

The impact of curriculum changes on english language teaching

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Abstract. Curriculum reform plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of education and determining how learning is conceptualised and delivered. In Indonesia, curriculum changes have been frequent, reflecting the government's attempt to balance local needs with global demands. The most recent reform, the Emancipated Curriculum (EC), was introduced in 2022 to promote learner autonomy, communicative competence, and project-based learning, especially in English Language Teaching (ELT). This conceptual study adopts an integrative literature review approach to synthesise theories and previous studies on curriculum reform and its impact on ELT. The analysis highlights that the EC offers significant opportunities, including the adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), learner-centered innovation, and contextualised instruction. However, challenges persist, such as limited teacher readiness, resource constraints, and students' difficulty in adapting to independent learning. The discussion integrates Change Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Constructivist Learning Theory to explain how curriculum reform can be enacted meaningfully in ELT. Findings suggest that successful reform requires policy alignment, continuous professional development for teachers, student engagement, and institutional support. This study contributes to both theory and practice by offering a conceptual model of responsive ELT in Indonesia and proposing directions for future research.

Keywords: Curriculum Change; English Language Teaching; Assessment; Teacher Perception; Student Perception

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum change has long been recognised as a central driver of educational development, shaping not only what students learn but also how knowledge and skills are constructed in the classroom. In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), curriculum reform carries particular significance because English is positioned as both an academic subject and a vital tool for global communication. As a consequence, any alteration in the curriculum directly influences pedagogical practices, teachers' professional identity, and students' language learning trajectories. Globally, reforms in ELT have been closely linked to efforts to promote learner autonomy, communicative competence, and critical thinking, signalling a shift away from traditional grammar-focused instruction toward more functional and student-centered paradigms.

Historically, Indonesia has witnessed repeated curriculum reforms since independence, each reflecting socio-political, cultural, and economic priorities of the time. The national curriculum has undergone more than ten revisions—from the 1947 Rencana Pelajaran to the most recent 2022 Emancipated Curriculum (EC)—illustrating the government's ongoing attempts to balance national identity with global competitiveness. While earlier curricula emphasised civic and moral education, later reforms introduced competency-based learning and attempted to integrate more communicative approaches in ELT. However, the gap between curriculum design and classroom implementation has remained a persistent issue. Teachers often face constraints related to resources, professional development, and large class sizes, while students frequently struggle to adapt to new learning expectations. These challenges highlight the structural complexities of translating curriculum policy into effective pedagogical practice.

The recent introduction of the EC marks another ambitious effort to reorient Indonesian education toward flexibility, contextualisation, and learner-centeredness. In ELT, it promotes Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), project-based learning, and authentic language use, aligning with global trends. Yet, despite its promise, research on the EC remains limited, and empirical evidence on its specific impact on ELT is scarce. Existing studies have tended to focus narrowly on teachers' perceptions or short-term responses, often neglecting students' voices and overlooking the broader theoretical implications. This creates a significant research gap in understanding how curriculum change influences ELT holistically. Against this backdrop, this study aims to provide a conceptual examination of

curriculum reform in Indonesia and its impact on ELT, synthesising theoretical perspectives and previous research. The contribution of this study lies in bridging policy discourse with classroom realities, integrating both teacher and student perspectives, and offering a responsive model of ELT that can inform future reforms in Indonesia and comparable contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum change in Indonesia has been a recurring phenomenon, reflecting the government's attempts to respond to shifting political, social, and global demands. Since independence in 1945, the national curriculum has undergone more than ten revisions, from the 1947 Rencana Pelajaran through the 2013 Curriculum and most recently the 2022 Emancipated Curriculum (EC). Each reform introduced new emphases, ranging from civic and moral education to competency-based learning, and from structural efficiency to learner autonomy (Muhammedi, 2016). Despite these initiatives, one of the most persistent challenges has been the gap between ambitious policy design and its enactment in classrooms, where teachers face issues of limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient professional support. This historical context underscores that curriculum reform is not simply a technical adjustment, but also a sociopolitical process that must engage with the realities of educational practice.

In the domain of English Language Teaching (ELT), curriculum change has had profound implications for pedagogy and learning outcomes. English, though not an official language in Indonesia, occupies a strategic role as a means of international communication and academic advancement. Earlier reforms often emphasised grammar-translation methods, but more recent policies, including the EC, have promoted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), project-based learning, and contextualised instruction (VOI, 2022; Lie, 2007). These approaches align with global trends that prioritise functional language use over rote memorisation. However, the transition has not been smooth; many teachers continue to rely on traditional approaches due to systemic pressures such as examination requirements and entrenched teaching habits. This tension illustrates how curriculum reform, though progressive in intent, often struggles to reshape entrenched classroom practices.

Teachers' perceptions of curriculum reform are critical, as they determine how policies are translated into practice. Studies indicate that Indonesian teachers generally view reforms positively, acknowledging their potential to enhance student outcomes, yet they also report feeling burdened by increased workload, inadequate resources, and insufficient training (Sukawati, Suwartono, & Palupi, 2023; Reza, Rohmah, & Abdullah, 2023). Puspitasari (2020) highlights that while teachers support learner-centered instruction in principle, many revert to teacher-centered methods due to examination pressures and classroom management challenges. These findings echo Fullan's (2006) argument that meaningful change requires sustained professional development and institutional support; without it, reform risks being reduced to superficial compliance. Thus, teachers' readiness and agency are central to the success or failure of curriculum reform in ELT.

While teachers' perspectives have been widely studied, students' voices in curriculum reform remain underexplored. Research suggests that students perceive reforms like the EC both as opportunities and challenges. For instance, Gustiani and Kardena (2024) found a positive correlation between students' perceptions of the EC and their motivation to learn English, though the effect size was modest. Hulu (2024) reported more nuanced findings: while some students valued the flexibility and independence promoted by the EC, others felt overwhelmed by the demands of self-directed learning. Fitri, Syarfuni, and Rosdiana (2024) similarly observed that students welcomed the relevance of the EC but highlighted the need for greater teacher support and diverse resources. These studies demonstrate that students' engagement is shaped not only by curriculum design but also by the quality of implementation, and that their perspectives must be integrated into reform evaluation.

Theoretically, curriculum change in ELT can be understood through multiple lenses. Schiro's (2013) curriculum ideologies frame the EC as a blend of learner-centered and social reconstructionist orientations, aiming to foster autonomy, creativity, and critical engagement. Fullan's (2006) Change Theory reminds us that reform is a dynamic, non-linear process that requires motivation, persistence, and professional growth among teachers. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory and Piaget's (1952) Constructivist Learning Theory further highlight the importance of social interaction, learner autonomy, and knowledge construction, all of which underpin CLT and project-based learning central to the EC. Despite these theoretical foundations, there remain significant gaps in the literature. Much research has been descriptive, cross-sectional, or limited to teacher perspectives, while students' voices and classroom-level enactments are often neglected. Moreover, little is known about how EC principles are

translated into concrete ELT practices across diverse contexts in Indonesia. This study seeks to address these gaps by offering a conceptual analysis that integrates teachers' and students' perspectives, situates reform within theoretical frameworks, and proposes a responsive model for ELT in Indonesia.

METHODS

This article adopts a conceptual research design framed within an integrative literature review approach. Unlike empirical studies that generate data from fieldwork, conceptual studies synthesise existing knowledge to construct new insights, theoretical propositions, or models. The design was selected to critically examine the impact of curriculum change on English Language Teaching (ELT), focusing on how the Emancipated Curriculum (EC) has been framed, interpreted, and discussed in scholarly literature. By employing this design, the study aims not only to summarise findings but also to advance a comprehensive understanding of reform in ELT by connecting diverse perspectives, theories, and contexts.

The sources of data for this article were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, and reputable reports published primarily between 2013 and 2024, with selective inclusion of seminal works such as Fullan's Change Theory (2006), Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), and Schiro's Curriculum Ideologies (2013). Database searches were conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and national repositories to ensure broad coverage. The procedure involved systematic identification of relevant literature through keywords such as "curriculum change," "English language teaching," "teacher perceptions," and "student perceptions." After screening for relevance, quality, and recency, selected works were reviewed and organised thematically to address the research objectives.

The approach to analysis employed narrative synthesis and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Texts were coded into themes including curriculum reform in Indonesia, implications for ELT, teachers' perceptions, students' perceptions, and theoretical perspectives. These themes were then critically compared and integrated to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps. To enhance quality assurance, triangulation of sources was maintained by consulting both national and international literature; peer debriefing with academic colleagues was conducted to refine interpretations; and reflexivity was applied to ensure that personal bias did not dominate the analysis. This rigorous procedure strengthens the trustworthiness of the conceptual findings and supports the development of a nuanced discussion on the impact of curriculum change on ELT.

DISCUSSION

Curriculum Reform and English Language Teaching: Opportunities and Challenges

Curriculum reform in Indonesia, particularly the introduction of the Emancipated Curriculum (EC), provides new opportunities for English Language Teaching (ELT). The emphasis on competence, aligning Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) represents a paradigm shift from grammar-oriented methods to communicative with global standards of language pedagogy. In addition, the EC promotes learner autonomy by encouraging students to take greater responsibility for their learning, while also supporting project-based learning that situates language use in authentic, real-life contexts. These features allow ELT to move closer to the sociocultural realities of students, fostering meaningful engagement with English as a living language rather than a subject of memorisation.

However, alongside these opportunities lie considerable challenges. A major concern is the limitation of human resources: many teachers lack sufficient training in CLT and project-based pedagogy, leading to uneven implementation across schools. Infrastructural and facility constraints, such as access to technology, teaching materials, and class size management, further complicate reform. Moreover, the mindset of teachers, shaped by years of traditional teacher-centered practice and examination-driven culture, often resists the shift toward student-centered learning. These challenges indicate that curriculum reform in ELT is not simply a matter of adopting new documents, but a complex process of transforming pedagogical culture, requiring time, training, and systemic support.

Teachers as Agents of Change

Teachers occupy a pivotal role in mediating curriculum reform, serving as the bridge between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Fullan (2006) emphasises that teachers are not mere implementers of policy but agents of change whose beliefs, motivation, and professional capacity determine whether reform succeeds or fails. In the context of ELT under the EC, teachers are expected to move beyond transmission of knowledge to become facilitators of communication, designers of learner-centered tasks, and mentors of autonomous learning.

To play this role effectively, teachers require continuous professional development that extends beyond one-off workshops. This includes mentoring, collaborative learning communities, reflective practices, and access to professional networks that allow them to exchange experiences. Without these supports, even the most innovative curriculum risks stagnation. Teachers must also be empowered with institutional trust and flexibility to adapt curriculum principles to local classroom realities. Ultimately, reform can only take root when teachers are recognised not as passive recipients but as co-creators of pedagogical innovation.

Students' Voices in Reform

While teachers are central to curriculum enactment, students are equally vital as the primary stakeholders of reform. Their perceptions of the EC influence not only their level of engagement but also the sustainability of reform itself. Evidence from recent studies suggests that many students welcome the increased independence and flexibility offered by the EC, but others feel overwhelmed by the demands of self-directed learning. This highlights that student readiness is as crucial as teacher readiness in determining reform outcomes.

The implications for motivation and learning strategies are significant. When students perceive the curriculum as relevant and empowering, their intrinsic motivation is strengthened, leading to more active participation in communicative and project-based activities. Conversely, if they view the curriculum as burdensome or disconnected from their needs, disengagement may occur. Therefore, student voices should not only be studied but actively incorporated into curriculum evaluation and development. Involving students in co-designing projects, choosing topics, or giving feedback ensures that reform aligns with their lived experiences, thereby enhancing ownership and effectiveness.

Theoretical Synthesis

The dynamics of curriculum reform in ELT can be illuminated by synthesising insights from established theories. Fullan's Change Theory (2006) underscores that educational reform is a multidimensional process requiring motivation, institutional alignment, and professional growth. This perspective explains why reform in Indonesia often encounters resistance—not due to flawed policy design alone, but because of insufficient systemic support for teachers and students.

From a pedagogical standpoint, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) highlights the role of social interaction, scaffolding, and cultural context in language learning. The EC's emphasis on collaborative, project-based tasks aligns with this theory by positioning learning as a socially mediated process. Similarly, Piaget's Constructivist Theory (1952) underlines the importance of learner autonomy and active knowledge construction, which resonates with the EC's goal of fostering independent learners. Taken together, these theories provide the foundation for an integrative conceptual model of ELT in Indonesia, one that positions reform not as a top-down imposition but as an evolving interplay between policy, pedagogy, and learner agency.

Toward a Responsive ELT Model in Indonesia

Building on the opportunities, challenges, and theoretical synthesis, this article proposes a responsive model of ELT tailored to the Indonesian context. The model is anchored on four interdependent pillars:

1. Policy alignment – ensuring that curriculum objectives, assessment systems, and institutional regulations are coherent and supportive of communicative and learner-centered teaching.
2. Teacher capacity building – providing sustained professional development, mentoring, and collaborative platforms to empower teachers as innovators.
3. Student-centered innovation – embedding student voices in curriculum design and fostering strategies that promote autonomy, creativity, and real-world communication.
4. Institutional support – securing resources, infrastructure, and leadership commitment to create an enabling environment for reform.

By integrating these four components, Indonesia can move toward an ELT system that is both globally relevant and locally responsive. The EC provides a promising framework, but its success hinges on whether teachers, students, and institutions can collaboratively transform policy intentions into lived classroom realities.

CONCLUSION

Curriculum reform has long been acknowledged as a vital mechanism for modernising education, particularly in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). The Indonesian case, culminating in the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum (EC), demonstrates how reform is not only a response to national challenges but also an effort to align with global trends in communicative and learner-centered pedagogy. The review of literature in this study underscores that while curriculum change opens opportunities for more contextualised, interactive, and meaningful English learning, its success is deeply contingent upon the alignment between policy objectives and classroom realities. Reform in ELT thus remains a multidimensional process that requires sustained engagement across all educational stakeholders.

The key insight emerging from this conceptual analysis is that the EC provides considerable promise for transforming ELT in Indonesia, yet its success is determined by three interdependent factors: teachers' readiness and professional competence, students' active involvement in learning, and systemic support from schools and policymakers. When these elements are not harmonised, the reform risks remaining aspirational rather than operational. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes by integrating Change Theory (Fullan, 2006), which views reform as dynamic and systemic; Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which foregrounds social interaction in learning; and Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, 1952), which emphasises learner autonomy and active knowledge construction. Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding how curriculum reform in ELT can be enacted meaningfully.

Practically, the findings highlight important implications for education policy and practice. Policymakers should ensure coherence between curriculum goals, assessment systems, and institutional support structures. Teacher education programmes must be redesigned to prioritise continuous professional development, equipping educators with the skills and confidence to implement communicative and project-based pedagogy. Curriculum designers should also develop teaching materials that reflect students' real-world contexts and learning needs, thereby increasing motivation and relevance. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal designs to trace how reforms evolve over time, conduct comparative studies of ELT reforms across different cultural contexts, and employ mixed-methods approaches to capture both the depth and breadth of stakeholders' experiences. By addressing these directions, scholarship can further illuminate pathways toward a more responsive and globally competitive model of ELT in Indonesia.

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APPENDIX

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