

Challenges in Implementing the Independent Curriculum in English Language Learning at MA Palapa Nusantara, East Lombok

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum in English learning and to explore strategies that enhance student engagement. Using a qualitative approach with observation, interviews, and questionnaires, the research involved three English teachers and three high-achieving students at MA Palapa Nusantara, East Lombok. The findings reveal that teachers encounter limited resources, insufficient training, and difficulties in adapting teaching methods to diverse student needs. Students, meanwhile, struggle with motivation, limited practice, and adapting to independent learning styles. Effective strategies identified include the use of technology, project-based activities, and communicative approaches. This study highlights the gap between curriculum principles and classroom realities, offering insights for improving English language learning in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Independent Curriculum, English Learning, Teacher Challenges, Student Interest*

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a crucial role in human life as a system of symbols used for communication, cooperation, and identity (Yule, 2022). English, in particular, has become a global language that provides access to knowledge, wider career opportunities, and participation in international communication (Horwitz, 2020). For Indonesian learners, English is not only a means of acquiring linguistic competence but also a gateway to cultural and social understanding that supports effective interaction across contexts (Huang, 2019).

In Indonesia, efforts to improve the quality of education have long included curriculum reforms. Several models have been introduced, such as the Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan (KTSP), the 2013 Curriculum (K-13), and most recently, the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). A curriculum serves as a systematic plan that organizes learning objectives, experiences, methods, and assessments (Nouraey et al., 2020; Januarto et al., 2020; Gurkan, 2021). The KTSP allowed flexibility for schools to design their own curriculum (Saputra, 2021; Ghufon, 2020; Nisa, 2023; Jannah, 2023), while the 2013 Curriculum emphasized competency-based learning, thematic integration, and authentic assessment (Sugianto et al., 2024; Mansur et al., 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2024; Costa et al., 2022; Nuraeni et al., 2020).

The Independent Curriculum, launched in 2021, represents a more radical shift by granting schools and teachers greater autonomy to design learning experiences suited to local needs and student interests (Whalley et al., 2021; Irwan et al., 2024; Hoidn & Reusser, 2020). It emphasizes project-based learning, student-centered approaches, and character development to equip learners with 21st-century competencies, including creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication (Hoidn & Reusser, 2020; Amelia, 2023; Susanna et al., 2023).

Despite these objectives, implementation in practice remains challenging. Teachers often face limited facilities, lack of training, and difficulties aligning teaching with curriculum principles (Ferri et al., 2020). At the same time, students may struggle to adapt to more independent and project-based approaches, particularly in contexts with limited technological resources or traditional classroom practices (Poperechna, 2022). Previous studies confirm such challenges, highlighting issues such as lack of references, unequal access, and insufficient readiness for technological change (Nasution, 2023; Monalisa & Irfan, 2023; Sasmita & Darmansyah, 2022).

Given these conditions, the success of the Independent Curriculum in English language learning, especially at the senior high school level, requires further investigation. Therefore, this study aims to identify the challenges encountered by teachers and students in implementing the Independent English Curriculum and to explore strategies for increasing student participation and interest in English learning.

METHOD

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative descriptive approach to capture the experiences of teachers and students in implementing the Independent Curriculum. As suggested by Hasna (2023), qualitative research is effective for exploring perceptions and practices related to curriculum implementation.

Participants

The study was conducted at MA Palapa Nusantara, East Lombok, in June 2025. Participants consisted of three English teachers and three high-achieving students, one from each grade level (X, XI, and XII). The selection used purposive sampling, targeting individuals directly involved in English language teaching and learning under the Independent Curriculum (Maulisa et al., 2024). Teachers were chosen based on their active role in curriculum implementation, while students were selected with the recommendation of their teachers to represent learners with consistent academic achievement.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through three techniques: observation, interviews, and questionnaires. Observations focused on teacher preparation, classroom activities, and student engagement. Semi-structured interviews, following Archibald et al. (2019), provided deeper insights into the challenges faced by both teachers and students. Questionnaires were adapted from the VARK learning style model (Vark-learning.com, 2019) to identify learning preferences and obstacles in adapting to the Independent Curriculum.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed the framework of Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Transcripts from interviews and field notes were subjected to thematic analysis, in which initial codes were generated, grouped into categories, and then developed into broader themes. Triangulation was employed by cross-checking findings from observations, interviews, and questionnaires to ensure validity. This process allowed recurring patterns to be identified while reducing researcher bias.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Challenges in Implementation

Observations across grades X, XI, and XII revealed variations in preparation, resources, and classroom practices. In grade X, teachers prepared lesson plans adequately but struggled with limited facilities such as projectors and learning media. English was rarely used consistently in classroom interaction, and student participation remained low. In grade XI, teaching preparation improved, and most students engaged actively, though assessments

were conducted irregularly. Grade XII showed weaker preparation but greater student participation, with more frequent use of English in class.

Interviews confirmed three main challenges faced by teachers, namely limited resources such as technology and supporting materials, the lack of intensive training to adjust their teaching practices to the Independent Curriculum, and difficulties in adapting instructional methods to meet the diverse needs of students.

Students also reported challenges such as low motivation, limited opportunities to practice English, and difficulties adjusting to project-based and independent learning styles. Questionnaire results reinforced these findings, indicating a preference for traditional learning and limited readiness for self-directed learning.

These challenges align with previous studies reporting resource constraints, insufficient teacher readiness, and students' weak independence in adopting the Independent Curriculum (Sasmita & Darmansyah, 2022; Monalisa & Irfan, 2023; Nasution, 2023).

Strategies for Engagement

Despite these challenges, several effective strategies emerged from both observations and interviews: (1) the integration of technology, including videos, online dictionaries, and multimedia, which stimulated student interest and improved comprehension (Irwan et al., 2024); (2) the implementation of project-based learning that provided meaningful contexts for collaboration and creativity, aligning with the vision of the Independent Curriculum (Whalley et al., 2021); and (3) the use of communicative approaches such as role play and group discussions, which encouraged authentic language use and enhanced student participation (Hoidn & Reusser, 2020).

These strategies were not always consistently applied due to time and resource constraints but demonstrated potential to increase student engagement when implemented effectively.

Discussion

The findings highlight the gap between the principles of the Independent Curriculum and classroom realities. While the curriculum emphasizes autonomy, creativity, and student-centered learning, its implementation is hindered by limited infrastructure, insufficient professional development, and uneven student readiness.

Teacher-related challenges suggest a need for continuous training and support to align teaching practices with curriculum goals (Hasibuan, 2024). Meanwhile, student difficulties in adapting to independent and project-based tasks indicate that scaffolding and gradual introduction of new learning approaches are necessary to build learner autonomy.

The effective use of technology, project-based activities, and communicative methods reflects the potential of the Independent Curriculum to improve English learning outcomes if supported by adequate resources and systematic teacher development. These insights reinforce the importance of aligning policy initiatives with classroom contexts to ensure meaningful implementation of curriculum reform.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that implementing the Independent Curriculum in English language learning at MA Palapa Nusantara faces significant challenges. Teachers struggle with limited resources, lack of intensive training, and adapting teaching methods to diverse student needs, while students encounter low motivation, limited practice, and difficulties adjusting to independent and project-based learning. Despite these obstacles, the integration of technology, project-based tasks, and communicative approaches proved effective in enhancing student engagement. These findings suggest that successful curriculum implementation requires stronger teacher support, adequate resources, and strategies tailored to local contexts.

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