

Research Article

SDGs in Higher Education: Implementing Cutting-Edge English Learning Approach and Merdeka Curriculum to Achieve the SDGs

Ikha Hardiyanti Puspita Mahading*, Zulkifli Tanipu, and Novi Rusnarty Usu

Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, Indonesia

ORCID

Ikha Hardiyanti Puspita Mahading: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1193-4143>

Abstract.

The implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education continues to face various challenges. This study argues that integrating innovative English language learning methods, particularly within the framework of the Merdeka curriculum, can contribute to advancing the SDGs in higher education. By promoting cooperative learning strategies, students are encouraged to think critically and independently, solve problems creatively, and collaborate effectively, offering a more holistic learning experience. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, challenges such as large class sizes, diverse student backgrounds, policy implementation, and the need for intercultural competence often hinder effective learning. This research highlights the importance of tailoring pedagogical approaches to meet individual learner needs while still nurturing analytical and innovative thinking. Through the Merdeka curriculum's flexible and student-centered design, this approach shows promise in addressing these challenges and supporting the broader goals of sustainable education.

Keywords: innovative learning, English learning, Merdeka curriculum, SDGs

Corresponding Author: Ikha Hardiyanti Puspita Mahading; email: ikha_s1sastrainggris@mahasiswa.ung.ac.id

Published 16 May 2025

Publishing services provided by Knowledge E

© Ikha Hardiyanti Puspita Mahading et al. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ICORSIA 2024 Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly changing world, achieving sustainable development has become a critical imperative across all sectors. Higher education institutions have a crucial role to play in shaping the future by producing skilled graduates who are not only well-equipped with knowledge but also possess the necessary skills to address pressing global challenges. In order to substantiate this claim, scholars in the field have emphasized the importance of integrating an innovative English language acquisition methodology and the Merdeka curriculum within institutions of higher education.



Chairy et al. [1] emphasized that integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the curriculum of higher education is essential for fostering students' awareness of social ethics and environmental sustainability. This integration is seen as essential in order to provide students with a comprehensive comprehension of sustainable development and the various issues associated with it. Oktavia et al. [2] highlighted that the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in elementary schools, particularly in English teaching, aligns with SDGs and fosters critical thinking skills. The author proposes that the implementation of an innovative English language learning methodology inside higher education institutions can effectively augment students' linguistic proficiency and their capacity to actively participate in projects and activities aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Fisher, Tran, and Verezub [3] discuss how flipped learning methods in teaching English in higher education significantly enhance students' English proficiency and align with innovative educational approaches to meet 21st century skills. They emphasize the importance of interactive and communicative activities in achieving effective learning outcomes. Jahn and Kenner [4] highlighted that the use of digital media in higher education can foster critical thinking skills among students. Their work emphasizes that integrating digital tools and methodologies into educational practices not only enhances critical thinking but also aligns with educational objectives like SDGs.

The Merdeka curriculum, which has been established by a group of educators and sustainability practitioners, seeks to cultivate the abilities of students in critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. The incorporation of the Merdeka curriculum into the current higher education curriculum has the potential to empower students in their pursuit of creating inventive and sustainable resolutions to real-life problems. This, in turn, would directly contribute to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The significance of integrating the SDGs into higher education courses is emphasized by Avelar et al. [5] who advocate for the utilization of transdisciplinary frameworks and the promotion of student-led initiatives. They argue that incorporating the SDGs into the curriculum can provide students with a comprehensive understanding of sustainable development and encourage them to actively engage in addressing global challenges.

In terms of English language learning methodologies, Hokly [6] discusses the implementation of blended learning in English language teaching, highlighting its effectiveness in enhancing language skills and supporting innovative educational strategies in higher education. They argue that these methodologies can enhance students' English

language proficiency and enable them to effectively contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. By incorporating interactive and communicative activities, project-based learning, and real-world applications, students can develop the language skills necessary to collaborate and communicate effectively in a globalized context.

Furthermore, The Merdeka curriculum has gained attention as a valuable tool in higher education institutions. According to Harahap et al.[7], the Merdeka curriculum promotes critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students. By integrating sustainability principles and real-world challenges into the curriculum, students are encouraged to develop innovative solutions and contribute directly to the achievement of the SDGs.

Based on the elaboration provided, the previous studies have highlighted the significance of integrating the SDGs into higher education, utilizing innovative English learning methodologies, and implementing the Merdeka curriculum. This research aims to complement the shortcomings of previous studies by focusing on these approaches to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and mindset necessary to actively participate in sustainable development efforts. By incorporating transdisciplinary frameworks, student-led initiatives, interactive language learning activities, and the promotion of critical thinking, higher education institutions can effectively prepare students to address global challenges and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

2. Literature Review

The significance of incorporating innovative English learning methodologies in higher education to successfully incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is emphasized in the literature study conducted by Siregar et al. [8]. The review places significant emphasis on the effects of these approaches on students' language ability, critical thinking abilities, and involvement in sustainable development matters. The proposition posits that the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the English language curriculum can furnish students with a complete comprehension of sustainable development concepts and enable them to actively participate in SDG-related projects and initiatives.

Maru'ao [9] provides a critical assessment of the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in higher education institutions as a means to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This paper critically analyses the various obstacles, achievements, and recommended strategies pertaining to the integration of the Merdeka curriculum, and its influence on students' comprehension of sustainable development principles. The Merdeka curriculum, which emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills, presents an opportunity to incorporate sustainability ideas and real-world concerns into the educational framework. Through the integration of the Merdeka curriculum, students are provided with opportunities to foster their creativity and actively contribute towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The scoping review conducted by Anggiasti and Nugraheni [10] offers a comprehensive examination of higher education programs that integrate advanced English learning methods and the Merdeka curriculum with the aim of fostering the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The review critically examines the prominent themes, tactics, and deficiencies present in the current body of literature, providing suggestions for future research endeavour and practical application. This statement underscores the capacity to combine various methodologies in order to adequately equip students in tackling global issues and making meaningful contributions towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In general, these literature studies offer detailed perspectives on the incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education by utilizing innovative English language learning methods and adopting the Merdeka curriculum. It is suggested that the integration of these techniques has the potential to provide students with the requisite information, abilities, and mindset to actively engage in endeavour related to sustainable development. Higher education institutions can effectively equip students to face global concerns and contribute to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by integrating transdisciplinary frameworks, student-led initiatives, interactive language learning activities, and the promotion of critical thinking.

3. Research Methodology

In order to examine the utilization of advanced English learning methodologies and the Merdeka curriculum in higher education for the purpose of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a qualitative research methodology would entail gathering

data via the means of observation and interviews with key individuals involved in the educational process, including students, faculty members, and administrators. The data will subsequently undergo interpretive analysis, a method that entails the identification of significant themes and patterns within the data.

The English Language Education Study Programme, Faculty of Letters and Cultures, Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, will be selected as the object for this investigation. The case studies will encompass a thorough examination of the institutions' policies, programs, and practices pertaining to the execution of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Additionally, the study will employ a participatory methodology, wherein stakeholders will actively engage in the research process. This approach would facilitate a more extensive comprehension of the difficulties and possibilities linked to the integration of state-of-the-art English learning methods and the Merdeka curriculum in order to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education.

In general, employing a qualitative study methodology would yield a thorough comprehension of the implementation of innovative English language learning methods and the Merdeka curriculum in higher education, with the aim of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The results of this study have the potential to provide valuable insights for policy and practice in higher education institutions, thereby contributing to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that relying solely on qualitative methodologies may impose constraints on the extent to which the findings can be generalized.

4. Research Result and Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the integration of innovative English language learning methods and the adoption of the Merdeka curriculum in higher education institutions offer a strong basis for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This conclusion is further supported by the feedback gathered from interviews conducted with students, lecturers, and faculty members. With the following question:

- Interview questions for students:

- 1) What do you think about the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education?

- 2) Have you heard of the Merdeka curriculum? What do you think about its potential to contribute to achieving the SDGs?
 - 3) How do you think cutting-edge English learning approaches can be used to support the achievement of the SDGs in higher education?
 - 4) How do you think higher education institutions can collaborate with other stakeholders to achieve the SDGs?
- Interview questions for lecturers:
 - 1) How do you integrate the SDGs into your teaching and research?
 - 2) How do you think the Merdeka curriculum can be improved to better align with the SDGs?
 - 3) What innovative teaching methodologies have you used to support the achievement of the SDGs in higher education?
 - 4) How do you think faculty training in Education for Sustainability and SDGs can be improved?
 - 5) How do you think higher education institutions can collaborate with other stakeholders to achieve the SDGs?
 - Interview questions for faculty members:
 - 1) How does your institution promote the integration of the SDGs in higher education?
 - 2) How do you think the Merdeka curriculum can be improved to better align with the SDGs?
 - 3) What innovative teaching methodologies have been implemented at your institution to support the achievement of the SDGs?
 - 4) How does your institution support faculty training in Education for Sustainability and SDGs?
 - 5) How does your institution collaborate with other stakeholders to achieve the SDGs?

4.1. Results

The interviews conducted with students, lecturers, and faculty members revealed significant insights into the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education. Students expressed enthusiasm about the inclusion of SDGs in their education, highlighting its potential to prepare them as change-makers for a sustainable future. They acknowledged the Merdeka curriculum's ability to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and real-world application. For instance, one student noted that the curriculum's focus on cultural studies and global collaboration aligns well with the SDGs' goals of fostering international partnerships.

Lecturers emphasized the importance of adapting teaching methodologies to integrate SDG principles effectively. They highlighted examples such as project-based learning and intercultural communication exercises, which enable students to develop competencies required for addressing global challenges. A lecturer mentioned that while efforts to integrate SDGs into their institution's programs are still evolving, practices like gender-responsive materials and technology-enhanced teaching are steps in the right direction.

Faculty members provided a broader perspective on institutional efforts. They acknowledged initiatives such as SDG-centered competitions and collaborations with external stakeholders. However, they also pointed out gaps, such as the need for more structured roadmaps and dedicated programs to internalize SDGs within the university framework. The Dean of Faculty mentioned that partnerships with industries and government bodies have enabled practical applications of the Merdeka curriculum, enriching students' learning experiences through real-world projects.

Overall, the findings underline the multifaceted approach needed to embed SDGs within higher education. From enhancing the Merdeka curriculum to forming cross-sector partnerships, the integration of SDGs requires concerted efforts across all levels of the academic ecosystem.

During the interviews, participants conveyed their gratitude for the engaged and stimulating educational setting fostered by the innovative English language learning methodologies. The significance of the multidisciplinary approach of the Merdeka curriculum in augmenting comprehension of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its practical implementation was also emphasized by the participants. By means of this collaborative methodology, students have acquired significant knowledge pertaining to matters of social, economic, and environmental sustainability, while also

TABLE 1: Key Themes from Interview Response on SDGs Integration.

Category	Key Insights	Examples from Response
Students' Perspectives	Positive outlook on SDGs integration in higher education, emphasizing its role in preparing students to tackle global challenges	"Integrating SDGs helps students become change-makers." "Cutting-edge English learning approaches enable effective communication for sustainable solutions."
Merdeka Curriculum	Recognizes as a tool for fostering critical thinking and addressing real-world challenges, though alignment with SDGs themes can be further improved	"The Merdeka curriculum has potential but needs more focus on real-world sustainability issues."
Teaching Methodologies	Innovative approaches like project-based learning and intercultural communication are seen as effective strategies for supporting SDGs in higher education.	"We use project-based learning to connect theory to practice, aligning with SDGs goals."
Institutional Efforts	Collaboration with external stakeholders (e.g., industries, NGOs, and existing SDGs Centers) are noted, though internal roadmap development is still lacking	"Partnership have enriched learning experiences, but a structured internal plan for SDGs integration is needed."

cultivating essential competencies such as critical analysis, solution-oriented thinking, and effective intercultural discourse.

The integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into higher education is of paramount importance in preparing students to become change-makers and active contributors to a more sustainable world. By incorporating the SDGs into the curriculum, universities can raise awareness and empower students to understand the interconnectedness of global challenges and the need for sustainable solutions.

The Merdeka curriculum and cutting-edge English learning approaches offer valuable opportunities to contribute to the SDGs. The Merdeka curriculum, with its emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, and real-world issues, can equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the complex challenges outlined in the SDGs. Similarly, cutting-edge English learning approaches can foster cross-cultural understanding, facilitate international collaboration, and enhance communication skills, all of which are essential for addressing global challenges.

Collaboration between higher education institutions and various stakeholders is vital for the successful achievement of the SDGs. By forming partnerships with local communities, businesses, NGOs, and governments, universities can leverage their collective expertise, resources, and networks to address specific SDGs and drive meaningful

change. These collaborations can provide opportunities for students to engage in real-world projects, research, and community service, further enhancing their understanding of the SDGs and their ability to contribute to sustainable development.

While there is a need for further alignment with SDGs themes and direct connections to real-world issues and sustainability, universities like Universitas Negeri Gorontalo (UNG) can take steps to improve their integration efforts. Enhancing the Merdeka curriculum, particularly in research and community service programs, can align it more closely with the SDGs. UNG can also continue implementing teaching methodologies that support the achievement of SDGs, such as intercultural communication competence and responsive gender materials. The existing SDGs Centre at UNG and collaborations with various parties for research and community service demonstrate a positive foundation for further progress.

On the other hand, the university has successfully pursued the overarching objective of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through fostering partnership between the University and Faculty RENSTRA. This collaboration has specifically targeted areas such as education, learning, teaching, research, and community service. The collaborative efforts have resulted in the establishment of the Merdeka Curriculum program, which integrates the nine activities associated with Merdeka Curriculum. The institution has implemented the case method and project-based learning approaches in its pedagogical practices, resulting in the development of novel courses centered upon digital literacy, cultural heritage, tourism, language acquisition, oral tradition, and forensic linguistics. The university provides support to its faculty staff through various means, such as training and the establishment of a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with faculty and study programs. These initiatives are aimed at ensuring that faculty staff actively contribute to the attainment of the institution's primary objective.

4.2. Discussion

The integration of innovative English learning methodologies and the Merdeka curriculum within higher education demonstrates significant potential to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As highlighted by Chairy et al. [1] integrating SDGs into curricula fosters students' awareness of social ethics and environmental sustainability. Similarly, Fisher et al. [3] emphasize that innovative methodologies such as flipped learning enhance language proficiency and align with SDGs by promoting 21st century skills. This study confirms that incorporating project-based learning and intercultural

communication within the Merdeka curriculum equips students with critical thinking and problem-solving skills essential for addressing global challenges.

Digital media integration, as argued by Jahn and Jenner [4], fosters critical thinking and innovative educational approaches aligning with the SDGs. This study observed similar results, where students engaged with digital tools demonstrated improved critical analysis and solutions-oriented thinking. Moreover, Anggiasti and Nugraheni[10], advocate for transdisciplinary frameworks to enhance students' capacity to tackle global issues, a perspective that reinforces this research's outcomes on connecting theoretical concepts with practical applications. Despite these advancements, gaps remain in the structured implementation of SDGs in higher educational institutions. Faculty members noted the absence of clear roadmaps for aligning institutional goals with SDGs, echoing Harahap et al.[7], who recommended more structured frameworks to incorporate real-world challenges into curricula. While universities like Universitas Negeri Gorontalo (UNG) have made commendable progress, further efforts are needed to align the Merdeka curriculum more closely with SDGs themes, particularly in research and community service initiatives.

Collaboration between higher education institutions and external stakeholders is pivotal to achieving the SDGs. Partnerships with industries, NGOs, and government bodies have enriched learning experiences by providing real-world applications of SDGs-related concepts. These findings align with Siregar et al.[8], who emphasize the necessity of multi-sectoral collaboration to address sustainability challenges effectively and enhance engagement in meaningful projects.

In summary, embedding SDGs within higher education requires a multidimensional approach. The Merdeka curriculum, supported by innovative teaching methodologies and strategic partnerships, has the potential to prepare students as global change-makers. Future studies should focus on developing structured roadmaps and exploring novel pedagogical frameworks to deepen the integration of SDGs into higher education practices.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Implementing Cutting-edge English Learning Approach to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into higher education is a complex process that

requires a comprehensive approach. The successful implementation of the SDGs necessitates the development of curricula, implementation of effective teaching methodologies, and collaboration with relevant stakeholders. Despite the presence of challenges and areas for improvement, universities such as UNG have the potential to play a significant role in preparing students to address global challenges and contribute to a more sustainable future. By embracing the SDGs and actively integrating them into their educational practices, universities can empower students to become informed, responsible global citizens who are equipped to make a positive impact on the world. Therefore, it is essential for institutions to adopt a strategic approach that covers all aspects of the integration process to ensure that students are adequately prepared to tackle global challenges and contribute towards a more sustainable future.

References

- [1] Chairy A, Istiqomah, Nahdiyah A. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) dan Pendidikan Islam di Perguruan Tinggi: Sinergi untuk Masa Depan. *Academia: Jurnal Inovasi Riset Akademik* 2024;4.
- [2] Oktavia D, Habibah N, Kurniawan R. Kurikulum Merdeka dan Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris di Sekolah Dasar: Need Analysis Study. *Jurnal Muara Pendidikan*; 2023. p. 8.
- [3] Fisher R, Tran Q, Verezub E. Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Higher Education using flipped learning/flipped classrooms: a literature review. *Innov Lang Learn Teach*. 2024;18(4):332–51.
- [4] Jahn D, Kenner A. Critical Thinking in Higher Education: How to foster it using Digital Media. In: Kergel D, Heidkamp B, Telléus PK, Rachwal T, Nowakowski S, editors. *The Digital Turn in Higher Education: International Perspectives on Learning and Teaching in a Changing World*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden; 2018. pp. 81–109.
- [5] Avelar AB, da Silva Oliveira KD, Farina MC. The integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into curricula, research and partnerships in higher education. *Int Rev Educ*. 2023;69(3):299–325.
- [6] Hockly N. Blended learning. *ELT J*. 2018;72(1):97–101.
- [7] Harahap MA, Ismaya B, Wahab A, Pramono SA, Ichsan. Concept and Implementation Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Higher Education. *Jurnal Pendidikan: Teori, Penelitian, Dan Pengembangan*; 2023. p. 8.

- [8] Siregar I. Mukhtar, Anwar K, MY M, Munte R. Isu-isu Global Pengembangan Kurikulum Merdeka dan Pemagangan Life Skill World Class Education. *Jurnal Review Pendidikan Dan Pengajaran*; 2024. p. 7.
- [9] Maru'ao N. Penerapan Pembelajaran Inovatif dalam Meningkatkan Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris. *Warta Dharmawangsa*. 2020;14:221–30.
- [10] Anggiasti AA, Nugraheni N. Upaya Mewujudkan Program Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) dalam Membangun Kualitas Pendidikan Indonesia. *Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin*. 2024;2:265–72.