

# An Analysis of Teachers' Understanding of Criterion Referenced Assessment Implementation in Kurikulum Merdeka

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates teachers' understanding of criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) within the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Although CRA is a fundamental component of competency-based education, its classroom application remains inconsistent based on what teachers understand. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five teachers from SMP Islam Ummulqura Indonesia who have direct experience implementing the curriculum. The findings reveal that while teachers possess a general conceptual understanding of CRA, teachers often struggle to operationalize it effectively. Teachers commonly adopt existing rubrics without considering the students and experience difficulties in interpreting learning outcomes, formulating measurable indicators, and aligning assessment criteria with students' diversity. Nevertheless, they perceive this approach as providing more meaningful and personalized feedback that supports students' learning development. The study highlights that enhancing teachers' capacity through authentic assessment training and rubric development is essential to ensure the consistent application of criterion-referenced assessment. In conclusion, both conceptual and technical understanding among teachers need to be strengthened through continuous mentoring. This study recommends the development of practice-based training programs and professional learning communities to enhance teachers' assessment competence in alignment with the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka.

**Keywords:** *assessment, assessment literacy, criterion referenced assessment, kurikulum merdeka*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The improvement of educational quality cannot be separated from the assessment practices implemented in schools (Dempster et al., 2017). In the context of contemporary learning, assessment functions not only as a tool for measuring learning outcomes but also as a process that promotes the comprehensive development of students' competencies (William, 2011). Global shifts in educational paradigms emphasize the importance of authentic assessment, which prioritizes evidence of competency attainment rather than merely numerical scores (Djoub, 2017). This shift has influenced national policy directions in Indonesia, particularly since the introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which positions assessment as an integral component of the teaching and learning process.

The Kurikulum Merdeka was introduced as a response to the dynamic demands of 21st-century learning, emphasizing differentiated instruction, character

development, and curricular flexibility (Anisa, 2022). Within this policy framework, assessment is conceptualized to support the continuous development of student competencies (Black & Wiliam, 2018). One of the key approaches promoted in this curriculum is criterion-referenced assessment (CRA), in which students' performance is evaluated against predefined competency standards rather than compared with their peers (Brookhart, 2012). This assessment model aligns with the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka, particularly its aim to ensure that every learner achieves learning outcomes appropriate to their developmental stage (Arifin et al., 2021).

CRA plays a central role in enabling teachers to monitor student learning progression objectively and accurately (Tovani, 2023). Through CRA, teachers are encouraged to identify specific levels of competency mastery, design relevant instructional interventions, and provide evidence-based, constructive feedback (Yang et al., 2022). Thus, CRA functions not only as an evaluative tool but also as a mechanism for ongoing instructional improvement (Brookhart, 2012). The effectiveness of CRA implementation will significantly determine the extent to which the Kurikulum Merdeka can achieve its intended outcomes, particularly in facilitating learning that is responsive to students' developmental needs (Arlinwibowo et al., 2023).

Despite its positive implications, numerous studies show that the successful implementation of CRA in schools is highly dependent on teachers' understanding of assessment concepts, procedures, and standards (Xu & Brown, 2017). Inadequate understanding may lead to misconceptions about the purpose of assessment, inaccuracies in establishing assessment criteria, and inconsistencies in providing meaningful feedback (DeLuca et al., 2018). Because CRA requires teachers to formulate clear achievement indicators and conduct evidence-based evaluations, limitations in conceptual knowledge or technical skill may hinder its effective application (Smith & Gillespie, 2023).

Previous research indicates significant variation in teachers' assessment literacy across the areas of planning, instrument development, and interpretation of assessment results (Meijer et al., 2023). Several studies also report that teachers are often more accustomed to using norm-referenced assessment (NRA), making the transition to CRA a substantial challenge (Velandar et al., 2024). However, studies that specifically examine teachers' understanding of CRA within the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka remain limited (Sari & Murwaningsih, 2023). This gap underscores the need for research that explores teachers' perceptions, conceptual understanding, and implementation practices related to CRA in schools (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010).

Understanding teachers' level of knowledge regarding CRA is crucial, as teachers serve as key actors in the successful implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Shulman, 1987). Without adequate understanding, CRA risks being applied merely for administrative compliance rather than contributing substantively to the improvement of

learning quality (Heritage, 2021). Therefore, investigating teachers' understanding is a strategic step toward identifying implementation barriers, professional development needs, and policy support mechanisms necessary to strengthen criterion-referenced assessment practices in schools (Mohammadkhah et al., 2022).

This study focuses on analyzing teachers' understanding of CRA implementation within the Kurikulum Merdeka, including their conceptual knowledge, technical abilities, and the difficulties they encounter. The findings are expected to contribute empirical insights to the field of educational assessment, particularly in the context of national curriculum transition. Furthermore, the results may serve as a foundation for developing more targeted and effective teacher training strategies to support assessment transformation in schools.

Considering these urgent needs and research gaps, this study is designed to provide a comprehensive portrayal of CRA implementation from the perspective of teachers as the primary practitioners in the field. A deeper analysis of teachers' understanding is expected to clarify the factors that influence the success of criterion-referenced assessment and inform necessary improvements at both policy and classroom practice levels. The following section outlines the methodology employed to obtain systematic and credible data for this study.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate teachers' understanding and implementation of criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) within the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. Qualitative descriptive research is appropriate for capturing participants' perceptions, practices, and challenges in their natural contexts without imposing predetermined theoretical structures. This design enabled the researcher to generate rich, detailed descriptions of teachers' assessment-related experiences and provide an in-depth understanding of how CRA is interpreted and implemented in real classroom settings.

### **2.2. Participants of the Study**

Five participants consisted of five teachers from SMP Islam Ummulqura Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met the specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. Teachers were chosen based on their: 1) Direct involvement in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka, 2) Experience conducting classroom assessments, and 3) willingness to participate in an in-depth interview.

Purposive sampling ensured that the selected participants possessed the necessary knowledge and experience to provide meaningful insights into CRA-related

practices. All participants had at least one year of experience working with Kurikulum Merdeka.

### **2.3. Instruments**

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide, which contained open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses. The instrument focused on three main areas:

1. Teachers' conceptual understanding of CRA,
2. How CRA is implemented in their classroom assessment practices
3. Challenges encountered during the implementation process.

Interviews were conducted online via video conferencing platforms to accommodate participants' schedules and ensure flexibility. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis.

### **2.4. Data Analysis Techniques**

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The instrument was used to gather information on what teachers understand about CRA, how they apply it, and the challenges they encounter. The transcribed data were analysed using thematic analysis, involving coding, categorizing, and identifying key themes to interpret teachers' experiences and perspectives systematically. To enhance the credibility of findings, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants, allowing them to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the themes derived from their responses.

## **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The findings indicates that teachers are familiar with the basic definition of criterion-referenced assessment (CRA), but their understanding remains largely conceptual and not yet supported by deep assessment literacy. This pattern is also widely reported in Indonesian assessment research, which states that teachers did not fully understanding the analytical processes required to implement it (Yusa et al., 2023). CRA demands teachers to evaluate students based on predetermined criteria rather than against peers, a shift that requires changes in mindset and technical competence (Scielzo et al., 2023). However, this studies confirm that many Indonesian teachers still perceive assessment primarily as a tool for grading rather than guiding learning. This explains they understand CRA at a declarative level but do not yet possess the procedural ability to apply it effectively. Moreover, Al Arsyadhi et al. (2024) acknowledges that the rapid rollout of Kurikulum Merdeka resulted teachers' capacity to carry out effective assessments remains below the expected standard.

A prominent barrier identified in this study is teachers' difficulty in designing assessment criteria that aligned with learning outcomes and student characteristics. Teachers often adopt existing rubrics without tailoring them to student needs. This struggle is frequently faced when educators attempt to translate abstract curriculum standards into concrete, actionable goals for the classroom. Instead teachers often adopt existing rubrics without tailoring them to student needs. This reliance on generic templates results in a "one-size-fits-all" context that fails to capture the nuances of individual student progress or specific local contexts. The root of this issue lies in the technical complexity of the task. Designing measurable indicators requires teachers to break down broad competencies into observable behaviors, a process that demands higher-order assessment skills (Stiggins, 2017).

The challenges in rubric development also stem from a shortage of clear guidelines and exemplars that could help teachers navigate this complex task. Teachers often find it hard to ensure rubrics are valid, reliable, and aligned with competency expectations, raising concerns about subjectivity and inconsistency in assessment outcomes (Bahar & June Maker, 2025). Many teachers face difficulties in translating broad competency goals into specific, observable criteria that accurately represent students' mastery levels (Rohma & Sa'adah, 2025). This problem is compounded by the challenge of designing rubrics that objectively capture these criteria, as rubric development demands a precise articulation of expected competencies at various performance levels (Wardana, 2024).

However, the curriculum explicitly mandates that assessment should be tailored to students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning contexts (Standar Badan Kurikulum, 2024). This principle of differentiation reflects the "Merdeka" (freedom) concept itself and teachers are granted autonomy to design learning experiences that respond to their students' unique needs rather than following rigid, standardized approaches. The process can be both cognitively demanding and time-consuming in adopting the new CRA system effectively, especially when teachers must balance this work with substantial administrative responsibilities. Additionally, limited access to resources and insufficient ongoing professional development hinder teachers' ability to confidently craft and adapt rubrics that reflect both the curriculum's intentions and students' individual contexts.

Despite the challenges, teachers view CRA as more meaningful and capable of providing clear, meaningful feedback that supports students' individual learning progress. This positive perception aligns with the rationale behind Kurikulum Merdeka, which positions assessment as a continuous, feedback-driven, student-centred process. The teachers' appreciation of CRA reflects an understanding that the shift from norm-referenced assessment to criterion-referenced assessment in Indonesia curriculum reflects the direction of modern curriculum reform as stated by Henson (2015).

However, This disconnect between aspiration and implementation is not unusual in educational reform. Teachers often embrace reform ideals before developing the skills and resources necessary to enact them. The challenge for education authorities is to leverage this positive disposition by providing the practical support systems teachers need to translate their beliefs into effective practice.

Furthermore, the findings between teacher understanding and implementation underscores the need for more intensive, practice-oriented professional development. This finding has direct implications for achieving Kurikulum Merdeka's implementation goals. The curriculum's success depends not merely on policy dissemination but on building teachers' capacity to exercise the pedagogical autonomy it grants them. As Pastore (2023) stated that teachers' professional growth develops gradually through a complex, iterative learning process shaped by pre-service and in-service education, various training-related factors (such as duration, content knowledge, and learning opportunities), and ongoing teaching experience alongside contextual influences like collaboration with colleague, school involvement, and professional standards. It shows that effective assessment practice requires opportunities for teachers to examine student work collaboratively.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that teachers implementing Kurikulum Merdeka demonstrate a general conceptual understanding of criterion-referenced assessment (CRA), yet continue to experience significant difficulties in applying it effectively in classroom practice. While teachers recognize CRA as an assessment approach grounded in predetermined learning standards and appreciate its potential to support individualized feedback, their procedural and technical assessment skills remain limited. In particular, challenges persist in interpreting learning outcomes, formulating measurable indicators, and developing context-responsive rubrics.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature by going beyond discussions of policy readiness and highlighting the concrete classroom-level realities of CRA implementation. By focusing on teachers' lived experiences, this research shows that the reliance on generic rubrics is not merely a matter of limited knowledge but also reflects constraints related to workload, time availability, and insufficient technical guidance. This insight adds nuance to previous research on assessment literacy and offers a clearer explanation of why CRA implementation often remains inconsistent.

Importantly, the study also demonstrates that teachers' positive attitudes toward CRA represent a valuable foundation for reform. Teachers perceive CRA as more meaningful and aligned with the principles of Kurikulum Merdeka; however, without sustained, practice-oriented professional development, this potential cannot be fully

realized. Therefore, strengthening teachers' assessment capacity should be viewed as a critical requirement rather than an optional support mechanism in curriculum reform.

Based on these findings, several implications emerge. School leaders should provide structured opportunities for collaborative assessment work, including rubric development workshops and peer discussions focused on student work analysis. Teachers are encouraged to engage in reflective and collaborative practices to gradually enhance their procedural assessment competence. For policymakers, continuous professional development programs emphasizing hands-on CRA application—rather than one-time training sessions—are essential.

In conclusion, achieving the goals of Kurikulum Merdeka requires bridging the gap between conceptual understanding and practical implementation of criterion-referenced assessment. This study underscores that meaningful assessment reform is contingent upon sustained professional support, contextual sensitivity, and the development of teachers' technical expertise. Strengthening these dimensions will enable CRA to function as an authentic tool for supporting student learning and realizing the curriculum's vision of competency-based education.

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