

Comparative Analysis of Dual-System Curriculum in ELT: The Merdeka Curriculum VS The Pesantren Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the comparative implementation of the Dual-System Curriculum to accommodate government's standard requirement. The Dual-System curriculum that is mentioned here is the Merdeka Curriculum and the Islamic boarding school (Pesantren) curriculum in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), seen by comparing the content of textbooks used. The focuses of this research consist of (1) the challenges and strategies in delivering lessons from both distinct textbooks, and (2) the differences between the textbooks (the content). This research employs a qualitative method by comparing both curricula, analyzing the implementation through observation and interviews, and presenting the data chronologically based on the aims of this research. Findings highlight two major things: (1) challenges identified include resource limitations, teacher training needs, and varying student proficiency levels, while the strategies used by the teacher is by applying blended strategies (incorporating communicative activities) within the framework of the pesantren curriculum and structuring grammar-focused lessons within the Merdeka curriculum. Finally, this research contributes to the discourse on curriculum design and its role in shaping effective language education in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: *English Language Teaching, Merdeka Curriculum, Pesantren Curriculum.*

1. Introduction


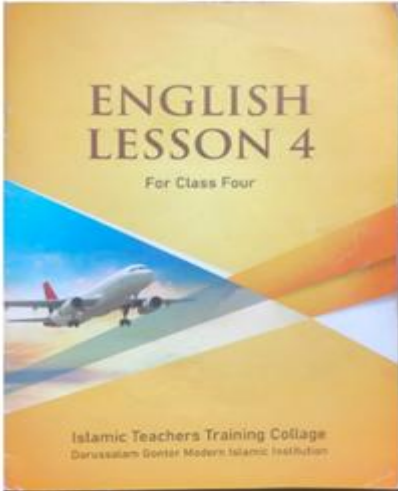
Curriculum development plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of education, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT). Over the years, Indonesia has witnessed several reforms in its national curriculum, culminating in the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum. This new curriculum aims to offer flexibility, promote student autonomy, and integrate 21st-century skills into the learning process (Kemendikbud, 2022). On the other hand, Islamic boarding schools or pesantren in Indonesia have long maintained their own distinct curriculum, often grounded in religious values and traditional teaching methods, which has sparked debate on how effective these systems are in teaching English (Zarkasyi, 2020).

There remains a significant gap in understanding how the Merdeka Curriculum compares with the pesantren curriculum, especially in terms of its approach to ELT. While the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered and flexible learning, pesantren curricula tend to focus more on religious content and traditional pedagogy, often using classical methods such as memorization (Hidayat, 2019). Despite this distinction, both systems are expected to deliver adequate English language instruction, which is increasingly important in a globalized world. However, limited research has been conducted to explore how these two distinct educational frameworks affect the quality of English language learning and whether one approach offers clear advantages over the other.

Preliminary observations reveal distinct differences between the covers of the two English textbooks displayed below which reveal notable visual differences. The English textbook for the Merdeka Curriculum has a vibrant and engaging design, featuring modern fonts and interactive imagery that aligns with its focus on fostering student-centered learning and communicative skills. The cover reflects an effort to make the material visually appealing, possibly aiming to stimulate students' interest in English through its modern aesthetic. In contrast, the Islamic boarding school textbook, particularly from Pondok Modern Gontor, employs a more traditional and formal design.

This cover appears conservative, emphasizing simplicity and conveying an educational atmosphere grounded in discipline and religious values.

Table 1. Cover of English textbook of *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Pesantren

English Textbook of <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i>	Pesantren English Textbook
	

These contrasts in cover design symbolize the broader curricular goals of each system. The Merdeka Curriculum seeks to captivate students with engaging, real-world applications of English, promoting flexibility and creativity in learning (Kemendikbud, 2022). On the other hand, the Pesantren curriculum, as represented by the Gontor textbook, focuses on a more structured, traditional approach, potentially limiting exposure to dynamic, communicative methods that are prevalent in modern ELT (Zarkasyi, 2020). Such visual and stylistic elements can significantly influence students' engagement and their initial perceptions of the learning material (Brown, 2016).

Previous researches support this observation, showing that the Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes learner autonomy and the application of language in real-world contexts, encouraging students to engage more actively in communication. On the other hand, the traditional methods in pesantren may provide fewer opportunities for students to develop practical language skills, contributing to a gap in speaking abilities between the two groups of students. These findings suggest that Islamic boarding schools may need to adjust their English teaching materials and methods to better align with the demands of modern communication and the challenges of globalization (Zulkarnain, 2021). The difference between this research and Zulkarnain's research lies in the focus of the language skills, which is speaking skill. However, this research used Zulkarnain's findings to compare the theories used. A previous study by Suryani & Fadila (2023) examined the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on students' critical thinking skills, particularly in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). Their research found that the Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on student autonomy and interactive learning, significantly enhanced students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. The study highlighted that the curriculum's flexibility and focus on learner-centered activities created an environment where students were more engaged and communicative in English. This aligns with the goals of modern ELT practices, which prioritize functional language use and student engagement over rote memorization. However, the study acknowledged that the effectiveness of the curriculum depends largely on teachers' ability to implement its principles effectively in the classroom. The difference between this research and Suryani's research is in the focus of the curriculum used, which is the Merdeka curriculum, while this research compares Dual-System curriculum. However, the findings of Suryani's give wider perspective about modern ELT, that can be useful enough to the development of our research.

Previous research conducted by Zarkasyi (2020) explored the traditional curriculum of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), focusing on the challenges of modernizing the curriculum, especially in the teaching of secular subjects like English. The research found that while pesantren curricula have strengths in character education and religious instruction, they lag in integrating modern pedagogical methods that promote communicative language use in ELT. The study emphasized that most pesantren still rely heavily on teacher-centered approaches and rote memorization, which limit students' ability to develop practical language skills. Zarkasyi also pointed

out the resistance to reform within many pesantren due to the strong adherence to traditional educational values, making it difficult to introduce more progressive language teaching methods such as task-based or communicative approaches. Zarkasyi's findings which states that the traditional values in pesantren make it difficult to adapt progressive language teaching method can be the guidance for us to conduct similar research in different locus. However, our research has different aspects to be explored; teaching material/textbooks used. So, we have different focus with Zarkasyi.

This study highlights the significant differences between the Merdeka Curriculum and the Islamic boarding school curriculum in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in their English Lesson Textbooks. While previous research by Suryani & Fadila (2023) found that the Merdeka Curriculum promotes critical thinking and student autonomy in language learning, other studies like Zarkasyi (2020) pointed out the traditional and religiously-centered nature of the pesantren curriculum, which often lacks modern pedagogical methods. Additionally, Zulkarnain (2021)'s work on student engagement in public schools versus pesantren highlighted the communicative advantages that the Merdeka Curriculum offers compared to the pesantren's more rigid instructional approach. By utilizing a qualitative comparative analysis, this research provides deeper insights into how these distinct curriculum models influence English language learning outcomes and suggests the need for curriculum reform in pesantren to better align with modern educational demands (Suryani & Fadila, 2023; Zarkasyi, 2020; Zulkarnain, 2021).

This study seeks to fill the existing gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the Merdeka Curriculum and the pesantren curriculum in the context of the English Lesson Textbook. What challenges do teachers face in delivering lessons from these two distinct textbooks, and how do they adapt their teaching strategies accordingly? What are the content differences between the two textbooks according to students and teachers and which they prefer most? The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the academic field by providing a deeper understanding of how different curricula, specifically the Merdeka Curriculum and the Islamic boarding school curriculum, influence English Language Teaching (ELT). By comparing the content of textbooks and the challenges faced by teachers, this study will enrich the body of knowledge on curriculum design and instructional practices in English language education. It will also offer valuable insights for curriculum developers, policymakers, and educators in improving teaching materials and strategies, particularly in the context of diverse educational settings. This research aims to bridge the gap between traditional and modern pedagogical approaches, enhancing the overall quality of English education in Indonesia's unique educational landscape.

In analyzing the Merdeka Curriculum and Islamic boarding school curriculum in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), it is essential to ground this research within relevant theories from both education and curriculum design. Several studies and theoretical perspectives offer a foundation for understanding the impact of curriculum structure on teaching effectiveness, textbook content, and teacher challenges.

First, curriculum theory asserts that curriculum is not just a collection of subjects, but a reflection of educational goals, societal needs, and institutional values. Scholars like Ornstein and Hunkins (2018) argue that curriculum design should be flexible to adapt to modern educational needs, particularly in fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills in students. This aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's aim to develop student autonomy and active learning (Kemendikbud, 2022). In contrast, Zarkasyi (2020) posits that the traditional curriculum in pesantren emphasizes religious content and teacher-centered learning, which could limit students' opportunities for critical engagement and practical language use. These perspectives highlight the theoretical distinction between progressive curriculum models like the Merdeka Curriculum and traditional religious education in pesantren, supporting the comparative nature of this study.

From the pedagogical standpoint, Richards and Rodgers (2014) emphasize the importance of communicative language teaching (CLT), which prioritizes interaction and meaningful communication over rote learning. The Merdeka Curriculum adopts this communicative approach, as it encourages task-based and project-based learning to help students use English in real-world contexts (Suryani & Fadila, 2023). On the other hand, Nunan (2015) argues that while CLT is widely accepted, its implementation can be challenging in environments where traditional teaching methods dominate, such as in pesantren. This theoretical tension between modern pedagogical frameworks and traditional instructional methods underpins the need for a comparative analysis of how these approaches influence teaching materials and outcomes.

Research by Suryani & Fadila (2023) also supports the idea that curriculum flexibility plays a crucial role in fostering better language acquisition. Their study shows that the Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on learner-centered approaches, leads to higher student engagement and better English proficiency outcomes compared to more rigid curricula. This is supported by Brown (2016) who suggests that materials in ELT should be designed to promote interaction, visual support, and diverse assessments, which align with the Merdeka Curriculum's goals but may contrast with the more traditional, text-heavy resources used in pesantren settings (Zulkarnain, 2021).

Further theoretical support comes from studies on teacher challenges in implementing diverse curricula. Garton & Graves (2014) highlight that teachers face difficulties when switching between curriculum models that have differing instructional methods and expectations. This is particularly relevant in the case of Merdeka Curriculum versus pesantren curriculum, as teachers may struggle to adapt from a flexible, communicative approach to a more rigid, religiously driven methodology. Moreover, Harmer (2015) adds that teacher professional development is key to addressing these challenges, as it equips educators with strategies to handle diverse content, including differences in textbook structure, chapter organization, and assessment types. This aligns with the current research's focus on the teacher challenges in utilizing different textbooks for English language instruction. Lastly, this study draws on previous research by Zulkarnain (2021), who compared student engagement and language outcomes in public schools and pesantren. His findings underscore the importance of curriculum design in shaping language proficiency, especially when comparing modern educational frameworks with more traditional, religious-based curricula. His work supports the notion that curriculum structure, including visual aids, chapter organization, and assessment methods, plays a significant role in student engagement and language mastery

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using observation and interview to collect valid data. Besides, this research also applies library research techniques to compare the Merdeka Curriculum and the Islamic boarding school curriculum in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). As defined by Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. In this case, the research focuses on analyzing the content, structure, and educational impact of two different curricula by examining textbooks and teacher experiences. The qualitative method is suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth analysis of non-numerical data, such as content differences in textbooks, teacher challenges, and instructional strategies.

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study design to explore the implementation and content of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pesantren Curriculum in English Language Teaching (ELT). This design is suitable for examining complex educational phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). It enables a nuanced understanding of curriculum content, pedagogical challenges, and instructional responses, particularly in the culturally distinct environments of public schools and pesantren. Three primary data collection techniques were utilized by the Document analysis of English textbooks from both curriculum models. Semi-structured interviews with English teachers and students to gain insights into their experiences. Field observations were conducted in classrooms to observe teaching practices and curriculum delivery. The use of multiple data sources facilitated data triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study applied purposive sampling to select information-rich cases that exemplify the features of each curriculum. English textbooks from the Merdeka Curriculum (published by the Ministry of Education and Culture) and textbooks used in pesantren such as Darel Azhar Rangkasbitung were chosen. Teacher and student participants were selected based on their direct involvement with the respective curricula, ensuring relevance to the research questions (Patton, 2015).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), which consists of the following stages: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme refinement, naming themes, and reporting. Interview transcripts were coded inductively to identify emerging patterns and themes related to the challenges, strategies, and content of English teaching across the two curriculum systems. To ensure validity, the following procedures were conducted by Member checking: Teachers and students were invited to verify the summaries of their interviews to ensure accuracy. Peer debriefing: Coded data were reviewed collaboratively with fellow researchers to enhance inter-coder reliability. Audit trail: A clear record of decisions and analytical processes was maintained to ensure transparency. All participants provided informed consent, and ethical

approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process. This comprehensive approach ensures that the study's findings are grounded in systematically collected and rigorously analyzed qualitative data, providing meaningful contributions to the discourse on curriculum implementation in diverse educational contexts.

To conduct this research, the researcher employed library research as the primary technique, which involves collecting and analyzing data from books, journals, and other academic resources. According to Zed (2004), library research allows the researcher to gather existing data and insights from various sources to support the comparative analysis. The textbooks and teacher materials related to the Merdeka Curriculum and Islamic boarding school curriculum serve as the main data sources. These materials are analyzed for differences in content structure, chapter organization, visual aids, assessments, and other relevant components. This method is effective in uncovering the pedagogical philosophies embedded in these curricula.

The primary sources of data are the textbooks used in both educational settings. For the Merdeka Curriculum, the official English language textbooks provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) are selected. These books are widely used across Indonesian public schools and are designed to foster student-centered learning and communicative language practices (Kemendikbud, 2022). For the Islamic boarding school curriculum, textbooks used in several pesantren, particularly in Darel Azhar Rangkasbitung, are analyzed. These materials were selected because they represent the traditional religious approach to education, where the focus is on moral and character development alongside academic subjects (Zarkasyi, 2020).

The choice of these textbooks as research objects is based on their direct role in shaping student learning experiences in both Merdeka and Islamic boarding school contexts. By comparing these textbooks, this study aims to explore how curriculum design reflects broader educational goals, and how teachers navigate the challenges of teaching with these distinct resources. The rationale for selecting these specific sources is to provide a clear and focused analysis of curriculum content and its impact on English language education. For sampling, a purposive sampling method was employed, focusing on the most relevant textbooks and teacher experiences that illustrate the key differences between the two curricula. Purposive sampling, according to Patton (2015), involves selecting cases that are rich in information and relevant to the research questions. This method was chosen to ensure that the analysis covers the most representative examples of curriculum content, rather than providing a broad but shallow overview of multiple sources. In addition to textbooks, teacher interviews and academic articles from the past five years are used to provide context on the challenges faced by educators in implementing these curricula. This data is essential for understanding how content differences in textbooks impact classroom instruction and student learning outcomes.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the comparative study between the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pesantren Curriculum in ELT. The data are derived from interviews with teachers and students, textbook analysis, and classroom observations. The results are discussed in two major themes: teaching challenges and strategies, and textbook content comparison.

Table 2. The Result

Focus Area	Merdeka Curriculum	Pesantren Curriculum
Teaching Approach	Student-centered, interactive, project-based	Teacher-centered, grammar-focused, rote memorization
Learning Activities	Collaborative projects, group discussion, real-world communication	Repetition, memorization, grammar drills
Challenges	Varying proficiency, resource limitation, confidence in speaking	Limited speaking practice, rigid structure, lack of interaction
Student Preferences	More engaging and communicative (Speaking & Writing focused)	Easier due to repetition, structured (Grammar focused)

The analysis focuses on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pesantren Curriculum in English language teaching (ELT), based on interviews conducted with teachers and students. The findings highlight their respective advantages, challenges, and implications for ELT practices. Below are some challenges highlighted in the interviews:

Interviewer: *What challenges do you face in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum?*

Teacher: *"The biggest challenge is addressing the varying proficiency levels of students. Some students are very fluent, while others struggle with basic vocabulary. This makes it hard to design lessons that meet everyone's needs."*

Interviewer: *How do you overcome these challenges?*

Teacher: *"We divide students into groups based on their English proficiency and use differentiated tasks to cater to their abilities. However, we still need more resources and training to manage these differences effectively."*

Students also highlighted difficulties in adapting to the interactive nature of the curriculum.

One student explained:

Interviewer: *What do you find challenging about the Merdeka Curriculum?*

Student: *"Sometimes it's hard to keep up in group discussions because I'm not confident in speaking English."*

Teaching Challenges and Instructional Strategies

Interviews with teachers highlighted that the Merdeka Curriculum is innovative and student-focused but requires high adaptability. Teachers must accommodate diverse student proficiencies and often struggle with limited teaching resources. One teacher stated: "The biggest challenge is addressing the varying proficiency levels of students. Some are very fluent, others struggle with basic vocabulary." (*Interview, Teacher 1, Merdeka Curriculum*) To overcome this, teachers implement grouping strategies and differentiated tasks, though professional development and classroom support remain essential (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Conversely, teachers using the Pesantren Curriculum adopt a traditional model prioritizing structure, grammar mastery, and memorization. While this ensures linguistic accuracy, it often lacks opportunities for speaking practice. A participant noted: "It's good for grammar, but we rarely speak English. I wish there were more discussions or speaking exercises." (*Interview, Student 2, Pesantren Curriculum*) The pedagogical tension here reflects Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, which advocates for scaffolding from basic to complex language use (Vygotsky, 1978). Pesantren students need support systems that extend learning beyond rote drills.

Below is the interview result from the students about Pesantren Curriculum, which is more structured and teacher-centered, focusing on grammar, vocabulary memorization. Below are key findings from the interviews:

Interviewer: *What is the main focus of the Pesantren Curriculum in English teaching?*

Teacher: *"The focus is on building a strong foundation in grammar and vocabulary. This helps students understand written English better, but it limits their speaking opportunities."*

Interviewer: *How do you teach English using the Pesantren Curriculum?*

Teacher: *"We rely on repetition and memorization to ensure students master the basics. Grammar drills are a significant part of the lessons."*

Students shared mixed feedback about the Pesantren Curriculum:

Interviewer: *Do you think the Pesantren Curriculum helps improve your English skills?*

Student: *"It's good for learning grammar, but I wish there were more speaking and listening activities. We don't get much practice using English in real-life situations."*

Based on the conclusion of the interview with teachers & students, my analysis reveals that the primary challenge teachers face in delivering lessons from the Merdeka Curriculum and Pesantren Curriculum lies in the stark contrast between their pedagogical approaches. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered, interactive learning, requiring teachers to facilitate project-based and communicative activities. Conversely, the Pesantren Curriculum adheres to a more traditional, teacher-centered model with a strong focus on grammar and rote learning. The Merdeka Curriculum and Pesantren Curriculum represent two distinct pedagogical approaches to English Language Teaching (ELT), each with its strengths and challenges. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, fostering critical thinking and active engagement through flexible, project-based, and communicative methods (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018; Kemendikbud, 2022). This aligns with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which prioritize real-world language use and interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, implementing these methods poses challenges for teachers, particularly in addressing diverse proficiency levels and ensuring access to sufficient resources (Suryani & Fadila, 2023).

In contrast, the Pesantren Curriculum adopts a more structured, teacher-centered model that focuses on grammar and memorization, providing a solid foundation in linguistic accuracy but limiting opportunities for practical communication (Zarkasyi, 2020). Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal

Development (ZPD) suggests that while such structured guidance supports foundational learning, it must be complemented by scaffolding to develop higher-order language skills. Integrating the flexibility and interactivity of the Merdeka Curriculum with the Pesantren Curriculum's emphasis on grammar could create a balanced approach, addressing gaps in communicative competence while retaining strong grammatical foundations (Zulkarnain, 2021).

This disparity forces teachers to navigate dual instructional demands, balancing the flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum with the structured rigidity of the Pesantren Curriculum. To address these challenges, teachers adapt by blending strategies—incorporating communicative activities within the framework of the Pesantren Curriculum and structuring grammar-focused lessons within the Merdeka Curriculum. They also supplement textbook materials with multimedia tools, peer collaboration, and real-world examples to ensure effective lesson delivery. My findings highlight the need for targeted teacher training programs and collaborative efforts among educators to develop unified strategies that cater to the diverse demands of these curricula. The Pesantren Curriculum emphasis on traditional methods such as memorization and grammar drills, ensures a strong foundation in linguistic accuracy while aligning with its broader goals of discipline, character building, and religious understanding. However, the researcher observes that this approach limits opportunities for developing communicative competence and critical thinking skills, which are increasingly essential in modern education. To address these gaps, the researcher suggests integrating student-centered approaches, such as task-based activities or collaborative projects, into the Pesantren Curriculum. This adaptation would enable students to gain real-world language practice while preserving the curriculum's focus on grammar and religious values, better preparing them to meet both religious and secular demands in a globalized context.

Below are some differences between Merdeka Curriculum and Pesantren Curriculum in ELT according to teachers and student highlighted in the interviews.

Interviewer: Based on your experiences, what are the key content differences between the textbooks used in the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pesantren Curriculum?

Teacher: *"The Merdeka Curriculum textbook is modern and interactive, focusing on project-based activities and critical thinking, while the Pesantren Curriculum textbook is traditional, focusing more on memorization vocabularies and structured exercises."*

Interviewer: How do you feel these differences impact your teaching strategies?

Teacher: *"Balancing both is challenging. The Merdeka Curriculum requires extra preparation for interactive tasks, while the Pesantren Curriculum limits opportunities for practical language use. I usually blend communicative tasks with grammar drills to address both needs."*

Interviewer: Students, what are your thoughts on the differences between these textbooks?

Student A: *"I like the Merdeka Curriculum textbook because it includes projects and group work that make learning enjoyable."*

Student B: *"I prefer the Pesantren Curriculum textbook because it focuses more on memorization tasks. For me, it's easier because I only need to memorize and repeat the material."*

Interviewer: Which textbook do you think helps you learn English more effectively?

Student A: *"The Merdeka Curriculum is better for improving speaking and writing."*

Student B: *"The Pesantren Curriculum suits me because I understand grammar better through repetition, even though it can feel monotonous."*

In addition to addressing the two research questions, the researcher explored further into the implementation of the two curricula in schools and uncovered new insights.

Interviewer: Do you think combining elements from both textbooks would be helpful?

Teacher: *"Yes, combining the structured grammar of the Pesantren Curriculum with the interactive approach of the Merdeka Curriculum would create a balanced learning experience."* Textbook analysis revealed clear structural and philosophical differences, The Merdeka Curriculum textbook is modern and designed with visual aids, project tasks, and communicative activities. It encourages autonomy and interaction (Kemendikbud, 2022).

The **Pesantren Curriculum textbook** is formal, text-heavy, and grammar-oriented with little space for communicative skill development.

Student Opinions:

"I enjoy working in groups with the Merdeka textbook—it feels alive."

(Student A)

"The Pesantren book is clear and easy because we just memorize. But it's boring sometimes."

(Student B)

Based on the results of the interview with the teacher and students, the content differences between the textbooks used in the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pesantren Curriculum are distinct and reflect contrasting pedagogical approaches. The Merdeka Curriculum textbook is modern and interactive, emphasizing project-based activities, group work, and critical thinking.

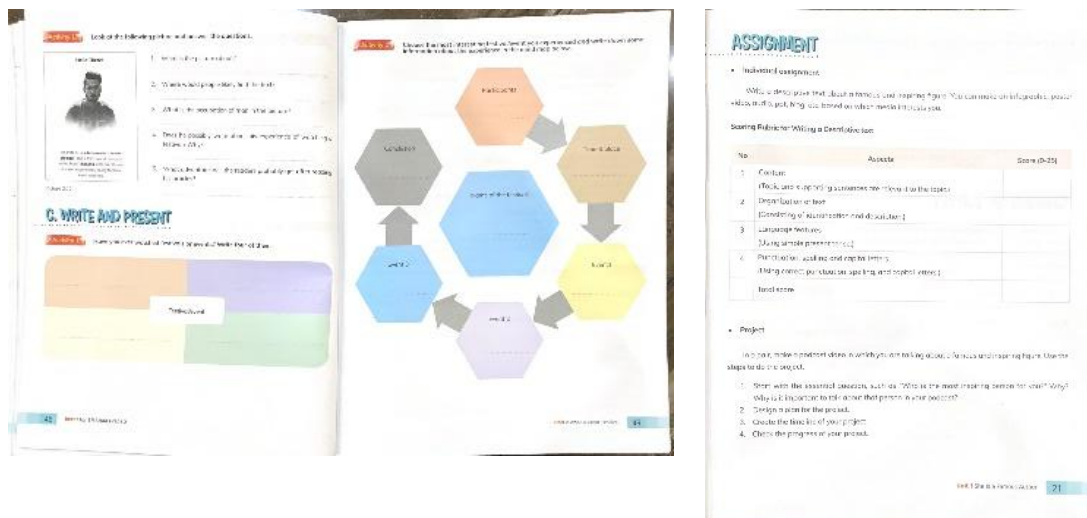


Fig 1 Pictures of Merdeka Curriculum English Textbook

This approach encourages students to actively participate and apply their language skills in real-life scenarios, making learning more engaging. On the other hand, the Pesantren Curriculum textbook is traditional and heavily grammar-focused, with structured exercises and memorization tasks.

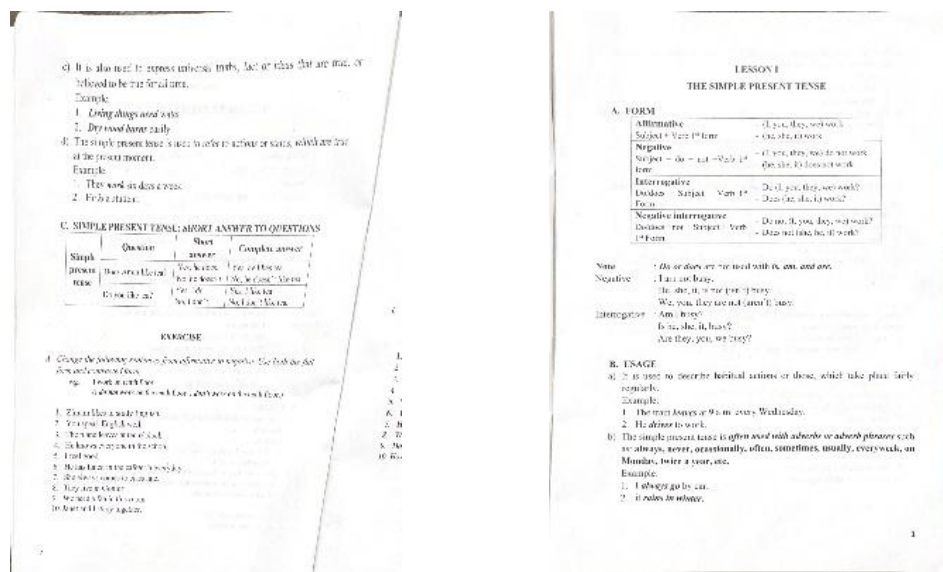


Fig 2 Pictures of Pesantren Curriculum English Grammar Lesson Textbook

While this method ensures a solid foundation in grammar, it lacks opportunities for practical and communicative language use.

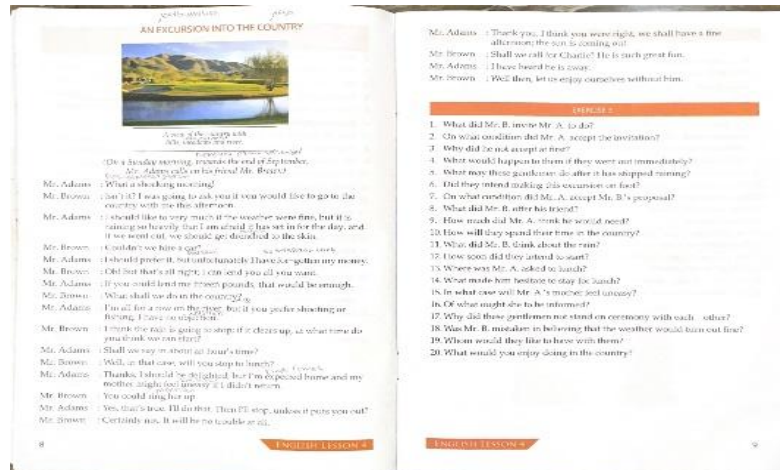


Fig 3 Pictures of Pesantren English Lesson Textbook

The teacher noted that balancing these two approaches is challenging, as the Merdeka Curriculum requires additional preparation for interactive tasks, whereas the Pesantren Curriculum restricts flexibility in teaching. Students expressed mixed preferences. Some students favored the Merdeka Curriculum textbook for its engaging activities and opportunities to improve speaking and writing skills. Others preferred the Pesantren Curriculum textbook for its straightforward, memorization-based approach, which they found easier to follow.

Overall, while the Merdeka Curriculum is preferred for fostering communicative competence, the Pesantren Curriculum is valued for its structured and clear focus on grammar. Both teacher and students suggested that a combination of the two textbooks would provide the most effective learning experience, blending the interactive, student-centered elements of the Merdeka Curriculum with the grammar-centric foundation of the Pesantren Curriculum. The analysis of interview results revealed insightful perspectives on how the Merdeka Curriculum and Pesantren Curriculum complement each other in English Language Teaching (ELT). Teachers emphasized the importance of leveraging project-based and collaborative methods in the Merdeka Curriculum to foster student engagement and practical language application. Meanwhile, the Pesantren Curriculum's structured approach was praised for building strong grammatical foundations but critiqued for its limited opportunities for interactive and communicative skill development.

One recurring theme was the need for integration. Teachers and students alike proposed combining the interactive activities of the Merdeka Curriculum with the rigorous grammar drills of the Pesantren Curriculum to create a balanced approach to English learning. Based on the overall findings, the researcher concludes that the combination between pesantren curriculum and Merdeka curriculum is still appropriate to be apply in pesantren. The strengths of both curricula could address the diverse needs of learners, ensuring they develop not only linguistic accuracy but also communicative competence. This would require a collaborative effort among educators, institutions, and stakeholders to design and implement a curriculum that effectively blends the best practices of both systems.

Table 3: Key Differences Between the Two Textbooks Based on Interviews

Aspect	Merdeka Curriculum	Pesantren Curriculum
Focus	Communicative skills, project-based	Grammar, memorization
Teaching Method	Student-centered, interactive	Teacher-centered, traditional
Visual Design	Modern, engaging	Simple, formal
Student Engagement	High through group tasks	Medium through structured repetition
Preferred by Students	For speaking and writing development	For grammar mastery

These findings underscore that the Merdeka Curriculum fosters creativity, collaboration, and real-world language use, consistent with Communicative Language Teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, its effectiveness depends on teacher training, class size, and resource access. Meanwhile, the Pesantren Curriculum maintains rigor in grammar but lacks dynamic communication opportunities. This could inhibit students' readiness in global or academic environments. Teachers expressed the need for a blended model that combines 1. The structured foundation of the pesantren system, and 2. The flexible, task-based learning of the Merdeka Curriculum. Such integration aligns with Harmer's (2015) recommendation for balanced input-output practices in language teaching,

allowing students to both internalize rules and express themselves meaningfully. The study confirmed pedagogical gaps in both curricula. Merdeka teachers face adaptability issues, while Pesantren teachers struggle with method constraints. Clear differences in content and approach impact students' motivation, with Merdeka preferred for engagement and Pesantren for structural clarity. The contrast between the Merdeka and Pesantren Curricula reflects broader educational values: innovation vs. tradition. By identifying these pedagogical distinctions and challenges, this research suggests the development of a dual-strategy curriculum that meets both global ELT standards and local educational philosophies.

4. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pesantren Curriculum in English Language Teaching (ELT) highlights distinct strengths and challenges associated with each framework. The Merdeka Curriculum demonstrates its potential to foster active student engagement, creativity, and practical language application through its student-centered and flexible approach. Teachers play a crucial role in implementing this curriculum by adopting project-based and interactive teaching methods, although they face challenges such as addressing diverse student proficiency levels and limited resources. In contrast, the Pesantren Curriculum excels in building a strong foundation in grammar and vocabulary, emphasizing structured and teacher-centered learning. While this approach ensures mastery of linguistic basics, it lacks opportunities for students to develop communicative and critical thinking skills. The rigid structure of the curriculum also limits its adaptability to individual learning needs.

The analysis revealed distinct differences in the content and approach of the textbooks used in the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pesantren Curriculum. Teachers highlighted that the Merdeka Curriculum textbook is modern and interactive, emphasizing project-based activities, critical thinking, and communicative tasks, while the Pesantren Curriculum textbook is more traditional, focusing on structured grammar exercises and memorization. Students expressed mixed preferences: some favored the Merdeka Curriculum for its engaging and practical activities that enhance speaking and writing skills, while others preferred the straightforward nature of the Pesantren Curriculum, which focuses on mastering grammar. Despite these differences, both teachers and students suggested that combining the interactive elements of the Merdeka Curriculum with the strong grammatical foundation of the Pesantren Curriculum would create a more balanced and effective approach to English language learning. This integration could address the diverse needs of learners, preparing them for both academic and practical language use. The findings underscore the importance of integrating the strengths of both curricula to achieve a more balanced approach to English language learning. Combining the interactive and creative aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum with the structured grammar and vocabulary focus of the Pesantren Curriculum could enhance overall learning outcomes. Additionally, collaboration among teachers, schools, and stakeholders is vital to address resource limitations and provide ongoing professional development to educators.

By leveraging the unique strengths of both curricula and addressing their limitations, educational institutions can create a more comprehensive and inclusive English language learning environment. This integrated approach will better prepare students to meet global challenges, ensuring their linguistic and academic development aligns with contemporary educational goals. Curriculum designers must bridge the gap between communicative fluency and grammatical precision. Institutions should support ongoing professional development for teachers, especially in pesantren, to adopt more adaptive and learner-centered methods. Future curriculum policies in Indonesia should accommodate cultural-religious contexts while promoting ELT innovation. To extend this research, the following directions are recommended: Longitudinal studies assessing the long-term impact of blended curriculum models on student language proficiency. Quantitative investigations comparing academic performance outcomes between pesantren and public-school students under both curricula. Studies exploring the role of digital and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in bridging the pedagogical gap between the two systems. Such research would enrich the national discourse on curriculum reform and support the development of a contextualized and progressive English education model in Indonesia.

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