# Exploring the coherence between the EFL curriculum policy and its implementation in the higher education setting

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## Abstract

This paper reports the results of a case study which explored the reality of ELT curriculum implementation in the higher education setting in Indonesia in light of the notion of coherence. The study was underpinned by naturalistic inquiry and was intended to know the extent to which the national curriculum policy was implemented in the individual higher education institution through the institutional curriculum policy and in turn was implemented through classroom instructions and experienced by the students. The data were collected by using documentation, interviews, and observations, and analyzed by using the Immersion/Crystallization method. The major finding was that the implementation of the ELT curriculum in the institutional level might not represent the vision of national curriculum policy. The institutional policy announced the application of curriculum on the basis on IQF (Indonesian Qualification Framework), nevertheless, divergent interpretation toward the national policy had led to bias implementation in the level of the department. While most subjects within the overarching (department) curriculum were directed to adopt a strong product-oriented model, the English subjects represented a different reality.

*Keywords: higher education, EFL curriculum, coherence, policy, and practice*

## Introduction

The development of English Language Teaching in the world has been greatly influenced by globalization and internationalization. In Europe and Asia, globalization has stimulated convergent movements across the nations such as those in the economic integration in Europe and Asia. People's mobility from one to other places, particularly academics and professionals, is increasing which confirms the importance of an international language as a medium for the encounters. In ASEAN countries, English is determined as the official language to use in communication among the members (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Therefore, communication skills in English are becoming more strategic to learn in any contexts in ASEAN.

The importance of English skills for people's future has been realized by Indonesian citizens. Even though English subject is not a mandatory subject in the elementary school, people keep sending their children to English classes or courses and expect that their children are able to communicate in English since they are kids (Novawan, 2014). In higher education,

bilingual communities grow, and most students believe that English mastery is key to catch the opportunity of getting a good job in the future. It is now common that a campus has an organization or community for those who expect to develop their English skills such as the English Club or English Debating Club. Moreover, English contest or competition has recently been conducted in many universities and at the national level to promote the importance of English skills. Thus, English is now becoming more common for Indonesian people in many contexts. Therefore, the nature of English that is formerly regarded as merely a subject exclusively used in English classes begins to change. English learners are now exposed to the reality of English as lingua franca, a means for real communication which connects people from a nation to others in other places.

In line with reality, the development of English Language Teaching and Education in higher education has brought about an emerging shift of paradigm. For a long time, the teaching of English has long been conducted based on the traditional framework. Through the subject-based curriculum, for instance, it has been common until today that curriculum is developed with a very limited reference to the students' learning needs and the learning contexts (Novawan, 2014). Additionally, the delivery of curriculum content has been considerably undermined by teacher-centered and knowledge-oriented pedagogy. However, the sorts of practice have been contested with the notion of student-centered and autonomous learning. Moreover, since the higher education becomes the summit of other educational levels which prepares the students to enter for the real workplace, curriculum and teaching begin to change to be more responsive to the complexity of socio-cultural contexts outside the classroom.

In the level of policy, the development of the English Language curriculum in higher education has greatly been influenced by the changes in national policy from 1994 until now. In 1994, a content-based curriculum was applied which promoted the centrality of content in the curriculum and instructional design. The content-based curriculum was criticized due to its primary orientation to knowledge and considered inadequate to cope with the complexity of student contexts outside the educational world. Based on the Decree of Education Minister No. 045/U/2002, the new curriculum called a competency-based curriculum was implemented. The curriculum was interpreted into similar practices to the former which required all instructional activities to have the specification of general and specific objectives. Since 2012, after learning from other countries for years, the national policy has managed that the curriculum of colleges and universities shall refer to the Indonesian Qualification Framework (IQF), a reference to standardize the learning outcomes of all educational programs in the higher education. In an effort to create the best curriculum, the government tries to elaborate IQF with the National Standards of Higher Education (NSHE) as the references of curriculum development (Direktorat Pembelajaran dan Kemahasiswaan-Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, 2014). The NSHE manages the standards of all educational processes in the higher education setting including the instructional planning and approach.

Within the changes in the policy level, the implementation of the ELT curriculum has been mostly explored or evaluated in isolation or exclusively carried out within a particular dimension and level. In that way, the evidence is necessary to close in on the reality of curriculum in those dimensions and level, but unsuccessful to reveal the relationship among them. Additionally, studies and researches in ELT curriculum have been predominated by

those aimed to produce innovative approaches in developing ELT curriculum and materials, while the reality of the relationship between policy and its practices has been left unpacked. Deficiency of evidence in the reality of curriculum implementation in macro, micro, and mezzo levels may possibly drive the development of curriculum to be more grounded on the theoretical and philosophical foundations and ignores the factual reference from the fields, and in turn, can possibly result in poor curriculum implementation. For instance, changes might merely be instrumental which only benefits particular parties in the level of overarching policies without a strong reference from the reality of classroom teaching and students' experience, and therefore remains superficial in its implementation and refinement. Otherwise, changes might only happen in the classroom with reference to the reality of teaching and learning processes only, without impacting on the construction of the overarching policies.

The above predicaments can be anticipated by strengthening the coherence of curriculum-pedagogy-assessment. Despite its complexity when dealing with micro and mezzo analysis, the notion of coherence is crucial in any given situations especially when there is a demand in macro level to integrate the curriculum and its implementation on the basis of a convergent framework. In this case, studies which explore such cases in light of any coherence notion is necessary (see e.g. the coherence framework offered in Novawan, Zuhro, & Miqawati, 2017).

**Theoretical framework**

*Curriculum Ideologies*
Studies in ELT curriculum and pedagogy basically have a relationship with foundational theories in education. There are at least three philosophical underpinnings which influence the development of ELT curriculum, known as curriculum as content, curriculum as process, and curriculum as product. The terms which represent certain ideologies may lead educators to innovate curriculum by referring to three different models of curriculum design, namely: content-based, process-based, and product-based respectively (see, e.g. Schiro, 2013; Kelly, 2009; Smith, 2000; Print, 1993). In the literature, the designs are commonly addressed in the ideological clash between positivism, constructivism, and socio-constructivism (e.g. in Kelly, 2009). With regards to this, Schiro (2013) provides 4 options in viewing the clash: (1) dualistic, when the position of educators values one ideology which is considered true or good and the others are wrong or bad; (2) relativistic, when all ideologies are appreciated equally without absolute claims; (3) contextual, decision is made on the basis of specific contexts; and (4) hierarchical, educators hold one overarching ideology and employ others to support it.

*ELT Curriculum Design*
The adoption of curriculum ideology in ELT curriculum development will greatly depend on the nature and characteristic of the language programs. In vocational colleges, for instance, English Language Teaching is expected to equip the students with practical skills of communication in English. While in universities, many English classes intent to develop knowledge of English Teaching and English Literature. Many others might aim to nurture the meta-cognitive ability as part of certain language programs.

In the recent development of ELT, the concept of ideology in curriculum development is likely to be brought into more pragmatic and practical domain rather than philosophical. In Richards (2013), for example, curriculum comprises of three procedural dimensions: input, process, and output. Input refers to the selection and sequencing of the linguistic content to teach. Process is all instructional activities including planning, implementation, and evaluation which are associated with methodology. Output is the learning outcomes as the result of the process experienced by the students. The degree of priority the curriculum developers or planners have will determine what kinds of design or model to employ (ibid).

With priority on input, scientific frameworks are employed to underpin the development which is manifested into linear procedures started with the formulation of what linguistics content to teach, decision on what instructional methodology to use based on the content and ended with strategy on how to evaluate the instruction and students' learning experience by referring to the targeted linguistics content. Since the center is on input, the instruction is characterized by the explicitness of linguistics content specification manifested into the syllabus and the teaching materials. Grammar-oriented, Communicative, and Content-based approaches are examples of the teaching approaches in this category (Finney, 2002; Richards, 2013). The role of the teacher is dominant, particularly, to direct the teaching and learning process to stick to the planned content. Assessment approaches relevant to the pedagogical orientation are those which are convergent and intended to assess the achievements of students based on the taught linguistics content (e.g. those underpinned by the tenet of assessment of learning).

A process-based model, on the other hand, concerns on the process as the central aspect of the curriculum development. A conceptual framework is firstly required as a tool to guide and envision the instructional strategies and approaches which will promote meaningful learning for the individual learners. Strategies and approaches are manifested into methodological principles and procedures to guide student-centered, individualized, creative, interactive, and dynamic language instructions. Some approaches categorized into this model are Natural Approach, Silent Way, Dogme, Counseling Learning, and Ecological Learning (Richards, 2013). The instructions fortified by the approaches intend to promote students' self-development as an individual and to nurture active, intrinsic and autonomous language learning. In this, designing and creating the appropriate learning environment becomes crucial, while linguistics content and learning outcomes are not necessarily emphasized. The instruction does not demand predetermined objectives and syllabus specification. Otherwise, through instructional processes, the evidence is collected to inform syllabus and materials development (input), and to decide where to end the instructions (output). For pedagogical practices like this, assessment strategies are intended to support the students learning rather than to test them (e.g. those underlain by assessment for learning).

The third model concerns on the learning outcomes (product-based design). The design is started with need analysis aimed to determine the specification of the learning outcomes as the objectives of teaching and learning process (output). Linguistics content is selected and organized (input) based on the learning outcomes determined earlier, followed with the decision on what instructional methods (process) required for achieving the learning outcomes. Teaching methods which are associated with this curriculum model are Competency-based Instruction and Task-based Language Teaching (Richards, 2013). These approaches emphasize the creation of practical activities to nurture and train the students'

ability with reference to the formulated learning outcomes. Hence, the assessment process is oriented to look at the development of students' performance measured against particular standards (standards-referenced assessment). This curriculum model represents concerns on the application of the convergent framework of reference, for example, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), IELTS, TOEFL, and others.

### *Curriculum Coherence*

The notion of coherence is often claimed complex and intricate to address and formulate. It is composed of the complicated reality of relationship between and within the curriculum modalities (Novawan, Zuhro, & Miqawati, 2017). It can be applied to reveal the reality of relationship between and within the educational levels, the policy levels, the curriculum domains and dimensions, the curriculum contents or the subjects, between planning and its realization, between content and teaching approaches, between the teacher's teaching and students' learning, within the instructional activities, and between materials and media (e.g. see Hargreaves, 1991; Knight, 2001; Howard, 2007; Kelly, 2009). Due to its breath and depth, it is important for the curriculum planners not to be isolated in the ideological domains but to bring the issues to a more particular, practical and applicable setting (Novawan, Zuhro, & Miqawati, 2017).

In the plethora of curriculum definition, many accept the tenet of coherence between what is planned, what is activated and what is experienced (Print, 1993; Wiles & Bondi, 2007; Kelly, 2009, and others). Basically, it is a common framework used in the evaluation of curriculum implementation against its policy. In the context of ELT in Indonesian higher education which is heterogeneous and unpredictable, such evidence as the reality of curriculum policy in national level and its implementation in the level of institution through the institutional policy, pedagogic practices and the students' experience, as well as how they align together, will become essential evidence to encourage in-depth understanding of ELT curriculum and to inform curriculum development. The reality shall comprise information about the intentions of planners, the procedures in implementing the intentions, and the actual experiences of students including the nature of the hidden learning process (Kelly, 2009). Moreover, as postulated by Clark et al. (1994):

> There is frequently a mismatch between intention and reality, and there is often a mismatch between the resources provided to implement the intentions and the intentions themselves. Not all learning resources embody curriculum intentions very well. Even where intentions and resources are in harmony, teachers may not use them in an intended way, and the resulting reality may have little to do with what was aimed at. Any educational initiative must seek to align intentions, resources, and reality. The effectiveness of any initiative will be judged in terms of the extent to which the outcome of curriculum reality, i.e. student learning, has improved in the desired direction. (p. 21)

### Method

The research reported in this article is underpinned by the principle of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) which is aimed to reveal the reality of curriculum and its implementation without manipulation (Patton, 2002). In the study, a case study method was

employed in order to get in-depth information and meaningful description (Yin, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Cohen et al., 2000) about the curriculum implementation and the extent to which it corresponded to the overarching policies.

The investigation was conducted in a department curriculum majoring in Computer Engineering in vocational higher education (Polytechnic) setting in Indonesia. The data were collected by using documentation, interviews, and observations. Document analysis was carried out to reveal the nature of curriculum policies in the national and institutional levels. Interviews were done to know the perspectives of policy leaders, lecturers, and the students by using the unstructured approach. English classes were observed. The data were analyzed by using Immersion/crystallization (I/C). This approach integrates the process of data collection with data analysis as an iterative process which includes reflexivity, describing, crystallization during the data organization, immersion, explication, corroborating/legitimating and representing the account (Borkan, 1999).

## Results and discussion

### National Curriculum policy

The reality of curriculum policy at the national level is marked with the vision of product-based elaborated with process-based curriculum design. Product-based vision is indicated in the Presidential Regulations No. 8 the Year 2012 which manages that curriculum development in the higher education be based on the newly-established national framework called Indonesian Qualification Framework (IQF). The framework is disposed to integrate the outcomes of all educational levels and types by using a convergent reference. Meanwhile, based on the Ministerial Decree No. 49 the Year 2014, higher education institutions are instructed to refer to SN-DIKTI (the National Standard of Higher Education) in establishing the educational programs. One of the standards managed in the decree is the standards for educational processes including those of pedagogical processes which have to represent the centrality of students learning experience and the importance of teacher agency. By referring to these frameworks, colleges and universities are promoted to adopt the strengths of the product-based curriculum without ignoring the importance of process-based one.

In the ideological domain, it is epistemologically difficult to formulate the elaboration of the product-based and process-based model. Nevertheless, current development in the literature of ELT has posited that many are turning to more pragmatic choices (Finney, 2002). Such choices are signified with the pertinence of the notion of particularity, practicality, and possibility (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) which open a wide negotiation across different and even conflicting ideologies. As shown in the educational literature, the dualistic approach is getting unpopular in the current dynamic development of the curriculum. Burton and Middlewood (2001) suggest that the difference among the ideologies of curriculum is more appropriately viewed as 'continuum of pressures' (p. 21). There are more than one interrelated aspect and pressures which always challenge the educators to make a decision between these two extremes—student-centered and subject-focused; process-driven and content-driven; classroom-led and state-controlled; and open-ended and target-driven. Similarly, Bernstein (2003) postulates to see the clash in light of a continuum in which the ideologies are placed in a line with two edges; conservative on one edge, the other is progressivism. In this perspective, the conflicting ideologies might possibly be negotiated in between the extreme positions in light of the coherence between what is planned

(curriculum), what is taught (pedagogy) and what is experienced by the students (evaluation). By using the work of Schiro (2013), the national policy adopts hierarchical approach since it holds the centrality of the learning outcomes as an overarching curriculum policy, while the process-oriented model is used to support it.

### Institutional curriculum policy

The characteristic of institutional curriculum policy was signified with superficial loyalty to the policy at the national level. The top-down policy diffusion was not followed with the same reality in the level of department and English subjects. Ineffectiveness of socialization had led to differences of interpretation in what constitutes curriculum and curriculum change, why, and in what ways it is implemented and evaluated. The orientation was merely on the uniformity of forms diffused from national policy and therefore was unsuccessful in the adoption of the principle issues into the institutional setting. Such forms were nationally designed by assuming their applicability in most disciplines in colleges and universities but might need more specific changes or modifications in order to be workable in particular disciplines and institutional setting.

In addition to the reality above, the department curriculum represented implicitness in managing the learning outcomes of English language teaching. Within the department curriculum, the proportion of English subjects weighed approximately 6.6% of the overall credits. With this small portion, English language teaching was expected to equip the students with complementary competencies to the core competencies in the field of Computer Engineering. Even though the perspective of the policy leader in the department confirmed the centrality of English language proficiency within the department curriculum the English competency had no place in the formulation of the learning outcomes. It means that the overarching curriculum might not officially manage the where to direct the teaching and learning process of English. With the absence of the direction from the department curriculum, the English subjects tended to be hugely open to various interpretations on where to bring the teaching and learning process.

### The reality of instruction

Consistent with the reality above, the characteristics of instructions indicated a slightly different direction from the vision of national policy. While the national policy instructed to orient the curriculum to the pertinence of learning outcomes without ignoring the process, robust evidence revealed that the teaching and learning process merely adopted the notion of process-based model. In the lecturer's perspective, syllabus does not have to contain pre-determined objectives accompanied by the details of the instructional sequence to guide and control the lecturer's teaching. According to the lecturer, valid syllabus could eventually be formed through the ongoing processes in the classroom which respect the individual and autonomous learning of the students.

As stated by the coordinator of the English Subjects:

> "English Language Teaching is only meaningful when a teacher can bring "the meaning" into the students' learning process in the classroom. In doing so, a teacher needs to consider that deterministic and target-oriented teaching plan, as well as decisive teaching style, can impose it. Students need independent, project-based,

*exploratory, and other creative activities which develop their autonomy in learning English."*

Closing in on what happened in the classroom, the lecturer demonstrated his preference for spontaneity and autonomy in learning. Within a two-hour pedagogical process, he took 15 to 45 minutes to present his materials and continued with various interactive and practical activities for the students, either individual, pairs or small groups. In the presentation, he mostly nurtured exchanges of experience by using a variety of visual aids and videos to teach the students with the meaning and sociocultural aspects of the linguistics content addressed in the classroom. For example, the lecturer presented "Statement and Question" not by using formulas but by using images and photographs which reflect on his or peoples' experiences on meaningful use of the linguistic content followed by limited exposure of the forms as a model for the students to practice in small groups. He then facilitated a task-based small group activity aimed to stimulate their awareness on forms and encouraged the students to change group and continue with conversational activity outside the classroom. This was intended to foster the students' participation in meaningful situations which might provide them with relevant experience of using English Statements and Questions in their own contexts. In sum, the lecturer was more concerned about creating learning contexts that allow the students to explore their own learning to find "the materials" rather than directly teaching "the material".

### The reality of students' experience
The reality of the students' experience was explored on the basis of the results of interviews about the purpose/motivation, the process and the outcomes of teaching and learning. There were 45 participants joining the interview.

In answer to the questions related to English learning motivation, most participants (87%) considered important to learn English and 100% believed that English proficiency is demanded at workplaces. Related to the learning process, 58 % of the participants considered that the teaching methods employed by the lecturer were good and appropriate to the materials. A larger percentage believed the process was good in terms of the contents of the curriculum (96%), learning atmosphere (90%) and the attitude or character of the lecturer (80%). Most participants admitted that the materials presented by the lecturer were interesting and inspiring. The learning situation in the classroom was conducive and relaxing since the lecturer applied personalized approach, behaved nicely, and associated his experiences to the students learning context. He might not be interested in demanding the students to be target-oriented in terms of the materials. In terms of the outcomes, there was a paradox in that, although the majority of the respondents perceived that they had been motivated in learning, less than 50% of them were confident of having improved their ability to write and to speak in English. There was evidence that the reality was caused by the nature of the instructions which might not be explicit enough to the students and the lack of the feedback especially in the project-based and exploratory tasks and activities.

Other evidence on the students learning experience was taken from the results of the summative test at the end of the course. The test was designed by the lecturer comprised of three sections which tested the students English Skills, particularly, vocabulary repertoire, grammar, writing, speaking, and general knowledge of the English learning strategies. In

Section A, the students were asked to make correct sentences by using two pre-determined words for each number. The students were scored on the accuracy of vocabulary usage and grammar. In Section B, they were given a writing task asking them to write a paragraph of 7 to 10 sentences. This writing task measured the students' ability to use vocabularies in context, accurate grammar in writing, and general knowledge of the English Learning Strategies. The last was Section C, a section that tested the speaking ability of the students. The students were grouped in small numbers and asked to get involved in a group discussion moderated by the lecturer. The students were scored on fluency, clarity, accuracy, and communicative functions. Since there was no specific framework of reference to measure the students' English ability, the lecturer applied the prevailing grading system in the university. By referring to that, the result of the test showed that none of the population (107) got A (Excellent) and AB (Good), 22 students got B (Fair), 45 were graded BC (Poor), 30 of the population got C (Very Poor), and 10 of them Failed (D).

Even though it is not the intention of the research to conduct micro-analysis on the test, evidence exposed by the lecturer indicated that most of the population was unable to demonstrate verbal and accurate spoken and written ability in the recommended level, for example, with reference to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). It was confirmed by the lecturer that the teaching and learning process might be unsuccessful to increase the students' awareness of accurate use of the linguistic features. For instance, an item on the test in Section A asked the students to write a simple question by using the words: play and important role and was answered correctly by 22 students (of 107). In Section B (writing a paragraph), a lot of mistakes were made by the students ranging from those related to the vital aspects which construct a sentence, such as: simple sentence structure, negative/positive statement, verbal and nominal sentences, to those of "unnecessary mistakes" such as the use of articles, possessive –s, plural –s, and others. In Part C (Group Conversation), there was almost half of the population was considered unsuccessful to perform well in the communicative task.

## Conclusion

As revealed in this study, the national policy represented hierarchical reference in the application of curriculum policy. It maintained the centrality of the learning outcomes as an overarching curriculum policy, while the process-oriented model is employed to support it. Nevertheless, its implementation in the level of institution represented superficial interpretation on the national policy and therefore there was a mismatch between the national policy and its implementation in the level of pedagogy. The pedagogy adopted a process-based approach which concerned on the development of students' intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning, but unsuccessful in developing their awareness on "forms" or linguistic content. The reality portrays two options: (1) whether to negotiate the overarching policy in order to sustain the application of process-based model, which is difficult to do in the top-down curriculum change, or (2) whether to make adjustment on the practices in the level of institution, department, and English subject in order to be aligned with the national policy, which is more demanding to do.

As addressed in this article, coherence is an essential aspect to consider in the development of curriculum. Particularly within a top-down curriculum change which intends to integrate its implementation in different settings, the notion of coherence helps curriculum

planners identify the reality of relationship between policy and its implementation, or between intention and its reality. Evidence on this, not only is valuable to guide the implementation of curriculum which is consistent with the overarching policy, but also necessary to inform policy changes. More importantly, the notion of coherence encourages healthy negotiation between policy makers and educators in the level of pedagogy.

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