FROM POLICY FRAMEWORKS TO CLASSROOMS: EFL CHALLENGES IN INDONESIA

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Abstract
This article explores the multifaceted challenges facing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Indonesia, focusing on the interplay between national policy, curriculum implementation, and classroom practices. Employing a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, this study synthesizes findings from academic publications, government reports, and international research from 2004 to 2024. The analysis reveals persistent issues, including policy-practice gaps, limited teacher training, resource disparities, and insufficient attention to local contexts in curriculum development. Additionally, classroom-level obstacles such as mixed-ability learners, low motivation, and lack of authentic materials hinder effective language instruction. The study emphasizes the need for adaptive pedagogical approaches, continuous professional development, and a more localized curriculum design. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of EFL complexities in Indonesia and offer insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers committed to enhancing English education across diverse regions.

Keywords: EFL, language policy, English education in Indonesia, teacher quality, digital divide, curriculum reform

Introduction

English has long held a pivotal position in Indonesia's national education system—not as a second language with daily communicative use, but as a foreign language mandated primarily for academic and instrumental purposes. It is introduced formally in the junior secondary curriculum and continues through senior secondary and tertiary levels. The adoption of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reflects Indonesia's strategic response to globalization, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the imperative to equip future generations with the linguistic capital needed to participate in international discourse, access global knowledge, and improve socio-economic mobility (Lauder, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2012).

The sociopolitical rationale behind EFL inclusion is compelling: English is often viewed as a key to unlocking global competitiveness, higher education, and employability (Butler, 2004). National curricula over the decades have shifted in emphasis from grammar translation methods to communicative approaches aligned with global pedagogical standards (Hamied, 2012). The 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum

2013), for example, foregrounds communicative competence and critical thinking. However, the realisation of such goals in everyday classrooms remains far from ideal.

Persistent challenges continue to undermine the quality and equity of EFL education in Indonesia. These include policy-practice gaps due to top-down curriculum implementation (Lie, 2007), inadequacies in teacher preparation and continuous professional development (Zein, 2016; Widodo et al., 2020), and limited institutional support, especially in rural and remote regions (Renandya et al., 2018). Moreover, students often exhibit low motivation or perceive English as irrelevant to their immediate context, particularly in areas where English has little to no presence in daily life (Lamb, 2017). The digital divide—magnified by regional disparities in internet connectivity and infrastructure—further complicates efforts to modernize EFL delivery and integrate technology into language learning (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020).

These challenges are not only pedagogical but also systemic, shaped by broader educational governance issues, socioeconomic inequality, and cultural diversity. For example, the implementation of a uniform national curriculum often fails to accommodate the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students across Indonesia's archipelagic geography. Consequently, a one-size-fits-all approach in EFL policy tends to marginalize local voices and classroom realities (Widodo, 2016; Zein, 2016).

It is therefore essential to revisit the state of EFL education in Indonesia through periodic and critical reflection. As the educational ecosystem evolves—amidst policy reforms, digital acceleration, global shifts in language ideologies, and post-pandemic transitions—the challenges of EFL cannot be viewed as static. Instead, they require ongoing scholarly inquiry to understand how policy intentions translate into practice, how teachers negotiate instructional dilemmas, and how learners experience and internalize English within their sociocultural contexts (Kubota, 2011; Holliday, 2005).

Moreover, re-examining EFL in Indonesia holds wider implications for educational equity, national development, and global engagement. Failure to address systemic barriers may widen the opportunity gap between students from different regions and socioeconomic backgrounds. Continuous academic scrutiny is thus not only warranted but urgent, to ensure that English education contributes meaningfully to inclusive and context-sensitive learning outcomes.

Despite these calls for critical reflection, while a number of studies have examined various challenges in EFL education in Indonesia, there is still a lack of integrative reviews that map the interrelated issues across different levels—from policy formulation to classroom implementation. Existing literature often treats these challenges in isolation, without fully capturing the systemic interdependence between curriculum policies, teacher capacity, resource distribution, and learners' sociocultural contexts. This fragmented understanding makes it difficult to develop holistic strategies that address both structural and pedagogical dimensions of EFL education.

To bridge this gap, this study investigates the following research question: What key challenges are consistently highlighted in the literature on EFL education in Indonesia? Through a systematic review of national and international studies published between 2004 and 2024, this article synthesizes recurring patterns and tensions related to language policy, teacher development, classroom practice, and sociocultural dynamics, with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex

landscape of EFL education in Indonesia and informing more equitable and context-sensitive approaches to policy and pedagogy.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in the principles of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), a structured method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing empirical and theoretical research relevant to a specific research question. The SLR was selected as the most appropriate methodology due to its capacity to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex and multidimensional issues surrounding English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Indonesia. Rather than conducting primary fieldwork, this study synthesizes existing knowledge to uncover patterns, tensions, and gaps in the literature that have shaped the discourse of EFL in Indonesia over the past two decades.

The research corpus includes peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, national education reports, and international scholarly studies published between 2004 and 2024. These documents were retrieved through a purposive sampling strategy from credible academic databases including Scopus, Google Scholar, SpringerLink, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). The search process used Boolean combinations of key terms such as "EFL in Indonesia," "English education challenges," "teacher competence," "curriculum implementation," and "language policy in Indonesia." Additional manual searches of reference lists were conducted to ensure the inclusion of foundational and frequently cited works.

To ensure the relevance and rigor of the sources, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied. The inclusion criteria required that studies: (1) focus explicitly on the Indonesian EFL context; (2) examine either macro-level (policy/systemic) or micro-level (classroom/practice) challenges; (3) are written in English or Bahasa Indonesia; and (4) are accessible in full-text format. Studies were excluded if they focused on ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts outside Indonesia, lacked empirical or theoretical grounding, or were editorial/opinion pieces without academic substantiation.

A total of 38 sources met the criteria and were subjected to thematic coding and synthesis using a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Each text was read multiple times to extract recurring themes, which were then categorized into overarching domains, including policy-practice gaps, teacher professionalism, pedagogical constraints, student motivation, technological integration, and sociocultural dynamics. Data were organized using matrix coding to facilitate cross-theme comparisons and ensure transparency in the analytical process.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was applied through comparison of perspectives from national and international sources, as well as from various educational stakeholders (e.g., teachers, policymakers, and scholars). The credibility of the thematic findings was further ensured through peer debriefing with two EFL education scholars and the application of an audit trail to document analytic decisions.

Ultimately, this methodological approach allows for a nuanced and critically reflective understanding of the evolving landscape of EFL education in Indonesia, while also highlighting the structural and pedagogical tensions that demand continued scholarly and policy-level attention.

Result and Discussion
Result
Policy-Practice Discrepancy in Curriculum Implementation

Despite the progressive intent of Indonesia's national English curricula, such as the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum, a significant gap persists between policy design and classroom implementation. These curricula emphasize communicative competence, critical thinking, and learner-centered pedagogy. However, many teachers continue to rely on traditional methods such as grammar-translation and rote memorization. This inconsistency is not solely due to resistance to change but reflects deeper systemic challenges including insufficient teacher preparation, ambiguous curricular guidelines, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms (Yuwono & Harbon, 2010; Widodo, 2016).

In many cases, teachers express confusion over how to operationalize curriculum goals into daily lesson plans. The absence of localized instructional models or practical examples means that educators often revert to older practices that are more familiar and seemingly more manageable. This phenomenon leads to what Hamied (2012) terms "surface implementation," where policies are followed in form but not in substance. Moreover, there is a lack of consistent professional support to mediate the gap between curriculum expectations and classroom constraints, particularly in schools outside urban centers.

A qualitative study by Widodo (2016) supports this concern, showing that EFL teachers in Central Java found curriculum terms such as "critical thinking" or "student-centered learning" too abstract and disconnected from their teaching reality. One senior teacher stated, "We were told to promote critical thinking, but we were never shown how to do that in an English lesson." Such ambiguity further reinforces surface-level compliance without deep pedagogical change.

Limited Teacher Competency and Professional Development Access

The effectiveness of EFL instruction is heavily influenced by teacher quality, yet Indonesia still grapples with wide disparities in teacher competence. Teachers in rural and remote areas often face difficulties in mastering English themselves, let alone teaching it effectively. Many of them graduate from under-resourced teacher training institutions with limited exposure to communicative methodologies or current pedagogical trends (Zein, 2016). These limitations impact both classroom interaction quality and learner outcomes.

Moreover, access to professional development remains highly centralized. Programs offered by the Ministry of Education or foreign language training institutions are typically conducted in major cities and cater primarily to teachers from well-funded schools. Even when rural teachers attend such workshops, they often find it difficult to apply what they've learned due to contextual mismatches or lack of follow-up mentoring (Renandya et al., 2018). As a result, teacher development efforts remain fragmented and disconnected from classroom realities.

These challenges are compounded by the quality of pre-service training itself. Zein (2016), in a study on teacher education programs, found that many trainee teachers from rural regions lacked confidence due to limited English exposure and practice-based training. One trainee confessed, "During college, we mostly practiced scripted dialogues. I felt anxious when I had to speak freely in front of my students." This

situation highlights how under-preparation can perpetuate ineffective classroom practices.

Unequal Student Motivation and Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Student motivation plays a critical role in language acquisition, yet it remains uneven across different regions and social classes in Indonesia. Students in urban environments, who have better access to technology, exposure to English media, and supportive family environments, often exhibit higher intrinsic and instrumental motivation to learn English. In contrast, students in rural or socioeconomically disadvantaged areas frequently perceive English as irrelevant to their daily lives and future aspirations (Lamb, 2017).

This motivational gap is compounded by unequal access to extracurricular opportunities, such as English clubs, speech competitions, and international programs. Without these opportunities, many students feel disconnected from English both linguistically and culturally. Moreover, when English is taught as a subject to pass exams rather than as a means of communication, students struggle to see its practical value. This results in a cycle of low engagement, poor performance, and decreased confidence, particularly among rural learners.

This motivational disparity was captured in Lamb's (2017) study in South Sulawesi, where students from farming communities perceived English as a language disconnected from their lives. One student expressed, "Why should I learn English? My father is a farmer—I won't be going abroad." This comment reflects how economic background and local context deeply influence learners' attitudes toward English.

Infrastructure and Technological Inequality

Infrastructural inequality remains one of the most persistent issues affecting the delivery of quality EFL education in Indonesia. While schools in urban or well-funded areas benefit from libraries, computer labs, and internet connectivity, schools in remote regions often lack basic teaching facilities. The disparity is particularly visible in the eastern provinces, such as Papua and Nusa Tenggara, where classrooms are overcrowded and teaching aids are scarce.

This infrastructure gap directly affects teachers' ability to implement interactive, media-rich, and student-centered learning. Even when teachers are trained in ICT-based instruction, their efforts are hampered by unreliable electricity, limited devices, or unaffordable data costs. These constraints not only widen the digital divide but also reinforce systemic educational inequalities, placing already marginalized students at a further disadvantage.

Further evidence from Supriyadi, Aryanti, and Anggraeni (2021) reveals that even in semi-urban schools in Yogyakarta, digital resources remain scarce. One English teacher noted, "We only have one projector for five classrooms. It's hard to use videos or presentations consistently." Such limitations make it difficult for teachers to implement the interactive, ICT-based learning envisioned in national curriculum goals.

Assessment-Oriented Teaching Practices

The assessment system in Indonesia exerts significant influence on how English is taught. Despite curricular shifts toward communicative competence, the national exams continue to prioritize grammar accuracy, vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension. Consequently, teachers often prioritize "teaching to the test" to

ensure student success in high-stakes assessments, leading to formulaic and test-driven pedagogy (Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

This exam-oriented culture discourages creativity and spontaneity in language use. Speaking and writing tasks—though essential in real-world communication—are often sidelined because they are not emphasized in exams. As a result, students may achieve high scores on standardized tests but struggle with actual language use. Furthermore, the pressure to perform well in exams leads to anxiety among students and contributes to the perception that English is a difficult and unenjoyable subject.

This pattern is evident in various classroom contexts. For instance, Setyono and Widodo (2019) observed that in several high schools in East Java, teachers tended to neglect speaking and writing activities because they were "not assessed in the national examination." One teacher admitted, "We don't have time for speaking because students are only assessed on reading and grammar in the exam." This finding illustrates how high-stakes assessments shape classroom priorities, often at the expense of communicative competence.

Digital Divide and Post-Pandemic Technology Integration

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified the digital divide in Indonesian education. While some schools rapidly transitioned to online platforms, many rural and under-resourced schools faced immense challenges due to lack of internet access, digital tools, and teacher readiness (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020). This disparity resulted in learning loss and increased dropout rates in some areas, highlighting systemic vulnerability in times of crisis.

Even after schools reopened, the long-term effects of the pandemic remain. Teachers who lacked digital literacy struggled to integrate technology meaningfully into classroom instruction. Moreover, many students lost interest in online learning due to poor connectivity or lack of interaction. These experiences underscore the need for comprehensive digital literacy training, infrastructure investment, and the development of blended learning models tailored to Indonesia's diverse educational contexts.

This divide was further illustrated by a case study from Fauzi and Khusuma (2020), who reported that elementary school teachers in rural West Java had to rely solely on WhatsApp broadcasts and printed worksheets due to a lack of internet access and digital tools. One teacher shared, "I can only send photo-based tasks via WhatsApp. Not all students have smartphones or can access Zoom." This example reflects both the resilience of educators and the harsh reality of digital inequality during the pandemic.

Discussion
Bridging Curriculum and Classroom Reality

The persistent gap between curriculum policy and classroom implementation suggests a systemic issue in Indonesia's educational governance. While policy designers aim to align national education with global standards through communicative and student-centered approaches, the execution remains constrained by ground-level realities. Teachers, especially in less resourced areas, interpret these curricula with limited pedagogical autonomy and often default to traditional methods due to a lack of clarity, support, or confidence. This results in a superficial enactment

of progressive policies—a phenomenon that reinforces educational inequality rather than mitigating it (Hamied, 2012).

To address this issue, curriculum development must be decentralized and inclusive, allowing regional education offices and schools to adapt curriculum goals to their contexts. Professional development programs should be embedded into curriculum implementation processes, with sustained mentoring and peer-collaboration models that help teachers internalize and apply pedagogical innovations. Without such a contextual and teacher-sensitive approach, national curriculum reforms risk becoming aspirational documents with minimal classroom impact.

Reframing Teacher Development as Professional Growth

Teacher quality remains a cornerstone of EFL effectiveness, yet current development models often treat training as a compliance measure rather than a reflective and transformative process. Most workshops are one-off events with limited follow-up, focusing on administrative accountability rather than teaching quality. This approach fails to foster sustained teacher learning or changes in practice (Widodo et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers in rural areas remain marginalized from these opportunities, further entrenching disparities.

A more effective approach would involve long-term, collaborative professional development that is context-responsive and empowers teachers as reflective practitioners. Communities of practice, mentoring systems, and action research can provide sustainable platforms for professional growth. Additionally, teacher education institutions must revise their curricula to emphasize practice-based learning, intercultural competence, and critical pedagogy, preparing future educators for the complex realities of Indonesian classrooms.

Rethinking Motivation and Learner Agency

Student motivation is not merely a psychological variable but is shaped by structural, cultural, and ideological factors. The perception of English as an elite language—primarily useful for urban, middle-class futures—excludes many learners who do not see its relevance to their lives. This exclusionary ideology contributes to motivation gaps and learner alienation (Lamb, 2017). In this context, pedagogical efforts must aim to make English learning meaningful, inclusive, and connected to local identities.

Teachers can play a critical role in reframing English as a tool for expression, access to global knowledge, and intercultural dialogue, rather than just a gatekeeping subject. Integrating local content, employing translanguaging strategies, and using project-based learning can foster a more participatory and motivating environment. Such approaches help bridge the cultural distance between learners and the English language, promoting deeper engagement and a stronger sense of learner agency.

Addressing Infrastructure and Digital Inequality

The issue of infrastructure inequality goes beyond physical resources; it reflects broader socio-political and economic marginalization. Schools in remote areas often face a double disadvantage: limited access to basic facilities and minimal attention from education authorities. This disparity hampers the realization of equitable language education and contradicts the national commitment to inclusive development.

Post-pandemic educational recovery offers an opportunity to address these gaps. Government and private stakeholders must collaborate to ensure equitable access to educational infrastructure, especially digital resources. Investment in school facilities must be accompanied by investment in people—training teachers to use technology not as a substitute for instruction, but as an enabler of critical, interactive learning. Sustainable development in this area also requires community involvement, ensuring that technological interventions are relevant and effectively utilized.

Reforming Assessment Culture

The current high-stakes testing system perpetuates narrow definitions of language proficiency and stifles pedagogical innovation. When teacher evaluation and student progression are tightly linked to standardized test results, it becomes rational for teachers to focus on test-taking strategies rather than communicative competence. This leads to a misalignment between curriculum intent and assessment practices (Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

Reform is urgently needed to make assessment more authentic and competency-based. Alternative assessments such as portfolios, peer assessment, and task-based evaluation should be mainstreamed and supported by policy. Moreover, teacher training must include assessment literacy so that teachers are equipped to design and interpret assessments aligned with communicative goals. A culture shift is essential—from assessment as control to assessment as learning.

Making Digital Transformation Inclusive and Sustainable

While the digital transformation of education offers opportunities, it also poses risks of deepening educational inequality if not managed inclusively. The digital divide in Indonesia is not just about infrastructure—it encompasses digital literacy, instructional design, and cultural relevance of technology use. During the pandemic, many teachers resorted to WhatsApp or offline worksheets due to poor connectivity, illustrating both ingenuity and systemic neglect (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020).

Digital transformation should thus focus on accessible tools, localized content, and teacher readiness. Government-led training programs must go beyond tool orientation to include pedagogical integration. Additionally, future EFL strategies should incorporate blended learning models that combine face-to-face and digital resources to increase flexibility and reach. The goal is not to digitize existing problems but to use technology to create more inclusive, engaging, and equitable learning environments.

To conclude the discussion, it is important to move beyond merely identifying isolated challenges and toward recognizing the interrelated nature of systemic and pedagogical issues in Indonesian EFL education. The following table provides a synthesized overview of the six key challenges explored in this study, along with their potential consequences if left unaddressed, and actionable strategies to mitigate them. This visualization aims to bridge theory and practice, offering practical entry points for educational reform and classroom innovation.

Table 1. Summary of Key EFL Challenges in Indonesia and Strategic Responses

Challenge	Potential Consequence if Ignored	Strategic Solution	Responsible Stakeholders

Policy-Practice Gap	Surface-level curriculum compliance without pedagogical change	Decentralize curriculum adaptation; context-based teacher mentoring	Ministry of Education; Local Education Authorities
Limited Teacher Competency	Low instructional quality; reduced learner engagement and outcomes	Practice-based pre-service training; sustainable in-service PD; peer mentoring networks	Teacher Education Institutions; School Leaders
Student Motivation Disparities	Disengagement, dropout, and widening educational inequities	Culturally relevant materials; project-based and identity-affirming pedagogy	Teachers; Curriculum Designers
Infrastructure and Digital Inequality	Persistent rural-urban education divide; technology-excluded classrooms	Equitable infrastructure investment; mobile-friendly content; community-based digital access	Government (National & Local); NGOs
Assessment-Oriented Teaching	Reduced communicative competence; narrow test-driven instruction	Shift to authentic assessment (portfolios, performance tasks); develop assessment literacy	Education Authorities; Teacher Training Programs
Post-Pandemic Tech Integration Gap	Long-term instructional disruption; missed opportunities for blended learning	Digital pedagogy training; hybrid learning models using low-tech tools	Ministry of Education; ICT Support Providers

Conclusion

This study underscores that the challenges surrounding EFL education in Indonesia are not discrete or isolated, but intricately connected through structural, pedagogical, and contextual dimensions. As previously synthesized, these interlinked issues—from policy-practice misalignment to digital inequities—cannot be addressed through fragmented interventions. Instead, they require systemic responses that are inclusive, context-aware, and aligned across all levels of the educational ecosystem.

Moving forward, EFL reform in Indonesia must be conceived as a continuous and adaptive process. National strategies should be grounded in classroom realities, informed by teacher voices, and responsive to regional diversity. Blended learning

models, equitable teacher development, and authentic assessment practices must be institutionalized, not treated as peripheral innovations.

Moreover, as global education shifts toward technological hybridity and intercultural competence, Indonesia's EFL system must remain open to change—guided by evidence, not ideology. By fostering participatory policy design, sustained professional learning, and equitable infrastructure development, stakeholders can ensure that English language education contributes not only to global competitiveness but also to national cohesion and social justice.

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