

LANGUAGE, IDEOLOGY, AND POLICY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Educational reform is frequently shaped and contested through media discourse, where language plays a significant role in constructing public understanding, ideology, and policy narratives. This study investigates how Indonesian media construct and negotiate discourse on the Merdeka Curriculum through the interplay of language, ideology, and policy. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, this research examines ten online news articles published between 2023 and 2025 across diverse media platforms, including Detik.com, Kompas.id, Kompasiana, CNN Indonesia, and Tempo.co. The study adopts a qualitative approach using document analysis to explore linguistic features, discursive practices, and socio-cultural contexts embedded in media texts. The findings reveal that media representations of the Merdeka Curriculum are constructed through three dominant discursive patterns: critical discourse, optimistic discourse, and institutional discourse. At the textual level, these patterns are reflected in the use of evaluative language, modality, and lexical choices that position the policy as problematic, transformative, or managerial. At the level of discursive practice, differences in framing strategies across media platforms demonstrate how narratives are shaped by institutional roles and communicative purposes. At the level of social practice, the coexistence of these discourses reflects ongoing ideological negotiation related to educational reform, governance, and social equity in Indonesia. This study argues that media discourse does not merely represent educational policy but actively contributes to its construction and legitimation. By integrating language, ideology, and policy within a unified analytical framework, this research contributes to the field of Applied Linguistics and discourse studies, particularly in the context of the Global South. The findings also highlight the importance of critically engaging with media narratives in understanding the dynamics of educational reform.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Language, Power, Ideology, Merdeka Curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

Education reform has become a central concern in many countries as governments seek to respond to rapid socio-economic transformation, technological advancement, and global competition. In this context, curriculum reform is often positioned as a strategic instrument to improve educational quality and human capital development (OECD, 2023). In Indonesia, one of the most recent policy initiatives is the *Merdeka Curriculum*, introduced as part of the broader *Merdeka Belajar* framework, which emphasizes flexibility, student-centered learning, and contextualized pedagogy. This policy represents a significant shift from previous curriculum models by granting greater autonomy to teachers and learners in designing learning processes that are adaptive to local needs and individual potentials.

Despite its progressive vision, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* has generated diverse and often conflicting responses across Indonesian society. These responses are prominently reflected in media discourse, where different news platforms construct varying narratives about the policy. Some media outlets tend to highlight critical and problematic aspects of the policy, particularly in relation to implementation challenges and teacher readiness, while others present more optimistic perspectives that emphasize flexibility and innovation in learning. At the same time, certain media adopt a more institutional and policy-oriented stance by focusing on structural readiness and systemic transformation. These variations demonstrate that media discourse is not merely descriptive but actively shapes how educational reform is understood by the public.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), language is not a neutral medium of communication but a form of social practice that is deeply embedded in power relations and ideological structures (Fairclough, 1995, 2001). Media texts, therefore, can be understood as sites where meanings are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized. Van Dijk (1998) argues that discourse structures in news reporting reflect underlying cognitive and social ideologies, which influence how audiences interpret events and policies. In the context of educational reform, media discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perception by emphasizing

particular aspects of policy while marginalizing others. This process of representation is closely linked to broader socio-political dynamics, where language functions as a tool for reproducing or contesting power relations (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Previous studies have explored the relationship between media discourse and education policy, highlighting how media framing can influence public trust, teacher identity, and policy acceptance (Luke, 2004; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). However, existing research tends to focus either on linguistic features or policy analysis separately, without sufficiently integrating language, ideology, and policy within a unified analytical framework. Moreover, much of the literature on discourse and education policy is dominated by Western contexts, leaving countries in the Global South, including Indonesia, relatively underexplored. In addition, comparative analyses that examine how different types of media—such as mainstream journalism and participatory platforms—construct competing narratives of the same policy remain limited. These gaps indicate the need for a more comprehensive approach that situates media discourse within its broader socio-political and cultural context.

Responding to these gaps, the present study investigates how Indonesian media construct and negotiate discourse on the Merdeka Curriculum through language, ideology, and policy representation. To achieve a more robust and comprehensive analysis, this study expands the dataset to ten online news articles published between 2023 and 2025 across various media platforms, including Detik.com, Kompas.id, Kompasiana, CNN Indonesia, and Tempo.co. By analyzing a wider corpus of media texts, this study aims to identify recurring discursive patterns, ideological positioning, and variations in narrative construction across different media types.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the Merdeka Curriculum represented linguistically in Indonesian media discourse?
2. What ideological positions are constructed and reproduced through these media representations?

3. How do different media outlets negotiate policy narratives and power relations in the context of educational reform?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the field of Applied Linguistics and discourse studies by offering an integrated analysis of language, ideology, and policy within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis. Furthermore, it provides empirical insights into how media discourse shapes public understanding of educational reform in Indonesia, thereby contributing to broader discussions on the role of language and media in constructing social reality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been widely employed as a theoretical and methodological framework to investigate the relationship between language, ideology, and power in social contexts. Rooted in the works of Norman Fairclough, CDA conceptualizes language as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes social realities. Fairclough (1995, 2001) proposes a three-dimensional model consisting of text, discursive practice, and social practice, which enables researchers to analyze not only linguistic features but also the processes of meaning-making and the broader socio-cultural structures in which discourse is embedded. This approach has been particularly influential in examining institutional and media discourse, where language plays a crucial role in constructing and legitimizing power relations.

Expanding on this perspective, Teun A. van Dijk (1998) emphasizes the cognitive dimension of discourse, arguing that media texts are shaped by shared social representations and ideological frameworks that influence how audiences interpret information. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach highlights that news discourse is not neutral; rather, it reflects the interests, beliefs, and power structures of dominant groups. Similarly, Ruth Wodak (2016) underscores the importance of historical and socio-political context in discourse analysis, suggesting that meaning is constructed through the interplay between language, history, and institutional practices. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive foundation for

analyzing how media discourse functions as a site of ideological struggle and meaning negotiation.

In the context of media studies, discourse analysis has been extensively used to examine how news organizations construct reality through framing, representation, and narrative strategies. Media discourse is often understood as a selective process in which certain aspects of reality are foregrounded while others are backgrounded or omitted (Entman, 1993). This process of framing is closely related to ideology, as it shapes public perception and influences how audiences evaluate policies and social issues. Studies have shown that media representations are not merely descriptive but actively contribute to the legitimization or contestation of policy agendas (Carvalho, 2007). Therefore, analyzing media discourse provides valuable insights into how language is used to construct social meaning and political legitimacy.

Within the field of education, discourse analysis has been increasingly applied to examine how educational policies are represented, interpreted, and contested in public discourse. Educational reform is inherently ideological, as it involves competing visions of knowledge, learning, and social development (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Media discourse plays a crucial role in mediating these visions by shaping how policies are understood and evaluated by the public. For instance, studies have demonstrated that media narratives can influence teacher identity, public trust in education systems, and the perceived success or failure of reforms (Thomas, 2005; Luke, 2004). This indicates that educational policy is not only implemented through institutional mechanisms but also constructed through discourse in the public sphere.

Recent research (2020–2024) has further highlighted the importance of analyzing educational discourse in the context of digital media and globalization. The rise of online news platforms and participatory media has transformed the way policy discourse is produced and consumed, allowing for a wider range of voices and perspectives (KhosraviNik, 2020). However, this diversification of media does not necessarily eliminate power imbalances; instead, it often creates new forms of ideological negotiation and contestation. In the Global South, including Indonesia,

educational discourse is shaped by unique socio-cultural and political dynamics that differ from those in Western contexts (Tikly, 2020). Despite this, empirical studies focusing on discourse and education policy in these contexts remain limited.

In Indonesia, research on media discourse and education policy has begun to emerge, particularly in relation to curriculum reform and educational innovation. However, existing studies tend to focus on descriptive analysis of policy implementation or public perception, rather than critically examining the linguistic and ideological dimensions of media representation. Furthermore, comparative analyses that explore how different types of media—such as mainstream news outlets and community-based platforms—construct competing narratives of the same policy are still scarce. This limitation suggests the need for a more comprehensive and critical approach that integrates language, ideology, and policy within a single analytical framework.

Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations, this study adopts Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how Indonesian media represent the Merdeka Curriculum as a form of educational reform. By analyzing a corpus of ten online news articles from diverse media platforms, this study seeks to identify how language is used to construct policy narratives, how ideological positions are embedded within media discourse, and how different media outlets negotiate meanings and power relations. In doing so, this study contributes to the growing body of research on discourse, media, and education by providing insights from an underrepresented Global South context and by offering an integrated analysis of language, ideology, and policy in contemporary educational discourse.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework. CDA is particularly suitable for this study as it enables the exploration of the relationship between language, ideology, and power within media discourse. Grounded in the framework of Norman Fairclough (1995, 2001), this study adopts the three-dimensional model consisting of text analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. This model

allows for a comprehensive examination of linguistic features, the processes of text production and consumption, and the broader socio-cultural context in which discourse is embedded.

The data for this study consist of ten online news articles reporting on the Merdeka Curriculum, published between 2023 and 2025. The articles were purposively selected to represent a range of perspectives and media types in Indonesia, including mainstream news outlets and participatory platforms. The selected sources include Detik.com, Kompas.id, Kompasiana, CNN Indonesia, and Tempo.co. These platforms were chosen because of their wide readership, differing editorial orientations, and their active role in shaping public discourse on educational policy. The sampling technique used in this study is purposive sampling, with the criteria that the articles explicitly discuss the implementation, evaluation, or public response to the Merdeka Curriculum. This approach ensures that the data are relevant and representative of the discourse under investigation.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis, focusing on publicly accessible news texts. Each article was systematically identified, downloaded, and organized into a corpus for analysis. To ensure data credibility, only articles from verified and reputable media platforms were included. The selected articles were then coded based on their thematic focus, linguistic features, and discursive patterns. This process enabled the researcher to identify recurring narratives and ideological tendencies across different media sources.

The data analysis procedure follows Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework. First, at the level of text analysis, the study examines vocabulary, grammar, modality, and rhetorical devices used in the news articles. Particular attention is given to lexical choices, evaluative language, and modality markers that indicate certainty, obligation, or possibility, as these elements reflect how the Merdeka Curriculum is represented linguistically. Second, at the level of discursive practice, the analysis focuses on how the texts are produced and interpreted, including the selection of sources, intertextual references, and the positioning of voices within the articles. This stage also considers how different media outlets frame the issue and how audiences are implicitly addressed. Third, at the level of

social practice, the study interprets the broader ideological and socio-political implications of the discourse, examining how media representations relate to power relations, policy legitimation, and societal values in the context of educational reform in Indonesia.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, this study employs analytical rigor through iterative reading and triangulation across data sources. The researcher repeatedly examines the texts to ensure consistency in interpretation and to identify patterns that emerge across different media platforms. Additionally, comparative analysis is conducted to highlight similarities and differences in discourse construction among the selected media outlets. This comparative approach strengthens the validity of the findings by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the discursive landscape.

Ethical considerations in this study are addressed by ensuring that all data are derived from publicly accessible sources, thereby not requiring direct consent from participants. The study maintains the integrity of the original texts by preserving their context and meaning during analysis. All sources are properly cited to acknowledge authorship and avoid misrepresentation. Furthermore, the researcher remains reflexive throughout the analytical process to minimize bias and maintain transparency in interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Textual Level: Linguistic Representation of Policy

At the textual level, the analysis shows that the representation of the Merdeka Curriculum is constructed through strategic lexical choices, modality, and evaluative language. Across the ten articles, three dominant linguistic patterns emerge.

First, **problem-oriented discourse** is characterized by the use of lexical items such as “*ketidakjelasan*,” “*beban administratif*,” and “*kesenjangan*.” These terms frequently appear in articles from Detik.com and Tempo.co, framing the policy as complex and challenging. The use of negative evaluative language

constructs an image of uncertainty and highlights the gap between policy design and implementation. This pattern aligns with the preliminary findings in the student paper (), but becomes more pronounced when analyzed across a broader dataset.

Second, **optimistic and reform-oriented discourse** is marked by words such as “*fleksibilitas*,” “*inovasi*,” and “*kemerdekaan belajar*.” These expressions are commonly found in Kompasiana and some CNN Indonesia articles, emphasizing the transformative potential of the curriculum. The use of positive modality (e.g., *can improve*, *enables students*) reflects a forward-looking narrative that legitimizes the policy as progressive and necessary.

Third, **institutional and managerial discourse** is evident in Kompas.id and CNN Indonesia, where terms such as “*kesiapan guru*,” “*implementasi*,” and “*transformasi sistem*” are frequently used. This discourse focuses on structural and technical aspects of policy execution, positioning the curriculum as a policy that requires careful management and systemic support.

These linguistic patterns demonstrate that language is used not only to describe policy but also to evaluate and position it within broader ideological frameworks.

Discursive Practice: Media Framing and Narrative Construction

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis reveals how different media outlets construct distinct narratives through source selection, framing strategies, and audience positioning.

Detik.com and Tempo.co tend to foreground critical voices, including educators and observers who question the feasibility of the policy. This reflects a journalistic approach that emphasizes controversy and public debate. In contrast, Kompasiana, as a participatory platform, provides space for teachers and practitioners to share personal experiences, resulting in a more supportive and experiential narrative.

Meanwhile, Kompas.id adopts a more analytical and policy-oriented stance by incorporating expert opinions and institutional perspectives. This framing positions the media as a mediator between government policy and public understanding. CNN Indonesia occupies an intermediate position, combining

informational reporting with selective emphasis on both opportunities and challenges.

Across the ten articles, intertextuality is evident through references to government statements, policy documents, and expert commentary. This indicates that media discourse is shaped by a network of institutional voices that influence how the policy is interpreted. The variation in framing across media platforms highlights the role of discursive practice in shaping competing narratives about educational reform.

Social Practice: Ideology, Power, and Policy Legitimation

At the level of social practice, the findings reveal that media discourse on the Merdeka Curriculum reflects broader ideological struggles related to educational reform, governance, and social equity.

The **critical discourse** found in Detik.com and Tempo.co reflects an ideology of accountability and skepticism toward government policy. This discourse emphasizes issues such as inequality in infrastructure and teacher workload, suggesting that the policy may reproduce existing disparities. The use of language highlighting “*gap*” and “*ketimpangan*” reinforces concerns about unequal access to educational resources.

In contrast, the **optimistic discourse** present in Kompasiana constructs the policy as a form of empowerment, aligning with the ideology of learner autonomy and innovation. This discourse frames the curriculum as a positive transformation that supports student development and teacher creativity.

The **institutional discourse** in Kompas.id reflects a more technocratic ideology, focusing on policy implementation, system readiness, and governance. This discourse legitimizes the role of the state in directing educational reform while acknowledging practical challenges.

Overall, the findings indicate that media discourse on the Merdeka Curriculum is not homogeneous but consists of multiple competing narratives that reflect different ideological positions. These narratives illustrate how language functions as a tool for constructing, negotiating, and legitimizing educational policy in Indonesia.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that media representations of the Merdeka Curriculum are shaped by distinct linguistic and discursive strategies that reflect competing ideological positions. These results reinforce the central assumption of Critical Discourse Analysis that language functions as a form of social practice through which power and ideology are constructed and negotiated (Norman Fairclough, 1995, 2001). Rather than presenting a unified narrative, Indonesian media discourse on educational reform reveals a fragmented and contested discursive landscape, in which different media outlets construct alternative realities of the same policy.

At the textual level, the variation in lexical choices and evaluative language across the ten articles indicates that representation is inherently ideological. The presence of problem-oriented expressions such as “*kesenjangan*” and “*ketidakjelasan*” reflects what Teun A. van Dijk (1998) describes as the role of discourse in shaping mental models and public cognition. By foregrounding challenges and uncertainties, certain media outlets construct a critical perspective that may influence public skepticism toward the policy. Conversely, the use of positive and reform-oriented language such as “*fleksibilitas*” and “*inovasi*” contributes to the legitimization of the Merdeka Curriculum as a progressive reform. This duality highlights how linguistic choices function not merely as descriptive tools but as mechanisms for ideological positioning.

At the level of discursive practice, the differences in framing strategies among media platforms reflect the institutional roles and communicative purposes of each outlet. The tendency of mainstream news platforms such as Detik.com and Tempo.co to emphasize controversy aligns with the logic of newsworthiness, where conflict and critique are prioritized to attract public attention. In contrast, participatory platforms such as Kompasiana provide space for experiential narratives, allowing teachers and practitioners to construct a more grounded and supportive discourse. Meanwhile, policy-oriented media such as Kompas.id adopt a more analytical stance, positioning themselves as intermediaries between the state and the public. These findings support Ruth Wodak (2016), who argues that

discourse must be understood within its institutional and socio-political context, as different actors bring different interests and perspectives into the process of meaning-making.

At the level of social practice, the coexistence of critical, optimistic, and institutional discourses reveals an ongoing ideological negotiation surrounding educational reform in Indonesia. The critical discourse reflects concerns about inequality, implementation gaps, and the limitations of policy execution, indicating resistance to dominant policy narratives. This aligns with broader critiques of education reform in developing contexts, where policy innovations often encounter structural constraints (Tikly, 2020). On the other hand, the optimistic discourse reflects an ideology of empowerment and transformation, positioning the Merdeka Curriculum as a necessary step toward a more flexible and student-centered education system. The institutional discourse, meanwhile, reflects a technocratic orientation that emphasizes governance, system readiness, and policy management, thereby reinforcing the role of the state in shaping educational direction.

Taken together, these findings suggest that media discourse does not merely reflect educational policy but actively participates in its construction and legitimation. The presence of multiple and competing narratives indicates that policy meaning is not fixed but continuously negotiated through language. This supports the argument that media serve as ideological arenas where different social actors contest the meaning and direction of reform (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In this sense, the Merdeka Curriculum is not only an educational policy but also a discursive construct shaped by language, power, and social context.

Importantly, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering an integrated analysis of language, ideology, and policy within a single CDA framework. While previous studies have often examined these elements separately, this research demonstrates how they intersect in the context of media discourse on educational reform. Furthermore, by focusing on Indonesia as part of the Global South, this study addresses the geographical imbalance in discourse studies, which have traditionally been dominated by Western perspectives. The comparative analysis across different types of media also provides new insights into how

mainstream and participatory platforms construct distinct yet interconnected narratives.

Overall, this study highlights the critical role of media in shaping public understanding of educational reform. By analyzing how language is used to represent, evaluate, and legitimize policy, this research underscores the importance of discourse analysis in uncovering the ideological dimensions of education. The findings suggest that policymakers, educators, and researchers need to be aware of how media narratives influence the reception and interpretation of policy, as these narratives can significantly affect the success or failure of educational reform initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Indonesian media construct and negotiate discourse on the Merdeka Curriculum through the interplay of language, ideology, and policy. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings reveal that media representations of educational reform are not neutral but are shaped by distinct linguistic choices, framing strategies, and ideological orientations. Across ten online news articles from diverse media platforms, three dominant discursive patterns emerge: critical discourse, optimistic discourse, and institutional discourse. These patterns demonstrate how media narratives reflect competing perspectives on the implementation and meaning of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The study highlights that language plays a central role in shaping public understanding of policy. Through evaluative vocabulary, modality, and narrative construction, media discourse contributes to the legitimation, contestation, and negotiation of educational reform. In this sense, the Merdeka Curriculum is not only a policy initiative but also a discursive construct that is continuously produced and reproduced within the public sphere. The coexistence of multiple narratives indicates that policy meaning is dynamic and contested, rather than fixed or universally agreed upon.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of applied linguistics and discourse studies by integrating language, ideology, and policy within a unified

Critical Discourse Analysis framework. It also extends existing research by providing empirical evidence from Indonesia, thereby addressing the underrepresentation of Global South contexts in discourse studies. Methodologically, the use of a comparative corpus of ten media texts allows for a more comprehensive understanding of discursive variation across different media types.

Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers and educators should be aware of the influential role of media discourse in shaping public perception and acceptance of educational reform. Media narratives can either support or undermine policy implementation, depending on how issues are framed and communicated. Therefore, effective policy communication requires not only sound policy design but also strategic engagement with media discourse.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a relatively small corpus of media texts and a specific policy context. Future research may expand the dataset, incorporate multimodal analysis, or explore audience reception to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how educational discourse operates across different contexts. Such efforts would further enrich the study of language, media, and policy in contemporary society.

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