

# Theoretical Overview

## TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN INDONESIAN SCHOOLS IN THE REFORM ERA: WHAT DO TEACHERS HAVE TO SAY?

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### Abstract

Confronted with ever-changing policy and practical demands teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia have to do a very unique priority setting in order to develop survival strategies which are unlikely required by their counterparts working overseas. The purpose of this article is to discuss EFL teachers' experiences in teaching English in Indonesian schools in the reform era. First, a historical sketch is presented which provides background to the contextual demands confronting EFL teachers both at policy and practical levels. Second, an analysis is conducted based on the context of situation in order to locate the core of teachers' roles within the changing context. Next, discussion is presented on the basis of comments made by different groups of teachers on their experiences working within a system fraught with conflicting demands: how the teachers cope with the problems and what strategies they use to survive working in the system. Based on results of this analysis fundamental issues are located and a room for improvement is created relative to the needs for concerted efforts to ensure that teachers get the support they deserve to discharge their

professional duties within the system. Last, suggestions are presented to provide a better support system for teachers' professional development so that the profession of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) proliferates as expected.

Keywords: EFL Teaching in Indonesia, ELT in Indonesia, Reform in TEFL in Indonesia, Reforming ELT in Indonesia

## Introduction

Education in Indonesia dates back to the beginning of the evolution of the country several hundred years ago. Within this lengthy history, the course of the development of Indonesian education system has been divided into six historical periods based on the changing views of the ruling power on the purposes of education. As described in Jalal & Musthafa (2001), the six distinctive periods cover ancient beginnings (Prehistory to Mid 1800s, during which time the primary purpose of education was socialization of religious values and functional everyday life skills), the Dutch Colonial period (Mid 1600s-1942, which provided educational access to only the chosen few), the Japanese Occupation period (1942-1945, during which education for the mass was introduced), the Old-Order Era (1945-1966, during this time the education was populist in its orientation and was directed towards the development of nation and character), New-Order Era (1966-1998, during this period education was oriented to producing "people for development" who have the spirit of *Pancasila*), and the Reform Era (1998-present, where the purpose of education moves towards democratization).

Within the broader context of developmental history, since Indonesia as a nation-state declared its independence in 1945, Indonesia has witnessed at least nine times of curricular changes—the 1945 curriculum, 1952 curriculum, 1964 curriculum, 1968 curriculum, 1975 curriculum, 1984 curriculum, 1994 curriculum, 2004 curriculum, and the 2006 curriculum. The latest curriculum currently known is called *KTSP* (school-based curriculum) (Alwasilah 2013). As teachers work within a system (call it "curriculum" to be more concrete) which imposes a certain structure and space within which teachers' work is initiated, refined, and further developed,

changes at the system level can create confusion and disorientation on the part of teachers, and this can disrupt their daily teaching practices.

The rest of this article will (1) pull together multi-level changes at both policy and practice which surround the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia's schools in the present reform era, (2) bring to fore comments made by different groups of EFL teachers on the centrally-mandated curriculum and approaches to the teaching of English, (3) discuss teachers' strategies in discharging their professional duties and maintaining their roles as teachers of English as a Foreign Language, and (4) to suggest alternative ways of supporting teachers so that they develop professionally.

## A. THE CHANGING CONTEXTS

Among great numbers of changes, which have occurred since the reform era, which began in 1988 are these four major impactful changes: decentralization of educational management and shifting locus of control; policy on the teaching of EFL in Indonesia's schooling system; curricular changes and recommended approaches to the teaching of English and modalities for quality improvement.

### I. Decentralization of educational management

As indicated in the preceding paragraphs, education in the reform era has been marked with some (limited) transfer of authority from central government to regional (provincial as well as district-level) governments. As the so called "regional" and "local" governments during approximately 32 years of the New-Order never enjoyed opportunities to make a decision for their own "collective life" as a province or a district, regional governments lack the necessary capabilities to smoothly manage resources they have in concert with central government in the context of unitary nation-state of Indonesia.

Take for example the cases of teacher recruitment, teacher training, and training organization. Under the decentralized system, currently teacher recruitment is done by provincial government in coordination with the central government while teacher in-service training is the responsibility of the Center for Teacher Professional Development (called "P4TK" in

the Indonesian Language), the regional Body for Quality Assurance (“LPMP”), and regional offices of education (Alwasilah 2011). With regards to the “LPMP”, which is a newly established body that oversees quality of education at provincial level, teachers have some comments. In Alwasilah’s (2011) survey, secondary EFL teachers (28%) believe that *LPMP* cannot do its job; and almost all teachers involved in the survey are aware that *LPMP* offices are not staffed with professionals and expert to do the job (Alwasilah 2011:15).

To overcome this intricate problem, Alwasilah (2011) suggests empowering the provincial government to implement quality standards of education in concert with the regional office of quality assurance (*LPMP*).

## 2. Policy on the teaching of EFL in Indonesia’s schools

While the status of English as a Foreign Language was declared early (in 1955) and accorded the status of a compulsory subject to be taught in Junior Secondary Schools approximately in the same year, the policy to introduce the English language as an optional school subject to elementary school pupils was not made until the 1990’s (Alwasilah 2011). The teaching of English as a Foreign Language at these levels of schooling is fraught with problems especially because there is a lack of academically qualified teachers to support the implementation of the policy.

## 3. Curricular changes and recommended approaches to the teaching of EFL

As indicated in the introductory part of this article, curricular changes in Indonesia’s schooling system in the reform era have been phenomenally frequent. This high frequency of curricular changes has become a public concern that a dissenting voice has this mocking comment: in Indonesia, a change in curriculum can happen following every succession of minister of education. A new minister creates a new curriculum.

An academic analyst, in contrast, has the following to say: the history of EFL teaching in Indonesia seems to follow the same universal pattern of

evolution, namely the use of grammar translation method, direct method, communicative language teaching, and Genre-Based Approach. In Alwasilah's (2011) survey of teachers, it was noted that the following approaches and methods of teaching are mostly mentioned by the teachers: contextual teaching and learning (CTL), PAIKEM (namely, Active, Innovative, Creative, Effective, and Fun), genre-based approach (GBA), and communicative approach.

#### **4. Modalities for quality improvement**

According to teacher respondents in Alwasilah's (2011) study, in the current reform era, most policies on education are basically the products of the following four bodies: (1) Center for Curriculum and Textbook Evaluation; (2) Quality Assurance Body; (3) Center for Educational Personnel Development; and (4) Center for Teacher Professional Development. Of these four, the numbers (1) and (2) units have issued regulations with greatest effects on the professionalism of teachers—that is, among other things, related to curriculum and learning materials, and provision of other educational resources.

### **B. TEACHERS' COMMENTS ON CURRICULAR CHANGES AND THE CONSTANT ROLES OF THE TEACHERS**

This section discusses two very important things related to teachers as one major stakeholder of education. First, discussion will be presented on what teachers have to say on the curricular changes which have caused a great concern among educational stakeholders. Second, teachers' understanding of their own major roles is presented to bring to fore their collective self-defined professional image and work ethos.

#### **I. What do teachers say on the curricular changes?**

To discuss the phenomenal frequency of curricular changes and their disconcerting effects, in this article a decision was made to highlight one illustrative example: the 2004 curriculum. This curriculum (issued in 2004) came to the public discourse with different names: some call it "life-skills curriculum"; some other came to know it as "competency-based curriculum"; and still some other people have associated the

curriculum with the term “Genre-based Approach” (GBE). GBE, coincidentally, began to get introduced to the attention of teachers and other educational stakeholders around the year 2004.

In a survey by Meilani (2007) involving 42 teachers of English from 15 junior secondary schools in Sukabumi Municipality, respondents were asked what they knew about the 2004 curriculum. Their answers to this basic question varied as can be seen from the following table.

Things I understand from the 2004 Curriculum	Percentage
2004 Curriculum emphasizes the mastery of standard competency of English in order to produce students who are communicatively competence both in spoken and written modes.	33.34%
2004 Curriculum emphasizes the teaching and learning process based on text types/genres, in which its focus is on writing skills.	26.19%
2004 Curriculum requires students to be active learners.	26.19%
The cycles of teaching and learning process covering the BKF (stands for Building Knowledge of the Field), MOT (Modeling of Texts), JCoT (Joint Construction of Texts), and ICOT (Independent Construction of Texts)	2.38%
Non-responses: - 1994 curriculum is more comprehensible and applicable than 2004 curriculum (7.14%) - the materials to be taught (2.38%) - the process of making the teaching aids (2.38%)	11.90%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

From these teachers' widely diverse answers, it was evident that teachers were confused. The majority of teacher respondents (33.34%) associated 2004 curriculum with communicative language teaching (CLT); 26.19 % of respondents associated the 2004 curriculum with GBE (Genre-based English); another 26.19% of teachers associated the

2004 curriculum with “student active learning” approach; and the rest of the respondents indicated an overwhelming confusion over the 2004 curriculum.

According to Kagan (1992) when teachers received confusing mixed messages from the system and people around them, teachers tend to create and internalize their own beliefs as guide for their day-to-day job of teaching.

## **2. What are the essential roles of teachers in an EFL class?**

In a recent national survey of Indonesia’s teachers of Junior Secondary and Senior High Schools represented by 55 activists of TEFLIN (The Association of Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia) organization, Musthafa and Hamied (2014) asked the respondents about the essential roles of the EFL teachers. The data led to the following conclusion: three major roles of teachers have been and will remain to be constant. First, teachers of EFL serve as a model for their students to observe and learn from (87.3%; n=48). Second, EFL teachers structure learning activities so that their students learn English optimally both in class and out (76.4%; n=42); and third, teachers of EFL provide continuous and consistent supports so that their students learn English independently (61.8%; n=34).

These data clearly indicate that regardless of the messages the curriculum developers tried to send to teachers, individually and collectively the teachers—through their conscious or unconscious participation (or lack thereof)—have the power to make or break the reform (Yero 2002 cited in Meilani 2007).

## **C. ENGLISH TEACHERS’ STRATEGIES TO SURVIVE IN THE SYSTEM**

As indicated earlier, this section of the article highlights what teachers of EFL are capable of doing, what comments they have on what they have experienced (*vis a vis* their understanding of good teaching), and what strategies the teachers have devised to survive working in the ever-changing system.

## **I. Teachers as decision makers**

In her comprehensive survey study, Meilani (2007) presented data sets which clearly indicated that confronted with pressing sets of decision-making demands during the actual teaching and learning, the majority of the teacher respondents made a very pragmatic decision: the teachers despised the instructional approaches mandated by the 2004 curriculum and taught their students to the test. What teachers did was not without an explanation. As Edwards (2004) has contended: no matter what approach or method is being adopted, teachers remain the ones who take control on most of the values involved in the classroom by making a series of decisions (before, during, and after teaching).

Teachers eventually shape the curriculum according to their own beliefs, teach their own personal values through the implicit curriculum, and frame their classroom interactions in accordance with their own particular definitions of teaching and learning.

## **2. What teachers say about good teaching?**

Based on repeated experiences with curricular changes and based on repeated confirmation about the fact that the changes in curriculum and its mandated teaching approaches, teachers of English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia's schools seem to have been conclusive in their understanding of what makes a good teaching. That is, a teaching activity is good when it leads to good scores on the part of students' learning results in the national English exam (Meilani 2007). And—in the current Indonesia's context-- English exam focuses only on reading, grammar and written expressions presented in the format of multiple-choice questions.

## **3. What strategies do the teachers take to succeed in their teaching?**

When asked about things they did not understand related to 2004 curriculum, most of Meilani's (2007) respondents (54.76%) commented on its impracticality, and plenty of the teachers (45.24%) considered the 2004 curriculum as difficult to implement because it was not relevant to the instructional context these teachers found themselves in. While this relatively newly-mandated curriculum confused the



teachers, the surrounding societal demands remained the same: students' high scores in the national exam.

Confronted with this real-life demand, the teachers were left with only one choice—to teach their students to the test. This is because, as Melani (2007) put it, scores are a direct evidence of both teachers' successful teaching and their students' successful learning.

#### D. PREVAILING ISSUES AND WAYS FORWARD

As indicated in the preceding paragraphs the excessively frequent curricular changes that have occurred in the reform-era Indonesia's educational system have brought with them some serious and counter-productive consequences. To begin to sort out possible solutions to the already indentified problems, this final section of the article discusses some prevailing problems to address, highlights illustrative problems associated with fragmented curricular changes, problems associated with failing socialization activities to ensure comprehensive understanding and support from implementers in the field, and proposes lessons to be drawn from this consequential set of policy changes, and ways forward for a better systemic supports for teachers' professional development.

##### I. Prevailing problems in reforming education in Indonesia

As suggested in previous analyses of reform cases related to curriculum of EFL in Indonesia's schooling system in the reform era, specific problems have recurred including inconsistency of regulations issued by government to guide practice (Alwasilah 2011), rushed and fragmented curricular changes, and the way these abrupt changes are introduced to the public without the necessary systemic supports to ensure their survival in their implementation in the field.

Related to the issue of inconsistency in rules and regulations, Alwasilah (2011) has administered a survey involving EFL teachers from various regions: that is, eighty-eight (88) elementary school teachers in Jakarta and 200 junior secondary teachers who live in Jakarta, West Java, and Banten provinces. The majority (59.3%) of these teachers commented

that inconsistency of government regulations have created confusion among teachers.

In addition, curricular reforms and their corresponding mandated instructional approaches including communicative language teaching, competency-based language teaching, Genre-Based English (GBE), and *KTSP* (School-based Curriculum) which were instituted within the past decade were never accompanied with adjustments in the way students' learning was assessed. As a result, teachers did not reckon these curricular changes as something to take seriously. This teachers' collective attitude—as previous analyses have clearly indicated—has led teachers to teach to the test, whose foci and content coverage remain the same across educational eras.

## **2. Fragmented curricular changes**

As indicated in the preceding paragraphs, learning from experiences, teachers of EFL in Indonesia's schools have developed coping strategies in response to the externally-mandated curricular changes and took a pragmatic strategy: they collect questions from previous years' national exams, and use these published sample exam questions as instructional materials so that their students can “over learn” and internalize them. In other words, the fragmented curricular changes have encouraged EFL teachers to use the “reductionistic” exam questions as a sole guide to their day-to-day EFL instruction.

## **3. Failing socialization**

An overwhelming percentage of Meilani's (2007) teacher respondents have witnessed that confusion prevailed among teachers when the then new 2004 curriculum was instituted to the schooling system. This EFL teachers' collective voice has recently gained empirical support from Alwasilah's (2011) survey respondents which commented on the difficulty of implementing the “reform ideas” primarily because there is no enough guideline to implement it (37.3%), and a huge number of teachers are still confused with the ideas.

#### 4. Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Future Teacher Development

If one closely examines the root causes of the problems this article has thus far attempted to bring to fore, one will undoubtedly come to the conclusion that two major decisive players in education have been excluded in the reform process: teachers and students. When teachers are excluded from the process of initiating curricular reforms, and they are later provided with less-than-clear explanations about both the theoretical as well as practical aspects about the reform ideas, the teachers become understandably confused and felt unsupported. This sense of anomie can lead teachers to create and internalize their own beliefs as suggested by Kagan (1992), and this will run counter to the spirit of the reform being initiated as suggested by Yero (2002 as cited in Meilani 2007).

When the idea of involving students in deciding on the topics covered in the curriculum is never considered in both process of both designing and instituting the new curriculum, the resulting curriculum will create a distance from the learners—the supposedly major beneficiary of the reform efforts. This distance, in its turn, can create “learning disengagement” on the part of learners (Musthafa 2011)

Given these major root causes, future efforts to initiate and institute reforms ideas should be made more inclusive in their orientation and concerted in their implementation.

In what follows, eight items of recommendations are proposed especially with reference to the provision of supports for the development of EFL teachers as professionals.

- (1) All teachers currently working in the system should be provided with opportunities to update their knowledge-base and improve their technical skills to support their optimal performance in their roles as both teachers and researcher (of their own practice).
- (2) Teachers participating in Alwasilah's (2011) survey have admitted that the 9-day certification programs they had attended have improved their welfare (34.45%) more than improved their

professionalism (23.4%). It is recommended that in the future the certification system should be redesigned by involving local universities, the regional office of education, and teacher professional associations. In this way, all resources available in the system can be brought together for fruitful synergy.

- (3) The coverage of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge of the current teacher certification training has been proven solid and effective (Setiadi & Musthafa 2013), in the near future the contents of this highly needed professional training should be incorporated into regular curriculum of preservice (and inservice) teacher professional education.
- (4) Closer working linkages should be established among Professional Association of EFL Teachers such as TEFLIN with English *MGMP* (Council of Teachers of English) and professors of English and/or Language Teaching & Research to ensure continues professional development of teachers.
- (5) Initial steps should be made to begin to establish Professional Development Schools (PDS) where more long-term mutual development is carried out to help teachers and university professors' work together in developing their respective as well as collective professional knowledge-base and technical skills in both research and instruction (Darling-Hammond 2006).
- (6) Education Central Offices should reach out to help develop human resources in the regional (provincial and district-level) offices so that they in turn become better capable of functioning productively and independently in carrying out their own share of responsibilities in the framework of decentralized management of education.
- (7) It is already the time that teachers and students were involved (or at least being consulted) in the process of designing, implementing, and evaluating programs of activities important to them such as curriculum and learning-materials developments.
- (8) While the notion of learner-centered curriculum has already been in policy documents such as Education Ministerial Laws, more

concrete translations should be made into policy implementations such as the determination of topics for student learning and the development of learning materials to support the learner-centered curriculum.

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