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The Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic Language Education: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Keywords:

Independent Curriculum, autonomous learning, Arabic language

This study investigates the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Manhaj al-Ta'allum al-Istiqlaali) in Arabic language teaching for Grade 10 students at Al-Washliyah Islamic Senior High School in Medan. The background of the problem lies in the need for a more flexible and student-centered approach to Arabic learning, given that traditional models often limit students' active participation and contextual understanding. The main objective of this research is to analyze how the Independent Curriculum is applied in the classroom and to evaluate its impact on both teaching practices and student learning outcomes. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through interviews with Arabic teachers, classroom observations, and documentation analysis. The findings reveal that the Independent Curriculum offers broad flexibility for teachers and students to design contextual, participatory, and interactive learning activities. Teachers take the role of facilitators who guide the learning process, while students are encouraged to actively select topics and tasks that match their interests and learning styles. This shift has contributed to significant improvements in students' Arabic language proficiency, as well as the development of independent, critical, and reflective learning attitudes. Nevertheless, the study also identifies several challenges, including insufficient digital infrastructure, limited availability of learning resources, and the

need for more comprehensive teacher training in curriculum implementation. Overall, this research contributes to the academic discourse on Arabic language pedagogy by demonstrating the potential of the Independent Curriculum to enhance both linguistic competence and learner autonomy. It also provides practical insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking to improve the effectiveness of Arabic language education in Indonesian Islamic schools.

Abstrak	
Kata Kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka, pembelajaran mandiri, bahasa Arab	<i>Penelitian ini mengkaji implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka (Manhaj al-Ta'allum al-Istiqlali) dalam pembelajaran bahasa Arab pada siswa kelas X Madrasah Aliyah Al-Washliyah Medan. Latar belakang masalah penelitian ini adalah kebutuhan akan pendekatan pembelajaran bahasa Arab yang lebih fleksibel, partisipatif, dan berpusat pada siswa, mengingat model pembelajaran tradisional cenderung membatasi peran aktif siswa serta kurang memberi ruang bagi konteks kehidupan nyata. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah menganalisis penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka dalam kelas bahasa Arab dan mengevaluasi dampaknya terhadap praktik pengajaran maupun hasil belajar siswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara dengan guru bahasa Arab, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka memberikan fleksibilitas luas bagi guru dan siswa dalam merancang pembelajaran yang kontekstual, partisipatif, dan interaktif. Guru berperan sebagai fasilitator, sementara siswa aktif memilih topik dan aktivitas pembelajaran sesuai minat serta gaya belajar mereka. Perubahan ini berdampak positif terhadap peningkatan kemampuan berbahasa Arab siswa, serta mendorong sikap belajar mandiri, kritis, dan reflektif. Namun demikian, penelitian juga menemukan beberapa tantangan, di antaranya keterbatasan infrastruktur digital, kurangnya sumber belajar, serta kebutuhan pelatihan guru yang lebih mendalam terkait implementasi kurikulum. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada pengembangan kajian pedagogi bahasa Arab dengan menunjukkan potensi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam meningkatkan kompetensi linguistik sekaligus kemandirian belajar siswa. Selain itu, hasil penelitian ini dapat menjadi masukan praktis bagi pendidik, pembuat kebijakan, dan pengembang kurikulum untuk meningkatkan kualitas pendidikan bahasa Arab di madrasah Indonesia.</i>

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Introduction

Education is a crucial aspect in determining the quality of human resources and the progress of a nation. It plays a vital role in shaping students' character, skills, and perspectives to face future challenges. Education is not merely aimed at providing knowledge but also strives to develop students with noble character and creativity in adapting to changing times. Within the scope of education, the learning process involves interaction between teachers and students (Srigar et al., 2024).

To achieve optimal learning, the curriculum serves as a primary tool that organizes learning materials, methods, and assessments in the educational process. The curriculum plays an important role in supporting learning activities to align with the intended goals. It serves as a reference for teachers in guiding students to actively participate in effective and meaningful learning, both inside and outside the classroom (Nisa & Alghifari, 2023).

The curriculum determines the success of the education system. Without proper and well-designed planning, it would be difficult to achieve educational goals, whether in formal, non-formal, or informal settings. Moreover, the curriculum acts as a reference in the learning process, ensuring that the taught materials are relevant to students' needs and the developments of the times. A well-structured curriculum enables a systematic, planned, and relevant learning process, helping shape skilled students who are ready to face challenges in various fields of life (Rahayu et al., 2023).

The Independent Learning Curriculum is founded upon four key policies, namely: the implementation of school examinations aligned with the national semester system, the adoption of a computer-based national examination, the use of a simplified learning implementation plan to ease the instructional process, and the application of a zoning system in new student admissions to ensure equal educational opportunities across regions. In this context, Madrasah Aliyah Muallimin Swasta Al-Washliyah Medan is an Islamic school that faces both challenges and opportunities in implementing the Independent Learning

Curriculum, particularly in the teaching of Arabic, which is an essential component of the Islamic curriculum.

The teaching of Arabic at Madrasah Aliyah Muallimin Swasta Al-Washliyah Medan aims to equip students with Arabic language skills that enhance their access to Islamic sources, such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning). Therefore, the Independent Learning Curriculum must align with the fundamental principles of curriculum development, namely philosophical, religious, social, cultural, and scientific-technological foundations (Nasution, 2016).

This school is particularly distinguished for its Arabic language teaching, which forms a significant part of its curriculum. This makes the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in this school a topic worthy of research, especially in the context of teaching Arabic to tenth-grade students. Thus, analyzing the application of the Independent Learning Curriculum is essential to understand the extent to which it can meet the school's needs and improve the quality of Arabic language education for students.

Previous studies on curriculum development highlight that the success of the teaching and learning process largely depends on the design of a curriculum that is relevant and well-structured. Srigar et al. (2024) emphasized that education is not merely about the transmission of knowledge, but also about shaping students' character and skills to face global challenges. Similarly, Nisa & Alghifari (2023) argued that the curriculum serves as a fundamental reference for teachers in facilitating meaningful learning inside and outside the classroom. Rahayu et al. (2023) further stressed the importance of a systematic, planned, and adaptive curriculum to meet contemporary demands and to prepare competent learners. These studies collectively demonstrate that a well-designed curriculum forms the foundation of educational success.

Nevertheless, most previous research has focused on curriculum implementation in general without addressing the specific challenges of applying the Independent Learning Curriculum within Islamic-based schools,

particularly in Arabic language education. Arabic holds a strategic position in madrasahs as it provides direct access to Islamic sources such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical texts. At the same time, the flexibility of the Independent Learning Curriculum presents unique challenges for Islamic schools: balancing academic freedom with the religious and cultural missions of the institution. This gap underscores the need to investigate how the Independent Learning Curriculum is implemented in Arabic language teaching at Madrasah Aliyah Muallimin Swasta Al-Washliyah Medan.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of curriculum policy analysis with the practical aspects of Arabic language instruction in an Islamic school context. Unlike prior studies, this research not only examines the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation but also highlights how the curriculum's flexibility can be aligned with the Islamic values that form the foundation of the madrasah. Therefore, this study contributes theoretically to curriculum studies and provides practical recommendations for teachers, school administrators, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs in designing effective strategies for implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum in Islamic education settings in Indonesia.

This research aims to analyze the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in Arabic language teaching at Madrasah Aliyah Muallimin Swasta Al-Washliyah Medan, covering planning, implementation, and evaluation. The results of this study contribute to enriching curriculum studies and serve as a reference for the school and the Ministry of Religious Affairs in developing Arabic language education policies.

In practice, the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in this school is not without challenges. One of the main challenges is how to align the curriculum's flexibility with the specific needs of a school that is strongly oriented toward Islamic values. The Independent Learning Curriculum grants considerable freedom in determining teaching methods and materials, but

without an appropriate strategy, this freedom can lead to an imbalance between academic objectives and the goals of an Islamic school.

Method

The type of research in this study is descriptive-analytical, aiming to describe and interpret the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in teaching Arabic to tenth-grade students at Madrasah Aliyah Muallimin Swasta Al-Washliyah Medan. This type of research does not aim to test hypotheses but focuses on analyzing phenomena as they are in reality, without researcher intervention or alteration of variables. Thus, this research seeks to understand the relationship between curriculum implementation and the quality of language education through careful observation and analysis of the actual context. For this reason, the researcher uses this method to arrive at a comprehensive and realistic understanding of the studied phenomenon, as noted by Sukmadinata (2020).

Regarding data collection methods, the researcher used three main tools: Interviews, conducted with the school principal, the Arabic language teacher, and some tenth-grade students; Observation, to directly document teaching situations; In addition to the questionnaire, which was distributed to collect both quantitative and qualitative evaluations regarding the effectiveness of the curriculum and its challenges, these tools are considered complementary in obtaining rich, multidimensional data (Nasrallah, 2021).

Regarding the method of data analysis, the researcher adopted a descriptive-analytical approach, which includes specific stages: collecting data in the field, analyzing it by linking it with the theoretical framework, presenting it in an organized manner, and finally, deriving precise conclusions that represent the essence of the study. This method ensures a comprehensive interpretation of the studied educational reality, highlighting the effectiveness of the independent learning curriculum in developing students' Arabic language learning competence, as recommended by contemporary language education studies (Fawzi, 2022).

Result and Discussion

The Concept of the Independent Curriculum

The Independent Curriculum is an educational curriculum that grants greater autonomy to schools, teachers, and students in planning, organizing, and evaluating the learning process. This curriculum aims to deepen concepts and skills through diverse internal learning and focuses on developing competencies and building learners' holistic character (Ahmed, 2021). The theory related to "freedom to learn" was first introduced by Carl Ransom Rogers in his book *Freedom to Learn*.

Thus, the meaning of independent learning is an educational process that provides freedom for teachers and students by considering needs aligned with students' interests and talents, making learning activities more ideal, relaxed, and enjoyable without overwhelming burdens beyond students' capacity. The Independent Curriculum is a diverse learning approach within the curriculum framework that makes each learning content more effective and aims to provide students with sufficient time to explore concepts and strengthen competencies. The development of the Independent Curriculum is part of the Ministry of Education and Culture's efforts to address the learning crisis being faced. From this, it can be understood that the existence of the Independent Curriculum provides flexibility for teachers and students through a simple and basic selection of competency-based subjects (Korniasih, 2022).

The structure of the curriculum in the Independent Curriculum consists of intramural activities, projects to strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile, and extracurricular activities. The allocation of lesson hours in the curriculum structure is written in total for one year and is supplemented with suggestions for allocating lesson hours if delivered regularly or weekly. In addition, there are adjustments to subject arrangements, detailed in the question-and-answer list for each grade level (Nasution, 2016).

One characteristic of a driving school is having a principal who not only manages school operations but also truly understands the student learning

process, is capable of developing teachers, and can serve as a mentor for them. All teachers in a driving school stand alongside students, understanding that each child has different characteristics, allowing teachers to teach at levels appropriate to their students. Driving schools are able to shape students' profiles to have noble character, independence, critical and creative thinking skills, the ability to collaborate, and a sense of diversity and unity toward the nation (Nisa, 2023).

The Independent Learning Platform is an educational platform established by the Ministry of Education and Culture to support the development of the Independent Curriculum. This platform serves as a motivating companion for teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum. It provides a reference for teachers to develop teaching practices in line with the Independent Curriculum program. The reference consists of teaching tools and student assessments; the teaching tools section includes 2,000 references for teaching materials based on the Independent Curriculum (Korniasih, 2022).

According to Korniasih (2022), the advantages of the Independent Curriculum compared to the previous curriculum are that it is simpler and more in-depth because it focuses on core subjects and developing students' competencies, making learning more meaningful and enjoyable. It also grants autonomy at three levels: students, teachers, and schools. In addition, project-based learning connects the learning process with real-life contexts, making it more interactive.

On the other hand, the disadvantages include challenges such as a lack of experience in program implementation, limited references, weak teaching skills, and insufficient facilities. Another obstacle to its implementation is teachers' resistance to change.

A lack of understanding of new concepts and insufficient comprehensive knowledge often leads to weak practical implementation despite the available potential (Rahayu, 2023).

Principles and Structure of the Independent Curriculum Design

The design of the independent curriculum is based on the principle of differentiation and diversity in learners' abilities and needs. It is formulated in a way that considers individual differences as well as students' social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, while fostering an inclusive learning environment that allows students to express themselves and engage in learning at their own pace and according to their interests. This design includes a comprehensive restructuring of the curriculum, which is not limited to traditional classroom activities but also incorporates individual and group research projects, as well as extracurricular activities related to strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile. These activities help build the student's character from intellectual, moral, and skills-based perspectives (Kurniasih, 2022).

In terms of time flexibility, study hours in this model are distributed in a non-traditional way, allowing teachers to adjust lesson schedules and allocate time based on students' performance and progress. This enables replanning at any time based on feedback. This approach provides space for teachers to experiment with different teaching models—something confirmed by one teacher in an interview conducted by the researcher, who said:

“In the past, we were tied to a fixed number of lessons and standardized content, but with the independent curriculum, we now have the freedom to adapt the time and material according to, for example, the grade 10 level. This has indeed improved student engagement.” (Interview with an Arabic language teacher, 2025).

The design is also based on an analysis of the local context in which the school operates. Each educational unit has the authority to adapt and develop its educational components to align with its vision, mission, and objectives, provided this is done within the general framework set by the Ministry of Education. This approach allows educational institutions to implement practical programs that address the needs of the school community, while strengthening

the relationship between the school and its surrounding environment (Nisa & Alghifari, 2023).

From a technical perspective, curriculum design must include a set of integrated elements, foremost among them: clear learning objectives, selection of appropriate content, the adoption of teaching methods that cater to different learning styles, the use of modern teaching aids, and the application of flexible assessment tools that measure students' skill and knowledge development. All these elements should be built in a coherent and interconnected manner to ensure a meaningful learning experience. For example, in an Arabic language teaching project, there must be a balance between developing the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and enhancing the cultural and religious dimensions closely tied to the use of the language in Islamic texts and various life situations (Siregar et al., 2024).

One principal involved in implementing this curriculum stated:

"Flexibility in content design had a significant impact on students' development, especially in subjects such as Arabic, which require an integration between linguistic aspects and religious texts." (Interview with the school principal, 2025).

From this perspective, the design of the independent curriculum is not aimed merely at delivering instructional content, but at providing a holistic and integrated learning experience that nurtures students intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally. Building such a curriculum therefore requires collective participation from teachers, school leadership, and even parents to develop a flexible, dynamic, and student-centered educational model (Rahayu et al., 2023).

The Independent Curriculum emphasizes differentiation, flexibility, and contextual adaptation, integrating clear objectives, varied teaching methods, and collective participation to foster inclusive, student-centered Arabic language learning with cultural and religious dimensions.

Table 1: Design of the Independent Curriculum in Arabic Language Learning

Design Aspect	Description
Principle of Differentiation	Considers students' individual differences (abilities, needs, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds) while fostering an inclusive environment.
Curriculum Structure	Not limited to traditional classroom activities; includes individual and group research projects, extracurricular activities, and Pancasila Student Profile strengthening.
Time Flexibility	Study hours are distributed non-traditionally; teachers can adjust schedules and content according to students' progress, with re-planning based on feedback.
Local Context Adaptation	Each educational unit has the authority to adapt the curriculum to its vision, mission, and community needs, within the framework set by the Ministry of Education.
Technical Components	Clear learning objectives, relevant content, diverse teaching methods for different learning styles, modern teaching aids, and flexible assessments.
Arabic Language Skills	Balance between the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and the cultural-religious dimensions linked to Islamic texts.
Impact of Design	Curriculum flexibility positively influences students' development, particularly in integrating linguistic and religious aspects of Arabic learning.
Collective Participation	Curriculum development requires collaboration among teachers, school leaders, and parents; emphasizing a flexible, dynamic, student-centered model.

Implementation in Arabic Language Education at Madrasah Aliyah Swasta Al-Washliyah Medan

The implementation of the independent learning curriculum in Arabic language education represents a strategic step in reshaping the learning environment in line with modern educational trends—particularly those that encourage the development of critical thinking and student autonomy. At the Madrasah Aliyah Swasta (Private Islamic Senior High School) of the Jam'iyah Washliyah in Medan, this curriculum has been introduced gradually, in accordance with the Ministry of Education's direction to develop curricula that enhance student competence and grant them greater freedom to explore their abilities. The application is based on the principle that the student is at the center of the learning process, shifting from a passive recipient to an active participant in knowledge construction, while the teacher transitions from a transmitter of information to a facilitator and supporter of learning.

This transformation requires teachers to rethink their traditional approaches and to develop more flexible and varied interactive teaching tools. In this framework, Grade 10 students are given the freedom to choose learning topics that suit their personal interests and talents, thereby increasing their engagement in class. In an interview, one Arabic language teacher said:

“Since adopting the independent curriculum, we have relied on educational projects and group activities that take into account students' levels and interests. One of my students suggested studying modern Arabic poetry through songs, which encouraged his classmates to read more and speak the language more fluently than before.”

These kinds of initiatives were not possible under traditional curricula that imposed uniform content for all students. The same teacher added:

“We now plan lessons together with the students, asking them what they want to learn, and helping them design individual learning plans—something we never did before.”

From an assessment perspective, the traditional examination system has been replaced with diagnostic tests and educational projects, through which students' understanding of the material and their applied skills are evaluated. One Grade 10 student expressed his experience:

"In the past, we were afraid of tests, but now we are assessed through tasks and projects we enjoy, like giving an oral presentation on a certain topic or writing a story in Arabic."

This testimony illustrates that the shift in assessment methods has created a less stressful environment, more motivating for production and linguistic interaction—especially since projects are designed to integrate the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nisa & Alghifari, 2023).

In addition, the school benefits from the Leadership School platform and the Independent Learning platform, which provide modern digital content and resources such as interactive videos, language exercises, and self-assessments. These tools have improved the quality of educational planning and enabled teachers to design lessons that accommodate individual student differences. One educational supervisor at the school affirmed: "The platform has made teachers more efficient, as it allows them to access..." Advanced curriculum content, which helps in accurately measuring student performance, especially through the analytical reports it provides for each student.

And despite all these advantages, the implementation was not without challenges. At first, teachers found it difficult to let go of traditional methods and shift to a flexible learning model that required them to put in extra effort in preparation and follow-up. In this regard, the school principal stated:

"We needed intensive training programs to retrain the teaching staff so they could adapt to this curriculum. Some teachers were hesitant at first, but after seeing the results in students, they became more engaged and enthusiastic about the change." Some also complained about the weak digital infrastructure in certain classrooms, which affected the effective use of online platforms (Rahayu et al., 2023).

Over time, the fruits of this curriculum began to show tangibly. The classroom environment became more lively, students more independent, and teachers more creative in delivering learning content. The impact of this transformation is clearly seen in the improvement of students' results and their interaction with the language. One teacher noted that some students, who previously struggled with writing, are now able to produce narrative and dialog texts in Arabic skillfully and confidently. This progress is attributed to the sense of ownership that the independent learning curriculum instills in students toward their own learning (Nasution, 2016).

In conclusion, it can be said that the implementation of the independent learning curriculum in teaching Arabic at Al-Washliyah School in Medan has brought about a true qualitative shift. This curriculum has not only contributed to improving students' language skills, but also helped build independent and confident learners who can think critically, work collaboratively, and express themselves with assurance. These results are clear evidence that adopting this type of education can serve as a successful model to be followed in other schools—especially if teachers are well-prepared, resources are provided, and national education policies support this direction (Siregar et al., 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Independent Learning Curriculum represents a significant advancement in the development of the educational process, particularly in Arabic language teaching. By placing students at the center of learning, it creates opportunities for exploration, self-expression, and active participation. The experience at Al-Washliyah Private Islamic Senior High School in Medan demonstrates that this curriculum effectively enhances students' competencies, fosters critical and creative thinking, and strengthens their linguistic abilities. At the same time, it reshapes the teacher's role into that of a facilitator and guide, ensuring a more dynamic and student-centered classroom environment.

Although challenges remain—such as limited infrastructure, teacher readiness, and the need for consistent support—the positive outcomes highlight the curriculum’s potential as a promising educational model. If implemented comprehensively and adapted to the needs of each school context, the Independent Learning Curriculum can serve as an innovative pathway for improving the quality of Arabic language education. Therefore, it is recommended that schools continue to refine teaching strategies, provide ongoing professional development for teachers, and strengthen collaboration among educators, policymakers, and parents to maximize the benefits of this approach.

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Author Contributions Statement

SNS contributed to the conceptualization, research design, data collection, and initial drafting of the manuscript. **MT** contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and refinement of the manuscript. Both authors discussed the results together, provided critical revisions, and approved the final version of the article.

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