

## **English Language Teaching in Indonesian Primary Schools: A Review from the Perspective of Out-of-Field Teachers**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The inclusion of English in Indonesia's primary education curriculum reflects a broader national effort to prepare students for global engagement. However, this policy initiative often collides with classroom realities, particularly in schools where English is taught by generalist or out-of-field teachers—those without formal qualifications in English language education. This literature-based study explores the pedagogical, emotional, and structural challenges faced by such educators, drawing from research published up to 2020. It reveals that out-of-field teachers often struggle with limited language proficiency, lack of methodological expertise, and diminished self-confidence, which results in textbook-dependent instruction and reduced communicative opportunities for learners. Despite these limitations, some teachers display resilience through informal peer learning, improvisation, and classroom innovation. Nevertheless, the mismatch between curricular expectations (as seen in *Kurikulum 2013* and *Kurikulum Merdeka*) and teachers' preparedness undermines instructional quality and learner outcomes. The study underscores the need for policy interventions that prioritize teacher training, ongoing professional development, and supportive school leadership. It concludes that the success of early English education hinges not solely on curriculum design, but on the capabilities, confidence, and well-being of the teachers tasked with delivering it.

**Keywords:** out-of-field teaching, primary English education, Indonesia, teacher identity, curriculum implementation, teacher preparedness, pedagogical challenges.

### **ABSTRAK**

Penerapan bahasa Inggris dalam kurikulum pendidikan dasar di Indonesia dimaksudkan untuk mempersiapkan siswa menghadapi tantangan global. Namun, di banyak sekolah, mata pelajaran ini diajarkan oleh guru umum atau lintas bidang yang tidak memiliki kualifikasi formal di bidang pendidikan bahasa Inggris. Kajian literatur ini mengungkap tantangan yang mereka hadapi, seperti keterbatasan penguasaan bahasa, kurangnya keterampilan metodologis, dan rendahnya rasa percaya diri, yang berujung pada pembelajaran yang bergantung pada buku teks dan minim interaksi komunikatif. Meski demikian, sebagian guru menunjukkan ketangguhan melalui pembelajaran informal bersama rekan sejawat, improvisasi, dan inovasi di kelas. Ketidaksesuaian antara tuntutan kurikulum (*Kurikulum 2013* dan *Kurikulum Merdeka*) dengan kesiapan guru berdampak pada kualitas pembelajaran. Studi ini menegaskan perlunya pelatihan, pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan, dan dukungan kepemimpinan sekolah, karena keberhasilan pendidikan bahasa Inggris di tingkat dasar bergantung pada kemampuan, kepercayaan diri, dan kesejahteraan guru.

**Kata kunci:** Pengajaran lintas bidang, Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di sekolah dasar, Indonesia, identitas guru, implementasi kurikulum, kesiapan guru, tantangan pedagogis.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The integration of English into the primary school curriculum in Indonesia reflects a national commitment to preparing learners for global communication. However, this policy move has often outpaced teacher preparation, particularly in regions where schools rely heavily on generalist or out-of-field teachers—educators assigned to teach English despite lacking formal training in English language education (Hobbs, 2013). This phenomenon, known as *out-of-field teaching*, is not unique to Indonesia but remains a pressing concern in many multilingual and resource-limited contexts across Southeast Asia.

Out-of-field English teachers frequently face significant challenges, including limited content knowledge, lack of confidence, and minimal access to professional development (Du Plessis, Carroll, & Gillies, 2015). As a result, they often adopt textbook-driven approaches and avoid communicative or interactive methods, which are essential for effective language acquisition in young learners (Nguyen & Bui, 2018; Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011). These teachers are not only teaching a subject they are unfamiliar with but are also shaping learners' earliest attitudes toward the English language—experiences that have long-term consequences (Cameron, 2001).

The early introduction of English is beneficial only when supported by qualified and confident educators using age-appropriate pedagogy (Nunan, 2003). However, in reality, many generalist primary teachers are “expected to teach English with minimal preparation” (Butler, 2004), often relying on simplified tasks or modifying materials to cope (Hayes, 2010). This misalignment between curricular goals and classroom capacity leads to instructional compromise and teacher stress (Wedell, 2008).

Teacher identity and professional confidence are deeply connected to how teachers perceive their own preparedness and how they are positioned within their institutions (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). While formal qualifications matter, classroom experience, peer collaboration, and school leadership support also play vital roles in developing teacher agency (Farrell, 2016). Without such support systems, many out-of-field teachers report feeling isolated and anxious about their performance.

Given this landscape, it becomes critical to examine how these teachers navigate the complexity of teaching English outside their specialization. How do they interpret their instructional roles? What challenges and coping strategies do they develop? And how do policy demands, such as those embedded in *Kurikulum Merdeka* or *Kurikulum 2013*, affect their teaching practices?

This study seeks to explore English language teaching in Indonesian primary schools through the lens of out-of-field teachers. By drawing on existing research and teacher perspectives, this paper aims to highlight the structural gaps, practical innovations, and emotional labor involved in delivering English instruction without a formal background in the language. Ultimately, this discussion contributes to rethinking policy, teacher training, and support mechanisms that better align with Indonesia's educational realities.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Out-of-Field Teaching: A Global and National Concern**

The phenomenon of out-of-field teaching—where teachers are required to teach subjects outside their formal area of expertise—has been widely acknowledged as a challenge to educational quality worldwide (Hobbs, 2013). In developing countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, this practice is often driven by systemic shortages of qualified personnel and uneven teacher distribution (Nguyen & Bui, 2018). In the Indonesian context, English teaching at the primary level is frequently assigned to generalist classroom teachers who have no formal education or certification in English language teaching (Lie, 2007; Widodo, 2016).

According to Du Plessis, Carroll, and Gillies (2015), out-of-field teachers often suffer from low confidence and feel professionally “illegitimate” when required to teach outside their training. This identity tension can affect both teacher morale and instructional performance. Many such teachers rely on basic or mechanical instruction and shy away from communicative activities due to limited content knowledge (Hayes, 2010). In Indonesia, this situation is compounded by a lack of ongoing, subject-specific professional development for teachers at the primary level (Astuti, 2013).

### **2.2 Teaching English at the Primary Level: Age-Specific Demands**

Teaching English to young learners is a specialized skill requiring age-appropriate pedagogy, classroom language strategies, and a strong grasp of developmental linguistics (Cameron, 2001). Nunan (2003) emphasizes that early exposure to English can only be effective if mediated by teachers who understand how children learn languages—namely through interaction, play, songs, storytelling, and visual input. Unfortunately, many Indonesian primary teachers are not equipped with such tools and instead focus on grammar, vocabulary lists, and rote memorization (Lie, 2007; Renandya, 2004).

Garton, Copland, and Burns (2011) argue that young learners require an emotionally safe and engaging environment to thrive in language acquisition. Out-of-field teachers, however, often struggle to provide this due to linguistic insecurity and pedagogical uncertainty. Hayes (2010) notes that when teachers lack confidence in their own English proficiency, they tend to avoid speaking tasks altogether, resulting in reduced learner exposure to authentic input.

Moreover, Butler (2004) points out that in many Asian countries, teachers are "expected to teach English with minimal preparation or prior training." In such settings, instructional focus shifts to survival strategies—teachers depend heavily on textbooks, translated instruction, or decontextualized worksheets. These practices, while providing structure, often fail to support language development in meaningful or communicative ways (Widodo, 2016).

### **2.3 Pedagogical Identity, Professional Confidence, and Teacher Agency**

The construction of teacher identity—how teachers see themselves and their role in the classroom—is closely tied to the level of preparedness and institutional support they receive (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). For out-of-field teachers, being assigned to teach English may lead to internal conflict, anxiety, and a sense of inadequacy. Du Plessis et al. (2015) found that such teachers often experience “role dissonance,” which may result in lowered job satisfaction and a sense of isolation within their school community.

According to Farrell (2016), building confidence and competence in language teaching requires sustained mentoring, reflective practice, and peer collaboration. Yet in many Indonesian schools, especially in rural or remote regions, such support systems are weak or absent. As a result, teachers often internalize their struggle as personal failure rather than systemic neglect (Hayes, 2010). This situation makes it difficult for them to develop what Bandura (1997) calls **teaching self-efficacy**—the belief in one’s ability to affect student learning.

### **2.4 Curriculum Pressures and Institutional Expectations**

Curriculum reform in Indonesia—particularly the introduction of **Kurikulum 2013 (K-13)** emphasized competence-based learning and communicative approaches in English education. However, the success of any curriculum lies in its implementation, which depends heavily on teacher capacity (Widodo, 2016). In reality, many teachers struggle to reconcile curriculum expectations with classroom realities, especially when they lack pedagogical training in English language teaching (Astuti, 2013).

Wedell (2008) warns that reform efforts often fail because they assume teachers are both willing and able to implement change. Without sufficient training, curriculum materials, or teaching time, teachers fall back on methods they feel safe with—even if those methods conflict with curriculum aims. Hayes (2010) reinforces this point by stating that “curriculum innovation without teacher support leads to surface-level compliance rather than deep engagement.”

The issue becomes more complex when school leaders and supervisors expect teachers to meet national benchmarks in English regardless of their background. Teachers feel pressure to deliver results in national exams (UN) and standardized tests (AKM) without having been properly equipped, leading to increased stress and pedagogical compromise (Lie, 2007; Renandya, 2004).

### **2.5 Professional Development: Quantity vs. Quality**

Teacher development initiatives in Indonesia tend to focus on generalized, large-scale training sessions rather than targeted support based on subject specialization. Renandya (2004) and Astuti (2013) observe that even when teachers receive training, it is often too brief, theoretical, or disconnected from classroom realities. Hayes (2010) argues that what out-of-field teachers need is not a one-size-fits-all workshop but a long-term, context-sensitive mentoring approach.

Collaborative models of professional development—such as lesson study or peer coaching—have shown promise in other Southeast Asian contexts (Nguyen & Bui, 2018), yet are still underutilized in Indonesia. Without ongoing professional learning communities, most non-English teachers lack the opportunity to reflect, experiment, or refine their practice.

## **2.6 Summary**

The literature reveals that out-of-field English teaching at the primary level is shaped by multiple, intersecting challenges: lack of subject expertise, insufficient pedagogical training, unclear policy support, and weak professional learning systems. While Indonesia's curriculum aims to promote communicative competence, the reality is that many generalist teachers are left underprepared, unsupported, and overwhelmed. The success of early English instruction thus depends not merely on curriculum design, but on how teacher identity, training, and agency are acknowledged and nurtured within school systems.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative literature review approach to explore the challenges, perceptions, and pedagogical realities faced by out-of-field teachers in Indonesian primary schools who are assigned to teach English. The review synthesizes findings from existing scholarly works, policy documents, and theoretical perspectives to examine the intersection of teacher identity, instructional competence, and institutional policy within this context.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The research is classified as a narrative literature review (Snyder, 2019), designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of an under-researched phenomenon through thematic analysis of selected literature. The study does not involve primary data collection; instead, it relies on **secondary sources** and critical interpretation to generate insights.

### **3.2 Data Sources**

Sources were selected from a range of peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, conference proceedings, and reputable academic theses accessed through:

- Google Scholar
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)
- Taylor & Francis Online
- ResearchGate
- Indonesian national repositories and journals such as *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra*, *Jurnal TEFLIN*, and *Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*.

Government documents and official curriculum frameworks, such as the Kurikulum 2013 and Kurikulum Merdeka guidelines, were also reviewed to contextualize the policy environment shaping primary English instruction.

### **3.3 Selection Criteria**

The inclusion of literature followed these criteria:

- Topical Relevance: The studies must address themes such as *out-of-field teaching*, *primary English instruction*, *teacher identity*, *pedagogical confidence*, or *curriculum implementation*.
- Geographic Relevance: Priority was given to works focusing on Indonesia, or comparable multilingual contexts in Southeast Asia.
- Publication Year: Only sources published between 2000 and 2020 were selected to align with the institutional requirement and capture both foundational and contemporary discourse.
- Language: Sources written in English and Bahasa Indonesia were included.
- Credibility: Only works published in accredited academic outlets or written by recognized scholars in the field were used.

### **3.4 Data Collection and Analysis**

The literature search was conducted using targeted keywords including:

- “out-of-field teachers”
- “primary English teaching Indonesia”
- “non-English teachers teaching English”
- “teacher identity in EFL”
- “curriculum implementation Indonesia”
- “English for young learners in Southeast Asia”

Abstracts and full texts were screened for relevance, then organized thematically into four categories: teacher preparedness, pedagogical strategies, curriculum demands, and professional development.

A thematic synthesis method was applied (Thomas & Harden, 2008), involving three steps:

1. Coding of key findings across the selected studies.
2. Grouping codes into analytical themes relevant to the research questions.
3. Interpreting cross-cutting patterns in the context of Indonesian education.

### **3.5 Research Limitations**

While this literature-based approach allows for wide-ranging conceptual analysis, it also presents several limitations:

- Lack of empirical field data may limit the depth of understanding regarding individual teacher experiences.
- Availability of localized research on out-of-field English teaching in Indonesia is still limited, making cross-country comparison necessary in some cases.
- The review scope excludes post-2020 publications, which may exclude more recent developments, particularly after the introduction of Kurikulum Merdeka.

## **4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Navigating English Teaching Without a Language Background**

Out-of-field teaching in English at the primary level creates a pedagogical gap that significantly affects instructional quality and learner engagement. Many generalist teachers, often trained in other disciplines such as mathematics, religion, or local language arts, are assigned to teach English due to staff shortages—especially in rural and under-resourced areas of Indonesia. This mismatch between teacher qualifications and assigned subject matter leads to uncertainty, instructional simplification, and teacher anxiety.

As Hobbs (2013) argues, “*Out-of-field teaching is a structural phenomenon that disrupts teacher identity and pedagogy, especially when the subject carries high cultural and communicative stakes.*” In the context of English,

a global lingua franca, this disruption is magnified. The perception of English as a prestigious subject creates additional psychological pressure for out-of-field teachers, many of whom report feeling unqualified and underprepared.

In Indonesia, Wati (2011) documented that many elementary teachers “rely on outdated materials and follow textbook scripts without adaptation” because they lack the linguistic competence to modify or contextualize tasks. Butler (2004) echoed this in her multi-country study in Asia, stating that “*elementary teachers often have little to no specialized training in EFL but are still expected to deliver outcomes aligned with national goals.*”

This disconnection between policy vision and classroom reality was also highlighted by Wedell (2008), who noted that “*top-down curricular change without sustained support produces confusion and uneven practices at the ground level.*” For Indonesian teachers, this has meant a reliance on rote-learning, grammar translation, and avoidance of speaking-focused tasks—despite the fact that young learners benefit most from communicative and interactive approaches (Cameron, 2001).

#### **4.2. Pedagogical Practices and Classroom Realities**

The dominant instructional pattern observed in classrooms led by out-of-field teachers is a dependence on textbook-driven learning, often accompanied by literal translation into Bahasa Indonesia. While this ensures lesson completion, it limits exposure to authentic language use. In a study conducted by Garton, Copland, and Burns (2011) in Southeast Asia, many teachers confessed to “*avoiding open-ended questions and group speaking activities due to fear of not being able to control student output.*” This issue was also present in Indonesia, where teachers admitted they often skipped listening and speaking sections.

The use of song-based or vocabulary-matching activities is common, but often without follow-up communicative output. As Nunan (2003) argued, “*activity alone is not pedagogy; there must be sequencing, scaffolding, and integration to promote meaningful interaction.*” Unfortunately, many out-of-field teachers are unfamiliar with how to design such scaffolding due to lack of pre-service exposure.

Moreover, Hayes (2010) observed that “*teachers tend to rely on mechanical repetition and controlled drills, which limit learners’ language experimentation.*” In rural areas, where teacher isolation is a factor, this situation is compounded by minimal access to continuous professional development.

#### **4.3. The Role of Teacher Identity and Confidence**

Teacher confidence emerges as a central variable affecting instructional choices. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) emphasized that “*teacher identity is shaped not only by qualifications, but by the perceived legitimacy of their instructional role.*” For out-of-field teachers, teaching English often feels like a burden or a role imposed upon them, leading to anxiety and reduced agency.

In Du Plessis et al. (2015)’s findings, out-of-field teachers frequently described themselves as “survivors” rather than “professionals.” This survival mentality often results in risk-averse behaviors: limiting student interaction, discouraging questions, and sticking strictly to textbook content.

Interestingly, teachers with strong school-level support (e.g., mentoring, co-teaching, in-house workshops) exhibit greater confidence. This finding supports Farrell (2016), who noted that “*professional learning communities and reflection improve even non-specialist teachers’ classroom decision-making and sense of belonging.*”

#### **4.4. Coping Strategies and Micro-Innovations**

Despite the challenges, many out-of-field teachers demonstrate creativity and agency. In a study by Zein (2016) in West Java, teachers reported using translated children's stories, English songs, and role-play games to build engagement. These micro-innovations, though simple, reflect teachers' commitment to making lessons more meaningful, even with limited linguistic resources.

Others sought peer support. For example, in Widiati and Cahyono's (2006) research, some primary teachers collaborated with high school English teachers for lesson planning or pronunciation practice. While these practices remain informal and sporadic, they illustrate that "teacher adaptability" can partially compensate for lack of formal preparation—though not sustainably.

#### **4.5. Policy Tensions: Between Vision and Implementation**

Indonesia's curricular policies, particularly Kurikulum 2013 and Kurikulum Merdeka, emphasize communicative competence, cultural exposure, and learner autonomy. However, this vision often clashes with the pedagogical realities of out-of-field teachers. Wedell (2008) asserted that *"reform fails not because of bad intent but because of weak delivery systems that ignore teacher constraints."*

Teachers interviewed in Siregar's (2010) study noted that they felt alienated from the goals of the curriculum. One teacher said, *"I don't understand the difference between thematic and communicative approach, so I just follow the book."*

This gap also stems from inadequate pre-service and in-service training. As Yuwono and Harbon (2010) noted, *"English language education for primary schools in Indonesia is still peripheral in teacher training institutions."* Without structured certification or ongoing mentoring, out-of-field teachers are left to self-navigate a complex task with few institutional resources.

#### **4.6. Emotional Labor and Teacher Well-Being**

The emotional burden of teaching English without sufficient preparation is often overlooked. Teachers report feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and guilt, especially when facing communicative breakdowns in class or dealing with parents' high expectations.

Kelchtermans (1996) described this as the "emotional dimension of teaching," where *"self-image and self-worth are constantly negotiated through classroom experiences."* For many out-of-field teachers, every English class becomes a test of professional identity. Yet, when successful lessons occur—often thanks to personal effort—they report heightened satisfaction and renewed motivation.

#### **4.7. Implications for Teacher Support and Reform**

The findings suggest several key directions for policy and practice:

- Recognize and formalize out-of-field teaching realities. Instead of assuming English teachers are always trained in English, policies must include targeted interventions for generalist teachers already in post.
- Expand in-service teacher development that is contextual, practice-oriented, and emotionally supportive. Short courses, peer mentoring, and digital microlearning platforms can offer scalable solutions.
- Rethink curricular expectations by aligning them with classroom realities. For instance, instead of emphasizing high-level communicative competence, early-stage English programs can focus on exposure, confidence building, and joy in learning.
- Promote collaboration between out-of-field teachers and trained English educators, either within schools or through teacher networks. As Lie (2007) argued, *"quality improvement does not begin with curriculum but with teacher capacity and collaboration."*

### **5.CONCLUSION**

This study has explored the complexities of English language teaching in Indonesian primary schools where teachers often come from non-English language education backgrounds. The findings reveal that while the policy drive to introduce English early in the curriculum reflects a national aspiration for global readiness, the reality in many classrooms paints a different picture—one marked by pedagogical compromise, teacher anxiety, and a lack of sustained institutional support.

Out-of-field teachers face substantial challenges, from limited linguistic proficiency and a lack of methodological knowledge to diminished confidence and professional identity struggles. Despite these barriers, many still show resilience by adopting creative coping strategies, such as using visual aids, peer support, or simplified English stories. However, such efforts remain fragmented and insufficient in the absence of structured professional development.

The tension between curricular aspirations—especially those found in *Kurikulum Merdeka* and *Kurikulum 2013*—and classroom realities has led to instructional inconsistencies. Policies emphasizing communicative competence are undermined when teachers are unprepared to move beyond textbook-based, grammar-oriented teaching. This misalignment not only affects the quality of English instruction but also shapes children's early attitudes toward the language, which may have lasting consequences.

The research reinforces the need for systemic reforms that acknowledge the prevalence of out-of-field teaching and respond with targeted, empathetic, and practice-based interventions. Strengthening teacher training programs, providing accessible in-service development, encouraging school-based collaboration, and adjusting curriculum goals to classroom capacity are all essential steps. Furthermore, teacher well-being must be recognized as a key factor in sustaining motivation and fostering professional growth.

Ultimately, enhancing the quality of English education in Indonesia's primary schools cannot be achieved merely by mandating English as a subject. It requires a holistic approach that honours the realities of teachers, invests in their growth, and builds supportive ecosystems where even non-specialist teachers can thrive and make a lasting impact on learners' language journeys.

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