

## CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ENGLISH SYLLABUS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** The implementation of an English syllabus in higher education often reveals a gap between the planned curriculum and actual classroom practice. While this is a known issue, limited research has explored the specific challenges and strategies from the perspective of lecturers in the Indonesian university context. This study addresses this gap by investigating the difficulties lecturers face and the adaptive strategies they employ. This research utilised a qualitative descriptive method, gathering data through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with English language lecturers from several Indonesian universities. The findings reveal that challenges in syllabus implementation are caused by both internal and external factors. The internal factor is the significant variation in students' English proficiency level, which is often linked to students' motivation gap and limited English language practice, leading to the needs for differentiated learning in the classroom. The external factor is the world rapid change, which requires teaching materials to remain relevant and updated. In addition, time constraints further complicate the implementation. To manage these, lecturers apply strategies such as differentiated teaching, strategic code-switching, material updates, and flexible time management. Importantly, lecturers perceive these adaptations not as a misalignment with the syllabus, but as a necessary and professional flexibility to meet students' needs. The study concludes that effective syllabus implementation is a dynamic process of adaptation rather than rigid adherence. Moreover, a collaborative approach between syllabus designers and implementers, combined with continuous evaluation, is essential to ensure the syllabus remains a relevant and effective tool that can respond to diverse student needs.

**Keywords:** syllabus implementation; syllabus design; syllabus evaluation, curriculum and syllabus alignment

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### INTRODUCTION

English language learning plays a vital role in higher education due to its global use as an international language both for academic and professional purposes. With respect to this, the curriculum provides broad goals expected to achieve by students and reflects institution's vision and its response to the demands of academic and professional world. To ensure the curriculum is implemented effectively, a syllabus is needed as a practical guideline. The syllabus serves as a comprehensive framework including learning objectives, materials, methods, and forms of evaluation to guide students to achieve these objectives (Tokatli & Keşli, 2009). From this perspective, the syllabus operationalise curriculum, turning the broad goals of curriculum into organised steps.

Putting the syllabus into action in classroom activities is essential; however, the actual implementation can come with certain challenges. Bastian (2016) found that having a planned curriculum and syllabus framework, the students' assessment results did not reflect the

accomplishment of learning objectives stated in the syllabus. This inconsistency was caused by students' unfamiliarity with the academic writing manual and insufficient writing practice. Similarly, Listyo Rini & Muhroji (2022), in their research on the implementation of lesson plan at SD N 1 Mojopuro, discovered that the lessons planned for grades 1, 3, 4, and 5 were not implemented effectively in the classroom. This inefficacy was due to failure to use learning media, resources, and tools as outlined in the plan. Besides, the learning preparation was insufficient, creating barriers in effective teaching. These findings show that while the syllabus presents certain expectations and an organised plan, the implementation sometimes fails to align with the objectives. The situation underlines the gap between the planned curriculum, referring to what is designed in the syllabus, and the enacted version, which includes what is delivered in the classroom (Thomas & Yoon, 2014).

Effective syllabus implementation ensures students achieve learning goals. However, challenges in implementing the English curriculum and syllabus have been confirmed by several studies. For example, Prehanto & Nuryadin (2022) observes how elementary school teachers implement curriculum, and the findings report the lack of optimal implementation compared with the planned lesson. Similarly, a study conducted by Akbar et al. (2023) shows that adapting teaching strategies to suit students' learning style is one of difficulties in implementing curriculum in Indonesia. Furthermore, his research, which was carried out in elementary schools in Indonesia, suggests that addressing this problem needs teachers' creativity, innovation, global awareness, understanding, and responsiveness. This finding is in line with Ferdaus & Novita (2023) research in a vocational high school in Indonesia, which highlights some challenges to curriculum implementation, including diversity in students' characteristics, attitudes, and backgrounds. The implementation problems are not limited in Indonesia. Somé-Guiébré (2018) lists some obstacles in the implementation of syllabus in Burkina Faso. They include teachers' limited knowledge of communicative language instruction, a lack of collaboration among education stakeholders, a gap between syllabus and teaching materials, and a lack of alignment with students' actual needs. These studies indicate that applying syllabus is a complex process. It involves not only following a written document but also understanding different learning conditions. Therefore, although developed to guide teaching, syllabus often faces barriers when implemented in real situations.

Research on syllabus design and implementation has been widely conducted; however, investigations associated with challenges in syllabus implementation in higher education in Indonesia remain limited. Previous studies have focused on the school level or adopted a broad perspective on curriculum framework, leading to a notable gap in exploring how syllabus is implemented in university context, particularly from the perspective of lecturers who implement it. Therefore, learning experiences, perspectives, and strategies of lecturers is crucial to discover

challenges in implementing English syllabus and develop practical recommendations. Considering this gap, the study aims to explore the challenges faced by lecturers in implementing English syllabus at the university level. The research is conducted across several universities in Indonesia, seeking to contribute to in-depth knowledge of the actual condition of syllabus implementation. In addition, the study explores what strategies the lecturers use to address these challenges.

## **METHOD**

The research employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore challenges encountered by lecturers in applying English syllabus at higher education and their potential strategies to overcome them. The research was conducted at several universities in Indonesia which offer English Education programmes to ensure participants were directly involved in syllabus implementation, making the findings more relevant to the topic of the study. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, meaning that they were chosen based on their experience and relevance to the topic. They consisted of English language lecturers who had a major role in teaching, providing complete, personal perspectives regarding syllabus implementation.

The study used semi-structured interviews and classroom observation to collect the data. The semi-structured interview with the lecturers was the main tool used to explore the participants' perspectives and experiences while providing flexibility to investigate richer insights that emerged during the interview (Creswell, 2014). The interviews focused on the lecturers' challenges and experiences during teaching related to syllabus implementation and the strategies they employed when applying the syllabus. Depending on the availability of the participants, the interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online. In addition, classroom observation was conducted to understand what happened during classroom activities by observing teaching and learning process and recording important events (Zhu Ya-nan, 2023). This observation was to examine how syllabus was applied in teaching process, including lesson implementation, teaching methods and strategies, teaching materials, students' participation, language use, assessment, time management, and classroom management. The observation notes and interview transcripts were analysed thematically to identify the patterns related to recurring issues and the strategies used by the lecturers to address them.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

The interviews with the English lecturers from different higher education institutions regarding their experience with syllabus implementation, along with classroom observations, suggests interdependent factors between pedagogical principles and actual learning conditions. The data reveals the challenges and strategies they use to connect the planned instructional design and teaching practices.

Based on the responses, many lecturers showed strong commitment to implementing the syllabus in their classroom activities consistently, indicating awareness of the importance of systematic learning to achieve the objectives. In addition, most of them were involved in the development of the syllabus, making them understand the function of every part of the syllabus and apply it confidently. However, they explained that although they generally followed the syllabus, sometimes they needed to make some modifications when teaching. For instance, adjustments in teaching strategies might be needed in certain classroom situations. This finding reveals that instructors perceive themselves as both implementers and decision makers of the syllabus, adjusting teaching materials for students' needs, within institutional boundaries. This practice suggests that lecturers' pedagogical decisions are crucial in syllabus implementation, particularly when they function as both implementers and designers. However, some lecturers stated they had a limited role in the syllabus design, restricting their capacity to adapt it to the students' needs. When teachers merely implement a pre-designed curriculum without participating in its design, their role becomes limited. Such exclusion can reduce the sense of ownership of the teaching and learning process, leading to a disconnect between the learning objectives outlined in the syllabus and the actual learning context. This underlines critical need of collaborative curriculum and syllabus design, where lecturers contribute to both structuring and applying the lesson plan. When lecturers participate in designing the syllabus, they can integrate relevant materials and teaching strategies based on their authentic classroom experiences.

The interviews show the lecturers' involvement in syllabus design and their commitment to its implementation. However, the interview responses highlight several challenges during the implementation of the English syllabus in higher education settings. A prominent issue raised by the lecturers is the variation in the students' English proficiency levels, creating differentiated learning needs, which shape their levels of motivation and engagement in classroom activities. One strategy applied by the lecturers to address the challenge is adopting varied teaching methods and flexible strategies to ensure inclusive learning. In higher education context, the lecturers sometimes need to adjust their teaching plan, including the activities and tasks, to suit the learners' needs. The lecturers point out that complying strictly with the syllabus can restrict the teaching and learning process, especially when the learners' backgrounds vary. Thus, some teaching steps may be added, delayed, or omitted, depending on the class dynamics. Importantly, despite the difference between the planned syllabus and its realisation, the lecturers do not perceive it as a misalignment, but a necessary response to the dynamic conditions of the classroom. Such adaptation is important to connect the formal curriculum and syllabus to authentic student needs and actual learning experience.

Moreover, differences in English proficiency levels are reflected in their use of English in the classroom, significantly affecting classroom language practices. The lecturers mentioned that students with high competence used English more confidently; on the other hand, students with lower competence tended to show hesitation and a tendency to use their first language. This condition can create a communication gap and affect students' learning effectiveness. To address the gap and support the students' learning, the lecturers often apply code-switching to explain tasks and reduce students' anxiety. The finding aligns with Hafid & Margana (2022), who show that code-switching enhances students' engagement, pedagogy, and classroom management, yet it should be used carefully to avoid reducing target language exposure. The significance of this result lies in demonstrating that lecturers in higher education also use code-switching not as a shortcut, but as a conscious strategy to achieve the intended learning objectives in the syllabus more effectively.

In addition to the challenges related to the learner, the interviews and observations reveal additional factors contributing to the difficulty in realising the syllabus as initially designed, particularly the rapid real-world changes. Based on the interview responses, the lecturers view that the rapid changes, including in education, technology, and policy, have direct impact on the learning. The shifts demand educators to remain responsive and relevant. Thus, the lecturers often need to adapt elements of the syllabus as they teach to reflect the current context. Consequently, this particularly impacts teaching materials, which need to be adjusted to stay current and relevant. For example, one of the interviewees shared his experience of replacing the original planned materials with content that was more relevant and up to date to make learning more engaging. This result confirms the view of Hanifa et al. (2024) that materials development must be flexible to ensure the planned curriculum works in real classroom setting. However, rather than perceiving it as inconsistency between the planned syllabus and its implementation, the lecturers see the modification as flexibility in syllabus implementation. Moreover, they regard this as essential to respond appropriately to the constantly changing world while maintaining the achievement of learning objectives. This implies that syllabus design should not be treated as a static product; rather, it should remain adaptable, enabling lecturers to integrate current examples or digital resources that make learning more engaging and relevant for students.

Another area of concern in syllabus implementation, based on interviews and observations, is time constraints. The lecturers reported that some topics were complex and required repeated and longer explanations, which can result in disruption to the planned activities and teaching timing. However, they managed this issue by adjusting their teaching time as needed. For instance, when a specific topic was covered more quickly than expected, the lecturers used the remaining time to discuss more difficult topics. Besides, in case of limited class time, the lecturers

asked the learners to do tasks and activities that can be completed outside the classroom, ensuring important content is covered without disrupting the overall course structure. This finding aligns with the research by Leek et al. (2024) which states that applying flexible time management is important to eliminate difficulties caused by crowded content in the curriculum. In the higher education context, the lecturers consider the ability to adapt to time allocation important as the syllabus practical implementation requires them to be responsive and adaptable, as well as essential to bridge the gap between the planned syllabus and its actual implementation.

Overall, the interview responses and observations emphasise that flexibility in implementing the syllabus is essential in response to classroom dynamics and real-world changes. Further, all the interviewees agree that while adaptation is sometimes needed, the primary focus must be to achieve the learning goals. Moreover, the lecturers consider that it is crucial to document the process, challenges, and issues experienced during teaching, as these records are valuable sources for future reflection and improvement. For this, the interviewees suggest strong collaboration between the syllabus developers and implementers. This highlights that systematic and periodic syllabus evaluation is essential to keep it relevant. In other words, ongoing course evaluation combined with needs analysis is required to make improvements for future syllabus design. The findings of the study indicate that continuous evaluation of the syllabus design and implementation are essential to ensure the syllabus remains relevant and effective. Moreover, it helps support the syllabus quality and flexibility, making sure that the syllabus aspects can meet students' needs and dynamic education expectations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that the implementation of the English syllabus in higher education is a dynamic process defined by necessary adaptation rather than rigid adherence. The primary challenges arise from internal factor, that is variations in students' English proficiency linked to differences motivation and limited English language practice, and external factor such as rapid global changes that create the constant need for relevant and up-to-date teaching materials. Furthermore, another challenge is time constraints, which often make the syllabus implementation differ from the original plan. Importantly, lecturers do not view these adjustments as a deviation but as a professional and flexible response to real classroom conditions. To navigate these issues, they employ a range of strategies, including differentiated teaching methods, strategic code-switching, material updates, and flexible time management, ensuring the learning objectives are met effectively.

The findings further underscore that a lecturer's sense of ownership and ability to adapt the syllabus is significantly enhanced when they are involved in its design process. This highlights a critical implication: effective implementation is fostered by a systemic, collaborative approach

between syllabus developers and implementers. Therefore, the study recommends a shift towards continuous and collaborative syllabus evaluation. Such a process ensures that the syllabus remains a relevant, living document capable of meeting diverse student needs and adapting to the evolving educational landscape.

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