CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING INNOVATIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: PERSPECTIVES FROM INDONESIAN HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract: Innovations in English Language Teaching (ELT) are pivotal for achieving success in language learning, particularly within Indonesia's *Merdeka belajar* curriculum. Despite their potential benefits, implementing these innovations often encounters significant challenges. This approach ensures a comprehensive and structured analysis of existing literature, providing insights into the challenges and strategies faced in implementing innovative teaching practices in Indonesian high schools. Data collection for this literature study primarily involved accessing academic databases such as JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar to retrieve relevant articles published from 2019. Keywords including "innovative English language teaching," "implementation challenges," "*Merdeka belajar* curriculum," and variations thereof were used to locate pertinent literature. The inclusion criteria encompassed articles written in English, focusing on empirical research, case studies, and theoretical discussions related to the adoption and challenges of innovative ELT methods in educational contexts similar to Indonesia. The findings reveal that infrastructure limitations, pedagogical constraints, and student-related factors are the most challenging in implementing the Merdeka curriculum, which all play significant roles in shaping the effectiveness of these innovative methods. Continuous professional development and curriculum adaptation are critical components. Additionally, policy interventions to reduce infrastructural disparities between urban and rural schools can help ensure that all students have equitable access to innovative ELT practices. Moreover, fostering a supportive school culture that encourages experimentation and innovation can help mitigate resistance to change among educators. Creating collaborative networks where teachers can share best practices and experiences with innovative ELT methods can also promote more widespread adoption. By addressing these multifaceted challenges, Indonesia can enhance the effectiveness of its ELT programs and better prepare students for global communication and collaboration.

Keywords: Educational implications, ELT, Innovations, *Merdeka belajar* Curriculum, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Innovations in English Language Teaching (ELT) are pivotal in advancing language education, especially within Indonesia's evolving educational landscape shaped by the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum. Introduced by Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture in 2019, the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum aims to modernize Indonesian education and align it with global standards. The term "*Merdeka belajar*" translates to "Freedom to Learn," encapsulating the curriculum's core philosophy of providing students with greater autonomy and flexibility in their learning processes. This curriculum emphasizes learner-centered approaches and flexible learning pathways, seeking to equip students with critical thinking, creativity, and independence.

As Indonesia aims to equip its students with 21st-century skills, the integration of innovative teaching practices becomes not only beneficial but imperative. These practices encompass a diverse range of methodologies and technological applications aimed at enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of language instruction across diverse student cohorts.

Recent literature underscores the significance of innovative ELT approaches in fostering a more engaging and comprehensive learning experience for students (Brown, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2021). Such approaches not only cater to the diverse linguistic needs of learners but also align with contemporary pedagogical theories that emphasize active learning and communicative competence (Johnson, 2019).

In Indonesia, the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum emphasizes autonomy, flexibility, and competency-based learning, creating fertile ground for the adoption of innovative teaching methods. These methods not only support the curriculum's goals but also empower educators to tailor their approaches to meet the unique needs of students, thereby enhancing educational outcomes. By focusing on learner autonomy, the curriculum promotes deeper engagement and better language retention among students (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

The *Merdeka belajar* curriculum encourages a shift towards student-centered and experiential learning, aiming to foster critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration among learners. Implementing this curriculum in ELT involves integrating innovative teaching practices that support its learner-centered philosophy. These practices include using digital tools and resources, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction tailored to the diverse needs of students. For instance, digital tools such as language learning apps and online platforms can enhance student engagement and provide interactive opportunities for practice and feedback (Johnson, 2019).

Additionally, project-based learning allows students to apply their language skills in meaningful contexts, further reinforcing their learning and development. Innovative ELT methods, such as flipped classrooms and immersive language experiences, are integral to realizing these goals. These methods not only enhance students' language skills but also cultivate their ability to communicate effectively in diverse contexts.

Despite the recognized benefits, the implementation of innovative ELT methods within Indonesian high schools faces multifaceted challenges that warrant rigorous investigation (Harahap & Fithriani, 2024; Zein et al., 2020). Setiawan and Sugeng (2019) highlight the substantial infrastructural hurdles, including insufficient technological resources and poor internet access, which significantly impede the effective application

of digital tools in language instruction. Similarly, Mahmud and Safitri (2018) discuss the pedagogical challenges, noting that many teachers are reluctant to adopt innovative practices due to their comfort with traditional methods and the lack of adequate training in new pedagogical approaches. These challenges, compounded by diverse student needs and varying levels of language proficiency, illustrate the complex landscape of ELT innovation implementation in Indonesian high schools.

Based on the above issues, it is concluded that while integrating innovative ELT methods holds promise for transforming language education in Indonesia, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the challenges accompanying this endeavour. Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping ELT practices in Indonesia and delve deeper into the challenges posed by implementing innovative ELT practices through a meticulous review and synthesis of recent literature and empirical findings.

This investigation's urgency lies in its potential to inform policymakers, curriculum developers, and educational practitioners about the complexities of enhancing English language proficiency among Indonesian students. Thus, this study can provide information to encourage these stakeholders to create a more supportive and conducive learning environment for students of diverse backgrounds and abilities.

METHOD

A systematic literature review methodology was employed to gather and synthesize relevant research findings from reputable journals within the field of ELT. This approach ensures a comprehensive and structured analysis of existing literature, providing insights into the challenges and strategies faced in implementing innovative teaching practices in Indonesian high schools. The systematic review methodology involves a meticulous search strategy designed to address the specific research questions pertaining to ELT innovations, their implementation challenges and how to addressing the challenges.

Data collection for this literature study primarily involved accessing academic databases such as JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar to retrieve relevant articles published from 2019. Keywords including "innovative English language teaching," "implementation challenges," "*Merdeka belajar* curriculum," and variations thereof were used to locate pertinent literature. The inclusion criteria encompassed articles written in English, focusing on empirical research, case studies, and theoretical discussions related to the adoption and challenges of innovative ELT methods in educational contexts similar to Indonesia.

The study objects of interest included empirical studies, qualitative and quantitative research articles, and theoretical frameworks that provided insights into the challenges encountered by educators and stakeholders in implementing innovative ELT practices. These articles were scrutinized for their relevance to the study's objectives, ensuring a diverse representation of perspectives and experiences from various educational settings. By examining a range of studies, the research aimed to uncover recurring themes, critical insights, and gaps in knowledge regarding the effective implementation of innovative ELT methods in Indonesian high schools.

Data analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach, inspired by methodologies outlined in Creswell (2014) and adapted for literature review purposes. This involved

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identifying key themes and patterns across the selected articles, categorizing challenges based on their prevalence and significance as reported in the literature. Through rigorous analysis and synthesis of findings, the study aimed to provide a coherent narrative on the complexities and barriers associated with implementing innovative ELT practices in the context of the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum. This approach facilitated the extraction of actionable recommendations and implications for policy, practice, and future research endeavors in enhancing ELT methodologies within Indonesian educational settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Introduction to Innovative ELT in *Merdeka belajar*

Innovative English Language Teaching (ELT) is paramount for enhancing language proficiency and achieving educational goals set by modern curricula, particularly within the context of Indonesia's *Merdeka belajar* curriculum. The *Merdeka belajar* initiative, introduced by Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture, aims to foster autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking among students by offering a more flexible and student-centered learning approach. As part of this reform, innovative ELT practices are essential to meet these ambitious educational objectives and improve language learning outcomes (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

The importance of innovative ELT methods lies in their ability to engage students actively in the learning process, making it more interactive and effective. According to Johnson (2019), these approaches align with contemporary pedagogical theories that emphasize communicative competence and active learning. By incorporating digital tools, interactive methodologies, and differentiated instruction, innovative ELT practices can cater to the diverse linguistic needs of learners, thereby enhancing their overall language proficiency. Smith and Jones (2021) further argue that these methods are crucial for adapting to the rapidly changing educational landscape and preparing students for global challenges.

Implementation Strategies for Innovative ELT Practices

Indonesia's educational reforms, particularly the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum, represent a significant shift towards modern teaching methods. Traditional teaching paradigms, which often rely on rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction, have been increasingly criticized for their inability to foster critical thinking and creativity. The *Merdeka belajar* initiative seeks to address these shortcomings by promoting more flexible and student-centered learning environments (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). This shift necessitates the adoption of innovative ELT practices that can support the curriculum's goals and improve student outcome

Implementing the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum in ELT involves integrating innovative teaching practices supporting its learner-centered philosophy. These practices include using digital tools and resources, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction tailored to the diverse needs of students. According to Johnson (2019), digital tools such as language learning apps and online platforms can enhance student engagement and provide interactive opportunities for practice and feedback. Additionally, project-based learning allows students to apply their language skills in meaningful contexts, further reinforcing their learning and development.

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One critical component of implementing the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum in ELT is professional development for teachers. Educators must be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to adopt and effectively use innovative teaching methods. Smith and Jones (2021) highlight the importance of continuous professional development programs focusing on modern pedagogical strategies, technology integration, and adaptive teaching methods. These programs are essential for helping teachers transition from traditional, teacher-centered approaches to more innovative, student-centered practices.

Challenges in Implementing Innovative ELT

The *Merdeka belajar* curriculum aims to modernize Indonesia's educational framework through the adoption of innovative ELT practices. However, the implementation of these innovative practices is not without challenges. The literature review process involved a systematic search of peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2024, focusing on innovative English Language Teaching (ELT) practices and their implementation challenges within the Indonesian educational context. Utilizing academic databases such as JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar, the search included keywords like "innovative English language teaching," "implementation challenges," "*Merdeka belajar* curriculum," "Indonesian high schools," and "ELT methods." A total of 15 articles were reviewed, covering key themes and topics related to innovative ELT practices and their implementation challenges.

The primary themes identified infrastructure limitations, pedagogical constraints, and student-related factors are most challenging faced in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, which all play significant roles in shaping the effectiveness of these innovative methods. The picture is presented
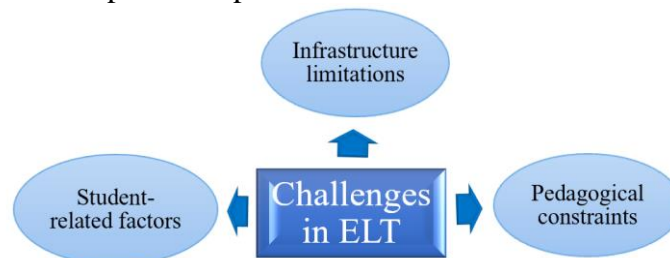
Picture 1. The primary challenges in implementing ELT

Infrastructural Limitations

One of the primary challenges is the lack of adequate infrastructure to support innovative ELT methods. Infrastructural limitations encompass challenges such as inadequate technological resources, poor internet access, and disparities in technological infrastructure between urban and rural schools (Garcia & Martinez, 2021; Setiawan & Sugeng, 2019; Lee & Tan, 2018). Many Indonesian schools, especially those in rural and underserved areas, struggle with limited access to essential technological resources.

Harahap and Fithriani (2024) highlight that insufficient internet connectivity and a lack of digital devices significantly impede the implementation of technology-enhanced language learning. Zein et al. (2020) further elaborate that the disparity in technological infrastructure between urban and rural schools exacerbates educational inequalities,

making it difficult for all students to benefit equally from innovative ELT approaches. These issues significantly impede the effective application of digital tools in language instruction (Harahap & Fithriani, 2024; Nugroho & Astuti, 2021).

Pedagogical Constraints

Pedagogical constraints also play a crucial role in the challenges faced by educators in implementing innovative ELT methods. Pedagogical constraints include resistance to change among educators, lack of adequate training in new pedagogical approaches, and the need for continuous professional development (Wang, 2020; Mahmud & Safitri, 2018; Zein et al., 2020). Continuous professional development programs are essential for building teachers' capacity to adopt and adapt innovative practices effectively (Nguyen et al., 2020; Smith & Jones, 2021). Traditional teaching paradigms, deeply rooted in Indonesian education, often rely on rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction. Transitioning to student-centered and interactive methodologies requires a fundamental shift in teaching philosophy and practice.

Zein et al. (2020) note that many teachers resist change due to a lack of exposure to new pedagogical strategies and insufficient professional development opportunities. Harahap and Fithriani (2024) emphasize the importance of continuous professional development programs to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary for effectively adopting innovative ELT practices. Without ongoing support and training, teachers may struggle to successfully integrate new methods into their classrooms.

Student-Related Factors

Student-related factors present additional challenges to the implementation of innovative ELT methods. Student-related factors involve varying levels of motivation, disparities in language proficiency, and different learning styles (Garcia & Martinez, 2017; Wang, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020). Tailoring teaching methods to address individual student needs complicates the implementation process (Rahman & Sutanto, 2022; Lee & Tan, 2019). Garcia and Martinez (2017) found that students with lower motivation levels may not benefit as much from interactive and student-centered approaches, requiring additional support and encouragement from teachers.

Wang (2019) highlights that addressing individual student needs while maintaining overall classroom coherence is a significant challenge for educators. Nguyen et al. (2020) suggest that differentiated instruction and personalized learning plans are essential for catering to diverse student needs, but these approaches require significant time and effort from teachers. For the detail, the following table presents the categorization.

Table 1. Previous studies about challenges in implementing ELT

No	Previous Researcher (year)	Focus-study	Categorization/ Theme
1	Garcia & Martinez (2021)	Highlighted significant barriers posed by inadequate technological infrastructure in rural schools.	Infrastructural Limitations
2	Setiawan & Sugeng (2019)	Discussed the substantial infrastructural hurdles, including insufficient technological resources and poor internet access.	

3	Lee & Tan (2018)	Focused on the disparity in technological infrastructure between urban and rural schools, exacerbating educational inequalities.	
4	Harahap & Fithriani (2024)	Identified infrastructural issues as one of the primary obstacles in the implementation of innovative ELT methods.	
5	Nugroho & Astuti (2021)	Addressed the lack of access to modern educational technology and digital tools in many Indonesian high schools.	
6	Wang (2020)	Emphasized resistance to pedagogical change among educators due to comfort with traditional methods.	Pedagogical Constraints
7	Mahmud & Safitri (2018)	Noted the lack of adequate training in new pedagogical approaches as a significant barrier.	
8	Zein et al. (2020)	Discussed the challenges related to professional development and the need for continuous teacher training.	
9	Nguyen et al. (2020)	Highlighted the importance of professional development programs to build teachers' capacity for adopting innovative practices.	
10	Smith & Jones (2021) -	Stressed the need for continuous professional development focusing on modern pedagogical strategies.	
11	Garcia & Martinez (2017)	Identified varying levels of motivation among students as a challenge in implementing innovative ELT practices.	Student-Related Factors
12	Wang (2019)	Addressed the disparities in language proficiency and different learning styles among students.	
13	Nguyen et al. (2020)	Found that student-related factors such as engagement and motivation significantly affect the success of innovative methods.	
14	Rahman & Sutanto (2022)	Discussed the need to tailor teaching methods to address individual student needs, which complicates the implementation process.	
15	Lee & Tan (2019)	Highlighted that diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying levels of proficiency among students pose challenges to effective language instruction.	

Addressing the Challenges

Several strategies have been proposed in the literature to overcome these challenges. Continuous professional development and curriculum adaptation are critical components. Smith and Jones (2021) emphasize the importance of targeted training and ongoing support to help educators transition from traditional to more innovative teaching methods. Harahap and Fithriani (2024) recommend leveraging partnerships with educational technology companies to provide schools with the necessary resources and training. Additionally, policy interventions to reduce infrastructural disparities between

urban and rural schools can help ensure that all students have equitable access to innovative ELT practices (Zein et al., 2020).

Moreover, fostering a supportive school culture that encourages experimentation and innovation can help mitigate resistance to change among educators. Creating collaborative networks where teachers can share best practices and experiences with innovative ELT methods can also promote more widespread adoption. By addressing these multifaceted challenges, Indonesia can enhance the effectiveness of its ELT programs and better prepare students for global communication and collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The reviewed literature provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities of implementing innovative ELT practices in Indonesian high schools. By systematically identifying and synthesizing findings from recent studies, this review highlights the critical issues that need to be addressed to enhance the effectiveness of ELT under the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum. The insights gained from this literature review are essential for informing policy, practice, and future research to overcome these challenges and improve language education outcomes in Indonesia. By understanding and addressing these challenges, educators and policymakers can better support the implementation of the *Merdeka belajar* curriculum, ultimately enhancing the quality of language education in Indonesia.

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