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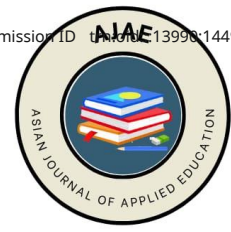
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Unveiling Success: Exploring Strategies of Pre-service Teachers in Implementing Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The comprehensive understanding towards Merdeka Curriculum is crucial for pre-service teachers because they will be responsible for effectively implementing it with their pedagogical knowledge, but it was found that only two from nine pre-service teachers who have good understanding towards Merdeka curriculum. This study aims to explore the issue in-depth about the strategies used by pre-service teachers in understanding Merdeka curriculum through conducting a case study with a qualitative approach. The subjects of this research are the students of the English Education Department from two different private Universities in Yogyakarta who have joined PPL (*Program Pengenalan Lapangan*) and have comprehensive understanding towards the Merdeka curriculum. The study used interview, observation, and document analysis to collect the data. The findings of this study indicate that the strategies used by the pre-service teachers were looking for information from the internet, reading, having discussion, and practice. Besides, understanding the core principle of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, they also put it into practice in class. The respondents also indicate that they are having applied the Merdeka curriculum into their teaching practice, but they faced difficulties in differentiated learning.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum plays an important role for shaping the quality of education. It is a guide for teacher to create and deliver effective lesson which is in line with the goals of education system. As stated by Ingtias et al., (2022) curriculum outlines the essential knowledge and skills that should be achieved by the students, and it sets the clear learning objectives and standard. Curriculum is a learning foundation that continues to be developed to adjust to the competencies needed and keep up with the challenges of the time. The development of the curriculum is to improve the quality of education in Indonesia through ensuring that it is relevant and effective for the needs of students and society as a whole (Tricahyati & Zaim, n.d.). Therefore, The Indonesian government made a curriculum transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the *Merdeka* Curriculum recently as a form of the government's commitment to improve the quality of education, which is addressing the prevailing issues in the Indonesian education system.

According to Gumilar et al., (2023) there are several factors that cause the transition from 2013 curriculum to the *Merdeka* curriculum. In 2013 curriculum was found to have limitations regarding character education development, teachers had lacked preparation and understanding, difficulty to consistently implement the curriculum in the classroom, inflexible and unable to adjust to the changes that occur in the world of education. In the 2013 curriculum, learning process was still teacher-centered, so it could not develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Therefore, the change of curriculum to the *Merdeka* curriculum is to bridge the gap between theory and practice through emphasizing active participation and direct engagement with the subject matter. As stated by Kemendikbud (2022) *Merdeka* Curriculum was developed as a more adaptive curriculum framework as part of the learning reform initiative, focusing on essential content and developing student character and skills that follow the development of the era.

In an effort to improve the quality of education, the *Merdeka* curriculum has different goals and characteristics from the previous curriculum (Hafiluddin et al., 2023.). The *Merdeka* curriculum integrates a differentiation learning where the learning focuses more on the students' characteristic and skills so that students can understand competencies and learning materials well (Fauzia & Hadikusuma Ramadan, 2023). Project based learning is also used as a learning approach to realize the Pancasila students' profile, which involves project-based learning activities that can develop critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Triastuti et al., 2023). As stated by Suryaman (2020) The *Merdeka* Curriculum has the following characteristics: shaping the Pancasila Student Profile through project-based learning to enhance students' skills and character, concentrating on essential materials so that fundamental materials such as literacy and numeracy gain in-depth competence, and more adaptable learning differentiated learning is more adaptable since it is based on the context and local content, as well as the learners' ability. The teachers have the flexibility to determine and choose any kind of teaching tools so the learning can be adapted to students' need and

interest. According to Semarang et al. (2022.) *Merdeka* Curriculum emphasizes holistic learning and character development that focuses not only on cognitive aspects, but also affective and psychomotor aspects. It is because *Merdeka* curriculum modifies the previously implemented curriculum, and it requires several parties to understand the independent curriculum, including the pre-service teachers.

In order to effectively design and provide teaching to their future students, it is essential for pre-service teachers to possess a robust comprehension of curriculum. The pre-service teachers who will be responsible for implementing the new curriculum, so they have a significant role to play in this process. According to Mufidah (2019). Pre-service teachers who are the future curriculum's developer in the classroom must take the necessary steps to properly implement the curriculum and achieve the intended learning objectives (Segbenya & MensahMinadzi, 2022). It is because the pre-service teachers and curriculum are two aspects of education that greatly determine the success of learning. According to Nurzen (2022a) in order to create learning that is in accordance with the objective of the curriculum, students should have a comprehensive understanding about the concepts and contents of *Merdeka* curriculum. Pre-service teachers should understand their duties when implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum to effectively adapt the *Merdeka* curriculum to the students' characteristics and needs (Hadi et al., 2023). As stated in *Permendikbudristek No. 262/M/2022, Keputusan Kepala BSKAP No.008/H/KR/2022 Tahun 2022, Keputusan Kepala BSKAP No.009/H/KR/2022 Tahun 2022, dan Surat Edaran No. 0574/H.H3/SK.02.01/2023*, teachers should understand the following policies related to *Merdeka* curriculum:

- 1) Structure of *Merdeka* Curriculum, rules related to learning and assessment, the *Pancasila* Student Profile Strengthening Project, and teacher workload.
- 2) Learning Outcomes for all levels and subjects in the *Merdeka* Curriculum structure.
- 3) Dimensions, Elements, and Sub-Elements of the *Pancasila* Student Profile in the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Contains explanations and stages of development of the *Pancasila* student profile which can be used especially for the *Pancasila* student strengthening project.
- 4) Guidelines for Curriculum implementation in the context of learning recovery.

Pre-service teachers who can understand these policies can effectively implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum in the learning process and understand the demands and expectations stipulated in the *Merdeka* curriculum.

There is a study about analysis of teachers' understanding towards the *Merdeka* curriculum by Belajar et al. (2023) which found that only 25% of the 30 observed and interviewed teachers demonstrated a proficient understanding of the curriculum. And further 35% possess a sufficient understanding, 25% possess a limited grasp, and 15% lack understanding of this new curriculum. The findings suggest that additional professional development is necessary for teachers to have a comprehensive understanding and effectively apply the *Merdeka* Learning program. There is a study that analyzed about the pre-service

1 teachers' understanding towards *Merdeka* curriculum by Alvindo et al. (2022). The findings showed that majority of the pre-service teachers' understanding towards *Merdeka* curriculum were good or agree category. Based on the survey result, it showed that the pre-service teachers have understood the *Merdeka* curriculum. However, the depth of exploration into the strategies by pre-service teachers especially in English language education study program area is inadequate, emphasizing the need for more extensive research.

Therefore, a study is needed to do to investigate what strategies are used by the pre-service teachers who can implement Curriculum Merdeka well. Further observation, document analysis, and interview with several pre-service teachers who have demonstrated a deeper understanding of Merdeka Curriculum is important to do in order to gain insights into the specific strategies they employed to understand Merdeka curriculum. The results of this study would provide valuable insights and references for other pre-service teachers in different field of study in using strategies for understanding the Merdeka curriculum, and it is also beneficial for the Study Program to gain insight into how to develop pre-service teachers' understanding of the Merdeka curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Merdeka curriculum

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Merdeka curriculum was released by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia which can be interpreted as freedom of thought. According to *Badan Standar Nasional Pendidikan* (BSNP) the *Merdeka* Curriculum focuses on intra-curricular learning, where the content is organized to provide students with ample opportunities to explore their ideas and develop their skills. In the learning process, *Merdeka* curriculum provides flexibility for teachers to choose various learning tools so that learning can be tailored to students' learning needs and interests. As stated by Simangunsong et al. (2023) providing flexibility in learning process aims to take into account the diverse needs of students, both in terms of time and learning ability. Students are allowed to choose subjects that match their interests and ability, so as to motivate students to learn better.

The *Merdeka* curriculum aims to create a fun learning atmosphere. Al et al. (n.d.) mentioned that *Merdeka* curriculum aims to restore the essence of education to give schools the freedom to interpret the basic competencies of the curriculum into the assessments. Which can create a pleasant learning atmosphere for all parties involved, including students, teachers, parents and everyone else. According to Nafi'ah (2023) *Merdeka* curriculum depends on the desire to produce a better quality of learning, where students not only memorize material, but also have the ability to think critically and have a comprehensive understanding. Nuriah et al. (2023) noted that there are several important aspects of the *Merdeka* Curriculum that are related to the development of independent thinking: character learning, development of learning theories and cycles, project-based learning, development of critical and creative thinking skills, development of character and behavior, and development of collaborative skills. In this way, students will learn to find out

and discover answers on their own, so that they can develop self-confidence and build curiosity.

The objective of *Merdeka* curriculum

The *Merdeka* curriculum was developed to answer the problems of the previous education system (Sitohang et al., 2023). This is to achieve excellent educational standards that can compete effectively on a world scale. According to Ndari et al. (2023), *Merdeka* curriculum has the goal of developing lifelong learners who are able to adapt to changes and advances in various fields, such as technology. Therefore, it is in line with the need for individuals to continue learning in order to remain competitive and contribute to society.

Another objective of *Merdeka* curriculum is to encourage teachers to deliver materials and provide learning experiences that meet students' needs and interests, taking into account the characteristics of each student and the resources available at school (Irawati et al., 2022). This can create teachers who are creative and contribute to improving student competencies, thereby improving the overall quality of education. This curriculum also realizes students' individual differences and provides different learning experiences. As stated by Ilham et al. (n.d.) *Merdeka* curriculum provides differentiated learning which refers to a learning approach that pays attention to students' individual differences, such as interests, abilities, and learning styles, so that students' needs can be fulfilled. Therefore, it can ensure that all students can develop their potential and achieve their full capabilities.

Project-based learning and differentiated learning are promoted to enhance the critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students (Rizqy Novitasary et al., 2023). Widhiatama and Daging (2021) mentioned that critical thinking is one of the most important skill in 21st century. As stated by Permana et al. (n.d.) differentiated learning refers to an approach that recognizes that each student has different needs and abilities. While learning supports character development in accordance with the Pancasila learner profile, this allows students to develop collaboration skills, creativity, independence, and critical thinking, problem solving in accordance with the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Overall, *Merdeka* Curriculum is aimed to provide a new paradigm for education in Indonesia that can improve the quality of education and make students more independent, creative, and think critically.

Definition of pre-service teachers

Teachers are professional educators with the main task of educating, teaching, directing, training, assessing and evaluating students. Teachers are educators meaning that teachers are implementer of education (Hamid, n.d.). This shows that the capacity of teachers is not only obliged to transfer knowledge, but more than just teach. The teacher must also be morally and spiritually responsible for the students. The students of English education study program are students who are being prepared to become teachers or in terms called pre-service teachers (Abdulwahed et al., 2019). Student teacher

1 candidates or pre-service teachers have a very strategic role in implementing curriculum in the classroom. The pre-service teachers who understand curriculum can make lesson plan on the target and meet the specific needs of their students.

1 Students who are the pre-service teachers must understand that the teacher is a profession that is responsible for student education. This can be understood from several explanations below based on (Ellis et al., 2020).

- 1) The teacher is a position or profession that requires special expertise as a teacher.
- 2) The teacher is someone who is able to carry out educational actions in an educational situation to achieve educational goals or an adult who is honest, physically and mentally healthy, moral, skilled, open, fair and compassionate.
- 2) 3) The teacher is one of the human components in the teaching and learning process, which plays a role in efforts to form potential human resources in the field of development.

METHODOLOGY

2 This study used a case study method with a qualitative approach. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018) qualitative research is a method used to investigate and comprehend the significance that individuals or groups attribute to social or human issues. Case studies is an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon in which researchers thoroughly examine a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals in a real-world context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As stated by Yazan (2015) case study aims to gain insight into the specificity and complexity of a case, providing a rich and detailed analysis of the phenomenon. In this case, this study aims to explore the strategies used by pre-service teachers in understanding Merdeka curriculum, so the utilization of a case study approach will enable this study to explore this issue in-depth and in its natural context. In this case, the qualitative method is also helpful because it lets this study get information about the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of the participants. This information will help the study come up with hypotheses, investigate further, and understand the data.

17 This study used purposive sampling technique to select 2 students of the English Education Department from two different private Universities in Yogyakarta, who have taken PPL course and can demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the goals, concepts, key differences, implementation, and real-world examples of the concepts of the 'Merdeka Curriculum.' The instruments used in this study were interview, observation, and document analysis. The instruments are used as a guideline for this study. Data analysis used descriptive analysis. To assess the validity of the data in this study uses triangulation, this involves verifying the reliability of the data from several sources using various methods such as interviews, observation, and document analysis. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018) triangulation is a technique that entails the utilization of diverse techniques or data sources to corroborate and validate the information acquired.

This study used interview to assess the pre-service teachers' understanding towards *Merdeka* curriculum, by designing 6 questions that cover 6 facets of understanding by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. The 6 facets provide diverse views of understanding, these consist of explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge. Explanation facets concerns about someone's ability to provide clear reasoning of a concept and can articulate the underlying principle of it. Interpretation refers to the ability to understand and explain the meaning of the information, experiences, concepts, and it is about analyzing and making sense of the topic in a meaningful way. Application facets incorporate theory and practice of knowledge and understanding of the topic, this demonstrates the ability to apply the concept in the real-world contexts. Perspective facets need the understanding and consideration of different points of view towards a topic. Empathy refers to the understanding and appreciation of feeling, thought, and experiences of others in relation to the topic. And self-knowledge refers to the awareness of the thinking process. This theory is suitable for this research because it provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing pre-service teachers' understanding of *Merdeka* curriculum, where each facet of this theory covers different aspects of mature understanding. As stated by Davilia (2017) by designing tests that specifically address each of the six facets of understanding. It can obtain useful insights regarding the extent and comprehensiveness of their understanding of the curriculum.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of *Merdeka* curriculum in Indonesia has resulted in notable transformations within the education system, prioritizing student-centered pedagogy and the incorporation of local cultural knowledge and character development (Digna & Widyasari, 2023a). This study was conducted by conducting observations, document analysis, and interviews with two pre-service teachers, referred to as Respondent 1 (ED) and Respondent 2 (AU), to get insights into the strategies that they employ in understanding the *Merdeka* curriculum. This section will show the findings obtained from the interviews, document analysis, and followed by the discussion. The findings of this study aim to answer the research question that has been raised.

Result

How did you prepare yourself to understand the Merdeka curriculum?

To prepare themselves in understanding the *Merdeka* curriculum the respondents did similarities activities such as looking for information from the internet and having discussion, as the respondents pointed out:

"First, I read file pdf about Merdeka curriculum that has been provided by my lecturer and I also asked some questions to my lecture. And my lecture asks to create lesson plans using Merdeka curriculum, so it makes me should know what and how Merdeka curriculum, not only read the pdf but I also learn Merdeka curriculum from YouTube videos and google, especially about how to create lesson plans." (ED, Respondent 1)

"It's by looking for the information from the internet, and I also discuss with my friends/having small discussions, and also discuss it with my lecture. Actually in my campus, my lecture gave us some examples of module ajar and the implementation of Merdeka curriculum. I also joined webinars and seminars to get more perspective about Merdeka curriculum and its implementation." (AU, Respondent 2)

Based on the statement above, it was evident that the pre-service teachers did several ways to prepare themselves in understanding *Merdeka* curriculum. They prepare themselves by reading more about *Merdeka* curriculum, looking for information and sources from the internet, as well as having discussions with friends and lecturers.

What strategies did you use to understand the Merdeka curriculum?

The strategies utilized by the respondents to understand the *Merdeka* curriculum were through having discussions with the lectures and also reading materials about The *Merdeka* curriculum, as stated by the respondents:

"The first one I have to know what is Merdeka curriculum, the goals, the concept and also what the different from the previous curriculum, especially when designing lesson plan because I asked to make it. And I also ask to my lecture when I confused about Merdeka curriculum. And I also read the pdf and explore the information about Merdeka curriculum from the internet like YouTube and google." (ED, Respondent 1)

"The strategies I used to understand the Merdeka curriculum is first and foremost is having discussions. I would say many times that having discussion is the most important thing to grow our understanding about the Merdeka curriculum. So we can discuss it with the English teacher, lecturers, friends, or even we can discuss it by ourselves by reading some books related to it or by reading some websites. And then I also read, that's the second strategy. I read a lot about the Merdeka curriculum and the last one is practicing. Practice makes perfect. So I made the module ajar and tried to apply it in the class and got some feedback from the English teachers and also my lectures and also my friends, so I learn more and more from their feedback." (AU, Respondent 2)

Based on the statement above, it can provide evidence that pre-service teachers used several strategies in improving their understanding of the *Merdeka* curriculum. The strategies used by pre-service teachers were reading materials, looking for sources from the internet, conducting discussion with friends and lecturers, and practical application to understand the *Merdeka* curriculum. By conducting discussions and applying the curriculum into their teaching practice, it can deepen their understanding of the *Merdeka* curriculum.

How do you apply the Merdeka curriculum in your teaching practice?

Regarding the application of *Merdeka* curriculum into the teaching process respondent 1 applied Genre-based Approach, while respondent 2 incorporating Pancasila students profile and using differentiated instruction in the teaching process, as the respondents have stated:

"I understand Merdeka curriculum. Using various technology can be used for my teaching practice, and using Genre based approach in my teaching practice, there

are BKOF, MOT, JCOT, and ICOT. With GBA it can build the students' creativity, critical thinking, their communication skill, and also make the collaborative." (ED, Respondent 1)

"So it's not far from the profile pelajar pancasila. So there is a religiousness. I give example, I give these students the chance to lead the prayer, and then it's in the beginning of the lesson. And at the end of the lesson, I give salam (greeting) after entering the class and I also give salam (greeting) when I want to leave the class at the end of the lesson. And I also make a group discussion and individual task, so they can there's a differentiated instruction and in the process. And then, for the media and material I try to differentiate these things depends on the students preference, so it's more like giving them the freedom. As a teacher, I act as the facilitator. Only give them. So, um. Knowledge, information about the material, and let them look for the whole information. It can be from the Internet, it can be from the textbook or it can be from their prior knowledge. They are so they can get it from their discussion. So it's more like giving them the freedom, freedom to choose what they want to learn and the freedom to choose how they want to learn." (AU, Respondent 2)

Based on the statement provided by the respondents, it could be concluded that they have applied the Merdeka curriculum into their teaching practice. Respondent 1 stated that she used Genre-Based Approach in her teaching practice that can build the students' creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. While respondent 2 said that she incorporated religiousness into her teaching practice, used differentiated instruction, and provided the students with the freedom to choose their interested media and materials.

What challenges have you faced in implementing the Merdeka curriculum, and how did you overcome them?

The respondents faced the same challenge in implementing the Merdeka curriculum namely, implementing differentiated learning. Respondents 2 also find it difficult in understanding the students' needs and characteristics. To overcome the challenge, respondent 1 did the discussion, while respondent 2 conducted a pre-test and diagnostic test. As was stated by the respondents:

"I find it, difficult to understand and apply differentiated learning that teach by considering students' learning styles. To overcome it, maybe do the collaboration with some lectures." (ED, Respondent 1)

"One of the challenges that have faced in implementing the Merdeka curriculum is the first one. Understanding the students' characteristics and the student's learning needs. So how do I overcome it? By having pre-test and diagnostic tests in the beginning of the learning process. And the second one is, um, how to differentiate the material and media for students who have different learning preferences or level of knowledge. How do I overcome it? By grouping the students based on their learning preferences and their knowledge. So, I don't need to make a lot. But just for one article, which consists mostly for students." (AU, Respondent 2)

Based on the statement above, it was indicated that there is an obstacle faced by pre-service teachers in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. The pre-service teachers found it difficult to understand and apply differentiated

learning into their teaching practice. They struggle to consider students' learning styles, characteristics and needs.

What did you do to be able to create lesson plan in accordance with the Merdeka curriculum?

To create lesson plan in accordance with the *Merdeka* curriculum the respondents look for the example of lesson plan from the internet and have discussions with their lectures and respondent 2 also have discussions with their friends. Respondents 1 adjusted the lesson plan to learning outcomes when creating the lesson plan.

"By looking for examples of lesson plans that use the Merdeka curriculum on the internet, and adjusting to the CP (learning outcomes) in the merdeka curriculum, and of course discussing with my lecturers." (ED, Respondent 1)

"I consulted with my lecturers and student teachers. On various occasions I also held discussions with peers (fellow students). in addition, I added references through examples of lesson plan examples on the website, especially the kemdikbud website." (AU, Respondent 2)

The statements above indicated that in creating lesson plan the pre-service teachers utilized a combination of resources, such as references from internet or educational website and the information from the lecturer and friends. So it can help the pre-service teachers gain comprehensive understanding towards *Merdeka* curriculum and create an effective lesson plan that is in line with the goals of *Merdeka* curriculum.

Why did you use this strategy in understanding Merdeka curriculum?

To increase the respondents' understanding towards *Merdeka* curriculum, they looked for information from the internet, reading a lot, having discussions with lectures, and sharing understanding with friends.

"By looking for examples on the internet, I can find out how the framework and structure of the Merdeka curriculum lesson plan, by reading a lot, can also increase my understanding towards Merdeka curriculum, and also discussing with lecturers can increase understanding and also based on relevant sources." (ED, Respondent 1)

"This is because in terms of insight and experience, lecturers and teachers are certainly much more qualified. Especially the teacher, he understands better the application of teaching modules that are in accordance with conditions in the field. While with my friends, sharing understanding and exchanging information can be easily done in an informal and relaxed atmosphere. the understanding I gained can then be developed and synchronized according to the guidelines on the website." (AU, Respondent 2)

Based on the statement above, it was evident that finding sources from the internet can help the pre-service teachers in understanding the framework of *Merdeka* curriculum. Conducted consultations with lecturers are certainly much more qualified. Conducted discussion with peers can share understanding and exchange information. All of the strategies used by pre-service teachers can enhance their understanding of *Merdeka* curriculum.

In order to make the study more objective and the data more accurate, this study observes pre-service teachers' teaching practice in implementing

Merdeka curriculum. This observation stage supports the findings from the interview. The observation result shows that:

Table 1. Observation result

Respondent	Aspect					
	Lesson plan	Teaching method	Project-based learning	Pancasila student' profile	Differentiated learning	The use of technology
ED	V	V	V	V	-	v
AU	V	V	V	V	-	v

The study conducted observation to support the findings from the interview. This study found that the pre-service teachers demonstrated proficiency in developing lesson plans that align with the objectives of the *Merdeka* curriculum. The pre-service teachers used teaching method to engage students and facilitate learning which is in line with the objective of *Merdeka* curriculum. The respondent 1 used Genre based approach in her teaching practice which is consist of four stages:

1. Building Knowledge of Field (BKOF)
In this stage the respondents 1 gave the students stimulus and recalled materials previously given about the generic structure of invitation letters.
2. Modeling of the Text (MOT)
In this stage the respondent 1 gave an example of invitation letters and distinguished the type of invitations letters.
3. Joint Construction of Text (JCOT)
In this stage the respondents 1 divided the students into 3 groups, then asked the students to analyze the generic structure of invitation letters, then asked the students to present their work.
4. Independent Construction of the Text (ICOT)
In this stage the respondent 1 asked the students to create an invitation letter with correct generic structure and language features.

The use of GBA indicates that respondent 1 has applied project-based learning to develop creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication skills of the students which can support character development in accordance with the Pancasila students Profile. As respondent 1 said in the interview that she has difficulty in understanding and implementing differentiated learning, this study also found that respondent 1 had not applied the concept of differentiated learning to her teaching practice.

On the other hand, this study found that respondent 2 applied a project-based learning method that begins by giving students the opportunity to lead prayers before starting learning which is in line with character development in accordance with the Pancasila Student Profile. Respondents 2 explained the material using power-point media and provided real examples of the material studied in the form of texts for students to analyze. Respondent 2 divided the

students into several groups and asked the students to collaborate and analyze the text, in this case respondent 2 also guided the students on the project by explaining the structure and format. Respondent 2 tried to implement differentiated learning by differentiating materials and media according to student needs, but respondent 2 faced difficulties in mastering effective differentiated learning. She had difficulty in having a deep understanding of student needs and abilities as well as the ability to compose materials that suit different ability levels.

The results of this study are also supported by document analysis, which serves to assist the study in collecting relevant data from documents that are the object of the and can be used as a basis for making decision.

Table 2. Document analysis

Respondent	Aspect			
	Preparation	Strategy	Application	Challenge
ED	V	V	V	V
AU	V	V	V	V

This study also conducted document analysis in which the respondents indicated that they have engaged in preparation activities related to understanding the *Merdeka* curriculum. It suggests that pre-service teachers recognize the importance of being prepared to effectively understand and implement the *Merdeka* curriculum. The pre-service teachers stated that they utilized various strategies to enhance their understand towards the *Merdeka* curriculum, such as reading a lot, searching information or sources from the internet, conducting discussion with lecturers and friends, and practice. The respondents had applied the *Merdeka* Curriculum to their teaching practices by creating effective lesson plans that were in line with the objectives of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, implementing project-based learning that supported character development in accordance with the Pancasila Student Profile, and using various technologies as teaching tools. The respondents 1 had difficulty in understanding differentiated learning, she could not provide the differentiation materials based on the students' need, while the respondents 2 had tried to make differentiation materials but she had difficulty in having a deep understanding of student needs and abilities.

Discussion

The strategies used by pre-service teachers in understanding the *Merdeka* Curriculum are indicated by the 6 facets of understanding by Grant Wiggins dan Jay McTighe. These strategies, which include reading a lot, seeking information or sources from the internet, engaging in discussions with lecturers and friends, and practicing the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum into teaching are in line with the facets of explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge. It is because the 6 facets provide a comprehensive framework for assessing the depth and breadth of understanding towards *Merdeka* curriculum.

How pre-service teachers prepare themselves to use *Merdeka* curriculum

Both respondents showed the similar answer about preparing themselves to understand the *Merdeka* curriculum. Both respondents emphasized the importance of looking for information about *Merdeka* curriculum from various sources such as the internet and having discussion with lectures. Respondent 1 also read materials that have been provided by the lecture, and respondent 2 joined webinars and seminars to get more information and perspective about *Merdeka* curriculum and its implementation. The findings are in line with previous study which has indicated that teachers gain better understanding of *Merdeka* curriculum and its implementation by doing various activities such as seeking information from internet, having discussion with colleagues, and also attending seminars (Nurzen, 2022b).

The strategies used by pre-service teachers in understanding *Merdeka* curriculum

Also, about the strategies for understanding *Merdeka* curriculum the respondents stated the same statements that they understand the *Merdeka* curriculum by having discussion with lectures and reading materials related with *Merdeka* curriculum. The second respondent mentioned about the practical application, she implemented the concept by creating teaching modules. These findings are in line with the previous study indicate that the teachers' difficulties in understanding and implementing *Merdeka* curriculum can be solved through discussion with colleagues and reading some articles could be helpful, but it is also necessary to join some seminar or training (Education & Vol, 2023).

How the pre-service teachers apply *Merdeka* curriculum into their teaching practice

The respondents have applied *Merdeka* curriculum into their teaching practice by incorporating the strategies and approaches. The respondent 1 stated that she used Genre Based Approach in her teaching practice to build the students' critical thinking, communication skill, creativity, and also collaboration because it includes Building Knowledge of Field (BKOF), Modelling of Text (MOT), Joint Construction of Text (JCOT), and Independent Construction of Text (ICOT). These findings are supported by previous study which stated that GBA can be effectively used in the teaching process, because it is a valuable tool that can build students' critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration among students (Herman et al., 2020). The respondent 2 implemented *Merdeka* curriculum through incorporating Pancasila students' profile with integrated religious aspect such as said *salam* (greeting) in the opening and closing class, gave students opportunity to lead in prayer, using differentiated instructions, also providing freedom in choosing and learning the materials. These findings are in line with previous study which stated that the implementation of the Pancasila students profile can involve opportunities for the students to learn in good environment, learn without

pressure, develop their creativity, also Incorporating religious aspect into teaching process is way to integrated Pancasila students profile into *Merdeka* curriculum (Laila et al., 2022).

The challenges faced by pre-service teachers in implementing *Merdeka* curriculum

Furthermore, the challenges faced by both respondents is about implementing differentiated learning, which include tailoring teaching methods, materials, and media to accommodate the different learning preferences or level of knowledge of the students. Respondent 2 also stated that she was difficult in Understanding the students' characteristics and the student's learning needs. This findings are in line with the previous study that indicate many teachers find the difficulty in implementing differentiated learning because they are not familiar with it, and some of the teachers are used to teacher-centered learning, they have not analyze the students' needs so they are not optimally prepared in implementing differentiated learning (Digna & Widiasari, 2023b). To overcome it, respondent 1 stated that she collaborated with some lecturers who understand *Merdeka* curriculum. While respondents 2 stated that she overcame these difficulties by conducting pre-test and diagnostic tests in the beginning of the learning process and she also grouped the students based on their learning preferences and their knowledge. It is also in line with previous study that stated teachers can modify the materials based on the students; learning style and their preferences, also the contents are customized according to the condition and ability of the students (Mabsutsah et al., 2023).

Pre-service teachers strategies in design lesson plan

The respondents stated that when creating lesson plans, they look for examples first on the internet as their reference especially the *kemendikbud* website, and they also discuss with experienced experts such as lecturers and teachers, and the respondents 2 stated that she also discussed with his friends to share information and experiences related to creating lesson plans. Respondents 1 also stated that he was adjusting to the CP (learning outcomes) in the *Merdeka* curriculum when creating lesson plans, which indicates that she is aware of the necessity of aligning the lesson plan with the *Merdeka* curriculum also ensuring that it meet the learning outcomes (CP) determined in the *Merdeka* curriculum. This finding are in line with the study by (Novita & Afriyanti, n.d.) which stated that the learning outcomes are crucial guiding tool for teachers and students in achieving the learning objectives. It is crucial for teachers to align the lesson plan to the learning outcomes specified in the *Merdeka* curriculum, because through the learning outcomes, teachers can understand clearly about learning objective, plan appropriate learning, and also achieve desired learning outcomes.

Same strategies in understanding *Merdeka* curriculum

The respondents stated the same statements regarding the strategies they used in understanding *Merdeka* curriculum which are looking for information from the internet, reading, having discussion, and practice. Those strategies are

to increase the understanding towards *Merdeka* curriculum. Through looking for information and reading a lot it can give insight and also as references, it is in line with the previous study as stated by Miraj et al. (2021) this study highlights several previous studies that stated a positive correlation between seeking information and academic success also a preference for utilizing search engines and other online resources to collect information, through seeking information from the internet into academic purposes can be a valuable tool for students to improve their understanding. Discussion to increase the understanding is in line with the previous study stated by Asmahasanah et al. (2023) discussion and collaboration with experienced educators can improve the understanding towards the curriculum and develop effective teaching strategy. Trough practice teachers can develop their understanding, knowledge, and skill to become professional teachers in the future (Mannathoko, 2013).

The results of the interview are reinforced by the existence of observation and document analysis by analyzing videos of respondents during teaching practice. The observations consisted of several aspects, namely lesson plan, teaching method, project-based learning, Pancasila students' profile, differentiated learning, and the use of technology. The table represents that the pre-service teachers can fulfill the aspects of implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum, but have difficulty in implementing differentiated learning into their teaching practice. The document analysis was divided into 4 aspects in accordance with the questions that have been asked such as: preparation, strategy, application, and challenge faced by the respondents in understanding *Merdeka* curriculum and its implementation in teaching practice. This table represents the similar responses from the respondents. The table shows that the respondents meet all aspects of documentation analysis, as indicated by the check mark in the appropriate column. This made an easy comparison and analysis of the respondents' perspective regarding the strategies that they used in understanding *Merdeka* curriculum, so it greatly strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings.

CONCLUSION

The pre-service teachers who had comprehensive understanding towards the curriculum are more likely to effectively align the teaching practices with national education goals (Arjihana et al., 2022). The results of the first interview regarding assessing the understanding of pre-service teachers towards *Merdeka* curriculum showed that there are only 2 pre-service teachers who understand the *Merdeka* curriculum and the rest do not understand the concept and characteristics of *Merdeka* curriculum, so it draws the background of this study. Hence it is crucial to conduct a case study to explore this issue in-depth and in its natural context regarding their strategies to understand the *Merdeka* curriculum.

The findings of this study indicate that the respondents use various strategies such as looking for information about *Merdeka* curriculum from the internet, reading a lot, having discussions with lectures and friends, and also practicing it in the teaching process. The pre-service teachers have applied the

Merdeka curriculum into their teaching practice. This study revealed that the pre-service teachers have difficulties about differentiated learning, difficulty in understanding the characteristics of the students and meeting diverse learning needs of the students. Nevertheless, respondent 1 stated that she conducted discussion with the lectures, while respondent 2 conducted pre-test and diagnostic tests also grouping the students based on the students preferences and knowledge levels to overcome the difficulties. The findings of this study give valuable contribution to the understanding about the pre-service teachers' strategies in understanding *Merdeka* curriculum. It is also valuable for Program Study to get insight on how to develop pre-service teachers' understanding towards *Merdeka* curriculum.

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