



## **A Complex Process of Autonomy Curriculum Approach in Indonesia**

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### **Introduction**

Vocational Education Training (VET) is referred to as technical education and is multi-sectoral in nature. In several countries including Indonesia, the higher secondary vocational program aims to develop skilled human resources as early as possible through diversified courses to meet the requirements of the labour market. VET is also established to reduce the aimless pursuit of higher education and thereby reduce pressure from tertiary education. VETs are related to specific occupations. Vocational education usually can take place at the high school level and may interact with the apprenticeship system. Recently, many of these educational processes take place in the classroom, or on the job site, with students learning skills and theories.

When preparing students for the workplace upon graduation, the English language plays a crucial role. In addition to General English (GE), vocational students in Indonesia need to learn the language for vocational purposes (hereafter VET since the orientation in VET is to prepare students to be able to take part in business & industry works. Moreover, vocational curricula which reflect on the texts, tasks, and language features should specifically pay attention to English language pedagogy.

However, the development of language curriculum at the secondary level in Indonesia makes use of the top-down approach. A Top-down approach is the approach where the government through the Ministry of Education decides what students, regardless of their diversity of needs, must learn and acquire. The application of this approach comes along with several consequences. Firman and Tola (2008) have argued that the freedom of schools to set up their English curriculum match with students' needs cannot be achieved. Watanabe (2006) has stated that when the curriculum is designated by the authorities, there may be a discrepancy between what learners need to do with the targeted language in the future, and what the government wants them to achieve. A number of scholars support this opinion, saying that the key programs of the educational system are in its curricula (Long, 2005; McCawley, 2009; Renold, et al, 2016). Therefore, instead of top-down, bottom-up approaches curriculum development should be reconsidered and it is one of the prominent highlights for educational policy makers in several countries. In this approach, stakeholders' voices such as teachers, principals, companies' employers, municipals, regional leaders and students are consulted to determine the learning objectives. Then, the curriculum should address their needs in order to match with the current demand and situation.

## Bottom-up Curriculum Development Process and Needs Analysis (NA)

Watanabe (2006) argues that designing bottom-up curricula is a complex process where all stakeholders' perspectives, language learning factors, standards, and available resources interact. The process can be seen from the steps described by Masuhara (2011) who described five phases of curriculum development using bottom-up approaches that have been implemented in Japan. The first step is reported to be the need analysis (NA) for determining the goals and objectives prior to the design of the syllabus (see Figure 1).

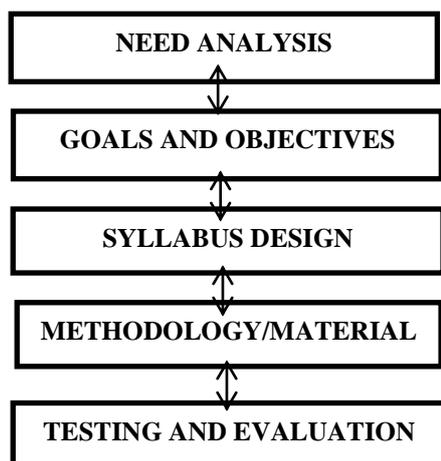


Figure 1. The stage of curriculum development by Masuhara.

This indicates that a systematic and rigorous evaluation through needs analysis (NA) has to be conducted in order to improve the English language curriculum and raise the proficiency level among graduates. Therefore, this study in developing curriculum is supported in the literature.

Gözüyeşil (2014) has argued that NA is the most important step leading to the creation of a learner-centered curriculum. However, it is essential to involve the students in the decision-making process, taking their preferences and wants into account. The importance of NA has been acknowledged by several scholars and experts (Gatehouse, 2001; Graves, 2000; Iwai, Kondo, Lim, Ray, Shimizu, & Brown, 1999; Long, 2005; McCawley, 2009; Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017; Songhori, 2008; Watanabe, 2006). Collecting and analysing data on needs allows educators and teachers to analyse the gap between what has been done and what needs to be done. Knowing how to close this gap helps in defining the purpose of educational services (McCawley, 2009). Accordingly, an NA study can support the development and implementation of language policies at both macro and micro levels, with far-reaching consequences.

When students are not fully prepared to function in the industry due to the absence of NA in the curriculum development, they will accordingly bear the consequences. The language incompetency will affect their participation and access to both national and international workplace opportunities.

Several NA studies have reported its benefits for vocational school curricula. Most available studies openly report a list of language skills—reading, listening, writing, and speaking and language components that students need to learn and master, to use English at work, to pass exams, and also to make use of it in everyday life (Albakrawi, 2013; Cahyati, Rahmijati, & Rizkiani, 2014; Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017). The most powerful message from Long (2005) is quoted to remind and alert educators not to waste educational investment.

In this era of globalization, there are growing demands for accountability in public life, including in education. In foreign and second language teaching, one of several consequences is the increasing

importance attached to careful studies of learner needs as a prerequisite for effective course design.  
(p. 1)

## The Challenges of Bottom-up Curriculum in Indonesia

Several countries have been successful in administering bottom-up curriculum development for VETs. For example, Japan formerly implemented the top-down approach in developing their curriculum, but its Government has now gained the benefits of implementing the bottom-up approach. This was also supported by Komatsu (2002) who stated that the Japanese school curriculum was designed by the Japanese Ministry of Education (now, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology or MEXT) to achieve schools' targets, taking into account the developmental conditions of the students, in accordance with the laws and regulations. Komatsu (2002) added that in accordance with the school Education Law, enforcement regulations for this law and the national standards of curriculum, schools organize their own personal curriculum, taking into account the actual circumstances of each school and community, and the mental stage and physical development of its children.

Similarly, in Taiwan, curricular reforms in the last 20 years have involved a wide range of stakeholders in the process of decision-making, planning, and implementation, from central and local governments, scholars and experts from universities, teachers, interest groups, and parents (Chen & Huang, 2017). They further explained that the central government delegated some authority to support local governments and schools with guidance and resources. As a result, they were given autonomy to discover the most suitable ways for the individual school community in implementing the curriculum.

However, the situation is completely different in Indonesia, where eleven instances of curricular reform has been recorded and documented. Among them, two curricula (Competence Based Curriculum and School Based Curriculum (SBC) or *Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan pendidikan (KTSP)*) were developed using bottom-up approach.

In 2004, the competency-based curriculum (CBC) was launched, and this type of bottom-up approach lasted for 5 years. The document highlighted the fundamental differences between CBC and the previous curriculum. The previous curriculum focused on students' mastery of English materials and content while the CBC on the other hand focuses on target competence. Also, the previous curriculum emphasized equality or uniformity throughout Indonesia, whereas the CBC accommodated the diversity of needs and the availability of educational resources.

In this curriculum, what to teach and how to achieve those standards are up to the schools and teachers. This can be good news for VET to have more freedom especially in developing learning materials based on job markets' needs. Thus, students' centered curriculum can be relevant to the school missions and visions, resources and staff availability. However, despite the fact that teachers are given freedom to create their own English materials, English along with Mathematics and Bahasa Indonesia becomes the obligatory subjects for the national examination for both the junior and senior high school levels including VET. As a result, there is an obvious tension between the commitment to the gradual shift of bottom-up curriculum which focuses on the competence and desire of the Ministry of Education to sustain the national examination for high school levels. According to Lie (2007), the fundamental principle of CBC is in stark contrast with the principles underlying the national exam. This exam should have been discontinued in the bottom-up curriculum. Otherwise, it drew teachers to adopt the traditional way of teaching English which focused on teaching for test purposes. Accordingly, during the CBC period, VET teachers who may have enjoyed the freedom for developing their own English materials to meet the needs of the students had to struggle in preparing for the national examination. Due to this tension, after a period of 5 years, the CBC was withdrawn.

In 2006, again the Indonesian Government launched a new English School Based Curriculum (SBC). The genuine intention behind the SBC was to give more autonomy for students to develop their learning potential based on their local potential and resources. The formulation of SBC concept was because the government realized that the top-down curriculum development led to graduates not having the

competitive power required in the labor market and resulted in an increase in unemployment rates. With this spirit of autonomy that comes along with the SBC, schools together with their committees can jointly formulate a curriculum that suits the needs, situation, and conditions of the school environment. This SBC type of curriculum literally gives the benefits of VET in developing syllabi that are in line with the school missions, budget and staff availability.

Again, similar issues and concerns emerged. The teacher upgrading system was yet to be formulated and shaped. Teachers who were sent to take part in the upgrading did not optimally deliver the training outcomes and information to others. They assumed that the trainings were only beneficial to them as individuals, so there was no particular obligation to pass it on to others.

In 2015, the Government projected that 70% of the upper secondary schools would be VET and 30% would be general high schools. However, this number fell short of its target and it has still not been achieved up to present (2018). For this reason, the Ministry of Education in Indonesia presumes that no urgent step is needed to review the English Curriculum of VET. As a result, VETs are still using the same curriculum of Senior High School which emphasizes English for General Purposes (EGP). As mentioned in the literature review, teaching EGP employs an approach different from teaching EVP/ESP. Due to inadequate knowledge of ESP/EVP pedagogy, the language teachers in VET believe that teaching English means teaching EGP which focuses on correcting mistakes and errors of the language use.

## **English for Vocational Purposes (EVP) Pedagogical Principles**

### **Communication Focus**

EVP, as the name suggests, is the teaching of English related to students' related majors. This means that students are expected to already understand and be able to use Basic English. Many know that the EVP is a branch of ESP, and therefore contains specific materials and subject related terminology, focusing more on communication rather than grammar. Poedjiastutie (2017) in her findings reported that even when teachers returned to teach EGP, many students still experienced difficulties learning the language because they had yet to master Basic English.

Furthermore, almost all teacher training institutions, especially the English departments provide students with generic curriculum that the graduates are projected to teach both lower and upper secondary level students, including VET with English for General Purposes (EGP). This is due to the fact that in many EFL contexts including Indonesia, teaching General English (GE) holds the linguistic supremacy. Almost none of the teacher institution curricula can equip graduates with the skills to be able to teach English for Vocational Purposes (EVP) despite a large number of VETs in the next 10 years. As a matter of fact, all VET teachers are graduates from English Departments or have master's degrees with no ESP specification. Consequently, they often have difficulties comprehending ESP/EVP materials that students are supposed to learn. Findings by Poedjiastutie (2017) have indicated that ESP practitioners including VET teachers commented that when they were pursuing their degrees, they did not learn enough about ESP pedagogy. One of the teachers expressed concern for the consequences of insufficient ESP related knowledge;

Yes, that's right, because in every meeting I have to really prepare things for the students. I am afraid there will be questions that I cannot answer since every department has its own particular terms (teacher).

In addition to terminology, communication as a part of ESP/EVP pedagogy should also be observed in classrooms. However, it might be a little harder to find high school teachers focusing on communication. Even when they are doing so, they still look to correct students' grammar and pronunciation.

That assertion was supported by Lie (2007) who pointed out that the competencies of Indonesian teachers of communication are still unsatisfactory. She shared her experience meeting and training senior high school teachers in a symposium held in Yogyakarta in November 2002 where she found that almost all teacher participants felt uncomfortable performing a presentation of Classroom Action Research (CAR) topics in English.

## **EVP and Collaborative Teaching**

The issue of who deserves to teach vocational schools is equally important in EVP and this has yet to be resolved. Some educators claim that these schools should be taught by practitioners who possess practical knowledge of particular discipline areas. For example, for a more practical approach, developing stronger linkage between VET and industry to facilitate practitioners to collaborate in providing practical skills should be reinforced. Teacher institutions or *Lembaga Pendidikan Tinggi Keguruan* (LPTK) in Indonesia at the moment only focus on preparing content teachers who are relying on theoretical knowledge.

Luo and Garner (2017) in their study described that the situation in China is apparently similar to that of Indonesia. ESP has been widely adopted in College English courses, while EVP has been adopted in secondary school level. As many know, both ESP and EVP call for the interdisciplinary knowledge to meet the needs of learners. Accordingly, teachers' role in bottom-up curricula changes dramatically from the traditional language teachers to being able to collaborate with content teachers. Collaborative teaching involves two teachers (language and content teachers) simultaneously working together in the classroom. "This approach will help address the problem of language teachers lacking content knowledge, and content teachers lacking linguistic background" (Poedjiastutie, 2017, p. 345). However, in Indonesian schools, teachers rarely employ this approach due to the school system. The school policy commonly requires teachers to teach their own subjects, which means that English teachers will teach only English, while Maths teachers are required to teach only Maths. For this reason, the opportunity to learn how to collaborate with other teachers is lacking.

Collaborative teaching is not as easy as just inviting a colleague to teach the subject together. Many who have practiced this (co-teaching) are still in the process of identifying what works; what and how to collaborate? Regarding this, Kaplan (2012) stated that the most common complaint from his teaching colleagues was when our partner had a different style of teaching and his/her philosophy was different from ours. For example, when one of the teachers believes accuracy is students' foremost goal of learning language, and the co-teacher believes that a trial and error approach will work best for students' speed of language acquisition. These philosophical differences may lead to tension.

Even when the English status in Indonesia that is English as a Foreign Language is similar to those of its neighbouring countries such as Taiwan and Japan, it is not enough of a reason for the Indonesian government to push changes towards a bottom-up curricular approach. As a matter of fact, comparing written curricula is very difficult in VET because it is almost impossible to find comparable occupations in terms of scope, level, and objectives. Each country has a unique labor market, so no two curricula will need to prepare students for the same goal, even when the occupations are the same and are taught to the same types of students.

## **Curriculum as an Element of Country's Cultural Entities**

In addition, many educators and policy makers may possibly fail to understand that the shift from top-down to a bottom-up approach is not an easy process, as changing the curriculum means a change in the country's cultural entity. Cultural entity in a broad sense is not only referring to a nation such as Indonesia or Australia; neither an ethnic group such as Javanese and aborigines. We can also refer to culture in smaller contexts such as schools, universities, and childcare centres where specific ways of life, habits, norms, and values reflecting specific cultural patterns might be seen.

As Brown (1995) claimed:

To the everyday tasks of teaching and curriculum planning does not define curriculum simply as a relationship between a set of ends and a set of means, as a statement of intended learning goals together with methods for goal achievement. We can view a curriculum as a process in which there is a constant interpretation and negotiation going on among and between teachers and students. In this sense, curriculum is the everyday activities in the classroom. The conceptual and methodological tools of ethnography get at this aspect of curriculum planning and teaching. (p. 298)

In a similar vein, Barnhardt (1981) has asserted that it is sad that curriculum development usually does not explicitly address the social context in which learning takes place, nor does it consider the underlying cultural processes by which the content is acquired and utilized. It is also argued that an awareness of the philosophical base upon which systems are built is a crucial element in analyzing and understanding models of curricular and pedagogic organizations, and that a lack of such understanding is likely to inhibit the process of curriculum change at all levels of the system (Pepin, 1998).

Understanding a country's culture is deemed essential in any reform initiative. Any type of change introduced to schools is often met with resistance and tension. There is a myriad of factors why curriculum reforms do not work very well. This is because the change is too fast for educators and teachers to cope with. It was previously mentioned that the change in curriculum occurred in very short periods of time. From 1947 to 2018 Indonesia has recorded and documented eleven instances of curriculum reform, and the change was not preceded by rigorous evaluations of the previous curricula. Evaluation is necessary for understanding if the curriculum is producing the desired results. This implies that the evaluators know what to expect prior to the evaluation and are looking out for these predetermined results. Moreover, given that a change in the curriculum is also a change in a country's educational system or in culture, it cannot be done in a rush. Changing a culture does not happen overnight. The curricular change will have an impact on a number of factors such as the change of teaching institution direction and curriculum, teachers' readiness for the new pedagogical frameworks and many more.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, vocational education is a crucial element of a country's educational system and its development since it prepares individuals for jobs and enhances their performance by honing their skills. However, developing bottom-up English curriculum for VET is not an easy process as many factors need to be considered. However, this does not mean that it is an impossible task. For VET providers and employers, the right curriculum can provide a valuable platform for bridging the worlds of education, training and work, providing a common language between competences acquired in learning, and the needs of occupations and the labor market.

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