

Teacher-Student Communication in the Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum: A Case Study at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo

Rini Indriyanti Sulistiawan^{1*}, Zulaikha², Didik Sugeng Widiarto³

Universitas Dr. Soetomo (Unitomo) Surabaya

Corresponding Author : Rini Indriyanti Sulistiawan

riniisulistiawan@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Communication, Educators, Merdeka Curriculum

Received : 23, May

Revised : 25, June

Accepted: 27, July

©2025 Sulistiawan, Zalaikha,

Widiarto: This is an open-access

article distributed under the terms of

the [Creative Commons Atribusi 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

The primary problem addressed in this study is the suboptimal bidirectional interaction in the learning process, characterized by students' low willingness to express opinions and limited comprehension of learning materials. This study utilizes DeVito's interpersonal communication theory, employing five indicators : message clarity, feedback, empathy, openness, and communication equality. The methodology adopted is a qualitative approach with a case study design, employing data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings indicate that teachers' interpersonal communication tends to be open, empathetic, and interactive, although challenges persist in fostering fully dialogical communication. Effective interpersonal communication is proven to be a foundational element for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is an educational policy launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia under the leadership of Nadiem Anwar Makarim. This curriculum serves as an improvement upon previous curricula, with the primary objective of providing broader scope for educational units, educators, and students to engage in learning that is contextual, enjoyable, and relevant to 21st-century needs (Salamah et al., 2023). The launch of the Merdeka Belajar policy has become a central focus in educational policy analysis discourse, particularly concerning its implementation in school environments. The Merdeka Curriculum offers educators flexibility in designing learning that aligns with students' characteristics and needs. This policy emphasizes a student-centered learning approach, aiming to holistically develop attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Teachers play a crucial role in creating a learning atmosphere that provides space for students to think critically, creatively, communicatively, and collaboratively (Wijayanti & Ekantini, 2023). The values of "freedom to learn" and "freedom to think" championed by the Merdeka Curriculum fundamentally seek to shape students into independent, reflective individuals capable of exploring their potential through active and participatory learning activities.

In the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and 21st-century challenges, this curriculum integrates the strengthening of 4C skills (Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication) as core competencies that students must possess (Ariga, 2023). One crucial aspect of these skills is communication ability, both oral and written. Communication serves as the primary instrument for bridging understanding, social interaction, and students' critical thinking processes during learning. In project-based learning, a characteristic of the Merdeka Curriculum, communication forms the foundation for planning, discussing, presenting ideas, and constructing arguments (Nopiani et al., 2023). Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 81A of 2013 also emphasizes that communication in learning activities includes conveying observation results and conclusions from an analysis, both orally and in writing. Communication functions to develop systematic thinking competence, convey ideas concisely, and use language correctly and appropriately. Effective communication enables students to actively ask questions, express opinions, and provide responses, ultimately supporting meaningful learning processes (Maryanti et al., 2012).

However, based on initial observations conducted by the researchers at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo, several issues were found indicating the suboptimal implementation of educator-student communication in Merdeka Curriculum-based learning. The primary challenge faced by teachers is students' low communication skills. This is reflected in students' reluctance to express opinions, their confusion when asked to ask questions, and difficulties in effectively understanding and responding to teacher explanations. Interaction in learning remains predominantly one-way, with teachers delivering material while students tend to be passive and do not provide reciprocal responses.

Another problem is that students do not take notes effectively because they often daydream or lose focus during lessons. When asked to ask questions or provide responses, students tend to be confused and unable to articulate their thoughts clearly. This situation indicates limitations in students' communication skills, which should be one of the main pillars for the success of Merdeka Curriculum learning. Students' inactivity in communication reveals a gap between the curriculum's objectives and actual practices in the field, particularly in building a participatory and dialogical learning environment.

These problems necessitate teachers' active role in creating an open and safe communication space for students to express themselves. Teachers need to apply a humanistic and constructivist educational communication approach that not only transfers knowledge but also builds two-way dialogue between teachers and students. Through this approach, students are encouraged to construct knowledge through social interaction, exchange of ideas, and reflection on their learning experiences (Putri et al., 2020). This research is crucial because effective communication between educators and students is the main foundation for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Communication is not merely a technical skill but also a means to build healthy relationships, convey ideas, and develop critical thinking. In the context of 21st-century learning, which demands students to be active, creative, and communicative, teachers are required to be facilitators and communicators who can motivate and empower students.

Furthermore, there are not many in-depth studies that specifically highlight the dynamics of teacher-student communication in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the vocational high school (SMK) level. Therefore, this research not only provides practical contributions for schools in improving learning quality but also theoretical contributions to the development of educational communication studies within the context of national curriculum policy. Research Question Based on the background outlined above, the research question for this study is: How does communication between educators and students occur in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum: A Case Study at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication in the educational world plays a central role as a bridge between educators and students in the process of conveying information, values, and understanding. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, communication is not only understood as a message delivery process but also as an active, participatory, and constructive interaction. Therefore, the relevant theories to underpin this research are Interpersonal Communication Theory in the Educational Context and the Humanistic and Constructivist Approaches to Learning (Wijayanti & Ekantini, 2023).

Interpersonal Communication Theory is an approach to understanding the dynamics of communication between educators and students in a learning context. According to DeVito (2022), interpersonal communication is the process of message exchange between two individuals that occurs directly, bidirectionally, and is personal in nature. In the educational process, this communication becomes the foundation for fostering mutual understanding between teachers and students, ultimately influencing the success of the teaching-learning process.

In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, where learning is required to be student-centered, participatory, and to foster dialogue, interpersonal communication serves not only as a medium for conveying material but also as a means to build emotional and cognitive relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, this research utilizes interpersonal communication theory due to its high relevance in addressing the research question of how educator-student communication occurs in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. To analyze this phenomenon, the theory is applied with reference to five key indicators:

1. **Message Clarity:** Whether the teacher is able to convey material clearly, systematically, and easily understandable by students.
2. **Feedback:** The extent to which students provide active responses, both verbally (asking questions, answering) and nonverbally (nodding, expressions).
3. **Empathy and Relational Warmth:** The teacher's ability to show care and understand students' emotional conditions during learning.
4. **Openness:** The level of comfort students feels in expressing opinions, asking questions, or responding to the teacher.
5. **Balanced Interaction:** Whether classroom communication is dialogical or still predominantly one-way from the teacher to the students.

Through this theory, the research can identify how effective interpersonal communication can encourage active student involvement in Merdeka Curriculum-based learning processes.

Previous research indicates that communication plays a strategic role in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Dianto and Valentine (2024) found that the function of communication encompasses planning, coordination, and the dissemination of information supporting changes in curriculum structure, learning processes, and assessment. Furthermore, the role of the teacher is also a significant highlight in the implementation of this curriculum. Widiyaningsih and Narimo (2023) explained that teachers act as facilitators, motivators, and mentors to enhance students' learning enthusiasm. This supports the execution of more contextual and enjoyable learning. Meanwhile, Salma and Yuli (2023) emphasized the importance of a Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach, where teachers serve as mediators capable of accommodating cultural diversity in the classroom. Mulyono and Sulistyani (2022) reviewed that the Merdeka Curriculum provides flexibility to educational units to choose implementation pathways such as *Mandiri Belajar* (Independent Learning), *Mandiri Berubah* (Independent Changing), and *Mandiri Berbagi*

(Independent Sharing). These four studies reinforce the basis that educator-student communication is a crucial element in the success of the Merdeka Curriculum. This research will fill a gap by focusing on the dynamics of teacher-student communication within the context of a case study at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, aiming for an in-depth understanding of communication practices between educators and students in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo. This approach was chosen for its ability to gather contextual and comprehensive data regarding interaction dynamics, communication strategies, and the perceptions of educational stakeholders in curriculum implementation (Yin, 2018). The primary data sources for this research are informants consisting of teachers, students, and school management personnel. Informant selection was carried out using purposive sampling, ensuring representation from various perspectives relevant to the focus on Merdeka Curriculum-based learning communication (Creswell, 2019).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed for narrative exploration of communication experiences between teachers and students, as well as the challenges and successes encountered (Flick, 2018). Observations were made in classrooms and the school environment during learning activities. Documents reviewed included teaching materials, Merdeka Curriculum implementation guidelines, and internal school reports related to learning evaluation.

Data analysis was performed using a thematic approach following Miles and Huberman's model (1994), which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of techniques and data sources, as well as a member checking process by confirming initial findings with the informants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the depth and validity of the data, this research was conducted in stages over an adequate period. Technique triangulation was utilized by comparing the results from interviews, observations, and documents. Additionally, member checking ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected the reality experienced by the informants and were scientifically justifiable.

RESEARCH RESULT

Interpersonal Communication Theory in Merdeka Curriculum Implementation the Interpersonal Communication Theory proposed by DeVito (2022) provides a relevant framework for examining the communicative relationship between educators and students in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered, differentiated, and participatory learning. Therefore, the quality of interpersonal communication between teachers and students is a crucial foundation for the successful implementation of this curriculum. In this context, five indicators of interpersonal communication

theory can be used to identify the effectiveness of communication occurring in the classroom.

1. Message Clarity:

The success of Merdeka Curriculum implementation is largely determined by how well educators can convey learning material systematically, logically, and contextually. Teachers who understand the principles of this curriculum will be able to link material with students' needs and interests and deliver it in simple yet meaningful language. In practice at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo, message clarity reflects the teacher's ability to thoroughly explain learning projects, learning outcomes, and diagnostic assessment processes, so students not only understand "what" is being taught, but also "why" and "how" it applies in the real world.

2. Feedback:

This indicator shows that in a curriculum emphasizing independent learning, student responses are a critical measure of communication success. When teachers create space for discussion and reflection, and respond constructively to students' opinions, the learning process becomes more participatory. In the context of this study, teachers who actively respond to questions and allow space for students to explore ideas demonstrate that communication is bidirectional and interactive.

3. Empathy and Relational Warmth:

These are fundamental aspects in creating a psychologically safe classroom atmosphere. Teachers who show concern for students' feelings and conditions not only strengthen emotional bonds but also increase learning motivation. During classroom observations at SMK Krian 1, teachers who used a humanistic approach, such as greeting students by name, asking about their well-being, or listening to their concerns, demonstrated warm interpersonal communication that supports students' affective development.

4. Openness:

From the perspective of openness, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum demands an inclusive communication space. When students feel comfortable expressing opinions without fear of being wrong, the learning process becomes collaborative. Teachers who encourage students to ask questions, contribute ideas in class discussions, and accept diversity of thought demonstrate a high level of openness in communication.

5. Balanced Interaction:

This indicator reflects a paradigm shift from a teacher-centered learning model to a student-centered one. In the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers who provide fair opportunities for students to actively participate show a balance in interaction. At SMK Krian 1, it was found that teachers who implemented question-and-answer strategies, group projects, and individual reflection demonstrated communication that was no longer dominated by one party.

Based on the interpersonal communication theory and the findings from the case study at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo, it can be concluded that the communication between educators and students in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum shows increasingly open, empathetic, and interactive patterns. All indicators of DeVito's theory were identified in the learning practices, although further reinforcement is needed in the aspects of communication equality and feedback to ensure a truly dialogical learning process. Effective interpersonal communication is proven to be a determining factor in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational education.

DISCUSSION

This research refers to the Interpersonal Communication theory (DeVito, 2022), which emphasizes the importance of communication quality between educators and students in supporting the success of the learning process. In the context of Merdeka Curriculum implementation, effective communication is a key factor in creating participatory, contextual, and student-centered learning.

First, regarding message clarity, the findings indicate that educators at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo are able to deliver learning material systematically and contextually. Teachers not only explain the content of the material but also connect it to learning objectives and its relevance to students' needs and the demands of the professional world. This aligns with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes project-based learning and character building.

Second, feedback is an important indicator in building two-way communication in the classroom. Teachers provide ample opportunities for students to ask questions, discuss, and express opinions, both orally and through digital media. Teachers' responses to students' questions and ideas are constructive, encouraging exploration, and increasing student participation in the learning process. This signifies a dynamic interaction that strengthens students' position as active participants in learning.

Third, empathy and relational warmth are reflected in teachers' efforts to build personal and emotional connections with students. Teachers show care through a humanistic approach, such as listening to students' problems, creating a comfortable learning environment, and providing positive reinforcement. This approach is crucial for building students' sense of security and trust in a learning process that demands courage in expression and innovation.

Fourth, the openness indicator is evident in teaching practices that provide ample space for students to express ideas, ask questions, and even offer critiques. Teachers encourage egalitarian communication, which facilitates the emergence of creativity and critical thinking. However, variations in student participation are still observed, particularly among less confident students or those with a passive communication background.

Fifth, balanced interaction is an important characteristic of communication that supports the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers strive to shift communication patterns from one-way delivery towards dialogical interaction. Learning activities are designed to enable students to play an active role in class discussions, project reflections, and learning decision-making. Nevertheless, challenges persist when the balance of roles between teachers and students is not yet fully equitable across all subjects.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on DeVito's (2022) interpersonal communication theory and the field findings from the case study at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo, it can be concluded that communication between educators and students in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum shows a positive trend towards more open, empathetic, and participatory communication patterns. All indicators in the interpersonal communication theory—namely message clarity, feedback, empathy and relational warmth, openness, and communication equality—can be identified in the learning process, although their implementation varies among teachers and subjects.

Message clarity is evident in the teachers' ability to explain learning material contextually and applicably. Meanwhile, empathy, openness, and emotional connection between teachers and students have created a supportive learning climate. However, aspects of communication equality and the optimization of feedback still require strengthening to ensure that learning interactions are truly dialogical and reflective.

Overall, this research affirms that effective interpersonal communication is a key element in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in vocational education institutions. Therefore, enhancing teachers' communication capacity should be a strategic agenda in strengthening the quality of education during this era of curriculum transformation.

First, it is important for educators at SMK Krian 1 Sidoarjo to improve their interpersonal communication skills through continuous training, particularly in the aspects of feedback and communication equality. By fostering two-way interaction patterns, teachers can create a more inclusive dialogue space, encouraging students to feel valued and motivated to be active in the learning process.

Second, the school and educational policymakers need to provide collaborative and reflective forums for teachers, such as learning communities or regular discussions on communication practices in Merdeka Curriculum learning. This can facilitate the exchange of experiences, the development of communicative teaching strategies, and strengthen teachers' understanding of the curriculum's essence.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research is recommended to explore training programs aimed at enhancing teachers' interpersonal communication competence to foster more dialogical and reflective learning interactions within vocational education environments.

REFERENCES

- Ariga, F. (2023). Kurikulum Merdeka dalam menjawab tantangan Revolusi Industri 4.0. *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Inovasi Kurikulum*, 11(2), 134–145. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jpik.2023.112.134>.
- Creswell, J. W. (2019). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- DeVito, J. A. (2022). *The interpersonal communication book* (15th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Dianto, A., & Valentine, F. (2024). Komunikasi dalam manajemen pada implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka. *Dirasah: Jurnal Studi Ilmu dan Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 7(1), 164–173.
- Flick, U. (2018). *An introduction to qualitative research* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Maryanti, R., Sulasmi, E., & Kusnadi, D. (2012). Komunikasi efektif dalam pembelajaran. *Jurnal Pendidikan Profesional*, 3(1), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jpp.2012.031.045>.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Mulyono, R., & Sulistyani, F. (2022). Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka (IKM) sebagai sebuah pilihan bagi satuan pendidikan: Kajian pustaka. *Didaktik: Jurnal Ilmiah PGSD STKIP Subang*, 8(2), 1999–2019.
- Nopiani, N., Fitriani, S., & Yuliana, D. (2023). Peran komunikasi dalam pembelajaran berbasis proyek Kurikulum Merdeka. *Jurnal Pendidikan Vokasi*, 9(1), 56–68. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jpv.2023.091.056>.
- Permendikbud No. 81A Tahun 2013 tentang Implementasi Kurikulum. (2013). Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia. <https://jdih.kemdikbud.go.id>.
- Putri, W. N., Handayani, S., & Anggraini, R. (2020). Membangun komunikasi dua arah dalam pembelajaran: Pendekatan humanistik dan konstruktivistik. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*, 8(3), 211–225. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jip.2020.083.211>.
- Salamah, S., Muniroh, L., & Kurniasari, T. (2023). Transformasi kebijakan pendidikan dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. *Jurnal Kebijakan Pendidikan*, 12(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jkp.2023.121.001>.
- Salma, I. M., & Yuli, R. R. (2023). Membangun paradigma tentang makna guru pada pembelajaran culturally responsive teaching dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di era abad 21. *Jurnal Teknologi Pendidikan*, 1(1), 11–11.

- Widiyaningsih, P., & Narimo, S. (2023). Peran guru dalam memaksimalkan semangat belajar peserta didik pada implementasi program Kurikulum Merdeka di SMK Negeri 1 Boyolali. *JIIP-Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pendidikan*, 6(8), 6325–6332.
- Wijayanti, R., & Ekantini, R. (2023). Peran guru dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka: Tinjauan komunikasi interpersonal dan pendekatan humanistik. *Jurnal PendidikandanPraktikPembelajaran*, 7(2), 88–100. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jppp.2023.072.088>.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.