

**ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT
IMPLEMENTATION UNDER THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM
AT SMK NEGERI 3 LAAHAT**

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia emphasises flexible, student-centred, and differentiated learning, where diagnostic assessment plays a key role in identifying students' readiness and learning needs. In English Language Teaching (ELT), this is particularly important due to variations in students' language proficiency and backgrounds. This study aims to examine English teachers' perceptions of the purpose, role, and challenges of implementing diagnostic assessment at SMK Negeri 3 Lahat. A mixed-methods approach with a convergent design was employed, involving five English teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers generally hold positive perceptions of diagnostic assessment and recognise its importance in supporting differentiated learning and identifying students' starting points. However, several challenges were identified, including limited time, insufficient training, lack of clear guidelines, and inconsistent implementation. These findings suggest that while diagnostic assessment is well-aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, its effective implementation requires stronger institutional support, clearer guidelines, and continuous professional development for teachers.

Keywords: Diagnostic assessment, English teachers' perceptions, Merdeka Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Recent global curriculum reforms have increasingly emphasized flexible, student-centered, and differentiated learning to address diverse student needs. Within this paradigm, diagnostic assessment is widely recognized as a crucial tool for identifying students' prior knowledge, readiness, and learning profiles. It enables teachers to

design targeted instruction and personalize learning pathways. Previous studies have demonstrated that diagnostic assessment provides insights not only into what students know and do not know but also into how they learn, thereby supporting more effective and inclusive teaching practices (Briggs et al., 2006; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).



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In the Indonesian context, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* reflects this global shift toward adaptive and differentiated learning. Diagnostic assessment is positioned as a key component to support these goals, as it allows teachers to identify both cognitive aspects (e.g., prior knowledge and academic skills) and non-cognitive aspects (e.g., motivation and emotional readiness). Empirical evidence suggests that diagnostic assessment can assist teachers in designing more responsive and needs-based instruction (Rahmawati & Mariani, 2023). However, despite its strong emphasis in policy, its implementation in classroom practice remains inconsistent.

The importance of diagnostic assessment becomes even more pronounced in English Language Teaching (ELT), where students often demonstrate considerable variation in language exposure, proficiency levels, and learning strategies. Diagnostic assessment can help identify learners' strengths and weaknesses across language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as reveal misconceptions and affective factors influencing learning. Research in applied linguistics indicates that such assessments support more informed instructional decisions and facilitate differentiated language learning (Harding et al., 2015).

Despite its recognized importance, diagnostic assessment is not yet optimally implemented in practice. Studies indicate that teachers still face challenges such as limited time, insufficient training, lack of clear guidelines, and limited use of technology-based diagnostic tools (Fitria et al., 2025). In addition, research from other subject areas suggests that assessment practices are often not used diagnostically; for example, teachers tend to rely on general formative tasks rather than structured diagnostic approaches, which limits the effectiveness of

assessment in supporting differentiated learning (Briggs et al., 2021). Furthermore, research in English education remains limited, particularly in exploring diagnostic assessment within specific contexts such as vocational schools (Zhang & Teng, 2016; Wardhani, 2023).

More importantly, previous studies have largely focused on the effectiveness or general implementation of diagnostic assessment, with limited attention to teachers' perceptions, especially using comprehensive approaches that combine multiple data sources. This gap is significant because teachers play a central role in interpreting and enacting assessment policies in the classroom. Without understanding their perceptions, challenges, and practices, it is difficult to ensure the effective implementation of diagnostic assessment in supporting adaptive, equitable, and student-centered learning.

Given these gaps, there is a clear need for context-specific research that examines how English teachers perceive and implement diagnostic assessment within the *Merdeka Curriculum*, particularly in vocational school settings. Therefore, this study aims to investigate English teachers' perceptions of diagnostic assessment at SMK Negeri 3 Lahat.

The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What are English teachers' perceptions of the purpose and roles of diagnostic assessment in the *Merdeka Curriculum*? (2) What challenges do English teachers face in implementing diagnostic assessment?

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improvement of classroom practices, support teacher professional development, and provide policy recommendations to enhance the effective implementation of diagnostic assessment in English language teaching.



METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a convergent design. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then integrated during the interpretation stage to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The integration process was conducted by comparing and relating the quantitative results (e.g., teachers' perceptions measured through questionnaires) with qualitative findings (e.g., teachers' experiences and explanations from interviews and observations). This approach allows for triangulation and helps to explain not only the extent of teachers' perceptions but also the underlying reasons behind their practices and challenges in implementing diagnostic assessment at SMK Negeri 3 Lahat. The participants consisted of five English teachers at SMK Negeri 3 Lahat, selected through purposive sampling, a technique used to identify and select information-rich cases relevant to the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). The selection criteria included teachers who were actively teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum and had experience in administering diagnostic assessments prior to instruction. From these participants, two teachers were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews to further explore their experiences, beliefs, and pedagogical reasoning regarding diagnostic assessment practices. This selection aligns with qualitative research standards that emphasize depth and richness of data in smaller samples (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018).

The study involved five English teachers who were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria to ensure their relevance to the research context. The participants were chosen because they were actively teaching under the *Merdeka Curriculum*

and had prior experience in administering diagnostic assessments in their classrooms. This selection was intended to ensure that the participants represented information-rich cases capable of providing meaningful insights into the implementation of diagnostic assessment in a vocational school setting, particularly at SMK Negeri 3 Lahat (Patton, 2015). Quantitative data were collected using Likert-scale questionnaires designed to examine teachers' general perceptions, the frequency of diagnostic assessment practices, and the challenges encountered during implementation. The Likert scale is widely used in educational research to measure attitudes, perceptions, and opinions (Likert, 1932). The collected quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, percentages, and frequency distributions, following standard procedures in educational research (Creswell, 2012).

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, classroom-related documents, and observations to provide deeper insights into teachers' experiences and practices. These data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves generating initial codes, identifying patterns, and developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, particularly regarding the challenges and practical implementation of diagnostic assessment in English language learning. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed, including data triangulation, participant verification (member checking), and maintaining an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These procedures ensure the credibility, consistency, and transparency of the qualitative analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative findings indicate that



English teachers generally hold positive perceptions of diagnostic assessment. As shown in Table 1, most questionnaire items obtained mean scores above 4.00,

suggesting strong agreement regarding the usefulness and relevance of diagnostic assessment in instructional practices.

Table 1. Summary of Teachers' Responses on Diagnostic Assessment (N = 5)

Indicator	Mean (M)	Interpretation
Usefulness of diagnostic assessment	4.60	Strongly Agree
Identification of student needs	4.80	Strongly Agree
Support for differentiated learning	4.40	Agree–Strongly Agree
Clarity of implementation	5.00	Strongly Agree
Implementation consistency	3.20	Moderate Agreement

The highest mean score (M = 5.00) indicates unanimous agreement among teachers regarding the clarity and usefulness of specific diagnostic assessment practices. Conversely, the lowest mean score (M = 3.20), although still within a positive range, suggests concerns related to implementation consistency, resource availability, and teacher readiness.

Further analysis of response distributions shows that between 60% and 80% of participants selected “strongly agree” for several items, reinforcing the overall positive perception. However, some items revealed variability. For example, one item showed a polarized distribution, with 60% of respondents selecting “disagree” and 40% selecting “strongly agree,” indicating differing experiences or challenges among teachers. In another case, responses were distributed as 60% “agree,” 20% “neutral,” and 20% “strongly agree,” reflecting moderate but consistent agreement.

To support transparency and reproducibility, quantitative data were processed using R statistical software. The process involved data cleaning, type conversion, and structured data validation to ensure accuracy and consistency. This approach enhanced analytical efficiency and reduced potential errors, contributing to the reliability of the findings.

Qualitative data from interviews,

observations, and documents were used to triangulate and enrich the quantitative results. Overall, the qualitative findings confirm that teachers perceive diagnostic assessment as essential for identifying students' starting points, prior knowledge, and learning needs. Teachers emphasized that this practice aligns with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in supporting differentiated instruction.

One teacher stated: “Diagnostic assessment gives me an idea of the starting point of students before I plan a lesson. It provides a clearer representation of what they need.”

Another participant highlighted its role in improving instructional effectiveness by avoiding unfocused teaching. However, despite these positive perceptions, several challenges were identified. These include limited instructional time, insufficient training, lack of clear guidelines, and inconsistencies in implementation across classrooms.

As one teacher explained: “I get the point, but it can be tough to apply universally, because you have such disparate students in class.”

Teachers also expressed a need for more structured professional support, including clearer guidelines, practical training, and technology-based tools to improve efficiency in administering and analyzing diagnostic assessments. One



participant noted: “There would be much easier things for us to do if there were more structured training or sample assessment tools.”

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings indicates that while teachers hold favorable attitudes toward diagnostic assessment and recognize its benefits, its implementation remains constrained by practical and institutional challenges. These results suggest that stronger support systems are needed to ensure more consistent and effective use of diagnostic assessment in English language teaching.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that English teachers hold generally positive perceptions of diagnostic assessment within the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Rather than merely confirming prior studies, these results suggest that such positive perceptions are likely influenced by the alignment between diagnostic assessment practices and the core principles of the curriculum, particularly its emphasis on differentiated and student-centered learning. As highlighted in previous literature, teachers are more likely to value assessment approaches that directly support instructional decision-making and classroom effectiveness (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013; Briggs et al., 2006). In this study, teachers perceived diagnostic assessment as a practical tool that helps them identify students’ starting points and design more targeted instruction, which explains the consistently high mean scores.

The qualitative findings further explain *why* teachers view diagnostic assessment positively. Teachers reported that diagnostic assessment reduces uncertainty in lesson planning and prevents “teaching without direction.” This suggests that diagnostic assessment functions not only as an evaluative tool but also as a planning mechanism that enhances teacher confidence and instructional clarity. This

supports the argument by Rahmawati and Mariani (2023) that diagnostic assessment facilitates more adaptive and needs-based teaching by providing concrete information about students’ readiness and learning profiles.

However, the variation in responses across certain items indicates that positive perceptions do not necessarily translate into consistent practice. Differences in responses, including polarized ratings on some items, can be explained by variations in teacher readiness, experience, and contextual constraints. Teachers who reported challenges may lack sufficient training or practical experience in implementing diagnostic assessment, particularly in digital formats. This finding is consistent with Fitria et al. (2025), who highlight that limited professional development restricts teachers’ ability to effectively apply diagnostic assessment in practice.

In addition, structural constraints such as limited instructional time and unclear procedural guidelines appear to significantly influence implementation. These factors help explain why, despite recognizing its importance, teachers may not consistently apply diagnostic assessment in their classrooms. This reflects a broader issue identified by Briggs et al. (2021), where teachers tend to rely on more familiar formative assessment practices when faced with workload pressures and limited institutional support. In this context, diagnostic assessment may be perceived as valuable but impractical without adequate systemic support.

These findings suggest that the gap between positive perception and inconsistent implementation is primarily driven by external and contextual factors rather than resistance from teachers themselves. In other words, teachers are conceptually ready to adopt diagnostic assessment, but practical limitations hinder its effective use. This highlights the importance of strengthening assessment



literacy, providing clearer guidelines, and offering sustained professional development opportunities.

Therefore, while diagnostic assessment is well-received and conceptually aligned with the *Merdeka Curriculum*, its successful implementation depends on institutional support systems. Enhancing teacher capacity, improving access to practical tools (including digital resources), and clarifying implementation procedures are essential to ensure that diagnostic assessment can be applied consistently and effectively in English language teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that English teachers generally hold positive perceptions of diagnostic assessment within the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate strong agreement on its importance in identifying students' starting points, supporting differentiated instruction, and enhancing overall learning effectiveness. These results suggest that teachers conceptually understand and value the role of diagnostic assessment in student-centered learning environments.

However, the findings also reveal a gap between teachers' positive perceptions and the consistent implementation of diagnostic assessment in practice. This gap can be explained by several contextual constraints, including limited instructional time, insufficient professional training, lack of clear procedural guidelines, and limited access to practical and technology-based assessment tools. These challenges indicate that the issue is not teachers' resistance, but rather the lack of systemic support required for effective implementation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of research on assessment in curriculum reform by highlighting the critical role of teacher perception as a mediating factor between policy and classroom practice. It reinforces the view that successful

implementation of diagnostic assessment depends not only on its conceptual alignment with student-centered learning but also on teachers' capacity to operationalize it effectively.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest several important implications. First, there is a need for structured and continuous professional development programs focusing on diagnostic assessment design, interpretation, and application. Second, clearer guidelines and practical examples should be provided to help teachers translate policy into classroom practice. Third, the integration of technology-based diagnostic tools should be promoted to improve efficiency and consistency. Finally, schools and policymakers should ensure adequate institutional support to reduce implementation barriers and enhance teacher readiness.

In conclusion, while diagnostic assessment is positively received and aligned with the principles of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, its effective implementation requires systematic support, including capacity building, resource provision, and clear policy guidance. Strengthening these aspects will be essential to ensure that diagnostic assessment can fully contribute to adaptive, equitable, and student-centered English language learning.

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