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Enacting Student-Centered Learning under Kurikulum Merdeka: Interactional Challenges in a Secondary EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Kurikulum Merdeka pushes Indonesian secondary schools toward Student-Centered Learning (SCL), but classroom-level enactment does not always follow the policy script. This study examines that gap through a two-stage qualitative design: an exploratory observation-checklist mapping across eleven secondary schools in Batam, followed by an intensive case study of one classroom selected because it showed the sharpest contrast between strong lesson-plan compliance and weak student participation. Over a six-week period, data were generated through non-participant classroom observations, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with one EFL teacher and six students grouped into high-, moderate-, and low-motivation tiers, then analyzed using Bogdan and Biklen's code-families framework. The findings show that the teacher's lesson plan was rated highly compliant with SCL and Kurikulum Merdeka expectations, yet open-ended classroom tasks routinely broke down into extended silence. Foreign language anxiety_tied to limited vocabulary, fear of peer judgment, and unfamiliarity with unscripted speaking, pushed students toward strategic silence, which the teacher managed by reverting to first-language (L1) mediation and more teacher-led questioning. These patterns should be read as evidence from one critical case rather than a general trend across Indonesian classrooms: they show that a lesson plan's alignment with SCL principles does not by itself guarantee student participation. Supporting learners through this gap is likely to depend on gradual vocabulary preparation, affective safety, and structured scaffolding, rather than treating teacher-led support as a pedagogical failure.

Keywords: Student-centered learning; L2 learner autonomy; Foreign language anxiety; *Kurikulum Merdeka*

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INTRODUCTION

The landscape of global English language teaching (ELT) has undergone a major paradigm shift, transitioning from transmission-oriented instructional formats toward dialogic, learner-centered practices (Alblooshi, 2017) . In contemporary educational ecologies, second language (L2) acquisition is no longer conceptualized as the passive accumulation of structural tokens or rote memorization of grammatical rules. Instead, contemporary Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory posits that linguistic competence emerges through meaningful participation, collaborative negotiation of meaning, and autonomous interaction within communicative spaces (Ritchie & Bhatia,

2026) . Consequently, educational jurisdictions worldwide have increasingly initiated top-down curricular reforms designed to mandate student-centered learning (SCL) as the default pedagogical framework for language education.

Within this paradigm, Student-Centered Learning (SCL) represents a foundational constructivist epistemological shift wherein the learner occupies the absolute epistemic center of the pedagogical ecosystem, actively constructing meaning through dialogic interaction rather than functioning as a passive recipient of transmitted information (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; Tang, 2023) . The operational enactment of SCL is fundamentally inseparable from the micro-dynamics of classroom interaction, involving the turn-by-turn discursive architecture, operational shifts, and conversational management deployed by participants within an institutional learning setting (Seedhouse, 2009; Tang, 2023) . Core standards of learner-centered practice, this interactive architecture operationalizes five structural shifts in classroom practice: the balance of power, the function of content, the role of the teacher, the responsibility for learning, and the purpose and processes of evaluation (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; Tang, 2023). In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, these integrated interactive standards dictate that successful SCL implementation demands the continuous presence of authentic communicative tasks where linguistic input is transformed into expressive oral performance through social mediation and fluid conversational turn-taking (Richard, 2001; Richards, 2006)

In Indonesia, this macro-pedagogical shift has been institutionalized through the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka (the Independent Curriculum). This curricular reform explicitly mandates a move away from teacher-dominated lecturing toward a flexible, contextualized framework that prioritizes learner agency, collaborative problem-solving, and communicative interaction (Agustina et al., 2022). Within the parameters of this national policy—specifically the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Decree (Kepmendikbudristek) No. 262/M/2022 regarding guidelines for curriculum implementation—SCL is positioned as an administrative and philosophical imperative. SCL redistributes classroom power dynamics by transforming the student into an active, autonomous agent of knowledge construction, while the teacher is repositioned as a facilitative mediator of the interactional architecture (Lengkanawati, 2017) . Under this framework, EFL learning is operationalized through standardized Capaian Pembelajaran (CP / Learning Outcomes) that explicitly collapse traditional discrete linguistic skills into three integrated interactive strands: Listening and Speaking (Menyimak - Berbicara), Reading and Viewing (Membaca - Memirsa), and Writing and Presenting (Menulis - Memresentasikan).

Consequently, successful SCL enactment is deeply intertwined with learner autonomy, which denotes a student's internal capacity to take active, deliberate charge of their own linguistic development and exercise independent agency within communicative tasks (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2011). Benson (2011) structurally categorizes learner autonomy into three interdependent dimensions: Technical Autonomy (control over learning management), Psychological Autonomy (control over cognitive processes), and Political Autonomy (control over learning content and context). However, when these theoretical classifications are applied within outer-circle Asian EFL contexts, the execution of learner autonomy frequently encounters a severe "autonomy paradox" (Kirkpatrick, 2010) (Littlewood, 2007). This socio-pedagogical tension occurs when top-down administrative mandates for student independence—such as those institutionalized by Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka—abruptly collide with deeply socialized educational cultures characterized by hierarchical teacher-dependence, systemic evaluation apprehension, and collective face-saving habits (Lengkanawati, 2017)

This paradox is heavily mediated by Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), conceptualized as a distinct, situation-specific psychological construct consisting of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors uniquely related to classroom language learning arising from the inherent complexities of the language acquisition process (Horwitz et al., 1986) . Grounded originally in Krashen (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, an elevated emotional filter acts as a psychological barrier that disrupts cognitive processing, preventing comprehensible input from reaching the language acquisition device and blocking learners from translating receptive competence into expressive oral performance (MacIntyre et al., 2001; Yashima et al., 2018). The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) establishes that classroom-situated anxiety is comprised of three interrelated performance-related components: Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, and Fear of Negative Evaluation. In student-centered learning environments, where traditional teacher-led lecturing is replaced by highly visible, autonomous peer interactions, students are stripped of their protective anonymity, and those experiencing high levels of FLA often deploy defensive avoidance mechanisms, such as strategic withdrawal or total conversational passivity, to protect their social "face" from perceived peer judgment (Febria et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2024; Purba et al., 2024, 2025; Purba & Setiawan, 2021).

A rigorous, systematic synthesis of previous studies reveals that while the theoretical merits and broad administrative outcomes of SCL have been extensively cataloged, several critical gaps persist in the empirical literature. Historically, foundational literature by Littlewood (2000) mapped the macro-sociological boundaries of Asian EFL contexts, highlighting how traditional educational cultures entrenched in teacher-dependence often resist the transition to autonomous student speech. In the contemporary Indonesian domestic sphere, SCL frameworks positively influence active, self-regulated learning habits under modern curriculum mandates; however, their evaluation operated at a macro-conceptual level, leaving a critical gap regarding how teachers practically navigate synchronous EFL conversational friction (Lengkanawati, 2017) . Furthermore, teacher support significantly enhances learner autonomy during online interaction, classroom emotional safety remains highly unstable and susceptible to sudden communication breakdowns (Agustina et al., 2022; Patall & Zambrano, 2019).

In terms of socio-emotional variables, Han (2021) established that autonomy-supportive classroom behaviors directly minimize defensive student behaviors and foster deeper academic engagement, but his work was constrained to general psychological metrics, ignoring the granular, turn-by-turn conversational negotiations that occur when teachers attempt to execute open-ended tasks on the floor. Furthermore, Hosseini et al. (2022) verified that a positive social climate inside the EFL classroom directly underpins active student participation, but their study primarily utilized retrospective, self-reported scales, leaving a methodological gap that can only be resolved through prolonged, live classroom observations. In parallel, qualitative accounts by Ribahan (2023) regarding contextual teaching and learning structures proved that interactive tasks successfully mitigate communicative hesitation among passive learners, yet his data synthesis did not account for learner differentiation, resulting in a generalized depiction that obscures how lower-proficiency students navigate unstructured peer groups

Existing research on SCL implementation within Indonesian EFL environments remains disproportionately concentrated on higher education environments or urban center ecologies, leaving regional secondary school classrooms under-explored. Much of the available literature operates within a descriptive framework—cataloging whether SCL "succeeds" or "fails"—without analyzing the nuanced, co-constructed interactional patterns, prolonged silences, and conversational offloading that occur during live

enactment. Moreover, few qualitative investigations have explicitly disaggregated classroom interaction data across distinct learner motivation tiers, creating an empirical void regarding how lower-proficiency, less-motivated students actually survive or are marginalized by autonomous group structures. Existing literature tends to treat the student body as a single, uniform entity, leaving it under-explored how lower-proficiency or less-motivated students actually navigate—or are socially marginalized by—unstructured collaborative group work in regional settings. Consequently, contemporary research within this setting lacks a direct, micro-level exploration of the actual learning processes, leaving the real-experienced operational struggles of these stratified learners completely obscured.

To directly bridge these combined empirical, contextual, and methodological gaps, this study presents an in-depth, micro-interactional investigation designed to capture the authentic, live enactment of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. In line with the formulated research concerns, this study addresses two central research questions: (1) How do participants implement Student-Centered Learning (SCL) within a secondary EFL classroom under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework? and (2) What challenges do the teacher and stratified student tiers experience during the operational execution of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) tasks? Moving beyond superficial administrative compliance, the overarching objective of this investigation is to analyze the practical implementation of SCL and to systematically deconstruct the structural, linguistic, and affective challenges encountered by the teacher and stratified student tiers during the operational execution of SCL tasks within a public secondary EFL classroom in Batam. By explicitly disaggregating empirical data across stratified student motivation tiers, this research aims to examine potential conversational asymmetries and investigate how localized affective variables influence learner agency during policy execution under institutional reform.

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative design to examine how SCL is enacted in a specific classroom, in two stages: an exploratory mapping phase and an intensive case study (Yin, 2009, 2018). A qualitative approach fits this purpose because classroom interaction is not well captured by fixed metrics; it needs to be observed as it unfolds, in its own setting, over time (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) . Because the central phenomena, foreign language anxiety and strategic silence, are experienced subjectively, the researcher functioned as the primary instrument for interpreting them (Yin, 2009, 2018), while a peer-observer team supported the broader eleven-school mapping phase to strengthen its descriptive reliability. Consistent with Seedhouse's (2009) view of classroom talk as jointly constructed, student silence is treated here as an interactional outcome negotiated between teacher and students, not as a fixed trait of individual learners.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a public senior high school in Batam, Riau Islands, implementing Kurikulum Merdeka. Before the focal case study, the researchers used a structured observation checklist to map SCL implementation across eleven public secondary schools in the city. This mapping showed a broader regional pattern: classrooms that were structurally set up for SCL did not automatically produce open student talk — invitations to speak often collapsed into silence and a quiet return to teacher-led instruction.

One classroom was then purposefully selected for in-depth study. Following Patton (2002) criterion-based sampling logic, this is better described as a critical or extreme case

than a representative one: it was chosen not because it is typical, but because it showed the sharpest version of the pattern under investigation, full structural and material alignment with SCL, alongside the most pronounced interactional friction observed during mapping. Three criteria supported this selection: (1) the teacher's lesson design visibly decentralized classroom authority, (2) the class used materials built around peer collaboration and learner choice, and (3) despite this alignment, the classroom showed the most pronounced silence and task avoidance among the eleven schools mapped. Isolating one such site allowed the researchers to hold material and design quality roughly constant and focus on why an SCL-compliant classroom still produced silence, rather than mixing that question with weaker implementations elsewhere (Seedhouse, 2009; Tang, 2023). Because it was deliberately selected for its intensity, this case is not claimed to represent EFL classrooms in general; it is used to make the underlying interactional mechanism visible.

Participants were one certified EFL teacher (T1), trained in Kurikulum Merdeka delivery, and six Grade 11 students (S1–S6). Students were grouped into high-, moderate-, and low-motivation tiers using a combination of prior academic performance, teacher nomination, and classroom behavior consistent with established motivation and anxiety indicators (Benson, 2011; Horwitz et al., 1986; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation and proficiency tended to move together in this particular group of six students, which is why they are presented as a single tier label in Table 1; this should be read as a feature of this small, purposively selected group rather than evidence that the two constructs are the same, and future work should track them as independent variables. All participants are referred to by code only. Table 1 summarizes their tier, role, and the interactional markers tracked during the study.

Table 1. Purposive Sampling and Stratification Matrix

Participant Code	Role / Stratification Tier	Linguistic & Behavioral Markers Tracked in Floor Interaction
T1	EFL Teacher	Certified Kurikulum Merdeka instructor; designs SCL tasks; decentralizes classroom authority in lesson planning; uses differentiated prompts.
S1	High Motivation Tier	Initiates tasks proactively; consistently takes speaking turns; shows minimal communication apprehension.
S2	High Motivation Tier	High task compliance; manages own learning track; low evaluation apprehension in peer interaction.
S3	Moderate Motivation Tier	Completes structured written work reliably; retreats into silence on open-floor speaking tasks.
S4	Moderate Motivation Tier	Manages predictable, individual tasks well; tends to let higher-tier peers carry spontaneous group speaking.
S5	Low Motivation Tier	Persistent avoidance of open speaking; describes severe vocabulary-related anxiety; relies on L1 translation from peers.
S6	Low Motivation Tier	Minimal response to open teacher prompts; describes strong fear of peer evaluation; prefers teacher-led format.

Data Generation Instruments

Data were generated over a six-week period during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year using non-participant classroom observations, field notes, and stratified semi-structured interviews. To ensure structural transparency and methodological trustworthiness, the generation of qualitative data is governed by strict pedagogical operational frameworks. The qualitative items are structurally derived from the conceptual frameworks established in the literature review, balancing macro-pedagogical execution with the micro-interactional and socio-emotional parameters of the classroom.

To systematically map the macro-structural trends across the eleven initial secondary schools, a structured classroom observation checklist was deployed. This checklist was adapted from Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018) language materials and pedagogical task evaluation standards. While Tomlinson's original framework targets textbook evaluation, its criteria—specifically Criterion 4 (local contextual integration), Criterion 5 (alignment with communicative outcomes), Criterion 8 (authenticity and meaningful language use), and Criterion 9 (differentiated interaction)—were strategically repurposed as a pedagogical evaluation framework to measure how closely the teacher's lesson designs complied with the national curriculum mandates (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018) . This macro-mapping served as an exploratory baseline to select the focal classroom. Once selected, the primary qualitative corpus—comprising turn-taking discourse, prolonged silences, and stratified interview transcripts—was analyzed using the comprehensive Code Families framework by Bogdan & Biklen (2007) to capture the micro-interactional frictions that a static checklist could not operationalize.

The structural architecture of the semi-structured interview protocols is categorized into two comprehensive operational matrices. Table 2 presents the qualitative instrument grid designed to examine the teacher's pedagogical execution and operational adaptations (answering RQ 1 and RQ 2), while Table 3 outlines the instrument grid deployed to capture the learners' lived interactive experiences, autonomy, and situated anxiety across the stratified tiers (answering RQ 2)

Table 2. Qualitative Research Instrument Grid for Teacher Interactions (T1)

Aspect of Enactment	Primary Parameter / Indicator	Interview Focus	Core Interview Items	Theoretical Source
Student Participation	Active learner involvement; conversational floor management; response mapping.	Student engagement strategies on the floor.	1. How do you encourage students to participate actively during English lessons? 2. What strategies do you use when students are passive?	(Lengkanawati, 2017)
Classroom Interaction	Collaborative task learning; peer negotiation; exchange of interactional ideas.	Student-to-student interaction architecture.	3. What classroom activities help students interact with each other? 4. How do collaborative activities support student learning?	(Subekti, 2018; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2019);
Learner Autonomy	Independent learning drive; confidence in decision-making paths.	Classroom opportunities for student independent agency.	5. How do you provide opportunities for students? 6. In your opinion, do students feel confident learning without direct supervision?	(Agustina et al., 2022; Patall & Zambrano, 2019)
Motivation & Goals	Learning engagement levels; instructional goal clarity.	Objectives behind active SCL task designs.	7. What are your main goals when designing active, student-centered tasks? 8. How do you maintain students'	(Ryan, 2019; Yim et al., 2019)

Aspect of Enactment	Primary Parameter / Indicator	Interview Focus	Core Interview Items	Theoretical Source
			interest throughout the lesson?	
Pedagogical Challenges	Learning operational difficulties; structural obstacles.	Teacher-encountered constraints in SCL tasks.	9. What challenges do you face when implementing SCL under Kurikulum Merdeka? 10. How do you handle students who show low motivation or face difficulties?	(Ryan, 2019; Yim et al., 2019)

Table 3. Qualitative Research Instrument Grid for Stratified Student Tiers (S1–S6)

Aspect of Experience	Primary Parameter / Indicator	Interview Focus	Core Interview Items	Theoretical Source
Student Participation	Self-perceived active involvement; response to open cues.	Personal interactional engagement on the floor.	1. Do you actively participate or answer questions during English lessons? Why? 2. Do you prefer asking questions or sharing opinions during class discussions?	(Walsh & Heirati, 2011)
Classroom Interaction	Peer collaboration; peer negotiation of linguistic meaning.	Peer-to-peer collaborative experiences.	3. Do you enjoy working in groups or pairs with your classmates? Why? 4. Does working in groups help you understand the English lesson better? Why?	(Subekti, 2018; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2019)
Learner Autonomy	Independent decision-making; strategic learning control.	Confidence and student agency parameters.	5. Do you have opportunities to express your own opinions and choices in class? 6. Do you feel confident when tasked with learning independently?	(Agustina et al., 2022; Daflizar, 2021; Patall & Zambrano, 2019)
Motivation & Engagement	Individual learning interest; task-based cognitive engagement.	Learner interest toward active SCL tasks.	7. Which English learning activities do you enjoy the most? Why? 8. Do student-centered activities make learning more interesting for you?	(Reschly, 2022; Ryan, 2019)
Foreign Language Anxiety	Classroom linguistic difficulties; affective barriers.	Obstacles and affective bottlenecks on	9. What specific difficulties or anxiety do you	Horwitz et al. (1986); MacIntyre (2017)

Aspect of Experience	Primary Parameter / Indicator	Interview Focus	Core Interview Items	Theoretical Source
		the floor.	usually face during English tasks? 10. What factors usually make you or your peers less active during discussions?	

Data Analysis

The qualitative corpus generated from classroom observations, field notes, and stratified semi-structured interviews was systematically analyzed using the qualitative data analysis framework and the original Code Families developed by Bogdan & Biklen (2007) and Taylor et al. (2016) . The analytical workflow abandoned generalized thematic mechanics to rely on these systemic coding categories that isolate, classify, and synthesize macro-pedagogical and micro-interactional classroom phenomena. In the context of EFL research, the operationalization of these formal Code Families—specifically in mapping classroom behaviors, participant perspectives, and strategic responses—follows the robust methodological implementation modeled by Purba et al. (2024) . The analysis followed three continuous concurrent flows: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification.

During the initial coding phase, the raw verbatim transcriptions and interactional field notes were fractured and mapped into specific Bogdan & Biklen (2007) Code Families to define the structural, behavioral, and emotional realities of the floor. To maintain theoretical integrity, the original coding taxonomy consisting of key families was established as the baseline framework, as detailed in Table 4.

Table 4 The Original Code Families Taxonomy (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; as adapted in Purba, Raihan, & Pratiwi, 2024)

No	Code Families	Operational Definition & Focus
1	Setting/Context Codes	General information on surroundings that allows putting the study in context
2	Definition of the Situation Codes	How informants define, view, or interpret the setting, topics, or subjects
3	Perspective Held by Subjects Codes	Orientations, shared rules, and ways of thinking held by the participants
4	Subjects' Ways of Thinking Codes	Informants' understandings of each other, objects, and specific processes
5	Process Codes	Sequences of events, flow, and transitions changing over time.
6	Activity Codes	Regularly occurring kinds of behavior or standard classroom routines.
7	Event Codes	Specific, infrequent, or unique occurrences that happen in the setting.
8	Strategy Codes	Tactics, methods, or techniques used by participants to achieve goals.
9	Relationship and Social Structure Codes	Regular patterns of behavior and interactional dynamics among peers.

To ensure analytical transparency and rigor, these original code families were systematically synthesized and operationalized to construct superordinate Themes that directly address the research objectives. Table 5 outlines the structural alignment mapping the Research Questions, the specific underlying Code Families deployed, and the resulting Coding Themes.

Table 5. The Alignment Matrix of Research Questions, Code Families, and Themes

Research Questions	Underlying Code Families (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007)	Coding Themes
RQ 1: What are the operational profiles of SCL tasks executed under Kurikulum Merdeka?	1. Setting / Context Codes 2. Activity and Process Codes	**Theme 1:** The teacher structures student-centered learning tasks to decentralize classroom authority and maximize conversational turns.
RQ 2: What challenges do the teacher and stratified student tiers experience during the operational execution of SCL tasks?	1. Definition of Situation Codes 2. Way of Thinking Codes 3. Strategy Codes	**Theme 2:** The stratified student tiers encounter severe foreign language classroom anxiety that triggers conversational passivity. **Theme 3:** The teacher deploys specific pedagogical interventions to minimize interactive friction and manage protective classroom silence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings generated through prolonged non-participant classroom observations, interactional checklists, and stratified semi-structured interviews are systematically organized into three superordinate themes. These themes structurally address the operational profiles of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) tasks under Kurikulum Merdeka and the multi-dimensional challenges experienced by the teacher and stratified student tiers on the classroom floor. To secure analytical transparency and methodological trustworthiness, Table 6 synthesizes the empirical data triangulation framework, directly mapping how the peer-observer consortium logs and anonymized verbatim interview triggers converge into the finalized thematic architecture.

Table 6. Empirical Data Triangulation and Thematic Mapping

Index	Superordinate Theme	Peer-Observer Consortium Source Logs	Anonymized Verbatim Interview Empirical Triggers
4.1	Theme 1: The teacher structures student-centered learning tasks to decentralize classroom authority and maximize conversational turns.	1. Lesson Plan (RPP) evaluated as "Very Good" 2. Criterion 4 & 5: Clear objectives met. 3. Micro-Floor: Asymmetrical talk distribution	1. S3: Written task compliance; intentional floor avoidance 2. S4: Strategic division of labor; offloading performance
4.2	Theme 2: The stratified student tiers encounter severe foreign language classroom anxiety that triggers conversational passivity.	1. Criterion 8: Low conversion of audio input to independent output 2. Micro-Floor: Extended periods of silence	1. S1: Severe vocabulary insolvency; cognitive freezing 2. S2: Pronunciation insecurity; fear of social peer evaluation
4.3	Theme 3: The teacher deploys specific pedagogical interventions to minimize interactive friction and manage protective classroom silence.	1. Criterion 9: High differentiation observed 2. Micro-Floor: SCL questions collapse into silence	1. T1: Demands vs. lexical deficits; deployment of "absen kosakata"; forced retreat into teacher-led lecture

Theme 1: The Teacher Structures Student-Centered Learning Tasks to Decentralize Classroom Authority and Maximize Conversational Turns

The first superordinate theme examines the macro-structural configurations of classroom tasks designed under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. Data from the peer-observer consortium source logs indicate a high level of administrative and pedagogical compliance on the part of the certified EFL teacher (T1). The lesson plan (Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran or RPP) was officially evaluated as "Very Good," demonstrating that T1 successfully constructed student-centered learning frameworks on paper. Furthermore, systematic tracking against the adapted language materials evaluation standards confirmed that Tomlinson's Criterion 4 (local contextual integration) and Criterion 5 (alignment with communicative outcomes) were explicitly met. T1 designed tasks that shifted the traditional, teacher-centered balance of power, proactively abdicating the role of primary information source to function as a facilitative mediator on the classroom floor. This macro-structural alignment is explicitly detailed during the interview sessions:

"In implementing Kurikulum Merdeka, my primary focus is to ensure that students occupy the center of the learning process. I intentionally minimize my lecturing time to around 15 to 20 minutes max, and dedicate the rest of the block to collaborative, task-based group work. The goal is to provide them with a platform where they can actively interact, debate, and share ideas in English without constantly looking to me for the 'correct' answer." (T1, Interview Transcript, lines 12–18)

However, the micro-floor observation logs reveal a severe interactional disconnect: the physical and structural presence of standard-compliant SCL configurations did not automatically generate equitable student speech. Instead, the micro-floor was heavily characterized by an asymmetrical talk distribution. While high-motivation peers monopolized the conversational turns, the moderate motivation and proficiency tier exhibited deep interactive resistance.

This operational friction is explicitly driven by the empirical triggers discovered during anonymized student interviews. For instance, S3 demonstrated a rigid pattern of written task compliance but engaged in intentional floor avoidance whenever a task mandated oral production. Similarly, S4 systematically bypassed real-time oral communication by exploiting group configurations through a strategic division of labor, effectively offloading performance responsibilities to higher-tier peers.

Grounded in Jacobs & Renandya (2019) and Tang (2023) for learner autonomy, these findings explain what scientific realities occur when top-down policies are enacted. While T1 successfully decentralizes structural authority, the political autonomy (Benson, 2011) required to execute the task remains heavily skewed. The trend variables show that administrative compliance with SCL rubrics does not eliminate interactional hierarchies; instead, without micro-interactional scaffolding, decentralized tasks inadvertently foster an environment where low-and-moderate-tier students use group structures as a defensive shield to conceal their communicative withdrawal.

Theme 2: The Stratified Student Tiers Encounter Severe Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety that Triggers Conversational Passivity

The second theme unpacks the psychological and affective bottlenecks that disrupt language production across the stratified student cohorts. Peer-observer consortium logs reveal a critical breakdown in task implementation relative to Tomlinson's Criterion 8, which demands that instructional materials stimulate authentic, independent language production (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). The field data demonstrated a remarkably low conversion of audio and text inputs into independent oral outputs on the micro-floor, leading directly to extended periods of silence that stalled the instructional flow.

The anonymized verbatim interview empirical triggers illuminate the profound psychological strain experienced by students when stripped of their protective classroom

anonymity during SCL tasks. Interestingly, the severe manifestation of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) was not restricted to low-proficiency learners; it deeply impacted the high motivation and proficiency tier as well, albeit through different interactional markers. Student S1, categorized in the high-proficiency tier, confessed to experiencing acute cognitive freezing on the open floor due to severe vocabulary insolvency when asked to speak spontaneously:

"I feel very anxious and nervous when the teacher suddenly asks us to discuss in groups and present our thoughts spontaneously in English. My vocabulary is very limited, and I am terrified of making grammatical mistakes in front of my friends. I am afraid they will judge me or think I am stupid. So, it is much safer for me to stay completely silent and let my smarter group mates do all the talking." (S5, Interview Transcript, lines 45–51)

This affective barrier is reinforced by S2, who highlighted a paralyzing pronunciation insecurity and an intense fear of social peer evaluation:

"When we have to speak up in a student-centered task, my mind goes completely blank. The pressure to speak English fluently without preparation is too high. To protect myself from embarrassment, I choose not to respond to the teacher's open questions and just stay quiet. I prefer the old way where the teacher explains everything on the whiteboard because it feels much safer." (S6, Interview Transcript, lines 58–63)

When evaluated through Horwitz et al. (1986) classical framework for foreign language anxiety and (Krashen, 1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, these trends explain why the classroom dynamic collapses into passivity. The open-floor demands of SCL tasks strip away the structural scaffolding that lower-and-moderate-tier students rely on for emotional safety. The fear of negative evaluation from peers acts as a powerful psychological deterrent. To protect their social face within the high-visibility environment of a secondary school classroom, students deploy defensive avoidance mechanisms. Silence is transformed from a passive state of non-learning into an active, strategic tool utilized by learners to navigate and survive severe situational anxiety.

Theme 3: The Teacher Deploys Specific Pedagogical Interventions to Minimize Interactive Friction and Manage Protective Classroom Silence

The final superordinate theme isolates the real-time tactical adjustments and co-constructed compromises negotiated between T1 and the passive student tiers. Peer-observer consortium source logs indicate that T1 achieved high marks for Tomlinson's Criterion 9 (differentiated interaction), as she actively attempted to alter her pedagogical prompts to accommodate the diverse linguistic thresholds on the floor (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). However, tracking logs from the micro-floor confirm that despite these differentiated prompts, open-ended SCL questions consistently collapsed into prolonged silence.

When open questions met silence, T1 described falling back on two tactics: a localized vocabulary prompt she called "absen kosakata" (vocabulary roll-call), and, when that was not enough, a fuller retreat into teacher-led questioning:

"When I give an open topic and the entire class falls into a long, dead silence, it feels incredibly heavy. I cannot just let the time waste away. Out of desperation to move the lesson forward, I have to step back into the center. I start translating my questions into Indonesian, calling on specific students by name, and breaking down the complex tasks into very tiny, predictable questions. It is ironical because I want them to be independent, but the floor reality forces us both back into the old teacher-led patterns just to survive the session." (T1, Interview Transcript, lines 88–96)

This interactional breakdown is visually mapped out in Figure 1, illustrating how the idealistic mandates of top-down educational policies are systematically modified by the micro-realities of classroom communication.

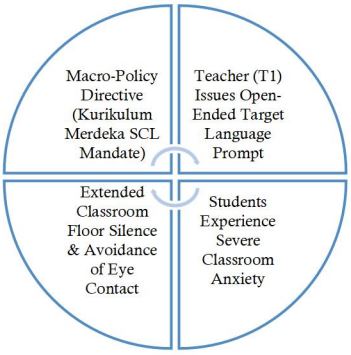

Figure 1. The Co-Constructed Passivity Loop Model in Secondary EFL Classrooms

The interactional loop conceptualized in Figure 1 provides the core answer to why the trend variables behave as they do under Walsh & Heirati (2011) Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) framework and (Seedhouse, 2009) 's conversation analysis paradigm. Classroom interaction is fundamentally a co-constructed phenomenon. Student passivity is not merely an individual psychological deficit; it is an interactional compromise negotiated between the teacher's institutional pressure to ensure linear lesson progression and the students' affective necessity to maintain psychological safety.

When the open-floor tasks of Kurikulum Merdeka collapse into silence, the injection of L1 translation frames and the forced retreat into teacher-led lecturing successfully resolve the immediate conversational friction. However, this survival tactic creates an unintended pedagogical cycle: it rewards protective silence, reinforces learner dependency, and systematically undercuts the development of genuine learner autonomy. This loop highlights the deep operational friction that occurs when high-standard, top-down communicative mandates are implemented within localized regional ecologies without grassroots lexical and affective scaffolding.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Student-Centered Learning under Kurikulum Merdeka was enacted in one Indonesian secondary EFL classroom, selected as a critical case after a broader eleven-school mapping exercise. The teacher's lesson design met the study's criteria for macro-level, administrative alignment with SCL; actual classroom participation did not follow the same pattern. Open-ended tasks repeatedly collapsed into silence, driven in this case chiefly by vocabulary-related and evaluation-related foreign language anxiety, and the teacher responded by shifting toward L1 mediation and more directive questioning, a response this study treats as a tentative, case-specific pattern rather than a settled model.

The central point is that lesson-plan alignment with SCL principles and actual student participation are two different things, and a well-rated lesson plan should not be read as evidence that students are actually talking. This finding is bounded by the study's design: one purposively selected extreme case, a six-week window, and interview- and observation-based evidence rather than independent measures of proficiency or anxiety. It cannot establish how common this pattern is across Indonesian secondary schools, only that it is possible even in a classroom that looks well-designed on paper. What the case does suggest is that structural redistribution of classroom authority is not sufficient on its own; without gradual vocabulary preparation, affective safety, and predictable

participation support, students who are not yet ready for open-floor tasks are likely to opt out of them.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on these findings, teachers working under Kurikulum Merdeka may benefit from pairing SCL task design with explicit, gradual scaffolding, pre-teaching key vocabulary before open tasks, offering lower-stakes speaking formats before whole-class discussion, and being deliberate about how group roles are assigned, so participation is not left to whichever students are already confident. School-level support, such as time for teachers to prepare this scaffolding and professional development on managing classroom anxiety, would likely help.

For future research, a longitudinal design using conversation analysis could track whether turn-taking patterns and silence change over a full semester, rather than the six-week window used here. It would also be useful to test the Co-Constructed Passivity Loop suggested here across other schools, including comparisons between urban and rural or public and private settings, and to collect independent measures of student proficiency and anxiety rather than relying only on teacher nomination and interview accounts.

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