

Teachers' Strategies and Challenges in Implementing the Independent Curriculum in English Language Teaching: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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Abstract

This study explores English teachers' strategies and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum in English language teaching. The Independent Curriculum emphasizes learner autonomy, differentiated instruction, and flexible learning pathways; however, its implementation in English classrooms presents practical challenges for teachers. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design involving English teachers at the secondary school level. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to capture teachers' experiences in planning, implementing, and evaluating English instruction under the Independent Curriculum framework. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers employed various strategies to support curriculum implementation, including adapting teaching materials to students' needs, integrating project-based learning, and using digital media to enhance student engagement. Despite these efforts, teachers faced several challenges, such as limited understanding of curriculum guidelines, insufficient training, time constraints, diverse student proficiency levels, and limited teaching resources. These challenges affected teachers' confidence and consistency in applying the curriculum principles in English classrooms. The study concludes that while English teachers show positive attitudes and adaptability toward the Independent Curriculum, effective implementation requires continuous professional development, clearer instructional guidance, and institutional support. The findings provide practical insights for teachers, school administrators, and policymakers to improve the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in English language teaching contexts.

Keywords: Independent Curriculum; English Language Teaching; Teachers' Strategies; Teachers' Challenges

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Introduction

Curriculum reform has become a central focus of educational improvement efforts in many countries, including Indonesia. One of the most recent reforms is the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes learner autonomy, differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and flexibility in teaching practices. This curriculum aims to provide teachers with greater freedom to design learning activities that respond to students' needs and learning contexts. In English language teaching, the Independent Curriculum is expected to support communicative competence, critical thinking, and meaningful language use rather than rigid content coverage. However, the shift from a structured curriculum to a flexible framework requires substantial adaptation from teachers, particularly in lesson planning, instructional strategies, and assessment practices.

Previous studies have shown that curriculum change often brings both opportunities and challenges for teachers. Teachers are expected to interpret policy documents, redesign learning activities, and align classroom practices with new curriculum principles, often within limited time and resources (Alsubaie, 2016; Priestley et al., 2019; Fullan, 2020). In English language teaching contexts, these demands are intensified by students' diverse language proficiency levels, varying learning motivation, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Research indicates that without sufficient guidance and professional support, teachers may struggle to translate curriculum ideals into effective classroom practices (Widodo, 2018; Rahmawati et al., 2023).

In the Indonesian context, early research on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum suggests that teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward its goals but encounter difficulties in practice. Studies have reported challenges related to understanding curriculum guidelines, designing differentiated instruction, implementing project-based learning, and conducting authentic assessment

(Suryana & Iskandar, 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2023). English teachers, in particular, often experience uncertainty in balancing curriculum flexibility with students' limited English proficiency and examination demands. These findings point to a gap between curriculum policy and classroom realities, especially in English language teaching.

Despite the growing body of research on the Independent Curriculum, most existing studies focus on policy analysis, general teacher perceptions, or administrative readiness. There is still limited research that specifically examines how English teachers implement the Independent Curriculum at the classroom level. Moreover, many studies rely on quantitative surveys, which provide broad trends but offer limited insight into teachers' actual strategies, decision-making processes, and challenges during instruction (Widodo, 2018; Priestley et al., 2019). As a result, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative evidence that captures English teachers' lived experiences in implementing the Independent Curriculum.

Contextual factors also play a crucial role in curriculum implementation. Teachers working in regional or non-urban areas may face different challenges compared to those in well-resourced urban schools. Variations in student background, school facilities, access to teaching materials, and professional development opportunities can significantly influence how curriculum policies are enacted in practice (Fullan, 2020). However, studies focusing on curriculum implementation in regional contexts, particularly in eastern Indonesia, remain limited.

This study addresses this gap by examining the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in English language teaching at SMPN 26 Sorong Regency, South West Papua. As a public junior high school located outside major urban centers, SMPN 26 Sorong Regency faces contextual challenges such as varied student English proficiency levels, limited instructional resources, and uneven access to professional development for teachers. These conditions shape how English teachers interpret curriculum guidelines and adapt them to daily classroom practice. Despite the importance of understanding curriculum implementation in such contexts, empirical research focusing on English teachers' experiences at the junior high school level in South West Papua is still scarce.

Therefore, the research problem addressed in this study is the limited understanding of English teachers' strategies and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum in English classrooms within a regional school context. This study aims to explore the strategies employed by English teachers at SMPN 26 Sorong Regency and the challenges they encounter during curriculum implementation. By adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, this research seeks to provide detailed and context-sensitive insights into teachers' classroom practices. The findings are expected to contribute to improving curriculum implementation by informing teacher professional development, instructional support, and policy refinement related to English language teaching under the Independent Curriculum.

Literature Review

a. English Language Teaching under Curriculum Reform

Curriculum reform has a significant impact on English language teaching practices because it requires teachers to adjust not only instructional content but also pedagogical orientation. Recent studies emphasize that curriculum reforms promoting flexibility and student-centered learning demand higher levels of pedagogical decision-making from teachers (Schiro, 2017; Penuel et al., 2017). In English classrooms, this shift often requires teachers to move away from textbook-driven instruction toward more adaptive teaching practices that consider learners' linguistic abilities, interests, and learning contexts. Research by Richards (2017) highlights that curriculum change in language education is successful only when teachers are able to reinterpret curriculum goals into practical classroom actions. However, several studies indicate that English teachers often experience difficulty aligning curriculum expectations with classroom realities. In reform-based curricula, teachers are expected to design communicative activities, integrate higher-order thinking, and assess learning holistically, yet they may lack sufficient pedagogical support or exemplars (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). These challenges suggest that curriculum implementation should be examined at the classroom level, particularly in subjects like English that require continuous interaction, feedback, and language exposure.

b. Teachers' Strategies in Implementing Flexible Curricula

Teachers' instructional strategies play a critical role in determining how curriculum reforms are enacted in practice. Recent studies show that English teachers commonly adopt adaptive strategies such

as modifying teaching materials, simplifying learning objectives, and integrating contextualized tasks to suit students' proficiency levels (Nation & Macalister, 2020; Farrell & Baecher, 2017). In flexible curricula, teachers often exercise professional judgment to balance curriculum demands with students' readiness. Project-based learning and contextual learning have also been identified as dominant strategies used by English teachers under reform-oriented curricula. Research by Bell (2017) and Guo et al. (2020) demonstrates that project-based learning can enhance student engagement and language use when teachers are able to scaffold tasks effectively. However, these strategies require careful planning, time management, and assessment literacy. Without sufficient training, teachers may implement projects superficially, focusing more on product completion than language development (Farrell & Kennedy, 2019).

c. Challenges in Curriculum Implementation for English Teachers

Despite teachers' efforts to adapt instruction, many studies report persistent challenges in curriculum implementation. One major issue is limited curriculum understanding. Teachers often receive policy documents but lack practical guidance on how to translate abstract curriculum principles into lesson plans and assessments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In English language teaching, this problem is compounded by the need to align curriculum goals with language skills development. Time constraints also emerge as a recurring challenge. Studies indicate that flexible curricula often demand additional preparation time for lesson design, material adaptation, and assessment development, which can overwhelm teachers (OECD, 2018). English teachers frequently report difficulty completing curriculum expectations while addressing students' language gaps and maintaining classroom management (Yusof et al., 2021). Another significant challenge relates to student diversity. Research shows that heterogeneous English proficiency levels make it difficult for teachers to implement differentiated instruction effectively (Tomlinson, 2017). Teachers may struggle to design tasks that challenge high-achieving students while still supporting those with limited language skills. This challenge is particularly evident in schools with limited resources, where access to supplementary materials and technology is restricted (Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

d. Contextual Factors in Regional School Settings

Context plays an essential role in shaping curriculum implementation. Studies conducted in non-urban or regional schools highlight that teachers often face additional constraints, including limited professional development opportunities, insufficient teaching resources, and minimal peer collaboration (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Baroutsis & Mills, 2018). In English language teaching, these constraints can affect teachers' ability to experiment with new strategies or adopt innovative approaches required by flexible curricula. Research by Wedell and Malderez (2019) emphasizes that curriculum reforms tend to be designed at the national level without sufficient consideration of local school contexts. As a result, teachers in regional settings must negotiate curriculum expectations independently, often relying on personal experience rather than institutional guidance. This situation reinforces the need for qualitative studies that capture teachers' experiences in specific school contexts to understand how curriculum reforms are adapted in practice.

Based on the reviewed literature, it is evident that previous studies have examined curriculum reform, teaching strategies, and implementation challenges in general terms. However, there is limited research that specifically explores English teachers' strategies and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum at the junior high school level within regional school contexts. Most studies focus on policy perspectives, large-scale surveys, or urban school settings, leaving a gap in understanding teachers' lived experiences in less-researched regions. Furthermore, existing research often treats English teaching as part of general curriculum implementation rather than examining its unique pedagogical demands. There is a lack of qualitative studies that explore how English teachers interpret curriculum flexibility, adapt instructional strategies, and cope with practical constraints in daily classroom practice. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining English teachers' strategies and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum at SMPN 26 Sorong Regency, Southwest Papua, providing context-sensitive insights into curriculum enactment in English language teaching.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore English teachers' strategies and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum in English language teaching. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to obtain in-depth descriptions of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and classroom practices rather than to measure instructional effectiveness quantitatively. The descriptive design allowed the researcher to capture naturally occurring teaching practices and contextual challenges within the real school setting.

The study was conducted at SMPN 26 Sorong Regency, South West Papua, a public junior high school that has implemented the Independent Curriculum. The participants were two English teachers teaching at the school during the academic year. The teachers were selected using purposive sampling based on several criteria: they were actively involved in implementing the Independent Curriculum, had experience teaching English at the junior high school level, and were willing to participate in the study. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed relevant experience and knowledge related to the research focus. To maintain confidentiality, the participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interviews were designed to explore teachers' understanding of the Independent Curriculum, instructional strategies used in English classrooms, challenges encountered during implementation, and perceived support needs. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to allow participants to express their views clearly and comfortably, and each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Classroom observations were conducted to gain direct insight into how the curriculum was enacted during English lessons, including teaching methods, student engagement, and learning activities aligned with curriculum principles. Observation notes were recorded systematically to support interview data.

The data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes were organized and reviewed repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively to identify meaningful patterns related to teaching strategies, instructional challenges, and contextual factors. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected recurring experiences across participants. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and aligned with the research objectives. Relevant excerpts from interviews and observation notes were used to support each theme and enhance analytical transparency.

Result

The analysis of interview and classroom observation data revealed consistent patterns related to English teachers' strategies and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum at SMPN 26 Sorong Regency, Southwest Papua. The findings are presented in two major categories: teachers' instructional strategies and challenges in curriculum implementation. Each section integrates direct interview excerpts followed by detailed interpretation to explain their significance.

1. Teachers' Strategies in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

a. Adapting Learning Materials to Students' Proficiency Levels

One of the most prominent strategies employed by English teachers was adapting learning materials to suit students' English proficiency levels. Teachers reported that although the Independent Curriculum provides general learning outcomes, these outcomes often do not align with students' actual abilities. Consequently, teachers modified materials by simplifying texts, reducing linguistic complexity, and providing bilingual explanations.

One teacher explained:

"The curriculum gives us freedom, but the students' English level is still low. If I follow the book directly, many students don't understand, so I have to simplify the material."

This statement indicates that teachers actively interpret curriculum flexibility as permission to adjust content based on classroom realities. Rather than strictly following prescribed materials, teachers exercised professional judgment to ensure student comprehension. This adaptation reflects a pragmatic approach to curriculum implementation, where teachers prioritize meaningful learning over rigid adherence to curriculum documents. Another teacher stated:

"I usually change the examples and texts to something easier. If not, students will just stay silent."

This quotation highlights the link between material difficulty and student participation. When materials are not adapted, students become passive and disengaged. By modifying examples, teachers aimed to create a learning environment where students felt capable of responding and participating. Classroom observations confirmed that simplified materials encouraged more student interaction, although they also reduced opportunities to expose students to more complex language structures suggested by the curriculum.

b. Using Contextual and Project-Based Learning Activities

Teachers also reported implementing contextual and project-based learning activities, in line with the Independent Curriculum's emphasis on meaningful and student-centered learning. These activities were designed to connect English lessons with students' daily experiences and local contexts. One teacher stated:

"Project-based learning is recommended, but I make it simple. For example, students describe their classroom or their daily activities."

This response suggests that teachers attempted to implement curriculum principles in a scaled-down form. While the curriculum encourages comprehensive projects, teachers adjusted project scope to match students' language proficiency and time availability. This adaptation shows teachers' effort to balance curriculum ideals with practical constraints. Another teacher noted:

"If the project is too big, students get confused. So I adjust it to what they can do."

This quotation reflects teachers' awareness of students' cognitive and linguistic limits. Rather than abandoning project-based learning entirely, teachers simplified tasks to maintain student engagement. Observational data showed that students were more active during these contextual tasks, indicating that even simplified projects can support curriculum goals when appropriately scaffolded.

c. Integrating Digital Media and Simple Technology

Teachers also used digital media and simple technology to support English instruction. Due to limited school facilities, technology use was modest, often relying on mobile phones, pictures, or short videos.

One teacher explained:

"I don't have many facilities, but sometimes I use videos from my phone. Students like it and become more interested."

This quotation demonstrates teachers' creativity in overcoming resource limitations. Rather than viewing limited facilities as a barrier, teachers utilized personal devices to enhance instruction. This practice aligns with the Independent Curriculum's encouragement of flexible and innovative teaching approaches. Another teacher added:

"Using pictures or videos helps students understand faster than only explaining."

This statement indicates that visual support plays an important role in aiding comprehension, especially for lower-proficiency learners. Observation data supported this claim, showing increased student attention and participation when visual media were used. These findings suggest that even minimal technological integration can positively influence learning when aligned with instructional goals.

2. Challenges in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

a. Limited Understanding of Curriculum Guidelines

Despite implementing various strategies, teachers faced significant challenges, particularly in understanding curriculum guidelines. Teachers expressed uncertainty in translating broad curriculum principles into concrete lesson plans and assessments. One teacher stated:

"The curriculum document explains the concept, but it doesn't give clear examples for English lessons. Sometimes I'm not sure if what I do is correct."

This quotation reveals teachers' lack of confidence in curriculum interpretation. While the curriculum promotes flexibility, insufficient instructional examples left teachers unsure about alignment. This uncertainty often led teachers to rely on personal experience rather than curriculum guidance. Another teacher commented:

"We are told to be flexible, but flexibility without guidance makes it confusing."

This statement highlights a key tension in curriculum implementation. Flexibility, while theoretically empowering, became a source of confusion in practice. Teachers needed clearer direction, especially for subject-specific application in English language teaching.

b. Time Constraints and Workload

Time constraints and heavy workload emerged as major obstacles. Teachers reported difficulty balancing curriculum demands with administrative responsibilities.

One teacher explained:

“Preparing projects and materials takes a lot of time, but we also have administrative work. Sometimes I just use the old method to save time.”

This quotation illustrates how time pressure influenced instructional decisions. Although teachers recognized the value of student-centered strategies, practical constraints pushed them toward more traditional approaches. Another teacher added:

“Ideally, we want student-centered learning, but time is always limited.”

Classroom observations confirmed this challenge, showing that lessons sometimes became teacher-centered when time was restricted. This finding suggests that curriculum implementation is shaped not only by teacher willingness but also by structural conditions.

c. Student Diversity in English Proficiency

Student diversity in English proficiency posed another significant challenge. Teachers reported wide gaps in students' language abilities within the same classroom. One teacher stated:

“In one class, some students understand quickly, but others don't know basic words. It's hard to teach them together.”

This statement highlights the difficulty of implementing differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. Teachers struggled to design activities that could simultaneously support weaker students and challenge stronger ones.

Another teacher explained:

“If I move too fast, many students are left behind. But if I slow down, the lesson target is not achieved.”

This quotation reflects the instructional dilemma teachers faced. Teachers were forced to compromise between curriculum targets and students' learning needs, which often limited the depth of instruction.

d. Limited Resources and Professional Development

Teachers also identified limited teaching resources and professional development as barriers to effective curriculum implementation. One teacher commented:

“The training talks about the curriculum in general, not how to teach English specifically.”

This statement indicates that existing training programs were perceived as insufficient for subject-specific application. Teachers needed practical examples and guidance tailored to English teaching. Another teacher added:

“We need more examples and practice, not only theory.”

This highlights the gap between policy-level training and classroom-level needs. Without adequate support, teachers relied heavily on trial and error when implementing the curriculum. The findings show that English teachers at SMPN 26 Sorong Regency demonstrated commitment and adaptability in implementing the Independent Curriculum. Teachers actively adjusted materials, teaching strategies, and learning activities to accommodate students' needs. However, curriculum implementation remained constrained by limited guidance, time pressure, student diversity, and resource limitations. These findings indicate that successful curriculum implementation requires not only teacher initiative but also sustained institutional and professional support.

Discussion

This study examined English teachers' strategies and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum at SMPN 26 Sorong Regency, South West Papua. The findings indicate that while teachers demonstrate positive attitudes and adaptive practices, curriculum implementation is strongly influenced by contextual constraints such as limited guidance, time pressure, student diversity, and restricted resources. These findings support previous research suggesting that curriculum reform success depends not only on policy design but also on teachers' capacity to interpret and enact curriculum principles in real classroom contexts (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2019; Fullan, 2020).

One of the key findings of this study is teachers' active adaptation of learning materials to students' English proficiency levels. Teachers simplified texts, modified tasks, and used bilingual

explanations to ensure comprehension. This practice aligns with recent studies indicating that English teachers often act as curriculum mediators who balance curriculum expectations with learners' linguistic readiness (Widodo, 2018; Nation & Macalister, 2020). The findings suggest that curriculum flexibility enables teacher agency; however, without concrete subject-specific guidance, teachers rely heavily on personal judgment and experience. This reliance may result in uneven implementation across classrooms, particularly in schools with limited instructional support.

The implementation of contextual and project-based learning activities further illustrates teachers' efforts to align classroom practices with curriculum principles. Teachers in this study implemented simplified projects connected to students' daily experiences rather than large-scale projects envisioned by the curriculum. This approach is consistent with recent research emphasizing that project-based learning in language classrooms must be carefully scaffolded to match learners' proficiency and contextual realities (Bell, 2017; Guo et al., 2020). The findings extend existing literature by showing that scaled-down projects can still support meaningful learning when designed with clear language goals and appropriate support, especially in under-resourced contexts.

The use of digital media, although limited, played a supportive role in enhancing student engagement and comprehension. Teachers' reliance on basic technology such as mobile phones and short videos reflects broader findings that low-cost digital tools can positively impact learning when integrated purposefully (Hwang et al., 2017; Susanti & Widyastuti, 2022). This suggests that effective digital integration does not necessarily require advanced infrastructure, but rather pedagogically informed use of available resources. However, the absence of institutional support and curated digital materials limits the sustainability and consistency of such practices.

Despite teachers' adaptive strategies, significant challenges hindered effective curriculum implementation. Teachers' limited understanding of curriculum guidelines emerged as a major concern. Similar to findings reported in recent curriculum reform studies, teachers perceived curriculum documents as conceptually clear but practically vague, particularly for subject-specific application (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Wedell & Malderez, 2019). This lack of clarity reduced teachers' confidence and contributed to inconsistent implementation. The findings highlight the need for curriculum support that goes beyond policy dissemination and focuses on practical classroom enactment.

Time constraints and workload further complicated implementation. Teachers reported that preparing differentiated materials and student-centered activities required considerable time, often leading them to revert to teacher-centered instruction. This finding supports previous research indicating that curriculum reforms frequently increase teachers' workload without sufficient structural adjustment (OECD, 2018; Opfer & Pedder, 2016). The persistence of administrative demands alongside instructional innovation undermines the sustainability of reform-oriented practices and limits teachers' ability to fully implement curriculum principles.

Student diversity in English proficiency was another major challenge. Teachers faced difficulty addressing wide gaps in students' language abilities within a single classroom. This dilemma reflects long-standing challenges in differentiated instruction, particularly in language learning contexts (Tomlinson, 2017). The findings suggest that without diagnostic tools and structured differentiation strategies, teachers struggle to meet diverse learning needs while maintaining curriculum targets. This tension often results in instructional compromise, reducing opportunities for higher-order learning.

Limited teaching resources and insufficient professional development also constrained curriculum implementation. Teachers reported that available training focused on general curriculum concepts rather than English-specific pedagogical practices. This finding aligns with recent studies highlighting the mismatch between policy-level training and classroom-level needs (Penuel et al., 2017; Azano & Stewart, 2016). Teachers in regional contexts are particularly affected by this gap, as they have fewer opportunities for peer collaboration and sustained professional support.

Overall, the findings confirm that the Independent Curriculum encourages teacher flexibility and innovation, but its effective implementation depends on contextual support and subject-specific guidance. This study contributes to the literature by providing in-depth, context-sensitive insight into English curriculum implementation in a regional junior high school setting. The results emphasize that curriculum reform should be accompanied by practical exemplars, sustained professional development,

workload adjustments, and equitable resource distribution. Without these supports, the potential of curriculum flexibility may not be fully realized in English language classrooms..

Conclusion

This study investigated English teachers' strategies and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum at SMPN 26 Sorong Regency, South West Papua. The findings indicate that teachers demonstrated positive attitudes and adaptability toward the curriculum by modifying learning materials, implementing contextual and project-based activities, and integrating simple digital media to support student learning. These strategies reflect teachers' efforts to translate curriculum flexibility into practical classroom actions that accommodate students' English proficiency levels and learning needs.. However, the study also reveals that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum was constrained by several interrelated challenges. Teachers experienced difficulty interpreting curriculum guidelines due to the lack of subject-specific examples for English language teaching. Time constraints, heavy workload, and administrative responsibilities limited teachers' ability to consistently apply student-centered approaches. In addition, wide variation in students' English proficiency and limited teaching resources further restricted effective curriculum enactment. These challenges indicate that curriculum flexibility alone is insufficient to ensure successful implementation without adequate instructional guidance and institutional support. The findings suggest that effective implementation of the Independent Curriculum in English classrooms requires sustained professional development that is specifically designed for English language teaching, clearer practical guidance for lesson planning and assessment, and supportive school policies that reduce teachers' workload. Schools and education authorities should also consider the contextual realities of regional schools by providing equitable access to resources and training opportunities. While the results of this study are based on a limited number of participants and a single school context, the findings offer valuable insight into the realities of curriculum implementation in regional English classrooms. Future research is recommended to involve a wider range of schools and combine qualitative analysis with classroom-based or student outcome data to further examine the impact of curriculum implementation on English language learning.

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