

From Policy to Practice: How Teachers Interpret Curriculum Levels in Indonesian TEFL Contexts

Bianca Aalya Frhasty*, Meisarah Winertah, Bayu Santoso, Kalayo Hasibuan

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia

* biancaalya77@gmail.com (Primary Contact)

ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes findings from prior studies that investigate English teachers' perceptions and practices in implementing English curriculum policies for Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Indonesian classrooms. A total of 25 national and international research articles published between 2013 and 2025 were reviewed to describe how teachers understand curriculum policy, respond to curriculum change, and engage in continuous professional development. The review also explores challenges teachers face and strategies they employ when translating curriculum documents into classroom practices. The analysis identifies four recurring themes: (1) varied perceptions of curriculum policy documents, (2) gaps between conceptual understanding and classroom implementation, (3) the influence of teacher competence on curriculum enactment, and (4) forms of resistance and constraints that limit teachers' awareness and adoption of curriculum guidelines. Overall, the findings highlight the critical role of teacher knowledge, competence, and institutional support in shaping curriculum implementation across classroom contexts, and suggest the need for more sustained professional development aligned with actual teaching realities.

Keywords

Curriculum adaptation,
Policy-practice gap,
Teacher competence,
EFL pedagogy

Article History

Received: 2025-12-09
Accepted: 2025-12-30

Copyright © 2025, Frhasty et al.
Published by MAN 4 Kota Pekanbaru
DOI: [10.56113/takuana.v4i3.258](https://doi.org/10.56113/takuana.v4i3.258)

1. INTRODUCTION

While infrastructural limitations, policy design, and institutional support undeniably affect curriculum implementation, teacher competence emerges as the most decisive mediating variable in the successful enactment of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) curricula. This is because curriculum policies, regardless of their theoretical soundness, are not implemented directly by systems or resources, but are interpreted, adapted, and enacted by teachers within classroom contexts (Zein et al., 2020; Pribudhiana et al., 2021). As policy actors at the micro level, teachers exercise professional judgment in selecting pedagogical strategies, designing learning activities, and responding to learners' needs. Consequently, variations in teacher competence often result in markedly different

classroom practices even under identical curricular and infrastructural conditions (Hakim et al., 2024).

Empirical studies continue to show how competent teachers can more effectively compensate for contextual constraints such as a lack of teaching materials, large class sizes, or institutional support. Artacho et al. (2020) illustrate that pedagogically competent teachers with the adaptive expertise to do so are better able to realize learner-centered practices despite structural limitations. In a related vein, Weng et al. (2019) contend that professional competence serves as an enabling condition through which teachers are able to instantiate curriculum intention into substantive learning experiences; conversely, a dearth of competence often results in superficial or procedural accommodation of curriculum imperatives.

Furthermore, recent literature conceptualizes teacher competence not merely as technical skill, but as an integrated construct encompassing pedagogical content knowledge, contextual awareness, reflective practice, and professional agency (Weng et al., 2019; Artacho et al., 2020). These dimensions enable teachers to navigate tensions between prescribed curriculum goals and classroom realities. In the Indonesian context, where curricular reforms are frequent and often ambitious, teachers' ability to understand policy intentions and translate them into feasible instructional practices becomes particularly critical (Zein et al., 2020). Without sufficient competence and sustained professional development, curriculum reforms risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative (Pribudhiana et al., 2021).

Therefore, while infrastructural improvements and policy coherence remain important, this review positions teacher competence as the central lever for bridging the persistent gap between TEFL curriculum aspirations and classroom practices in Indonesia. Strengthening teacher education and continuous professional development should thus be prioritized as a strategic investment to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of ongoing and future curriculum reforms (Hakim et al., 2024; Artacho et al., 2020).

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

In order to investigate how Indonesian English teachers comprehend and implement different curriculum levels in TEFL context, this study employed a literature review design. Researchers can integrate findings from various studies to obtain a comprehensive understanding of trends, difficulties, and teaching implications by employing a literature review. In order to identify significant themes, theoretical connections, and research gaps pertaining to teachers' interpretation and implementation of curricula, the approach was founded on the frameworks of Snyder (2019) and Torraco (2016). According to Hakim et al. (2024), this review emphasizes how teachers' professional competence and curriculum knowledge are essential components that link educational theory to real-world classroom implementation. Similarly, Pribudhiana et al. (2021) note that the efficacy of curriculum policy implementation is greatly influenced by the way teachers interpret the curriculum.

2.2. Data sources and selection criteria

The reviewed literature was derived from a range of academic databases including Google Scholar, ERIC and ResearchGate. This comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings and institutional reports published from 2013 to 2025. This range of time was chosen so that the papers written in two curricula, namely 2013 Curriculum and *Kurikulum Merdeka* can be compare to explain teacher experiences between one and the other curriculum reforms. To ensure relevance and quality, the inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Studies focusing on Indonesian English teachers and curriculum implementation.
2. Articles addressing teacher understanding, readiness, and pedagogical adaptation.
3. Research published in reputable journals or proceedings.
4. Studies written in English or Indonesian and accessible online.

Studies that did not specifically discuss English language teaching or did not include curriculum-related elements were excluded. The final selection consisted of 25 key studies representing diverse methodological and regional perspectives.

2.3. Data collection procedures

Data collection involved systematic searching, screening, and selection of relevant sources following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach. The process included the following stages:

1. Identification: Initial search using keywords such as “curriculum implementation,” “English teachers,” “Kurikulum 2013,” and “Kurikulum Merdeka.”
2. Screening: Removal of duplicates and irrelevant articles based on titles and abstracts.
3. Eligibility: Full-text review to ensure that each study aligned with the inclusion criteria.
4. Inclusion: Final compilation of studies that provided empirical or conceptual insights into teachers’ curriculum interpretation and implementation.

Each article was catalogued according to the author(s), year, research focus, and major findings. This process ensured systematic data organization and allowed the comparison of results across different studies.

2.4. Data analysis

The entire body of literature which was included for review was subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006 i.e., patterns across the studies are observed and interpreted). The process included:

1. Acquaintance: Reading of specific articles for multiple times to have a full comprehension.
2. Coding: Identification of major themes and common ideas on the interpretation of curricula, difficulties in implementation, and pedagogical responses.
3. Development of Themes: Categorization of codes into higher order themes such as teacher preparedness, interpretation of policy, experience of implementation and pedagogic renewal.

4. Refinement: Reviewing and synthesizing themes in relation to the fit with research purpose.
5. Synthesis: Drawing meaning from findings to show how teacher competence, institutional support, and training impact curriculum implementation.

To enhance credibility, the review followed methodological rigor through triangulation of sources, comparative analysis, and reference validation. This approach aligns with the procedures described by Hakim et al. (2024), who emphasize systematic coding and synthesis as key strategies for ensuring analytical depth in educational literature reviews.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this systematic literature review are organized into four major themes that emerged from the synthesis of the selected studies. These themes elucidate how English teachers conceptualize syllabus standards, how they interpret and enact prescribed guidelines in instructional practices, and the challenges they encounter in the implementation process.

3.1. Varied interpretation of curriculum policy

The main discovery reveals that teachers understand curriculum standards in various ways, shaped by their educational background, teaching situation, and school rules. Even though most people who answered knew the main ideas of the Independent Curriculum and the updated 2013 Curriculum, their understanding of how to use it in real life was very different.

Some teachers thought of the curriculum as a set of skills and chances to be creative, but others mainly saw it as a list of official duties to finish. This difference agrees with Hakim et al.'s (2024) idea that many teachers in Indonesia spend more time trying to understand curriculum instructions than making teaching materials.

Teachers in private schools usually changed the curriculum more freely, adding group activities and assignments focused on projects. However, teachers in public schools usually stuck to the official lesson plans closely, with very few changes, because of limits set by the school.

3.2. Policy understanding versus classroom reality

There is a huge disconnect between teachers' knowledge of curriculum policy in theory and their everyday enactment as practitioners with students. While the colleagues responded positively to student-centered learning in principle, classroom observation revealed dominance of teacher-centered approaches. In general, teachers were conservative in their methods and employed traditional measures such as translation, drilling for mechanical repetition and textbook exercises. Such paradox is in agreement with the results of Pribudhiana et al. (2021) that a key determinant for effective education policies is the professional readiness of teachers. Teachers explained that lack of resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient technology were barriers to change in teaching practice

3.3. Curriculum implementation influenced by teacher competence

The third subject centers on how teachers' skill levels relate to how they understand the curriculum. Educators who had superior abilities in language and teaching displayed more assurance and inventiveness when modifying resources and creating evaluations that matched the goals of the curriculum.

In contrast, teachers who had less experience usually relied a lot on directions from textbooks or official government outlines, which revealed only a small amount of original thinking in making classes relevant for what students needed. These findings agree with what Hakim et al. (2024) found, noting that the professional development of teachers needs to find a middle ground between classroom ideas and actual teaching.

Several people participating said that curriculum classes were overly focused on abstract ideas and did not give them specific methods for using the curriculum in different teaching situations for English as a Foreign Language.

3.4. Challenges and adaptive strategies

The final theme is about how teachers struggle with the realities in everyday life, and the ways they come up with finding to relate to curricula. The most common problems that arose were too little time, too little teaching materials, students being not good enough in English and getting too little support from the school. Despite these barriers, several other teachers said they had devised creative workarounds, such as creating online learning units, using familiar surroundings to teach their material and teaming up with colleagues to swap materials. This is consistent with the finding of Pribudhiana et al. (2021) in which improved teaching and teamwork contribute to readiness and flexibility for the implementation of education guidelines. Educators also voiced a deep need for ongoing skill-building opportunities that prioritize useful skills for the classroom instead of just following rules.

According to the synthesis of the reviewed studies, curriculum implementation in Indonesian English language instruction is a dynamic process that involves interactions between local context, teacher cognition, and policy. Despite the fact that national curriculum reforms like the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Curriculum were intended to promote communicative competence and learner-centered pedagogy, their implementation in classrooms is still uneven. The interpretation and application of policy are heavily influenced by the beliefs, knowledge, and contextual realities of teachers, who serve as the primary mediators in this process. This result supports the idea put forth by Hakim et al. (2024) that educators are interpretive agents who reframe curriculum objectives in light of their knowledge and available resources rather than merely carrying out policies.

The reviewed literature points out to the fact that professional competence establishes the way in which curricula are carried out. Studies of Garzon Artacho et al. (2020) and Weng et al. (2019) notes that instructors with pedagogically and linguistically superior skills develop interaction-rich learning events. This essential additional support structure is undermined by poor access to continuous professional development. More frequently, teachers only engage in short workshops that are theoretical and not linked with actual classroom experiences. This inefficiency can be attributed to deficiency of practical training that still make teacher-centeredness persist in education in spite of the policies that promote student autonomy and active learning. According to Pribudhiana et al. (2021), professional readiness cannot be supported by stand-alone certification programs alone,

but through ongoing coaching and reflection-in-action, combined with community-based learning. The literature points to structural and systemic constraints as a major factor affecting the implementation of policy in schools. Factors such as large class sizes, lack of teaching resources, and an emphasis on exam-based assessments hinder teachers' ability to effectively use communicative teaching methods (Suryadi et al., 2019; Zein et al., 2020). These limitations highlight that educational reform in Indonesia often adopts a top-down strategy, where changes to the curriculum are made without adequate support for infrastructure or training. Consequently, teachers are expected to innovate within strict administrative frameworks. This supports the view of Leithwood et al. (2020) that for educational reform to be successful, there needs to be a connection between high-level policy design, institutional management, and the practices of individual teachers.

However, there is also proof of teachers' adaptability and resilience in the literature. By incorporating digital media, peer collaboration, and culturally relevant materials into their lessons, many educators have started to create locally responsive pedagogies (Setyaningsih, 2024). These programs demonstrate the expansion of teacher agency, or the ability of educators to think critically, innovate, and modify policies while keeping in mind contextual constraints. These bottom-up approaches show that teachers' innovative interactions with policy, rather than merely following the rules, can lead to successful curriculum implementation. A workable solution to close the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities might be to strengthen this agency through school-based professional learning communities.

Theoretically, these results lend credence to the idea that curriculum implementation is a complex process influenced by interrelated institutional, individual, and policy factors. The need for an integrated strategy that incorporates contextualized training, supportive school leadership, and clear policy communication is highlighted by the policy-practice gap noted throughout the literature. Indonesia can only transition to a more cohesive and long-lasting TEFL curriculum reform model by working together. In the end, the most important step in making sure that curriculum innovations result in significant enhancements to students' learning experiences is to empower teachers as reflective practitioners rather than passive implementers.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review highlights that the implementation of the curriculum in Indonesia's English language education system is a complicated and inconsistent process. It is significantly affected by teachers' professional skills, the conditions of the institutions, and the design of systemic policies. Even with ongoing reforms like the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka curriculum, the desired transition to a communicative and student-centered approach has not been fully achieved in classrooms. The research shows that teachers interpret curriculum policies in diverse ways, influenced by their teaching philosophies, educational backgrounds, and the level of support from their institutions. These differences have resulted in varied classroom practices, contributing to a persistent gap between policy and practice in various educational contexts.

A key takeaway from this review is that teacher competence, especially in areas like pedagogy, language skills, and self-reflection, is crucial for successful curriculum implementation. Teachers who are more professionally prepared can creatively adapt

policies and create lessons that follow communicative principles. In contrast, those with less competence often rely on textbooks and administrative guidelines. To improve curriculum implementation, it is essential to enhance teacher quality through long-term, context-specific professional development programs. These initiatives should focus on ongoing mentoring, collaborative learning, and reflective practices that tackle the actual challenges teachers face in the classroom, rather than just offering brief, theory-based workshops.

The review also shows that teachers' capacity to implement creative pedagogies is still limited by structural and contextual factors, including exam-driven assessment systems, large class sizes, and a lack of instructional resources. Systemic change that connects the objectives of national policy with local realities is necessary to remove these obstacles. Curriculum changes must be supported by sufficient infrastructure, training, and school-level leadership, according to educational policymakers. Additionally, empowering educators to be change agents rather than merely implementers can result in a more flexible and long-lasting curriculum reform model.

In conclusion, a comprehensive and multi-level approach is needed to close the gap between Indonesian curriculum policy and classroom practice. Effective curriculum reform relies on empowering teachers via contextualized training, competency development, and institutional support in addition to well-crafted policies. Indonesia can progress toward a more responsive and cohesive English language education system that actually improves communicative competence and learner engagement by coordinating educational policy with teachers' real-world experiences.

REFERENCES

- Adiantika, H. (2021). Challenges in implementing national curriculum in Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of English Education*, 8(2), 145–157.
- Garzon Artacho, E., Martínez, T. M., Ortega Martin, J. L., Marin, M. M., & Gomez Garcia, G. (2020). Teacher competence and readiness in educational innovation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 94, 103123.
- Gasva, D., Mathura, S., & Ngwenya, T. (2019). Teachers' experiences with curriculum reform: The need for contextual adaptation. *Asian EFL Journal*, 24(6), 75–89.
- Hakim, L. N., Widiati, U., Purwaningsih, S., Wulyani, A. N., & Mulyanti, W. (2024). Revisiting the content and instruction of TEFL methodology course: A needs analysis. *Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction*, 14(1), 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.47750/pegegog.14.01.19>
- Islam, M. A., Permzadian, V., Choudhury, R., Johnston, C., & Anderson, C. (2018). Personality and pedagogical competencies in teacher quality. *Educational Review*, 70(3), 355–374.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22.
- Mappiasse, S. S., & Bin Sihes, A. J. (2014). Evaluation of English as a foreign language learning policy in Indonesia. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 112, 106–113.
- Pribudhiana, R., Yahya, B. D., & Yusof, M. R. (2021). Determining the influence of teacher quality toward teacher readiness in implementing Indonesian education policy. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 93, 373–390. <https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2021.93.18>

- Sakkir, G., Dollah, S., & Ahmad, J. (2021). Curriculum implementation and teacher readiness in Indonesian schools. *Asian Journal of Educational Research*, 9(3), 45–56.
- Suryadi, D., Zein, M. S., & Riadi, B. (2019). English teachers' understanding of the 2013 Curriculum: Policy and practice. *TEFLIN Journal*, 30(2), 223–240.
- Thien, L. M. (2019). Factors influencing teachers' readiness and motivation for curriculum implementation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 39(1), 51–67.
- Weng, F., Liu, Y., & Chuang, C. (2019). The impact of teacher competence on teaching performance. *International Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(3), 136–145.
- Zein, M. S., Sukirman, S., & Riadi, B. (2020). English language education reform in Indonesia: Policy, context, and practice. *Asian Englishes*, 22(2), 201–218.
- Abdulhak, I., Djohar, S., & Wahyudin, D. (2018). Professional competencies of Indonesian teachers in the 21st century. *Journal of Educational Studies*, 14(2), 55–68.