

Between global aspiration and local reality: English Teaching in Indonesian primary schools: Prospects, barriers, and policy innovations

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Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical and practical tensions shaping English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesian primary schools, focusing on the interplay between global educational demands and local pedagogical realities. Situated within language policy studies and critical pedagogy, it examines how Indonesia's pursuit of global competitiveness through early English instruction intersects with its multicultural, multilingual, and geographically diverse education system. The study highlights potential benefits of early English learning, including cognitive development, enhanced economic mobility through linguistic capital, and alignment with ASEAN regional integration goals. Yet, it also interrogates persistent barriers such as the shortage of qualified English teachers for young learners, stark urban-rural disparities in resources, and the epistemological clash between standardized global frameworks and Indonesia's linguistic diversity. Analyzing recent policy reforms—particularly the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and its decentralization principles—the paper illustrates how educational innovations seek to balance universalist language paradigms with culturally grounded approaches. Employing critical discourse analysis, statistical review, and philosophical reflection, the study argues that sustainable ELT must transcend the global-local binary, embracing integrative pedagogies that respect Indonesia's cultural and linguistic richness while fostering global engagement. Ultimately, the paper recommends context-responsive teacher development, culturally relevant curriculum design, and equitable policy implementation to reimagine English education as a space for both global participation and the affirmation of local identity.

Keywords

English language teaching, primary education, Indonesia, language policy, global-local dialectic, educational equity, curriculum innovation, critical pedagogy

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Introduction

The proliferation of English as a global lingua franca has fundamentally reshaped educational priorities across diverse national contexts, compelling policymakers to reconsider the timing, scope, and pedagogical approaches to foreign language instruction (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Rose & McKinley, 2018). Within this transformative landscape, Indonesia—a nation encompassing extraordinary linguistic diversity with over 700 indigenous languages alongside its national language, Bahasa Indonesia—navigates a particularly complex terrain as it seeks to cultivate English proficiency while safeguarding its multicultural heritage (Lauder, 2008; Zein, 2017). This challenge becomes especially acute at the primary education level, where decisions regarding early English instruction intersect with critical developmental periods for first language literacy, cognitive maturation, and cultural identity formation (Copland et al., 2014; Luciana, 2019).

Indonesia's policy trajectory concerning English language education reveals a history of philosophical ambivalence and strategic recalibration. In the post-independence era, English occupied a circumscribed position within the curriculum, formally introduced only at the secondary level as policymakers prioritized national language consolidation and educational access (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). However, mounting recognition of English as indispensable linguistic capital within an increasingly interconnected global economy precipitated gradual policy evolution toward earlier introduction (Lengkanawati, 2017). The 1994 curriculum innovatively permitted English as optional local content in primary schools, signaling nascent acknowledgment of early language learning benefits, while subsequent curricular iterations progressively expanded English instruction, culminating in the 2013 Curriculum's systematic integration beginning at Grade IV (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013). Most significantly, the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum), implemented from 2022 onward, represents a paradigmatic reconceptualization of educational governance, devolving unprecedented curricular autonomy to individual schools and educators (Fahrurrozi & Rahmawati, 2023; Widiastuti et al., 2023).

These policy developments reflect Indonesia's strategic positioning within regional and global networks, particularly its participation in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community, where English proficiency increasingly functions as prerequisite for meaningful economic and cultural engagement (Lauder, 2008; Renandya, 2022). Empirical research consistently demonstrates correlations between English competency and enhanced occupational prospects, particularly within sectors central to Indonesia's development aspirations, including tourism, information technology, manufacturing, and international commerce (Lengkanawati, 2017; Rahmawati et al., 2018). Furthermore, proponents of early foreign language instruction cite substantial cognitive benefits associated with childhood multilingualism, encompassing enhanced executive function, metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, and intercultural competence (Copland et al., 2014; Pinter, 2017). From this perspective, introducing English at the primary level represents not merely pragmatic economic preparation but investment in holistic cognitive and social development.

Notwithstanding these compelling rationales, the implementation of English language teaching within Indonesian primary schools encounters formidable obstacles that problematize straightforward policy ambitions. Principal among these challenges is the critical shortage of adequately qualified teachers possessing both advanced English proficiency and specialized pedagogical expertise appropriate for young learners (Nur, 2020; Zein, 2016, 2017). Comprehensive studies reveal that substantial proportions of primary school English teachers lack formal preparation in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), instead employing pedagogical approaches more suitable for adolescent or adult populations (Rachmajanti & Musthofiyah, 2017; Silviana & Zein, 2020). This pedagogical misalignment frequently manifests in instruction emphasizing decontextualized grammar exercises, rote memorization, and translation rather than communicative competence, meaningful interaction, and developmentally appropriate language play (Emilia et al., 2018; Yuwono & Harbon, 2020).

The challenge of teacher preparedness intersects critically with profound geographic and socioeconomic disparities that structure educational access throughout Indonesia's archipelagic geography spanning over 17,000 islands. While metropolitan centers—particularly Java's major urban agglomerations—benefit from comparatively robust educational infrastructure, access to qualified teachers, and instructional resources, rural and remote regions experience severe deficits across these dimensions (Handayani, 2016; Sundari, 2021). Research documents dramatic variation in instructional quality, technological infrastructure, materials availability, and teacher qualifications between urban and rural primary schools, with English education often entirely absent, sporadic, or perfunctory in underserved communities (Lamb & Coleman, 2008; Lie, 2017). These disparities perpetuate and amplify existing socioeconomic stratification, transforming English proficiency into a marker of privilege rather than a democratically accessible competency (Madya, 2019; Zacharias, 2015).

Beyond these pragmatic implementation challenges, English teaching in Indonesian primary schools raises fundamental epistemological and ideological questions concerning language, power, identity, and educational purpose. Critical applied linguists have interrogated the "native speaker" ideology that frequently undergirds ELT practices globally, questioning whether pedagogical models derived predominantly from Western, Anglophone, monolingual contexts prove appropriate or equitable for Indonesia's profoundly multilingual reality (Kuswandono, 2017; Renandya & Widodo, 2016). The privileging of standardized native speaker varieties—typically British or American English—potentially marginalizes World Englishes perspectives that would legitimize regional and local English use patterns as authentic communicative practices (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017; Marlina & Giri, 2014). This linguistic hegemony intersects problematically with Indonesia's constitutional commitment to Bahasa Indonesia as the unifying national language and the preservation of regional languages (*bahasa daerah*) as invaluable cultural patrimony (Goebel, 2015; Junaidi et al., 2020).

Responding to these concerns, recent scholarship has increasingly advocated for culturally responsive or culturally sustaining pedagogies that deliberately integrate local knowledge systems, values, practices, and linguistic resources into English instruction (Musthafa, 2015; Zein & Rahmawati, 2024). Such approaches resonate with broader decolonial movements challenging the assumed universality and neutrality of Western pedagogical paradigms while affirming the epistemic validity of Indigenous and local knowledge (Phan, 2020; Sulistiyo, 2016). Within the Indonesian context specifically, ethnopedagogical frameworks—which systematically incorporate local wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) into teaching and learning processes—offer theoretically compelling pathways for reconciling global language competencies with situated cultural identities and values (Sudaryanto et al., 2020; Zein & Rahmawati, 2024). However, systematic integration of ethnopedagogical principles into primary English education remains embryonic, with limited empirical investigation of implementation strategies, learning outcomes, or scalability (Mahmud, 2019; Simbolon & Sardiana, 2021).

The Kurikulum Merdeka represents Indonesia's most ambitious structural attempt to address these multifaceted challenges through comprehensive reform emphasizing flexibility, differentiation, and contextualized adaptation (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022). By devolving significant curricular authority to schools and educators, policymakers aspire to enable more responsive, culturally grounded, and pedagogically appropriate instruction tailored to diverse local contexts and student populations (Fahrurrozi & Rahmawati, 2023). For English education specifically, this decentralization potentially creates space for innovative pedagogical approaches transcending standardized, one-size-fits-all models, theoretically allowing integration of local linguistic resources, cultural knowledge, and community funds of knowledge into language learning (Widiastuti et al., 2023). Nevertheless, critical questions persist regarding implementation capacity, quality assurance mechanisms, teacher preparedness for exercising curricular autonomy, and whether increased flexibility might paradoxically exacerbate existing inequalities if under-resourced schools lack capacity to exercise meaningful curricular agency (Bjork, 2013; Raihani, 2020).

Despite burgeoning scholarly attention to English language education in Indonesia, significant research gaps remain inadequately addressed. While existing literature comprehensively documents

teacher qualification deficits and urban-rural disparities, substantially less attention has been devoted to examining how these systemic challenges manifest specifically within primary education's unique developmental considerations and within the emerging framework of Kurikulum Merdeka's decentralized governance structure (Nur, 2020; Zein, 2017). Furthermore, although theoretical arguments advocating culturally responsive English pedagogy proliferate in scholarly discourse, rigorous empirical research examining successful integration of local wisdom, multilingual resources, and ethnopedagogical principles into actual primary English classroom practices remains scarce (Mahmud, 2019; Simbolon & Sardiana, 2021). Additionally, policy analysis scholarship has insufficiently interrogated the philosophical assumptions and ideological commitments embedded within Indonesia's English education policies—particularly how these frameworks conceptualize and theorize the relationship between global participation and local identity preservation, and whether current policy discourse adequately moves beyond instrumental, neoliberal rationales to articulate more holistic educational purposes (Hadisantosa, 2018; Zacharias, 2015).

This analysis addresses these gaps by critically interrogating the dialectical tensions between global aspirations and local realities that fundamentally shape English language teaching in Indonesian primary schools. Drawing upon critical policy discourse analysis, systematic examination of implementation data, and philosophical inquiry into underlying pedagogical assumptions and values, this paper illuminates both the transformative possibilities and persistent structural constraints characterizing early English education within Indonesia's complex, multilayered educational landscape. Specifically, this research addresses three interrelated questions:

1. How do recent policy innovations, particularly the Kurikulum Merdeka, reconceptualize the role, purpose, and implementation of English language teaching in Indonesian primary schools, and what philosophical assumptions and ideological commitments undergird these policy frameworks?
2. What systemic barriers—encompassing teacher preparedness, resource distribution, pedagogical approaches, and institutional capacity—constrain effective and equitable English language instruction in primary schools, and how do these barriers differentially impact diverse contexts, particularly urban versus rural settings?
3. In what ways might ethnopedagogical and culturally responsive frameworks enable meaningful reconciliation between global English language competencies and Indonesia's multilingual, multicultural educational commitments, and what empirical evidence exists regarding their implementation, effectiveness, and scalability in primary educational settings?

Through systematic engagement with these questions, this paper aspires to contribute both theoretical insight and practical guidance toward more equitable, culturally grounded, contextually responsive, and pedagogically sound English language education in Indonesian primary schools—education that neither capitulates uncritically to homogenizing globalizing imperatives nor retreats defensively into linguistic isolationism, but instead cultivates multilingual competencies as resources simultaneously enabling global engagement and local identity affirmation.

Policy innovations and philosophical reconceptualization of english language teaching in Indonesian primary schools

The Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum), officially launched in 2022, represents a fundamental paradigmatic shift in Indonesian educational governance, moving from centralized, standardized curriculum implementation toward decentralized, context-responsive pedagogical frameworks (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022). This policy innovation emerges from what Widiastuti et al. (2023) characterize as a "philosophical reorientation" that repositions teachers as curriculum architects rather than passive implementers, fundamentally altering the conceptualization of English language teaching in primary schools. The curriculum's design philosophy draws explicitly from constructivist learning theories and sociocultural approaches to

education, privileging student agency, contextual adaptation, and locally meaningful knowledge construction over standardized content delivery (Fahrurrozi & Rahmawati, 2023).

Reconceptualizing roles and purposes

The Kurikulum Merdeka reconceptualizes English language teaching through three interrelated dimensions: pedagogical flexibility, competency-based progression, and cultural contextualization. Unlike its predecessor, the 2013 Curriculum, which mandated English instruction beginning at Grade IV with prescribed content and achievement standards, the Kurikulum Merdeka grants schools autonomy to determine whether, when, and how English instruction occurs within primary education (Nisa & Widiati, 2023). This represents a significant ideological shift from viewing English as a universal necessity toward conceptualizing it as a contextually contingent resource that schools can adapt based on local needs, resources, and community aspirations (Astuti & Lammers, 2022).

Theoretically, this shift aligns with what Tollefson (2013) terms "language-as-right" rather than "language-as-resource" frameworks, acknowledging that linguistic diversity represents inherent value rather than merely instrumental utility. However, critical scholars note tension between this rhetoric and underlying neoliberal assumptions embedded within the policy's competency frameworks, which continue to position English proficiency as economic capital essential for global competitiveness (Zacharias & Sahiruddin, 2020). Rahmawati and Cahyono (2023) argue that despite surface-level emphasis on local adaptation, the curriculum's assessment structures and learning outcomes remain oriented toward international English proficiency standards, particularly those aligned with Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors, revealing persistent global-local tensions.

The curriculum operationalizes constructivist principles through what it terms "pembelajaran berdiferensiasi" (differentiated learning), which requires teachers to design instruction responsive to students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Widiastuti et al., 2023). For English language teaching specifically, this framework theoretically enables integration of translanguaging pedagogies—approaches that leverage students' entire linguistic repertoires rather than treating languages as separate systems—though Pratiwi and Arifin (2024) note that implementation remains constrained by teachers' limited understanding of these pedagogical concepts and persistent monolingual ideologies privileging English-only instruction.

Philosophical assumptions and ideological commitments

The Kurikulum Merdeka's philosophical foundations rest upon several interconnected assumptions that warrant critical examination. First, the curriculum presumes substantial teacher professional capacity for exercising meaningful curricular autonomy. This assumption reflects what Biesta (2015) critiques as "learnification"—an ideology positioning education primarily as individualized learning facilitation rather than guided instruction within structured knowledge domains. The policy framework assumes teachers possess not only English language proficiency and pedagogical expertise but also sophisticated curriculum design capabilities, critical consciousness regarding local contexts, and capacities for ongoing reflective practice (Sari & Gulö, 2023). However, empirical evidence suggests this assumption proves problematic given Indonesia's teacher preparation infrastructure, particularly in under-resourced rural contexts where teachers often lack access to professional development supporting these elevated expectations (Yuwono & Harbon, 2020).

Second, the curriculum embeds assumptions regarding the relationship between educational decentralization and quality improvement. Drawing from educational decentralization theories, policymakers presume that devolving curricular authority to schools will generate more contextually appropriate, culturally responsive, and pedagogically effective instruction (Bjork, 2013). This reflects broader New Public Management ideologies positioning decentralization as inherently beneficial, assuming local actors possess superior knowledge of community needs and will exercise autonomy

toward quality enhancement (Raihani, 2020). However, critical policy scholars caution that decentralization absent adequate resources, capacity building, and quality assurance mechanisms may paradoxically exacerbate inequalities, as schools with existing advantages prove better positioned to capitalize on autonomy while under-resourced schools struggle (Tahrun et al., 2023).

Third, the curriculum reflects ideological commitments regarding language diversity and national identity. The policy's rhetoric emphasizes "Profil Pelajar Pancasila" (Pancasila Student Profile) as central organizing principle, positioning character development and Indonesian identity formation as co-equal with academic achievement (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022). For English education, this represents significant philosophical repositioning, subordinating English acquisition to broader identity development goals and explicitly rejecting linguistic imperialism wherein English displaces local languages or cultural values (Hadisantosa et al., 2022). This ideological orientation aligns with culturally sustaining pedagogy theories, which argue that education should actively cultivate students' cultural and linguistic heritage rather than merely tolerating or accommodating diversity (Paris & Alim, 2017).

However, Zacharias and Manara (2023) identify inherent contradictions between these stated commitments and assessment structures that continue privileging standardized English competencies. They argue that while the curriculum's philosophical framework espouses cultural pluralism and local contextualization, its accountability mechanisms—particularly high-stakes assessments for educational quality evaluation—reinforce standardized performance expectations that ultimately constrain teachers' curricular autonomy and perpetuate homogenizing pressures.

Implementation framework and theoretical underpinnings

The Kurikulum Merdeka operationalizes its philosophical commitments through three implementation pathways termed "Mandiri Belajar" (independent learning), "Mandiri Berubah" (independent change), and "Mandiri Berbagi" (independent sharing), representing progressive levels of curricular autonomy schools may exercise (Nuraeni et al., 2023). This differentiated implementation model reflects adaptive implementation theories recognizing that educational change occurs variably across contexts and that policy frameworks must accommodate diverse institutional capacities (Century & Cassata, 2016). For English language teaching specifically, the curriculum introduces "Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila" (Project for Strengthening Pancasila Student Profile), which integrates English learning with interdisciplinary, problem-based projects addressing real-world issues (Fahrurrozi & Rahmawati, 2023). This pedagogical approach draws from project-based learning theories and sociocultural perspectives emphasizing authentic language use within meaningful communicative contexts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Theoretically, this framework positions English not as decontextualized linguistic knowledge but as mediational tool for engaging complex social, environmental, and cultural challenges (Sumardi & Muamaroh, 2020).

Nevertheless, implementation research reveals substantial gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities. Pratiwi and Arifin (2024) document that many primary English teachers continue employing traditional grammar-translation methods despite the curriculum's communicative orientation, attributing this persistence to insufficient professional development, limited instructional materials aligned with new frameworks, and teachers' own learning histories privileging form-focused instruction. Similarly, Astuti and Lammers (2022) observe that while the curriculum theoretically enables culturally responsive pedagogy integrating local wisdom, actual implementation remains nascent, constrained by teachers' limited understanding of how to operationalize these principles practically.

The philosophical tensions embedded within the Kurikulum Merdeka reflect broader debates within Indonesian educational discourse regarding the purposes of schooling, the role of English in national development, and the relationship between global participation and local identity preservation (Zacharias & Sahiruddin, 2020). While the curriculum's rhetoric emphasizes student-centered learning,

cultural responsiveness, and pedagogical flexibility, its implementation occurs within structural conditions—including teacher preparation systems, assessment regimes, and resource distribution patterns—that often contradict these stated commitments (Tahrun et al., 2023). Understanding these tensions proves essential for evaluating whether policy innovations genuinely reconceptualize English language teaching or merely repackage existing approaches within new terminological frameworks.

The Kurikulum Merdeka represents ambitious attempt to reconceptualize English language teaching in Indonesian primary schools, philosophically repositioning it from standardized competency acquisition toward contextualized, culturally grounded language development. However, the policy embeds contradictory assumptions regarding teacher capacity, decentralization benefits, and assessment purposes that complicate its transformative potential. Moving forward, realizing the curriculum's philosophical vision requires addressing these foundational tensions through comprehensive teacher professional development, equitable resource allocation, and assessment systems genuinely aligned with stated commitments to cultural responsiveness and local adaptation.

Systemic barriers to effective and equitable english language instruction in primary schools

The persistence of inequitable English language instruction in primary schools worldwide demands analytical frameworks capable of illuminating how multiple constraints interact to produce differentiated educational experiences and outcomes. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides foundational insight into how educational systems reproduce social inequalities through unequal distribution of linguistic and cultural resources that schools valorize (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of English language education, students arriving at school with exposure to English—through educated parents, access to media, or residence in linguistically diverse urban environments—possess cultural capital that schools recognize and reward, while those lacking such exposure face systematic disadvantage (Piller & Cho, 2013). This theoretical lens illuminates how apparently neutral pedagogical practices and assessment systems may inadvertently privilege already-advantaged students while marginalizing those from linguistically and economically marginalized backgrounds.

Critical pedagogy, particularly as articulated by scholars examining language education, provides complementary theoretical apparatus for understanding how systemic barriers operate (Freire, 1970; Norton & Toohey, 2021). This perspective directs attention toward power relations embedded within educational structures, curriculum content, and pedagogical practices, revealing how English language instruction may function either as a mechanism for social mobility or as an instrument perpetuating existing hierarchies (Tollefson, 2013). Within this framework, barriers to effective instruction emerge not merely as technical deficiencies requiring improved resources or training but as manifestations of broader political and economic arrangements that systematically advantage certain communities while disadvantaging others (Shin, 2020).

Systems theory offers additional analytical leverage by conceptualizing educational quality as emerging from complex interactions among multiple interdependent components rather than from any single factor operating in isolation (Kools & Stoll, 2016). From this perspective, teacher preparedness, resource availability, pedagogical approaches, and institutional capacity constitute interconnected subsystems whose interactions produce emergent properties—educational outcomes that cannot be reduced to simple summation of individual components (Spillane et al., 2020). This theoretical orientation proves particularly valuable for understanding why interventions targeting isolated barriers often fail to produce anticipated improvements, as modifications to one system component may be constrained or undermined by unchanged conditions in others.

Teacher preparedness as a multidimensional constraint

Teacher preparedness for primary English language instruction encompasses far more than linguistic proficiency, extending to specialized pedagogical knowledge, understanding of child development, and capacity to implement age-appropriate, context-sensitive instructional practices. Recent research consistently documents substantial deficiencies across these domains, with particularly acute challenges in contexts characterized by rapid expansion of primary-level English instruction (Copland et al., 2021). Investigations in diverse national contexts—including Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and various African nations—reveal that many primary English teachers possess limited training specifically addressing young learners' linguistic, cognitive, and socioemotional developmental trajectories (Zein, 2020).

Particularly problematic is the widespread deployment of generalist primary teachers who receive minimal preparation in language teaching methodologies or are expected to teach English despite lacking advanced proficiency themselves (Moon, 2020). Research by Emery (2021) examining rural Canadian contexts documented how teachers with limited English language expertise experienced profound anxiety and inadequacy when assigned to teach the subject, often reverting to grammar translation methods despite awareness of their pedagogical limitations. Similar patterns emerge across diverse global contexts, wherein teachers implement familiar but pedagogically questionable approaches—rote memorization, decontextualized grammar exercises, chorus repetition—not from conviction regarding their effectiveness but from lack of knowledge regarding viable alternatives (Zein, 2020).

The preparation deficit extends beyond initial teacher education to encompass insufficient ongoing professional development. Investigations across multiple contexts reveal that when professional learning opportunities exist, they frequently adopt one-off workshop formats that prove ineffective for supporting sustained pedagogical change (Copland et al., 2021). Moreover, professional development initiatives often fail to address the specific challenges teachers confront in their particular contexts, instead offering generic approaches developed in and for dramatically different educational settings (Hayes, 2021). This misalignment between professional learning content and teachers' situated realities renders much professional development minimally impactful, leaving teachers to navigate complex pedagogical challenges with inadequate support.

The urban-rural divide manifests starkly in teacher preparedness, with rural schools experiencing disproportionate difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified English language teachers (Emery, 2021). Geographic isolation, limited professional networking opportunities, inadequate compensation relative to urban positions, and challenging working conditions contribute to high turnover rates in rural contexts, creating instability that undermines instructional quality (Lamb & Wedell, 2021). Conversely, urban schools, while often able to employ more qualified teachers, face distinctive challenges including the need to serve linguistically diverse student populations and navigate competitive, high-pressure educational environments that may incentivize test-focused instruction over developmentally appropriate practice (Butler, 2020).

Resource distribution and material inequities

The distribution of material and technological resources fundamentally shapes what pedagogical approaches become feasible within particular contexts. Contemporary scholarship documents profound inequities in access to basic instructional materials, with disparities particularly pronounced along urban-rural and socioeconomic lines (UNESCO, 2020). While affluent urban schools may provide multimedia language laboratories, extensive digital resources, age-appropriate English literature libraries, and manipulative materials supporting interactive learning, schools serving

economically marginalized communities—disproportionately located in rural areas—frequently lack even sufficient textbooks, functioning audio equipment, or reliable electricity (Lamb & Wedell, 2021). Recent investigations examining digital divides in language education reveal that COVID-19 pandemic responses dramatically amplified pre-existing inequities. Research by Gao and Zhang (2020) documented how rapid transitions to online instruction systematically disadvantaged students lacking home internet access, appropriate devices, or physical spaces conducive to learning—conditions correlating strongly with rural residence and family socioeconomic status. Similarly, investigations in Southeast Asian contexts revealed that students in under-resourced schools experienced substantially diminished English language learning opportunities during pandemic-related school closures compared to peers in well-resourced institutions (Hadidjah & Shalawati, 2021).

Beyond physical materials, human resource inequities prove equally consequential. Schools in privileged contexts often employ native English-speaking teaching assistants, specialized language coordinators, and support staff facilitating small-group instruction, while under-resourced schools struggle to maintain even single qualified English teachers serving entire student populations (Hayes, 2021). These staffing disparities translate directly into differentiated learning experiences, with students in well-resourced contexts receiving individualized attention, exposure to diverse English varieties, and enriched linguistic environments that their peers in resource-constrained settings cannot access.

Class size represents another dimension of resource inequity with substantial pedagogical implications. Research consistently demonstrates that effective communicative language teaching requires opportunities for meaningful interaction, personalized feedback, and individualized attention—instructional approaches that become increasingly difficult as class sizes expand (Copland et al., 2021). While urban schools in privileged contexts may maintain reasonable student-teacher ratios, schools serving economically marginalized populations—particularly in rural areas of developing nations—frequently operate with class sizes of fifty, sixty, or more students, rendering interactive, communicative pedagogies practically infeasible regardless of teacher expertise or commitment (Zein, 2020).

Pedagogical approaches and contextual (mis)alignment

The pedagogical approaches employed in primary English language classrooms reflect complex negotiations among teacher knowledge, curricular mandates, assessment pressures, available resources, and contextual affordances. Considerable evidence suggests that pedagogical practices in many contexts remain dominated by teacher-centered, grammar-focused, accuracy-oriented instruction emphasizing mechanical skill development over communicative competence (Butler, 2020). While such approaches may reflect teachers' limited preparation in alternative methodologies, they also emerge from rational responses to specific contextual constraints including large class sizes, examination-oriented educational systems, and insufficient resources supporting more interactive approaches (Moon, 2020).

Particularly problematic is the widespread adoption of pedagogical models developed in and for Western, well-resourced contexts with limited consideration of their appropriateness for dramatically different settings (Shin, 2020). Communicative language teaching methodologies emphasizing student-centered interaction, for instance, presuppose conditions—reasonable class sizes, flexible physical spaces, available supplementary materials, assessment systems valuing communicative competence—frequently absent in resource-constrained contexts (Hayes, 2021). The uncritical transfer of such approaches can produce pedagogical frustration and failure, as teachers attempt to implement methodologies incompatible with their contextual realities.

Recent scholarship advocates for contextually responsive pedagogical approaches that thoughtfully adapt evidence-based principles to local circumstances rather than imposing decontextualized methodologies (Copland et al., 2021). Such approaches acknowledge that effective practice in large, under-resourced classrooms may look substantially different from practice in small,

well-equipped contexts while maintaining commitment to developmentally appropriate, meaning-focused instruction. However, developing and disseminating contextually adapted pedagogical frameworks demands considerable investment in research, teacher education, and professional development—resources often unavailable in settings most requiring them (Zein, 2020).

The pedagogical divide between urban and rural contexts reflects not only resource differentials but also variations in students' linguistic environments and learning needs. Urban students often possess greater exposure to English through media, signage, and linguistically diverse communities, potentially enabling pedagogical approaches building on such informal learning (Butler, 2020). Rural students, conversely, may encounter English almost exclusively within school contexts, necessitating more explicit, structured instruction developing foundational competencies that urban peers acquire incidentally (Emery, 2021). However, teachers frequently receive limited guidance regarding how to differentiate instruction responsively to these contextual variations.

Institutional capacity and systemic functioning

Institutional capacity—encompassing administrative support, organizational structures, resource management systems, and capacity for continuous improvement—fundamentally conditions what becomes possible within individual classrooms. Research examining school effectiveness reveals that instructional quality depends substantially on institutional factors including coherent curricula, mechanisms for teacher collaboration, supportive leadership, and systems for monitoring and improving practice (Kools & Stoll, 2016). Schools operating with robust institutional capacity facilitate teacher learning, enable pedagogical innovation, and sustain improvement efforts, while institutions lacking such capacity struggle to maintain basic educational functions regardless of individual teacher quality (Spillane et al., 2020).

Investigations in diverse contexts document how weak institutional capacity constrains English language instruction. Research by Lamb and Wedell (2021) examining Indonesian primary schools revealed that inadequate administrative support, unclear curricular guidance, and absence of mechanisms for teacher collaboration left individual teachers isolated in addressing complex pedagogical challenges. Similarly, studies in sub-Saharan African contexts documented how institutional instability—including irregular supervision, frequent leadership changes, and unreliable resource provision—undermined teachers' capacity to implement sustained improvement initiatives (Moon, 2020).

The institutional capacity divide between urban and rural contexts proves particularly consequential. Urban schools, particularly those serving advantaged populations, often benefit from stronger administrative infrastructure, greater access to external support networks, and enhanced capacity for professional learning communities (Butler, 2020). Rural schools, conversely, frequently operate with minimal administrative support, geographic isolation limiting access to external expertise, and insufficient organizational infrastructure sustaining continuous improvement (Emery, 2021). These institutional disparities amplify other resource inequities, creating compound disadvantage for students in already-marginalized contexts.

Assessment systems represent a crucial dimension of institutional functioning with profound implications for pedagogical practice. Research consistently demonstrates that high-stakes assessments emphasizing decontextualized grammar knowledge and mechanical skills exert powerful influence on instructional practices, often incentivizing pedagogical approaches contrary to evidence-based principles for language learning (Butler, 2020). While some jurisdictions have attempted assessment reforms incorporating communicative competencies, implementation challenges and political pressures frequently result in reversion to traditional formats that prove easier to administer and score but provide limited information regarding students' functional language abilities (Hayes, 2021).

Intersecting barriers and compound disadvantage

Perhaps most consequential is how these multiple barriers interact and compound one another, creating particularly intractable obstacles for the most vulnerable student populations. Schools serving economically disadvantaged communities typically confront simultaneous challenges including inadequately prepared teachers, insufficient material resources, pedagogical approaches misaligned with students' needs, and weak institutional capacity (UNESCO, 2020). This concentration of disadvantage produces educational experiences qualitatively different from those in privileged contexts, with ramifications extending throughout students' educational trajectories and beyond.

The urban-rural divide exemplifies such compound disadvantage. Rural schools frequently experience simultaneous constraints including difficulty attracting qualified teachers, limited material resources, geographic isolation from professional support networks, and student populations whose home environments provide minimal English exposure (Lamb & Wedell, 2021). These intersecting challenges create self-reinforcing cycles wherein initial disadvantages progressively amplify, producing educational inequities that resist simple remediation. Understanding these complex interactions proves essential for developing interventions capable of meaningfully addressing systemic barriers rather than merely ameliorating isolated symptoms.

Ethnopedagogical and culturally responsive frameworks in Indonesian Primary English language education

The reconciliation of global English language competencies with Indonesia's profound multilingual and multicultural heritage represents one of the most compelling pedagogical challenges in contemporary language education. Ethnopedagogy, conceptualized as the systematic integration of ethnic cultural knowledge, indigenous wisdom, and traditional educational practices into formal schooling processes, offers a theoretically robust framework for addressing this tension (Volkov et al., 2020). This approach fundamentally reconceptualizes language learning not as a process of cultural replacement or linguistic imperialism but as an additive endeavor wherein global communicative competencies enhance rather than diminish local linguistic and cultural identities (García & Li, 2021). When intersected with culturally responsive pedagogy—which prioritizes students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles to make learning encounters more relevant and effective—ethnopedagogical frameworks provide conceptual architecture for authentic integration of global and local educational imperatives (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Translanguaging theory provides additional theoretical scaffolding for understanding how ethnopedagogical approaches might function within Indonesian contexts. Rather than treating languages as separate, bounded systems requiring strict compartmentalization, translanguaging recognizes that multilingual individuals possess integrated linguistic repertoires from which they strategically draw to construct meaning and accomplish communicative purposes (García & Kleyn, 2016). In the Indonesian context, where students typically navigate Bahasa Indonesia, regional languages, and English simultaneously, translanguaging pedagogies legitimate the fluid movement across linguistic boundaries as a cognitive resource rather than a deficit requiring remediation (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2022). This theoretical orientation aligns organically with ethnopedagogical commitments to

honoring local linguistic ecologies while facilitating acquisition of additional language competencies.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy extends these foundations by explicitly centering the perpetuation and revitalization of linguistic and cultural practices as educational objectives coequal with academic achievement (Paris & Alim, 2017). Applied to English language instruction in Indonesia, this framework insists that pedagogical approaches must not merely accommodate cultural diversity but actively sustain it, positioning local languages, cultural knowledge, and indigenous wisdom as foundational rather than supplementary curricular content (Zacharias, 2021). The integration of these theoretical perspectives suggests that effective English language pedagogy in Indonesian primary schools necessitates fundamental reconceptualization of what constitutes successful language learning—moving beyond narrow metrics of grammatical accuracy and standardized test performance toward broader outcomes encompassing intercultural competence, plurilingual awareness, and capacity to navigate diverse linguistic and cultural contexts (Marlina & Giri, 2020).

Empirical evidence from Indonesian contexts

Recent empirical investigations within Indonesian educational settings provide preliminary evidence regarding the viability and effectiveness of ethnopedagogical approaches to English language instruction. Zacharias (2021) conducted ethnographic research examining how Indonesian English teachers integrate local cultural content into their instructional practices, documenting instances where traditional stories, local customs, and regional knowledge systems served as meaningful contexts for language learning activities. Teachers in this study reported that culturally grounded materials enhanced student engagement and motivation while simultaneously validating students' cultural identities, though significant challenges emerged regarding the availability of appropriate materials and teachers' confidence in adapting standardized curricula (Zacharias, 2021). Widodo et al. (2022) investigated the implementation of culturally responsive English language teaching materials in Indonesian primary schools, employing mixed-methods approaches to assess both learning outcomes and affective dimensions of student experience. Their findings indicated that materials incorporating Indonesian cultural elements, traditional narratives, and locally relevant contexts produced comparable language learning outcomes to conventional textbooks while demonstrating superior performance on measures of student motivation, cultural pride, and sustained engagement (Widodo et al., 2022). Particularly noteworthy was evidence suggesting that culturally responsive materials enhanced learning particularly for students from rural backgrounds and those whose home languages differed from Bahasa Indonesia, populations frequently marginalized within conventional pedagogical approaches (Widodo et al., 2022).

Research by Suryanto and colleagues (2023) examined digital ethnopedagogical materials integrating Javanese cultural wisdom with English language instruction in East Java primary schools. Employing quasi-experimental designs, this investigation compared student outcomes across classrooms utilizing ethnopedagogically-informed digital materials versus those employing standard textbooks. Results demonstrated statistically significant advantages for the ethnopedagogical intervention across multiple domains including vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and intercultural communicative competence (Suryanto et al., 2023). Qualitative data revealed that students demonstrated enhanced capacity to articulate connections between local cultural knowledge and English language content,

suggesting that ethnopedagogical approaches may cultivate more sophisticated metalinguistic and metacultural awareness (Suryanto et al., 2023).

Investigations focusing specifically on translanguaging pedagogies within Indonesian contexts provide complementary evidence. Fauziati and Sulistyawati (2020) documented classroom practices wherein teachers strategically incorporated students' first languages and regional dialects as resources for English learning rather than viewing them as interference. Their findings suggested that legitimizing students' full linguistic repertoires created more inclusive learning environments and facilitated deeper processing of English language content, particularly for students whose home languages differed substantially from Bahasa Indonesia (Fauziati & Sulistyawati, 2020). However, these researchers also identified significant institutional barriers including assessment systems that penalize code-switching and administrative expectations emphasizing English-only instruction (Fauziati & Sulistyawati, 2020).

Recent scholarship has also examined teachers' perspectives on and capacity for implementing culturally responsive pedagogies. Kuswandono (2021) investigated Indonesian English teachers' beliefs about integrating local cultural content, revealing complex negotiations between professional commitments to cultural responsiveness and institutional pressures emphasizing standardized curricula aligned with international English language frameworks. While teachers expressed philosophical alignment with culturally sustaining approaches, they reported substantial practical obstacles including limited instructional time, assessment systems prioritizing decontextualized language skills, and insufficient professional development addressing how to effectively integrate cultural content (Kuswandono, 2021).

Challenges and limitations in implementation

Despite promising theoretical foundations and emergent empirical support, significant challenges constrain the implementation, effectiveness, and scalability of ethnopedagogical and culturally responsive frameworks in Indonesian primary English education. Material resource constraints represent a fundamental obstacle, as commercially available textbooks predominantly reflect Western cultural contexts and monolingual pedagogical assumptions (Zacharias, 2021). The development of contextually appropriate, culturally grounded materials demands substantial investment of time, expertise, and financial resources, creating barriers particularly acute for under-resourced schools and individual teachers lacking institutional support (Widodo et al., 2022).

Teacher preparation and professional development emerge consistently as critical limiting factors. Indonesian pre-service teacher education programs have historically emphasized technical language proficiency and generic pedagogical knowledge while providing limited preparation in culturally responsive pedagogy, translanguaging approaches, or ethnopedagogical frameworks (Lengkanawati et al., 2020). Consequently, many practicing teachers lack both theoretical grounding and practical competencies necessary for effectively implementing culturally sustaining approaches, even when philosophically committed to such pedagogies (Kuswandono, 2021). Furthermore, professional development opportunities addressing these domains remain scarce, particularly in rural areas where teachers may be geographically isolated from training centers and professional networks (Suryanto et al., 2023). Assessment regimes present additional structural obstacles. Indonesia's educational system increasingly emphasizes standardized testing aligned with international benchmarks, creating

tensions with pedagogical approaches prioritizing culturally situated learning and plurilingual competencies that resist simple quantification (Zacharias, 2021). Teachers implementing ethnopedagogical approaches frequently express anxiety regarding whether students will perform adequately on standardized English assessments that privilege decontextualized grammar knowledge and skills divorced from cultural understanding (Kuswandono, 2021). This misalignment between assessment systems and pedagogical approaches creates disincentives for teachers to embrace culturally responsive practices, regardless of their educational merits.

The diversity of Indonesia's linguistic and cultural landscape, while representing a valuable educational resource, also complicates efforts toward systematic implementation of ethnopedagogical frameworks. Indonesia encompasses over 700 living languages distributed across thousands of islands, with profound variations in cultural practices, traditional knowledge systems, and educational contexts (Marlina & Giri, 2020). Pedagogical approaches effective within Javanese cultural contexts may transfer inadequately to Sundanese, Balinese, Batak, or Papuan settings, necessitating context-specific adaptations that resist standardized, scalable solutions (Widodo et al., 2022). This contextual diversity, while pedagogically enriching, creates practical challenges for teacher education programs, material development initiatives, and policy implementation operating at provincial or national scales.

Pathways toward scalable implementation

Despite these formidable challenges, emerging research suggests several promising pathways toward more widespread and effective implementation of ethnopedagogical and culturally responsive frameworks in Indonesian primary English education. Digital technologies offer particular potential for addressing resource constraints and contextual diversity. Suryanto et al. (2023) demonstrated that digital platforms can facilitate development and dissemination of ethnopedagogically-informed materials tailored to specific regional contexts while maintaining pedagogical quality and alignment with language learning objectives. Such technologies potentially enable teachers to access, adapt, and share culturally grounded materials more readily than traditional print resources allow, though significant digital divides between urban and rural contexts demand attention (Suryanto et al., 2023).

Collaborative professional learning communities represent another promising mechanism for enhancing teacher capacity. Research suggests that sustained engagement in communities of practice wherein teachers collectively examine student work, develop culturally responsive materials, and refine pedagogical approaches proves more effective than conventional one-off professional development workshops (Kuswandono, 2021). These communities provide ongoing support, facilitate knowledge sharing, and enable teachers to navigate institutional constraints collaboratively rather than individually (Lengkanawati et al., 2020). However, establishing and sustaining such communities requires institutional commitment and structural supports often absent in resource-constrained educational systems.

Policy reforms addressing assessment systems constitute another critical lever for change. Recent scholarship advocates for assessment approaches that evaluate students' intercultural communicative competence, metalinguistic awareness, and capacity to navigate multilingual contexts alongside traditional measures of grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge (Marlina & Giri, 2020). Such reforms would legitimate culturally responsive

pedagogies by aligning accountability systems with their objectives, though implementing meaningful assessment reform in large-scale educational systems presents substantial political and technical challenges (Zacharias, 2021).

Ethnopedagogical and culturally responsive frameworks offer theoretically compelling and empirically promising approaches for reconciling global English competencies with Indonesia's multilingual, multicultural educational commitments. Emerging evidence from Indonesian contexts suggests these frameworks can enhance both language learning outcomes and students' cultural identities when implemented thoughtfully. However, significant obstacles including resource constraints, teacher preparation deficiencies, assessment misalignments, and contextual diversity constrain their widespread implementation and scalability. Addressing these challenges will require sustained commitment from multiple stakeholders including policymakers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, and researchers working collaboratively to create conditions wherein culturally sustaining English language education becomes not an aspirational ideal but an achievable reality in Indonesian primary schools.

Conclusion

This analysis has illuminated the profound complexities characterizing English language instruction in Indonesian primary schools, revealing a landscape where global imperatives intersect tensely with local realities, policy aspirations confront implementation constraints, and pedagogical possibilities encounter structural limitations. The examination of systemic barriers—encompassing teacher preparedness deficiencies, resource distribution inequities, pedagogical misalignments, and institutional capacity weaknesses—demonstrates that obstacles to effective and equitable English instruction operate not as isolated deficiencies but as interconnected elements within broader educational ecosystems that systematically privilege certain communities while marginalizing others. The pronounced urban-rural divide exemplifies this compound disadvantage, wherein schools serving already-vulnerable populations simultaneously grapple with inadequately prepared teachers, insufficient material resources, inappropriate pedagogical approaches, and weak institutional infrastructure, creating self-reinforcing cycles of educational inequity.

The Kurikulum Merdeka represents Indonesia's most ambitious attempt to transcend these constraints through decentralized governance structures that theoretically enable contextually responsive, culturally grounded instruction. However, this policy innovation embodies inherent tensions between aspirations for flexibility and risks of exacerbating existing disparities, particularly if under-resourced schools lack capacity to exercise meaningful curricular autonomy. The devolution of decision-making authority, while potentially liberating, presupposes teacher competencies, institutional infrastructures, and resource availabilities unevenly distributed across Indonesia's diverse educational landscape.

Ethnopedagogical and culturally responsive frameworks offer theoretically compelling pathways for reconciling global English competencies with Indonesia's multilingual, multicultural heritage. Emerging empirical evidence suggests that pedagogies integrating local wisdom, legitimizing students' full linguistic repertoires, and centering cultural knowledge can enhance both language learning outcomes and students' cultural identities. Nevertheless, significant obstacles constrain widespread implementation, including material resource limitations, teacher preparation deficiencies, assessment system misalignments, and the

contextual diversity resisting standardized solutions. Addressing these challenges demands sustained, multifaceted interventions encompassing policy reforms, teacher education transformation, material resource development, and institutional capacity building.

Ultimately, this analysis reveals that effective English language education in Indonesian primary schools requires moving beyond both uncritical adoption of Western pedagogical models and defensive linguistic nationalism toward more nuanced approaches that recognize multilingualism as an asset rather than a deficit. Such education must cultivate English proficiency not as replacement for but as complement to students' existing linguistic resources, positioning global communicative competencies as tools enabling rather than threatening local identity affirmation. Achieving this vision necessitates confronting uncomfortable questions regarding how educational systems reproduce social inequalities, whose knowledge receives validation, and what purposes language education ultimately serves within Indonesia's democratic, multicultural society.

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