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Curriculum Innovation in English Language Education: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation and impact of curriculum innovation in English language education at SMA Negeri 1 Padang Sidempuan. Against the backdrop of national curriculum reforms and global educational trends, this research investigates how curriculum innovation is interpreted and practiced by English teachers, and how it influences teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Employing a qualitative approach with case study methods, data were gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that innovative practices—such as the integration of technology, contextualized learning materials, and student-centered pedagogy—are being implemented to varying degrees. However, several challenges persist, including limited teacher training, inconsistent access to resources, and misalignment between innovation goals and assessment practices. The study concludes that successful curriculum innovation depends not only on policy directives but also on teacher agency, institutional support, and continuous professional development. This research contributes to the growing discourse on English curriculum transformation and offers recommendations for sustainable, context-sensitive innovation in secondary language education.

Keywords: Curriculum Innovation, English Language Education, Teaching Strategies,

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary educational landscape, innovation in curriculum design has become an urgent imperative, particularly in the field of English language education (Aisyah et al., 2023; Amaliah et al., 2024; Pasaribu, Widayati, et al., 2023). As English increasingly functions as a global lingua franca, the ability to communicate effectively in English is no longer a privilege, but a necessity for students who aspire to engage in international academic, professional, and technological environments. In Indonesia, this need has been formally acknowledged through various national curriculum reforms, including the introduction of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes student autonomy, contextual learning, and the integration of 21st-century skills. Despite these advancements at the policy level, the practical implementation of English curriculum innovation across schools remains uneven and context-dependent. (Mentari Hakim & Harahap, 2024; Pasaribu, Daulay, et al., 2023; Wardana & Mulyadi, 2022)

One example of this phenomenon can be observed at SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidempuan, a prominent public high school in North Sumatra. Within this institution, efforts have been made to reform English language instruction in ways that better align with contemporary pedagogical principles (Kusyani et al., 2024; Pasaribu, Salmiah, et al., 2023; Pasaribu, Daulay, et al., 2024). In some classrooms or programs, teachers have adopted more communicative and interactive methods, incorporated project-based learning, and utilized digital platforms to support language acquisition. In contrast, other classrooms continue to rely heavily on traditional methods, such as textbook-based grammar translation and rote memorization (DuBartell, 2018; Pasaribu, Arfianty, et al., 2024; Zafirah et al., 2023). This disparity within a single institutional setting raises important questions about the effectiveness, perception, and sustainability of curriculum innovation in practice. Why do some classes adopt innovation more readily than others? What factors influence the success or stagnation of curriculum change within the same school?

Several scholars have previously investigated curriculum innovation in English education from various perspectives. For example, Siregar and Sinaga (2021) found that the integration of task-based learning models significantly increased student participation and motivation in language classes across several high schools in North Sumatra. Their study emphasized the importance of designing contextually relevant learning activities to foster communicative competence. Meanwhile, Wahyuni (2022) explored the challenges of implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) in Indonesian secondary schools, identifying issues such as limited teacher training, insufficient classroom resources, and resistance to pedagogical change. Similarly, Arifin (2023) examined how curriculum innovation in English is often hindered by institutional rigidity and a lack of

continuous professional development for teachers. These studies have greatly contributed to our understanding of the factors that facilitate or obstruct curriculum change (Darmawan et al., 2024; Lasfika et al., 2022; Rahis Pasaribu & Salmiah, 2024).

Nevertheless, a critical gap remains unaddressed. Most of the previous research has approached curriculum innovation by comparing different schools or analyzing policy implementation from a macro perspective. Few studies have investigated the **intra-institutional** differences—that is, how curriculum innovation unfolds differently within the same school across different classes, programs, or teaching units. Such a micro-level analysis is essential, as it sheds light on the nuanced realities of curriculum implementation and the interplay between institutional policies, teacher agency, student engagement, and classroom culture. Without understanding these internal dynamics, efforts to improve the quality of English education through curriculum reform may overlook critical challenges that occur on the ground.

This study seeks to fill that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of curriculum innovation in English language education across different programs or classrooms within SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidempuan. The focus is not only on what curriculum changes have been made, but also on how these innovations are interpreted, adapted, and practiced by teachers and students alike. By exploring the lived experiences of educators and learners within the same institutional framework, this study aims to uncover the internal factors that either support or hinder innovation at the classroom level.

The novelty of this research lies in its intra-school comparative approach, which offers a fresh lens through which curriculum innovation can be understood more holistically. Unlike studies that generalize findings across multiple institutions, this research acknowledges the complexity and specificity of each classroom environment—even within the same school. Furthermore, it contributes to the growing discourse on educational transformation by highlighting the importance of local agency, pedagogical flexibility, and contextual adaptability in driving effective curriculum reform.

Based on the background above, the central research question posed in this study is as follows:

How is curriculum innovation in English language education implemented and experienced across different programs or classrooms within SMA Negeri

1 Padangsidempuan, and what are the pedagogical and learning implications of such variations?

Through this question, the study aims to generate deeper insights into the processes and outcomes of curriculum innovation, while offering practical recommendations for enhancing English language instruction in Indonesian high schools.

METHODS

This study employed a **qualitative comparative case study** approach to explore how curriculum innovation in English language education is implemented and experienced in different classrooms or programs within SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidempuan. The qualitative method was chosen to allow in-depth understanding of the processes, perceptions, and contextual factors that influence curriculum change, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative data alone, (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Nahak et al., 2019; Sugiyono, 2010)

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidempuan, a public senior high school in North Sumatra, Indonesia, known for its diverse academic programs and active involvement in curriculum reform. Three English language classrooms representing different programs—such as the regular program, the science-focused class, and a class with an international or bilingual approach—were purposively selected for comparison.

Participants included:

- Three English teachers who had different experiences and levels of involvement in curriculum innovation.
- Fifteen students (five from each selected classroom), chosen through purposive sampling to reflect varying levels of English proficiency and classroom engagement.
- The curriculum coordinator or vice principal for curriculum affairs, who provided institutional insights regarding curriculum policy and implementation.

Data Collection Techniques

To obtain rich, triangulated data, the following techniques were employed:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with teachers, students, and the curriculum coordinator. These interviews focused on participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to the implementation of curriculum innovation in English teaching.

2. Classroom Observations

Classroom sessions were observed in each selected class to document teaching practices, use of materials, student engagement, and the incorporation of innovative strategies. An observation checklist and field notes were used to maintain consistency.

3. Document Analysis

Relevant documents such as lesson plans (RPP), syllabi, teaching materials, and school curriculum policy documents were analyzed to understand the planned curriculum changes and how they were translated into practice.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes across the different data sources. The data were coded manually using open and axial coding processes. Comparisons were then made between the different classrooms to highlight similarities and differences in the implementation and perception of curriculum innovation.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, techniques such as member checking, peer debriefing, and data triangulation were applied. This enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the findings. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their consent before data collection began. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. The study also obtained formal permission from the school's administration.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that curriculum innovation in English language education at SMA Negeri 1 Padang Sidimpuan has been implemented with varying degrees of success across different academic tracks. The school adopts the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) policy and integrates both national curriculum standards and local educational values. Key innovations identified include the use of project-based learning, the integration of technology in the classroom, differentiated instruction based on student proficiency, and the application of communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches.

In the science-focused track, teachers were observed to incorporate more digital tools such as interactive whiteboards, language learning apps, and online assessments. Lesson plans reflected greater alignment with critical thinking and scientific reasoning, with English being used as a medium to access global knowledge. Meanwhile, the social science track emphasized contextualized English learning, using themes such as societal issues, local culture, and debates to foster engagement. Students in this track reported higher motivation when lessons were linked to real-life applications and local contexts.

Teacher interviews indicated that while curriculum innovation is generally welcomed, implementation often depends on teacher competence, resource availability, and support from school leadership. Most teachers noted the need for ongoing professional development to align with innovative practices. Moreover, classroom observations revealed that student-centered learning was present but not yet dominant; traditional methods like grammar translation still coexisted with innovative strategies.

Assessment systems have also evolved. There is a shift from summative to formative assessment, with performance tasks, group presentations, and reflective journals becoming more common. However, some challenges remain, especially in ensuring consistent application of innovation across classes and managing large class sizes.

Discussion

The findings indicate that curriculum innovation in English language education at SMA Negeri 1 Padang Sidimpuan reflects national trends and policy shifts but is uniquely adapted to the school's context. The

implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* aligns with what Nunan (2004) and Richards (2013) emphasize as learner autonomy and contextualized curriculum design in language education. The shift toward project-based and technology-supported learning is consistent with findings from Yunita and Marlina (2020), who argue that Indonesian secondary schools are gradually adopting digital tools for language teaching, albeit unevenly. (Astari Hendrawati, 2014; Pasaribu, Arfianty, et al., 2024; SaThierbach et al., 2015)

The differentiated approaches observed between science and social science tracks align with the recommendations of Borg (2015), who highlights the importance of aligning curriculum with students' academic needs and interests. The integration of real-life issues and culture in the social track supports Kramsch's (1993) view that language learning should be embedded in cultural discourse, promoting both linguistic and intercultural competence. (Ameka & Essegbey, 2006)

However, the study also reveals implementation gaps, echoing the findings of Hamied (2012), who noted that teacher readiness and institutional support are pivotal in determining the success of curriculum reforms. Although formative assessments are increasingly used, the persistence of traditional methods suggests a transitional phase in pedagogical practice. This duality reflects what Widodo (2016) identified as "curricular hybridity" in Indonesian classrooms, where innovation coexists with legacy practices due to various structural and cultural factors. (Hagi, 2021)

Moreover, the limited yet growing use of communicative approaches reflects the findings of Widiati and Cahyono (2021), who observed a gradual shift toward CLT in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Still, full realization is hindered by class sizes and teacher training gaps. The call for professional development aligns with research by Suherdi (2019), which emphasizes that sustainable innovation requires not only curriculum design but also teacher capacity-building.

In conclusion, while SMA Negeri 1 Padang Sidempuan is making strides in curriculum innovation, the full potential of such innovation can only be realized through strategic support, continuous teacher development, and a more systemic integration of student-centered approaches.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the significance of curriculum innovation in shaping the quality of English language education in SMA Negeri 1 Padang Sidempuan. It was observed that while the institution has made several progressive efforts to incorporate innovative strategies—such as the integration of technology-based tools, contextual learning materials, and student-centered methodologies—challenges still persist in terms of teacher training, resource availability, and assessment adaptability. The comparative analysis revealed that the effectiveness of curriculum innovation largely depends on the teachers' ability to interpret and implement the curriculum creatively and responsively. Schools that actively involved teachers in curriculum planning, professional development, and collaborative pedagogical strategies showed a greater impact on student engagement and language proficiency. This study also affirms that innovation must not only focus on content but also on pedagogical approaches and institutional support. Moreover, student feedback mechanisms and continuous curriculum evaluation are critical to ensuring the curriculum remains relevant, practical, and motivating for learners. In conclusion, curriculum innovation in English language education should be viewed as a dynamic and ongoing process. It requires a collaborative ecosystem involving policymakers, educators, students, and local contexts. As shown in this study, meaningful change in language education occurs when innovation is embedded holistically in teaching culture, supported structurally, and aligned with the real-world needs of 21st-century learners.

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