

Challenges and Strategies of Pre-Service EFL Teachers in Implementing the Emancipated Curriculum During Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the challenges encountered by pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) during their teaching practicum, and the strategies they adopted to address these challenges. The Emancipated Curriculum, recently introduced in Indonesia, emphasizes student-centered learning, flexibility, and project-based approaches. However, for novice teachers, curriculum innovation can present difficulties due to limited preparation and lack of institutional support. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research involved three pre-service EFL teachers from senior and vocational high schools in Tasikmalaya. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and practicum document analysis, then analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that participants faced three main challenges: pre-service teachers' readiness, school environment support, knowledge and understanding of the Emancipated Curriculum. To cope the challenges, they engaged in various strategies, including seeking support and feedback, practical implementation and reflection. The results highlight the importance of integrating Emancipated Curriculum training in teacher education programs and ensuring mentoring and resource availability at partner schools. This study provides insights into supporting future teachers in adapting to Emancipated Curriculum and contributes to ongoing discussions on the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Challenges; Emancipated Curriculum; Pre-service EFL teachers; Strategies; Teaching practicum*

A. Introduction

In 2022, Indonesia's Ministry of Education introduced the Emancipated Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) as part of its effort to respond to pressing educational challenges such as learning crises, digital inequality, and the need for 21st-century skills (Suharta, 2024; Sulaiman, 2024). Unlike previous curricula, the Emancipated Curriculum emphasizes flexibility, project-based learning, and the development of Pancasila student profiles (Suharta,

2024). The policy is designed to allow schools and teachers greater autonomy in developing lesson plans, teaching strategies, and assessments that reflect the needs of learners and their contexts (Festiyed et al., 2022). This innovation represents a significant step in Indonesia's education reform; however, as with any new curriculum, successful implementation requires adequate preparation and adaptation at all levels.

For pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, the challenge of implementing this curriculum during their teaching practicum is particularly complex. The teaching practicum is one of the most crucial phases in teacher education programs because it allows pre-service teachers to integrate theory into practice, experiment with pedagogical strategies, and develop their professional identity (Darling-Hammons, 2017). The shift to the Emancipated Curriculum places additional demands on pre-service teachers, who must quickly grasp new curricular principles, design lesson plans aligned with project-based and student-centered approaches, and manage classrooms that may not be fully equipped to support these changes (Retnaningdyah, 2020).

Several studies have investigated teachers' experiences with curriculum changes in Indonesia. Pakpahan (2023) noted that pre-service teachers frequently struggle with readiness when confronted with new curriculum requirements, citing insufficient preparation and lack of exposure to curriculum content during their training. Rizkiya (2020) reported that curriculum changes often lead to classroom management difficulties and confusion about assessment standards among novice teachers. Similarly, Reza, Hasanah, and Paramesthi (2023) highlighted that teachers faced obstacles related to limited resources and inconsistent support from schools when implementing the Emancipated Curriculum. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they largely focus on in-service teachers or broader curriculum contexts, leaving limited exploration of pre-service EFL teachers' experiences during practicum.

Understanding these challenges is vital for several reasons. First, pre-service teachers are at a formative stage of their professional development; their experiences with curriculum implementation will shape their attitudes toward teaching and their confidence in managing classrooms. Second, the teaching practicum serves as a bridge between university coursework and professional teaching practice. If pre-service teachers encounter significant obstacles without sufficient guidance, the goals of the Emancipated Curriculum may not be fully realized. Third, exploring the strategies that pre-service teachers employ to cope with

difficulties can provide important lessons for teacher education institutions, schools, and policymakers in designing better support systems.

This study addresses the identified gap by focusing specifically on the challenges faced by pre-service EFL teachers in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during teaching practicum and the strategies they used to overcome those challenges. The objectives of this research are twofold: (1) to investigate the challenges pre-service EFL teachers faced when implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during teaching practicum, and (2) to investigate the strategies pre-service EFL teachers used to cope with the challenges they faced when implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during teaching practicum.

By achieving these objectives, this study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on curriculum implementation by adding empirical evidence from the perspective of pre-service teachers, a group often underrepresented in educational research. Practically, the findings offer recommendations for teacher education programs to better prepare pre-service teachers for emancipated curriculum and for schools to strengthen their mentoring and support mechanisms.

The structure of this article is organized as follows. After the introduction, the methodology section outlines the research design, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures. The results section presents the main findings on challenges and strategies, supported by tables and excerpts from interviews. This is followed by the discussion section, which interprets the findings in relation to previous studies and highlights their implications. The article concludes with suggestions for teacher education programs, schools, and future research.

B. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges faced by pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum and the strategies they used to address these challenges during their teaching practicum. A case study design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences in real-world contexts and provides rich descriptions of phenomena (Creswell, 2014).

Participant and Setting

This research conducted at a university in West Java, Indonesia. This researchd involved three pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers currently conducting their teaching practicum at senior high schools (SMA) and vocational high schools (SMK) in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia. These participants have been selected based on their experience with implementing the Emancipated Curriculum, known as Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesia, during their teaching practicum. This research selected using a convinience sampling method. The convinience sampling technique was chosen because the participants were easy to reach, willing to take part, and had experience with the Emancipated Curriculum. This method is common in qualitative case studies, as it helps researcher get deep insights from those directly involved in the topic.

Before conducting the interviews, the researcher provided a consent form to each participant as part of the ethical code, and they have identified as P1 , P2 , and P3 to ensure their anonymity.

Data Collection

Two primary sources of data were used in this study: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews explored participants' understanding of the Emancipated Curriculum, the challenges they encountered, and the strategies they applied to cope with those challenges. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions for deeper insights.

Document analysis was conducted using practicum reports submitted by the participants. These reports included lesson plans, reflective journals, and teaching documentation. They provided additional information on how the curriculum was implemented in practice and served as a supplementary source to validate interview findings.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the collected data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The process began with familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts and practicum documents. Coding was then carried out to identify meaningful units related to challenges and strategies. These codes were organized into potential themes, which were subsequently reviewed, refined, and defined.

The use of thematic analysis enabled the identification of patterns across participants' experiences while allowing space for unique insights. Themes were presented in two

categories challenges and strategies supported by illustrative excerpts and summarized in tables for clarity.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study that answer the research questions: (1) What challenges did pre-service EFL teachers face when implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during teaching practicum? (2) What strategies did pre-service EFL teachers use to cope with the challenges they face when implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during teaching practicum?. Based on the interviews and document analysis with three pre-service EFL teachers who implemented the Emancipated Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) during their teaching practicum (*PLP*). The findings are categorized into key themes, including: (1) Pre-service EFL teacher challenges, consisting of : pre-service teachers' readiness, school environment support, knowledge and understanding of the Emancipated Curriculum, and (2) Strategies to overcome those challenges.

1. Challenges in Implementing the Emancipated Curriculum

From the interview data, it was found that there are three biggest challenges faced by pre-service teachers, namely pre-service teacher readiness, school environment support, knowledge and understanding about the Emancipated Curriculum.

a. Readiness

The findings from the interviews indicate that all participants had limited knowledge about the Emancipated Curriculum before their practicum. Despite their enrollment in the English Education program, they had not received comprehensive instruction on how to implement the curriculum in actual classroom settings. Instead, their preparation was largely independent, consisting of self-study, reviewing curriculum documents, consulting with mentor teachers, and participating in informal briefings.

P1 stated:

“ I understood the concept of the Emancipated Curriculum in theory, but when I had to design a lesson plan, I felt confused. It was different from what we learned before.” (P1)

Similarly, P2 emphasized that the limited exposure made her feel anxious during the first weeks of teaching:

“I didn’t know if my teaching really matched the curriculum’s requirements. I just tried to do my best, but I wasn’t confident.” (P2)

b. School Support

The findings indicate that the school environment, particularly the role of mentor teachers and school principals, played a crucial role in guiding pre-service teachers through the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum. However, the level of support received by each participant varied, and in some cases, they felt left to navigate the curriculum independently. Facilities such as projectors, internet access, and supporting materials were also limited, which hindered the implementation of project-based learning.

P3 recalled:

“My mentor teacher was very busy, so sometimes I had to figure things out on my own. Also, the classroom didn’t always have the tools I needed, like media for group projects.” (P3)

P1 further highlighted that some school administrators had not fully socialized the Emancipated Curriculum, making expectations unclear:

“The school itself was still adjusting to the curriculum. So, as a practicum teacher, I felt like we were experimenting together without clear direction.” (P1)

The researcher have found new findings student reflection from PLP report also indicated that are not found in interviews that pre-service teachers have difficult to deliver materials that required visual support due to limited resources and lack of facilities.

P1 stated :

*“Another major challenge I faced during the teaching practicum was the **lack of facilities**, particularly the absence of projectors in some classrooms. This situation made it difficult to deliver materials that required visual support, such as images, videos, or diagrams.”*

c. Curriculum Knowledge

The findings indicate that all three participants demonstrated a general understanding of the Emancipated Curriculum’s fundamental principles, particularly its emphasis on flexible learning, differentiated instruction, and project-based learning. However, despite this basic understanding, they encountered significant difficulties in several key areas, such as assessment strategies, differentiation techniques, and lesson planning.

P2 stated:

“The hardest part for me was creating assessments. The curriculum required new rubrics, but I didn’t know exactly how to make them appropriate.” (P2)

P3 added that applying project-based learning was demanding given the time limitations of the practicum:

“I wanted to apply project-based learning, but with limited time and large classes, it was difficult to manage.” (P3)

These findings suggest that the gap between curriculum theory and classroom practice was a significant issue.

Table 1. Challenges faced by pre-service EFL teachers in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum

Challenges	Description
Readiness	Limited preparation and shallow understanding of the curriculum before practicum.
School Support	Inconsistent mentorship, lack of facilities, and limited direct conversation.
Curriculum Knowledge	Difficulty in designing lesson plans, applying differentiated instruction, and developing assessments.

2. Strategies to Overcome Challenges

Despite facing various challenges in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during their teaching practicum, the participants identified and employed several strategies to navigate these difficulties. Based on the interview findings, the key strategies adopted by the pre-service teachers fall into two main categories:

- a. Seeking Support and feedback
- b. Practical Implementation and Reflection

Each strategy played a crucial role in helping them adapt to the Emancipated Curriculum’s flexible and student-centered approach.

a. Seeking Support and Feedback

The participants actively sought guidance from mentor teachers, peers, and online resources. Although mentor teacher support was not always consistent, participants reported that consulting whenever possible helped them clarify curriculum requirements.

P1 explained:

“Even though my mentor was busy, I still asked questions whenever I could. I also discussed with my friends who were also doing practicum.” (P1)

Online teaching forums and digital resources were also valuable:

“Sometimes I searched YouTube or teacher communities online to see examples of how to apply project-based learning.” (P2)

Furthermore, another qualitative finding through student reflection from PLP report also indicated that despite facing various challenges in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during their teaching practicum, the participants identified and employed several strategies to navigate these difficulties **to overcome the challenges**. Such as the importance of regular discussions with their mentor teachers and peers.

P2 stated :

*“ Pre-service teachers realized that **communication with mentor teachers**, as well as sharing ideas and engaging in discussions with fellow pre-service teachers, was essential. Such collaboration served as a primary solution for addressing the challenges they encountered, such as in developing teaching modules and selecting appropriate teaching methods.”*

b. Practical Implementation and Reflection

Beyond seeking external support, pre-service teachers also adopted practical, experience-based strategies to adjust to the curriculum’s demands. They emphasized the importance of trial-and-error approaches, adapting teaching materials, and reflecting on their teaching experiences to improve lesson delivery.

P3 described her approach:

“I couldn’t do a big project because of time, so I made small projects like poster presentations. It was still in line with the curriculum but easier to handle.” (P3)

P1 stated :

“Yes, I believe it is necessary. After teaching, I often ask students simple questions about their learning experience to gauge their understanding.”

Furthermore, another qualitative finding through student reflection from PLP report also indicated that despite facing various challenges in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during their teaching practicum, the participants identified and employed several strategies to navigate these difficulties strategies to overcome the challenges. Such as applying interactive methods, breaking down the stages of module preparation and utilizing available references, understanding students' characteristics in the classroom, discussions, simulations, and role-playing to manage a less conducive classroom environment, appreciated every effort made by students, differentiated instruction to manage heterogeneous classroom, ,applying various interactive methods

P2 stated :

"By applying a flexible approach and utilizing a variety of interactive methods, I was able to accommodate students' diverse needs."

P1 stated :

"To address the challenges of managing a heterogeneous classroom, I implemented a differentiated instruction approach by designing tasks that could be adapted to students' varying abilities and interests."

P2 stated :

"To manage a less conducive classroom environment, I redirected students' energy through more structured activities such as group discussions, simulations, and role-playing."

Reflection was another strategy used by participants. After each lesson, they evaluated what worked and what needed improvement. Feedback from mentor teachers and peers was used to refine their practices.

P2 highlighted:

"After teaching, I always wrote in my journal about what went well and what I needed to change. This helped me improve for the next lesson." (P2)

This reflective practice allowed them to gradually adapt their teaching to align better with the Emancipated Curriculum.

Table 2. Strategies employed by pre-service EFL teachers to overcome challenges

Strategy	Description
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Seeking Support and Feedback	Consulting mentor teachers, collaborating with peers, and using online resources.
Practical Implementation and Reflection	Simplifying project-based learning, using interactive media, and adjusting methods to class conditions. Evaluating classroom practices through journals and feedback to improve teaching skill.

2. Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges faced by pre-service EFL teachers in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum during their teaching practicum and to investigate the strategies they employed to overcome these challenges. By focusing on pre-service teachers, the study contributes to understanding how novice educators adapt to emancipated curriculum during the early stage of their professional development.

The results revealed three main challenges: (1) lack of readiness due to limited preparation before practicum, (2) insufficient school support in terms of guidance and facilities, and (3) limited curriculum knowledge, particularly concerning project-based learning and assessment. In response, participants developed two main strategies: (1) seeking support and feedback, and (2) practical implementation and reflection.

The present study reveals that pre-service EFL teachers face challenges in implementing the Emancipated Curriculum. Pre-service teacher limited prior knowledge and lack of structured training before their teaching practicum. As indicated in previous studies (Razali, 2020; Ndari et al., 2023; Pakpahan, 2023), this lack of preparation hinders effective curriculum implementation. This aligns with studies indicating that pre-service teachers often struggle with implementing newly introduced curricula due to a lack of structured pre-service training (Ndari et al., 2023)

The findings similar with several prior studies. The issue of readiness supports Pakpahan (2023), who reported that pre-service teachers often lack sufficient exposure to curriculum innovations before practicum. This suggests that the gap between coursework and practicum is a recurring issue in teacher education.

The challenge of school support aligns with Reza, Hasanah, and Paramesthi (2023), who found that many schools remain in transition regarding the Emancipated Curriculum and

therefore provide inconsistent guidance to teachers. The experiences of participants in this study confirm that weak institutional support amplifies the difficulties of novice teachers.

The challenge of curriculum knowledge echoes Rizkiya (2020), who emphasized that designing assessments and implementing project-based learning are difficult tasks for teachers under new curriculum frameworks. Similarly, participants in this study struggled to apply curriculum concepts in practical classroom settings.

Maintaining classroom management while implementing a student-centered approach was challenging. The participant faced challenges some time to establish a quiet and supportive classroom environment, and providing individual attention to each student was difficult, likely due to the limited time they had (Widiati et al., 2018).

The strategies identified in this study also reinforce existing findings. Ndari, Syahputra, and Lestari (2023) highlighted the role of collaborative learning and reflection in enabling teachers to adapt to the Emancipated Curriculum. This study extends that understanding by showing that pre-service teachers, despite limited experience, use similar strategies to cope with implementation demands.

The findings in this study can be explained by the structural and transitional nature of the Emancipated Curriculum. The issue of readiness may stem from the fact that teacher education programs have not fully integrated the Emancipated Curriculum into their coursework. Unlike in-service teachers who may receive professional development workshops, pre-service teachers primarily rely on university instruction, which lags behind curriculum changes.

The issue of school support can be explained by the transitional state of many schools. Since the Emancipated Curriculum is relatively new, schools and mentor teachers are also still adapting, which reduces the level of support they can provide to pre-service teachers. This environment of simultaneous learning creates uncertainty and inconsistency.

The challenge of curriculum knowledge reflects the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom realities. The requirements for differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and authentic assessment are ambitious, but limited time and large classes made them difficult to implement. This reinforces Fullan's argument that the Emancipated Curriculum often fails without adequate support mechanisms.

Similarities with other studies indicate that the challenges identified here are systemic rather than individual. Pre-service and in-service teachers alike struggle with assessment design, project-based learning, and mentorship. However, differences also emerged. Unlike

many studies that focus primarily on difficulties, this study highlighted the resilience and agency of pre-service teachers. Their strategies of seeking support, practical adaptation, and reflection show that novice teachers are capable of negotiating challenges actively rather than passively experiencing them.

Another dissimilar lies in the subject focus. The emphasis on EFL teaching introduced specific challenges such as balancing language instruction with project-based learning, which may not be as prominent in other subject areas. This indicates that while curriculum challenges are common across disciplines, subject-specific contexts shape how they manifest and how teachers respond.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

Conclusion

The study reveals that pre-service EFL teachers were not fully prepared to implement the Emancipated Curriculum during their teaching practicum. Although they showed a basic understanding of its core principles—such as flexibility, differentiated instruction, and student-centered learning—their limited prior exposure and lack of structured training significantly hindered their readiness. Much of their preparation was self-initiated, relying on independent learning and informal guidance from mentor teachers. Challenges such as adapting lesson plans, managing diverse classrooms, and applying assessment strategies revealed a clear gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. The absence of comprehensive training in teacher education programs further emphasized the need for curriculum alignment between universities and school expectations.

Despite these challenges, pre-service teachers demonstrated resilience and adaptability by employing a range of strategies to navigate curriculum implementation. Key approaches included seeking mentor support, utilizing digital learning platforms, engaging in reflective teaching practices, and incorporating innovative methods like Project-Based Learning and technology integration. These findings underline the importance of structured mentorship, hands-on training, and continuous professional development to support novice teachers in adapting to new educational frameworks. Therefore, it is recommended that teacher education institutions redesign their programs to provide more practical exposure and systematic support, ensuring that future teachers are better equipped to meet the demands of the Emancipated Curriculum.

Suggestion

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations can be offered to relevant stakeholders.

For pre-service teachers, it is essential to continuously enhance their competencies through self-directed learning, participation in professional development programs, and actively seeking guidance from mentor teachers and school staff. They are also encouraged to experiment with various teaching strategies and reflect on their effectiveness in actual classroom settings.

Meanwhile, teacher education programs at universities should integrate the Emancipated Curriculum more comprehensively into their coursework, particularly in areas such as lesson planning, differentiated instruction, and formative assessment. Strengthening collaboration between universities and partner schools is also necessary to ensure that pre-service teachers receive structured mentorship during their teaching practicum. Furthermore, practice-based training, such as workshops on lesson planning and project-based learning, is highly recommended to prepare pre-service teachers for real classroom challenges.

For future research, it is suggested to investigate the role of mentor teachers in supporting curriculum implementation, investigate how in-service teachers adapt to the curriculum over the long term, and analyze the impact of the Emancipated Curriculum on student learning outcomes and classroom engagement.

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