

Reflections on the policy-practice gap: Adaptive interpretation of curriculum levels by Indonesian EFL teachers

Kalayo Hasibuan, Siti Fadilah Sukma*, Dinda Kurniawati, Dinda Salsabella

State Islamic University of Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia

* sitifadilahsukma@gmail.com (Primary Contact)

ABSTRACT

Curriculum reform in Indonesia, notably the *Merdeka Curriculum*, has introduced explicit language proficiency levels benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This article undertakes a critical narrative literature review to analyze how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesian contexts interpret and implement these policy-mandated curriculum levels. Findings demonstrate a significant policy-to-practice gap, primarily characterized by high conceptual inconsistency regarding CEFR descriptors and a compulsory process of contextual adaptation necessary due to profound classroom constraints. The analysis reveals three systemic deficits: insufficient, non-contextualized professional development (PD); scarcity of resources compounded by teacher competency gaps; and an inherent tension between mandated policy fidelity and professional pedagogical autonomy. The article concludes that teacher interpretation constitutes a vital, non-linear adaptive professional mechanism that translates abstract policy into locally relevant pedagogy. This necessitates that future policy design formally recognizes and empower this essential teacher agency to ensure sustainable and equitable curriculum implementation.

Keywords

Merdeka Curriculum;
Curriculum Levels;
CEFR; Teacher
Interpretation; Policy-
Practice Gap;
Pedagogical
Autonomy; EFL
Indonesia

Article History

Received: 2025-12-23
Accepted: 2026-04-06

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Published by MAN 4 Kota Pekanbaru
DOI: [10.56113/takuana.v5i1.293](https://doi.org/10.56113/takuana.v5i1.293)

1. INTRODUCTION

The global pursuit of educational standardization has substantially impacted national policy landscapes, compelling many education systems to adopt international benchmarks to facilitate learner comparability and professional mobility. In Indonesia, this initiative is encapsulated by the recent *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum), which emphasizes measurable learning outcomes (*Capaian Pembelajaran*) deliberately benchmarked against external standards, prominently the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020). This policy establishes an explicit trajectory for language acquisition, aiming to

standardize proficiency and guide learners' progression towards Independent User (B1/B2) levels (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

However, empirical scholarship consistently highlights that the implementation of any centralized, top-down curriculum policy inevitably generates a profound disjuncture between its intended *ideal design* and its practical *classroom execution* (Iskandar, 2020; Widodo, 2016). Within this ecosystem, teachers are not inert recipients of policy; they operate as critical interpretive agents who actively mediate standardized demands against the unique backdrop of local, idiosyncratic classroom contexts (Iskandar, 2020; Renandya et al., 2018). This crucial interpretive role demands a complex professional reconciliation, inevitably placing a substantial cognitive and pedagogical burden on the individual professional (Dwinalida K. et al., 2024).

Therefore, achieving a granular understanding of this interpretive process is foundational for effective and equitable policy refinement. This article examines the academic literature to address two central questions: 1) How do Indonesian EFL teachers conceptually interpret and operationalize the official curriculum levels? 2) What are the main structural and pedagogical challenges that precipitate and sustain the policy-practice gap? By offering a critical synthesis focused on recent scholarship (2015-2025), this paper provides nuanced insights into the complexities of curriculum standardization and adaptive professional agency within Indonesian TEFL settings, building upon a comprehensive review of the local ELT landscape (Zein et al., 2020).

2. METHOD

This article employs a critical narrative literature review with a systematic search protocol to enhance rigor. The search was conducted in Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar (2015–2025) using keywords: *'CEFR Indonesia'*, *'Merdeka Curriculum English'*, *'teacher interpretation curriculum levels'*, and *'EFL teacher policy gap'*. After removing duplicates, 187 records were screened by title and abstract, followed by full-text review against inclusion criteria: empirical studies focusing on Indonesian EFL teachers' perceptions, implementation challenges, or practices related to CEFR-aligned curricula. This yielded 33 studies for final synthesis.

Study quality was assessed using an adapted CASP checklist; no study was excluded solely on quality, but lower-quality studies received less analytical weight. Thematic synthesis followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, definition, and writing. Initial codes (e.g., *level-grade equivalence*, *resource scarcity*, *fidelity vs. autonomy*) were clustered into three core themes (presented as F1, F2, F3 in Findings). A PRISMA-style flow diagram and a summary table of the 33 studies are available in the appendices, providing full traceability from data collection to interpretation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

The systematic thematic analysis of the synthesized literature revealed a consistent set of core findings that define the nature of the policy-practice gap in Indonesian EFL contexts:

Conceptual Ambiguity and The Level-Grade Trap

Teachers exhibit significant conceptual inconsistency in their understanding and application of the nuanced, criterion-referenced "*can-do*" descriptors that underpin the CEFR framework. This ambiguity often manifests as the Level-Grade Trap, a pervasive simplification wherein teachers mechanically equate complex proficiency levels (e.g., A2 or B1) with specific school grade levels (e.g., Grade 10) instead of engaging in proficiency-based diagnosis (Novawan et al., 2023). This reductive interpretation mirrors challenges observed in other non-European contexts adopting the CEFR, where the framework is often simplified for administrative convenience rather than pedagogical diagnosis (Kirkgöz & Ağçam, 2021; Nguyen & Hamid, 2021).

Contextual Adaptation as a Pedagogical Imperative

Teacher interpretation is fundamentally driven by the necessity of adapting policy to the immediate, challenging classroom environment. Due to large class sizes and immense student heterogeneity, strict fidelity to a single, prescribed curriculum level is pedagogically unsustainable (Robbani, A. S. et al., 2023; Sulistiyo et al., 2020). This adaptive practice, which often involves instruction modification or level reduction, is identified as an essential act of localized curriculum interpretation exercised to preserve pedagogical integrity and student relevance.

Systemic Deficits Sustaining the Implementation Gap

The observed implementation discrepancies are directly traceable to systemic structural deficits across the educational infrastructure:

1. **Inadequate Professional Support:** Professional development (PD) programs frequently lack the practical, contextualized guidance necessary for teachers to implement proficiency-level differentiation strategies effectively, remaining largely theoretical and *top-down* (Efendi, 2024). This aligns with critical reviews indicating that PD in Indonesia often fails to address the contextual realities of teachers' classrooms, remaining disconnected from daily practice (Lengkanawati & Sundayana, 2021).
2. **Resource and Competence Constraints:** A critical scarcity of appropriately leveled teaching materials and technology, combined with documented gaps in the baseline English proficiency of some teachers, severely limits the capacity to accurately diagnose and deliver instruction aligned with higher CEFR descriptors (B1 and above) (Dwinalida K. et al., 2024). Recent studies on *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation confirm that resource scarcity and competency gaps remain primary barriers for teachers (Hapsari & Soepriatmadji, 2022; Maya & Purnawarman, 2024).
3. **Enduring Tension:** Teachers are subjected to an ongoing professional tension between the policy demand for standardized adherence (*high fidelity*) and the critical necessity of exercising pedagogical freedom to meet heterogeneous student needs (*autonomy*) (Iskandar, 2020).

3.2. Discussion

The Interpretive Failure: Reducing Proficiency to Administrative Benchmarks

The *Level-Grade Trap* (Novawan et al., 2023; Renandya et al., 2018) exemplifies how teachers simplify CEFR descriptors. However, contrasting evidence from large-scale surveys (Maya & Purnawarman, 2024; $n > 200$) indicates that a minority of teachers ($\approx 30\%$) demonstrate accurate CEFR differentiation, whereas small-scale studies (Dwinalida et al., 2024; $n = 6$) report near-universal confusion. This divergence suggests sampling bias: smaller studies target under-resourced schools, while larger studies include better-trained urban teachers. Thus, interpretive failure is most acute in low-resource, non-urban settings.

The Adaptive Teacher: Mediating Policy through Pedagogical Integrity

Successful high-fidelity implementations exist. Efendi (2024) describes two schools achieving B1-level instruction without level reduction via peer-coaching. In contrast, Robbani et al. (2023) report drastic level lowering (B1 to A1) due to heterogeneity. Notably, successful cases are small-scale purposive samples, while failure cases are supported by larger representative surveys (Sulistiyo et al., 2020; $n = 120$ schools). Adaptation is therefore a contextual response, not a universal necessity.

Systemic Deficits and the Fidelity vs. Autonomy Nexus

Large-scale research (Lengkanawati & Sundayana, 2021; $n = 450$) confirms PD is decontextualized for 78% of teachers. Yet a case study (Hapsari & Soepriatmadji, 2022) found intensive school-based PD resolved the fidelity-autonomy tension. This highlights a limitation: large studies miss local innovations; small studies capture successes that may not replicate. The claim that systemic deficits fuel the gap is robust at the population level, but local agency can sometimes overcome deficits.

Critical Evaluation of Methodological Limitations

Three limitations pervade the reviewed literature: (a) sampling bias – over 60% of studies rely on Javanese convenience samples, limiting generalizability (Zein et al., 2020); (b) cross-sectional design – no longitudinal study tracks evolving interpretation; (c) self-report reliance – 27 of 33 studies use surveys/interviews without observation, risking social desirability bias. These limitations demand cautious interpretation and future longitudinal, multi-regional, observational designs.

4. CONCLUSION

The policy–practice gap in Indonesian EFL curriculum implementation persists due to limited professional development, resource constraints, and the heterogeneity of student proficiency levels. Within this context, teacher interpretation emerges as a critical adaptive mechanism, reflecting what Mark Priestley et al. (2015) conceptualize as ecological agency, which enables teachers to mediate policy demands with classroom realities. This study demonstrates that such adaptive capacity is not merely incidental but constitutes the core driver of meaningful curriculum enactment.

To operationalize this adaptive agency, the findings highlight the importance of context-sensitive strategies at multiple levels. At the classroom level, the use of CEFR-aligned formative tools, such as simplified “can-do” descriptors, allows teachers to calibrate instruction according to learners’ actual proficiency. In addition, differentiated instructional models that accommodate heterogeneous classrooms have proven effective in improving student engagement and task completion. At the institutional level, sustained participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) provides a more impactful alternative to top-down professional development, particularly through collaborative lesson design and peer coaching practices. Empirical evidence from local contexts further illustrates that even in low-resource environments, adaptive teaching practices can significantly enhance student learning outcomes when supported by iterative instructional design and institutional recognition.

Importantly, the study also underscores the need for systemic alignment. Educational policy should explicitly recognize teacher professional judgment as a legitimate basis for adapting curriculum implementation, rather than enforcing rigid fidelity to prescribed standards. Such recognition would shift the focus from compliance-oriented supervision toward the development of adaptive expertise. Ultimately, by integrating practical classroom tools, strengthening institutional support through PLCs, and embedding flexibility within policy frameworks, Indonesian EFL education can move toward more equitable, context-responsive, and sustainable proficiency development.

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