Navigating Challenges: English Language Education in Rural Indonesia

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Abstract: *This paper examines the challenges and successes of English language education in Indonesia, focusing on the experiences of local participants. Data collection included 27 classroom observations, questionnaire responses, and interviews with 446 participants, including current secondary teachers, pre-service teachers, teacher educators, and educational leaders across the seven major regions of Indonesia. The research highlights a persistent lack of resources in some areas, the need for professional development, and potential opportunities in the future, particularly in rural areas. Despite some challenges, Indonesian teachers have demonstrated exceptional practices by engaging students with minimal resources, emphasizing communicative language teaching, and overcoming other challenges. The study also reveals a need for better integration of critical thinking and 21st-century skills into lessons. The findings suggest that targeted, medium and long-term professional development could be useful in improving teaching practices, establishing communities of practice, and enhancing student engagement in English language learning across Indonesia.*

Keywords: pre-service teacher education, Indonesia, English language education, rural education, critical thinking skills, 21st century skills, technology integration, classroom engagement, professional development

Introduction

Success of educational systems, manifested in the success of local schools, is an important aspect of maintaining and supporting social and economic institutions (Winton, 2013). Much research indicates that pre-service teacher education and ongoing professional teacher development are important aspects of providing teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to affect impact in the classroom (Ahonen et al., 2015; Flores et al., 2014; Naylor & Sayed, 2014; Wang et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there remains discussion related to the most effective components of, and the impact of, local, cultural and social variables on such pre-service teacher education programs (Avalos, 2011). In addition, disparities, including professional development opportunities and certification for teachers, limited budgetary resources, and access to and the development of skills

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to utilize technology, remain between rural educational centers and countries at different stages of development (Rasyidi & Al Idrus, 2024; Novita, 2024).

Indonesia provides a unique opportunity to research both the effectiveness of pre-service teacher education and current teaching practice at the secondary level regarding English language education in a multilingual, multicultural context. Indonesia is a vibrant, diverse country with a developing economy in Southeast Asia. With a population of 273 million (2018), Indonesia is the fourth most populous nation with the 10th largest economy globally. The country spans approximately 17,500 islands, encompassing a variety of ethnic groups, religions and cultures, representing speakers of more than 700 languages (Aji et al., 2022; Ariawan, 2022; Mailin et al., 2023; World Bank, 2024). Classified as a middle-income country (World Bank, 2024), Indonesia has realized significant achievements yet continues to face some challenges providing quality education to such a diverse population across such a large area (Hadisaputra et al., 2024; Shaturaev, 2021b; Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2020). Teachers and school staff are considered civil servants, and elementary through secondary education is divided between public (*negeri*) and private (*swasta*) schools (Shaturaev, 2021a).

From a teacher education / secondary teaching practice focus, this research project focused on determining the alignment and complementarity of pre-service teacher education for future English language educators and actual secondary teaching practice in Indonesia. In addition, in the unique linguistic and cultural landscape of Indonesia, how English language education is situated related to other national and local languages, and how this may impact teaching practice was investigated. Lastly, this research project included the consideration of specific aspects of teaching practice, including the integration and development of critical thinking skills, the use of translanguaging pedagogy and technology, and the need for professional development.

Background

Pre-service teacher education and ongoing professional development have been indicated as key factors in providing, maintaining and improving educational systems (Naylor & Sayed, 2014; Wang, 2010). While there may remain a lack of consensus regarding the ideal components of teacher education at different periods, research does indicate that broad categories are important, including understanding curriculum content, learning theories and processes, methodological approaches, materials development, classroom management, and the use of technology, and then connecting these to teaching practice. The recognition that professional development is a complex and long-term process has also been highlighted in the literature (Ahonen et al., 2015; Flores et al, 2014; Rasyidi & Al Idrus, 2024; Wang, 2010). Researchers also recommend that teacher education programs consider individual teacher beliefs, cultural and social contexts, and the availability of resources (Ahonen et al., 2015; Avalos, 2011). More recent research focuses on the need to emphasize professional identity, the integration of theory and practice, reflection, responsiveness to global changes, and research-based practice (Ahonen et al., 2015; Avalos, 2011; Farrell, 2018; Fernandes et al., 2023; Fernandes et al., 2024).

Clearly, when developing a pre-service teacher education program, or implementing ongoing professional development, including such a comprehensive list is challenging due to both time and resource constraints. Nevertheless, in the Indonesian context, along with the crucial components mentioned above, some other aspects warrant special consideration. The diverse multicultural

and multilinguistic characteristics of Indonesia result in the need to focus on the unique cultural and social context of each region. Also, differences between rural and urban centers of education must be considered related to availability of resources, technology, and infrastructure. Drawing a clear connection between theory and acceptable and feasible teaching practice in local classrooms also takes on a more important role (Flores et al., 2014; Rasyidi & Al Idrus, 2024; Rodríguez, 2019; Novita, 2024). While there is a lack of consensus in the literature regarding whether this is a role of pre-service teacher education programs, recognizing the reality of the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Indonesia, the English proficiency level of pre-service and practicing secondary teachers should be considered (Rodríguez, 2019).

Indonesia has experienced numerous national curriculum changes between 1947 and 2006 (Alhamuddin et al., 2020; Fajriyah et al., 2024; Hikmawati et al., 2022; Tajurrahman et al., 2023). The major national curriculum changes over the last 20 years began with the School-Based Curriculum (*Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan – KTSP*) in 2006 which provided for more local autonomy. A more recent curriculum was the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*) which emphasized learning through scientific approaches and problem-based and project-based learning in order to prepare students for the 21st century. This curriculum also emphasized English language teaching (Hikmawati et al., 2022; Judijanto et al., 2024). Most recently, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of an "emergency curriculum," and recognizing the need for local institutions to address student needs during the pandemic more independently, the Indonesian government has implemented the Emancipated Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) 2022, or the "Independent Curriculum," emphasizing competency-based assessment, additional local autonomy, character education, and project-based learning. During the pandemic, this curriculum also necessitated the further integration of technology. Within this curriculum, English competencies are integrated with other disciplines. The goal of this most recent curriculum is adaptability to students' needs in local institutions (Fajriyah et al., 2024; Hikmawati et al., 2022; Waruwu, 2024).

This progression of national curriculum changes ushered in an increased sense of teacher agency, and teacher autonomy, allowing teachers to determine how best to adapt to different circumstances and challenges, and utilize methodologies in order to achieve goals (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Putri & Budiraharjo, 2024). While many teachers welcomed this newfound freedom, implementation of recent national curricula has not been without obstacles. Teacher preparedness to take on such autonomy, disparities in digital resources and institutional infrastructure, the need for professional development in order to adapt materials and assessment, and having to respond to numerous national curriculum changes are some of the areas about which teachers have expressed concern (Gulo, 2024; Hadisaputra et al., 2024; Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024).

In Indonesia, as in other countries, the English language learning classroom has also been utilized to develop skills other than English language proficiency. Among these, critical thinking skills have often received significant attention (Hadley & Boon, 2023; Iman, 2017; Kusmaryani et al., 2022; MacDonald et al., 2014). As in many countries, the development of critical thinking skills is now an objective implemented to improve student performance and position nation states as globally competitive. While some researchers support the systematic development of critical thinking skills in the language learning classroom, there remains debate as to whether this is a skill that can be enhanced in such a context. In addition, while some research indicates that teachers are successful in helping students develop these skills, other researchers indicate that sufficient professional development is first necessary for teachers to fully understand the underlying concepts,

and to skillfully craft activities that develop their students' critical thinking skills (Anggraenya & Khongput, 2024; Fernandes et al., 2024; Muhsin et al., 2023; Stroupe, 2010; Stroupe & Arora, 2024; Stroupe & Kanzaka, 2024). As the national curriculum in Indonesia emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills, and points to the English language learning classroom as an appropriate context to achieve this goal, the success of this approach has yet to be confirmed, and further investigation is needed (Fernandes et al., 2024).

In addition to the emphasis on English language education and additional skills, such as critical thinking, Indonesia presents a unique opportunity to consider the place of English, the national language and multiple regional languages and dialects in teaching practice. Allowing for students to use their entire linguistic repertoire to communicate meaningful information is related to the concept of translanguaging (Garcia & Lin, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014; Zein, 2018, 2020). While some authors in the Indonesian context have discussed the concept of translanguaging and its utility in this multilingual country, a limited amount of research or commentary has been published to determine its effectiveness or prevalence (Rasman, 2018; Zein et al., 2018, 2020).

As the Indonesian government has implemented numerous curricular revisions and improvements, educational quality continues to be a concern. Rural and urban disparities continue to exist: Teachers must periodically update their materials, classroom approaches, and familiarity with new curriculum requirements, often with limited professional development opportunities. Limited resources and access to technology and school infrastructure continue to be areas of concern. Oftentimes, teachers must also supplement their salaries through external work opportunities, which may affect their teaching performance. While notable progress has been achieved in such a diverse country with the implementation of more recent national curricula, including local control, teacher autonomy, and a focus on 21st century skills, significant challenges remain. Yet, while facing such challenges, Indonesian teachers remain resilient and dedicated to providing the best possible educational opportunities for their students (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Hura, 2024; Judijanto et al., 2024; Nasution & Indrasari, 2024; Puspitasari, 2024; Shaturaev, 2021a, 2021b; Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2020; Tjalla & Sunubi, 2024; Zein et al., 2020).

Against this landscape, the current research project seeked to investigate how the various factors described above impacted pre-service English language teacher preparation, implementation of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*), and secondary school English language teacher practice in rural schools in the Indonesian context.

Methodology

In this research project, qualitative research methodologies were utilized to 1) determine the alignment of pre-service teacher education with actual teaching practice of secondary teachers, 2) understand the educational/curricula situation of English amongst the national language and numerous local languages and dialects, and 3) explore the integration of culture, local languages, critical thinking skills, and translanguaging in the English language learning classroom at the secondary school level in rural communities in Indonesia. Data was collected during 2019 with the assistance of identified local university faculty members who were responsible for pre-service English language teacher preparation, and who also had contacts at local secondary schools. These local university faculty members were identified with assistance from professional colleagues, as well as through the Association for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language in

Indonesia (TEFLIN). With their assistance, representative secondary schools were identified in all seven major regions across Indonesia.

The qualitative research methodologies employed included interviews, either individual or group, with teacher educators (i.e., university faculty members, responsible for pre-service teacher education at local universities), pre-service teachers (i.e., university students enrolled in pre-service teacher education courses in order to receive English teacher licensure), and educational leaders (i.e., principals, vice principals, curriculum developers, head teachers, local members of boards of education). Interviews were conducted in either English or Indonesian based on the preference of interviewees. Interviews conducted in Indonesian were simultaneously translated by local university faculty research collaborators. Resulting audio recordings and transcriptions were coded, identifying trends, patterns and frequencies of responses to interview questions (Nicmanis, 2024).

Secondly, an online questionnaire, in Indonesian, was distributed to secondary English language education teachers in each region of Indonesia through professional contacts as well as during professional development opportunities. Data collected through the online questionnaire were interpreted based on frequency statistics for Likert scale type questions, and responses from open-ended questions were translated through AI software and coded (Nicmanis, 2024). Lastly, when possible, classroom observations of English language classrooms were conducted at each secondary school visited. Classroom observation field notes were used to identify methodologies employed, instructional language used, use of technology, engagement of learners, and the extent to which critical thinking skills were encouraged.

Results and Discussion

Through coordination provided by identified local university faculty members, universities and secondary schools were selected in 15 areas (municipalities and / or regencies) representing the seven major regions across Indonesia (Image 1), including Jakarta, Yogyakarta (Java); Medan, Padang, Bukittinggi, the Mentawai Islands (Sumatra); Pontianak, Banjarmasin, Samarinda (Kalimantan); Makassar (Sulawesi); Denpasar, Singaraja, Kupang (Nusa Tenggara Islands); Ambon (Maluku Islands); and Manokwari (Papua, Western New Guinea). A total of 68 schools were visited. Interviews were conducted, either individually or in groups, either in English, or in Indonesian with simultaneous translation provided, with 180 secondary English language teachers and 67 educational leaders, including principals, vice principals, other school administrators, and representatives of local boards of education. Twenty-seven English language lessons were observed in the schools that were visited. In each region (excluding Padang), a local university with a specialized program for pre-service English teacher preparation program / courses was identified, and 57 teacher educators (university faculty members) in those programs were interviewed. In the same programs, 147 current pre-service English language teachers were also interviewed. Interviews resulted in 102 hours of audio recordings, which were transcribed and coded through both inductive and deductive processes. Coding focused on determining trends related to instructional language use, knowledge of and implementation of activities to develop critical thinking skills, teacher beliefs, challenges in implementing national curricula, and satisfaction and challenges related to pre-service teacher education programs. Lastly, an online questionnaire in Bahasa Indonesia was provided to all groups of research participants, including secondary English language teachers

who attended professional development programs at the identified universities, resulting in 431 total respondents (Table 1).

Figure 1. *Seven major regions of Indonesia*

Table 1. *Summary of participants*

Location	Secondary English Teachers	Educational Leaders	Pre-Service English Teachers	Teacher Educators	Total	Time of interviews (min)
Kalimantan	30	7	15	11	63	626
Bali	27	9	26	11	73	718
Yogyakarta	18	7	28	4	57	1003
Medan	17	6	11	5	39	373
Padang	7	2	0	1	10	286
Ambon	7	4	14	8	33	770
Kupang	23	7	19	0	49	634
Papua	33	17	8	2	60	853
Makasar	9	5	18	6	38	531
Jakarta	9	3	8	4	24	331
Overall Totals	180	67	147	52	446	6125
						102 hours

Interviews
- 180 Secondary English teachers
- 147 Pre-service teachers (students)
- 52 Teacher educators
- 67 Educational leaders
- 446 Interviews (individual or group)
- 102 Hours

68 School visits
27 Observed classes

Questionnaires
- 243 Secondary English teachers
- 157 Pre-service teacher (students)
- 28 Teacher educators
- 3 Educational leaders
- 431 Total respondents

Pre-service teacher preparation

One component of the current research project was to determine the relevancy and alignment with existing pre-service teacher education programs and the actual practices and context of secondary English language teachers in Indonesia. Satisfaction with the pre-service teacher education programs was mixed, with approximately 55% of comments during the interviews with pre-service teachers recommending changes or pointing out negative aspects of their programs. The most common negative responses were related to inappropriate methodology, lack of understanding, or unclear connection between theory and methodology. Pre-service teachers seem to indicate that, although recognizing the importance of theory, there was a lack of understanding related to the connection between theory and actual methodology in the classroom. One pre-service teacher indicated that "Because … when I have a …class, we just talk about theory, there's no … something more challenging, something that's more novel. Everything is feels flat" (Interviewee MPST/20371-H08). Another student indicated that there seemed to be a mismatch between what the pre-service teachers were instructed to do as a teacher in their future classes, a communicative approach, and the nature of the actual pre-service teacher education courses, which were lecture based. Many of the negative comments centered around the amount of material necessary to cover in each class, the lack of time to discuss and reflect on mistakes or understanding, or lack of clear feedback. Another pre-service teacher observed:

> I think this is one of the most important subjects that I have to understand. But sadly, …, the explanations not really deeply. And we only …did like, a good presentation each week. And I felt like we had found so many information, but we didn't know the standardization of what is right and what's wrong of this information … (Interviewee FPST4/NR70 H09)

Many of the positive comments regarding the pre-service teacher education programs centered around practice teaching, in many cases termed micro-teaching. In these situations, the pre-service teachers were actually able to present lessons to other groups of pre-service teachers in their cohort as a form of a class activity. These required the development of lesson plans, teaching materials, and actually performing the activity with their peers in class. One pre-service teacher observed "Those classes prepare me to make lesson plans. Like how I can really create a well-organized classroom with a very engaging activity" (Interviewee FPST1/JKY2H02), and another agreed, "[We] call it the microteaching class, it's really useful because we were, we're not only like learn, but we also practice what we have learned in the micro class" (Interviewee FPST1/NR4H02). However, even here, pre-service teachers wished for additional feedback and guidance as to what to do as teachers in actual classrooms, such as "And then we [are] in microteaching. We only give a chance in 20 minutes ... And then we don't have any time to learn how to assess the students" (Interviewee FPST1/New Recording 69 H010). A number of concerns were raised about the need to understand the mechanics of daily teaching responsibilities: dealing with students' motivation, working with Google classroom, addressing discipline problems, and completing administrative duties. However, another strength of the program was indicated as the in-depth understanding of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*), and their responsibilities as English language educators.

Teacher educators were also asked to reflect on the relevancy of the teacher education programs at their respective institutions. The teacher educators included in the study ranged in experience from newly appointed to the program to more than 20 years, and in some cases almost 30 years, of experience. Most had between five and 20 years of experience as teacher educators.

When asked about the strongest components of their respective pre-service teacher programs, a focus on teaching methodology seemed vital:

> I think we did our best to at least have the student have the four basic skills and know what they are doing. So in terms of methodology, and teaching methodology, I always mentioned to the students, when you use [a] certain methodology in your lesson plan, then at least you know the reason why you use that methodology. So I think that's our responsibility to really educate our students … [also, that] You have to speak English, because being an English teacher, without speaking English … then you are not an English teacher … (Interviewee MTE 1/JKYH021)

Some teacher educators also recognize the limits of their program. One concern is that many of the students who enroll in the pre-service English language educator programs do not plan to become actual teachers. Rather, they are focused on improving their English, or are intent on pursuing other professional paths. One teacher educator observed that "I find that some of our graduates are going to hotel, tourism … business. … I'm really concerned about … how to produce qualified teachers who really have passion. And I'm … dreaming of having such students coming here" (Interviewee TE/JB No. 50 3 H015). Also, the English fluency of their pre-service teachers is a concern:

> But unfortunately the English is not as one of the requirement here… so that's actually what makes us … have some troubles facing students sometimes especially to practice their English… then we keep encouraging them to speak English but sometimes it doesn't work. (Interviewee FTE/20371-5H028)

Another teacher educator observed that the level of English proficiency skills of pre-service teachers was quite broad, resulting in problems for the program:

> Actually they are coming from very different backgrounds and different education background … So actually, there is a big difference in their … basic English knowledge. So that's one challenge… you can imagine a student from [rural areas] … very far from here coming to study here … the English is zero, they had the motivation but so to become an English teacher, of course, but then this is a challenge for us as educators to see this problem, to how to solve this problem. (Interviewee MTE 1/JKYH05).

This is also a concern that was recognized by the pre-service teachers themselves: "... in this first semester and now in the last semester to get something from study English, we cannot speak English very well. Still try try try but …" (Interviewee MTPre-service99/NR28). In some cases, the pre-service teachers suggested that the entrance criteria for pre-service education programs for English teachers should be more rigorous related to English proficiency:

> I mean … if you want to take music department, … show me your skill. What do you master? Okay, I master guitar. Okay. So … we really need, here, … additional tests to come here, … a higher standard.. [of] English proficiency (Interviewee FPST1/JMH029)

In addition, teacher educators in these programs are required to supervise a significant number of pre-service teachers during their practicum experience. This leads to limited time for observation, feedback, and mentoring. While the teacher educators expressed a desire to provide more

feedback, the scheduling of visiting schools and observing so many pre-service teachers limits their ability to provide individualized support for their practicum advisees:

> Because they're in the field, maybe I could say, we cannot provide optimal supervising to them… we hand over them to the school and then we hope that the teachers can … help them, can supervise them more than then we the lecturers… we have a quite the distance from the school… So we obviously we cannot go that often to school, right? So maybe once or twice of observation. And that's the weakness, we cannot always monitor [them], how they see how they progress (Interviewee TE/JKP4H05)

In addition, the teacher educators recognized the need for more actual classroom practice:

> So another weaknesses that we don't provide students with enough practice … For example, like, we teach them teaching methodology, but we don't provide them practice on how to apply those strategy or in curriculum on how to comprehend the curriculum … if we teach this students to be an English teacher, and that we need to ask them to actually go to the classroom and see how real teacher [teach] … we will ask them to go to school when they are in [their] 10th semester. . . seventh or eighth semester… so that was the first time they officially being in the school, and that's … late (Interviewee FT 1/NR71H08)

Overall, the results of the interviews with both teacher educators and pre-service teachers indicated that the evaluation of the pre-service teacher education programs was mixed. Strengths indicated were the knowledge of theory gained, the ability to practice through micro teaching opportunities, and development of a deeper understanding of the requirements of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*). However, from the view of the pre-service students, because so much material is covered in all of the courses, there is limited opportunity to digest and internalize the information, reflect on their teaching experiences, and fully understand the theories, concepts, and methodologies to which they are exposed prior to becoming actual secondary English teachers. There were also concerns raised related to the connection between theory and classroom practice as well as English language proficiency.

Teaching practice

Teachers were observed during 27 classroom observations in order to gain a better understanding of current teaching practice in English courses at the secondary level in Indonesia. Many of the teachers were working with classes with more than 25 students. Educational leaders and teachers in schools often reported through their interviews the absence of equipment (DVD and CD players, computers), facilities (electricity, internet connectivity) and materials (textbooks, and students without pens and paper). With this lack of resources, educational leaders described the difficulty of meeting the expectations of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*):

> It is impossible because [of the] curriculum, nowadays [in] Indonesia you see [the] curriculum but the gap is quite big because the situations in here. To support the [the] curriculum you have to have books, computers and other [equipment or materials] they cannot have here (Interviewee 109/NR38 via translator)

Nevertheless, there were notable examples of excellent teachers in rural areas (Kalimantan, Papua, Kupang, and Makassar). The teachers at these schools strove to provide stimulating learning

opportunities for their students regardless of the lack of resources. These teachers focused on crafting activities with minimal resources, such as simple games based on linguistic functions, or focusing on pair or group work activities, rather than focusing on the lack of technology or other materials. What resulted were classrooms of students that were fully engaged, speaking and experimenting with English for the majority of the class time, and who were both motivated and interested. Without the trappings of well-resourced classrooms, these teachers were able to focus on the basics of communicative English language teaching, and their success was evident in the attitude of their students.

In addition, there were schools that exemplified exceptional educational practice at an institutional level, due in large part to the educational leadership of the principals (Bali, Medan, Bukittinggi and Yogyakarta) (Stroupe et al., 2023), and schools that were flourishing with extremely limited resources, in some cases without even electricity (Papua). The educational environment evident in the schools was clear throughout the institution, including all students and teachers accepting ownership of schoolwide visions and programs, and striving to realize data-based results of their students. Such dedication and hard work among the teachers and educational leaders was predominant and evident throughout Indonesia.

Teaching methodology

There were consistent trends related to classroom instruction. The predominant approach to teaching was teacher centered, and textbook directed. During the majority of classes observed, students were attentive, engaged, and motivated when given the opportunity for interaction. This classroom environment only broke down when students were provided with an overload of information, without appropriate scaffolding, or were asked to engage in irrelevant activities. In one case, the teacher asked students to read a letter about a summer job that was both culturally difficult to understand and irrelevant (especially for lower secondary school learners). The students who had been up to this point fully engaged quickly lost interest and motivation suffered. When the teacher was asked after the class observation was completed, why had that particular type of letter been selected, the response was "because it is in the textbook." In another case, in a vocational secondary school, a teacher presented numerous forms of a particular function, and had students engage in successful pair work. Yet when asked why so many variations (18 separate functions) of a single function were introduced, far more than students would need or be able to comprehend, again, the response was the same, "because it is in the textbook." Another teacher summed up the situation by observing "I just use the book to teach them the material" (Interviewee MTS111NR40). This indicated a trend of classroom instruction driven by the textbook or curriculum demands, without regard to student needs or interest.

Again here, when teachers focused on activities that engaged students, with or without technology, these were largely successful. Teachers developed simple games, used pictures, or other realia in class that captured students' attention and interest. Regardless of resources, when teachers were focusing on crafting activities which encouraged and allowed students to communicate and interact, these classes were successful. When teachers overly relied on textbooks or teaching manuals, or teacher centered instruction, students quickly lost interest.

Curriculum demands

Regarding the demands of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*), without exception, all teachers interviewed indicated that completing the goals and objectives outlined in the curriculum for English language courses was not feasible. However, this was the requirement of their courses, and they struggled to present as much information as possible. Oftentimes, the teachers reported that this resulted in students' lack of comprehension, as the classes were moving too quickly for them to follow. This indicated a lack of teacher autonomy, and a lack of ability or possibility of teachers editing the available teaching materials, focusing on achieving goals and objectives outlined by the national curriculum, but reducing the amount of information presented so that students could remain engaged and motivated.

There was also a clear sense among the teachers that a primary function of their work was to prepare students for high stakes national exams, even when they personally believe that they should focus on communicative abilities. One teacher suggested that "… Sometimes when we teach English we try to make students [understand and communicate] and some teachers never think to how to teach students to speak English but just prepare students to take exam" (Interviewee MTS108NR37). Another teacher observed:

> … in Indonesia, especially we teach the content that should be, like prepare the students to face the high stakes test, … it's important to get the result, … assessment for learning instead of an assessment of learning … because everything is about grading … you've been taught them like a lot of things in the classroom just to get the grade… (Interviewee FTNR8H027)

Having to teach to the test is a common concern among teachers in Southeast and East Asia, where high stakes national exams are used to determine the future of students as well as the evaluation of schools. In Indonesia, in the new Emancipated Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) 2022, this focus on national examinations was reduced to some extent, resulting in hopefully less pressure placed on teachers and students in the classroom.

Use of technology

Technology seemed to be another stumbling block for many teachers. The term 'technology' as used in this research refers to the broadest sense of the word, including not only computer access and online resources, but also cassette players and cassette tapes, CD players and CDs, and class materials such as textbooks, dictionaries, pens and paper. One teacher shared that "... the equipments for support, for example, in teaching learning process, we don't have enough equipment to support these learning process" (Interviewee MTNR11-H024). In rare cases, there were so few teaching materials related to the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*), the educational leaders and teachers had to revert back to the outdated 2006 School-Based Curriculum (*Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan – KTSP*) materials and curricular objectives. Another teacher shared what she observed was an inequality in the allocation of resources, and how this affects student motivation:

> … it might be cliche but the bigger more favorite schools within the city, they are being provided with so many facilities. Like for example you mentioned they don't have laboratory here. So, the students are motivated when they see this nice-looking particular things. But when we are far away here in this corner of the island, even when they submit a proposal, etc., it takes so long for them to get something to get it going. And, and I … would like to see

> this kind of support from the government, not to the big schools, but actually to the small… (Interviewee PNR 6-H023).

In some cases, Internet access or even cell phone signals at schools were not available. In some rare cases, schools were without electricity. In almost each case, when teachers used technology, for example presentations created with slide presentation software, instruction became more teacher centered, students were overwhelmed by the amount of information presented on slides, and student motivation and engagement dropped. When asked why slide presentation software was used, teachers indicated this was a requirement of the curriculum, the integration of technology in English language learning. In short, this was a box that needed to be ticked for an administrative report. In another case of unnecessary use of technology, a teacher was using a microphone and loudspeaker in a room with less than 20 students. On the other hand, the exceptional teachers mentioned above used little or no technology, using activities that were group or pair focused, and when using digital presentations, presented limited information which was easy to comprehend so that students could return to communicative activities with peers or groups. Following up these observations, most teachers indicated they were following the direction of the curriculum, and using the technology to the best of their ability without proper professional development, reflection, and experimentation which would allow them to use the technology more successfully. Indeed, many teachers recognized the shortcoming, and expressed a desire to engage in such professional development.

Critical thinking and 21st century skills

One aspect of this research was to determine the extent to which teachers fully understood and implemented activities to encourage the development of critical thinking skills. A major component of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*) is the development of critical thinking and 21st century skills in order to raise Indonesian students on par with the global community (Fernandes et al., 2024). Some research has indicated that many teachers in Indonesia report integrating such skills into their lesson plans and classroom activities (Anggraenya & Khongput, 2024; Kusmaryani et al., 2022; Muhsin et al., 2023). In the questionnaire for this research, many teachers reported that they were very familiar (11%) or familiar (43%) with critical thinking skills in general. When further asked how often they integrate separate aspects of 21st century skills into their class lessons, teachers responded 'often, or 'very often' related to critical thinking skills (often 37%; very often 6%); creativity (often 44%; very often 10%); collaboration (often 38%; very often 16%); cross cultural understanding (often 29%; very often 4%); effective communication (often 44%; very often 11%); computer skills and digital literacy (often 25%; very often 9%); and, independent learning (often 32%; very often 6%). While these are impressive response rates and may reflect similar findings that relied heavily on questionnaire data (Muhsin et al., 2023), such results may be an indication of response bias and may not reflect their actual practice or understanding.

In the current study, during the interviews, while a majority of teachers did indicate that they were familiar with critical thinking skills (72%), termed lower order thinking skills and 'higher order thinking skills,' i.e., HOTS, less than 23% reported incorporating such skills into their lessons. When pressed to provide examples, almost all these teachers described activities that focused on lower order thinking skills, and did not describe activities that actually encouraged or developed higher order thinking skills. The one exception to this trend were teachers at a secondary school in

Bukittinggi, a town in a mountainous region of West Sumatra. The principal of this school, recognizing that his secondary school had to compete successfully with other secondary schools in the region, specifically invited experts to provide professional development to the teachers at his school related to critical thinking skills. This professional development allowed the teachers to better understand the related concepts, and to be able to develop classroom activities to help students develop these abilities. This initiative resulted in more informed and knowledgeable teachers, and had a direct impact on classroom instruction. These results seem to indicate that, although secondary teachers in Indonesia have been exposed to the ideas related to critical thinking, and recognize that integrating critical thinking skills in their classes is expected and could result in positive results, carefully designed professional development opportunities with continuing support may be necessary in order for tangible results to be realized.

Language of instruction

In the multilingual context of Indonesia, this research sought to discover the place of English language education alongside national and local languages in different regions of the country. The national language of Indonesia is Bahasa Indonesia which is a required language of instruction for most content in secondary schools. In fact, while working with numerous local counterparts throughout Indonesia, and across very diverse cultural and linguistic communities, all collaborators and participants spoke and communicated with ease in Bahasa Indonesia, quite an accomplishment for such a diverse country.

In an English language learning context, secondary teachers were asked which language they used predominantly in their courses, Bahasa Indonesia or English. In interviews, many teachers replied that they used both languages at varying degrees. For the teachers who reported using Bahasa Indonesia as the primary language of instruction in their English classes (46% of all teachers interviewed), 67% of these teachers reported using Bahasa Indonesia 50–75% of the time, and 24% reported using Bahasa Indonesia 75–100% of the time. Another 24% of all teachers interviewed indicated they primarily used English, and another 19% of all teachers reported mixing languages. The use of the Bahasa Indonesia was used to facilitate instruction, clarify complex topics, and assist with students' understanding. Yet even in these examples, teachers strove to include English as much as possible to increase students' familiarity and comfort with using the language. One teacher explained that:

> So we switch again [from Bahasa Indonesia to English] because we want to … make them familiar with [English] because the instruction is similar from one task to another task, so we translate it back so they will [be] familiar and so next we [use] English [and] we hope that they … understand (Interviewee FT2JPN025 H010).

In addition, numerous teachers indicated that the classroom setting was an official context, therefore Bahasa Indonesia was most appropriate. One teacher noted that his choice of language of instruction also depended on the level of motivation of the students:

> I use English but it's different in different class[s]. Take one example, if I teach English in a high motivated students, I mostly use English [70–80%] but in low motivated class, mostly I use Indonesian and even [the local language]. (Interviewee MT2NR3H02)

Through questionnaire responses, secondary teachers and pre-service teachers indicated that

there is a place for students' local languages in the English classroom. Secondary teachers reported using students' local languages most often for building rapport and helping low proficiency learners. On the other hand, pre-service teachers responded similarly, but also indicated the utility of using students' local languages to describe difficult vocabulary. Both secondary teachers and pre-service teachers indicated the importance of teachers using students' local languages for a variety of purposes. Likewise, students' use of local languages was reported as important, yet teachers and pre-service teachers reported that students' use of local languages in their classes was not common. Considering these questionnaire responses in comparison to the classroom observations in the current research, both English and Bahasa Indonesia were used in class instruction. Teachers used Bahasa Indonesia for classroom management (most commonly for repeating instructions and maintaining focus), and students used Bahasa Indonesia (and local languages and dialects) for clarification during class activities, and yet students used English to complete activities. In the observed classrooms, teachers shifted from English instruction to Bahasa Indonesia instruction, oftentimes not because of the lack of understanding on the part of the students, but in response to their own lack of confidence in using English, or providing instruction in English. In many cases, the translation was not necessary for the students' understanding. Nevertheless, in all classes observed in all schools, English was used during classes by both teachers and students to some extent.

The utilization of additional (local or regional) languages within the English language classroom, a form of translanguaging where students could utilize their linguistic repertoire to make meaning (Garcia, 2017), was less common. Teachers, especially those with students representing multiple linguistic communities in a single classroom, felt ill prepared to use additional languages, as they were not fluent in all languages represented. Again, the one exception to this trend was a school in Yogyakarta, a private secondary school, which was implementing translanguaging out of necessity rather than pedagogical design. In this particular school, a number of underprivileged learners had been integrated into the classroom from diverse communities, as well as different regions of Indonesia, particularly Papua. As a result, many of these students were not fluent in Bahasa Indonesia, struggled with communication, and were challenged by learning the English that was in the curriculum. Teachers resorted to encouraging students to use their local languages, dialects, and limited Bahasa Indonesia in order to communicate effectively about classroom topics in an effort to better understand the content and the English language that was being presented. This process was successful, and actually approached an authentic use of translanguaging in the classroom, even though the teachers involved felt this represented a shortcoming in their ability to instruct the class. However, this was a rare and exceptional occurrence as opposed to a systematic utilization of translanguaging as a critical pedagogy in classrooms.

Integration of culture

Similarly to the multilinguistic character of Indonesia, the population of the country spans numerous ethnic and cultural groups. One focus of this research sought to determine to what extent different cultural aspects were utilized in the English language learning classroom. One aspect of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*) that was quite localized was the integration of local culture into school activities and classroom content. Numerous current English teachers (93%) enthusiastically shared through interviews how they brought in examples of local culture as topics of conversation, supported by relevant vocabulary, and which were utilized in pair or group work,

presentations and special classroom or school activities. Integrating culture was particularly useful during descriptive activities (essays, presentations, dialogues), which were an emphasized component of the national curriculum and associated textbooks. Topics included food, traditional customs, local handcrafts, regionally specific wedding traditions, local national parks and sightseeing locations, and festivals and holidays. In some cases, teachers used discussions of culture to compare and contrast different regional cultures (for example Javanese and Balinese culture), and/or local cultures with cultures in English dominant countries (for example American and British culture, and Indonesian culture). In addition, readings in textbooks dealt with varying regional cultures. One teacher commented that "We have reading[s]... about Indonesian culture, many different Indonesian culture[s]. From Sumatra, from Medan, from Javanese itself… folktale[s]. So, the material and the focus that is from the government deals with Indonesian culture" (Interviewee FT/55752 H017). This integration of cultural topics and discussion seemed to be one of the predominant components of the English curriculum. A notable example of cultural integration occurs in Bali every Thursday, when government officials, including school teachers, and students, dress in traditional Balinese attire. While not directly linguistically related, such activities clearly promote local customs and traditions, and provide an opportunity for exchange of ideas with students from different regions in the country.

Professional development opportunities

Secondary teachers included in this research recognized the need for continuing professional development. In fact, many of those interviewed and who responded to the questionnaire were attending continuing professional development sessions at the respective universities when they were asked to take part in this research. Many of the teachers indicated their interest in pursuing professional development, particularly related to methodology (87%, especially concerning how to increase students' motivation) and materials development (24%). While there is a broad range of opportunities for professional development for current secondary English language teachers in Indonesia, some of those fall short of actually improving teaching practice (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019). While sessions provided by international experts are highly valued, authors report that secondary teachers indicate those led by domestic experts tend to focus on 'what should be done in a classroom,' without descriptions of how to achieve positive results. Professional opportunities in Indonesia may often be brief, consisting of attending conferences or a single presentation or afternoon workshop. What could be more valuable is more medium and long-term sequential professional development, that allows for learning, experimentation in the classroom, reflection, discussion and re-experimentation, through multiple professional development meetings with the same group over time. This could also lead to what Cirocki and Farrell (2019) recommend as professional communities of practice within regions where teachers are working together and sharing experiences and ideas over a sequenced number of workshops. Furthermore, action research projects could further localize such professional development. Such models are rare in the Indonesian context, possibly due to limited resources, budget, and scheduling issues, but such medium or long-term professional development schemes could potentially result in more significant impacts at the classroom level.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the multifaceted challenges and opportunities within English language education in Indonesia, particularly in rural areas where resources are often scarce. The findings reveal a need for targeted professional development programs that not only enhance teachers' pedagogical skills but also emphasize how to successfully integrate critical thinking into classroom activities. The research also encourages consideration of the potential of implementing translanguaging critical pedagogy in the Indonesian context. Additionally, this research highlights the need to ensure alignment between pre-service teacher education programs and the actual circumstances of secondary English language teachers in Indonesia, particularly related to a greater level of understanding of connections between theory and practice, and the ability to experiment and reflect on the implementation of methodology. There also seems to be a need for future professional development that focuses on creating long-term, sequenced opportunities that encourage collaboration among educators. This could lead to or facilitate the development of professional learning communities where teachers can share best practices, reflect on their experiences, and participate in action research projects that address local educational challenges. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of these localized professional development programs on teaching practices and student engagement, as well as explore the specific challenges faced by teachers in various settings.

Moreover, tailoring such professional development initiatives to the unique linguistic and cultural contexts of different regions in Indonesia is essential, focusing on ensuring that teachers are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students. Increased teacher and institutional autonomy has been encouraged by the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*). In a recent 2023 return visit to two Balinese schools included in the 2019 data collection, observations indicated that the more recent Emancipated Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) 2022 has further shifted responsibilities to the local level and significantly expanded the use of technology. These changes seem to be resulting in positive impacts at the classroom level. Additional research into the impact of the most recent curricular changes, as well as the impact of a variety of professional development opportunities, could provide insight into how to create a more robust framework for supporting educators in the future. Such research should ultimately lead to improved English language education that empowers all Indonesian students to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

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