Exploring Challenges Faced by English Language Teachers: Voices from EFL Teachers in Indonesia

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Abstract: Playing a vital role in EFL education, teachers often encounter challenges when teaching students English. This study focuses on exploring challenges faced by EFL teachers in Indonesia. The study was conducted through qualitative research design with a case study approach. A total of 5 male and female EFL teachers in senior high schools in North Sulawesi participated in interview sessions during the data collection. A semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain comprehensive descriptions of teachers' challenges in teaching English in EFL context. The interview data was transcribed, coded, and grouped to decide the themes. The findings indicated that the primary challenges they encountered when teaching EFL including demotivated students, excessive working hours, numerous obligations, improper utilization of technology by students, and governmental expectations resulted from the Merdeka Curriculum. These results suggest complex problems experienced by teachers in Indonesia. Understanding teachers' challenges in EFL education give insights to stakeholders, including policy maker and curriculum developers to optimize EFL education in Indonesia.

Keywords: EFL teachers, Merdeka Curriculum, teaching challenges, TEFL

Introduction

To date, English is still considered the most prominent international lingua franca which functions as tools to overcome language barriers among speakers from different countries. Besides, this language also promises economic values for its speaker due to bigger chances to various job opportunities in global market. Consequently, amidst the popularity rise of other foreign language, such as Korea and Mandarin, English still possesses a substantial position in expanding circle countries, including Indonesia. As one of the potential markets for English language education, this subject will continue to be taught and still earn immense attention from society (Zein et al., 2020)

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Despite the long history of English language teaching, EFL students' proficiency in Indonesia remains low. This issue is often associated with various factors, including students' low motivation and learning anxiety, inappropriate teaching method, class size, poor English environment, (Maruf et al., n.d.; Renandya et al., 2018; Wulyani et al., 2019). Additionally, previous studies have revealed that EFL teachers' low competence levels, both in content and pedagogic knowledge result in their inability to help students comprehend the materials and use the target language (Renandya et al., 2018; Wulyani et al., 2019).

While there is numerous literature that addresses various challenges in EFL education, there remains a notable gap regarding teachers' perceptions of these challenges within the Indonesian context. As previous studies primarily focused on exploring student-related factors, there is still limited research focusing on teachers' perspectives and the specific challenges they encounter in their teaching practices.

This study aims to explore how teachers perceive the challenges of teaching English in the EFL context in Indonesia. By delving into the specific difficulties faced by EFL teachers, this research seeks to inform stakeholders including curriculum developer and policy makers about the necessary changes needed to support teachers more effectively. Additionally, this study contributes to the existing body of literature by filling the research gap concerning the intersection of teacher challenges and student proficiency, highlighting the critical role that English teachers play in shaping education outcomes.

Method

This study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically a case study approach, to deeply explore the perceptions of English teachers regarding the research topic. A case study design was selected for its ability to provide rich, contextualized insights into participants' experiences and beliefs within their specific educational settings. By focusing on a limited number of cases—specifically, the perspectives of English teachers in North Sulawesi—this approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the complexities surrounding the topic.

The research involved six English teachers from senior high schools located in Tomohon Municipal, Manado Municipal, and North Minahasa Regency. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, aiming to include individuals with varied teaching experiences and backgrounds to ensure diverse perspectives. Each teacher was informed about the study's purpose and provided consent to participate, ensuring ethical considerations were addressed.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility in exploring the informants' perceptions while maintaining a focused line of inquiry. The interviews were conducted in a conversational style, allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely. An interview guide was developed, containing open-ended questions that prompted discussions about their teaching practices, challenges, and attitudes toward the research topic. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was recorded with the participants' permission for accurate data capture.

Following the data collection, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, which involved several key steps, namely coding, theme development, and data display. Several excerpts from the informants are selected to support the findings; pseudo names are used to maintain the confidentiality of the informants in the study (Andeen, Dea, Sintia, Ana, Dewi, Budi, and Chris).

Results and Discussion

The study indicated that educators face obstacles in teaching the English language, including demotivated students, excessive working hours, numerous obligations, improper utilization of technology by students, and governmental expectations.

The interview results predominantly indicated that the numerous obligations teachers have restrict their ability to effectively educate children. Since most informants in this study were female, in addition to their jobs as English instructors, they also had to fulfilled responsibilities as homeroom teachers, wives, and mothers. This condition prevents them from focusing on their roles as English teachers and attending to their students' progress. Excerpt 1 illustrates one informant's mention of her exhaustion in managing all the duties.

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Excerpt 1
        "..kita harus mengakomodir lagi tapi jujur exhausted. Karena apa, kami harus
        mengakomodir semua sementara kami ini manusia juga, kami punya juga punya
        kehidupan pribadi misalnya juga kita lagi mikir sesuatu dan lain lagi (memikirkan
        masalah sekolah) jadi berat (we have to accommodate it but, honestly, it is
        exhausting. Because what, we have to accommodate everything, but we are still
        human, we have personal life, for instance, while we have to think about something,
        we have to think (how to accommodate the students, so it is tough).
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Another female teacher also reported her multiple responsibilities in professional, family, and community as she also participated in religious activities in church. Despite her duties at work and family, her statements indicate people's expectation to be more active and in charge of various responsibilities due to her attribute as an English teacher, who is assumed to be more competent. Consequently, this hinders her from improving her competence and preparing herself with the teaching material.

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Excerpt 2
        Banyak kesibukan. Baik di rumah di sekolah di jemaat. Di gereja kalo guru memang
        kalo di Masyarakat maupun di gereja selalu dorang (they in Melayu Manado) tahu
        guru itu mampu. Jadi memang kalo memang untuk focus mengembangkan kemampuan
        mengajar dan Bahasa Inggris, itu sulit
        (Numerous duties, at school, home, (and) church. At church, if you are a teacher,
        the community or church, they know that teachers are competent (in doing things).
        So, it is difficult, indeed, to improve teaching competence and knowledge in
        English.)
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Excerpts 1 and 2 reveal that female English teachers in Indonesia still face work-family conflict (Putri Utami et al., 2018). They who perform more than one role, in family and work, are likely to struggle balancing their performance in those areas simultaneously. The EFL teaching challenges in relation to family-work conflict is also experienced by female EFL teachers in other developing countries such as Pakistan (Hussain, et al., 2021). A study conducted in EFL Vietnamese context also found that complex roles of female English teachers combined with social-cultural norms and expectations concerning gender issue contribute to heavier burden of EFL female teachers (Pham et al., 2023). Another study conducted to female teachers in Malaysia also found that female teachers, who specifically are married, felt more burden and more exessive workload resulting in burnout (Mousavy, 2014). It has long been believed that teaching is a woman-friendly occupation due to its relatively shorter work hours, which allow female teachers to still take care of their family after work (Conley & Jenkins, 2011). In indonesian society, gender roles and cultural expectations around the responsibilities of women – particularly those who are teacher – add an additional layer of complexity to the challenges female teachers face. Women are expected to fulfill both domestic and professional duties. It is part of the societal expectation that female teachers should maintain competence in both their family and professional roles, which

may lead to emotional and physical exhaustion. As observed in the excerpts, both the female teachers in the study are expected to accommodate everything, including their duties as teachers as well as mothers, wives, and community members.

The multiple responsibilities resulted from complex roles of female English teachers can significantly present unique challenges and burdens as these duties are potential to adversely affect teachers' performance and, consequently, students' outcomes. Research has shown that when female teachers struggle to balance familial responsibilities with professional demands, their stress levels increase, leading to decreased job satisfaction and performance (Li, 2023; Md Shah et al., 2024) This conflict often results in teachers being less engaged and effective in the classroom, which can hinder student learning and achievement.

Moreover, the emotional and psychological strain faced by female teachers, as highlighted in the excerpts, cannot be ignored. Teachers often feel the weight of expectations to succeed in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, which requires not only changes in pedagogy but also a shift in mindset. This pressure can result in stress, burnout, and even a sense of inadequacy when they feel they cannot meet the demands placed on them by the curriculum, the institution, and their broader social roles.

If, we examine teachers' report in this study closely, teachers' numerous responsibilities that they face as a challenge in teaching English are also a direct consequence of other challenges, including government expectations, extensive teaching hours, and demotivated students. The term government expectation this study use refers to the duties they teacher have to carry out when implementing the curriculum. According to the informants, government expects teachers to be competent in assisting students construct their knowledge, as well as facilitator, motivator, and other roles.

> *Kalau menurut pendapat saya sih, pemerintah maunya sekarang guru itu menjadi fasilitator. Kita sudah all in semuanya, kita menjadi orang tua bagi mereka (siswa), kita juga menjadi motivator, kita juga bisa menjadi konselor bagi anak-anak, karena pada saat saya masuk kelas itu, setiap hari, saya menghadapi beragam siswa dengan beragam permasalahan mereka sendiri, belum lagi dengan pemahaman Bahasa Inggris yang rata-rata masih minim.*
>
> According to me, the government expects teachers to be a facilitator. We have become all in one, we become their (students) parents, motivator, and counselor to students, because when we are in the classroom, every day, we meet students with various problems, not to mention, in average, their low level of English proficiency.

Since 2022, the teaching of English in all educational levels in Indonesia has been governed by the Merdeka Curriculum (Independence Curriculum), which prioritizes individual differences. This curriculum is characterized by 'personalized' learning activities, where students are exposed to supportive and conducive learning circumstances according to their readiness, learning interest, and learning profiles (Barlian et al., 2023). There are three phases of learning in Merdeka Curriculum, namely initial, implementation, and evaluation phases. In the initial stage, teachers are expected to carry out an initial assessment to diagnose what the students are interested in, how they best learn things and how their learning style is. In addition to student diagnostic, the Merdeka Curriculum also requires teachers to analyze the curriculum to determine the teaching materials for the students. Then, the information from the initial phase will be used to design a teaching-learning process which meets students' distinct conditions. When designing the learning content, teachers must also take into consideration what to teach according to students' readiness and how to deliver the content to meet students' learning styles. Furthermore, unlike the former curriculums,

where students could be graded by using numeric scores, the Merdeka Curriculum prefer qualitative description of students 'competence.

Andin, for instance, reported that she had to prepare teaching learning activities that can accommodate students with different needs and learning styles, it is not to mention the large class she had to teach.

Excerpt 3

> *Sekarang diferensiasi learning pembelajaran itu exhausted walaupun memang sekarang diharapkan guru harus mampu seperti itu, Cuma y aitu, kita harus mengakomodir per siswa itu kesulitan apalagi kelas kita kan cukup besar mulai dari 30 sampai 35 ada yang sampai 39 seperti itu*
>
> Now, (the curriculum) focuses on differentiation learning, and it is exhausting, even though now, teachers are expected to be like such (aware of individual differences), we must accommodate each student, that is the challenge, it is not to mention that we have relatively large class, comprising of 30 to 35, sometimes 39 (students)

Excerpt 3 reveals the burden that teachers have when implementing differentiation learning as suggested in the Merdeka Curriculum. The teachers reported that the load is heavier because the number of students that they should accommodate was quite large, which has been another classic issue in Indonesia (Boy Jon et al., 2021; Sudrajat, 2021). Moreover, the responsibility resulted from differentiation learning in crowded class adds the complexity of EFL teaching in Indonesia. Therefore, in order to address the issue of learning differentiation in the Merdeka Curriculum, the teachers implemented the former curriculum (K13), which includes peer learning where students who had demonstrated the necessary level of proficiency collaborated with their peers and supported them in their academic pursuits.

Differentiated instruction is an educational approach that recognizes and addresses the diverse learning needs, preferences, and abilities of students in a classroom. While this approach can be highly effective in promoting individualized learning and ensuring that all students can access the curriculum, it often comes with significant challenges for teachers. One of the most notable challenges is the increased administrative burden, as teachers are required to prepare multiple lesson plans that can accommodate various learning styles and abilities (Pozas et al., 2023; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). These plans may include modifications for students with disabilities, English language learners, and those requiring enrichment or remediation. In addition to crafting these tailored lessons, teachers must also maintain detailed records of student progress, collaborate with colleagues, and attend meetings focused on student outcomes. The time and energy spent on these administrative tasks can detract from the actual teaching process, leaving educators feeling overwhelmed and overworked. As a result, while differentiated instruction can enhance learning outcomes, the excessive administrative demands placed on teachers can create a barrier to its effective implementation.

Furthermore, according to Silfanus, the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation, which he believes is not yet prepared for use, also complicates the teaching of the English language as relevant textbooks were not available. He stated that the socialization for the Merdeka Curriculum was still insufficient, in contrast to the previous curriculum (KTSP and K13), and that instructors were expected to independently research the information from the Internet. This is particularly more challenging for senior teachers who are unable to effectively navigate the Internet due to their limited literacy. According to (Boy Jon et al., 2021), teachers' insufficient ability to utilize digital technologies hinders them from optimally use them in making teaching and learning more effectively and attractily. Another challenge pointed out by Silfanus is that while the Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers to create their own topics and teaching content, this results in other

problems, including uniformity of topic organization that should be taught. According to Silfanus, if the curriculum is contrasted to K13 (Curriculum 13), the Merdeka Curriculum does not provide clear guidelines of topics that should be taught from the lower to the highest levels, as what is suggested by K13. Teachers have been compelled to allocate their time to research and re-learn the manner in which the English subject should be taught to students in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum due to its unpreparedness for implementation. This increases their workload as English teachers, as they are also responsible for preparing teaching materials and instructing students. Consequently, they continued to employ the outdated curriculum rather than acquiring the necessary skills to effectively implement learning differentiation.

Excerpt 4

> *Masih pakai yang kurikulum yang lama, KTSP dan K13. Jujur saya untuk guru, dalam kurikulum Merdeka ini, sosialisasinya kurang karena dituntut untuk cari sendiri di internet. Sementara yang kita tahu bahwa banyak guru yang susah untuk mengakses internet, kemudian malas untuk masuk. Beda dengan yang dulu, yang dulu, K13 sosialisasinya secara massif, beda dengan kurikulum Merdeka. Semuanya ke platform, semuanya ke aplikasi sehingga banyak guru yang bingung juga aplikasi mana yang harus dipakai.*

The unreadiness of the Merdeka Curriculum in schools and teachers is also reported by previous studies. (Ndari et al., 2023), for instance, reported that the Merdeka Curriculum has not been fully implemented in Yogyakarta in accordance with the policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture and Technology as schools have not had sufficient knowledge of conducting the curriculum. Instead of applying student-centered learning as suggested in the curriculum, teachers in the schools still utilized lectures to deliver the topics due to their inadequate understanding of accommodating diverse students' needs and learning styles.

Similar to the report of the teacher in the study, the unreadiness of supporting documents and a lack of socialization among teachers have hindered them from effectively applying the curriculum in classrooms. Many teachers have expressed confusion over the curriculum's requirements, as the necessary materials and guidelines were not adequately disseminated or classified prior to the execution. Despite the fact that the government has prepared platforms for the online trainings, not all teachers are apparently able to access them due to several reasons, including digital literacy. This frustration has led to a reliance on the previous curriculum, as teachers, unsure of how to proceed with the Merdeka Curriculum, continue using familiar methods and content. Additionally, the frequent changes in Indonesia's educational curricula over the years have contributed to a sense of instability and a lack of preparation at the governmental level(Fitriyah & Wardani, 2022). The rapid shifts in curriculum policies often leave little time for comprehensive training and material development, hindering the smooth transition between systems. This cycle of ongoing curriculum revisions has not only overwhelmed teachers but also impeded the government's ability to properly support and equip schools for effective curriculum implementation, further deepening the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities.

One word that will emerge when discussing the challenges of EFL instruction in Indonesia is "complicated," as one challenge resulted from another, and vice versa. The term "multiple responsibility" refers to the fact that English teachers are unable to enhance their pedagogic competencies and content knowledge, which results in low student proficiency due to demotivation. Additionally, demotivated students may impose additional teaching responsibilities. There are numerous factors that can be linked to students' low motivation in learning English, including negative stigma towards the target language and instructors who are frequently blamed for causing this issue. Nevertheless, teachers report that pupils who are unwilling to learn cause

them to experience feelings of guilt, as they believe they have failed to ensure that they learn and use the language.

Excerpt 5

> *Tidak, karena mereka tidak bisa berbiara Bahasa Inggris, walaupun ini PR saya sebenarnya karena Ketika mereka tidak bisa berbicara Bahasa Inggris itu yang membuat saya terenyuh dan membuat saya merasa gagal.*
> (No, because they cannot speak English, though it is a homework for me actually because, when they cannot speaking English, this makes me and failed).

> *Ya pernah, ada siswa-siwa yang memang sudah berulang kali tapi memang tidak mampu mencapai tujuan pembelajaran, jadi mungkin merasa gagal.*
> (Yes, I have, there were students who had been taught many times, but they did not achieve the learning objectives, so I think I failed.)

Not only cause the feeling of failure to teachers, teachers in the study also reported that students who are not motivated to learn English are inclined to utilize digital technologies inappropriately. Students with low motivation, who particularly, are afraid to learning the language give up easily when doing their assignment and use technology to solve their provlem. According to the teachers, they often found their students to copy the answers from the Internet; some of them even use artificial intelligence (AI) such as ChatGpt to give them the answer to the given tasks.

Excerpt 6

> *Memang saya lihat menurun kreatifitas anak-anak, mungkin karena ini juga ya, kita berada di era teknologi sehingga anak-anak dininabobokkan dengan teknologi itu sendiri. Mereka bukannya mau meng-create something tapi cuma mau mengcopy. Sehingga alhasil product yang mereka hasilkan bukan produk yang authentic gitu ya, bukan yang original*
> (I see that students' creativity is declining, probably because we are in digital era. Technology is like a lullaby to students. Instead of utilizing the technology to create something, they simply copy the information (from the Internet). Consequently, their product is not original.)

Excerpt 7

> When I told them to make a conversation, they did it, but when I checked (their works), because I know their ability, right. I checked their books; I think it is not related with their ability. I asked them where did you find this conversation and they told me "By chat GPT". I told them if you want to make conversations in English and if you think it is difficult for you to do it, you can start from Bahasa Indonesia and translate them into English. I told them AI would never help you, it will make you stupid in the class.

Excerpts 6 and 7 highlight how digital technologies have spoiled students in learning. The teachers in this study reported that they encountered misuse of technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) tools, in various ways, including plagiarism and cheating. These findings also express teachers' frustration with students relying on AI, specifically ChatGPT, to complete assignments such as conversation, resulting in work that lacks originality and does not reflect their true language abilities. This study found that when the students were asked to create specific language products, some students only copied the content from the available material on the Internet, while some others utilized the AI tools such as ChatGPT to create generate something for them.

While the Merdeka Curriculum attempts to improve students' independency, creativeness, and literacy in using digital technologies to anticipate for technological disruptions in the future, the misuse of technology by students is apparently still a substantial challenge for teachers. The curriculum which emphasizes student-centered learning and critical thinking to foster deeper learning through creativity and problem-solving is interrupted by the inappropriate use of AI by the students. It is more challenging, especially among teachers from older age groups who are not familiar with the rapid advancement of the technologies and inable to detect and tackle the issue.

Consequently, instead of teaching the students how to use the AI in a more ethical manner in their learning processes, they encourage students to avoid using the AI when learning or ban the use of digital tools in classroom. It is in accordance with the report by Silfanus "*biasanya kita bilang supaya mereka tidak buka Hp di kelas, karena sudah ada PowerPoint* (usually I ask them not to use their mobile phone in classrooms as we already have PowerPoint)". Many teachers still consider AI tools such as ChatGPT as a treat to education as it can be used by the students to generate any written assignments and answers to questions, leading to concerns about AI-assisted cheating (Lo, 2023).

The results and discussion have desribe the complex issues faced by EFL teachers in Indonesia amidst the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, starting from the complex interplay between their multiple responsibilities, demotivated students, and the inappropriate use of articifical intelligence (AI) in language learning. EFL teachers are often tasked with not only teaching language skills but also managing administrative duties, adapting to diverse student needs, and implementing new technological tools, all while maintaining high teaching standards. This scenario may even be worse among female teachers who also carry the other responsibilities result in their status as married female teachers. Not only can it lead to heavy workload and burnout among teachers, but also will decrease the effectiveness in the classroom. At the same time, demotivated students who struggle with motivation, low engagement, and poor performance in class are inclined to utilize AI tools when doing the assignments. AI tools, which are supposed to be a powerful resource for language learning, are utilized in inappropriate manners by students to resolve and oversimplify the complex language tasks. However, the reports from the teachers suggest that they could only encourage students to strive and delve into the process of learning rather than focus on the immediate results.

Conclusion

This study found complex challenges faced by the EFL teachers in senior high schools in North Sulawesi, which can be categorized primarily into demotivated students, multiple responsibilities, extensive teaching hours, and governmental expectation resulted from the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings provide insights into teachers' perceptions over issues they found when teaching the students, the reports were limited to a select number of high schools in North Sulawesi. The findings may not fully capture the diverse challenges experienced by EFL teachers in other regions of Indonesia, where contextual factors such as local educational policies, socio-economic conditions, and student demographics may different. Therefore, future research may include more respondents with more diverse background and locations to gain more comprehensive insights.

The study highlights the urgent need for targeted professional development programs to support EFL teachers in addressing the specific challenges in relation to the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in managing student motivation and adapting to the curriculum. Additionally, schools and government must prioritize reducing the burden of excessive teaching hours and administrative duties to allow teachers to focus more on improving the quality of their teaching. Furthermore, curriculum developers and policymakers should consider the local context and provide more tailored resources, training, and support to ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented effectively across diverse regions. Finally, future research could also explore the role of technology, including AI, in addressing some of these challenges, particularly in enhancing student engagement and supporting teachers' workload management.

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