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## **THE USE OF GENRE-BASED APPROACH IN THE CONTEXT OF ENGLISH FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AT ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN INDONESIA**

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### **Abstract**

*The genre-based approach has been known to characterize pedagogical practices during the implementation of the 2006 school-level curriculum. Despite its prevalent use and overwhelming support by school stakeholders, the efficacy of this approach was nonetheless questionable. This paper aims to revisit the 2006 School level curriculum, its plausibility and compatibility with individual contexts and its bearing on EFL practices. It also discusses the Genre-based approach in terms of its underlying paradigms, and possible variables and contextual factors which might have impinged on its implementation. Some research findings on the adoption of the approach in Southeast Asia context are also presented to provide insights into how the Genre-based approach could be efficiently adopted. This essay concludes with some ideas for the amendment to the 2006 school-level curriculum and how*

*the genre-based approach might still be relevant in the context of teaching writing skills at tertiary education.*

## **Keywords**

*Curriculum Design, Genre-Based Approach, L2 Language Acquisition*

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## **1. Introduction**

As a matter of fact, EFL curriculum in Indonesia has undergone frequent changes over time. Different approaches and methods have been introduced in an attempt to best facilitate English language learning as well as in respond to the perceived needs and demand both at micro and macro levels. The history of EFL curriculum in Indonesia dates back as early as 1945, when the grammar translation method left by the Dutch was used as a method to teach English to students in senior high schools (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). The aim was to equip learners with knowledge about grammatical rules and a range of vocabulary to deal with textbooks. The 1968 and 1975 curriculum, referred to as the oral approach curriculum, seemed to draw heavily on the theories of the audio-lingual method and behaviorism, following the international trend at that time. It was aimed at developing the four language skills with listening skill taken as the first priority followed by speaking, reading, and writing. (Dardjowijoyo, 2000)

The following years saw the shift in English language teaching toward more focus on language use rather than language usage (Widdowson, 1978). It was during this period when the notion of Communicative Approach was prevalent and became the underlying concept of the 1984 Communicative Approach curriculum. The change to Communicative Approach, however, did not seem to have tangible impact on the way English was taught in schools. The teaching syllabi, for example, was strictly grammar-based, with lessons being graded following the structural ladder. Similarly, the textbooks were designed around grammatical units rather than incorporating the four skills. The teaching method was also teacher-centered with heavy emphasis on the teaching of discreet skills of the language and an attempt to teach English to the test. Lastly, the majority of EFL teachers in general were not proficient speakers of English and lacked the practical knowledge of how the Approach truly worked in classroom teaching. Despite such ambiguities and mismatches in its implementation, the Communicative Approach has been adopted ever since. The 1994 Curriculum, referred to as the Meaning-Based curriculum, also recommended the same approach to serve as the framework for the teaching learning process in the classrooms.

The reform movement which toppled down the Soeharto regime in 1998 brought about new enlightened perspective on issues pertaining to democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech. There was demand for greater transparency in the process of policy making in all areas including education. The curriculum inevitably came under public scrutiny and criticism. It was believed at that time that the regime used the curriculum as a means of gaining control over the public mindset. The emerging discourse on separatism in some areas of the country was also believed to be largely due to the centralized nature of educational policy. Apparently in response to this socio-political shift, the government introduced the so-called Competency Based (CBC) curriculum in 2004. The CBC was designed to allow schools greater autonomy to make decisions about the content of the curricula based on the needs in their own context. Along with the curriculum, the Ministry of Education introduced the genre-based approach to teaching English in high school levels. The 2006 curriculum, called KTSP (translated as School-Level Curriculum), was introduced in 2006 and basically a further modification of the CBC 2004. The School-Level Curriculum reflects a strong awareness to empower local government and schools in designing school curricula which can resonate with the demands, challenges and needs in each context and make learning more authentic and relevant for students. School stakeholders can work together to design the content of curricula to suit the peculiarity of each context and to establish a link between classroom pedagogy and the world outside.

Despite the shift in curriculum policy and a whole range of possibilities for betterment in the quality of education, there remains a number of shortcomings which need to be addressed. This essay aims to discuss some issues encircling the school-based curriculum; how it has been implemented and what might have contributed to its inefficiency. In view of EFL, a question may be raised as to how the genre-based approach was applied in the context of Indonesia and what constraints might impinge on its adoption within the context of EFL in high school levels. The second part of this essay presents a review of two research articles on pedagogical issues which might bear relevance to the context of Indonesian education system, in particular, the issues pertaining to the current School-Level curriculum.

## **2. The 2006 School-Level Curriculum**

The School –Level Curriculum can be understood as an attempt to reform the education system in Indonesia towards a decentralized system of education. As Fuhrman & Mallen (1990) put it, curriculum reform concerns primarily control and empowerment, in

which control strategies are the mechanism for increasing the efficiency of the educational system and empowerment strategies to address teacher competence and teacher commitment. Alongside this notion of empowerment, curriculum reform takes place as an inevitable consequence of its interaction with broader context of globalization. Rivera (2003) points out that many significant changes in the curricula of most developing countries in decades past could be attributed to the twin metonymic conditions of greater internationalization of market economies and globalization of cultural economy. In the context of educational reform in Indonesia, the socio-political twist following Soeharto's downfall, along with the subsequent public discourse on democracy, and in particular, decentralization and autonomy, has provided a context for the introduction of School-Level Curriculum, as well the market-driven economy and globalization in many areas of life. The curriculum, thus, might be viewed as an attempt by the government to adopt a bottom-up process in curriculum design by channeling more power to schools to design their own curricula. Edward (2003) concedes that the problem between what is intended in the national curriculum and what is being implemented in the classroom results from local educators not having a sense of ownership in the curriculum reform. Hence, the autonomy attached to the 2006 curriculum is expected to create ownership in the curriculum.

It is undeniable that in the past, the perceived failure in education, especially at high school levels, has been attributed to the nature of curriculum which pretends to fit all schools regardless of their diverse contexts. The one-size-fit-all curriculum has failed to take into account the fact that there are differences among regions in Indonesia in terms of resources, economic status, and accessibility. Under the School –Level Curriculum, schools are given autonomy to decide on what competencies to include in addition to those set by the Ministry of Education and choose the learning materials considered most appropriate to develop those competencies.

Despite the ideals of the School-Level Curriculum, there have been concerns encircling its implementation. The Ministry of Education seems to demonstrate ambiguity in its commitment to competence. Whilst they allow each school to determine its curricula based on their own context, they also insist that the National Examination be applied to all junior and high school levels. Such policy has taken its toll on the teaching learning process to a great extent. As a matter of fact, the National Examination has long created frenzy among students, teachers and parents. This in turn has prompted teachers to gear the teaching learning process toward exam strategies to cope with the National Examination. Likewise,

the fact that English is one of the subjects tested in the National Examination has such an adverse washback impact on the teaching and learning process. English teachers would rather spend more time drilling students with examination strategies particularly in the last year of the schooling. It is also believed that in some cases, teachers deliberately temper with the exam procedure to help students pass the exam. Despite such exam-oriented classroom instruction, some schools in certain areas in Indonesia are known to have shown a higher percentage of students failing the National Examination, suggesting the possibility that factors such as lack of resources, low budgets, and accessibility may have come into play to make those schools unable to compete in such high stake National Examination. Thus, the National Examination, to some extent, has proven to have detrimental effects on the teaching practices and even the principles of integrity.

Another shortcoming in the implementation of the School-Level Curriculum is that schools might not be able to identify clearly their needs, wants and capabilities. School principals, teachers and parents may become over excited about the amount of autonomy given and therefore set unrealistic expectation pertaining to the learning and teaching process and its outcomes. This could have a severe impact on the psychological narratives of all related stakeholders when such expectation turns out to be too high a wall to climb due to limited resources. Similarly, needs analysis can be such a hard task for some schools when different interests of different groups come into play and impede the process of curricula design. This is true if we understand the nature of dialectical interaction among different stakeholders in education in Indonesia. As recommended by the Ministry of Education, the schools may work in cooperation with the local government to conduct need analysis for the design of curricula. One of the threats which might emerge is that the local government brings their own interpretation and interest into the discussion and assert this through their power in such a way that it contradicts the spirit of autonomy and decentralization itself.

### **3. The Genre-Based Approach in the context of the School-Level Curriculum**

The 2004 and 2006 curriculum are based on the government regulation stipulating, among other things, that the level of achievement in every curriculum is stated in terms of competence, that the learning process is carried out by developing reading and writing culture, and that the competence for language subjects should emphasise the ability to read and write suitable for the levels of education. It also suggests that language education,

including English education, is expected to develop communicative competence or the ability to communicate in spoken or written language so that learners will possess the so called social skills. In line with the goals of the curriculum, the Ministry of Education introduced the genre-based approach to teaching English in high school levels in Indonesia. The types of text (genres) developed in the 2004 English curriculum include transactional conversations (to get something done), interpersonal conversations (to establish and maintain social relations), short functional texts (announcements, greeting cards etc.), monologues and essays of certain genres. In other words, they are supposed to be able to access accumulated knowledge typically required at higher learning institutions. Based on Well's taxonomy (1987), the junior high school literacy level is the functional level, a level where the graduates are expected to use English for survival purposes such as carrying out transactional exchanges, reading for fun, reading popular science or teenagers' encyclopaedia, etc. Senior high school graduates are expected to achieve the informational level where they can carry out more extended and interpersonal conversations, and deal with texts to access knowledge at university level and self-study.

Nonetheless, having been in place since 2004, the adoption of the genre-based approach has yet to bring satisfactory outcomes in terms of students' mastery of English language. Several factors might contribute to this condition. The first one is the nature of EFL learning environment. According to Kahru's (1992) category, Indonesia falls under the Expanding Circle in which the majority of learners do not have adequate exposure to English. Although it can be argued that learners from upper socio economic class in urban area may have considerable, intense exposure to English through various media, the majority of learners in Indonesia are denied of such privilege and feel there are no real urgent needs to use English in everyday life. This is different from the context of Australia where the Genre based approach was initially used to develop students' literacy skills in writing and reading in the context of English as a first and second language. There is also a question of its appropriateness because in the context of Australian education system, the approach has been found effective in teaching writing to native speakers whereas In Indonesia this approach is used to teach integrated language skills. Secondly, the genre-based approach requires teachers to have a considerably high level of English proficiency. This phenomenon is more apparent in remote and impoverished areas in Indonesia. And when set against the threat posed by the National Examination, the realities look even more worrying. Therefore, the government needs to consider context at the centre of language teaching (Bax, 2003a, 2003b),

and the ecological approach (Tudor, 2002), which considers various human and contextual factors into a course design. The last constraint is the fact that the genre based approach does not contribute significantly to students in terms of being able to do the National Examination. The National Examination comes in a different format that it does not fully test what has been learnt through the genre based approach. As discussed earlier, this explains why in some cases teachers tend to teach English to the National Exam at the expense of some aspects of the genre-based approach.

#### **4. Review of Research Studies**

The section presents a review of two research studies namely ‘Using a genre-based approach to teaching writing to Thai students : a case study’ written by SaowadeeKongpetch of UbonRachathani University Thailand and ‘Critical Friends Group for EFL teacher professional development’ by Long Thanh Vo and HoaThi Mai Nguyen. The two studies were chosen because they are in some ways relevant to the context of Indonesia. First, the studies were conducted in Thailand and Vietnam where English is taught as a foreign language. Both Thailand and Vietnam are within the expanding circles of English language use and therefore can be assumed to have relatively the same level of exposure to English. In terms of learning style, there is also much resemblance among students in South East Asia. Lastly, as developing countries, Thailand and Vietnam face similar problems with regard to logistic support, budgeting, infrastructures and teachers welfare.

The study by Kongpetch is based on his belief that many university students in Thailand are not fluent in writing because they lack the knowledge of how a text is organized. He is particularly tempted to introduce the Australian genre-based approach to teach writing skills to students because this approach deals with the relationship between texts (spoken and written) and provides a systematic explanation how such texts are organized in different social and cultural contexts. Also, the genre-based approach provides him with a sound theory on which to base his practical methodology to teach writing to his students.

The research is a case study which focused on 42 students who enrolled in the Essay Writing Course at KhonKaen University. The goal of the research was to describe learners’ response to the approach and the effects it had on their writing. Through the data analysis, it was revealed that the genre-based approach had significant impact on students’ writing and fostered positive attitude toward writing skill development. The research brought up valuable recommendations with regard to the use of the genre- based approach. First, when using the

approach, the topics and genre chosen must be interesting to create a sense of ownership. Topics may be negotiated with students. Second, the objectives of the program should be clearly explained to students. Third, there must be socialization and adaptation to the nature of the genre-based approach which requires learners to take more active and collaborative role in learning while at the same time to work more independently. Lastly, changes in curriculum development should take into account the notion that language learning is not simply about language rules and function but also learning about the world through language and about language (Halliday as cited by Kongpetch, 2006).

The second study analyzed the use of Critical Friends Group technique as a model for teacher professional development. CFG is a method in which ‘critical friends’ from the same educational institution work to help each other. It involves mutual observation and criticism. As a method, CFG provides clear protocols as a framework for the group. The research is based on the rationale that the poor quality of ELT is partly attributable to a lack of sound teacher training and teacher professional development. According to the writer, citing Dunne and Honts, CFG is a practitioner-driven study group that reflects the growing trend for site-based professional development in which participants behave as managers of their own learning.

The researcher drew on a number of previous studies which showed that CFG had positive effects on teacher professional development. The research was a qualitative case study which focused on a group of four beginner EFL teachers who worked in the same faculty of a university in Vietnam. The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of the group during their participation in CFG over one semester. Data was collected through observation and interviews. The findings revealed that CFG had considerable positive impact on the teachers’ motivational skills, teaching performance, sense of professional community. All participants expressed their great pleasure and satisfaction with their CFG experience. The findings recommended that in order to benefit most from CFG, the number of participants needs to be carefully considered so as to make CFG works efficiently. Although CFG was initially used with native speakers of English, the findings of the research convinced the researcher that CFG was transferable to the Vietnam context.

Having discussed both studies, it can be concluded that both studies are very closely related. They took place in the context of TEFL in university levels and considered teachers at the center of EFL quality teaching improvement. Whereas the first study focused on classroom methodology, the second study attempted to offer a mechanism for teacher

professional development which could enhance teachers' understanding of the method being investigated in the first study. The findings of both studies could provide feedback to curriculum developers especially on the notion of interconnectedness between the quality of EFL teaching practice and classroom methodology and teachers' professional development.

## **5. Conclusion**

Drawing upon the previous discussion, it can be concluded that curriculum design needs to take into account different contexts which might come into play to impinge on the efficacy of any given curriculum. In the context of National curriculum and EFL curriculum in Indonesia, the government needs to re-consider the National Examination as a sole school-leaving examination because it proved to have such adverse effect on the teaching learning process, including EFL classroom practices. The school-Level Curriculum which attempts to appreciate the schools' own contexts should not be contradicted with and deterred by the National Examination which exerts a uniform standard of competence on such diverse contexts of Indonesia. At the level of EFL teaching, the genre-based approach needs also to be reconsidered to include contexts as suggested by Bax (2003a, 2003b). Tudor (1993) also holds that simply adopting a method used in one cultural context in another is unlikely to be successful. Therefore, it might be worth considering the use of an eclectic approach to EFL practices in high schools in Indonesia as it will be able to accommodate different contexts.

Along the same line, the fundamental question is ultimately concerned with the quality of EFL teachers. Regardless of how sound an approach or method can be, it is unlikely to work in the hands of unproficient teachers. Within this notion, the findings of the two research studies might as well be considered to offer insights into improving EFL teachers, especially in high school levels in Indonesia. University is the right place to start such endeavor since it is where prospective teachers are cultivated and will be responsible for the betterment of education in the future. The rationale of the first study reflects the same condition in Indonesia where students of English department in universities are in general not proficient in English. Students of English department need to be taught and trained in writing, and the genre-based approach might be best suited to the purpose. Similarly, the CFG model might also be suitable to improve the quality of EFL teachers in high school levels in Indonesia. CFG requires very minimum resources which suit well in the context of Indonesia where inadequate logistic support and teachers welfare can often pose serious problems. Although there have been similar methods in the form of teachers' workshop, network, and study group, they do not follow a clear framework by which they can work

comfortably and with a sense of direction. CFG provides a clear method so that its application with EFL teachers in high school levels in Indonesia is likely to bring fruitful results.

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