

**Indonesian EFL Teachers in the Swing of Curricula**

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### Abstract

In the era of standard-based education which is marked by the reforms in many areas of education including curriculum, it is necessary to understand how Indonesian EFL teachers coped with curricular change in the course of their profession. This study attempts to discover how EFL teachers in Indonesia perceive the curricular changes through their beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Employing an on-line survey combined with semi-structured individual interviews, the qualitative study began with mapping EFL teachers' generic perceptions towards curricular change. The initial map was then used to probe major emergent themes through individual interviews on purposively selected participants. The result showed that: (1) teachers' belief was perceived to reshape through adequate socialization and training. (2), it took time to witness teachers' belief formation and eventually attitudinal change, and (3) as their beliefs and practices were reshaped, teachers' practice was highly likely to change moreover when improvement in learning gains were achieved by the students. However, the latter is often dismayed by the implementation of high-stakes testing (The National Examinations). This article is closed with relevant recommendations based on the particular findings.

**Keywords:** Curricular change, teacher belief, teacher practice, qualitative

### **Indonesian EFL Teachers in the Swing of Curricula**

Every curriculum needs to change and adapt in order to meet the evolving demands and recent developments in the society. As the nature of the labor market has changed significantly, curriculum changes become unavoidable. The emergence of world knowledge-based and service-based economies has shaped a new industrial order. Indonesia is moving from a developing nation to one of Asia's biggest economy together with Japan and India. In relation to education, it is interesting to ask if curriculum change is merely to prepare learners for the changing market place or to achieve broader education outcomes. It is widely believed that schools need to prepare students with the life skills, knowledge and individual potentials to be flexible and adaptable in any social changes. Hence, whatever role they hold in the future, students can really learn new skills and acquire new knowledge to move forward regardless of any changes.

Mills (2006) urges to "take change by the hand and make a future and shape it before it grabs us by the throat." However, Fullan (2007) and (Dyer, 1999) warn that the status quo is difficult to evolve if the selected change agents (the teachers), do not recognize themselves as having any stake in the construction. Indonesian EFL teachers are not different, without such a stake, it is unlikely that they would undertake the fundamental changes in practices and beliefs that every new curriculum demands. Fullan adds "Educational change depends on what teachers do and think - it's as simple and as complex as that" (2007, p.117). In Indonesia, curriculum change becomes a logical consequence of the change the social and political system. The national curricula have generally been based on the same basis, the Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, foundations that unite the nation. The difference has often been the weight on implementation approaches and subject matters as reflected in the teaching hours.

This inquiry is an attempt to understand how EFL teachers in Indonesia make sense of the curriculum changes they experienced in their professional course. Sense making of the curriculum change is an important endeavor to comprehend the impacts of the change in teachers' beliefs and practices. This article discusses how EFL teachers in Indonesian schools perceive their (1) beliefs, (2) practices, and (3) attitudes in response to curriculum changes they experienced. Further recommendations on practice and policy are discussed in the end of this article.

### **Teachers' Beliefs, Practices and Attitudes**

Understanding teachers' beliefs, practices and attitudes is central to recognize improvements in educational processes including the teachers' own development. These notions are closely related to teachers' strategies in dealing with challenges in their professional routines and they shape students' learning environment and influence student motivation and achievement (OECD, 2009). Guskey (1986) argued that teachers adjust their beliefs through changing their practice and reflecting on the result. Criticizing Guskey's model as linear, Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) claimed the process as a cycle with numerous entry points. Their model, called Teacher Professional Growth, considers four different realms that cover the teacher's world namely: personal domain, external domain, domain of practice, and domain of consequence. The model assumes that principle change happens through the processes of reflection and performance. When teachers act purposively and make continuous reflection on the action, their belief may change as they find an external source of information as stimulus and salient outcomes. Hence, the notions of stimulus and outcomes are crucial in order to understand teacher change.

In relation to teacher change, Guskey (2002) further proposed three major goals of change in the classroom practices of teachers: change in the learning outcomes of students, change in their attitudes, and change in their beliefs. He emphasized the significance of having successful experiences that can change teachers' prior attitudes and beliefs. When teachers believe it works as they experience themselves, that experience shapes their fresh attitudes and beliefs. Built on the James-Lange theory of emotion feedback, Guskey's model of teacher change implies that change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs is principally an outcome, rather than a trigger, of change in the learning outcomes of students. Without any evidence of positive change in students' learning, significant change in the attitudes and beliefs of teachers is unlikely to occur. Thus, it is their belief that professional development will increase their understanding and competence, grow their professionalism, and develop their instructional practices to what drives teachers to professional development.

Attitude is believed to be influenced by a belief system and experience, and this is also true of teacher attitudes (Jenkins, 2005). For this reason, Basalama (2010) raises the concern that high job security among government teachers in Indonesia may affect their motivation towards professional learning and thus, their capacity to develop into more effective teachers. Additionally, she argues that it is not easy to maintain a positive attitude towards learning to change across the course of a teacher's career. In a stronger account, Yeom, Acedo, and Utomo (2002) claim that teachers in Indonesia are reluctant to follow directions from the government because government officials are perceived to lack the background knowledge and skill to provide advice to schools. These impressions of public school teachers' attitudes towards change and professional learning need to be verified through an in-depth study involving EFL teachers often regarded as agents of change.

### **Sense-Making Through Organizational Learning**

School as a learning institution (for all of its stakeholders) have gained a central function and its leaders and teachers have significant roles to play in school improvement. In Guskey's (1995) terminology, these leaders' and teachers' active learning and collaboration will bring about productive change, leading to organizational learning. It is the inner creative capacity of schools to adjust to the dynamics of educational change (Sleegers & Leithwood, 2010, p. 558). Sleegers & Leithwood add that research often describes this conception of collective learning in school cultures as a professional learning community which has three strong principles: a professionally oriented culture, a learning focus, and appreciation of teachers' inquiry and association. Hence, it would be suitable to ask relevant teachers and school stakeholders to know to what extent they make sense of curricular changes.

Despite the different indicators and variables to describe and define the learning community, the essential idea of school organizational learning is to help form teachers' attitudes towards new pedagogies and curricula. The key implication for schools that wish to create learning organization is that they must provide a range of targeted opportunities for teachers to learn and participate in the organizational learning. Such a view inevitably places schools in a significant role as learning opportunity providers for teachers as the agents of school change in this particular study. Thus, knowing how school stakeholders make sense of the changes, the barriers they encounter, and the efforts they make to adapt is essential in the current study.

Sense-making is the process through which individuals select, interpret, assign meaning to, and act on stimulation they perceive from their environment (Weick, 1995). Research has taken into account how organizational theories such as sense-making can help us to better understand teacher learning in schools. The theory highlights the interpretive, social, and on-

going nature of constructing understanding, directing away from a notion of learning as simple, properly designated activities. On the contrary, teachers might engage in sense-making any time for instance when they encounter difficulty in understanding a policy instruction or have classroom teaching experiences they find bewildering. Moreover, the interpretations teachers draw from these matters is, to a certain extent, related to their identity, including their knowledge, beliefs, and current practices. Thus, employing a sense-making lens to the study of teachers' sense making facilitates the study to the conception of why, what, how, when, and where teachers change in response to curricular changes.

The process of learning from experiences takes time and allows teachers to ponder what they have encountered in their professional experiences. They have impressions, judgments, and interpretations of the particular experiences they have lived because teachers' knowledge is mostly formed through narrative accounts of experience in order to construct a shared understanding of their work (Johnson, 2009). Doyle (1997) argues that narratives can locate and link facts to one another and that the real meaning of truth lies in how phenomena are connected and interpreted by the participants. Narrative also enables the unheard, unseen, and undocumented – the ordinary, marginalized, and silenced to give voice (Riessman, 2008). Within this set of assumptions, the exploration of teacher beliefs, practices and attitudes in response to curriculum change can be obtained through rigorously analyzing their perceptions and stories which leads to how they identify, respond and make-sense of the change.

### Indonesian EFL Context

According to Lie (2007), Indonesia underwent six EFL curricular changes with three different approaches prior to her publication. With the two recent changes, there have been eight English teaching curricula implemented in the country. Table 1 below describes the English teaching curricular changes that happened in the Indonesian education system (the shaded rows could be found by Lie (2009)).

**Table 1.**

#### List of curricula implemented in Indonesia

No	Starting year	Name of Curriculum	Approach
1	1945	Unknown	Grammar translation
2	1968	Oral Approach	Audio-lingual
3	1975	Oral Approach	Audio-lingual
4	1984	Communicative approach	Communicative
5	1994	Meaning-based curriculum	Communicative
6	2004	Competency-based curriculum	Communicative
7	2006	School-based curriculum	Communicative
8	2013	Curriculum 2013	Scientific

Criticizing the communicativeness of the curricula, Lie (2009) noticed two ambiguities emerged from the implementation of the curricula in the 80s and 90s. First is the mismatch of the claimed ‘communicative’ curriculum and the very structured syllabi. Second is the incongruity of the claimed ‘communicative’ curriculum and the priority for the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. The integration of the four skills was halted by discreet pedagogy in classroom practice due to teachers’ incompetency.

Overall, Lie (2009) noted four main constraints in all of the curricular changes experienced by ELT in Indonesia. First, the number of students in classrooms is so large and their socio-economic disparity is so wide that it is difficult to design a curriculum that would work effectively all students in schools. In other words, a one-size-fits-all curriculum would be inappropriate for the Indonesian education setting. The next constraint is the budget shortage which has implications on the large class size, the low teacher salary, and the lack of educational resources. The third constraint is the nature of EFL learning environment where unequal opportunities exist in the learning environment for learners of English in Indonesia. The last constraint is the politics of policy and curriculum. Although teachers were supposed to have the autonomy to develop and carry out the curriculum based on the basic competencies and minimal standards as set in, for instance, the 2004 Curriculum, school practices in regard to EFL teaching did not reflect the ideals of the curriculum. The national exam pressure forces teachers to teach to the test and drill their students for several months of their last year in high school.

Such conditions have put EFL teachers into a dilemma of following the prescribed curriculum or achieving the high scores in the National Examinations (NEs). They are in between the extreme pendulum which to a certain extent impact on their pedagogical practices. The competency-based curriculum approach employed since 2004 is dismayed by the implementation of high-stakes testing as the NEs. After the political heat, the new government seems to take the pro-teacher steps in terms of educational policy. However, still, the voice of teachers remains central despite the policy shifts.

### **Teacher Resistance**

The desire and intention to maintain existing practices in response to changes teachers consider being undesirable and threatening is often defined as teacher resistance (Giles, 2006).

Such resistance is believed to happen when teachers do not comprehend and value the need for change. Under such conditions, they tend to be more interested in keeping the status quo to continue. It must be easier to continue the existing instructional practices in the same way rather than trying to learn new approaches and methods. Greenberg and Baron (2008) argue that teachers might fear the loss of what is familiar and comfortable, and might feel anxious about the new changes when their fixed professional and instructional routines are disturbed. Teacher resistance might also arise from a lowered commitment to change in the late years of career cycle (Huberman, 1989), and from drives to retain status and self-interest when recommended changes are considered intimidating (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996).

However, Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) and Gitlin and Margonis (1995) remind the danger of stereotypical and biased stigma on teachers who resist curricular reform proposals, and argue that teachers show ‘principled resistance’ only when they identify proposed curriculum changes as unfavorable to their students’ learning.

This article argues that teacher resistance should not always be perceived as a problem because it provides opportunities for policy makers to reflect on the reform proposals and to learn from teacher responses. Fullan (2007) also suggests that curricular change does not necessarily mean progress especially when policy makers never carry out an evaluation on the previous curriculum. Hence, EFL teacher resistance to the curricular changes in Indonesia can be seen as a form of negative response when there is disagreement about an innovation. This why the current study attempts to understand to what extent EFL teachers respond to curricular changes with regards to their beliefs, attitudes and practices.

### Brief Methods

In order to answer the proposed research question, the study was designed to accommodate extensive and in-depth information from the participants. For that reason, the study had to cover wide-ranging participants while at the same time the depth of their responses was central. Thomas Schwandt (2007, p. 296) argues that “to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode. It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick.” Thus, the interpretations of the phenomena made the current study reach what so called ‘thick description’.

Embracing a qualitative approach, this study was carried out through two phases of data collection. The first was in the form of on line survey involving EFL teachers of different backgrounds in which the obtained information was used as the initial data. Sent through on line channels such as e-mails and social media applications, the survey gained considerable responses from EFL teachers due to the spiral nature of these technologies. Only expecting for about forty responses, fifty one teachers voluntarily gave their responses within a fortnight. The following table summarizes the details of the participants in the study.

**Table 2.**  
**Summary of Participants & Data Collection**

Instrument	Participants	Gender		Duration	Output	Analysis
		M	F			
Survey	51	16	35	2 weeks	Semi-structured interview questions	Mapped
Interviews	16	5	11	60 minutes/ participant	Verbatim data	Coded

The initial data from the on-line survey was utilized to construct questions for the second stage of semi-structured individual interviews. Sixteen participants were selected purposively to represent different gender, academic background, school type, and teaching experience. With twelve pre-designed questions and probes mapped from the first phase of data gathering, each participant took about sixty minutes to respond in a relaxed situation. All individual interviews were conducted in Indonesian to facilitate comprehension, recorded by means of an audio tape, and the verbatim data were transcribed in order to ease subsequent coding processes.

### **Results and Discussions**

In line with the research questions, this section is divided into three sub-sections to facilitate the discussion. The first sub-section discusses the perceived impacts on EFL teachers' beliefs. Following that, the perceived impacts on their attitudes will be discussed and finally, this section will elaborate the perceived impact of curricular change on teachers' practices. Every finding of the study is followed by a discussion with relevant literature to make sense of the data and to locate the findings among the existing studies in related area.

#### **The Perceived Impact on Teachers' Beliefs**

More than half of the received initial responses showed teachers' preference in the school-level curriculum which actually still embraces competency-based approach. As probed further through the interview, the response was due to their familiarity and satisfaction with the curriculum. Luke, a high school teacher from northern suburbs said, "It took a rather long time for us to learn and understand this curriculum (2006) so that we could enjoy it in the classroom but then the government decided to change with the new one." Several other participants from different schools who had longer experiences also had concern over the length of learning time they had to learn a new curriculum. Richardson et al. (1991) warn that ignoring fixed beliefs

when implementing curricular reform often results in disappointing outcomes. Therefore, it is necessary to first understand set belief incorporated by the teachers before implementing change.

Reflecting on her own experience, another teacher in a well-established vocational school, Anne argued, “It is not easy for us to learn new things instantly. We have to make sure that the change is really favorable for us and for our students.” Her statement reflects teachers’ concern over the short socialization and speedy learning expected from the teachers who have been comfortable in using their preferred curriculum for years. As they claim, it requires time and effort to change their beliefs in the curriculum.

In a rather cynical way, Brad who teaches English in a junior school in the city claimed, “They (the authority) never conducted any study on the (competency-based) curriculum. How could they change it?” As probed further, his voice was not meant to be rebellious but a reflection of his disappointment towards the marginalization he experienced at school, exclusion from policy making, and a form of critical voice that was also heard from most interviews with the participants. These teachers argued that, by all means, they had to comply with the regulation (curriculum) as it has been enacted; they would change. In other words, they would inevitably reshape their beliefs in the existing curriculum in the light of the new one despite their resistant-look and apathy.

In spite of the qualitative nature of the current study, it is interesting to present the quasi-statistics of their responses in the on-line survey. Most of the responses related to their relevant activities were in contrast with the commonly perceived negative attitudes. When asked, “As an EFL teacher, what did you do when the curriculum changed” the survey participants answered:

**Table 3.****Summary Responses of Participants' Attitudes**

Asked relevant questions to the school(s)	18	35%
Found information through outside network	21	41%
Asked questions to the school supervisors	6	12%
Waited until I got the information	6	12%
Others	0	0%

Only a half-dozen participants showed their averseness while the rest tried to positively look for information about the change through different channels. It demonstrates that most of the survey participants (EFL teachers) were aware of the curricular change despite their perceived attitudes which are discussed in the following sub-section.

#### **The Perceived Impacts on Teachers' Attitudes**

Two major voices in common among the participants are the demand for better communication and the emphasis for curricular evaluation before any change. These two themes were consistently emergent both in the survey and the interviews. The two themes can be said to become the main drive for teachers' attitudinal reactions in the study.

While some teachers are resistant in their strategies to ignore such agendas, others obviously try to search of a way around the system (Smagorinsky et al. 2002; Starnes 2000). This phenomena can be tracked trough and is well-reflected the participants' responses both in the survey and interviews. A fairly young teacher of 27 years old who teaches English in a vocational school declared, "I had to search for information about the details of new curriculum by myself through different sources such as the internet, colleagues and professional network".

Despite his colleagues' reluctance, he admitted that it would be too long to understand the change if he only waited for the official socialization from the authority.

Ling (2002) finds changes in teacher feelings during curriculum reform. In her study, teachers' feelings changed from *frustration* during the first phase of curriculum change to *confidence* when they were able to adapt the materials. It is similar to what Maria, an EFL teacher who participated in the interview, said, "*I was struggling with the new curriculum but after attending several trainings and workshops, I gradually understood what was required by the curriculum*". Burns (1995) admits that curriculum change challenges familiar practices but with the passing of time that brings familiarity, initial concerns are normally resolved. The familiarity which came with experience as time passed was the factor that helped in reshaping the teachers' belief of the change and contributed to improving the teachers' attitudes.

This could be what happened to the teachers in this study whose initial perceptions of reform in curriculum changed over time and this adjustment in belief was reflected in their attitudes and eventually practices. It needs to be emphasized that there are similarities and differences between teachers in the way they internalize the changes. As what the survey captures, teacher participants have mixed-responses towards the curriculum reform. Regardless of their dissatisfaction with their roles in the process of curriculum change, the participants showed different reactions to this top-down policy and marginalization. It is, therefore, possible that different teachers drew on their different educational, social, and cultural backgrounds in managing their responses and reactions towards the newly implemented curriculum.

### **The Perceived Impact on Teachers' Practices**

"I know they change the curriculum, but I will maintain my way of teaching because I know my students better", claimed Paula a middle-aged teacher with limited access to

professional learning in a rural school. She seemed to resist the change in the way she maintained her instructions. It is interesting to review the literature regarding the phenomenon. Allington, Johnston, and Day (2002, p. 462) viewed teaching as “a complex activity that is not amendable to scripted materials, standardized lessons, or any one-size-fits-all plan for the organization of instruction”. In line with that, teachers, according to Fang (1996), organize instruction in alignment with previous classroom interactions, personal reflections and beliefs, and the observed needs of their students. In more recent research, Van Der Schaaf, Stokking, and Verloop (2008) find that quality teaching is bred when competent teachers align their personal beliefs with their professional practice. Thus, what teachers believe is normally represented in their instructional practice.

Three interview participants voiced their concerns over their hesitation to implement the suggested instructions in the new curriculum. “My friends and I don’t feel confident and comfortable with the new curriculum. We can’t see the difference in the competence standard and the approach is not familiar ELT”, said Charlie, acting as a spoken person for his colleagues. “We are worried that our students also get confused with our new way of teaching”, explained Jessica who also stressed the focus on the National Examinations (NEs). The latter emphasis was a clue to understand the teachers’ reluctance to shift their instructions. The suggested approach and practices on skills and competencies had to collide with the drive of the NEs on the other extreme of the pendulum which noticeably creates disharmony.

Regardless of the curriculum, the participants’ pedagogical practices seemed to be driven more by the force of the NEs. As Au (2007, p. 63) claims, “whether in the form of increased teacher-centered instruction or increased student-centered instruction, the evidence suggests that high-stakes testing exerts significant pedagogic control over curriculum.” The phenomena that

occurred among the current study's participants resemble Au's meta-synthesis study. Most participants argued that they normally practice (a method) which they believed to be practicable and effective in their classrooms. When a new method or approach to teaching is introduced (through a new curriculum), they tend to 'wait and see'. Until its benefits and effectiveness are proven, they will seek information on it but maintain their practices regardless of the invitation to change.

Hence, it is actually both matters of time and result for teachers to 'learn' and embrace a new change. They realize the work to implement the curriculum through their instructional practices. They want to make sure that the change will facilitate their practice and is effective in terms of achieving students' academic success. With the implementation of the NEs, the term academic success has been reduced to gaining high scores in the subject (English). Although less than half of the survey participants felt that the problem is on the content of the new curriculum, the interviews suggest that how it is socialized and introduced to them as practitioners and users in the classrooms matters more.

### **Conclusions & Suggestions**

The results and discussions show that teachers kept their practices because the new curriculum is considered as alien and understanding it takes time. During the period of adaptation, teachers are actually testing their beliefs and learning to familiarize themselves with the new curriculum but unfortunately their attitudes are often misinterpreted as forms of resistance. McKernan (2008, p. 86) argues that teachers need to be given "a fair stake in qualitative judgment, classroom research and evaluation ... (and) decision-making belongs to individual teachers." According to Elliott (1994), curriculum development means a process in which teachers play a key role in the sense that they keep experimenting with their students to

develop the curriculum. Similarly, Rea-Dickens and Germaine (1998) argue for the importance of involving teachers in curriculum development. Being alienated from policy making has made EFL teachers in Indonesia more calculative in response to curricular changes.

The partial revocation of curriculum 2013 by the new government demonstrates the importance of engaging teachers the processes of curriculum development, implementation and evaluations. In terms of developing a language curriculum, the processes of articulating broad educational philosophies, policies, needs analysis, goals, and methodological approaches need to take into account EFL teachers' voice. For instance, Agustien (2014) exemplified that teachers noticed the flaws in the curriculum particularly in the interpretation of the embraced paradigm with the reality they faced in the dissemination. She also found that there was no clear guidance for the teachers in training materials as to how to accommodate Scientific Approach elements in the Genre Based Approach method to achieve the targeted communicative competence. Consequently, teachers interpreted the principles in the approach differently. This example should become a lesson in policy learning so that future decision can consider a more participatory approach.

As the current study suggests, teachers know best what happen in the classrooms as they are the true users of the curriculum. Their criticism and cynical attitudes towards the withdrawn curriculum should be marked as significant signals from the practitioners in the schools that have been neglected so far. In relation to the negligence, Fullan (2006) said, "I am not saying that standards, assessment, curriculum, and professional development are wrong things to do. I am saying that they are seriously incomplete theories of action because they do not get close to what happens in classrooms and school cultures." Hence, it is important for policy makers to realize the importance of taking teachers' voice into account. Simultaneously, teacher educators need to

make teachers and teacher candidates aware that change is inevitable and they have to be ready for any change including in their instructional practices. The education context is changing rapidly and EFL teachers need to be equipped with the ability to adapt in order to be able to cope well with the speed of transformation.

As most of the participants in the study underwent three or less curricular changes in their professional experience, their responses tend to focus on the reform that occurred in the last two decades. This demographic issue might be due to the employment of on-line survey which was probably novel for more senior teachers. Therefore, methodologically, it will be useful for future studies to combine both online and paper survey to accommodate more and deeper insights. Such an approach can provide wider perspectives and more comprehensive information from the participants.

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