

Student-Centered Learning Practices in English Language Teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum Framework

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Abstract

The Merdeka Curriculum promotes student autonomy and competency development through Student-Centered Learning (SCL) implementation. As future educators, pre-service teachers are expected to design and facilitate active, meaningful, and independent learning experiences. However, translating SCL theory into classroom practice remains challenging, particularly during teaching internships. This study aims to analyze the implementation of SCL by pre-service English teachers within the Merdeka Curriculum framework during their apprenticeship program. A qualitative case study design was employed involving three pre-service teachers who completed teaching internships at senior high schools. Data were collected through classroom video observations and document analysis of lesson modules prepared by the participants. The analysis focused on the implementation of nine SCL characteristics—active, constructive, collaborative, enthusiastic, dialogical, contextual, reflective, multisensory, and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)—as well as the application of six SCL-related learning models: Cooperative Learning, Problem-Based Learning, Project-Based Learning, Contextual Teaching and Learning, Discovery Learning, and Blended Learning. The results reveal that all participants successfully incorporated SCL principles into both their lesson modules and classroom practices. However, variations were identified in the selection of learning models and the extent to which SCL characteristics were integrated into teaching. Some pre-service teachers demonstrated stronger implementation of collaborative and reflective learning than others, indicating differing levels of pedagogical competence. These results suggest that while pre-service teachers possess a foundational understanding of SCL, consistent and effective implementation requires continuous guidance, practical training, and reflective mentoring.

Keywords: Student-Centered Learning, Merdeka Curriculum, Pre-service teachers, English Language Teaching, Qualitative Case Study

A. Introduction

Curriculum reform plays a crucial role in improving the quality of education by responding to the changing demands of society and preparing students with competencies required in the twenty-first century. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education, Culture,

Research, and Technology introduced the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022 to promote more flexible, competency-based, and student-oriented learning. The curriculum emphasizes the principle of *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn), which provides teachers and students with greater autonomy in organizing meaningful learning experiences according to students' needs, interests, and learning characteristics (Kemdikbud, 2024). Rather than emphasizing the mastery of subject content alone, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages the development of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and learner autonomy. Consequently, teachers are expected to adopt instructional approaches that actively engage students in constructing knowledge and developing higher-order thinking skills.

One of the key pedagogical approaches promoted within the Merdeka Curriculum is Student-Centered Learning (SCL). Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, SCL positions students as active participants in the learning process, while teachers function as facilitators who guide students in constructing knowledge through meaningful learning activities (Darmayanti, 2023). According to Puspitasari (2021), SCL encourages students to become independent learners by actively participating in classroom interactions and problem-solving activities. Furthermore, Azizah (2011) identifies several characteristics of SCL, including active, constructive, collaborative, enthusiastic, dialogical, contextual, reflective, multisensory, and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-oriented learning. These characteristics are reflected in various instructional models, such as Cooperative Learning, Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), Discovery Learning, and Blended Learning. From both academic and practical perspectives, implementing SCL is essential because it aligns with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum while preparing students with competencies needed for lifelong learning and future employment.

Despite its pedagogical advantages, implementing SCL remains challenging, particularly in English language teaching. English teachers are required not only to master subject knowledge but also to design interactive learning experiences that accommodate students' diverse learning needs, language proficiency levels, and classroom contexts. These challenges become even greater for pre-service teachers, who are still developing their pedagogical competence while simultaneously adapting theoretical knowledge to authentic classroom situations during teaching internships. They must manage classroom interactions, select appropriate instructional strategies, integrate technology, facilitate collaborative

learning, and assess students' learning outcomes, all while implementing the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Therefore, teaching internships represent a critical stage in teacher preparation because they provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to transform pedagogical theories into actual classroom practices.

Previous studies have demonstrated the benefits and challenges of implementing both the Merdeka Curriculum and Student-Centered Learning. Lestari (2023) reported that the Merdeka Curriculum provides greater flexibility for teachers in designing learning activities but also presents challenges in addressing students' diverse learning styles and learning readiness. Darmayanti (2023) found that Student-Centered Learning promotes learner autonomy, increases students' motivation, and improves learning outcomes in English classrooms. Similarly, several studies have highlighted that active learning strategies encourage students' participation and critical thinking. However, Kurniawan et al. (2023) argued that Teacher-Centered Learning (TCL) remains necessary in certain classroom situations to maintain classroom management and achieve specific instructional objectives. These results suggest that although SCL is strongly encouraged, its implementation is often influenced by contextual factors that require teachers to balance student-centered and teacher-centered instructional approaches.

Although previous studies have contributed valuable insights into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and Student-Centered Learning, several gaps remain. First, most existing studies have focused primarily on in-service teachers, secondary school students, or conceptual discussions regarding curriculum implementation. Second, limited research has specifically examined how pre-service English teachers implement Student-Centered Learning during their teaching internships, where pedagogical theories are translated into authentic classroom practices. Third, previous studies have predominantly evaluated the effectiveness of SCL in improving learning outcomes, while relatively little attention has been given to examining how the characteristics of Student-Centered Learning are manifested in pre-service teachers' instructional practices. Addressing these gaps is important because understanding how prospective teachers implement SCL can provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of teacher education programs and identify areas requiring further pedagogical support.

Based on these gaps, the present study investigates the implementation of Student-Centered Learning by pre-service English teachers within the framework of the Merdeka

Curriculum during their teaching internships. Specifically, this study aims to identify the characteristics of Student-Centered Learning reflected in their classroom practices and examine how these characteristics are implemented in authentic English language teaching contexts. The research focuses on English pre-service teachers participating in teaching internships, with classroom teaching activities serving as the primary unit of analysis. By exploring their instructional practices through classroom observation and document analysis, this study is expected to contribute to the existing literature on Student-Centered Learning implementation and provide practical recommendations for improving English teacher education programs, particularly in preparing future teachers to implement student-centered pedagogy effectively within the Merdeka Curriculum.

B. Research Methodology

Qualitative research was used to analyze one of the phenomena that occurs, especially in the world of education, specifically curriculum changes as stated by Ugwu & Val (2023). In this study, researchers used a descriptive qualitative design, to find facts and interpret the implementation of Student Centered Learning (SCL) in the Merdeka curriculum framework in teaching English at the senior high school level.

The participants in this research were all pre-service teachers, students of eight-semester of the English language education program at Wiralodra University during the apprenticeship program, consisting of 24 students that is divided into 6 schools, 4 State Senior High Schools, 1 Vocational High School and 1 Islamic Senior High School. However, this research focuses on analysing the implementation of Student Centered Learning within the framework of a Merdeka Curriculum using modules and the teaching process. Based on this, all participants who fulfilled the independent curriculum are only 13 Students. Meanwhile, of the 13 pre-service teachers, only 3 participants met the criteria in this research, one from each of the State Senior High Schools, 1 Vocational High School and 1 Islamic Senior High School. The reason researcher selected the participants possessively based on some consideration namely those who have been equipped with the latest innovations related to teaching, especially with the implementation of a new curriculum.

The instruments used in this research are observation and documentation. In this study, the researcher conducted an observation checklist that focuses on teaching modules and classroom learning. The second instrument was documentation. It come from written

items in the form of the learning modules developed by pre-service teachers while teaching English during the apprenticeship program.

Data were analyzed using qualitative techniques through video observation and document analysis. Video observation involved collecting classroom teaching recordings, preparing observation instruments, observing instructional practices, analyzing the recorded data, and reporting the results. This method enabled repeated examination of teaching behaviors and interactions during classroom instruction. Document analysis focused on reviewing lesson modules prepared by the pre-service teachers following the procedures proposed by Ary et al. (2010), including organizing and familiarizing with the data, coding and reducing data, and interpreting the results. Codes such as M (Module), V (Video), P1–P3 (Participants), and abbreviations for SCL learning models were used to ensure systematic data organization and analysis.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

This section presents the results obtained from document analysis and classroom video observations to address the research objective. The document analysis focused on lesson modules prepared by the pre-service teachers to examine the implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) and the learning models adopted in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum framework. Meanwhile, video observations were conducted to analyze how the pre-service teachers implemented the planned instructional activities in English classrooms. The results provide evidence of the consistency between lesson planning and classroom practice, as well as the extent to which SCL characteristics were reflected during the teaching and learning process.

Table 1. Characteristics of Student-Centered Learning in Module and Classroom Implementation

NO	The Characteristics of Student-Centered Learning	Participants					
		Participant 1		Participant 2		Participant 3	
		M	V	M	V	M	V
1	Active	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	Constructive	√	√	√	√	√	√
3	Collaborative	√	√	√	√	√	√
4	Enthusiastic	√	√	√	√	√	√
5	Dialogical	√	√	√	√	√	√
6	Contextual	√	√	√	√	√	√

7	Reflective	√	√	√	√	√	√
8	Multisensory	√	√	√	√	√	√
9	High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)	√	√	√	√	√	√

The results in table 1 reveal that all three participants successfully demonstrated the nine characteristics of Student-Centered Learning in both their teaching modules and classroom practices. These characteristics include active, constructive, collaborative, enthusiastic, dialogical, contextual, reflective, multisensory, and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). The consistency between lesson planning and classroom implementation indicates that the participants were generally able to translate the principles of Student-Centered Learning into authentic teaching practices during their teaching internship.

Regarding the active characteristic, all participants actively engaged students through questioning, discussions, and learning tasks requiring learners to construct their own understanding rather than passively receiving information. Each lesson began with activities that activated students' prior knowledge by using pictures, videos, or audio materials, followed by teacher questions that encouraged students to express opinions and identify information independently. These activities positioned students as active participants throughout the learning process.

The constructive and collaborative characteristics were also evident across the three participants. Students were encouraged to develop their understanding by completing meaningful learning tasks, sharing ideas, solving problems, and discussing answers with peers. Although all participants incorporated these characteristics, Participant One tended to ask students to respond individually rather than collaboratively during one activity, while Participants Two and Three consistently organized students into groups to complete worksheets, discussions, and educational games. Overall, collaborative learning became an essential strategy for constructing students' understanding.

The implementation of the enthusiastic and dialogical characteristics demonstrated that classroom interaction extended beyond teacher explanations. Students were given opportunities to present their work, explain their ideas, answer questions, and respond to classmates' opinions. Teachers also encouraged students to appreciate and listen to one another during presentations, creating a classroom environment characterized by mutual respect and meaningful interaction. These results indicate that classroom communication

reflected one of the central principles of Student-Centered Learning, where learning occurs through dialogue rather than one-way instruction.

The contextual characteristic was implemented by connecting English learning with students' daily experiences. Participant One used familiar public figures when teaching descriptive texts, Participant Two introduced procedure texts through a video on making fruit juice, and Participant Three employed audio about operating a sewing machine. These authentic learning resources enabled students to connect classroom activities with real-life situations, making the learning process more meaningful and relevant.

All participants also incorporated reflective activities at the end of their lessons. Students were invited to review what they had learned, recall important concepts, evaluate their understanding, and express their learning experiences. Reflection served not only as an assessment strategy but also as an opportunity for students to monitor their own learning progress, which is one of the essential principles of Student-Centered Learning.

The multisensory characteristic was demonstrated through the integration of educational technology and multimedia resources. All participants used laptops, projectors, PowerPoint presentations, and digital learning media to support classroom instruction. In addition, Participant Two incorporated instructional videos, while Participant Three employed audio recordings and the Bamboozle educational platform to increase student engagement. The use of these technologies enriched learning experiences and supported students with different learning preferences.

The implementation of Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) was reflected through learning activities that required students to analyse information, interpret learning materials, solve problems, produce written work, present ideas, and evaluate learning outcomes. Rather than memorizing information, students were encouraged to apply knowledge in meaningful contexts and justify their responses. These activities indicate that the participants attempted to foster critical thinking and independent learning in accordance with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The second focus of the analysis examined the learning models used to implement Student-Centered Learning. The results indicate that although six instructional models were used as analytical references, only Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Project-Based Learning (PjBL), and Discovery Learning (DL) appeared in the participants' teaching modules or classroom implementation. Problem-Based Learning was the dominant model adopted by all

participants because it provided opportunities for students to investigate problems, collaborate with peers, and present learning outcomes.

However, several inconsistencies were identified between the lesson plans and classroom implementation. Participant One designed learning activities based primarily on the PBL model but omitted collaborative problem-solving during one stage and introduced one Project-Based Learning activity during classroom instruction. Participant Two explicitly identified Discovery Learning in the teaching module; however, analysis of both the lesson plan and classroom observation showed that the implemented instructional procedures more closely followed the syntax of Problem-Based Learning. Participant Three did not explicitly mention the learning model in the teaching module, yet both the lesson plan and classroom activities consistently reflected the stages of Problem-Based Learning. Despite these differences, all participants maintained the core principles of Student-Centered Learning throughout the teaching process.

Overall, the results suggest that the implementation of Student-Centered Learning by the three pre-service English teachers was successful in demonstrating all nine SCL characteristics within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. Although minor inconsistencies existed between lesson planning and classroom practice, particularly regarding the application of instructional models, the participants consistently created learning environments that promoted active participation, collaboration, contextual learning, reflection, technology integration, and higher-order thinking. These results indicate that pre-service teachers were generally able to transform theoretical knowledge of Student-Centered Learning into authentic classroom practices during their teaching internships, while still requiring further guidance in selecting and consistently implementing appropriate instructional models.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how pre-service English teachers implemented Student-Centered Learning (SCL) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework during their teaching internship. By analysing both teaching modules and classroom video observations, the study provides empirical evidence of how student-centered principles were translated into classroom practice rather than merely being planned in lesson documents. This contribution is particularly important because previous studies have predominantly examined SCL

implementation among in-service teachers or discussed the Merdeka Curriculum from a conceptual perspective. In contrast, this study focuses on pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum, a critical phase in which pedagogical knowledge is transformed into authentic teaching practice. The findings therefore extend current understanding of how prospective English teachers enact student-centered pedagogy in real classroom settings.

The findings indicate that all three participants demonstrated the nine characteristics of Student-Centered Learning in both their teaching modules and classroom implementation. These characteristics included active, constructive, collaborative, enthusiastic, dialogical, contextual, reflective, multisensory, and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Although the degree of implementation varied across learning activities, the overall findings suggest that the participants were able to design and conduct learning experiences that aligned with the student-centered principles promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum. This finding supports the claim that pre-service teachers with sufficient pedagogical preparation can facilitate learning environments in which students actively construct knowledge rather than function solely as passive recipients of information (MacPhail et al., 2013; Şahin-Taşkın, Ç., 2018).

The successful implementation of the active characteristic demonstrates that the participants consistently encouraged students to engage in classroom interaction through questioning, responding to visual or audio stimuli, and expressing opinions. Rather than relying exclusively on teacher explanations, students were invited to participate in identifying information, answering questions, and communicating their ideas. These findings are consistent with Azizah's conceptualization of active learning, which emphasizes students' active participation throughout the learning process, and support previous findings reported by Wati et al. (2023) that active engagement is one of the defining characteristics of Student-Centered Learning. However, this study also indicates that active participation alone does not necessarily guarantee deeper conceptual understanding (Hiver et al., 2021). In several classroom activities, students were encouraged to answer questions, yet opportunities to elaborate their reasoning or justify their responses remained relatively limited. This suggests that although active learning was successfully implemented, further attention should be given to designing questioning techniques that promote deeper cognitive engagement rather than simple recall.

Similarly, the constructive and collaborative characteristics were evident in all three participants' classroom practices. Students were frequently asked to discuss learning tasks, solve problems, complete worksheets, and exchange ideas with peers. These activities reflect

the central principle of Student-Centered Learning that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and collaboration (Gillies, 2016). Nevertheless, differences emerged among the participants regarding how collaboration was facilitated. Participants Two and Three consistently organized students into small groups that required shared responsibility for completing learning tasks, whereas Participant One occasionally relied on individual responses despite employing activities labelled as collaborative. This finding suggests that collaborative learning should not merely involve students working simultaneously but should encourage meaningful interaction in which learners negotiate ideas and construct shared understanding (Mercer, 2013; Storch, 2002). Consequently, the quality of collaboration may be more important than simply organizing students into groups.

Another important finding concerns the implementation of enthusiastic and dialogical learning. The participants consistently created opportunities for students to present their work, explain ideas, respond to peers, and participate in classroom discussions. Such activities demonstrate that classroom communication was characterized by two-way interaction rather than one-way transmission of knowledge. These findings correspond with Azizah (2011)'s concept of dialogical learning, which highlights reciprocal communication and respect for multiple perspectives. More importantly, they indicate that the role of the teacher shifted from information provider to facilitator who guided classroom interaction while allowing students to become the primary contributors to knowledge construction (Ramsay and Zainal, 2023; Sybing, 2021). This pedagogical shift reflects one of the fundamental objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, namely creating learning environments that encourage learner autonomy and meaningful participation.

The implementation of the contextual, reflective, multisensory, and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) characteristics further demonstrates that the participants attempted to align classroom practices with the principles of Student-Centered Learning promoted in the Merdeka Curriculum. Contextual learning was evident through the use of familiar topics, authentic learning materials, and situations closely related to students' daily experiences. The participants selected learning resources such as public figures, instructional videos, and authentic audio recordings that enabled students to connect classroom content with real-life situations. This finding is consistent with the concept of contextual learning proposed by Khoiron and Sutadji (2015), which emphasizes connecting academic content with learners' everyday experiences to promote meaningful understanding. Rather than presenting English

as isolated linguistic knowledge, the participants integrated language learning with situations that students could easily recognize, thereby increasing the relevance of classroom activities.

Reflection was consistently incorporated at the end of each lesson through review questions and classroom discussions. Students were encouraged to recall important concepts, evaluate their understanding, and identify what they had learned during the lesson. Although the findings demonstrate that reflection was regularly implemented, the reflection activities primarily focused on recalling lesson content rather than encouraging students to critically evaluate their own learning strategies or identify areas requiring further improvement. Consequently, the findings suggest that reflection functioned mainly as a closing activity rather than as a process of metacognitive development. This observation does not diminish the importance of reflective activities but indicates that future teacher preparation programs may strengthen pre-service teachers' understanding of reflective pedagogy by incorporating more structured self-assessment and metacognitive reflection into classroom practice.

Another notable finding concerns the integration of technology through multisensory learning. All participants employed various digital media, including PowerPoint presentations, videos, audio recordings, projectors, and interactive applications such as Bamboozle. The consistent use of multiple learning media indicates that pre-service teachers recognize technology as an important resource for supporting student engagement and participation. However, the findings also suggest that technology primarily functioned as a medium for presenting learning materials and facilitating classroom activities rather than transforming learning into more student-directed inquiry. Therefore, while the implementation reflects the multisensory characteristic of Student-Centered Learning, the educational value of technology appears to depend more on how teachers design learning activities than on the technology itself.

The implementation of Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) also reflects this pattern. Across the three participants, students were encouraged to analyse information, complete authentic tasks, solve problems, present ideas, and respond to classroom questions. These activities indicate that opportunities for higher-order thinking were integrated into English instruction. Nevertheless, the findings reveal that evidence of HOTS was primarily inferred from the learning activities rather than from students' demonstrated cognitive processes. As a result, this study confirms that the participants attempted to incorporate HOTS-oriented activities but does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude the extent to which students developed higher-order thinking skills. This distinction is important because classroom

activities designed to promote HOTS do not necessarily guarantee that higher-order thinking actually occurs. Future research may therefore examine students' cognitive processes more directly through interviews, learning reflections, or performance assessments.

In addition to examining the characteristics of Student-Centered Learning, this study also analysed the instructional models used by the participants. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) emerged as the dominant instructional model across both teaching modules and classroom implementation. This finding is understandable because the stages of PBL—including problem orientation, investigation, collaborative learning, presentation, and evaluation—closely correspond with the principles of Student-Centered Learning emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum. However, the findings also reveal several inconsistencies between lesson planning and classroom implementation. One participant incorporated Project-Based Learning activities during instruction despite planning a Problem-Based Learning lesson, another identified Discovery Learning in the teaching module although the implemented activities reflected the syntax of Problem-Based Learning, and another participant implemented Problem-Based Learning without explicitly identifying the learning model in the lesson plan.

These inconsistencies should not be interpreted as evidence that the participants failed to implement Student-Centered Learning. Instead, they suggest that although the participants demonstrated an understanding of student-centered instructional principles, distinguishing among closely related instructional models remained challenging during authentic teaching practice. Because pre-service teachers are still developing pedagogical competence, they may prioritize implementing meaningful learning activities over strictly adhering to a particular instructional syntax. This explanation is supported by the finding that, despite variations in instructional models, all participants consistently demonstrated the nine characteristics of Student-Centered Learning throughout classroom instruction.

Overall, the findings suggest that the implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) by the three pre-service teachers extended beyond the use of individual teaching techniques and reflected a broader learner-centered pedagogical orientation in which students consistently participated actively in constructing knowledge. The consistency between lesson planning and classroom implementation indicates that the participants had a sound understanding of the pedagogical principles underpinning SCL, although several aspects, particularly the alignment between instructional models and classroom practices, still require further refinement. These findings imply that successful implementation of Student-Centered

Learning depends not only on selecting appropriate instructional models but also on teachers' pedagogical competence in designing learning environments that promote active participation, collaboration, contextual learning, reflection, and higher-order thinking. Consequently, this study contributes to English teacher education by providing empirical evidence that pre-service teachers are generally able to implement the core principles of Student-Centered Learning during teaching internships while highlighting the importance of strengthening pedagogical content knowledge to ensure greater consistency between lesson planning and classroom practice within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study concludes that the three pre-service English teachers successfully implemented Student-Centered Learning (SCL) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework during their teaching internships. Document analysis and classroom observations revealed that all participants demonstrated the nine characteristics of SCL—active, constructive, collaborative, enthusiastic, dialogical, contextual, reflective, multisensory, and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)—in both their teaching modules and classroom practices. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) emerged as the dominant instructional model, although minor inconsistencies were identified between lesson planning and classroom implementation, particularly in the selection and application of learning models. Nevertheless, these inconsistencies did not prevent the participants from maintaining learner-centered classroom practices.

The findings suggest that teacher education programs should provide greater emphasis on helping pre-service teachers align instructional models with lesson planning and classroom implementation. Strengthening pedagogical content knowledge and practical experience may improve consistency in applying Student-Centered Learning principles. Future studies are recommended to involve more participants from different educational contexts and investigate not only teachers' instructional practices but also students' learning experiences and outcomes. Such research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of Student-Centered Learning implementation within the Merdeka Curriculum..

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