a focus on social-emotional development (SED) in junior high schools in Boyolali, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach through interviews, observations, and document analysis, the research examines how teachers integrate SED into English lessons and how students respond. Teachers employed interactive methods such as group discussions, projects, and games to enhance emotional intelligence and engagement, although they faced challenges related to student motivation, behavior, and classroom constraints. Overall, students responded positively, appreciating the engaging learning atmosphere. The study underscores the need for strong collaboration among teachers, students, and parents to support both academic and social-emotional growth within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

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INTRODUCTION

In formal education, learning is an intentional process that results in meaningful changes in students, distinct from incidental changes caused by external factors. One essential aspect of learning is the development of social-emotional skills, which shape students' attitudes and behaviors positively. By integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into English language teaching, teachers not only teach linguistic skills but also cultivate students' ability to contribute positively to society (Dayani, 2024).

SEL refers to students' capacity to understand and manage emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. In the classroom context, SEL fosters motivation, optimism, self-confidence, and adaptability, ultimately supporting academic success. According to Fitratullah (2023), English teachers who successfully implement SEL help students express ideas confidently during group or individual activities, making them more active and engaged.

Previous studies (Fitratullah, 2023; Mawaddah, 2024; Rahmah Wati Anzani & Intan Khairul Insan, 2020) emphasize the importance of social-emotional competence in improving learning motivation and classroom effectiveness. The application of social-emotional learning has also been proven to have a significant impact on students' language learning. As found in the research by (Gusniwati & Rahmawati, 2019). However, this research primarily focuses on theoretical aspects or counseling models rather than the practical implementation challenges faced by teachers. Additionally, much of the existing research centers on the cognitive aspects of language learning, leaving a gap regarding teachers' experiences in integrating SEL, particularly in English language classrooms.

The Merdeka Curriculum, currently adopted in Indonesia, aims to accommodate developmental assessment and character education (Sofyan Mustoip, 2023). In this curriculum, SEL becomes an essential element in shaping students' character. Research conducted in various contexts (Setyawan, 2023; Sari & Munifah, 2021; Helaluddin & Alamsyah, 2019) suggests a strong correlation between teachers' social-emotional approaches and students' learning motivation, indicating that incorporating SEL can significantly enhance student engagement and achievement.

The implementation of social-emotional learning in education can effectively enhance students' competencies while contributing to improvements in their academic performance and well-being at school. Based on research conducted by several researchers, such as studies by (Widiastuti, 2022), (Anisa et al., 2019), and (Anita et al., 2024). This study discusses a fairly good and significant correlation between the two variables, where teachers' social-emotional competencies contribute to students' learning motivation.

Nevertheless, the implementation of SEL presents challenges for teachers, including diverse student motivations, behavioral problems, and classroom management issues (Amalia et al., 2023). These social-emotional issues, if not addressed effectively, may negatively impact students' academic outcomes and overall well-being. According to Hall & Liebenberg (2024), understanding complex educational phenomena, such as SEL integration, requires qualitative approaches that capture teachers' nuanced experiences.

Given these considerations, this research aims to explore not only how SEL is implemented in English classrooms under the Merdeka Curriculum but also the challenges teachers face and students' responses. Specifically, this study addresses three questions: (1) What strategies do teachers use to implement SEL within the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) What challenges do they encounter? (3) How do students respond to SEL-focused English learning?

This study aims to fill the research gap by focusing on teachers' practical experiences in integrating SEL, an area that has often been overlooked in previous studies that have emphasized cognitive outcomes. By addressing these issues, this study aims to contribute to the development of strategies through an

understanding of the challenges encountered, thereby creating more effective methods for promoting students' social-emotional growth alongside their academic achievement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative methods in data collection. This method will focus on identifying students' strategies, challenges, and responses in the implementation of social-emotional learning. This study will utilize the perceptions or perspectives experienced by English language teachers in one of the districts in Boyolali Regency in implementing learning focused on social-emotional development in the current Merdeka Curriculum era.

Qualitative research delves into the rich texture of human experiences and perspectives, capturing the context and nuances that are often lost in numerical translations (Lim, 2024). The approach used by researchers to obtain data is through data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and documentation.

The reason why participants use a learning system focused on social-emotional learning is because the school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum system in its entirety, employing various teaching methods that enhance student engagement, self-confidence, and academic performance, one of which is learning focused on social-emotional development.

The strategies in social-emotional learning, the challenges faced by teachers in implementing social-emotional learning, and students' responses to applying social-emotional learning at school are the objects of this study. Through the three research objects mentioned, the researcher can determine how an English teacher can help students recognize themselves and their environment, build confidence, and achieve academic success at one of the junior high schools in Boyolali, Indonesia.

The research was conducted at a junior high school in Boyolali Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. The school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in all classes and is known for promoting a supportive social-emotional environment through programs such as the 5S program (*Senyum, Salam, Sapa, Sopan, Santun*).

Participants included three English teachers and students from class 8A. The teachers taught at different grade levels and had varying teaching experiences.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

No.	Teacher Name	Age	Grade Taught	Years of Experience
1	EG, S.S	48	Grade 7	~20 years (since 2005)
2	GL, S.Pd	29	Grade 8	~6 years
3	AH, S.Pd	50	Grade 9	~24 years

Data were collected using interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to ensure data triangulation and credibility (Rifa'i, 2023).

Table 2. Data Collection

Method	Description	Participants	Purpose
Interview	Semi-structured interviews conducted in the counseling room (approx. 10–15 minutes per teacher).	3 English teachers	To explore strategies, challenges, and students' responses in implementing SEL.
Observation	Classroom observations during English lessons, lasting two periods (80 minutes), with field notes and documentation.	Class 8A students (37)	To observe real-time student responses and teacher practices in SEL implementation.
Documentation	Collection of teaching modules, attendance records, student grades, and photos.	School documents	To complement and validate data obtained from interviews and observations.

In this study, researchers used interviews and observation to obtain the necessary information. This is in line with the theory presented by (Timmermans S & Tavory I, 2022) regarding qualitative cases. The researchers used in-depth or unstructured interview techniques in this study. In this study, the researchers had systematic and comprehensive questions for the data collection needed in their research. In addition, unstructured interviews usually consist of people who are selected because they have or know the information needed.

In addition to interviews, the researchers will also collect data by conducting observations in the classroom while English lessons are taking place. The researchers went directly to the field to study the phenomena that occurred when teachers implemented teaching that focused on social and emotional aspects.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the researcher discusses the strategies, challenges, and students' responses related to implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) in English teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum. Data were obtained through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, using triangulation techniques to validate findings (Rifa'i, 2023).

SEL Implementation Strategies

The findings show that teachers have applied SEL through various interactive activities such as group discussions, project-based assignments,

games, music integration, and P5 (*Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila*) activities. These strategies aim to foster students' emotional intelligence, empathy, communication skills, and a supportive classroom environment.

As Teacher EG noted, *"We have to understand students' characters to apply these methods. Strategies such as random group assignments and music-based games help students bond and develop emotional skills."* Similarly, Teacher GL emphasized the importance of categorizing students by learning traits, stating, *"Grouping based on students' abilities helps in understanding their emotions. The P5 project is also highly effective in developing students' social-emotional skills."* Meanwhile, Teacher AH highlighted, *"Cooperation, honesty, discipline, and continuous advice are key strategies to build strong social-emotional skills."*

Classroom observations confirm that teachers consistently integrate this method to promote collaboration and self-awareness among students. These findings are in line with Ika Tsary et al. (2024), who argue that group activities and role-playing enhance SEL in language learning. Social-emotional development also involves students' ability to interact with their peers, collaborate in games, be friendly, recognize their surroundings, and demonstrate patience, among other things (Wahyunnisa Aisy Agustini & Anniez Rachmawati Musslifah, 2024).

Motivation and Classroom Challenges

Despite these efforts, several challenges emerged, particularly regarding student motivation, behavioral issues, and classroom conditions. Teachers reported dealing with students who lack enthusiasm, come from challenging family backgrounds, or demonstrate disruptive behavior.

Teacher EG shared, *"Many students are difficult to control, especially those from broken homes or low-economic backgrounds, which significantly affects their classroom behavior."* Teacher GL added, *"Hot and uncomfortable classrooms make students more emotional. Additionally, misuse of mobile phones presents a challenge, even though initially intended for learning."* Teacher AH explained, *"Undisciplined students disrupt learning and rely heavily on others in group tasks, making it hard to build genuine social-emotional skills."*

These challenges reflect findings from Aulia Astika Nengsih et al. (2024) and Sa'adah & Rosidi Rofiqah (2023), emphasizing that external and internal student factors can hinder SEL implementation. Effective classroom management, emotional regulation, and supportive leadership are crucial (Lim, 2024).

Student Responses

Students generally responded positively to SEL-focused learning. They appreciated engaging methods such as group projects, games, and musical

activities, which made classes more enjoyable and helped them connect with peers.

A group of Grade 9 students mentioned, *"Through group assignments and P5 activities, we can better recognize ourselves and manage our emotions."* Grade 8 students shared, *"We like games and singing because they make us closer to friends and prevent the class from becoming boring. The teacher's advice also helps us understand how to behave well outside school."* Similarly, Grade 7 students stated, *"We enjoy English because it feels new and fun, with games and group work making it easier to understand the material."*

The theory mentioned by (Yudi Sumertayasa et al., 2025) and (Faizah & Dewi, 2024) is in line with the results of this study, which show that some students have made significant progress in social and academic dimensions in implementing learning that focuses on students' social-emotional aspects. However, on the other hand, there are also some students who still struggle to understand the material and apply the method due to their social-emotional abilities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) is essential in English teaching at the junior high school level, particularly under the Merdeka Curriculum framework. By integrating strategies such as discussions, group work, and collaborative activities, teachers successfully foster students' emotional intelligence, motivation, and classroom engagement.

Despite facing challenges related to student motivation, classroom conditions, and diverse student backgrounds, most students responded positively to SEL-focused approaches. They reported feeling more engaged, confident, and capable of recognizing themselves and their social environment.

The findings highlight the importance of strong collaboration among teachers, students, and parents to create a supportive and effective learning atmosphere. Continuous efforts in understanding students' characteristics and addressing external factors are crucial for sustaining SEL implementation and enhancing overall learning outcomes.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

IM contributed as the main author of the article by planning and developing the research, collecting and analyzing data, and drafting the manuscript. AP provided guidance and direction to IM in drafting the manuscript, helped refine the results of the data collected, collection of theories and supporting evidence, and reviewed, considered and refined the drafted article.

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