



Freedom to Learn Implementing Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic Language Teaching at Senior High Schools

Kebebasan Belajar: Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab di Sekolah Menengah Atas

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Article Info:

Received March 13, 2024

Accepted April 13, 2024

Revised March 23, 2024

Available online April 30, 2024

ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Curriculum represents a paradigm shift in Indonesian education, emphasizing student-centered learning, flexibility, and competency development. This opinion article explores the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic language teaching at senior high schools. Through critical analysis, this article examines how the curriculum's core principles—student autonomy, differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment—can transform Arabic language pedagogy. The discussion highlights three key aspects: the philosophical alignment between Merdeka Curriculum and communicative language teaching, practical strategies for implementing differentiated Arabic instruction, and the challenges teachers face in balancing curricular freedom with structured language acquisition. This article argues that while the Merdeka Curriculum offers unprecedented opportunities for innovative Arabic teaching, its success depends heavily on teacher preparation, institutional support, and a fundamental reconceptualization of language learning outcomes. The findings suggest that Arabic teachers must embrace their role as facilitators rather than transmitters of knowledge, creating learning environments where students actively construct their linguistic and cultural competencies.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, Arabic Language Teaching, Student-Centered Learning, Differentiated Instruction

ABSTRAK

Kurikulum Merdeka merepresentasikan pergeseran paradigma dalam pendidikan Indonesia, menekankan pembelajaran berpusat pada siswa, fleksibilitas, dan pengembangan kompetensi. Artikel opini ini mengeksplorasi implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam pembelajaran bahasa Arab di sekolah menengah atas. Melalui analisis kritis, artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana prinsip-prinsip inti kurikulum—otonomi siswa, pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, dan penilaian autentik—dapat mentransformasi pedagogi bahasa Arab. Pembahasan menyoroti tiga aspek kunci: keselarasan filosofis antara Kurikulum Merdeka dan pengajaran bahasa komunikatif, strategi praktis untuk mengimplementasikan pembelajaran bahasa Arab berdiferensiasi, dan tantangan yang dihadapi guru dalam menyeimbangkan kebebasan kurikuler dengan akuisisi bahasa yang terstruktur. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa meskipun Kurikulum Merdeka menawarkan peluang belum pernah terjadi sebelumnya untuk pengajaran bahasa Arab yang inovatif, kesuksesannya sangat bergantung pada persiapan guru, dukungan institusional, dan rekonseptualisasi fundamental terhadap hasil pembelajaran

bahasa. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru bahasa Arab harus mengadopsi peran sebagai fasilitator daripada transmisioner pengetahuan, menciptakan lingkungan pembelajaran di mana siswa secara aktif mengonstruksi kompetensi linguistik dan kultural mereka.

Kata Kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka, Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab, Pembelajaran Berpusat Siswa, Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi

A. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language education in Indonesia has undergone significant transformation since the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022 (Muhsyanur, 2024). As part of the national education reform efforts, the Merdeka Curriculum offers a more flexible and student-centered approach, fundamentally different from previous curricula that tended to be rigid and content-oriented. This change has profound implications for Arabic language learning in senior high schools, where Arabic is viewed not only as a religious language but also as an international language of communication with strategic value in the global context. Fadlillah (2021) asserts that the Merdeka Curriculum provides space for teachers to develop learning that suits the needs and characteristics of students, making the learning process more meaningful and contextual.

Arabic language learning in Indonesia faces unique challenges that differ from other foreign languages such as English (Muhsyanur et al., 2022). Historically, Arabic in public schools has often been perceived as a difficult language, with an unfamiliar writing system and complex grammatical structure. However, on the other hand, Arabic has cultural proximity to Indonesian society, which is predominantly Muslim, creating intrinsic motivation that has potential to be strengthened. The Merdeka Curriculum comes with a philosophy that emphasizes holistic competency development, not merely content mastery, which is highly relevant to the needs of contemporary Arabic language learning. According to Rahmawati (2022), the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic language learning requires a mindset shift from text-based teaching to communication and culture-based learning.

The principles of the Merdeka Curriculum—which include differentiated learning, projects to strengthen the Pancasila student profile, and formative assessment—align with modern language pedagogy theories that emphasize communicative approaches and meaningful learning. In the context of Arabic language learning, these principles open opportunities to integrate language skills (*istima'*, *kalam*, *qira'ah*, and *kitabah*) holistically through authentic activities relevant to students' lives. Mustofa (2020) explains that effective Arabic language learning must go beyond memorizing vocabulary and grammar, but rather facilitate students to use Arabic in real communicative contexts.

The autonomy granted by the Merdeka Curriculum to Arabic teachers is a double-edged sword. On one side, this freedom allows teachers to design creative learning responsive to local needs. Teachers can choose teaching materials, methods, and learning media most suitable to school conditions and student characteristics. On the other side, this freedom demands high pedagogical and professional competence from teachers, as there is no longer detailed guidance regulating every aspect of learning. Hidayat (2023) argues that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum heavily depends on teachers' readiness to utilize this autonomy to create learning innovations, rather than creating confusion or inconsistency in teaching practices (Muhsyanur et al., 2021).

The context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in senior high schools has its own peculiarities. High school students are at a cognitive development stage that allows them to think abstractly and critically, yet simultaneously face high academic pressure related to university preparation. Arabic language learning at this level must be able to balance the development of practical communicative competence with deep understanding of Arabic language structure and culture. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on project-based learning and soft skills development, offers an appropriate framework to accommo-

date these complex needs. Nurjanah and Rusman (2021) state that Arabic language learning in senior high schools must be designed to develop students' abilities in cross-cultural communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving, all of which are accommodated in the Merdeka Curriculum philosophy.

This opinion article aims to critically analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic language learning at senior high schools, focusing on three main dimensions: the philosophical alignment between the Merdeka Curriculum and the communicative approach in language teaching, practical strategies for implementing differentiated learning in Arabic language classrooms, and the challenges and opportunities teachers face in utilizing curricular freedom. Through in-depth discussion of these three dimensions, this article argues that the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to revitalize Arabic language learning in Indonesia, but the realization of this potential requires fundamental transformation in pedagogical practices, professional support systems, and learning culture in schools.

B. DISCUSSION

Philosophical Alignment: Merdeka Curriculum and Communicative Approach in Arabic Language Learning

The Merdeka Curriculum and the communicative approach in language teaching have convergent philosophical foundations, both emphasizing the use of language as a tool for meaningful communication rather than merely an object of linguistic study. In the context of Arabic language learning, this alignment opens opportunities to shift the paradigm from learning oriented toward grammatical structure mastery to learning that prioritizes functional communicative competence. Hermawan (2018) explains that the communicative approach in Arabic language learning emphasizes the use of the target language in authentic and meaningful contexts, where students not only learn about the language but use the language to communicate. This principle aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum philosophy that prioritizes experience-based and competency-based learning, not just knowledge transfer.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic language learning demands a redefinition of learning objectives. Rather than focusing on mastering hundreds of vocabulary items or complex nahwu-sharaf rules, Arabic language learning within the Merdeka Curriculum framework must be oriented toward achieving communicative competence that can be applied in real situations (Muhsyanur, 2014) and (Muhsyanur, 2019). This includes the ability to understand contemporary Arabic texts, communicate orally in everyday contexts, and appreciate the richness of Arab culture. This transformation requires fundamental changes in the selection of teaching materials, where authentic texts such as Arabic news articles, Arabic-language YouTube videos, or social media conversations become relevant learning resources. Effendy (2019) argues that Arabic teaching materials must be contextual and functional, allowing students to see direct relevance between what they learn and their lives.

The communicative approach aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum also transforms the roles of teachers and students in Arabic language classrooms. Teachers are no longer the sole source of knowledge transmitting language rules, but facilitators who create communicative opportunities for students. Students, on the other hand, become active agents who construct their understanding of Arabic through interaction, experimentation, and reflection. In practice, this means Arabic language classrooms must be filled with interactive activities such as role-plays, simulations, group discussions, and collaborative projects, not dominated by teacher lectures and mechanical exercises. According to Zulhannan (2022), effective Arabic language learning is learning that provides maximum time allocation for students to use the target language, not listening to explanations about the target language.

Differentiated Learning Strategies in Arabic Language Classrooms

Differentiated learning is one of the main pillars of the Merdeka Curriculum that has significant implications for Arabic language teaching in senior high schools. This concept recognizes that every student has different learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles, so a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer relevant. In the context of Arabic language learning, differentiation can be done in three dimensions: content (what is learned), process (how students learn it), and product (how students demonstrate their learning). Tomlinson, as cited by Marlina (2020), emphasizes that differentiated learning does not mean providing different learning for each individual, but rather using various strategies to meet the diverse needs of students in one classroom.

The implementation of content differentiation in Arabic language learning can be done through providing texts with varying difficulty levels for the same topic. For example, when studying the theme of "travel" (ar-rihlah), students with high proficiency can be given travel news articles from Arab media, intermediate-level students can read simple stories about travel, while students who still need more support can start with short dialogues about travel activities. What is important is that all students remain engaged in the same topic and can contribute to class discussions, although the depth and complexity of the materials they access differ. Asrori (2021) and (Muhsyanur, 2022) explains that content differentiation in Arabic language learning requires teachers who have a rich material bank and the ability to adapt authentic texts according to student levels without losing the authenticity and meaningfulness of the texts.

Process differentiation involves variations in how students process and internalize Arabic language information. Some students may learn more effectively through visual approaches (using flashcards, mind maps, or videos), while others are more responsive to auditory approaches (listening to Arabic songs, podcasts, or conversation recordings) or kinesthetic approaches (role-playing, drama, or language games). The Merdeka Curriculum provides flexibility for teachers to design learning activities that accommodate these various learning styles. In practice, Arabic teachers can use learning stations where students rotate through various activities that each target different language skills with different learning modalities. Suyadi (2020) argues that effective differentiated learning requires teachers who not only understand Arabic language materials but also understand developmental psychology and individual student characteristics.

Product differentiation gives students choices in how they demonstrate their understanding and Arabic language competence. Instead of all students having to write essays or take the same written tests, the Merdeka Curriculum allows variation in assessment forms. Students can choose to create video vlogs in Arabic, compile podcasts, design digital posters, write blogs, or even create Arabic-language comics, according to their strengths and interests. What is important is that the product still demonstrates the achievement of targeted language competencies. This approach not only makes learning more inclusive but also more motivating, as students feel they have agency in their learning process. According to Hamalik (2019), giving students choices in learning products increases sense of ownership and in turn improves the quality of learning outcomes.

Challenges and Opportunities: Balancing Curricular Freedom with Language Acquisition Structure

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic language learning presents a paradoxical challenge: how to balance between the freedom and flexibility offered by the curriculum with the need for systematic structure and sequencing in second language acquisition. Language learning, including Arabic, requires well-planned progression, where basic skills must be mastered before moving to more complex skills (Muhsyanur, 2025).

Too much freedom without a clear framework can result in sporadic and incoherent learning, where students get exposure to various aspects of language without deep mastery of any of them. Hanafi (2022) warns that curricular autonomy must be accompanied by strong pedagogical understanding of how languages are learned, otherwise, this freedom can actually hinder the achievement of learning objectives.

One specific challenge in Arabic language learning is the complexity of the writing system and grammar that requires explicit learning and systematic practice. Unlike English which is already familiar to Indonesian students, Arabic uses a different alphabet, is written from right to left, and has a very rich morphological system. Mastering these basic skills requires structured and repeated practice, which appears to contradict the Merdeka Curriculum philosophy that emphasizes organic and discovery-based learning. However, this contradiction can be overcome through a hybrid approach where explicit learning for technical aspects of language is integrated into meaningful communicative activities. For example, learning Arabic letters and their connection rules can be done through activities of writing short messages, creating name posters, or composing digital calligraphy. Arsyad (2020) suggests that learning formal aspects of Arabic language does not have to be dry and mechanical, but can be integrated in authentic and enjoyable language use contexts.

Another significant challenge is the limitation of resources and teacher competence. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum demands Arabic teachers to have competencies far broader than just Arabic language mastery. Teachers must be able to design creative and varied learning, use learning technology, develop authentic assessments, and conduct continuous reflection and improvement of their teaching practices. However, the reality in the field shows that many Arabic teachers, especially in rural areas, have not received adequate training on the Merdeka Curriculum and innovative pedagogical approaches. Additionally, limited access to authentic Arabic teaching materials, learning technology, and institutional support makes the ideal implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum difficult to realize. Wahab (2021) emphasizes that curriculum policy, however well designed, will fail if not accompanied by adequate investment in teacher professional development and provision of supporting infrastructure.

Behind these challenges, the Merdeka Curriculum also opens interesting opportunities for innovation in Arabic language learning. Curricular flexibility allows teachers to integrate digital technology and abundant online resources, such as Arabic language learning applications, e-learning platforms, learning videos from Arab countries, and even virtual collaboration with native Arabic speakers. The digital era has made exposure to authentic Arabic far more accessible compared to previous generations, and the Merdeka Curriculum provides space to utilize these resources optimally. Moreover, the emphasis on projects to strengthen the Pancasila student profile opens opportunities to integrate Arabic language learning with character development and 21st century competencies, such as collaboration, creativity, and global literacy. For example, students can undertake projects creating digital content about Indonesian-Arab cultural comparisons, social campaigns in Arabic, or documentation of local Arab communities, all of which integrate language learning with holistic competency development. According to Fuad (2023) and (Santalia et al., 2025), the momentum of the Merdeka Curriculum must be utilized to reposition Arabic language learning from what has been relatively marginal to learning that is innovative, relevant, and attractive to digital native generations.

C. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic language learning at senior high schools represents a transformational opportunity to revitalize Arabic language pedagogy in Indonesia. The philosophical alignment between the Merdeka Curriculum and the communicative approach in language teaching creates a solid foundation for more mean-

ingful and contextual learning. Differentiated learning, as one of the main pillars of this curriculum, offers a framework to accommodate student diversity and optimize each individual's potential. However, the realization of this potential depends on teachers' ability to balance curricular freedom with the systematic structure required in second language acquisition, as well as adequate institutional support in the form of teacher training, provision of learning resources, and technological infrastructure. The existing challenges—ranging from the complexity of the Arabic language, limitations in teacher competence, to resource gaps—are not insurmountable obstacles, but rather areas that require serious attention from all education stakeholders. With the right approach, the Merdeka Curriculum can become a catalyst for realizing Arabic language learning that not only produces students competent in Arabic, but also individuals who have deep appreciation for cultural diversity, cross-cultural communication abilities, and readiness to become inclusive global citizens.

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