
Teaching English as a foreign language through *Merdeka* curriculum framework: The four C's (Critical thinking, Communication Collaboration, and Creativity)

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A B S T R A C T

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21st-century skills—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—commonly known as the Four C's, are essential for preparing students to thrive in modern educational and professional environments. This research was conducted in response to widespread confusion among teachers regarding the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in Indonesian high schools. The study aimed to analyze how the Four C's are incorporated into English language instruction under the Merdeka curriculum and to examine the extent to which these skills are integrated into the teaching modules.

A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing documentation, observation, and interviews as data collection techniques. The presence of the Four C's in teaching activities and instructional materials. Data analysis followed a three-stage process: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings offer insights into how the Four C's are embedded in classroom practices and curriculum resources, and highlight challenges and opportunities for effective implementation.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a “pressing international concern”, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) has recognized the development of 21st-century skills (Four C's skills) competencies among youth. The advent of plethora of new demands in the 21st-century requires students to possess Four C's skills. From initiatives that prioritize the preservation of the economy and the preparation for the world of work and future employment, to those that prioritize the conservation of the planet and its resources and a dedication to a sustainable economy, there is a wide range of initiatives(Fallah Shayan et al., 2022)

The characteristics of the 21st-century necessitate that students acquire new set skills in order to navigate a constantly changing and intricate future(Erdem et al., 2019). The teacher plays a critical role in the development of learning aids in this case. To guarantee the curriculum's proper and efficient implementation and the resultant enhancement of learning quality, the teacher must be proficient in program planning and development, learning execution, learning evaluation, and the curriculum itself (Nursyamsi, 2018)

Particularly in the context of Merdeka curriculum, teachers must cultivate proficiency in the methods of teaching and learning. The Merdeka curriculum lesson planning was incorporated in to Teaching Module(Rahimah, 2022). To comprehend educational learning principles and learning theory, teachers are motivated by their understanding of learning theory and curriculum(Ifrianti, 2018). The Teaching module offers a collection of instructional

strategies that are intended to facilitate a structure learning process and accomplish specific objectives. In addition to assessments that evaluate the completion of learning objectives and student activity forms, the Teaching module offers more comprehensive guidance(Mukhlishina et al., 2023). Specific characteristics of the class and the needs of the students are the factors that influence the development and formulation of Teaching module.

Cognitive skills are improved by teachers to foster innovation. An insufficiently planned Teaching module may result in a lack of systematic knowledge delivery to students, which could result in imbalance in learning activities between teachers and students(Maulida, 2022). It is imperative that teachers are acquainted with the methodology for creating Teaching module, which prioritize the acquisition of the Four C's skills to be included in the Teaching module. Additionally, the learning activities that are incorporated into the Teaching module should be consistent with the principles of the assessment and learning.

Previous research has indicated that a substantial number of teachers remain perplexed by the Merdeka curriculum and face challenges in developing effective instructional materials(Firmansyah, 2023). These findings support the assertion that the Merdeka curriculum has significantly altered multiple aspects of the previous K-13 curriculum. As a result, many teachers still have an incomplete understanding of how to prepare the Teaching module, especially in English subjects. Specific difficulties include formulating English learning objectives, identifying and organizing Teaching module components, and designing appropriate assessments for English instruction(Susanti et al., 2023). These challenges may lead to the underrepresentation or neglect of 21st-century competencies—particularly the Four C's—in both administrative planning and classroom implementation.

In preliminary research conducted by the current researchers at SMA N 1 Seputih Banyak, teacher collaboration was utilized in the development of English Teaching module. XI-grade English teachers engaged in discussions about the Teaching module to be implemented. Although they used the same Teaching module, the classroom activities differed from one teacher to another. One teacher, for instance, noted that the provided Teaching module did not explicitly include components of the Four C's skills. While some teachers attempted to integrate these skills during classroom instruction, others used the Teaching module merely for administrative compliance, relying on their own strategies to facilitate learning activities.

The Four C's—Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity—are increasingly regarded as essential soft skills in today's global and digital era. Integrating these competencies can strengthen students' cognitive and problem-solving skills, improve decision-making through critical thinking, and enhance their capacity for innovation and teamwork. These skills are now recognized as core elements of 21st-century learning, aligned with literacy, expertise, and digital fluency. Therefore, the integration of the Four C's into English language instruction under the Merdeka curriculum is not only desirable but necessary for equipping students with future-ready skills.

However, a significant research gap remains. While previous studies have discussed general challenges with the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum or focused on the K-13 curriculum(Gea, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2024; Tomasouw et al., 2024), few have examined how the Four C's are incorporated specifically in the Teaching module and in classroom practices within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. There is limited empirical evidence on how these essential skills are embedded in both the written curriculum and actual teaching practice under the Merdeka framework.

To address this gap, this study investigates the integration of the Four C's—Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity—within the English Teaching module and teaching-learning processes under the Merdeka curriculum. The primary objective is to examine how these skills are incorporated into both the written lesson plans (Teaching module) and the enacted classroom practices in EFL contexts. This study focuses on the core learning activities, including writing and presenting, to explore the depth and consistency of Four C's integration in line with the goals of the Merdeka curriculum.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative study design to investigate how the Four C's—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—are integrated into English language teaching within the framework of the Merdeka curriculum. As defined by Yin (2014), it is suitable for exploring a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are blurred. The qualitative nature of the study allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of instructional practices and teaching materials in a natural classroom setting.

The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Seputih Banyak in Central Lampung, a school that has implemented the Merdeka curriculum for four consecutive years—significantly earlier than most other schools in the region, which only began applying the curriculum in the 2023/2024 academic year. This early adoption made the school an ideal case for examining the integration of 21st-century skills in classroom practice. One English teacher from Grade XI was purposively selected as the subject of the study, based on criteria including their active role in developing Teaching module and participation in professional development workshops related to the Merdeka curriculum. In addition, three classes (XI.1, XI.2, and XI.3) were observed to understand how the Four C's were implemented during instruction. Grade XI was chosen because it represents a transitional phase in students' academic journey—less burdened by final exams than Grade XII, and more stable than Grade X, which is still adjusting to the new curriculum environment.

Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and documentation analysis, following Creswell's (2014) qualitative research framework. Interviews explored the teacher's perceptions, strategies, and experiences; observations captured classroom practices; and documents, specifically the Teaching module, were examined to identify the presence of the Four C's. These three sources provided a triangulated data set that enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted using followed the interactive model proposed by (Miles & Huberman, 1994) consisted of three stages: (1) data condensation, in which the raw data were selected and focused based on relevance to the research objectives; (2) data display, where key information was organized into visual and narrative forms; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, where emerging patterns were interpreted and validated across data sources. This approach enabled the researcher to identify how the Four C's were embedded in classroom practices and curriculum materials, as well as the challenges and successes experienced by the teacher in implementing them.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Implementation of Four C's Skills into *Teaching module*

The data obtained from the documentation of the Teaching module at SMA N 1 Seputih Banyak, developed by the teachers, suggests that several key components were missing from the module. These components include learning elements rooted in Pancasila values, the targets and phases that must be achieved, the learning outcomes (CP), and the learning objective flow (ATP). These are the primary components that should be incorporated into the Ajar Module to distinguish it from the previous curriculum (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024). The teacher did not include the Learning Objective Flow (ATP) or learning based on Pancasila ideals in the Ajar Module. Despite these principles being fundamental to the Merdeka curriculum's learning design, the module remained aligned with the lesson plan from the K-13 curriculum.

As noted in the interview with the teacher, "*We were focused on following the K-13 curriculum because we had little training on Merdeka. It's hard to implement the full scope of the Merdeka curriculum when we are not fully familiar with its framework.*" This reflects the challenges teachers face when attempting to integrate new curriculum elements without sufficient guidance or training.

This research focused on the core section of learning, examining the extent to which the 4C skills were incorporated into the Teaching module's core activity section. In this section, the teacher effectively implemented critical thinking skills through writing. The teacher developed a task in which students were required to identify three videos of live report material and present the results of their group discussions. This allowed students to evaluate the facts in the videos, analyze the problems, draw conclusions from their findings, and then present their ideas in class.

The Teaching module also met two criteria for communication skills. The teacher, who is responsible for instructing students on presenting and communicating the results of their discussions, facilitated effective verbal communication. Students were able to communicate their ideas clearly with a specific objective—informing their peers about the results of their group discussions. However, the teacher did not design activities that required students to pay attention to their peers' viewpoints. There was also no feedback activity created following the presentations. As the teacher mentioned in the interview, "*We focused more on the presentation aspect and didn't think much about peer feedback. We wanted to get the content across clearly.*"

Regarding collaboration skills, only one indicator was fulfilled. A group discussion activity was incorporated to promote effective collaboration among students. However, the teacher did not develop activities that involved mutual feedback between teams, which limited the full utilization of collaboration skills in the Teaching module. The interview further revealed that, "*I believe collaboration is important, but we didn't emphasize feedback between groups because we were more concerned with covering the material on time.*" This shows a gap in leveraging collaborative skills effectively in the module.

Finally, the creative skills indicators were not fulfilled in the Teaching module. The teacher neglected to include activities that encouraged student creativity. All activities were centered on discussions and presentations, without fostering creativity by encouraging the development of new ideas or broadening students' understanding of concepts.

3.1.2. Implementation of Four C's Skills into Teaching and Learning of English Lesson

The proportion between the Teaching module and direct activities in the classroom was assessed by re-observing classroom teaching and learning activities following the review of the Teaching module document analysis. As part of the classroom observation, critical thinking skills were extensively applied, while numerous indicators remain unfulfilled. Engaging in analysis, evaluation, and further argumentation are the objectives of the activity that cultivates critical thinking skills(Rima et al., 2024). The teacher has been successful in encouraging students to engage in activities that involve the analysis, evaluation, and further argumentation of a topic under discussion.

At the first meeting, students in class XI.2 demonstrated a high level of engagement in the analysis, evaluation, and further argumentation of the live report video that was presented to them. In addition, they were actively involved in the decision-making process, utilizing writing to draw conclusions and establishing a connection between the information and arguments they had gathered. The teacher also successfully integrated critical thinking skills into classes XI.1 and XI.3, but the students in these classes were less engaged in decision-making and judgment. As a result, the teacher made a concerted effort to motivate students to articulate arguments based on their analysis. The teacher explained,

"During the lessons, I try to create opportunities for students to analyze and evaluate information critically. For example, when showing the live report video, I ask them to break it down and evaluate the arguments, then present their conclusions based on their analysis. In class XI.2, I saw a high level of engagement—students were really involved in the discussions and used the video to support their arguments. However, in classes XI.1 and XI.3, I had to work harder to get them to engage in the decision-making process and develop stronger arguments based on their analysis. I encouraged them to make more explicit connections between the evidence and their conclusions, which I believe helped them think more critically."

The teacher was also quite proficient in integrating critical thinking skills into classes XI.1, XI.2, and XI.3 during the second meeting. This was accomplished by engaging students in group presentation activities and collaborative discussions regarding the numerous inquiries raised during the three live report videos presented at the previous meeting. Students actively engaged in the presentations and open discussions, using the results from other groups to analyze, evaluate, and draw conclusions. Conversely, the presentation was the primary focus of this meeting, which led to a lack of emphasis on the direct experience essential for engaging with the discussion topic. Overall, the teacher was highly effective in fostering the development of critical thinking skills in her students.

There are numerous methods for improving communication skills. These include engaging in activities that require the expression of ideas orally, in writing, or nonverbally, listening effectively to interpret messages or knowledge, engaging in multilingual, collaborative work, and utilizing a diverse array of media to enhance communication skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). At the first meeting, each indicator was accomplished. The teacher devised activities to promote communication by encouraging students to express their ideas in written or oral form, or by viewing videos of live reports to acquire knowledge, values, and meaning. Through the utilization of technology, particularly YouTube media, this was accomplished. Additionally, the teacher implemented multilingual learning environments to facilitate the attainment of language objectives through communication skills activities.

During the second meeting, communication skills were also satisfied. At this meeting, the focus was on the oral presentation of ideas, as students presented the results of their

discussions in groups without the use of technology or media. Afterward, they participated in a dialogue with other groups to ascertain whether the results from the presenting group were diverse. This also improved the individuals' ability to communicate with their colleagues in a respectful and effective manner. The teacher mentioned,

"In terms of communication, I find that encouraging students to express their ideas both verbally and in writing helps them internalize the material better. In class XI.2, they were particularly good at presenting their findings and engaging in a discussion afterward. It was great to see them use their ideas to interact with other groups and develop their communication skills further."

Collaboration incorporates the capacity to achieve objectives from a diverse range of perspectives, in addition to the ability to work in groups. To establish group learning, the primary objective of improving collaboration skills is required. Through the establishment of groups, each member is obligated to exhibit the capacity to establish or engage in interpersonal relationships, accomplish group objectives, and resolve issues(Herlinawati et al., 2024; Thaanyane & Jita, 2024). At the first meeting, the teacher implemented collaboration skills in classes XI.1, XI.2, and XI.3. The assignment involved the analysis of three live report videos that the students had previously viewed to address the questions posed by their teacher and provide written explanations. The students then participated in a collaborative discussion to express their opinions on the video. The results of this discussion were documented in writing and presented to the class. The teacher explained,

"Collaboration was a key aspect of our lessons. I wanted students to not only analyze the videos but also collaborate in groups to discuss their ideas. It's important for them to work together and learn from each other. In classes XI.2 and XI.3, the groups had productive discussions, and the result was a deeper understanding of the videos and a chance to present their ideas to their classmates."

The teacher also encouraged students to present the results of their discussions in groups in front of the class during the second meeting of classes XI.1, XI.2, and XI.3. The portion that had been previously allocated to the groups was elaborated upon by each member. Then, each member participated in the discussion process if there were objections, comments, or discrepancies in the results from other groups.

Creativity skills are in high demand due to the current dominance of service industries that necessitate individuals to generate original concepts through their creativity. Brainstorming, elaboration, refinement, analysis, and evaluation of ideas within the context of creative endeavors are among the numerous activities that can improve creativity skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). Furthermore, it is expected that students will be able to produce original content. The first meeting yielded the indicator of ideation. The teacher conducted brainstorming sessions exclusively at the outset of the learning process to improve creativity skills through learning. Brainstorming was initiated by the teacher, who posed intriguing queries about the subject matter. Students were tasked with organizing their thoughts.

However, the other indicator activities were not accomplished. The teacher did not maximize the development of students' creativity skills. Subsequently, the indicator that was achieved during the second meeting was focused exclusively on the activity of elaborating, refining, analyzing, and evaluating their ideas to enhance and optimize their creative endeavors. This activity was completed by conducting supplementary analysis, describing, and evaluating the results of group presentations in turn. However, the teacher was unable to achieve the other corroborating indicators. While students are expected to possess creative abilities to generate

original ideas, the teacher did not recognize this, resulting in the teacher's lack of proficiency in incorporating creativity skills into the teaching and learning process. The teacher acknowledged,

"While I encourage brainstorming at the start, I realized that I didn't push the students far enough to develop original content. In the second meeting, I had them elaborate on their ideas and refine them, but I did not encourage them enough to produce completely creative, original content. I will need to improve in fostering more creativity among students in the future."

3.2. Discussion

This study investigated the integration of the Four C's skills—Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity—into both the *Teaching module* and the actual teaching and learning process of English lessons. The findings reveal that while critical thinking, communication, and collaboration were relatively well-incorporated, creativity was the least addressed skill in both the module and classroom implementation.

Critical Thinking appeared to be meaningfully embedded in the *Teaching module* through activities that encouraged learners to identify elements in a live report, analyze content, and formulate their arguments. These activities reflect higher-order thinking and align with the curriculum's aim to cultivate analytical skills among students. In classroom practice, the teacher facilitated critical thinking by prompting students to engage with video content through questioning, analysis, and reflection. These efforts are consistent with (Gopalan & Hashim, 2021), who emphasizes that critical thinking is a foundational competence that must be fostered from an early age to equip students for future challenges.

Communication skills were evident in the emphasis on speaking and presenting. The *Teaching module* guided students to communicate ideas through discussions and oral presentations, although it did not explicitly target non-verbal communication or reflective listening. In practice, students demonstrated communicative abilities by expressing opinions, responding to questions, and participating in peer exchanges. These experiences reflect the significance of communication in education particularly in promoting personal development and collaborative learning(Cojorn & Sonsupap, 2024).

Collaboration was also integrated through group activities requiring teamwork, discussion, and shared decision-making. The module encouraged students to collaborate in identifying report components and delivering joint presentations. This was mirrored in classroom practice where students worked together to construct meaning, solve tasks, and respect differing viewpoints. As noted by (Butcher & Gilchrist, 2020) such collaborative engagements are crucial for developing interpersonal skills and addressing complex problems through collective intelligence.

In contrast, Creativity was the least developed skill. The *Teaching module* did not include tasks that required students to create novel or original content. Although brainstorming was briefly introduced during the ideation phase, it was not followed by activities that allowed for imaginative exploration or innovative outputs. Classroom practice also lacked opportunities for students to express themselves creatively. This gap is significant, given that creativity fosters internal capacities like innovation, strategic thinking, and problem-solving, which are essential in 21st-century education(Chidiac & Ajaka, 2018)

Overall, the incorporation of the Four C's in both the *Teaching module* and classroom practice showed strength in three domains—critical thinking, communication, and collaboration—while falling short in creativity. Moreover, the *Teaching module* lacked several

essential instructional components such as media, assessment tools, remedial strategies, and enrichment programs. Future development of modules and teaching approaches should aim for a more balanced integration of all Four C's skills, especially by embedding structured opportunities for creative expression and innovation.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this research highlights that the incorporation of Four C's skills—Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity—into English learning activities in the classroom was relatively effective, particularly from the teacher's perspective. Throughout the observed teaching and learning process, the teacher consistently prioritized the development of critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. This was reflected through activities involving material analysis, evaluation, decision-making, drawing conclusions, articulating ideas both orally and in writing, group discussions, and class presentations. These practices were integrated into all classes, although class XI.2 stood out for its dynamic atmosphere, likely due to the students' greater motivation and enthusiasm.

However, the incorporation of creativity skills was notably lacking. The teacher did not design or facilitate activities that could enhance students' imaginative and innovative thinking, which are essential components of 21st-century competencies. As a result, the development of this skill remains underrepresented in current English language acquisition practices.

To optimize the integration of all Four C's, especially creativity, English teachers are encouraged to access resources available through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's official website. These resources provide guidance on 21st-century learning, characteristics of effective 21st-century teachers, and applicable learning models that emphasize the Four C's. Additionally, teachers can consult the Ministerial Decree No. 56/M/2022 to better understand how to align instructional systems and tools with the Merdeka Curriculum.

At the institutional level, school principals play a vital role in supporting this effort. They are recommended to organize workshops that focus on the optimal integration of Four C's skills into classroom practices. Furthermore, regular coordination meetings with teachers should be conducted to refine instructional strategies and ensure the development of essential future-ready skills among students.

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