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Between Readiness and Reality: EFL Teachers' Deep Learning Implementation in Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum Amid Remote-Region Constraints

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the readiness of EFL teachers in Toraja, a geographically remote region of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, to implement the Deep Learning approach within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, and examines the systemic, pedagogical, student-related, and infrastructural challenges they encounter during implementation.A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed, involving six purposively selected junior secondary school EFL teachers. Quantitative data were collected through a validated 20-item questionnaire measuring four readiness dimensions (pedagogical, technological, psychological, and institutional) on a five-point Likert scale, analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis within Miles and Huberman's interactive framework. Quantitative results revealed Very High overall teacher readiness (M = 4.28, SD = 0.470), with pedagogical and psychological readiness achieving Very High categorization (M = 4.40 each) and technological and institutional readiness achieving High categorization (M = 4.20 and 4.13 respectively). Four of six teachers (66.7%) were classified as Very High readiness. However, qualitative analysis identified four major challenge themes that systematically constrain implementation: (1) systemic institutional constraints inadequate sporadic professional development, rigid curriculum structures, and heavy administrative burden; (2) pedagogical instructional difficulties severe time constraints, challenges implementing inquiry and reflection phases, and authentic assessment design gaps; (3) student-related barriers uneven readiness, limited EFL vocabulary, passive learning habits, and cultural deference norms; and (4) infrastructure and technological limitations limited shared devices, unstable internet, and forced pedagogical regression reducing deep learning quality by up to 50%. This study reveals a critical readiness-reality gap: teachers demonstrate high internal readiness, yet face substantial external constraints that systematically undermine implementation quality. The findings contribute evidence-based insights to the emerging literature on Deep Learning implementation in under-resourced Indonesian EFL contexts and offer targeted recommendations for teachers, school leaders, district authorities, and national policymakers to achieve sustainable implementation in Toraja and comparable remote regions.

KEYWORDS: deep learning, EFL teacher readiness, Merdeka Curriculum; remote education, Toraja, mixed methods, implementation challenges, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed profound transformations in educational paradigms worldwide, with a decisive global shift toward student-centered and competency-based learning that prioritizes critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and real-world knowledge application (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Traditional pedagogical approaches focused on rote memorization are increasingly recognized as insufficient for preparing students to navigate complex, technology-driven societies. Within this context, Deep Learning has emerged as a fundamental approach in modern pedagogy, emphasizing not merely knowledge acquisition but students' capacity to understand, connect, and apply concepts across meaningful contexts (Fullan, Langworthy, & Michael, 2014). Central to this model are six interrelated global competencies—the '6Cs': critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, citizenship, and character—that serve as the foundation for holistic twenty-first-century education.

In Indonesia, these global educational trends have been institutionalized through the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum), a national initiative launched to promote holistic, student-centered, and competency-based learning (Rosiyati, 2025). This curriculum represents a deliberate departure from exam-oriented, teacher-centered instruction toward approaches cultivating higher-order thinking, creativity, and authentic problem-solving. Central to the Merdeka Curriculum is the integration of Deep Learning principles requiring learners to engage with concepts meaningfully, reflect critically, and solve problems in authentic contexts

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(Gufron & Suryahadikusumah, 2024). The curriculum emphasizes teacher autonomy in designing learning activities that foster student inquiry and the 6Cs competencies (Sumarto & Harahap, 2025). Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) specifically, Deep Learning demands that teachers design experiences integrating language acquisition with analytical and reflective tasks, enabling students to interpret texts, evaluate perspectives, and use English as a tool for inquiry rather than mere grammatical accuracy (Khodadadi & Jund, 2023).

The success of any curriculum reform depends critically on teacher readiness. Hall and Hord (2015) conceptualize teacher readiness as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive readiness (understanding of theoretical foundations and pedagogical strategies), affective readiness (emotional and attitudinal preparedness including openness to change), and behavioral readiness (actual ability to apply new instructional practices). The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) embedded within Hall and Hord's framework proposes that teachers move through stages of concern—from self-concern to task concern to impact concern—as they develop readiness for innovation. Applied to Deep Learning implementation, this framework predicts that teachers may demonstrate high affective readiness (believing in Deep Learning's value) while remaining at task-concern stages (struggling with how to implement it practically), a theoretical prediction this study empirically examines.

In the Indonesian policy context, teacher readiness is elaborated through national competency standards (Permendiknas No. 16/2007), specifying pedagogical, professional, social, and personal competencies required of all teachers. Critically, these standards were established prior to the Merdeka Curriculum's Deep Learning orientation, creating a potential misalignment between the competencies initially certified and those currently demanded. Wiyono, Kusumaningrum, and Triwiyanto (2023), analyzing twenty years of Indonesian curriculum reform, conclude that positive teacher attitudes toward innovation are consistently observed, but systemic infrastructural support consistently lags—a pattern this study examines in the specific remote-region context of Toraja.

Despite extensive research on curriculum reform in Indonesia, existing studies have focused predominantly on urban or well-resourced settings (Setiawan & Sukyadi, 2022). Geographically remote regions such as Toraja in South Sulawesi remain systematically underexplored—a gap that is consequential because educational innovation cannot be imposed uniformly without adaptation to local realities, resources, and cultural contexts (Fullan, 2007). Toraja presents a unique educational context characterized by rich indigenous cultural heritage, linguistic diversity, and significant geographical constraints. Teachers in Toraja face structural and systemic barriers including heavy teaching loads, limited professional development access, insufficient instructional resources, and entrenched assessment practices favoring factual recall over higher-order thinking (Sari & Arta, 2025; Wathon, 2024).

Research on educational innovation in under-resourced contexts consistently documents the 'implementation dip' (Fullan, 2007)—the observable deterioration in performance when teachers attempt to implement new practices before they have internalized the underlying competencies. In remote Indonesian regions, this phenomenon is compounded by what Susanto and Malik (2024) term the 'force multiplier' effect of infrastructure limitations: technological constraints do not merely constitute an isolated barrier but amplify all other implementation challenges by preventing the digital learning experiences, collaborative platforms, and access to professional resources that Deep Learning implementation presupposes. Abedi (2023), in a mixed-methods study of 245 Indonesian junior secondary teachers, further demonstrates that strong foundational beliefs in pedagogical innovation consistently coexist with systemic constraints inhibiting translation of those beliefs into practice—a pattern directly relevant to interpreting the present study's findings.

Research on Deep Learning in Indonesian EFL contexts remains limited to higher education settings (Mariani, Faizah, & Mashfufah, 2024), reading instruction (Utami, 2025), and business English (Nurhidayati & Sumrati, 2025). No prior study has examined EFL teachers' readiness to implement Deep Learning within the Merdeka Curriculum in geographically remote contexts. This study addresses this critical gap through two research questions: (1) What is the level of readiness among EFL teachers in Toraja to implement the Deep Learning approach within the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) What are the major challenges encountered by EFL teachers in implementing Deep Learning strategies?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first to establish the breadth of teacher readiness patterns, followed by qualitative data to explain, contextualize, and deepen the

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quantitative findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was selected because the research questions demand both measurable indicators of readiness and rich insight into teachers' experiences of implementation challenges a complementarity that neither method alone could achieve. The sequential structure enabled qualitative interview design to be informed by initial quantitative findings, ensuring that interview questions probed areas of theoretical significance identified by the quantitative phase.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at junior secondary schools in Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia a geographically remote region with distinct cultural characteristics, indigenous language vitality, and significant infrastructure constraints. Six EFL teachers were purposively selected based on maximum variation criteria: years of teaching experience, curriculum implementation involvement, gender, educational background, school location, and ethnicity (Patton, 2015). Table 1 presents the demographic profile of all participants.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education	Experience	Ethnicity
1	Mrs. Arni	48	Female	S1 (B.Ed.)	20 years	Toraja
2	Mrs. Agustina	43	Female	S2 (M.Ed.)	20 years	Toraja
3	Mrs. Lilis	40	Female	S1 (B.Ed.)	16 years	Toraja
4	Mr. Rehan	29	Male	S1 (B.Ed.)	6 years	Konjo
5	Mr. Yardi	34	Male	S2 (M.Ed.)	6 years	Toraja
6	Mr. Aris	50	Male	S1 (B.Ed.)	20 years	Toraja

Data Collection

Quantitative Instrument

Quantitative data were collected using a validated 20-item questionnaire measuring four dimensions of teacher readiness: pedagogical readiness (5 items: lesson plan design, critical thinking task creation, multi-step learning guidance, project-based learning design, and Deep Learning conceptual understanding), technological readiness (5 items: technical problem-solving, digital tool proficiency, multimedia integration, school technology support, and digital platform selection), psychological readiness (5 items: belief in Deep Learning effectiveness, attitude toward pedagogical shift, readiness to face challenges, implementation motivation, and willingness to invest extra effort), and institutional readiness (5 items: professional development access, leadership encouragement, administrative support, teacher collaboration promotion, and infrastructure provision). Items used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), validated through expert review prior to administration.

Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in Indonesian to enable full and natural expression (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interview protocol explored four areas: teachers' perceptions of their readiness, specific implementation challenges encountered, perceptions of Deep Learning's relevance and effectiveness in the Toraja context, and professional development needs. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions). Mean scores were classified on a five-level scale: Very High (4.21–5.00), High (3.41–4.20), Moderate (2.61–3.40), Low (1.81–2.60), and Very Low (1.00–1.80). Qualitative data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2020) interactive model comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Transcripts were coded using both deductive codes from the research questions and inductive codes from the data (Saldana, 2021), refined through constant comparison. Integration of the two phases followed a 'building' strategy, with qualitative themes explicitly mapped onto quantitative dimensional findings to explain convergences and divergences.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data sources, member checking with four participants, peer debriefing with two colleagues specializing in EFL curriculum research, prolonged engagement with the research

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context, and audit trail documentation of all analytic decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description of the Toraja educational context addresses transferability. Ethical approval was obtained, informed consent secured, and pseudonyms assigned throughout.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings: Level of Teacher Readiness

The quantitative analysis revealed Very High overall teacher readiness to implement Deep Learning (M = 4.28, SD = 0.470). Four of six teachers (66.7%) were classified as Very High readiness, and two (33.3%) as High readiness. No teachers fell into Moderate, Low, or Very Low categories. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics by dimension.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Readiness by Dimension (N = 6)

Pedagogical Readiness	**4.40**	**0.498**	***Very High***
Psychological Readiness	**4.40**	0.498	*Very High*
Technological Readiness	**4.20**	0.607	*High*
Institutional Readiness	**4.13**	0.571	*High*
Overall Readiness	**4.28**	0.470	***Very High***

Pedagogical Readiness achieved Very High categorization (M = 4.40). Four of five indicators reached means of 4.50 (confidence in lesson plan design, ability to create critical thinking tasks, ability to guide multi-step learning, and project-based learning design skills), with understanding of Deep Learning principles representing the sole area requiring reinforcement (M = 4.00). Psychological Readiness also achieved Very High categorization (M = 4.40), with belief that Deep Learning improves student performance, positive attitude toward pedagogical shift, readiness to face challenges, and implementation motivation all reaching 4.33–4.50. Technological Readiness achieved High categorization (M = 4.20), with three indicators at Very High (technical problem-solving M = 4.50; digital tool confidence M = 4.33; multimedia integration M = 4.33) and two at High (school technology support M = 4.00; digital platform selection M = 3.83). Institutional Readiness achieved High categorization (M = 4.13), with training opportunities rated Very High (M = 4.50) but infrastructure provision receiving the lowest rating across all dimensions (M = 3.67). Table 3 presents individual teacher profiles.

Table 3. Individual Teacher Readiness Scores by Dimension

Mr. Rehan	**4.0**	**3.2**	**3.8**	**3.2**	**3.55**	**High**
Mr. Aris	4.6	4.2	4.8	3.8	**4.35**	**Very High**
Mrs. Lilis	4.0	3.8	4.0	3.8	**3.90**	**High**
Mr. Yardi	4.8	4.6	4.8	4.6	**4.70**	**Very High**
Mrs. Arni	4.4	4.6	4.6	4.6	**4.55**	**Very High**
Mrs. Agustina	4.6	4.8	4.4	4.8	**4.65**	**Very High**

Qualitative Findings: Four Thematic Challenge Clusters

Thematic analysis of interview data identified four major challenge clusters that systematically constrain Deep Learning implementation. Table 4 provides an overview; each cluster is subsequently developed with rich evidentiary support.

Table 4. Thematic Clusters of Implementation Challenges (N = 6 Teachers)

Systemic Constraints	**Institutional**	**Inadequate and sporadic professional development (2–3 day workshops lacking depth in reflective assessment and AI integration for EFL); rigid curriculum structures and national standardized testing pressure inhibiting long-term project work; heavy administrative burden (24 lesson hours/week) limiting planning time for deep learning design.**
Pedagogical Difficulties	**Instructional**	Severe time constraints (40-minute periods insufficient for EFL deep discussion and reflection); difficulty implementing inquiry and reflection

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	phases (students require 15–20 extra minutes to process ideas in English); authentic assessment design gaps (rubrics measuring thinking processes and collaboration vs. final products only).
Student-Related Barriers	Moderate, uneven student readiness (rated 3/5 for critical thinking; stronger in collaboration, weaker in independent reflection); limited EFL vocabulary constraining complex idea expression; passive learning habits socialized by prior teacher-centered instruction; cultural respect-for-teacher norms inhibiting autonomous inquiry and disagreement.
Infrastructure & Technological Limitations	Limited shared devices (single laptop/projector per class); unstable, slow internet (5–10 Mbps) across Toraja; forced pedagogical regression to traditional methods reducing 'joyful learning' quality by up to 50%; inadequate locally relevant digital learning materials for Toraja EFL contexts.

Systemic Institutional Constraints

All six teachers identified systemic and institutional factors as significant implementation barriers. Professional development was consistently characterized as inadequate in both quality and depth. Mrs. Arni described: 'My training on deep learning strategies focused on online Kurikulum Merdeka workshops... the duration was short (2–3 days). The lacking areas are in-depth training on reflective assessment and AI integration for EFL.' Mr. Yardi characterized training as 'basic and sporadic... lacking depth in practical application for EFL.'

Rigid curriculum structures and national standardized testing pressures compounded the professional development deficit. Mrs. Arni noted that school structures 'hinder with dense subject loads and traditional assessment,' while Mr. Rehan elaborated: 'Pressure from national standardized tests often becomes an obstacle, because limited time makes it difficult to implement long-term projects.' The contradiction between national Deep Learning policy and the persistence of standardized testing oriented toward factual recall represents a structural policy incoherence that teachers in remote regions are left to navigate without institutional resolution.

Pedagogical Instructional Difficulties

Severe time constraints emerged as the most frequently cited challenge across all six interviews. Mrs. Arni stated: '40 minutes per lesson is not enough for in-depth discussion or reflection for beginner EFL students.' Mr. Yardi added that 'the dense teaching schedule (24 lesson hours per week) leaves little time to design deep activities' a time-poverty that compounds the professional development deficit by preventing teachers from engaging in the planning that sophisticated Deep Learning instruction requires.

Specific Deep Learning components proved particularly difficult to implement. Mrs. Arni reported that 'independent reflection and peer evaluation are the most difficult... students need an extra 15–20 minutes to process ideas in English.' Mr. Rehan identified the inquiry phase as most challenging: 'Students need unpredictable amounts of time to explore ideas.' Assessment design emerged as a discrete professional development gap, with Mr. Aris stating: 'I feel I am still lacking in authentic assessment strategies... how to objectively assess students' thinking processes.' Mr. Rehan elaborated: 'The area still lacking is how to create rubrics that assess thinking processes and collaboration, not just the final product.'

Student-Related Barriers

All six teachers reported that student readiness for Deep Learning tasks was moderate and uneven. Mrs. Arni rated students at 'moderate (scale 3/5) for critical thinking or independent work, stronger in collaboration but weak in independent reflection.' Mr. Yardi provided important sociocultural context: 'the cultural background that emphasizes respect for teachers makes them initially passive' a Toraja-specific factor that positions deference to teacher authority as a cultural value that directly inhibits the autonomous inquiry and willing disagreement that Deep Learning's inquiry and reflection phases require.

Specific student difficulties included limited EFL vocabulary for expressing complex ideas, low confidence in sharing opinions, and deeply socialized passive habits. Mr. Rehan's observation 'Students often ask, What is the answer? instead of asking, How do we solve it?' encapsulates the profound difference between the epistemic orientation students bring from prior schooling

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and the epistemic orientation that Deep Learning demands. This gap requires not merely pedagogical adjustment but systematic student re-socialization into new learning roles, expectations, and identities.

Infrastructure and Technological Limitations

All six respondents reported that inadequate infrastructure severely constrained Deep Learning implementation. Device limitations were universal: Mrs. Arni noted 'only 1 laptop/projector unit per class,' while Mr. Rehan documented 'unbalanced device-to-student ratios.' Internet connectivity was persistently problematic, with Mrs. Agustina describing 'slow, unstable internet in Toraja' and Mrs. Arni quantifying speeds of 5–10 Mbps insufficient for the digital learning activities that Deep Learning implementation typically presupposes.

Most significantly, all six teachers acknowledged that these limitations force pedagogical regression to traditional methods. Mrs. Arni's quantification is striking: infrastructure limitations 'reduce the quality of joyful learning by up to 50%... Students are less motivated without visualization.' Mrs. Agustina characterized implementation as 'partial and less joyful.' Mr. Rehan stated: 'These limitations force me to reduce the complexity of lesson design... learning feels less authentic and less deep.' These accounts illustrate that technological constraints function not merely as isolated inconveniences but as structural barriers that systematically undermine the pedagogical coherence and affective quality of Deep Learning instruction.

DISCUSSION

The Readiness-Reality Gap: A Central Finding

The central finding of this study Very High self-reported teacher readiness (M = 4.28) coexisting with substantial and interconnected implementation challenges across all four thematic clusters constitutes what this paper terms the readiness-reality gap: the structural disjuncture between teachers' internal preparedness for pedagogical innovation and the external conditions required for that preparedness to translate into sustained implementation quality. This finding aligns with and extends Hanum's (2024) comprehensive analysis of Merdeka Curriculum implementation across twelve Indonesian provinces, which identified this coexistence of positive teacher attitudes with implementation struggles as characteristic of rapid curriculum reform transition periods. The present study demonstrates that in geographically remote contexts, this gap is amplified by infrastructure deficits that have no parallel in the urban and peri-urban settings that dominate the existing literature.

The gap between pedagogical and psychological readiness (both M = 4.40, Very High) and institutional readiness (M = 4.13, High) and especially the lowest-rated item of infrastructure provision (M = 3.67) precisely maps the readiness-reality gap at the dimensional level. Teachers believe deeply in Deep Learning's value and feel pedagogically equipped to design it; what they lack is the institutional and infrastructural scaffolding to enact it. This pattern confirms the theoretical framework proposed by Wiyono, Kusumaningrum, and Triwiyanto (2023), who conclude from twenty years of Indonesian curriculum reform analysis that positive teacher attitudes are always present but systemic support is never sufficient. The present study provides the first empirical confirmation of this pattern in a remote-region Deep Learning context.

Professional Development Inadequacy as a Structural Barrier

The professional development gaps identified by teachers reflective assessment, AI integration for EFL, authentic assessment design, and brain-based learning adaptation for remote contexts are not incidental to the readiness-reality gap but constitutive of it. Guskey (2021) argues that complex pedagogical competencies require professional development designs including demonstration, practice, feedback, and extended coaching cycles over time. The 2–3 day sporadic workshops that currently constitute Toraja teachers' primary professional development provision represent the opposite of this model: decontextualized, brief, and lacking the sustained practice and feedback cycles that Deep Learning competency development demands.

Teachers' explicit articulations of what they need 'more hands-on practice rather than theory' (Mrs. Arni), 'further guidance' (Mr. Rehan) align precisely with the features that the professional learning literature identifies as necessary for complex competency development (Guskey, 2021). This congruence between teachers' expressed needs and the literature's recommendations suggests that the barriers are not primarily attitudinal but systemic: teachers know what kind of support they need and are not receiving it.

Student Socialization as a Deep Learning Implementation Challenge

The student-related barriers documented in this study are not merely contextual inconveniences but reflect cumulative socialization patterns documented across Indonesian EFL contexts. Lestari and Rahman (2023), in a survey of 950 junior secondary students across five provinces, found that the majority reported preferences for teacher-centered instruction, expressed anxiety with

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open-ended tasks, and lacked metacognitive strategies for self-regulated learning. The Toraja-specific dimension cultural deference norms that make students 'initially passive' in Mr. Yardi's characterization adds a culturally embedded layer to these general Indonesian patterns.

The implication is significant: Deep Learning implementation in Indonesian EFL contexts must be understood as a long-term developmental project requiring not only teacher transformation but systematic student re-socialization into new learning roles. This re-socialization cannot be accomplished within individual lessons or even semesters; it requires sustained, school-wide commitment to alternative pedagogical norms over extended periods. Without this systemic perspective, individual teachers implementing Deep Learning will continue to face students whose epistemic orientations (asking 'What is the answer?' rather than 'How do we solve it?') are misaligned with Deep Learning's demands regardless of teacher preparation quality.

Infrastructure as a Force Multiplier of Challenges

The infrastructure and technological limitations documented in this study function as what Susanto and Malik (2024) term a ‘force multiplier’ constraint that amplify the effects of all other implementation challenges rather than operating independently. When internet is unreliable and devices are shared, the collaborative digital learning platforms that Deep Learning implementation typically leverages become inaccessible. When students lack device access, the multimodal engagement strategies that reduce passive learning habits cannot be deployed. When teachers cannot access online professional development resources due to connectivity constraints, the professional learning gap widens. Mrs. Arni's quantification that these limitations reduce 'joyful learning quality by up to 50%' and Mr. Rehan's observation that teaching 'feels less authentic and less deep' as a result illustrate that infrastructure limitations operate at the level of pedagogical coherence undermining the very essence of what Deep Learning aims to achieve rather than merely adding inconvenience.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

Theoretically, this study extends the teacher readiness literature by demonstrating that high readiness scores on self-report instruments are insufficient predictors of implementation quality in under-resourced contexts. The readiness-reality gap identified here suggests that readiness frameworks must incorporate external readiness conditions institutional, infrastructural, and systemic alongside internal teacher readiness dimensions. A teacher with Very High internal readiness operating in Very Low external readiness conditions cannot be expected to produce Very High implementation quality. This theoretical extension has direct implications for how readiness-focused intervention research designs its measurement and intervention protocols.

Practically, for teachers, the findings underscore the importance of collaborative Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and peer coaching as alternatives to top-down workshop models, culturally responsive approaches leveraging Toraja indigenous contexts as authentic Deep Learning content, and strategic adaptation of Deep Learning principles to low-technology environments. For school leaders, the findings indicate the urgent need for sustained, practice-based professional learning redesign, priority infrastructure investment, and administrative burden reduction to create planning time for Deep Learning design. For district and provincial authorities, differentiated infrastructure investment prioritizing remote regions, school-based instructional coaching, and assessment policy reform aligning with Deep Learning principles represent the most consequential interventions. For national policymakers, resolving the structural contradiction between Deep Learning curriculum goals and standardized testing pressures represents the most fundamental prerequisite for sustainable implementation a contradiction that no amount of teacher readiness development can overcome while it persists.

CONCLUSION

This sequential explanatory mixed-methods study investigated EFL teachers' readiness to implement Deep Learning within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum in the geographically remote context of Toraja, South Sulawesi. Quantitative findings revealed Very High overall teacher readiness (M = 4.28), with pedagogical and psychological dimensions achieving Very High categorization demonstrating that teachers have substantially internalized the values and self-perceived competencies associated with Deep Learning. However, qualitative findings revealed four interconnected challenge clusters systemic institutional constraints, pedagogical instructional difficulties, student-related barriers, and infrastructure and technological limitations that systematically constrain the translation of this readiness into sustained implementation quality. The study's central contribution is the conceptualization of the readiness-reality gap: the structural disjuncture between teachers' high internal readiness and the inadequate external conditions required for that readiness to produce pedagogical transformation. This gap is not primarily a function of teacher

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attitude or knowledge deficits but of systemic under-resourcing, policy incoherence, and infrastructure neglect in remote Indonesian regions. The finding that infrastructure limitations can reduce 'joyful learning quality by up to 50%' illustrates the magnitude of what is lost when curriculum reform ambitions outpace infrastructural investment. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track implementation development over time, incorporate systematic classroom observation to complement self-report data, include student perspectives as essential triangulation, and conduct multi-site comparative studies across diverse remote Indonesian contexts. Most urgently, experimental and quasi-experimental research is needed to evaluate specific interventions sustained instructional coaching, technology provision, assessment reform, and administrative burden reduction that address the readiness-reality gap identified in this study. The goal is not merely to document the gap but to generate the evidence base required to close it, and thereby honor the Deep Learning curriculum's promise with the systemic support it demands.

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