

Challenges and Strategies of English Language Teaching Within the Freedom-to-Learn Curriculum in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The so-called “Freedom-to-Learn” Curriculum has been implemented in Indonesia. However, in its application, the teachers seemed to face some challenges in executing their teaching plans. The aim of this research is to examine the challenges encountered by junior high school English teachers in the town of Banyumas, Indonesia, and to explore the strategies used by the teachers to confront the challenges. This is qualitative research that uses interviews, observations, and documents to collect the data. The study revealed that there are some challenges faced by the teachers: lack of understanding of the concept, lack of preparation, learning loss, big class size, and adjustment of a simultaneous summative test. Although there are some challenges, the learning process must continue. Therefore, the teachers used some strategies to meet the challenges: taking training, attending an English Teachers’ Association meetings, creating an exciting and enjoyable learning environment, implementing the differentiated learning, and conducting an evaluation. The Freedom-to Learn Curriculum provides flexibility to educators to create quality learning that suits the needs and learning environment of students. Although the reality shows that it has not reached the curricular goal yet, all parties have tried to do their best.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum becomes the core value of the activities that happen at school. Curriculum can be what is taught in school, dealing with the set of materials taught at school or the content of the subjects and courses of the study [1]. Another expert defines that the curriculum has its own meaning which is everything dealing with the learning process in the classroom [2]. It can be concluded that curriculum is everything dealing with the learning process in the classroom

Planning, process, monitoring, management, and evaluation in the teaching and learning process are administered in the curriculum. The curriculum has a long process from planning the curriculum, designing curriculum, implementing the curriculum, and evaluating curriculum. This research focuses on curriculum implementation. Curriculum implementation refers to the action of the education plan set by the curriculum expert and the subject expert in the school setting [2]. There are many parties that work together at school but teachers are the key to success in curriculum implementation. Teachers have a big role in curriculum implementation because they directly meet the students to do the teaching and learning process.

A teacher is the front gun of education. There are some views about the role of the teacher in curriculum implementation [3]. First, the teachers interpret the curriculum to the real world through instruction that they implemented in the classroom. Second, the teachers are included most in the process of curriculum development from the implementation and the evaluation of the curriculum. The teacher knows well what material should be taught, the activities should be implemented, and the learning competencies that the students can achieve. The better of understanding of teachers on the curriculum implementation, the more effective they plan and design the lesson. The more a teacher understands the curriculum, the better result of the curriculum implementation because it can minimize the gap of information between what the teachers understand and what the curriculum really wants [4].

The Pandemic covid-19 caused learning loss in Indonesia which becomes a crucial problem faced in the education sector. The pandemic of Covid-19 has been going on for two years and give negative impacts on many aspects of life [5]. The Education sector also gets bad impacts of the pandemic. Learning loss happens in education. In an effort to recover education in Indonesia, the government implemented a new curriculum called Freedom-to-learn.

Freedom-to-learn curriculum is more flexible than the previous curriculum and it focuses on the character and competency development of students. It has three main characteristics: project-based learning, focused on the essential material, and student-centered learning. The learning development framework of the IndependentCurriculum is a continuous learning cycle rather than a linear approach. To ensure that educators have greater room to create suitable learning plans and assessments that take into account students' characteristics and needs, the Independentcurriculum contains competency standard mapping, independent learning, and minimal competency assessment [6]. These three elements work together and have an impact on one another. It is anticipated that this alignment will alter the paradigm of education and promote practice-based continuous learning.

The learning outcome of Independentcurriculum is found in the Decree of Research and Development Agency and Books Head Number 028/H/KU/2021 About Learning outcome of Preschool, Primary School, Secondary School, Special Primary School, and Special Secondary School on the Movement School Program [7]. The general outcome of the English lesson in phase D is learners use spoken, visual, and written text in English to interact and communicate in more diverse contexts, formal and informal context. The main reference in learning English in this phase is the learners can use various kinds of text such as descriptive, narrative, procedure, particular text (short message, advertisement), and authentic text. The learners use English to discuss and deliver their wants and feelings. Their understanding of a written text is growing and their inference skills begin to appear when understanding implied information. The learners can produce well-structured visual and written text in English with a more diverse vocabulary. The learners understand the goal when they view and produce visual and written text in English.

Since this is a new implementation, it means that it is still in the process of transformation of the teaching and learning process. The teachers need an adaptation to change their paradigm and the technical term in implementing the freedom-to-learn curriculum principles and its aspects. English teachers as the front guard of the language teaching and learning process are challenged to implement the new curriculum. Therefore, the researcher formulates two research questions as follows:

1. What challenges are faced by the junior high school English teacher in Indonesia in the Freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation?
2. What strategies are used by the junior high school English teacher in Indonesia to confront the challenges?.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research Method

This research describes the challenges faced by English teachers in Freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation and the strategies they used to confront the challenges using qualitative research. Qualitative research uses text for the findings; analyses data, and interprets the meanings [8]. The result of qualitative research is not used to generalize the data. Qualitative research rarely addresses the generalizability of their data, and they contend that rather than statistical generalization, their purpose is to gain a deeper knowledge of the phenomena [9]. The researcher intended to dig up deeper information about the challenges in Freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation and investigate the way they confront the challenges. Qualitative researchers generally gather information directly at the location where participants face the issue being studied [10], in this case, is about Freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation. The researcher came to the participant's schools to get data. The researcher met face-to-face with the participants for the first meeting to know each other and communicated through WhatsApp to build rapport between the researcher and the participants.

2.2 Research Participants

The researcher took the Junior High School English teachers in a district called Banyumas, Indonesia as the research participants. There were six English teachers from four state junior high schools. The researcher used convenience sampling as the method to select the participants. Convenience sampling selects participants from the target population based on accessibility [11].

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

Given that qualitative research has high subjectivity, the researcher used multiple techniques to collect the data. There were three techniques used in this research: semi-structured interview, observation, and document study to get holistic information for the research. The main data was taken from the individual semi-structured interview with each participant. The supporting data was from observing the learning process in the classrooms. A useful research technique that has been around for a while is document analysis [12]. Therefore, the researcher also use supporting data from the document which was the teaching module of the teachers.

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

After collecting the data from the whole process of document analysis, observation, and interview, the researcher went to the data analysis. The gathered data should be processed to become meaningful information [13]. The data were analyzed using thematic data analysis. There are some phases in thematic data analysis: Phases 1-2 are familiarizing and coding, phases 3-5 are theme development, refinement, and naming, and phase 6 is writing up [14].

In the first phase, familiarization, the researcher read and re-read the data to really understand and engage with it. The next phase is coding. Something of interest in the data is identified and labeled using a code [14]. Next, the researcher developed the data into some classifications. The researcher described the data in a meaningful text that could be easily understood by the reader. The descriptive and interpretative commentary provided to the reader gives context to data quotes, explains what is analytically significant, and explains how this response to the research question is referred to as an analytical narrative [14]. The last phase is writing up. After all the discussion had been described and discussed, the researcher gathered, created, and modified previous written analytical work and placed it within a larger report, and took the conclusion of the challenges and strategies in the Independentcurriculum implementation.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Challenges

The research found that there are some challenges experienced by the teachers in the Freedom-to-learn curriculum as follows:

Table 1. Challenges in the Freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation

No.	Challenges	Participants
1.	Lack of understanding of the Freedom-to-learn curriculum concept	Res, Ret, Am
2.	Lack of preparation	Res, Ret, Fa, Am
3.	Learning loss	Res, Ret, Am, At, As, Fa
4.	Big class size	Res, Ret, Am, At
5.	Adjustment of a simultaneous summative test	Ret, Am, As

Lack of understanding of the Freedom-to-learn curriculum concept. The Freedom-to-learn curriculum has high flexibility in its concept. Project-based learning, focus on the essential material, and flexibility in curriculum design are characteristics of Freedom-to-learn curriculum [15]. However, it also brings confusion to the teacher as stated by *Res*. She stated that she needs a handbook from the government just like the previous curriculum. *Fa* also stated that the handbook helps her a lot. She decided to choose her own handbook but then it also brings challenges for her because the material in the book for grade 7 is more difficult than for grade 8. While *Am* stated that it happens because this is the first year of implementation.

“To be honest, actually I’m still confused about the Independentcurriculum because it was just implemented this year.” (*Am*)

The teachers are still in the process of adapting to the implementation. *Ret*, who is a senior teacher stated that it is more challenging for the older teacher.

“I am still in the process of studying the Freedom-to-learn curriculum concept. This is a challenge for me since I am no longer young.” (*Ret*)

The finding of this research is in line with other research. Many teachers are still unsure of the Freedom-to-learn approach. In spite of their perplexity, they persisted in trying to find a solution [16]. Different from the previous curriculum, the freedom-to-learn curriculum gives freedom for the teacher to manage their own teaching material.

Lack of preparation. This is the first year of The Freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation. Ideally, a new curriculum should be prepared well first before it is implemented at schools. Teachers, notably EFL teachers, are essential in preparing a generation for a successful future [17]. To be able to prepare a brilliant generation, teachers also need careful preparation in the learning that will be carried out. However, there is no perfect change in the first year of the implementation. *Res* stated that the planning is late. The teachers make the lesson planning while the curriculum has already been implemented. It is strengthened by *Ret*'s statement:

“We were quite surprised by the implementation of the Freedom-to-learn curriculum. I was just discussed, then it was suddenly implemented. The limited time between the information and the implementation made us confused at the beginning of the semester because there was no planning.”
(*Ret*)

The ideal one is that the teachers have already got teacher training related to the new curriculum implementation. However, it is different in reality. *Fa* stated that teacher training is done when the new curriculum has already been implemented. In fact, there are even teachers who have not joined the teacher training yet as experienced by *Am*.

“I haven't attended the Independentcurriculum implementation training yet. So, I'm still groping about the Independentcurriculum itself.” (*Am*)

There are many factors that influence the role of teachers in education. Both internal and external influences influence the teacher's job [18]. Teacher training related to the Freedom-to-learn curriculum is the external factor that gives a big contribution to the teacher's understanding and their quality of teaching. Unfortunately, the fact that the training was held when the new curriculum has already been implemented at school made the teacher as the front guard of the education become distraught.

Learning loss. The effect of the pandemic covid-19 makes the learning loss become worse. Concerns regarding the unequal impact of the epidemic on children and families are confirmed by the fact that losses are up to 60% greater among kids from less-educated backgrounds [19]. The students are forced to implement online schools which the Indonesian education system is not ready for it. In the first year of the implementation in Indonesia, the Freedom-to-learn curriculum is implemented for grade 7. In fact, grade 7 students have different characters and competencies. *Res* stated that the pandemic affected the student's abilities and characters. The pandemic forced students to learn from home and they didn't get English in elementary school. It becomes a challenge for teachers. *Ret* stated that:

“Moreover, grade 7 students are “pandemic” students who have graduated from online learning in elementary school for quite a long time. And they don't get English lessons in elementary school.” (*Ret*)

They are already in junior high school but they are still like in elementary school who must be guided. This finding is in line with other research. Teachers often hesitate when discussing technology, and parents are unaware of the nature of teaching and learning activities done at home [20]. This results in students being less able to control their distance learning activities. This attitude caused low competencies of the students.

Big class size. The Freedom-to-learn curriculum which is used student-centered learning requires the teacher to recognize the student's character better. From the observation done by the researcher, the number of students in the class was in the range of 35-37 students. Classes are divided into three groups: small classes (less than 15 students); medium classes (between 15 and 34 students); and large classes (35 or more students) [21]. Based on the classification, the number of students in Indonesia is a big class size. The big class size becomes a challenge for teachers. *Res* stated that:

“The challenge lies in the number of students. One class consists of 37 students and one teacher teach more than 1 class.” (*Res*)

This number is still understandable when still using teacher-centered learning because the number of secondary schools is less than the number of elementary schools. Based on the interview results of this study, three participants stated that in the curriculum that uses student-centered learning, this number is a challenge for teachers. This is in line with other research results that refute the widely held belief that learner-centric practices are encouraged in small courses whereas rote memorization is forced upon teachers in large classes [21]. The ratio of teachers to the number of students in student-centered learning in this number is still less than ideal.

Adjustment of simultaneous summative tests. Freedom-to-learn curriculum gives full authority to the school to manage the educational management including the test for students. However, based on the result of the principal's work deliberations, there is still a joint summative test even though each school at the sub-regional level already has a plot of material that is different from one another. From the interview result, three participants stated that they got difficulty preparing the children to take summative text, considering that if there

is a joint summative test, it will use the same questions within the scope of one regional school. The policy becomes a challenge for the teachers, as experienced by *Am*.

“In the beginning, there was freedom in determining the material in each school. Then it turns out that there is still a simultaneous summative test where the questions are also equated even though each school takes different material so automatically if the simultaneous summative test questions are equated, it will be difficult for each school to take the test.” (*Am*)

At the conclusion of a learning period, the students take the summative test to assess how much they have learned in certain competencies [22]. However, when the question of the test is not related to the material that has been taught at school, it cannot really measure the student’s competencies. The purpose of learning in the Merdeka curriculum is for lifelong learning rather than studying for exams. Unfortunately, the fact shows that the learning process at school is still used to pursue the material that will be tested in a joint summative test rather than for lifelong learning goals.

4.2 Strategies

To confront the challenges of curriculum implementation, the teachers have some strategies as follows:

Table 2. Strategies to confront the challenges in the Freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation

No.	Strategies	Participants
1)	Take training	Ret, Fa
2)	Attending an English Teacher’s Association meetings	Res, Ret, As, At
3)	Creating an exciting and enjoyable learning environment	Ret, Am, At, As
4)	Implementing the differentiated learning	Res, Ret, Am, At, As, Fa
5)	Conducting an evaluation	Ret, Am, At, As

Take training. Although the government has already provided a platform that provides many sources of information related to the Freedom-to-learn curriculum, teacher still needs training for them about the Freedom-to-learn curriculum concept itself. *Ret* stated that:

“In turn, representatives of subject teachers who have not attended the training will take part in the Independentcurriculum socialization.” (*Ret*)

The teacher training helps the teachers teach professionally in the new curriculum. Professionalism is a multifaceted structure that represents one’s views and behaviors toward their profession, as well as their attainment of high standards and subject matter competence [17]. Although there are many sources to learn autonomously, the teacher still needs to confirm their confusion, and teacher training helps them to get a better understanding of the curriculum.

Attending English Teachers Association meetings. The different understandings among the teachers create diversity in each school. However, the adaptation of the curriculum still needs discussion among the teacher especially the teacher from the same subject. *Ret* stated that the English teacher’s association help her solve some problems in the Independentcurriculum implementation.

“We held an English teachers’ association meeting in sub-region 7 to discuss the Independentcurriculum and reach mutual agreements, especially on the materials to be taught and we arrange the administration together.” (*Ret*)

The English teacher’s association consists of English teachers from one sub-region with the character of students and school conditions that are not much different, mostly they have the same challenges. The teacher receives numerous advantages from The English teacher’s association [23]. Therefore, the participants share their experiences in facing the challenges of the Freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation such as the confusion over different understandings, and discuss the confusion about the Freedom-to-learn curriculum concept.

At stated that the English teachers’ association meeting resulted in some agreements including the material and the flow of learning objectives. The teachers work together to make the flow of learning objectives in order to help each other in adopting the new curriculum. The English teachers’ association agreement is need to be agreed upon because there is still a joint summative test in the same sub-region. The agreements gotten from the English teachers’ association meeting can be implemented in each school. The schools still have their own authority to manage which material will be taught first.

Creating an exciting and enjoyable learning environment. From the finding of the challenge, the teacher stated that the students of grade 7 have a different character from the other student in the above level.

The grade 7 students have lower competencies in English and their struggle in learning is less. The finding shows that four participants try to create an interesting and comfortable learning environment for students to increase their motivation in learning English. A student's learning environment has a big impact on how well they do in school [24]. *Am* used games to increase the social and emotional skills of the student.

“In terms of students, I usually use games at the beginning to make them more socialize with friends in their class.” (*Am*)

While *Ret* tried to engage the teaching material in the student's daily life to make the learning process easier for students. Different from *Ret*, *At* have her own way to make the students more comfortable by giving them the freedom to the students in choosing their own topic. Utilizing a large area of the school environment, *As* tried to invite students to study outside the classroom.

Implementing differentiated learning. One of the main characteristics of the Freedom-to-learn curriculum is student-centered learning in which the teacher suits the teaching material to the student's needs and interests. In fact, teachers have difficulties in implementing student-centered learning because of the big number of students. Based on the finding, all participants try to implement differentiated learning to accommodate the diversity of needs and character of the students. Differentiated learning is learning that is adaptable and flexible to meet students' needs in order to maximize their potential in light of their various learning profiles, interests, and preparation for learning [25]. By implementing differentiated learning, the teacher does not mean that they are helter-skelter preparing many things to meet the needs of students. Three approaches to mapping a student's learning needs: 1. their readiness to learn; 2. their interests; and 3. the learner's learning profile [25]. The teachers conduct student profiling and grouping based on the learning goals to be achieved to meet the needs of the students in learning. *Ret* stated that grouping the students helped her to simplify the preparation.

“We group them to make it easier for teachers to prepare lessons. For students who have a higher level of understanding, we ask them to become peer tutors to help other students.” (*Ret*)

The grouping is done based on the learning competencies. There are high-level students and low-level students in one group. The heterogeneous grouping was done to implement peer tutoring. The high-level students can help the low-level students in giving a better understanding to their mates. The teachers have their own way of implementing differentiated learning. *As* focuses on a certain learning style in one meeting and focuses on another learning style in another meeting. While *At* prefers to focus on process differentiation with a personal approach to the students. And *Fa* combines differentiated learning with another teaching model such as project-based learning. There are some characters in one group that can complement each other in finishing their project.

Conducting an evaluation. The new curriculum implementation has already run for one semester and there were many things that need to be improved related to the decision of some things including the implementation of the assessment. Although it is only one semester there are many decisions made in a short time. The teachers do an evaluation to improve the quality of the curriculum implementation, especially in the assessment part. There was a change that happened in *Ret's* school. There was no midterm test for grade 7 at the beginning of the semester. However, after being evaluated, it was finally agreed that the midterm test in semester 2 would be held for all students in grades 7, 8, and 9. The evaluation is also done in the scope of the sub-rayon. The teachers gave criticism and input regarding the policies provided to make the better implementation of the Independent curriculum. The evaluation is carried out periodically so that the resulting decisions can still be developed. As stated by *At* as follows:

“For the joint summative test at this time, it is still the same, but the next joint summative test will be carried out by each school.” (*At*)

Somehow the decision that has been made confuses the teachers. Through the English teacher's association conference, the teacher continues to provide criticism to evaluate the policies implemented. The evaluation for the subregion level, the evaluation is done through criticism of the sub-region English teacher's association meeting. For the evaluation at the school level, the evaluation is done through teachers meeting at school. By using evaluations, teachers can modify their lesson plans and teaching methods to match the skill levels of their pupils [26]. To help teachers not only conduct the assessments more effectively but also resolve their organizational issues with the Freedom-to-learn curriculum, there should be provided a practical material regarding these exams [27]. It means that the evaluation is not only for the sub-regional dan the school but also for the government as the main director of the curriculum implementation. The teachers still need guidance on the assessment implementation of the Freedom-to-learn curriculum.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Freedom-to-learn curriculum has already been implemented in Indonesia. However, English teachers as the front guard of the language teaching and learning process are challenged to implement the new curriculum. There are some challenges faced by the teacher in the freedom-to-learn curriculum implementation: lack of understanding of the concept, lack of preparation, learning loss, big class size, and adjustment of a simultaneous summative test.

Although they got challenges, they still did their best effort in implementing the new curriculum. They have some strategies to confront the challenges: taking training, attending an English Teachers' Association meeting, creating an exciting and enjoyable learning environment, implementing differentiated learning, and conducting an evaluation. The implementation of the Freedom-to-learn curriculum has given the teachers a lot of learning. Whatever challenges are faced, the teachers have made their best effort to implement the new curriculum. However, the thing to remember is that the teacher as the spearhead of education requires the teachers to alter their paradigm and terminology related to education today which is far different from the past. The Freedom-to

Learn Curriculum provides flexibility to educators to create quality learning that suits the needs and learning environment of students. Although the reality shows that it has not reached the curricular goal yet, all parties have tried to do their best

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