

## PERCEPTION AND PROBLEM OF ENGLISH PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN APPLYING MERDEKA BELAJAR CURRICULUM DURING TEACHING PRACTICE

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**Abstract:** Curriculum is updated according to the era's demands which aims at actualizing qualified human resources. The great concept of the curriculum will be superfluous without the teachers' role. The objective of this research is to examine English preservice teachers' perceptions and problems they encounter in understanding and implementing the new curriculum during their teaching practice. Ten English preservice teachers who completed their teaching practice took part in this research. They were assigned to schools that implement the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Since the data was gathered and analyzed in two ways, this research is a mixed-method study. The findings of the study revealed that English preservice teachers have a negative perception of understanding and implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in their teaching practice, incapability in designing flow of learning objectives and teaching modules, incapability to conduct differential learning, lack of knowledge on how to integrate Profil Pelajar Pancasila into teaching-learning process contributes to the negative perception of English Pre-Service Teacher. Additionally, the problem was made worse because the university did not properly prepare English pre-service teachers for the latest curriculum.

**Keywords:** Perception, Pre-service teacher, Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

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## INTRODUCTION

Having qualified human resources becomes the primary issue that must be addressed in every aspect of life. Having qualified human resources can resolve the complexity of life problems. Furthermore, Mathura affirmed that the quality of human resources contributes to the advancement of the country's development (Mathura, 2019). Undeniably, the educational aspect is the leading sector that has a crucial role in upgrading human resources. The revitalization of the curriculum was also triggered by the result of PISA Survey in 2018 which placed Indonesia in seventy-four positions, and it was the sixth place from the bottom. The result in detail described that Indonesian students' reading ability

with a score of 371 is in the 74th position, Mathematics ability with 379 is in the 73rd position, and science ability with a score of 396 is in the 71st position (Kemendikbud, 2019). It is an ironic result for Indonesian education that the position shows the quality of Indonesian human resources. Thus, Indonesian education under the supervision of Kemdikbud has gradually altered and revitalized the educational system to be better through the curriculum.

First and foremost, the curriculum is a fundamental aspect of the development and advancement educational system in a country (Akinoğlu, 2017). It was also strengthened by Khasawneh (2022) and Ismail (2011) who affirmed that the changing of curriculum in a state was also followed with the changing all the elements such as the purpose, the learning style, and the evaluation which aims at upgrading better the previous curriculum (Bada, 2022; Ismail, 2011). By learning the history of curriculum development, the curriculum designer, educator, and teacher can obtain valuable information concerning the success and failure of curriculums that have been used. As Setyaningsih asserted that the development of an educational system always relates to the development of a curriculum design that underlies the goals and strategies for how the system is implemented (Hadi et al., 2023; Setyaningsih et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2023). The main objective of an education system is described in the outline of the curriculum which forms the basis for its implementation and evaluation. In short, the curriculum regulates planning systematically related to what is taught in the field or school program. Therefore, the curriculum in terms of documents becomes a teacher's guide that regulates their mandatory authority within the scope of education. It is equal importance and the presence of a curriculum are significant to assure understanding among stakeholders regarding the design of the implemented education system (Nurindah et al., 2022).

Indonesia has noted implementing some different curricula starting from the post-independence period up to the present time. The curriculum has been upgraded every five started from 1974 until present. the curriculum must be designed to meet skill requirements today, to overtake educational quality to be more proficient (Pratikno et al., 2022). The curriculum had its own name such as KBK in 2004, KTSP in 2016, K13 in 2013, and Merdeka Belajar curriculum in 2023. KBK which was released in 2004, replaced the 1994 curriculum with three key features: competency selection, evaluation indicators, and learning development. It emphasizes learning outcomes-oriented competency achievement and allows teachers to use various resources (Yamin & Syahrir, 2020). Then, the 2006 curriculum replaced KBK, which was requiring teachers to develop syllabuses and assessments based on their schools' circumstance, and it was leading to teacher fatigue in completing lesson plans and administrative tasks. Fortunately, The new minister prioritizes administrative tasks over developing learning materials, he was omitting KTSP and announcing it as part of the K13 curriculum (Tridiana & Rizal, 2020).

The K13 curriculum focused on Kemdikbud-determined competencies, known as "Kompetensi Dasar," including cognitive, skill, and psychomotor assessment aspects for effective teaching and learning. The K13 curriculum has undergone three times revisions, to address a lesson plan issue from dozens of pages into a page (Retnawati, 2019). The K13 curriculum has achieved significant success by requiring teachers to foster students' critical thinking and utilize the 21st learning style in the teaching-learning process (Jayanti, 2018). Critical and creative thinking, collaborative and communicative are invention in K13 following with character building (Fakhrunnisa, 2021). K13 curriculum also required teachers also as test-designers to design assessment based on High Order Thinking skill

(HOTS) (Indrawati, 2018). This curriculum was implemented well until the COVID-19 pandemic assaulted all life aspects, including educational aspects.

Online classes were conducted to overcome the absence of conventional teaching-learning. Meanwhile, the learning goals were arduous to be achieved. Due to of this, Kurikulum Darurat as known as Prototype curriculum was proposed. The curriculum was shortened for effectiveness, focusing on the main competency, (Kemendikbud, 2019) Directly ahead, the prototype has been immaculate to Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar with some advancement aspects and revitalized the K13 Curriculum (Astungkoro, 2022).

Given the idea that Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar is the advancement of K13 curriculum, some aspects have been rectified. Basic competence of K13 curriculum is replaced with objective learning or *Capaian Pembelajaran*. *Capaian Pembelajaran* divides into four phases; PAUD (Young learners), Primary (SD), Secondary (SMP&SMA) phase which indicates students' grades. 5 *Penanaman Pendidikan Karakter* or Character Building of K13 curriculum is also being revitalized into *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Pancasila Students Profile). Indonesian education minister also encourages teachers to manage differential learnings which allows different students ability obtain appropriate learning (Bahar & Herli, Sundi, 2020). Other remarkable aspects of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar also impose Project-based learning as a teaching methodology that aims to develop students' skills and *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar also focuses on essential material that originated from the resemblance of the topic learning. In equal importance, the lesson plan has followed the K13 curriculum which is only a page lesson plan. Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar gives teachers and students more flexible time in teaching and learning (Mustagfiroh, 2020).

However, the great concept of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar will be ineffective and will not be able to be accomplished without involving the teachers' role. Teachers have a pivotal role in bridging curriculum into the process of teaching-learning. Since they are the main actors, the vericator, and the judges in teaching-learning (Turgut et al., 2016). Therefore, teachers are required to be adaptive as their roles are always shifting following the policy. Meanwhile, English preservice teachers are teachers' candidacy who will be the real teachers after they complete their studies. English preservice teachers must prepare and equip themselves with sufficient knowledge and competence regarding the new policy of Indonesian curriculum. Hence, an innovative approach is needed to know English preservice teachers' perception and their problems in implementing Merdeka Belajar curriculum during their teaching practice.

A large number of existing studies in broader literature have examined Merdeka Belajar curriculum as the main subject of the study. Previous studies (Ahid & Sufirmansyah, 2022; Fathurrahman et al., 2022; Prakoso et al., 2021; Setyaningsih et al., 2022) analyzed the effect of Merdeka Belajar curriculum on the school's management. The school shows readiness to change, revitalize, and add some school policies related to Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar (Fathurrahman et al., 2022). Similarly, the study was conducted by Ahid and Sufirmansyah which promoted G\*Gold strategy; Greatness, Gratitude, Obedience, Love, and Discipline in applying Merdeka Belajar curriculum. The findings of the study pointed out that the G\*Gold strategy was worth it and good to use. The model was considered rational, flexible, contextual, clear, and applicable (Ahid & Sufirmansyah, 2022). Then, Setyaningsih identified and analyzed teachers' role as the applicator of Pancasila learners in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. The results of this study concluded that by cultivating

Pancasila Profile to learners can be reached through advice, being tolerant, raising discipline, and being patriotic (Setiyaningsih et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, those previous studies were limited in portraying English pre-service teachers' perceptions and their problems concerning the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. Aims at occupying the gap, the present research invited pre-service teachers as the future teachers who acquire the way of teaching from teaching practice. Teaching practice allows them to get real-teaching experiences before they do the real teaching. In short, they must equip themselves with professionalism competence, and skills with an understanding of their education and education philosophies. Thus, the goal of this study is to unveil English preservice teachers' perception and their problems in understanding and implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum during their practice.

The study seeks to address the following questions: How do English pre-service teachers perceive the Merdeka Belajar curriculum as the new Indonesian curriculum? Additionally, what challenges do English pre-service teachers encounter in implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum during their teaching practice?

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This descriptive study aims to investigate the English pre-service teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, the new Indonesian curriculum, and the challenges they encounter in implementing the curriculum during their teaching practice.

### **Participants of Study**

Ten English preservice teachers took part in this research. They were seventh-semester students came from three universities in Gresik, University of Kyai Abdullah Faqih, University Muhammadiyah Gresik and Gresik University with English language teaching as the major. They have completed their teaching practices in schools that implement Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar as the curriculum. For this reason, they were chosen. They did their teaching practice from the beginning of August 2023 to the beginning of October 2023. Before they did teach practice, they enrolled and completed a Microteaching course.

### **Research Instrument**

Concerning the instruments used in this research, A closed-ended questionnaire was underpinned with twelve questions to find out English preservice teachers' perceptions. It was called for the characters and features of Merdeka Belajar curriculum. The questionnaire was designed by noticing some aspects of the revitalization K13 curriculum into Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar curriculum and new aspects of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar curriculum. This questionnaire is eligible to be used since the Cronbach alpha reach 0.81.

Table 1. The Cronbach Alpha of Questionnaire

<b>Reliability Statistics</b>	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
.818	12

Table 2. Questionnaire of English Preservice Teachers' Perception

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	I understand that K13 Curriculum has been revitalized into Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar.				
2	I understand well some updated terms and policies from K13 to Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.				
3	I understand well English teaching method which highly suggested by Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.				
4	I understand well there were two addition of English skills that must be taught in EFL class based on the syllabus.				
5	There is "Pembelajaran Diferensiasi" in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. I know it and I understand well about it.				
6	I can conduct Pembelajaran Diferensiasi.				
7	Critical Thinking and Creative Thinking are two learning style that are highly suggested to be applied in Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. I am having good understanding of these and Able to teach these.				
8	I have a good understanding and I am able to create assessments based on HOTS (high order thinking style).				
9	I know that 5 PPK in K13 has altered into Profil Pelajar Pancasila and able to integrate it in my teaching-learning.				
10	I have Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar Syllabus and I understand the whole content of the English teaching part.				
11	I can design Alur Tujuan pembelajaran of in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar.				
12	I can design "Modul Ajar" based on the guidelines of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum				

In the same manner, the interview was employed to seek English preservice teachers' problems confronted in applying Merdeka Belajar curriculum during their teaching practices. Consisting of five questions, inquiring about their background knowledge, and their problems related to the implementation of Merdeka Belajar curriculum during their teaching practice and its cause. The questions can be seen as follow:

Table 3. List of interview questions

No	Questions
1.	Before you did teaching practice, have you understood of Merdeka Belajar curriculum or is it new for you?
2	If you have understood with Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, how can you know and how do you comprehend it? (SKIP this question item if the interviewee does not know)
3	If Merdeka Belajar is new for you, do you have any difficulties in understanding and implementing it during your teaching practice?
4	In what elements do you think it is hard to be understood and implemented? Please, state your reason! <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The aspect of Fase and Capaian Pembelajaran</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The aspect of pembelajaran diferensiasi</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The aspect of assessment</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The aspect of making "materi esensi"</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Another.....</li> </ul>

Reason:

No	Questions
5	What are the main cause of these difficulties? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does not have sufficient background knowledge.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> University does not equip me well.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> It is hard to be understood and implemented.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> K13 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar have some similarities</li> </ul>

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### English Preservice Teachers' Perception

The obtained data was calculated using descriptive statistics which seeks for the frequency and the percentage. The categorizations are as follows: Excellent (76-100%), Good (51-75%), Poor (26-50%), and Very Poor (0-25%).

Table 3. The Result of the Questionnaire

Student	Total	Percentage	Category
1	23	48%	Poor
2	25	52%	Good
3	23	48%	Poor
4	23	48%	Poor
5	23	48%	Poor
6	26	54%	Good
7	22	45%	Poor
8	23	48%	Poor
9	21	43%	Poor
10	23	48%	Poor

The present findings heed in-depth attention in portraying the specific perceptions as shown in Table 3, the English preservice teachers' perception is statistically significant at the level of "poor". It indicates that they do not perceive well in understanding and implementing kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. Concerning the first research aims, it is highly suggested that lecturers and universities echo insistent internal positive supports for the knowledge of Merdeka Belajar curriculum to English preservice teachers as has been claimed by Wijaya, that preservice teachers' perception contributes significantly to their future profession (Wijaya, 2022). Indeed, transferring information and knowledge related to the curriculum Merdeka Belajar must be civilized.

Detailing from the first questionnaire items one to twelve, the lightest point that gains positive responses is the first point which explores students' knowledge about the changing of K13 curriculum to Merdeka Belajar curriculum. The average point of respondents' answers is four which indicates that they have known well the changing of K13 curriculum to Merdeka Belajar curriculum. The primary information is essential to lead English preservice teachers to acquire more and deeper information about other aspects of the latest curriculum. Notwithstanding, the other eleventh perceptions are indicated defective since the average places in small number. The last point of questionnaire items figured out in the lowest number which is one point four (1.4) (item12). It figures out that they are not skillful in designing and developing Modul Ajar based on Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy. The points which also disclosed the negative perception are the English pre-service teachers' knowledge on how to teach English based on what Merdeka Belajar curriculum highly recommended (Item 3) They also claimed that they do not have the proper ability to conduct differential learning (Item 6) and design lesson plans of Merdeka Belajar curriculum known as ATP; Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran (Item 11).

Concerning, the findings of this research, the first chain is mutually intertwined with the prior study which was conducted by Lestiyani with her findings that not all educators in her research site have a good understanding related to Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. She uncovered that less dissemination, teachers' workshops, and forums, and less technical guidance became the main cause of teachers' lack of understanding (Lestiyani, 2020). That was ironic, knowing the fact that educators as the actors who implement the curriculum did not know about curriculum revitalization. In a similar sense, (Pertiwi & Pusparini, 2021) uncovered that English preservice teachers could not perform designing lesson plans based on Merdeka Belajar curriculum requirements. It was caused because they were unable to discriminate the difference between K13 lesson plan and Merdeka Belajar curriculum lesson plan. They supposed that those have similar attachments and focuses. The massive intensive must be afforded to English preservice teachers' regarding the Merdeka Belajar curriculum contents, characters, and features to fortify their readiness for real professionalism was also asserted by (Prakoso et al., 2021).

### **English Preservice Teachers' Problems in Implementing Merdeka Belajar Curriculum**

This part notices profound attention in depicting the specific problems English preservice teachers have toward the implementation during their teaching practices. Five open-ended questions were undertaken via a face-to-face interview with ten English teachers. It explored their background information regarding the alteration of K13 curriculum into the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, the elements of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum that are hard to understand and implement, and the cause of these.

### **Background Information and Sources of changing K13 curriculum into Merdeka Belajar Curriculum**

Ten English preservice teachers confessed that they knew and understood that the curriculum had been changed from the schools where they had been assigned. Their lecturer in microteaching warned them of the release of this curriculum before they did teaching practice. The lecturer informed them that K13 was being revitalized into an emergent curriculum and prototype curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some schools have applied these two curriculums. On the other hand, when they have microteaching courses, they learn more about the K13 curriculum rather than Merdeka Belajar curriculum. This case made them lack understanding of Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

### **English Preservices' Obstacles in Understanding and Implementing Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.**

Figure 1 indicates that the most element of Merdeka Belajar curriculum that was tough to be understood and implemented by English preservice teachers is the creation of essential material. The incapability of understanding some text types used for its grade, the systematical text used, and the way to design critical text was mentioned as the cause of their difficulties.

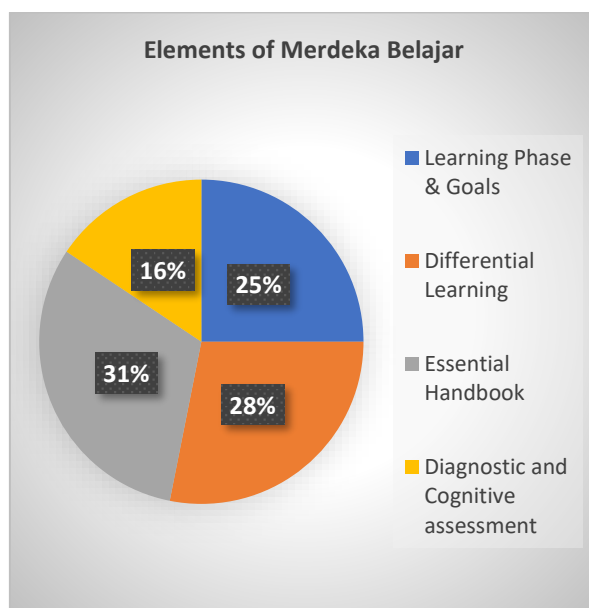


Figure 1. English Preservices' Obstacles in Understanding Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

Following diagnostic and cognitive assessment, English preservice teachers elucidated that they cannot distinguish the main things of diagnostic and cognitive and the way to create the diagnostic assessment. They were anxious about formulating questions for diagnostic assessment which would be like cognitive assessment. Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi or differential learning also got more attention from them to be conducted. They have difficulties in grouping students into low, middle, and high students. They have unfit thoughts for this way due to the student's physical condition. They were aware that students would feel demotivated in this way. They also did not have any background knowledge of how to run differential learning. In a similar vein, the students' phase and learning objective were hard to grasp considering that these elements were new in Merdeka Belajar curriculum. English preservice teachers claimed that objective learning was formulated too general and more specific in K13 curriculum. They felt insecure in formulating the operational verb for each topic learning whether it is applicable or not.

### **The Problems' Cause of Lack of Understanding and Implementing Merdeka Belajar Curriculum**

From Figure 2, the explanation of the negative result derived from the majority cause of English preservice teachers' barriers in understanding and implementing of Merdeka Belajar curriculum is the university did not equip them well which was taken by all respondents. This case must be regenerated by the university to assist English preservice teachers in gaining experience during their teaching practice. The university must be adaptive to curriculum changes, and accommodate, and adjust the teaching-learning information concerning that. The statement was strengthened by Faiz in his research, he affirmed that education stakeholders must be responsible for informing the educators and the teachers regarding the new policy of Merdeka Belajar curriculum (Faiz et al., 2022). It can be achieved by having positive awareness and preparing for the conditions of the times, education must continue to move dynamically, prioritizing an initiative-taking attitude in dealing with progressive and transformative change.



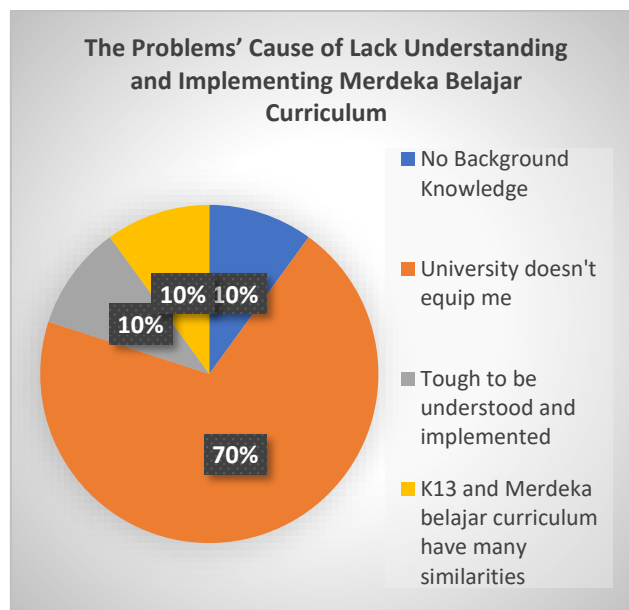


Figure 2. English Preservices' Cause of Lack of Understanding and Implementing Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

The deficiency of background knowledge, the adversity of comprehending the elements and the way to implement them, and the consideration that K13 and Merdeka Belajar curricula have many similarities were declared by three respondents with each student picking a statement. On the contrary, some research has been conducted to settle the condition in which the first study was undertaken by Komariah et al. (2022) with her advice to organize face-to-face in the form of a workshop and regular online discussions. She has proved these two ways were effective in introducing, equipping, and strengthening the new curriculum to English teachers in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. A similar study was conducted by Septi which proposed literacy-based independent learning in Merdeka Belajar teaching-learning process to reach a good teaching-learning process. It should run to hold deliberations with various related elements. In a similar sense, research which was carried out by (Cahya & Syafrizal, 2022) promoted several techniques to integrate and improve Pancasila learners' profiles by integrating a pearl of local wisdom and authentic tasks into the teaching-learning process.

The result of this present ties well wherein by (Pertiwi & Pusparini, 2021) They found that EFL teachers have a negative perception of the new rule of the Merdeka Belajar Lesson plan. The lesson plan of K13 curriculum only had one to five papers. Meanwhile, the latest lesson plan model reached ten to fifteen pages. EFL teachers stated that it is the same as KTSP curriculum which the lesson plan could reach twenty pages. Similarly, Sufirmansyah and Ahid (2022) investigated the quality of Merdeka Belajar curriculum implementation in East Java schools. They revealed that many teachers do not have sufficient knowledge to implement Merdeka Belajar Curriculum due to the lack of workshops, training, and similar events to equip them well. Teachers claimed that they were not ready yet to implement Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (Ahid & Sufirmansyah, 2022). In the similar vein, Digna et al. (2023) asserted that teachers' understanding of Merdeka Belajar curriculum was not sufficient. The inability to understand some features of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum such as "Penguatan Produk Profil Pelajar Pancasila", how to teach differently or Differential learning, and the complexity of Modul Ajar caused the inability (Digna & Widyasari, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

Pedagogical teaching methodology, classroom management, learning sources, and designing assessments are aspects that preservice teachers are required to possess. The capability to run these things contributes to their teaching practice. Since teaching practice gives them an opportunity to practice their pedagogic which they get from the microteaching class. As has been known that teaching practice plays a significant role in introducing preservice teachers to the real classroom, the real teaching-learning, and the real students. Being adaptive to curriculum changes and rapid technological development is necessary for those who want to compete well in 5.0 era including in educational settings. Nevertheless, the findings of the study uncovered that English preservice teachers have unfit perceptions and problems in understanding and implementing the new policy of the Indonesian curriculum. Once, the curriculum changes, it is also followed by the changing of characters, features, and mandatory aspects that teachers must be able to achieve. On the contrary, English preservice teachers have inadequate competence and skills to understand and implement it. This circumstance can evoke perilous effects when they graduate and plunge into real teaching professionalism. It is aggravated by the problems that they confront regarding the elements of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. They are the capability of conducting differential learning, creating essential material, creating diagnostic and cognitive assessments, and understanding students' phases and the objective of learning.

The analysis of the interview finds evidence that the absence of a university role in preparing English preservice teachers for Merdeka Belajar curriculum caused their inadequacy in understanding and implementing Merdeka Belajar curriculum. It can sum up that the broad implication of the present research is the expectation of establishing sufficient preparation for English preservice teachers for the curriculum changes. Concerning the negative perceptions of English preservice teachers in understanding and implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum also its problems, future research should further bridge between English preservice teachers and universities to seek what must be accommodated in supplying sufficient competence and skill of Merdeka Belajar curriculum before teaching practice.

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