

**ADDRESSING PASSIVE STUDENTS IN THE *MERDEKA* CURRICULUM:
ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON ENHANCING STUDENT
ENGAGEMENT**

THESIS

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ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

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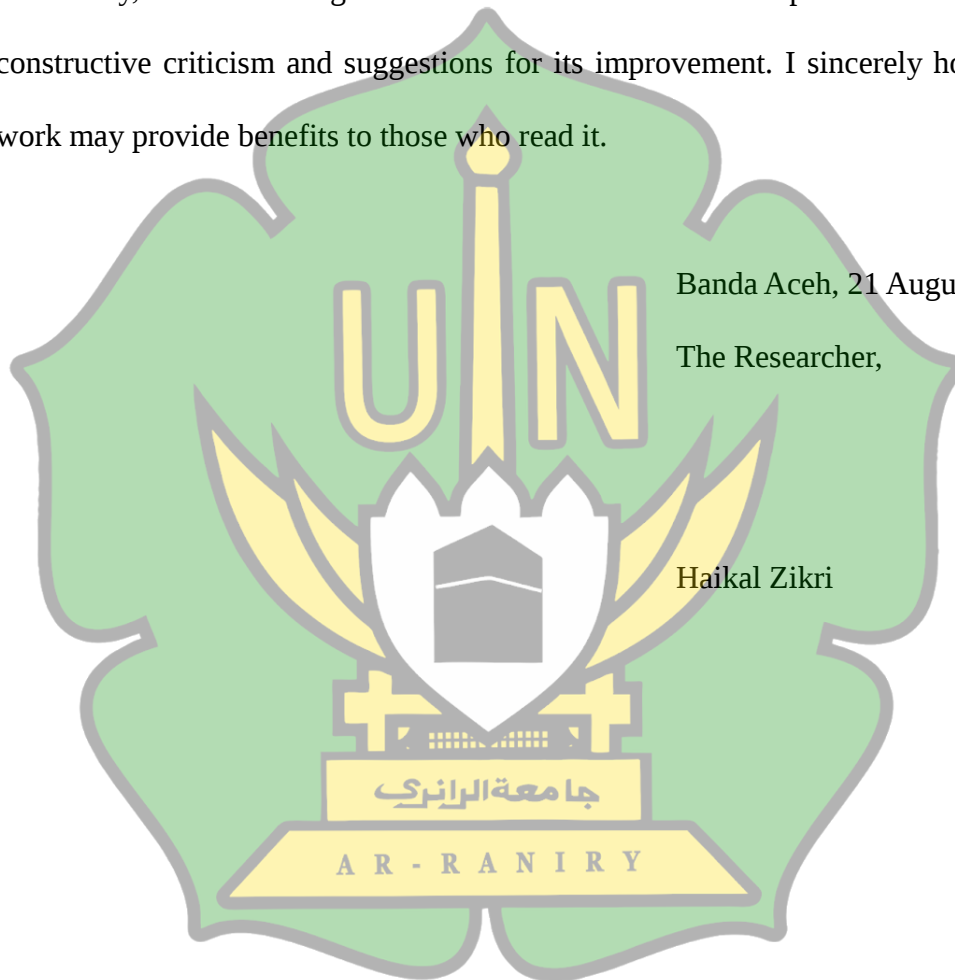
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ABSTRACT

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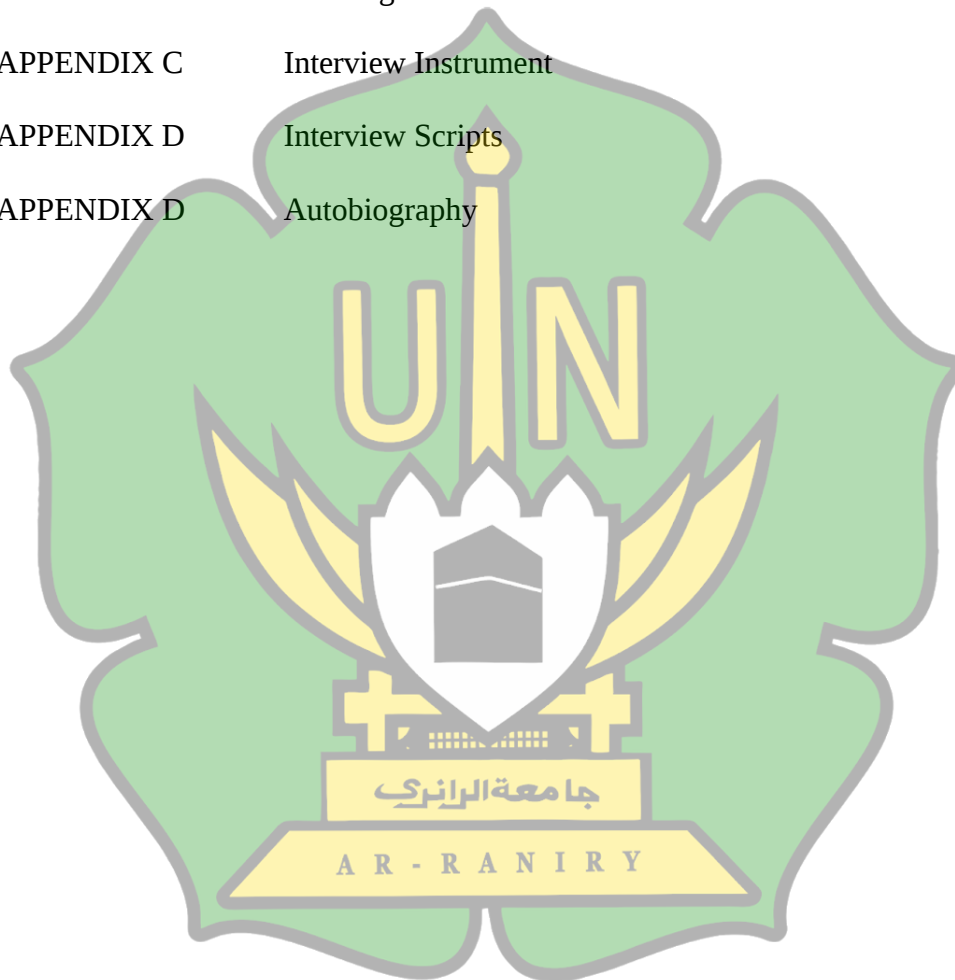
This study investigates English teachers' perspectives on passive students and the strategies used to enhance engagement in English language learning at the elementary level under the *merdeka* curriculum. The research emphasizes affective engagement, which involves students' emotions, motivation, confidence, and sense of comfort, as these factors significantly influence participation and learning outcomes. A qualitative case study was conducted with three English teachers from MIN 20 Aceh Besar, a primary school that has formally adopted and implemented the *merdeka* curriculum. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to ensure a systematic interpretation of findings. The findings reveal that teachers perceive passive students not as lazy or incapable but as learners constrained by affective barriers such as low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, lack of encouragement, and anxiety about speaking English in front of peers. Observable indicators of passivity include silence during lessons, hesitation in responding to questions, avoidance of eye contact, and dependence on repeated prompting or motivation. To overcome these challenges, teachers employed a variety of strategies, including engaging and enjoyable activities (such as games, songs, and visual aids), providing emotional support through positive reinforcement, using differentiated instruction tailored to individual needs, and promoting peer collaboration to build a supportive classroom atmosphere. These strategies align with the *merdeka* curriculum's principles of student-centered learning, psychological safety, and joyful learning. The study highlights the importance of empathy, creativity, and flexibility in teaching, offering valuable insights for teachers, schools, and policymakers to strengthen student engagement and improve English instruction in elementary schools.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of Study

During the teaching and learning process, teachers implement a curriculum as a framework to deliver education to students. The curriculum encompasses learning objectives, instructional materials, and a set of activities designed to achieve those objectives. According to Fauzan (2017), the curriculum has often been narrowly defined as a collection of subjects that students must complete in schools or universities. However, in a broader sense, it includes all learning experiences undertaken by students, both inside and outside the classroom, in order to achieve educational goals. Fauzan further explains that the curriculum consists of various components, ranging from the selection of instructional approaches, learning strategies, teaching methods, classroom processes, to evaluation techniques, all of which are integrated to support effective learning.

The curriculum is not merely a lesson plan but a meaningful and authentic learning experience that shapes students' educational journeys. Students engage in activities to meet competency demands (Afgani, 2019). According to Hasbullah (2015), curriculum changes in Indonesia are influenced by multiple national factors, including political shifts, evolving government priorities, and leadership transitions. These dynamics significantly shape educational policies and determine the direction of curriculum reforms. Furthermore, curriculum modifications are not

only driven by changes over time but also by shifts in instructional methods and contextual variables (Hadiasnyah, Pradhana, & Mustiningsih, 2020).

The introduction of the *merdeka* curriculum under the leadership of Nadiem Makarim marked an important reform in Indonesian education. The *merdeka* curriculum emphasizes student independence, granting learners the flexibility to acquire knowledge through both formal and non-formal education. It promotes creativity for both teachers and students and allows learning to extend beyond the classroom (Manalu, Sitohang, & Henrika, 2022). According to Risdianto (2019), the establishment of this curriculum responds to the challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, aiming to strengthen students' competencies in critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, innovation, communication, and collaboration. These skills are essential to meet the demands of 21st-century education and global competitiveness.

The *merdeka* curriculum, often referred to as a prototype curriculum, is designed to be flexible and adaptable. It emphasizes essential content, character building, and the development of students' capabilities. One of its characteristic features is the use of participatory and collaborative learning approaches. Compared to earlier curricula, the *merdeka* curriculum provides greater autonomy for teachers, students, and schools in carrying out educational activities (Lestari, Asbari, & Yani, 2023).

At its core, the *merdeka* curriculum promotes freedom of thought. Teachers play a central role in shaping this freedom, making them the foundation for educational achievement. In the digital era, technological advancements

significantly influence the quality of education, as both teachers and students increasingly rely on digital tools. Literacy skills, knowledge, talents, attitudes, and technological competence are all integrated within the framework of the *merdeka* curriculum (Manalu, Sitohang, & Henrika, 2022).

The principles of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) align with those of the *merdeka* curriculum, emphasizing active student participation. This approach encourages learners to take ownership of their learning through discussions, collaborative projects, and self-directed exploration. Teachers act as facilitators rather than sole knowledge providers, guiding students to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This shift fosters a dynamic and interactive classroom environment, where learning extends beyond information absorption to knowledge application and analysis (Goodman, Barker, & Cooke, 2018).

Nevertheless, despite the curriculum's emphasis on flexibility and student autonomy, some students remain passive in the classroom. Their lack of active participation can hinder educational progress, requiring teachers to apply effective strategies to foster engagement. Research suggests that passive students often struggle with low confidence, lack of motivation, and fear of making mistakes, which limit their participation (Smith & Cardaciotto, 2012). In today's digital context, integrating technology and interactive learning methods offers potential solutions to address student passivity (Mariappan, 2023). Understanding teachers' perspectives on passive students and the strategies they employ is therefore crucial to ensure the success of the *merdeka* curriculum.

This issue is particularly evident in elementary school English classes, where passive students may struggle to respond to questions, participate in discussions, or complete assigned tasks. Contributing factors include lack of motivation, low self-confidence, fear of mistakes, and ineffective teaching methods (Abdirimova, 2023). Additionally, language barriers, unfamiliarity with learning materials, and anxiety about speaking in English often exacerbate passivity (Hanh, 2020).

The presence of passive students significantly impacts English learning. First, their reluctance to engage limits language development, particularly in speaking and vocabulary acquisition (Meva et al., 2023). Second, minimal participation creates an imbalanced classroom dynamic, where only a few students dominate discussions while others remain silent (Morita, 2004). Third, passivity reduces opportunities to develop cognitive skills such as problem solving and critical thinking, which are central to the *merdeka* curriculum (Borg, 2015).

To address these challenges, teachers play a crucial role in implementing strategies that encourage active participation. Group-based learning, game-based activities, and technology integration have been shown to effectively engage passive students (Mariappan, 2023). By fostering a supportive and interactive environment, teachers can help students overcome reluctance and improve the overall effectiveness of English instruction at the elementary level.

Based on the above explanation, this study focuses on English teachers' perspectives and their strategies in addressing passive student participation, which

in turn influences decisions about teaching methods and classroom effectiveness. The research aims to provide insights into how teachers respond to these challenges and to highlight their role in enhancing the learning environment.

B. Research Questions

1. What are English teachers' perspectives on the presence of passive students and the factors influencing their level of participation in learning under the *merdeka* curriculum?
2. What strategies do English teachers implement to enhance the engagement of passive students in learning within the *merdeka* curriculum framework?

C. Research Aims

1. To explore English teachers' perspectives on the presence of passive students and the factors influencing their level of participation in learning under the *merdeka* curriculum.
2. To identify the strategies implemented by English teachers to enhance the engagement of passive students in learning within the *merdeka* curriculum framework.

D. Significance of Study

1. For the Government: The findings provide insights into challenges faced by English teachers in implementing the *merdeka* curriculum, particularly in addressing passive students. These insights can inform policy development, teacher training programs, and resource allocation to enhance student engagement.

2. For Teachers: The study offers practical strategies to encourage participation and engagement. By understanding the factors contributing to passivity, teachers can adapt their teaching methods, classroom management, and assessment approaches to create more interactive and inclusive learning environments.
3. For Researchers: This study contributes to the body of knowledge on student engagement in language learning within the *Merdeka* curriculum context. It can serve as a foundation for future studies exploring new methodologies, comparing strategies across different settings, and examining long-term effects on passive students' learning outcomes.

E. Terminology

1. *Merdeka* curriculum

According to Rifa'i (2022), the *merdeka* curriculum allows schools to utilize their unique resources while granting teachers flexibility in delivering essential knowledge to help students reach their potential. Introduced after the Covid-19 pandemic, this curriculum was implemented by the Ministry of Education to support learning recovery from 2022 to 2024. Smith et al. (2023) explain that teachers implementing the *merdeka* curriculum must align with the “*Profil Pelajar Pancasila*” guidelines outlined in Permendikbud No. 22 of 2022, which encourage foundational literacy skills in early grades. Effective implementation requires skilled teachers who adapt their methods and benefit from Ministry-led seminars.

In this study, the *merdeka* curriculum refers specifically to the curriculum applied in Indonesian elementary schools, designed to enhance engagement in English learning through student-centered approaches, flexible teaching, and the promotion of student independence.

2. Passive Student

According to Bosacki (2005), passive students are characterized by the absence of verbal participation or audible contributions during learning. Similarly, Chickering and Reisser (1993) define passive engagement as students' lack of involvement in learning activities, where they avoid discussions, refrain from asking questions, and remain silent. In this study, passive students are defined as learners who do not actively contribute in class, often due to low self-confidence and fear of expressing opinions.

3. Student Engagement

Student engagement refers to the extent of learners' involvement in the classroom. In this research, engagement is limited to the affective dimension, which involves students' emotions, interest, motivation, and sense of comfort in learning English. At the elementary level, engagement is strongly shaped by how safe and enjoyable students feel in class. Positive emotions such as enjoyment, interest, and belonging promote participation, while negative emotions like fear, anxiety, and low confidence contribute to passivity. This perspective aligns with the *Merdeka* curriculum, which emphasizes joyful learning, psychological safety, and student well-being as foundations of engagement.

4. Teacher Perspective

According to Reynolds and Miller (2013), perspectives in educational psychology are influenced by individual experiences, beliefs, and contextual factors, shaping how educators interpret and respond to teaching and learning situations. Each teacher holds unique views on how to achieve curriculum goals, complete syllabi, assist student comprehension, manage classrooms, and foster positive teacher-student relationships (Zaiturrahmi, 2021).

