

Flex, adapt, and engage: A new framework for EFL teaching success

Muhammad Yunus^{1*}, Riesty Kartika Anggraini², M Galuh Elga Romadhon³

^{1,2}English Language Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Islam Malang, Indonesia

³English Language Education, Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy, Universitas PGRI Wiranegara, Indonesia

*) Corresponding Author, email: m.yunus@unisma.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Although the Independent Curriculum of Indonesia promotes self-directed learning and encourages the active involvement of learners, minimal student participation continues to be a persistent challenge. Prior research has reductively viewed student engagement as simply attendance, and few have looked at how teachers fill this gap within the flexible structure of the curriculum. This qualitative case study tries to fill this gap by looking at one East Java English teacher's experiences through narrative interviews. Findings illuminate her multifaceted strategies such as energizing students and encouraging the use of English, adapting lessons in real-time, and implementing a multitude of methods. Persistent challenges included high rates of absenteeism and a general reluctance to converse in English. These indicate a greater need for tailored approaches and ongoing, differentiated instructional support from teachers to meet the aims of the curriculum. Due to the analysis consisting of only one single participant, the findings may not be generalizable; however, the results provide direct insight for educators regarding changes to instructional strategies as well as for policy makers in developing policies grounded on research. Subsequent inquiries should increase participant numbers and integrate other forms of documentation to build evidentiary strength. Such efforts can inform responsive approaches to foster language acquisition in Indonesia and comparable settings.

Keywords: EFL teaching; independent curriculum; learning methods; narrative inquiry; student engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's education system has been facing stagnation for an indefinite period. To address such issues, in 2022, the government made a huge bold effort by introducing the 'Independent Curriculum' (*Kurikulum Merdeka*). The new curriculum focuses on mastery learning, enabling goal setting, planning, and self-monitoring. This was reported by Aditomo (2024). Along with the other *Merdeka Belajar*'s policy initiatives, this curriculum allows different options for lesson delivery, teaching style, and degree of student ownership (Haq & Wakidi, 2024; Romadhon, 2020). In English language teaching (ELT), the emphasis has moved from the conventional reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills to include viewing and presenting. This expansion captures the essence of self-directed learning and

deeper critical thinking (Suhartoyo, 2017; Zein et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the realization of this vision faces challenges, especially regarding a lack of teacher readiness and adequate training concerning the Independent Curriculum's pedagogical frameworks (Fikri & Prasetya, 2024; Puspitasari & Maisarah, 2025). Such issues replicate those faced alongside the K-13 curriculum, in which teachers lacked the means to effectively incorporate the integration of language skills into a unified, interdisciplinary approach smoothly (Erizar et al., 2021).

One of the hallmarks of the Independent Curriculum is its flexibility: it gives teachers greater creativity in developing specific teaching practices while encouraging active and independent learning among students. This paradigm shift is particularly revolutionary in ELT, where the curriculum now extends beyond traditional literacy skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing to encompass viewing and presentation, thus adopting a multimodal approach to language learning that is appropriate for 21st-century digital communication (Ilmi & Dewi, 2022). However, all of these innovative reframing come with some struggles. To maintain the trust of all stakeholders, the government has launched tailored teacher training sessions, digital infrastructure grants, and policy changes to redress inequities in resources relative to readiness. Research shows that these efforts have resulted in profound, albeit gradual, changes: teachers report feeling more empowered to modify lesson delivery using ICT, implementing student-focused instruction such as project-based learning that encourages collaboration and critical thinking. Like teachers, students also report a significant increase in motivation when mainstream media, including videos and podcasts, along with peer-led activities, are integrated into lessons. The curriculum empowers learners by incorporating self-regulated learning and communicative competencies placed in a global context, thus preparing them for real-world engagement while demonstrating the impact of systemic collaboration of stakeholders, policymakers, and practitioners.

While the vision of the Independent Curriculum is forward-thinking, its implementation is hindered primarily by teacher preparedness and training. Due to a lack of professional development that emphasizes holistic, interdisciplinary, and student-centered teaching approaches, most educators find it challenging to cope with changing instructional practices (Bramley et al., 2025; Ventista & Brown, 2023). This reflects issues experienced in the past with the K-13 curriculum where teachers integrated language skills in a trivialized manner which stifled cross-disciplinary learning, or stuck to a boxed-in, fragmented approach (Keith & Ramadani, 2024). In the absence of proper support, training, and teaching materials, the policy intentions behind the Independent Curriculum stand little chance of being realized, highlighting an enduring disconnect between educational policy and actual practice.

Whilst several scholars have examined the policies and theoretical reasoning underlying the Independent Curriculum, how its paradigm shifts impact teachers in terms of student engagement is still an area yet to be explored in depth. More attention has been paid to constructivism as an educational approach and its impact on students, as well as the importance of the social interactions between students and teachers (Saarsar, 2018). Nonetheless, the English language teachers' particular techniques to enhance structured participation and maintain learner motivation within this curriculum are still unexplored. Moreover, the balance between teacher's discretion over their work and student engagement with school activities is yet to be studied in depth, especially where the support systems and professional growth opportunities have limited institutional backing.

To address this gap, the study explores how teachers integrate engagement approaches with the implementation of the independent curriculum philosophy in their teaching practices, along with the challenges they encounter. Furthermore, the study aims to understand how teachers grapple with aspects of the independent curriculum with a particular focus on elements that encourage active participation in learning while addressing organizational mandates. The data collected from the study has further enhanced the literature addressing constructivist-based approaches for promoting student engagement as well as informing policy for pre-service teacher education program. This study argues that there is a gap in professional development designed for teachers that focuses on empowering them to apply constructionist methods and principles. Based on the findings of this study, there is an attempt to bridge the gap between the philosophy of independent curriculum and its implementation

in classroom-level instructional practice. In this way, the study seeks to harness the formative educational power of the curriculum, ensuring that its guiding principles are brought to life in an engaging and flexible learning process for students. The conclusions seek to resolve the gap between empirical theory and its practical application by suggesting actionable approaches to inform the choices of decision-makers, educators, policy developers, and curriculum designers. To answer the question above, the current research is organized around the following questions:

1. What is the existing gap between empirical theory and practical applications in Independence Curriculum?
2. Which primary obstacles restrict the convergence of theory with real-world application in EFL?
3. What specific measures can be taken by policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers to achieve better alignment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The previous research framework is based on a number of fundamental educational theories, which serve to underlie the triad of concepts: flexibility, adaptability, and involvement in EFL teaching. These considerations ensure that the framework is not only pedagogically rational but also useful in various language learning practices.

Constructivism, as proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky ([Kamii & Ewing, 2012](#)), forms the basis of this research framework. Concerning EFL teaching, it is suggested that instruction should be tailored to different stages of cognitive development. This is rooted in Piaget's cognitive constructivism, which emphasizes that students construct knowledge through interaction with the world. With Vygotsky, attention is paid to the role of other students and especially more competent peers in the student's environment. It is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the difference between self-directed and guided tasks, shifting focus onto scaffolding and adaptive teaching strategies. For example, an EFL teacher may identify a student's ZPD by noticing their ability to construct simple sentences but struggle with more complex tenses. To help the student improve, the teacher could incorporate scaffolding methods by providing sentence frames or modelling correct usage before fading support. Students can also be scaffolded through collaborative group work where more advanced peers assist others in completing structured tasks. Such activities enable students to work within their ZPD.

Adaptation within this research framework aligns with ([Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023](#)) differentiated instruction (DI) theory. DI asserts that instruction is only effective when content, processes, and products are matched to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Working through a differentiated approach is what is needed when students are at different proficiency levels, have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, or vary in learning styles. Incorporating differentiation strategies such as tiered tasks, flexible grouping, or multimodal materials allows educators to build inclusive classrooms where all students succeed.

Furthermore, [Kearsley and Shneiderman \(1998\)](#), Engagement Theory reinforces why the Engage component is so heavily emphasized in the current research framework. The theory states that learning is most productive when it is collaborative, project-based, and anchored in reality. In education, the Relate-Create-Donate model encourages students to collaborate in teams (Relate), undertake relevant project work (Create), and use their knowledge outside of the classroom (Donate). In EFL teaching, this means task-based learning (TBL), gamification, and technology integration to motivate students and encourage their participation.

The need for Flexibility and Adaptability in teaching is reinforced by [Larsen-Freeman's \(2023\)](#) Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST). CDST conceptualizes language learning as a system in continuous change. It is multifactorial and interdimensional—student cognition, social context, and teaching style—evolving interdependently. Because EFL classrooms are spontaneous and unpredictable, teachers must be flexible, responsive to emerging conditions, and continually modify their strategies based on intrinsic feedback, real-time feedback, and cues from students present.

The composite nature of the flex, adapt, and engage (FAE) framework renders it adaptable, comprehensive, and effective for language acquisition within EFL contexts. By bridging theoretical perspectives and the lived dynamics of the classroom, the present research builds upon the scholarship of teacher agency and curriculum enactment. It furnishes a tangible model that equips educators to personalize and actively interact with the curriculum, thereby enhancing both instructional quality and professional agency.

METHOD

The current investigation employed a qualitative methodology in the form of a narrative inquiry design, which seeks to comprehend an individual's experience through stories. According to [Creswell \(2006\)](#) narrative inquiry is a form of research where the individual's experiences are captured through recounting, documenting, and interpreting the critical episodes of their life. This approach is especially useful for studying educators, as it helps understand their professional lived experiences in detail, including their struggles and reflections. Focusing on tales told, the study was directed to provide a deeper understanding of how teachers within certain contexts structurally implement their teaching as per the frameworks guiding those contexts.

The participant in this study was an English teacher working at a junior high school in Malang, Indonesia. Despite the focus being on a single participant, this approach is consistent with the narrative inquiry strategies that tend to emphasize the holistic understanding of an individual's experience ([Clandinin, 2006](#)). The participants elaborate accounts are best captured within the single-case framework which analyses deeply the teacher's unique perspectives, practices, and life experiences and vividly details the complexity of educational issues. As a confidential measure, the teacher was given the pseudonym Mrs. Sasa. Data was collected through three separate interviews, each containing nineteen semi-structured questions grouped into thematic sections: opening classroom activities, teaching practices, and closing the lesson. This interview took 30 to 60 minutes. Multiple interviews contributed to data triangulation, broadening the scope of response verification and thus reliability.

The researchers used qualitative content analysis (QCA) for data analysis, as it allows for a systematic interpretation of text data and reduces researcher bias. According to [Forman and Damschroder \(2008\)](#), QCA allows researchers to analyze data from different angles which promotes a holistic analysis and reduces bias. The rigor and clarity of the approach were maintained in the analysis by following several essential processes.

Initially, to ensure their experience was interpreted adequately, all interviews were incorporated in the analysis, avoiding selective bias. Next, the data underwent a two-part review process involving first an evaluation centered on within the content for general all-encompassing themes, and second sifting through line-by-line to look for definable themes. Last, all the tools and procedures including analytical methods were documented for complete transparency enabling the work, while enhancing trustworthiness, to be replicable by other researchers without hindering access to valuable insights.

In the end, the analysis followed intersubjective verification which means that other researchers could reach the same conclusions independently. Such methodological precision enhanced the verification of the data and integrated the results with the participants' accounts, ensuring coherence. The study used both narrative inquiry and QCA, creating in-depth insights into how the participant employed student engagement approaches relative to Indonesia's Independent curriculum. The insights of this study add in doctrinal value regarding modern day teaching and the changing identity of teachers within curriculum change.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented under four main themes. These themes are motivating students to learn and stay engaged, overcoming students reluctant to speak English, balancing lesson plans with classroom realities, and teaching methods used in the classroom.

Table 1

Summary of Emerging Themes and Corresponding FAE Dimension

Theme	Description	FAE Dimension
1. Motivating students to learn and stay engaged	Designing lessons to maintain student interest and energy through varied, relevant, and student-centered activities.	Engaging
2. Overcoming students' reluctance to speak English	Addressing fear of speaking and judgment by creating a supportive environment and using familiar language and scaffolding.	Facilitating
3. Balancing lesson plans with classroom realities	Aligning lesson plans with student needs while being flexible to adjust instruction in real-time.	Adapting
4. Teaching methods used in the classroom	Employing PjBL, PBL, and Discovery Learning to foster active learning, independence, and problem-solving among students.	Facilitating and engaging

The teacher observed that fostering and managing motivation is more complex than attention – it requires creativity especially when dealing with fatigue or lack of interest. She noted how, in the middle of a lesson, attention would slump, and a motivational talk could then spark interest and attention back. By talking about and appreciating the important parts of the lesson, she brought students' attention to the relevance of what they were learning, helping them learn in a constructive way. Like most teachers, Mrs. Sasa understands that motivation goes beyond content needs. It actually requires developing a genuine interest in the learning as a whole. She noted that students face challenges with energy levels after a break or the next lesson, and so she designs her lessons with active elements to reduce boredom. To achieve engagement, the learners' mentality needs to change. Dynamic debates and movement exercises are enough to do that, so Mrs. Sasa starts with her students. Passive listening is replaced by activity-centered participation because her students are now given the opportunity to speak and move - something that encourages investment in the lesson. In addition, she emphasizes the need for teachers to focus on presentation because of the technology and media used, and how they must vary their teaching methods for each class topic to enhance the delivery of the lesson. The paradigm shift is to put the learner at the center and teachers must adapt to become facilitators, not instructors.

The teacher's method of motivating students is based on three key areas: time, relevance, and engagement. She focuses on increasing interest in the middle of the lesson when students are beginning to understand the content. For example, when teaching about giving congratulations, she shows why it is important to acknowledge others' happiness as a way to highlight real-life applications. This helps not only reinforce the lesson but also makes the lesson more valuable to the students. She relates classroom learning to the students' experiences, which helps students appreciate what they are learning, thus increasing their motivation. Keeping students engaged can be difficult, especially when their English lessons are scheduled at the end of the day. The teacher noticed that students tended to be tired and completely disengaged at these times. To address this issue, she implemented active methods such as exercises, discussions, and group work. Her approach focused on student-centered instruction rather than teacher-centered instruction, ensuring that students were engaged and motivated. By actively adapting her approach to students' needs, such as their energy levels, she created a more engaging and active classroom. It is clear that motivation works under the condition that the lesson is relevant and interesting and tailored to the students' experiences.

In delivering material in class, Mrs. Sasa makes sure to use language that is easily understood by her students. She believes that students generally understand what is being conveyed, provided she uses language they are familiar with. However, the challenge arises when students are asked to respond

or answer questions. Many of them hesitate or struggle to answer in English due to a fear of speaking. They worry that their responses may be incorrect or out of context. Additionally, students often feel embarrassed about speaking a foreign language, especially since it's not one they use daily. They fear being judged by their peers for attempting to speak in English.

Mrs. Sasa emphasized that the core issue is students' fear of making mistakes when speaking a foreign language. Occasionally, she faces difficulty finding simple verbs or sentences to ensure clarity for the students. In such cases, she resorts to using both English and Indonesian to avoid confusion. While she predominantly uses English, she provides explanations in Indonesian to ensure comprehension. Interestingly, most students understand her explanations but often respond in Indonesian. For Mrs. Sasa, this is acceptable, although she encourages them to try answering in English by gently reprimanding and guiding them to make an effort in the foreign language.

Mrs. Sasa was also asked about the core material that she used in her classrooms. She explained that she presents learning materials by using everyday language that students can easily understand. She noted that students generally comprehend her questions, such as "Have you ever been to the zoo? What's going on there?" However, they struggle when it comes to responding in English, often due to fear of making mistakes.

When the language she uses seems too difficult for the students to grasp, Mrs. Sasa mixes English with Indonesian to ensure clarity. Nonetheless, she always tries to speak English first. If students do not understand, she switches to Indonesian or uses a blend of both languages. Although from the context of the video most of the students understand how Mrs. Sasa gives instruction, they sometimes respond back in Indonesian language. In this case, she corrects them and asks them to answer in English.

Mrs. Sasa explained that the most effective way to conduct teaching is by adhering to the learning plan, as it is designed to consider several factors, including students' abilities. The learning plan is carefully crafted by the teacher to adjust to the classroom situation, conditions, and students' capabilities, while outlining the necessary steps to achieve the learning objectives. However, Mrs. Sasa noted that even when the learning plan has been tailored with these factors in mind, it sometimes does not work as expected when implemented in the classroom.

In such cases, Mrs. Sasa believes that teachers must be flexible and adapt to the classroom dynamics by making minor adjustments to the plan without making significant changes. During the interview, she emphasized that a learning plan is just that—a plan, and it cannot always be executed exactly as written. The key, according to her, is to stay aligned with the learning plan (RPP/Modul) but be ready to make adjustments based on classroom conditions and student needs.

This finding is based on the teacher's response to the question: *Does the delivery of material to students follow the flow or follow the students' HOTS (Higher-Order Thinking Skills)?* Mrs. Sasa explained that the most appropriate approach is to follow the learning plan because it has been structured to meet all the learning objectives for the material, and it is tailored to the students' abilities. However, she acknowledged that even when the teaching module or plan is carefully adjusted to the classroom situation, conditions, and students' abilities, it sometimes does not work as expected when applied.

In such cases, Mrs. Sasa believes that the solution is to adapt the plan according to the classroom situation, making necessary adjustments. She emphasized that a plan is, after all, just a plan, and it is unrealistic to expect it to be followed perfectly. The key, according to her, is to initially follow the learning plan but remain flexible enough to adjust to the students' abilities, ensuring that the learning objectives are ultimately achieved.

The methods utilized by the participant varies; however, the most frequently employed approaches are project-based learning (PjBL), discovery learning, and problem-based learning (PBL). According to the participant, PjBL encourages students to be more active and independent, as they have the autonomy to select their own projects. In this context, the teacher's role primarily becomes that of a facilitator or guide. In the discovery learning method, students remain actively engaged because each individual brings unique knowledge and resources to the classroom. Lastly, in the PBL

approach, students are tasked with problem-solving and finding solutions to real-world issues presented by the teacher, which enhances the relevance of their learning experience.

This response is based on the question: *What methods are used in learning?* The teacher indicated that she typically assesses the classroom conditions before selecting her teaching methods. The approaches she frequently employs include PjBL, discovery learning, and PBL. In PjBL, students actively engage in projects of their choosing, allowing them to take the lead while the teacher steps back from direct involvement. Discovery learning fosters varied responses from students, resulting in a more dynamic and interactive classroom atmosphere. Lastly, the PBL method challenges students to think critically as they work through real-world problems.

Mrs. Sasa in the interview session shared her challenges in encouraging students to engage actively in learning. Several difficulties were noted. First, students often display a lack of motivation, which may be exacerbated by an unsuitable classroom environment, such as overcrowding or students still eating after break time. Second, many students struggle with or fear speaking English; this anxiety can stem from concerns about mispronunciation or incorrect sentence structure when speaking in front of their peers. Lastly, Mrs. Sasa expressed challenges in selecting appropriate media that can effectively engage students and inspire them to take an active role in the classroom.

This is based on the answer to the question: *What are the challenges of engaging students?* The participant identified several difficulties in encouraging students to be active in the classroom. First, there are instances when students appear too lazy to engage in learning, often due to unfavorable conditions, such as a crowded classroom or students still eating during class. Second, many students struggle with responding in English and may feel apprehensive about speaking the language. Lastly, the participant noted that the media used in lessons can be uninteresting, leading to student boredom and a lack of engagement.

DISCUSSION

Effective teaching practices involve ensuring motivation, active lesson planning, and the use of student-centered approaches to enhance participation and learning among students. Mrs. Sasa, an experienced teacher, attracts students' attention through timely verbal praise when students begin to lose interest in the middle of a lesson or after completing paradigm work during a lesson. This strategy is consistent with [Tiwari \(2024\)](#) findings on the motivational power of immediate feedback. She also attempts to manage situational indiscipline, lethargy after recess, and fatigue at the end of class by using some form of movement or speaking that allows students to actively participate, supporting [Ningsih \(2023\)](#) claim that active engagement enhances sustained attention. Students are no longer passive recipients of information; they actively participate in the construction of knowledge, which enhances retention and makes learning more enjoyable.

Students tend to get tired and lose interest, especially right after a break or during the last part of the class when their energy is low, and the learning environment is not very conducive to increasing student engagement. This is a common occurrence in educational institutions. Specialists claim that the ability to concentrate on one stimulus for a long time naturally decreases, especially when the material is delivered using a teacher-focused 'transmission' teaching model ([Poulton, 2025](#)). To overcome this problem, Mrs. Sasa took the initiative to implement energizing strategies aimed at attracting students' interest and attention.

Moreover, she added to the curriculum physically active lessons known as "*brain breaks*" and other movement-based activities that reduce fatigue and improve cognitive function. Research shows that movement increases blood flow to the brain and alertness while also improving retention ([Peiris et al., 2021](#)). She also developed active and engaging debate discussions, encouraging some students to teach material previously taught by the teacher, thus changing the dynamic to a student-centered pedagogy. This phenomenon is related to constructivist learning theory, which states that students learn best when they actively participate and are involved in the construction of knowledge, rather than just passively receiving information ([Kamii & Ewing, 2012](#)).

Furthermore, [Balalle \(2024\)](#) claim that active engagement is very beneficial for intensive focus and active participation because it allows students to fully interact with the material being taught. When students are given enough time and resources to think and discuss with their peers and apply ideas in real life, they become more engaged with the lesson. Mrs. Sasa's implementation of strategies, such as thinking exercises, role-plays, and other practical work, attracts and motivates students, thereby reducing the likelihood of them becoming uninspired in their learning.

Furthermore, Mrs. Sasa is a strong advocate for giving students more control in the classroom. In her words, teachers should “design activities where students do the talking.” This is an alternative to the traditional favorite of teachers’ ‘talk-and-chalkboard’. [Hattie and Timperley \(2007\)](#) validate this approach by showing how, when students discuss, self-evaluate, and solve problems, their participation enhances the acquisition of advanced skills along with relevant knowledge and facilitates better retention. They also highlight the fact that a student-centered approach helps to increase motivation because students feel more in control of their education ([Tang, 2023](#)).

Through the implementation of these strategies, Mrs. Sasa not only addresses classroom burnout but also actively takes steps to promote persistent engagement through interactivity, relevance, and freedom (choice). Even more profoundly, her strategies demonstrate that teachers must also respond cognitively and emotionally to the students in their care, which creates a richer and more responsive learning environment.

Furthermore, a significant challenge identified by Mrs. Sasa is students' reluctance to speak English in class, often stemming from a fear of making mistakes or being judged by their peers. While students generally understand the content presented in English, they hesitate to respond or participate due to anxiety about pronunciation errors or incorrect grammar. This reluctance is further compounded by the foreign nature of the language, which students do not regularly use outside of the classroom. As noted by ([Wang et al., 2022](#)), language anxiety can inhibit learners' willingness to communicate, leading to decreased participation and engagement.

The teacher was asked about the strategies that she used to overcome students' reluctance to speak English. Mrs. Sasa stated that she employed several strategies. One of the key strategies employed by Mrs. Sasa is mixing English and Indonesian in her explanations. She initially attempts to communicate entirely in English, but if students struggle to comprehend, she switches to a mix of languages to ensure clarity. This bilingual approach aligns with research by [Wulantari et al. \(2023\)](#), whose emphasizes that strategic use of the native language can facilitate understanding and promote a more effective learning environment.

Moreover, Mrs. Sasa actively encourages students to respond in English, even if their answers are not perfect. When students respond in Indonesian, she gently reprimands them and motivates them to attempt using English, thereby gradually building their confidence in the language. This technique is supported by [Bernhardt and Krashen \(1989\)](#) Input Hypothesis, which suggests that providing learners with comprehensible input, slightly above their current level, can enhance language acquisition. By fostering a supportive atmosphere that values effort over perfection, Mrs. Sasa helps to mitigate the fear associated with speaking English, enabling her students to engage more freely in conversation.

Lesson plans are essential for guiding instruction, as they are carefully designed to align with students' abilities and overall learning objectives. However, the teacher acknowledges that, despite meticulous planning, real-time classroom situations often necessitate adjustments. Factors such as student engagement levels, varying learning paces, or unexpected challenges may require the teacher to modify the plan on the spot. As highlighted by [Blase and Blase \(2004\)](#), effective teachers are those who can adapt their teaching strategies to meet the dynamic needs of their students.

Mrs. Sasa emphasizes that while teachers should adhere to the general structure of the lesson plan, they must also remain flexible, adapting their approach to fit the classroom dynamics without significantly deviating from the core objectives. This adaptability underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between structured planning and responsive teaching. As she noted, "The plan remains a plan; it is impossible to achieve one hundred percent. What matters is achieving the learning

objectives, even if it means adjusting to students' abilities and the classroom context." This perspective resonates with the principles of differentiated instruction, which advocate for tailoring teaching methods to accommodate diverse learners' needs (Tomlinson, 2014).

Furthermore, effective lesson planning must consider the unpredictability of classroom environments. According to Zondag (2021), responsive teaching involves not only preparing for anticipated challenges but also being open to spontaneity and student input, which can enrich the learning experience. Mrs. Sasa's approach exemplifies this philosophy, illustrating that while structured lesson plans serve as valuable guides, the ability to pivot in response to student needs is crucial for fostering an engaging and productive learning environment.

In addition, Sasa implements a number of student-focused teaching strategies to address learning gaps and classroom variability. Among the most effective approaches she uses are PjBL, discovery learning, and PBL. All of them emphasize active participation, critical assessment, and knowledge application. Those approaches are a departure from the traditional teacher-centered instructional model towards learners becoming increasingly active participants in attending to their individual mastery, hence fostering retention of concepts in a meaningful and longitudinal manner.

Mrs. Sasa's class is characterized by increased student participation where PjBL is practiced. Giving students freedom to choose and customize their projects encourages youngsters to exercise independence, creativity, and problem solving. PjBL enhances student motivation and active participation as students work in groups to solve problems, inquire questions, and engage in hands-on activities (Firdausih & Aslan, 2024). Mrs. Sasa fulfills all procedures to make students active participants rather than passive listeners by encouraging them to facilitate their learning, hence acquiring vital skills such as researching, managing their time, and presenting. Students are more motivated when there is relevance and meaningfulness associated with an activity instead of being scaffolded to memorize information. Such an approach is useful as it shifts learning challenges students experience in the real world.

Discovery Learning is another method Mrs. Sasa applies which encourages learners to use their previous knowledge to seek new information through exploration and research. This method promotes critical thinking and curiosity because students are required to search for information rather than being told the information. According to Chusni et al. (2020), students understand the subject better with discovery learning because it is based on active exploration and students building knowledge by doing. In Mrs. Sasa's class, students may participate in an inquiry-based learning activities, hands-on experiments, or guided research projects that push students to pose questions, test theories, and reach conclusions. Students learn how to think critically, which enhances their confidence to take charge of their own learning.

Furthermore, Mrs. Sasa uses PBL, which has students working in groups to find solutions to real-life problems posed by the teacher. This technique fosters collaboration and critical thinking, since learners analyze situations, propose answers, and provide explanations. Sliogerjane et al. (2025) emphasizes the fact that PBL is an effective method of teaching because it teaches students not only academic concepts but also life skills such as communication, flexibility, and problem solving. PBL in Mrs. Sasa's class may involve practical activities like research projects, simulations, or case studies that encourage students to use their knowledge. This method helps the students connect the concepts they learn in class with those they encounter in real life.

The effectiveness of these strategies has been proven through numerous studies. As an example, Silma et al. (2024) illustrates how PBL greatly enhances a student's motivation and educational outcome by making learning hands-on and student centric. Active participation through *Doing* encourages retention and comprehension, as is the case in discovery learning and PBL, rather than in passive 'soaking in' information. Mrs. Sasa employs these strategies to ensure that her students function in a learning atmosphere in which they are not only passive receivers but also producers, creators, problem solvers, and deep thinkers. Such a blend of approaches allows every learner to use their unique learning styles/strategies and develop competences needed for success in schooling and the world of work.

Despite employing a variety of effective teaching methods, Mrs. Sasa faces several challenges in promoting student engagement. The first challenge is students' lack of motivation, particularly when the classroom environment is not conducive to learning, such as after recess or during periods of distraction. This lack of motivation can significantly impact student participation and learning outcomes, as noted by [Teravainen-Goff \(2022\)](#), who argue that intrinsic motivation is crucial for effective learning. When students feel unmotivated, they are less likely to engage actively in classroom activities.

The second challenge is students' fear of speaking English, which can hinder their active participation. Anxiety about making mistakes in front of peers often prevents students from fully engaging in language practice. Research by [Hoang \(2024\)](#) indicates that language anxiety can negatively affect learners' willingness to communicate, further complicating the effort to foster an interactive learning environment. To combat this, teachers must create a supportive atmosphere that reduces anxiety and encourages risk-taking in language use.

Finally, selecting appropriate media and materials that capture students' interest poses another difficulty for Mrs. Sasa. Uninteresting media can lead to student boredom and decreased engagement. The relevance and appeal of learning materials are vital for maintaining students' attention and enthusiasm ([Le, 2021](#)). Therefore, it is essential for educators to continually assess and adapt their resources to align with students' interests and learning needs.

In summary, while Mrs. Sasa has developed strategies to motivate and engage her students, she continually adapts her teaching methods to address the challenges of the classroom. By employing a mix of approaches and remaining flexible with lesson plans, she strives to create a learning environment that encourages active participation and addresses the diverse needs of her students. This aligns with the findings of [Yunus and Ubaidillah \(2021\)](#), who investigate the experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher educators in Indonesia. They focus on how these educators approach critical reading instruction, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they use to overcome those challenges. Their study highlights the importance of fostering critical reading skills in students to promote deeper understanding and critical thinking in reading activities. The authors also emphasize the need for teacher professional development to enhance educators' ability to teach effectively, considering the context of Indonesian EFL education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesian EFL classrooms, focusing on teacher strategies for student engagement, challenges faced, and adaptability in lesson delivery. The findings reveal that while the curriculum's flexibility and student-centered approaches, such as PjBL, discovery learning, and PBL, enhance motivation and critical thinking, significant barriers persist. Teachers like Mrs. Sasa employ verbal encouragement, bilingual scaffolding, and dynamic activities to motivate students and mitigate language anxiety. However, challenges such as low student motivation, fear of speaking English, and inadequate instructional media hinder full curriculum effectiveness. Additionally, the study highlights the tension between structured lesson plans and the need for real-time adaptability, emphasizing that teacher flexibility is crucial yet constrained by insufficient training and resources. These findings underscore a persistent gap between policy intent and classroom reality, suggesting that the success of the Independent Curriculum depends on robust teacher support systems. For future research, longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of professional development programs on teacher readiness and student outcomes. Further investigation into culturally responsive teaching strategies and digital tools may also address engagement challenges, ensuring the curriculum's transformative potential is fully realized in diverse Indonesian classrooms.

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About the authors

Muhammad Yunus is a lecturer at the Universitas Islam Malang (UNISMA), specifically in the English Language Education program. He is actively involved in teaching and academic development within the institution. With a strong background in education, he has contributed to research and pedagogical advancements in English language teaching (ELT). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3299-6713>, email: m.yunus@unisma.ac.id

Riesty Kartika Anggraini is an English Language Education student at Universitas Islam Malang (UNISMA). As a dedicated scholar, she actively pursues knowledge in language pedagogy and teaching methodologies. Passionate about education, she strives to enhance her expertise to become an effective English educator. Her commitment reflects her enthusiasm for academic and professional growth. Email: kartikariesty7@gmail.com

M Galuh Elga Romadhon is a lecturer in the English Language Education program at Universitas PGRI Wiranegara (UNIWARA). Dedicated to academia, he shapes future educators in English language teaching. His expertise covers English language education, EFL media, ESP, and AI for ELT, contributing to innovative teaching approaches and student development. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5155-7887>, email: galuhelga23@gmail.com