

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MERDEKA CURRICULUM AT VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS IN LUBUKLINGGAU

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to investigate English teachers' perceptions about the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at vocational high schools in Lubuklinggau. This research used a descriptive qualitative method. English Teachers at several vocational high schools in Lubuklinggau who implemented the Merdeka Curriculum were included as subjects in the research. The schools were SMK Negeri 2 Lubuk Linggau, SMK Negeri 3 Lubuk Linggau, and SMK Negeri 4 Lubuk Linggau. In collecting data, questionnaires and interviews were used. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Interview data were reviewed descriptively to yield reliable, trustworthy findings. The result of this study was useful for evaluating the Education Office of Lubuklinggau and all elements that proposed the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. It showed that, among the English teachers' perceptions toward the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, 4 English teachers were in the very good category, with a percentage of 66.66%. However, 2 English teachers were in the good category (33.33%). While there is no English teacher for the fair, bad, and very bad category (0%). It means that most of the English teachers at Vocational schools in Lubuklinggau who implemented the Merdeka Curriculum have a very good understanding and perception of its implementation at their schools. There are some important points related to English teachers' perceptions, such as the fact that they are the main factor in determining the success of implementing the curriculum, so optimal socialization and training are very important for them. The government can also give greater attention to the provision of facilities and infrastructure for each school to support the learning process.

Keywords: English Subject, Implementation, Merdeka Curriculum, Perception

INTRODUCTION

To optimize human development, Indonesia makes maximum efforts, especially in the education field. All aspects of factors in education are being focused on by the government. One aspect that becomes the primary element is the curriculum. Ormond's (2017) explains that a curriculum is a set of guidelines designed into a curriculum consisting of principles, environments, and requirements consistent with the learning objectives to be achieved. Siregar (2021) also expressed a similar view regarding curriculum. He states that the curriculum is one of the important elements in the implementation of learning at all levels of education. The latest curriculum implemented in Indonesia is the Merdeka Curriculum.

Merdeka curriculum is a refinement of the previous curriculum, the K-13 Curriculum (Saputra et al., 2023). The government has received responses on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum concept at all levels of education, from elementary schools to junior high schools and senior high schools in Indonesia. The Merdeka Curriculum, as an extension of the 2013 curriculum, certainly received mixed reactions from teachers, students, and parents (Takdir et al., 2021). Each of them argued, and not a few complained, that the curriculum change was considered to move too quickly to replace the 2013 curriculum (Nasution, 2022). So far, the concept of the Merdeka curriculum has received varied responses from educational institutions that promote student learning at the elementary and secondary school levels, as well as at the tertiary level.

Research about perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has been conducted by several researchers. The first previous research was conducted by Hidayati & Nurdi (2023) with the title "Persepsi Guru Terhadap Penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka Dalam Pembelajaran PAI dan Budi Pekerti di Sekolah Dasar". The results show that most participants (85.7%) supported the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in schools and acknowledged its advantages, but only some (39.5%) understood and consistently applied the key concepts in learning activities. This is because participants experience difficulties understanding learning outcomes, reducing CP to TP and ATP, preparing lesson plans/modules, and conducting assessments based on the Kurikulum Merdeka. Another obstacle is limited facilities and infrastructure, as well as teachers' low IT skills. These findings indicate that socialization and training on the Kurikulum Merdeka alone are insufficient; there needs to be a consistent mentoring program to support teachers in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. This research only focused on the perception "positive or negative" perception, and lack of the practice of its curriculum.

Supriyatna, et.al. (2023) also investigated teachers' perceptions of the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. It was found that (1) teachers' perceptions are positive and good towards the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in elementary schools; (2) teachers play an essential role in the process of curriculum development and implementation in elementary schools, and the success of curriculum implementation depends on the intensity with which teachers implement the curriculum in the classroom; (3) teachers can develop and implement curriculum and design classes to improve learning quality; (4) socialisation and special technical guidance related to the formation of the

Pancasila learner profile have not been maximised; (5) not all elementary school teachers have adopted Merdeka curriculum; (6) not all teachers have information technology skills; and (7) the obstacle in implementing Merdeka curriculum is the lack of stable internet access, especially for remote schools that have geographically difficult internet access. This findings show the elementary schools which there is no English subject at this level.

Perceptions of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum were also an interesting topic for Suwardi (2023). However, he focused on the school principals' perceptions. Based on interviews with 9 school principals, it was concluded that 67% understood the implementation of the independent curriculum, while the remaining 33% did not. Meanwhile, the principal's perception of the principal's readiness to apply the independent curriculum is 100% registered, although the choices differ according to the conditions and availability of human resources.

The previous researches focused on the teachers' perceptions toward Merdeka Curriculum in general. Possitive or negative perception were found but lack of the implemention of this curriculum at school. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how teachers perceive the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, especially in the English subject. The research of Merdeka curriculum implementation of English subject at vocational school, especially in Lubuklinggau has not conducted previously.

The English teachers' perceptions in Lubuklinggau need to be analyzed to determine their preparedness to face the Merdeka Curriculum. This study makes several important contributions to the development of education in Indonesia, particularly in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at vocational high schools. This research provides empirical evidence regarding English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational high schools in Lubuklinggau. It also contributes to curriculum evaluation by identifying teachers' perceptions of the strengths and challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

LITERATUR REVIEW

Merdeka curriculum is one of the Ministry of Education and Culture's initiative programs. The goal of independent learning is for teachers, students, and parents to feel a happy atmosphere in the learning process. Yamin & Syahrir (2020) state that the Merdeka curriculum is one in which the education unit (schools, teachers, and students) has the freedom to innovate and learn creatively and independently. It allows students to learn anytime, anywhere, and promotes teachers' freedom of thought. This curriculum includes various intra-curricular learning activities. The content will be more optimal, so students have enough time to explore concepts and strengthen their competence (Ramadina, 2021; Manalu et al., 2022). Teachers have the flexibility to choose various teaching tools so that learning can be adapted to students' learning needs and interests (Pertiwi et al., 2022; Sasmita & Darmansyah, 2022).

The Merdeka curriculum concept also addresses problems in the learning process. These teachers are supported by administration, given freedom to design and assess student learning, and are opened to the obstacles educators face, such as creating lesson plans (Yamin & Syahrir, 2020). In addition, this curriculum aims to create fun education for students and teachers, as the Indonesian education system still faces problems that emphasize cognitive aspects of learning (Faidin et al., 2022). The main focus of the Merdeka curriculum is achieving concrete learning outcomes that lead to behavioral knowledge, abilities, and results.

Teachers must be familiar with current curriculum policies to perform their primary duties as educators effectively. This Merdeka curriculum is considered more accessible and comprehensive, as it focuses on only the essentials and develops students' competencies in phases; in terms of teaching, teachers will provide instruction according to each student's level of achievement (KEMENDIKBUD, 2021). Based on its concept, teachers are given the freedom and actualization to apply the national curriculum to their school's resources in teaching and learning activities (Prakoso et al., 2021). This concept is not much different from that of the previous curriculum, namely the 2013 curriculum, which also provides an excellent opportunity for teachers to become experts at finding resources (Maba, 2017), considering that the Merdeka curriculum is a simplified version of the 2013 curriculum.

On the other hand, in the Merdeka curriculum, students are free to explore learning materials from various sources to implement the local wisdom-based learning process and optimize school resources (Prakoso et al., 2021). This is considered appropriate because the "Merdeka" curriculum is seen as giving teachers the freedom to explore the best way to learn. Furthermore, knowing freedom permits the teacher to experiment more with learning strategies. And for its students, this policy provides an opportunity to add experience, insight, and knowledge to this program. They can learn outside their scope (Vega & Nur, 2022). In other words, students now have greater freedom regarding their learning resources, and the teacher's material is no longer the only basis for learning.

METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative research method. The purpose of this research method is to describe systematically the facts and the object that is studied precisely. In this research, the researchers focused on English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum for vocational high schools in Lubuklinggau. Some vocational schools in Lubuklinggau have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. The schools are SMK N 2, SMK N 3, and SMK N 4 Lubuklinggau. Six English teachers from the schools served as the sample for this research with total sampling selection.

In collecting data, the researchers used two instruments: a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire is adapted from Perdana (2021) and consists of 37 statements, both in negative and positive forms, with both open- and closed-ended items. An interview is used to support data from a questionnaire. The interview questions are adapted from Muzarifah et al. (2023). There were 10 questions that asked about the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at

Vocational High Schools. Before the instruments were administered, their validity was established to ensure that they accurately measured the intended constructs. Since the questionnaire and interview protocol were adapted from previous studies (Perdana, 2021; Muzarifah et al., 2023), content validity was first assessed through expert judgment. The expert reviewed the instruments to evaluate the clarity, relevance, appropriateness, and representativeness of each item in relation to the research objectives. Based on her feedback, several items were revised to improve wording, clarity, and contextual suitability for vocational high schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The validity of the qualitative interview data was further enhanced through data triangulation by comparing the interview findings with the questionnaire results. This triangulation helped ensure the consistency and credibility of the data and provided a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The data analysis was conducted in several stages. To analyze the questionnaire data, the researchers used descriptive statistics. The responses from the questionnaires were coded and entered into the descriptive statistics included percentages to describe teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Next, the interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The analysis consisted of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings from the questionnaire and interview were triangulated to strengthen the credibility of the study. The qualitative findings were used to explain, confirm, and enrich the quantitative results, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational high schools.

FINDING

Data from Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 37 items, each a statement, with both positive and negative statements. This questionnaire is divided into three indicators: the concept of the Merdeka curriculum, its content, and its implementation. An interview was conducted to validate respondents' questionnaire responses. and, from the whole data, it has 100% from 37 items of statements about English teachers' perspectives on the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. Data about English teachers' perspectives on the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in the category can be seen in the following table:

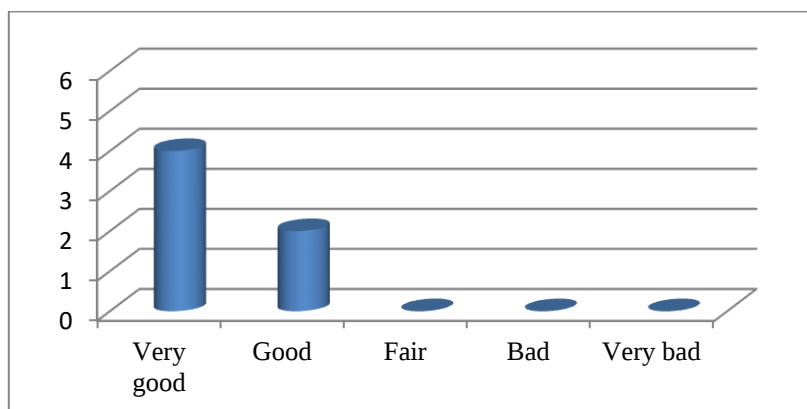


Figure 1. Category of English teachers' perception toward the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum

Figure 1 illustrate there were 4 English teachers were in very good category with the percentage 66.66%. There were 2 English teachers in good category (33.33%). While, no English teacher for fair, bad and very bad category (0%). It means that all sample have very good understanding and perception about the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum at their schools.

This research data was described to know clear description about the characteristics of the data itself. To get clearer description, the data above should be explained separately based on the indicators of the questionnaire.

1. Concept

The concept is one of factors that arise from the teachers themselves that influence to bad or good their perception toward the implementation of Merdeka curriculum. There are 13 items of statement that measure English teachers' perception. The concept has 35.13% (13) from 100% (37) items of total items. With the maximum score is 26, the minimum score is 13 and mean score is 24. For futher information about English teachers' performance about the concept, the figure 2 below is presented.

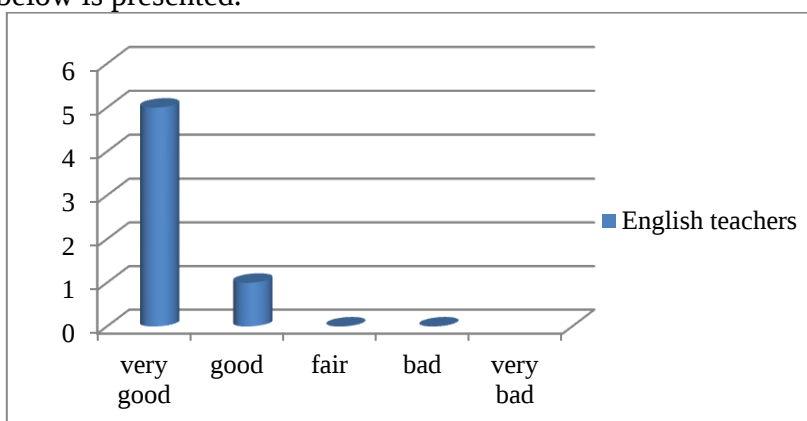


Figure 2. Teachers' perception about the concept of Merdeka Curriculum

From the figure 2 above, it can be seen that there were 5 English teachers or 83.33% in very good ceriteria to the perception of the implementation of

Merdeka Curriculum. There was 1 English teacher (16.66%) in good criteria. While, there was 0 English teacher (0%) for fair, bad and very bad criteria.

2. Content

The second indicator in questionnaire is content of merdeka curriculum. There are four aspects of content: UN, USBN, RPP nad PPDB. The four aspects were designed into 16 items. The content has 43.24% poin or 16 questions from 100% of 37 items. The maximum score is 32 and the minimum score is 16. Then, the mean score of this indicator is 26.5. The data about English perception toward the implementation of merdeka curriculum is presented to the following figure:

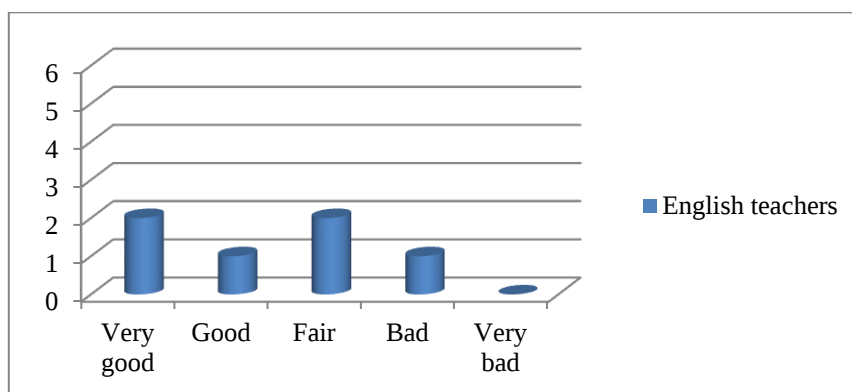


Figure 3. Teachers' Perception about the content of Merdeka Curriculum

Figure 3 above shows that there were 2 English teachers (33.33%) have good perception about the content of Merdeka curriculum. There was 1 English teacher (16.66%) which was in good category. Then, there were 2 English teachers too (33.33%) in fair category. 1 English teacher (16.66%) was included into bad category. While, no English teachers was in very bad category.

3. Implementation

The last indicator or factor that influenced English teachers towards the implementation of Merdeka curriculum is Implementation. This factor has 34.78% or 8 items of statements of 100% or 37 items of statements in questionnaire. the maximum score was 16. The minimum score was 8. Then, the mean score of this indicator was 15.33. Below is figure 4 which illustrates the perception of English teachers towards the implementation indicators.

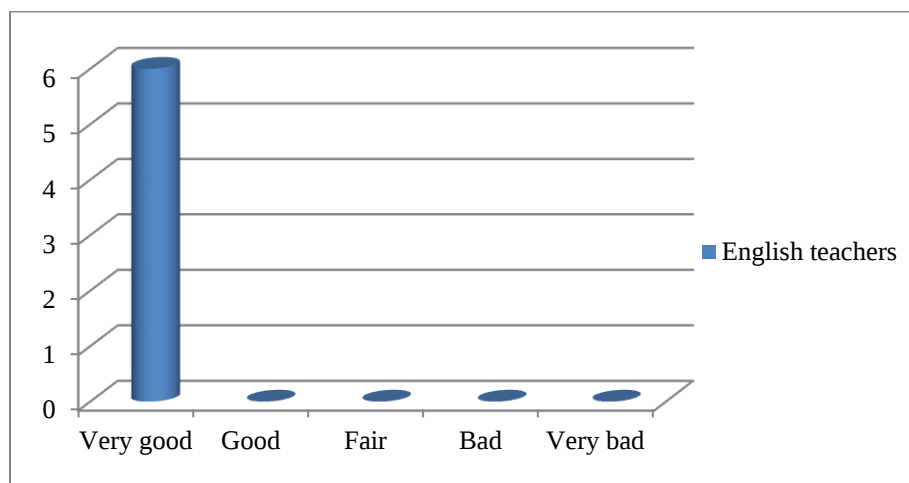


Figure 4. Teachers' perception about the impenlenation factor

The data from diagram can be explained that all English teachers have very good perception about the implementation factors in implementing Merdeka curriculum at their school.

Interview Data Findings

Data in this research was also collected by interviewing the English Teacher of some Vocational schools in Lubuklinggau who implemented Merdeka curriculum. The interview was used to get additional data about their perception toward the implementation of Merdeka curriculum ath their schools. There were 10 questions asked to the sample. The interview was conducted by takin the voice record. Here will be presented the result of the interview.

The first question is *“Apakah sekolah anda sudah menerapkan kurikulum merdeka dan apa yang anda ketahui tentang kurikulum merdeka setelah ditetapkannya di sekolah anda?”*. From this question, all samples answered that their schools have been implemented this curriculum. One of English teacher at SMK N 4 Lubuklinggau said that they know Merdeka Curriculum since the minister of Education and culture announced about this curriculum. But, they learned about the curriculum, when the school had opinion to implement thhis curriculum. And they seek the information by browsing in internet and other sources such as joining workshop of Merdeka curriculum. Another English teacher from SMK N 2 Lubuklinggau said that Merdeka curriculum is a curricuum that is matched to what students needs and the originally students as a human. They have a freedom to decice what they need to learn and how they learn.

The second question is asking about English teachers' readiness to implement Merdeka curriculum. The question is *“Bagaimana kesiapan anda dalam mengimplementasikan kurikulum merdeka di sekolah?”*. Mrs. N from SMK N 2 Lubuklinggau said that she was just already to implement the curriculum after she got worskhop and training about the implementation of Merdeka curriculum from Dinas Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan both Lubuklinggau city and South Sumatra province. While, the English teachers of SMK N 3 Lubuklinggau said

that they prepare themselves to implement Merdeka curriculum by learning autodidactly and joining workshop.

"Bagaimana peran anda sebagai guru dalam mengimplementasikan kurikulum merdeka di sekolah?" was also asked in interview. Mrs. S said that in merdeka curriculum English teacher should become a planner, motivator, and many others roles. Teacher is not only transferring knowledge but also supporting and motivating students to be creative, confident, independent, and active in learning process.

The next question, all the samples said that the changing curriculum from the previous curriculum to merdeka curriculum of course influencing in their teaching. The effect was in teaching strategy they used. They teach by using students centered, not teacher centered anymore. The students was given brainstorming and some questions to stimulate their interest and focus to the topic lesson. The students become more active in learning process.

The sixth question was allowed the English teacher to mention their difficulties in implementing merdeka curriculum. *"Apakah sebagai guru anda masih kesulitan dalam mengimplementasikan kurikulum merdeka?"* was asked. The researchers concluded their answers by mentioning some difficulties. The first is, they are still lack of information about merdeka curriculum. Training and workshop are needed to strengthen their understanding about Merdeka curriculum. The most important part that they still confused is about curriculum structure issues for learning Pancasila student profiles and non-assessment cognitive which is carried out at the beginning of the school year. In addition, the English teachers need to learn many more about the strategies and teaching methods that appropriate to the curriculum. The procedure of assessing students' skills and performance related to the curriculum were also included to what they need to be learnt.

In implementing merdeka curriculum, they also face some obstacles such as the availability of facilities and infrastructure at school. They were suggested to teach by using digital media but the availability of internet connection is still disturbed. The language laboratory is not available at schools. so, these obstacles require the English teacher to think hard in preparing learning media that suitable for the curriculum implementation. They hope government can provide learning facilities and infrastructure to support the implementation of merdeka curriculum.

And the last question was about their opinion toward the effectiveness of Merdeka curriculum. They argue that between merdeka curriculum and the previous curriculum (K-13) was not difference significantly. Merdeka curriculum is the revision of K-13. The differences were in some aspects, such as the goals of curriculums. K-13 was well-structured and complex that Merdeka curriculum emphasize to character education. The next difference is in designing lesson plan. Merdeka curriculum is shorter than lesson plan in K-13, but the point is the same. Teacher should attach learning materials and learning evaluations in lesson plan. Both of curriculums implement students centre in learning process.

DISCUSSION

Merdeka curriculum is a policy from the Ministry of Education and Culture that marks a breakthrough in improving the quality of education. The curriculum is a deep offer to restructure the education system to support the nation's change and progress, adapting to this time. It allows students to learn more and to have a positive learning environment. The main goal of this curriculum is to prepare students to face life after school.

Based on the data obtained, teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum are very good, with 66.66% of the samples. In detail, it shows that 66.66% have a very good perception of English teachers, or 4 of 6. And 2 English teachers, or 33.33%, have a good perception. There is no English teacher in fair, bad, and very bad perceptions. Overall, teachers' positive perceptions suggest that they recognize the potential of the Merdeka Curriculum to improve teaching and learning practices. First, Merdeka Curriculum gives greater flexibility for teachers to design learning activities based on students' need and students' characteristics. It is in line with (Rosyida, 2025) that this curriculum was introduced to provide educators with the flexibility to design learning activities tailored to students' needs. Next, Merdeka curriculum practice students centered learning which encourages students' active engagement. This positive perception is also influenced by the continuously government support the teachers such workshop and merdeka platform (suparman & Muhammad, 2024).

The data obtained show several important points regarding English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at their school. The findings was related to the results of some previous researchers, such as Sunarni & Karyono (2023), Suwardi (2023) mentioned that 1) teachers have positive perceptions and appreciate the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at their schools; 2) the role of the teachers are very important in the development and implementation of Merdeka curriculum at schools and the successfulness of Merdeka curriculum implementation is really depend on the their intencities in implementation; 3) there is still not optimal socialization and technical guidance training regarding formation of Pancasila students' profile. The government and schools have allocated a special budget for socialization, technical guidance, and workshops related to the Merdeka curriculum itself. But, the teachers still have less information about it; 4) Not all teachers have IT skills; and 5) internal obstacles are a lack of support of facilities, infrastructure, and resources.

Siregar (2021), Wilestari (2021), Supriatna et al. (2023) also argue that teachers' views and ideas should be incorporated into curriculum development. On the other hand, the team developing the curriculum should consider teachers as part of the environment that shapes it. Therefore, teachers' involvement is essential for successful and meaningful curriculum development. Teachers, as implementers, are part of the final stage of school curriculum development. The data from the interview is still aligned with their findings. Teachers hope their opinions and perspectives are considered in developing the next curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data analysis, it can be concluded that among the English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, 4 English teachers are in the very good category, representing 66.66%. However, 2 English teachers were in the good category (33.33%). While there is no English teacher for the fair, bad, and very bad category (0%). It means that most English teachers at Vocational schools in Lubuklinggau who implemented the Merdeka curriculum have a very good understanding of its implementation at their schools.

There are some important points related to English teachers' perceptions: they are the main factor in determining the success of curriculum implementation, so optimal socialization and training are very important for them. The government can also give greater attention to providing facilities and infrastructure for each school to support the learning process.

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