

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY: CHALLENGES OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EYL IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

The status of English as an optional subject in the Indonesian primary school curriculum has created significant ambiguity for English for Young Learners (EYL) teachers. This policy uncertainty limits institutional support and curricular guidance, leaving many EYL teachers without a clear framework to effectively deliver English Language Teaching (ELT) at the primary level. This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the landscape of Teacher Professional Development (TPD) initiatives for EYL educators in Indonesia. Drawing from peer-reviewed journals, government documents, and educational reports published between 2020-2025, this review identifies key themes, challenges, and best practices in the professional development of EYL teachers. The findings reveal that while various TPD programs exist, many are fragmented, underfunded, or misaligned with the practical needs of teachers operating in contexts where English instruction lacks formal curricular status. This article highlights the urgent need for policy-informed, context-responsive TPD models to equip EYL teachers with the practical needs of teachers operating in contexts where English instruction lacks formal curricular status.

Keywords – Teacher Professional Development (TPD), English Language Teaching for Young Learner (ELT-YL), Merdeka Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the role English in Indonesian education system has undergone significant transformation. As globalization continues influencing national policy and socioeconomic development, English has become an important skill to possess. In order to answer this need, Indonesian government has included English in their education curriculum. Begin in early years, English language teaching for primary-aged students or English for Young Learners (EYL) has emerged as an increasingly important focus for both policymakers and educational institutions. However, this growing importance is not yet reflected in a coherent national policy. It is not in consistent institutional support. Even now, English remains an optional subject in Indonesia's primary school curriculum—a status that fosters policy ambiguity and leaves schools and teachers with little clarity or guidance on how to implement EYL effectively.

Despite the non-mandatory nature of English in the national curriculum, as it is placed as EFL, societal demand for early English proficiency continues to surge. Parents and educational institutions are alike in viewing the early exposure to English as a strategic advantage in a competitive global environment. This resurgence

causing a trend where a lot of schools decided to adopt English-based curriculum approach. This trend is visible not only in the growing number of international schools in Indonesia, but also in a lot of public and private institutions that adopt English enrichment programs, often starting in the first grade or even earlier. The proliferation of “Sekolah Nasional Plus” and Cambridge-affiliated institutions across Indonesia further reflects this trend (Hassan, 2017). They offer a curriculum that integrates English as a core subject from the early years of schooling. These developments underscore the growing demand for qualified English Language Teaching for Young Learners (ELT YL) professionals across the country.

The increasing re-introduction of English subjects in primary schools—both within and outside the formal national curriculum—has intensified the demand for competent and professionally trained EYL teachers. In urban centers such as Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, and Denpasar, schools are under pressure to offer competitive programs that include early English instructions (Ardi, 2016). In rural areas, although there are lack of infrastructure and support, there is also growing recognition of the importance of English, driven by national exams, higher education requirements, and broader access to digital resources (OECD, 2018). As a result, these schools frequently seek EYL teachers who is not only can deliver the language instructions but also align with the pedagogical needs of young learners (Kurniawati, 2019).

However, the rapid growth in demand for EYL teachers cannot keep up with the corresponding development in teacher preparation programs. Most pre-service teacher education curricula in Indonesia continue to focus on general education or English teaching at the secondary level (Ardi, 2016). The specialized pedagogical skills required to teach English to young learners—such as age-appropriate communicative methods, classroom language exposure strategies, and child-centered learning—are often underrepresented in both pre-service and in-service training programs (Kurniawati, 2019). As a result, many EYL teachers enter classrooms with limited knowledge of effective EYL pedagogy, relying instead on general language teaching methods that may not suit younger learners’ cognitive and emotional development stages. Not to mention, given nowadays rapid changes of teaching methods, mostly integrated within the vast technology world. Minimum interaction towards these changes are mainly caused by the lack of knowledge and access, abundantly provided in TPD.

This where the urgent need for the Teacher Professional Development (TPD) becomes crucial. TPD is widely recognized as essential for ensuring effective educational delivery. However, in the context of EYL in Indonesia, TPD mostly remain sporadic, underfunded, and poorly aligned with classroom realities. Many available programs are short-term workshops that offer little follow-up or contextual adaptation (Sari & Saripah, 2018). These programs often focus on theoretical knowledge rather than practical skills. They are rarely designed with the input of practicing EYL from the experienced teachers. Moreover, access to TPD is highly unequal; teachers in urban, mostly private, schools often benefit from greater access to resources and training, while those in rural schools, sometimes even the public ones, face significant barriers, including cost, travel, and lack of information (OECD, 2018).

Several studies and educational reports have pointed to the fragmented nature of TPD initiatives in Indonesia, particularly for EYL teachers. Despite the Ministry of Education’s broad goals to improve teacher quality—such as through the Merdeka Belajar program and other in-service training schemes—few of these initiatives specifically address the needs of primary-level English teachers (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). In some cases, English teachers are grouped with general subject educators or secondary English teachers, further diluting the relevance of training content. This mismatch between TPD content, access, and teachers’ daily challenges contributes to low engagement, poor implementation of new strategies, and ultimately, limited impact on student outcomes (Ardi, 2016; Avillanova & Kuswandono, 2019; Sari & Saripah, 2018).

This reality underlines a growing concern within the field: the structural and pedagogical support available to EYL teachers in Indonesia remains insufficient. At some points, they are even misaligned with classroom needs, national expectations, and current demands. Recent policy shifts—particularly the reintroduction of English in the primary curriculum under Kurikulum Merdeka—have brought renewed focus to early English exposure. However, this policy momentum has not been met with equal progress in building teacher capacity that supposedly done by the implementation of TPD. Many EYL teachers continue to report insufficient preparation in both English proficiency and child-centered pedagogical approaches (Kurniawati, 2019; Nurfadillah, 2020).

Moreover, observing current trends, the implementation of EYL varies widely between schools and regions. Research reveals that English is inconsistently treated—ranging from core subject status in international and National Plus schools to local content or extracurricular offerings in public schools (Hassan, 2017; Maharani & Fariyanti, 2021). This disparity results in uneven expectations and leaves teachers to interpret curricular goals independently, often without sufficient pedagogical guidance or support (Suharno, 2017). In rural area, the case often revolves around the gap between teachers’ awareness of EYL principles and their struggle to apply them effectively, especially in classrooms with large student numbers, limited resources, and lack of institutional direction. While on the other side, in most of urban areas, even though the teachers are not limited by the resources or institutional direction, they often constrained by the related content knowledge of lessons in English. Even

though they have the basic background of English Language program graduate, they don't have the knowledge of further content materials and how to apply them due the lack of TPD.

Teacher identity also plays a critical role in shaping instructional practices in English. Albastomi et al. (2023) and Arlinda (2021) highlight how EYL teachers often form their professional identity based on personal teaching experiences, emotional relationships with students, and school culture—rather than through structured teacher training. Without access to targeted TPD, these teachers often rely on intuition, imitation, or generalized strategies, mostly learned and discussed with others, that may not be developmentally appropriate or proven to be effective for young learners. Roslina (2023) further demonstrates that while some EYL teachers can plan lessons and engage students, their classroom management and instructional coherence remain inconsistent due to gaps in training.

The challenge continue extends into teacher education institutions as well. Ardi (2016) notes that most pre-service English teacher training programs in Indonesia focus on secondary-level teaching, often neglecting the distinct pedagogical demands of working with young learners. This misalignment results in novice teachers entering the workforce underprepared, particularly in areas like language exposure strategies, play-based instruction, and scaffolding of learning activities (Kurniawati, 2019). Even where teacher trainees demonstrate creativity and enthusiasm, they often lack the structured knowledge to support effective EYL instruction (Ambarwati, Yonata, & Handayani, 2022; Ningsih et al., 2023). Even within experienced teacher, due to lack of structured guidance formed during TPD, the methodology seems to be rigidly shaped towards certain way that is hard to bend, leaving a huge gap towards the continuous growing of generations.

Nonetheless, there are emerging innovations that offer promise. Studies by Ambarwati et al. (2022) and DwiYanti and Santika (2023) highlight the effectiveness of project-based learning (PjBL) and technology integration in pre-service and early-career teacher development. These strategies encourage reflective practice, digital literacy, and collaborative learning—all essential for delivering engaging and meaningful instruction to young learners. PjBL, when supported adequately, has been shown to foster student creativity, critical thinking, and motivation. However, again, these pedagogical innovations are mostly found in teacher training institutes or well-resourced schools and have yet to reach broader national implementation.

Digital competence also emerged as a critical theme during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the shift toward online learning. Kuswandono et al. (2021) report that many EYL teachers were ill-prepared for this transition, relying on rote tasks that failed to sustain learner interest. This experience emphasized the urgent need for TPD programs that include not only content knowledge and pedagogy but also technology-enhanced instruction tailored to young learners' developmental stages. Not to mention with the changing generations; the TPD programs should be able to bridge the gap between generations of the teachers and their young learners. It is critical that the TPD programs facilitates the development of approaches and methodologies customized to the current trends within the generations.

At the policy level, while Merdeka Belajar encourages flexibility and teacher agency, its current rollout lacks targeted support for primary English instruction. Sari and Saripah (2018) argue that most available TPD programs are short-term, theoretical, and disconnected from classroom realities. Avillanova and Kuswandono (2019) call for more sustained, collaborative forms of professional development such as lesson studies, peer coaching, and contextually grounded mentoring. These approaches are more likely to address the real challenges teachers face and promote long-term pedagogical change.

Regional disparities further complicate the landscape. OECD (2018) reports that urban schools—especially those privately funded—benefit from greater access to resources and training, while rural and remote areas often lack even the basic infrastructure needed to support teacher growth. Without equitable distribution of support, national efforts to enhance early English education will remain limited in scope and impact.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that teacher beliefs and identity development are deeply intertwined with effective practice. Arlinda (2021) underscores the importance of reflective practice and identity negotiation, suggesting that professional development should not only provide technical skills but also foster self-awareness and growth. TPD that neglects this dimension may fail to engage teachers on a meaningful level or catalyze real pedagogical transformation.

In summary, the literature consistently points to a series of interconnected issues: fragmented policy implementation, insufficient and misaligned teacher preparation, regional inequality, and underutilization of context-responsive professional development models. Despite promising innovations such as PjBL and technology-integrated learning, these remain unevenly adopted and unsupported at scale. The current structure of teacher professional development in Indonesia for EYL is therefore in urgent need of reform.

Crafting effective, scalable, and sustainable TPD for EYL teachers in Indonesia will require more than curriculum changes or isolated training sessions. It must involve a comprehensive, evidence-based approach—one that integrates pedagogical, technological, and reflective dimensions of teacher development. Such an approach must also be sensitive to context, especially the socio-economic and geographic realities of the schools

where teachers work. Only through such a holistic model can Indonesia ensure that its primary-level English instruction meets both national goals and the developmental needs of young learners.

METHODS

The data collection process began with the formulation of a search strategy to be applied across selected databases, followed by the screening of studies in line with predetermined criteria. The databases consulted for this review were Scopus, Google Scholar, and ERIC. The review timeframe of 2016–2025 was chosen to align with major educational policy shifts in Indonesia, beginning with the School Literacy Movement under the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 23/2015 and extending through the implementation of Merdeka Belajar and post-pandemic reforms. This ten-year span ensures that the review captures both the policy-driven transformations and the contemporary challenges of teacher professional development for EYL while excluding earlier studies that reflect outdated curricular contexts.

Selection criteria

1. The researchers established specific selection criteria to serve as a framework for identifying, screening, coding, and evaluating the studies. Only studies that met these criteria were included in the review, while those that did not were excluded.
2. The study focuses on teacher professional development (TPD) initiatives, strategies, or practices that address the teaching of English for Young Learners (EYL).
3. The context of the study is classroom-level instruction in Indonesian elementary school settings.
4. The study reports empirical findings from original research (excluding reviews, policy documents, or purely theoretical discussions).
5. The study was published between 2016 and 2025, reflecting the period of significant educational reform in Indonesia, including the School Literacy Movement, Merdeka Belajar, and post-pandemic policy adjustments.
6. The study is published in a peer-reviewed journal.
7. The study is written in English to ensure accessibility and comparability within the international academic discourse.
8. The full text of the study is available for review and analysis.

Approach to analysis and synthesis

The analysis and synthesis process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability. The review began with the identification stage, where a total of studies were retrieved from Scopus, Google Scholar, and ERIC using predefined keywords related to Teacher Professional Development (TPD) and English for Young Learners (EYL) in Indonesia. At the screening stage, duplicate records were removed, and abstracts were examined to assess initial relevance to the research focus. Eligibility was then determined by applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring that only peer-reviewed, empirical studies published between 2016–2025 were considered. The final stage involved the inclusion of studies that specifically addressed classroom-level TPD practices for EYL teachers.

For synthesis, a thematic approach was applied. The included studies were coded based on recurring patterns such as policy alignment, pedagogical strategies, technological integration, and regional disparities. Themes were refined through iterative comparison, enabling a comprehensive understanding of both challenges and innovations within the Indonesian context. By following PRISMA, this study ensured systematic selection, minimized bias, and enhanced the reliability of findings, thus providing a robust evidence base for evaluating TPD in EYL settings.

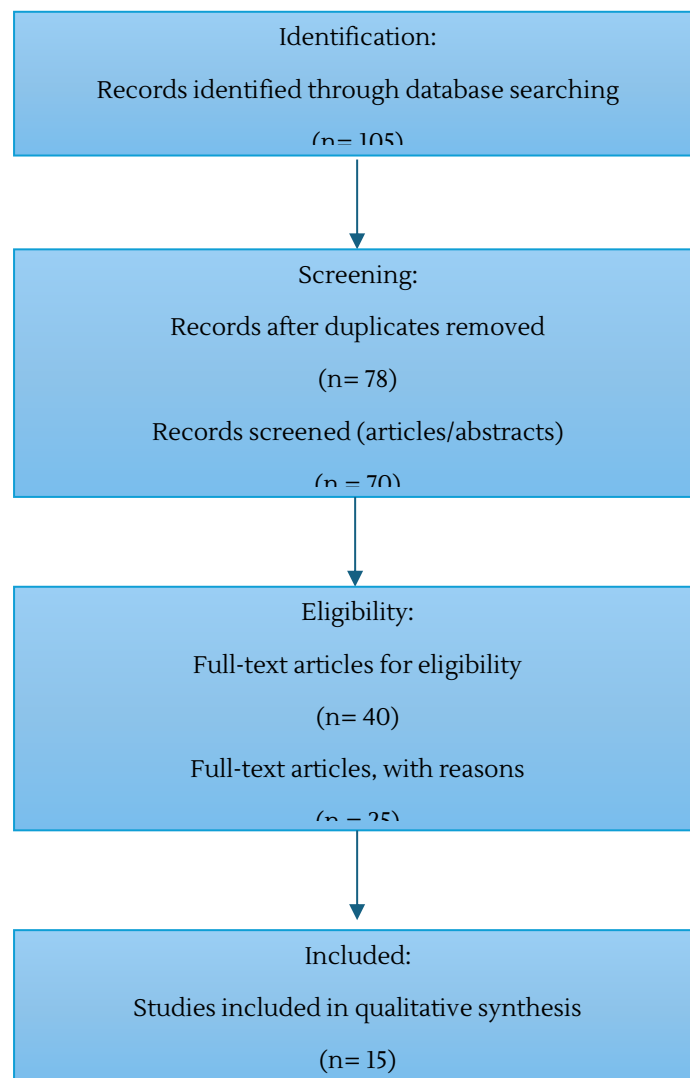


Figure 1. PRISMA Framework

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overview of Selected Studies (2015–2025)

A total of 15 studies met the inclusion criteria through PRISMA screening. These span from 2015 to 2025 and provide a holistic picture of TPD for English for Young Learners (EYL) in Indonesia. Table 1 summarizes their characteristics.

Table 1. Overview of Selected Studies on TPD for EYL in Indonesia (2015–2025)

Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Methodology	Key Findings
Sari & Saripah (2018)	National PD policies for English teachers	Policy review	TPD fragmented, short-term, lacking follow-up.
OECD (2018)	Regional disparities in education	Policy report	Urban teachers access better PD; rural teachers disadvantaged.
Yulindrasari & Ujianti (2018)	ECE teacher professionalism	Qualitative	Standardized assessment undermines authentic professional identity.
Kurniawati (2019)	EYL teacher training	Case study	Teachers rely on general ELT strategies, not EYL pedagogy.
Nurfadillah (2020)	EYL challenges in classrooms	Mixed-methods	Lack of preparation, limited materials hinder effectiveness.
Samad, Sumantri & Dhieni (2020)	Lesson study in early education	Experimental	Lesson study improved lesson design, reflection, evaluation.

Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Methodology	Key Findings
Ministry of Education (2020)	Merdeka Belajar policy	Policy brief	Teacher agency encouraged, but no clear EYL-specific PD.
Kuswandono et al. (2021)	Teachers and online learning	Survey	Digital pedagogy unpreparedness during COVID-19.
Maharani & Fariyanti (2021)	Curriculum implementation	Critical review	English inconsistently treated across schools.
Arlinda (2021)	Teacher identity	Qualitative	Identity shaped by experiences more than structured training.
Ambarwati et al. (2022)	Project-based learning in PD	Experimental	PjBL enhanced creativity, critical thinking, engagement.
Dwiyanti & Santika (2023)	Tech integration in PD	Case study	Digital literacy essential but unevenly supported.
Albustomi et al. (2023)	Professional identity formation	Mixed-methods	Identity grounded in relationships and culture.
Roslina (2023)	Lesson planning and management	Case study	Teachers improved creativity but lacked coherence.
Tesar & Pangastuti (2024)	Gender and professionalism in ECE	Critical review	Structural inequities marginalize female ECE teachers.

Distribution Trends

- **2015–2018:** Policy-focused studies, highlighting fragmentation and inequality (Sari & Saripah, 2018; OECD, 2018).
- **2019–2020:** Emerging concerns about pedagogical mismatch and preparation gaps (Kurniawati, 2019; Nurfadillah, 2020).
- **2020–2021:** Pandemic-driven research on digital literacy and identity (Kuswandono et al., 2021; Arlinda, 2021).
- **2022–2023:** Innovations in project-based learning, tech integration, reflective practice (Ambarwati et al., 2022; Dwiyanti & Santika, 2023; Roslina, 2023).
- **2024–2025:** Broader debates on equity, gender, and structural barriers in professionalisation (Tesar & Pangastuti, 2024).

Thematic Findings

Policy Alignment and Curriculum Reform

The decade-long evidence demonstrates persistent policy–practice gaps. While *Merdeka Belajar* promoted flexibility (Ministry of Education, 2020), teachers rarely received structured EYL-focused training. Curriculum ambiguity forced teachers to interpret outcomes independently (Maharani & Fariyanti, 2021). Earlier reviews flagged these risks (Sari & Saripah, 2018), and recent studies confirm their persistence (Albustomi et al., 2023).

Pedagogical Competence and Classroom Practices

EYL teachers often enter classrooms with secondary-level ELT strategies, not suited for young learners’ cognitive stages (Kurniawati, 2019). Evidence shows that lesson study (Samad et al., 2020) and project-based learning (Ambarwati et al., 2022) increase teachers’ ability to design interactive, developmentally appropriate lessons. Still, these are exceptions rather than norms.

Technology Integration and Digital Competence

COVID-19 highlighted the unpreparedness of teachers for online learning (Kuswandono et al., 2021). Later interventions integrated digital literacy into PD (Dwiyanti & Santika, 2023), promoting multimodal EYL pedagogy. However, studies note inequitable access between western/central and eastern Indonesia (Istiana, 2023).

Teacher Identity and Professional Agency

Identity is central to professional growth. Teachers construct their practice identities more through experiences and local culture than formal PD (Arlinda, 2021; Albustomi et al., 2023). Reflective practices like journaling and peer coaching enhance identity and encourage pedagogical experimentation (Fidelis & Kuswando, 2023).

Regional and Structural Disparities

The OECD (2018) and Nurfadillah (2020) highlight stark inequities in PD access. Tesar & Pangastuti (2024) expand this by showing **gender inequities**: female EYL/ECE teachers are systematically undervalued, limiting professional recognition.

Discussion

The findings of this review clearly illustrate the persistent gap between national policy and classroom realities in the professional development of EYL teachers. While Merdeka Belajar emphasizes flexibility and teacher agency (Ministry of Education, 2020), the absence of EYL-specific standards and structured training leaves many teachers uncertain about curricular expectations and pedagogical direction. Earlier studies warned of fragmented and short-term TPD programs that lack coherence (Sari & Saripah, 2018), and recent reviews confirm that this pattern continues to undermine teacher confidence and effectiveness (Maharani & Fariyanti, 2021; Albustomi et al., 2023). This mismatch between policy rhetoric and classroom needs highlights the structural weaknesses in aligning reforms with sustainable teacher professional development, especially when English remains optional within the primary curriculum.

Another central concern lies in the limited pedagogical competence of EYL teachers, which is often a direct outcome of inadequate preparation and misaligned training programs. Many teachers continue to adopt general ELT approaches designed for older learners, which do not correspond to the cognitive and socio-emotional development of younger students (Kurniawati, 2019; Nurfadillah, 2020). Promising interventions such as lesson study and project-based learning have demonstrated the potential to improve lesson design, creativity, and reflective practice (Samad, Sumantri, & Dhieni, 2020; Ambarwati, Yonata, & Handayani, 2022). However, these practices remain localized and are not yet embedded within national PD systems. Without wider adoption, teachers continue to struggle with adapting pedagogy to suit young learners, and the overall impact of these innovations remains limited to specific contexts rather than addressing systemic challenges.

The rapid digital transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in teacher preparedness. Many EYL teachers relied on rote assignments and minimal interaction during online learning, underscoring their lack of digital competence (Kuswando et al., 2021). More recent initiatives integrating digital literacy into PD have demonstrated the potential of technology to foster multimodal pedagogy and interactive learning experiences (Dwiyantri & Santika, 2023). Yet, this shift also highlighted deep inequities in access to resources across regions, with rural and under-resourced schools unable to benefit at the same level as their urban counterparts (OECD, 2018; Istiana, 2023). These findings suggest that while technology can act as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation, it also functions as an amplifier of structural disparities when not accompanied by equitable resource distribution and context-sensitive support.

Finally, the professional identity of teachers emerged as a decisive factor in determining the uptake and effectiveness of TPD. Studies show that teachers often construct their identities through personal experience, emotional bonds with students, and institutional culture rather than through structured PD (Arlinda, 2021; Albustomi et al., 2023). This reliance on informal identity formation leads to wide variation in classroom practices and inconsistent adoption of child-centered methods. Reflective practices such as journaling and peer coaching have been shown to foster professional growth and strengthen agency (Roslina, 2023; Fidelis & Kuswando, 2023). However, without systemic support for identity-oriented PD, many teachers continue to fall back on intuition and generalized strategies. This challenge is compounded by regional and gender disparities, with female and rural teachers facing greater obstacles in accessing meaningful PD opportunities (Nurfadillah, 2020; Tesar & Pangastuti, 2024). Taken together, the evidence suggests that sustainable improvement in EYL instruction requires a holistic model of TPD that integrates policy clarity, pedagogical innovation, digital equity, and identity development within an equitable and inclusive framework.

CONCLUSION

This review has shown that teacher professional development (TPD) for English for Young Learners (EYL) in Indonesia remains fragmented, uneven, and often misaligned with the realities of classroom practice. Despite the aspirations of *Merdeka Belajar* to promote flexibility and empower teachers, the absence of structured EYL-focused training and curricular standards continues to create uncertainty. Many teachers, particularly in public and rural schools, still enter classrooms without adequate preparation to address young learners'

developmental needs, resulting in reliance on general ELT strategies that are not age-appropriate. The persistence of short-term, theoretical workshops with little follow-up further underscores the systemic weaknesses in current TPD initiatives.

At the same time, promising practices have emerged that highlight the potential for sustainable improvement. Lesson study and project-based learning approaches have proven effective in enhancing teacher reflection, creativity, and lesson design, while the integration of digital literacy into PD has expanded possibilities for multimodal instruction. However, these innovations remain unevenly distributed and are often concentrated in urban or well-resourced contexts, leaving many teachers unable to access or sustain them. The COVID-19 pandemic further revealed vulnerabilities in digital competence, emphasizing the urgency of designing TPD that is responsive to technological demands and tailored to the realities of EYL classrooms across diverse settings.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that meaningful reform in TPD for EYL requires a holistic and context-sensitive approach. Such an approach must integrate clear policy alignment, pedagogical innovation, equitable digital integration, and sustained support for teacher identity development. Attention must also be directed toward addressing regional and gender disparities that limit access to professional growth opportunities. Without these systemic adjustments, EYL instruction in Indonesia will remain fragmented, and teachers will continue to rely on individual effort rather than structured professional pathways. With coherent policy, equitable resource distribution, and embedded reflective practices, TPD can serve as a powerful driver of both teacher empowerment and improved learning outcomes for young learners.

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