

Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers in Setting Learning Objectives for Writing Materials in the Senior High School Context

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in setting learning objectives for writing instruction in Indonesian senior high schools. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 20 EFL teachers across various schools in Makassar, followed by thematic analysis to identify shared patterns of experience. The findings reveal five major themes: challenges in curriculum interpretation, constraints from student-related factors, instructional design limitations, adaptive strategies for objective setting, and institutional and professional needs. Teachers reported difficulty translating the broad competencies of *Kurikulum 2013* into measurable classroom objectives due to limited training in curriculum interpretation and instructional design. They also faced learner heterogeneity, low motivation, and writing anxiety, which necessitated process-based and differentiated goals. Despite these barriers, teachers demonstrated pedagogical agency through adaptive strategies such as backward design, pre-assessment, authentic writing tasks, and technology-assisted feedback to enhance coherence and engagement. The study highlights the need for sustained, practical, and context-specific professional development that connects curriculum theory with classroom practice. Institutional mentoring and professional learning communities are recommended to strengthen teachers' ability to design realistic, measurable, and contextually relevant objectives for EFL writing instruction. The research contributes to the broader understanding of teacher cognition and curriculum enactment, illustrating how educational policy, pedagogical decision-making, and local realities interact to shape the quality of writing instruction in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Indonesia, writing is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging skills to teach and learn. This complexity arises not only from its linguistic demands (grammar, coherence, cohesion, and vocabulary) but also from pedagogical factors, such as curriculum interpretation and instructional design (Liando et al., 2023; 2022). One essential pedagogical element in teaching writing is the formulation of clear and effective learning objectives, which serve as a foundation for lesson planning, classroom activities, and assessment.

In the Indonesian education system, EFL teachers are expected to design lessons that align with the national curriculum Rahma and Setyaningsih, (2023) which emphasizes competency-based learning. However, studies indicate that many teachers still encounter substantial difficulties in translating curriculum documents into operational learning objectives, especially when teaching productive skills like writing. This difficulty is often amplified by limited professional training, lack of teaching resources, and a rigid focus on grammar and reading in classroom practices.

Moreover, English writing instruction in Indonesian senior high schools is often hindered by time constraints, large class sizes, and diverse student proficiency levels. As a result, teachers tend to adopt general or vague objectives that fail to reflect the complexity of the writing process or to differentiate between text types and genres as required by the curriculum. For example, a learning objective such as “students are able to write a narrative text” is frequently left without sufficient indicators of success or alignment with assessment criteria.

Research also shows that many Indonesian EFL teachers struggle with integrating higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) into their objectives, despite policy encouragement to do so. The gap between policy and practice suggests a need for deeper investigation into the real challenges that teachers face in setting meaningful learning objectives, especially in writing classes where output-based performance is emphasized.

Furthermore, professional development programs for EFL teachers in Indonesia have traditionally focused more on general pedagogical knowledge than on specific instructional strategies for writing, including how to construct SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) objectives. As a result, teachers are left to rely on intuition or prior models without fully understanding the underlying pedagogical reasoning.

Understanding the challenges faced by EFL teachers in formulating writing objectives is critical not only for improving classroom practice but also for informing curriculum designers, policymakers, and teacher training institutions. Without clearly defined objectives, teaching becomes fragmented and assessment loses its alignment with learning targets. By identifying these challenges, this study seeks to bridge the gap between policy expectations and practical implementation.

In the Indonesian EFL context, formulating clear and measurable learning objectives for writing instruction remains a persistent challenge for many English teachers at the senior high school level. Although national curricula such as Kurikulum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum emphasize competency-based learning, teachers often struggle to translate these abstract competencies into classroom-level objectives that align with students' needs and proficiency levels. This difficulty is exacerbated by practical constraints, including large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and varying student motivation. Furthermore, while writing is considered a complex skill involving cognitive, linguistic, and organizational dimensions, many teachers report that assessments and classroom tasks are not well aligned with the stated learning goals. These issues raise critical questions about the extent to which EFL teachers are able to design appropriate objectives that guide effective instruction and improve student outcomes in writing. Therefore, it is important to investigate the challenges teachers face and the factors that influence their ability to set effective learning objectives for writing instruction in Indonesian senior high schools.

This study aims to explore the challenges experienced by EFL teachers in developing learning objectives for writing instruction at the senior high school level in Indonesia. It seeks to identify the key barriers that hinder the formulation of specific and measurable objectives and to examine how external and internal factors, such as curriculum demands, student diversity, and teacher training, affect this process. Moreover, the research intends to uncover the strategies teachers use to overcome these difficulties and ensure the alignment between objectives, instruction, and assessment. Finally, the study aims to offer practical recommendations for improving teacher support in planning writing lessons, particularly in relation to objective-setting practices.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Learning Objectives and Professional Development in Educational Setting

Learning objectives are widely recognized as the foundation of instructional planning, defining what learners should achieve by the end of a lesson or course (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing, well-formulated objectives guide teachers in aligning content, activities, and assessment with desired outcomes (Lestari & Yusuf, 2025). However, many teachers

struggle to construct measurable and pedagogically sound objectives, often using vague verbs such as "understand" or "produce." This vagueness weakens the connection between teaching and assessment and obscures expected learning outcomes. Furthermore, Indonesia's *Kurikulum 2013* provides broad *kompetensi inti* and *kompetensi dasar* descriptors that encourage flexibility but require teachers to translate abstract competencies into practical classroom goals. Hanifa, (2024); Rahma and Setyaningsih, (2023) observed that this translation process is difficult when teachers receive limited guidance, leading to inconsistencies in interpreting curriculum standards particularly in skills-based areas like writing, which demand precision in coherence, grammar, and vocabulary.

A major contextual factor influencing objective-setting is the heterogeneity of students' proficiency levels within the same classroom. Teachers often encounter mixed-ability groups in which some learners struggle to compose basic sentences while others demonstrate near fluency (Siekmann, 2022). As Tomlinson, (2017) points out, differentiated instruction becomes essential in such settings to ensure fairness and inclusion. Nevertheless, teachers in Indonesia frequently modify national objectives to suit classroom realities, shifting from outcome-based goals such as "students produce a narrative text" to process-oriented aims like "students draft a paragraph using a simple outline." Writing instruction itself intensifies the challenge: it demands cognitive, linguistic, and affective engagement from learners who often perceive writing as the most difficult language skill (Cahyono, 2024; Hamdani, 2025; Moses & Mohamad, 2019). This combination of heterogeneous proficiency and writing anxiety forces teachers to balance curriculum expectations with learner capabilities when formulating achievable objectives.

Teachers' limited competence in instructional design further constrains the quality of learning objectives. Although many teachers are familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy, studies reveal that they often fail to apply it effectively in planning and assessment (Saiful, 2020). Without targeted training, objectives are frequently recycled from previous syllabi or remain too broad to guide instruction. Such practices weaken constructive alignment the principle that objectives, materials, and assessment must form a coherent system (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Lestari and Yusuf, (2025) discovered that misalignment in Indonesian EFL classrooms commonly arises when objectives are incomplete or do not match evaluation rubrics. Moreover, material adaptation is a constant necessity. Hanifa, (2024) noted that teachers modify content and scaffolding to fit students' contexts and proficiency, but unless objectives are revised accordingly, the adaptation loses coherence. Thus, objective-setting must be a dynamic process integrated with material design, assessment planning, and classroom realities.

Professional development (PD) emerges in the literature as a critical yet insufficiently addressed need. Despite regular curriculum workshops, teachers report that most training programs remain theoretical and disconnected from

classroom practice (Averina & Kuswando, 2023). Saiful, (2020) emphasizes that PD in Indonesia tends to focus on curriculum dissemination rather than practical guidance in instructional design or objective writing. As a result, teachers continue to face uncertainty in defining measurable outcomes and aligning them with students' levels and assessment criteria. Effective PD should provide sustained, hands-on mentoring that integrates lesson planning, assessment literacy, and materials development. Institutional support for collaborative learning, reflective practice, and peer observation can also strengthen teachers' ability to design realistic objectives that enhance writing instruction quality.

Underlying these challenges is the concept of teacher agency the capacity of educators to make informed and context-responsive decisions. Priestley et al., (2015) view agency as an ecological process shaped by professional experience, institutional structures, and available resources. In EFL writing instruction, teacher agency is evident when teachers exercise autonomy to adjust objectives, apply backward design principles, and differentiate learning targets based on diagnostic assessment. Recognizing and empowering this agency is vital to improving curriculum enactment and instructional coherence. Despite considerable research on curriculum implementation, writing pedagogy, and professional development, few studies explicitly explore how EFL teachers in senior high schools set and adapt learning objectives for writing materials. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the multifaceted challenges teachers face and the strategies they employ to formulate measurable, realistic, and contextually relevant objectives that meet the demands of both curriculum policy and classroom diversity.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, aiming to explore in-depth the lived experiences and perspectives of EFL teachers regarding the challenges of setting learning objectives for writing instruction. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 senior high school English teachers from various provinces in Indonesia. The data were collected through open-ended questionnaires followed by semi-structured interviews with selected participants. These instruments were designed to capture detailed information about teachers' experiences in interpreting curriculum standards, designing learning objectives, and aligning them with teaching and assessment practices. To analyze the data, the researcher employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke, (2006) six-phase model: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This approach allows the researcher to identify common patterns, categories, and unique insights from the participants' responses. Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study, including informed consent and data confidentiality. This method provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex, context-specific

challenges EFL teachers face in developing meaningful and effective writing objectives in Indonesian high schools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Challenges in Curriculum Interpretation

A recurring challenge expressed by teachers is the difficulty in interpreting the general competencies outlined in national curriculum documents into concrete, classroom-level objectives. The Kurikulum 2013 and its revised versions emphasize *kompetensi inti dan kompetensi dasar* (core and basic competencies), which are intentionally broad to allow local adaptation. However, this flexibility often becomes a burden for teachers who lack adequate training in curriculum translation. One participant noted, "*The syllabus only states 'students write a descriptive text,' but it does not specify what elements are considered successful grammar, coherence, or vocabulary?*" Such statements reflect a broader pattern where verbs like "*express*," "*compose*," or "*produce*" are perceived as insufficiently operationalized, lacking explicit indicators of what students must demonstrate and how teachers should assess them.

In addition to the general challenge of interpreting the curriculum, many teachers emphasized that the abstract language of the *Kompetensi Dasar* (Basic Competencies) often creates inconsistencies in classroom implementation. Without clear performance indicators, teachers tend to rely on their own interpretation or borrow lesson plans from peers or online sources. This leads to significant variation in expected learning outcomes, even among schools within the same district. Several teachers admitted that they often feel uncertain whether their lesson objectives truly align with the national standards. This uncertainty not only affects lesson planning but also has implications for how teachers select teaching materials, develop assessments, and evaluate student performance. As a result, the connection between curriculum policy and classroom reality becomes fragmented, reducing the overall coherence of English instruction.

Another related issue is the lack of professional development programs focusing on curriculum operationalization. Teachers reported that training workshops provided by local education offices often focus on administrative aspects such as documentation and lesson plan formatting rather than on the pedagogical interpretation of competencies. Consequently, teachers are left with minimal guidance on transforming broad curriculum statements into measurable objectives that match students' linguistic and cultural contexts. In rural and resource-limited schools, this gap is further widened by limited access to expert mentoring and

reference materials. These constraints collectively weaken teachers' confidence and autonomy in designing lessons that are both compliant with the curriculum and responsive to their students' real learning needs.

Constraints from Student-Related Factors

A significant challenge frequently mentioned by teachers was the heterogeneity of student proficiency levels within the same classroom. Teachers often face mixed-ability groups, where some students struggle to construct even basic sentences, while others exhibit relative fluency in writing. One teacher shared, *"I usually have to modify the objectives because some students are not ready to write full texts. If I keep the original objective, it won't be fair."* This reflects a common issue in EFL contexts, where standardized curriculum expectations must be adjusted to accommodate individual learner differences (Tomlinson, 2017)

This diversity often forces teachers to compromise on learning goals, shifting from outcome-based objectives such as "Students produce a well-structured narrative text" to more process-oriented goals like "Students can write a draft using a simple outline." This change reflects the teacher's pragmatic adaptation to the classroom reality balancing the need for achievement with students' actual capabilities. Beyond cognitive readiness, affective factors such as low motivation, fear of failure, and negative perceptions of writing emerged as recurring constraints. Many teachers reported that students perceive writing as the most difficult language skill. As one participant stated, *"Some students say 'I hate writing' before we even begin. How can I aim for complex outcomes if their mindset is closed?"* This type of affective barrier aligns with what Dörnyei, (2005) describes as "language learning demotivation," where anxiety and self-doubt prevent students from engaging meaningfully with writing tasks.

In addition to differing proficiency levels and motivational challenges, teachers also identified students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom as a major constraint. In many schools, particularly those located in semi-urban and rural areas, students have very few opportunities to practice English communicatively. English is rarely used in daily interaction, and digital access to authentic English materials is minimal due to poor internet connectivity or lack of devices. As a result, students' progress in writing depends almost entirely on classroom instruction, which is often insufficient to build consistent competence. Teachers explained that without regular input and practice, students tend to forget previously learned structures, vocabulary, and text organization patterns. This situation forces teachers to repeatedly review foundational content, leaving less time to meet higher-level writing objectives. The result is a learning cycle that focuses more on remediation than on progression.

Moreover, socio-cultural and linguistic factors also play a crucial role in shaping students' engagement and ability to meet writing objectives. In multilingual communities where local or regional languages dominate, students frequently

transfer grammatical and rhetorical patterns from their first language into English writing. While such transfer can sometimes be constructive, teachers reported that it more often leads to structural confusion and coherence problems in students' work. Additionally, in collectivist classroom cultures, students may feel reluctant to express personal ideas or opinions, perceiving writing as a risky and individualistic activity rather than a creative or communicative one. These cultural and contextual factors compound the pedagogical challenge, requiring teachers to not only differentiate instruction but also mediate between linguistic, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions of learning in order to sustain meaningful participation in writing activities.

Instructional Design Limitations

A prominent theme that emerged from both questionnaire and interview responses was the lack of formal training in instructional design, particularly in how to construct clear, pedagogically sound learning objectives. While most teachers were familiar with educational frameworks like Bloom's Taxonomy or Kurikulum 2013's competence descriptors, they often reported difficulty applying these concepts in practice. As one teacher stated, *"I only know Bloom's Taxonomy from theory, not how to write objectives with it."* Others admitted to recycling old lesson objectives with minor modifications, without deeper reflection on their relevance, scope, or alignment with assessment tools.

This finding reflects what Wiggins & McTighe, (2005) describe as a disconnect between curriculum planning and instructional execution. Without adequate support in backward design, the process of identifying desired learning outcomes first and then aligning instruction, teachers may default to superficial or misaligned objectives. This gap is especially concerning in writing instruction, where objectives must integrate linguistic, cognitive, and genre-specific elements.

Another recurring issue identified by teachers was the limited institutional emphasis on systematic lesson planning and reflection. Many participants reported that lesson plans and learning objectives are often prepared merely to fulfill administrative requirements rather than to serve as functional guides for instruction. As a result, objectives are frequently written in generic or vague terms, such as *"students understand descriptive text,"* without specifying measurable indicators or observable student behaviors. This administrative culture, combined with heavy teaching workloads, discourages teachers from engaging in deep pedagogical reflection or collaborative lesson study. Several teachers mentioned that they rarely receive constructive feedback on their lesson plans from supervisors or colleagues, leading to a cycle where objectives are copied, pasted, and slightly altered each semester. This practice limits innovation in instructional design and prevents the development of writing objectives that truly reflect students' learning needs and curriculum goals.

Furthermore, technological and resource limitations exacerbate these instructional design challenges. Teachers often lack access to digital tools or model repositories that could support more effective lesson planning and objective formulation. In schools where professional development opportunities are scarce, teachers rely heavily on self-study or peer discussions, which may not always provide accurate pedagogical guidance. Consequently, even well-intentioned teachers struggle to design objectives that integrate linguistic sub-skills (grammar, vocabulary, coherence) with broader cognitive and communicative competencies. This absence of scaffolding mechanisms not only affects the quality of instructional materials but also leads to inconsistencies between intended objectives, classroom activities, and assessment criteria. Addressing these instructional design limitations, therefore, requires systemic intervention through sustained professional development, peer mentoring, and institutional support to strengthen teachers' capacity for evidence-based lesson planning and reflective pedagogical practice.

Adaptive Strategies for Objective Setting

In response to the pedagogical and contextual constraints outlined earlier, several EFL teachers in this study reported employing a range of adaptive strategies to design more meaningful, realistic, and measurable learning objectives for writing instruction. These strategies represent teachers' pedagogical agency, their ability to make informed and reflective decisions within restrictive institutional structures (Priestley et al., 2015). One widely cited strategy was the use of backward design, in which teachers begin lesson planning by identifying desired learning outcomes often based on assessment tasks before formulating instructional objectives. This approach ensures coherence between learning objectives, classroom activities, and evaluation tools (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). A teacher noted, *"I look at the writing rubric first, then decide what the goal of the lesson should be. That way I know what I'm aiming for."* This method not only improves alignment but also shifts focus from textbook-driven planning to goal-oriented instruction.

Another effective practice mentioned was pre-assessment. By administering short diagnostic writing tasks before each unit or week, teachers gained insights into students' existing skill levels and were better positioned to formulate differentiated objectives. This strategy echoes recommendations by Tomlinson, (2017) on the importance of assessment-for-learning as a driver of personalized instruction. One respondent emphasized: *"I check their writing journals before setting weekly goals. It helps me avoid setting objectives that are either too easy or too difficult."*

In addition to backward design and pre-assessment, many teachers described using scaffolding and tiered objectives as practical adaptations to address classroom diversity. Rather than setting a single, uniform goal for all students, they formulated layered objectives that allowed for varying levels of achievement. For instance, advanced students might be expected to "produce a coherent descriptive paragraph,"

while beginners aimed to “write simple sentences using descriptive adjectives.” This flexible structuring aligns with Vygotsky’s concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), where instruction is most effective when it builds on learners’ current abilities and gradually extends their competence (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). By differentiating objectives in this way, teachers were able to maintain fairness, sustain motivation, and promote incremental progress among all students. Several teachers also highlighted peer modeling and collaborative writing as supportive techniques, emphasizing that these methods fostered mutual learning and helped weaker students internalize writing conventions through guided participation.

Moreover, reflective and collaborative practices emerged as important components of adaptive strategies. Some teachers reported participating in informal teacher learning communities where they exchanged lesson plans, discussed students’ writing samples, and co-developed context-sensitive objectives. This collegial sharing provided a space for professional dialogue and reduced the sense of isolation often experienced in teaching writing. Teachers who engaged in such reflection noted improvements not only in the clarity of their objectives but also in the overall coherence of their writing instruction. Reflection journals, peer feedback, and post-lesson reviews were cited as tools for refining objectives over time. These adaptive strategies collectively demonstrate teachers’ resilience and creativity in navigating the gap between ideal curriculum expectations and classroom realities. They also underscore the importance of fostering professional autonomy and collaborative cultures to support sustainable improvement in instructional design for writing education.

Institutional and Professional Needs

A strong and consistent theme across participant responses was the need for institutionalized professional development tailored to the realities of EFL writing instruction. Teachers across school types and regions expressed concern about the limited availability of practical, sustained training programs, particularly those that go beyond theoretical curriculum orientation to offer *hands-on guidance* in designing writing objectives, aligning them with assessments, and scaffolding them across varying proficiency levels. Many participants indicated that existing professional development is often sporadic, top-down, or overly general, focusing on bureaucratic compliance rather than pedagogical competence. This reflects findings by Lieberman and Miller, (2008); Widodo, 2016) who note that without context-sensitive mentoring and follow-up, teacher learning rarely translates into improved classroom practice. As one teacher in this study reflected, “*Even after years of teaching, I still wish someone would coach me in writing better objectives that really guide my students.*”

Several teachers also emphasized the potential of technology-supported collaboration, such as creating an *online repository of curriculum-aligned learning*

objectives. One participant proposed: "Why not create an online database of learning objectives for writing, based on curriculum levels? It will help new teachers especially." This suggests a demand not only for training but also for accessible digital infrastructure to facilitate knowledge sharing.

In addition to the call for more practical training, teachers highlighted the need for sustained mentorship and peer collaboration as part of institutional support systems. Many participants explained that one-off workshops or short seminars rarely lead to meaningful pedagogical change because they lack ongoing follow-up and individualized guidance. Several teachers suggested that schools or education offices establish mentoring schemes where experienced educators or curriculum specialists regularly observe classes, review lesson plans, and provide feedback on the formulation of learning objectives. Teachers also expressed a desire for cross-school communities of practice—spaces where EFL teachers could share sample objectives, discuss teaching challenges, and collaboratively refine their approaches. These professional networks, they argued, would strengthen pedagogical consistency, reduce professional isolation, and build collective expertise in writing instruction design.

Moreover, institutional change was seen as essential for enabling teachers to apply what they learn from training and collaboration. Participants pointed out that excessive administrative workloads, rigid curriculum requirements, and limited time for lesson preparation often prevent them from experimenting with improved instructional design. To address this, teachers proposed more flexible scheduling, reduced bureaucratic documentation, and designated "curriculum innovation hours" where they can focus on reflective lesson planning. They also emphasized that recognition and incentives from school leadership such as acknowledging innovative lesson plans or rewarding professional growth could motivate teachers to continuously refine their practice. In essence, the findings reveal that enhancing teachers' ability to set effective writing objectives requires not only skill-oriented professional development but also systemic reforms that cultivate a supportive institutional culture prioritizing pedagogical quality over mere compliance.

Discussion

Challenges in Curriculum Interpretation

The findings indicate that teachers face persistent challenges in interpreting the general competencies outlined in the *Kurikulum 2013* into clear, measurable classroom objectives. This suggests that the curriculum's broad framework, while intended to promote flexibility and contextual adaptation, often leaves teachers uncertain about how to operationalize abstract competencies such as "express" or "compose" into specific learning outcomes. Many teachers rely on their own assumptions or textbook guidance rather than standardized performance indicators,

leading to inconsistencies in teaching and evaluation. This finding underscores the need for more explicit curriculum guidelines and professional development programs to help teachers translate national competencies into practical classroom objectives that reflect students' actual writing abilities.

The problem is compounded by the curriculum's strong orientation toward genre-based writing pedagogy, which requires students to master various text types such as narrative, recount, report, descriptive, and analytical exposition. While genre-based teaching is theoretically beneficial Hyland, (2003) in practice it demands that teachers formulate different instructional goals for each genre goals that address the specific linguistic features, text structure, and rhetorical purpose of each. Teachers in this study reported uncertainty about how to differentiate objectives across genres, with one teacher asking, *"Is the objective the same for narrative and report text? I always have to guess or simplify it."*

This reflects a lack of scaffolding in curriculum documents. As Emilia, (2011) pointed out, while genre-based pedagogy has been included in Indonesia's English curriculum since the early 2000s, its successful implementation requires systematic teacher training and concrete instructional tools, both of which are often lacking. Without these supports, many teachers fall back on overly general or recycled objectives, such as *"Students are able to write a descriptive paragraph,"* without specifying the expected structure, cohesion markers, or thematic development. Moreover, the lack of alignment between curriculum documents and assessment standards creates further confusion. Teachers are unsure whether their instructional goals should aim for fluency, accuracy, or genre mastery and whether these are assessed in school-level or national exams. This misalignment discourages innovation and contributes to a culture of compliance rather than reflective teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2020).

In sum, the challenge of curriculum interpretation stems from both document design (vagueness and abstraction) and systemic issues (insufficient training, top-down policy implementation, and weak feedback loops). Without clearer models and sustained professional development, teachers are left to navigate this complexity largely on their own. Additionally, this challenge highlights a deeper issue of curriculum enactment versus curriculum design, where teachers are positioned not as co-constructors but as implementers of top-down educational policy. In such contexts, the professional judgment and contextual expertise of teachers are often undervalued, leading to what Priestley et al., (2015) describe as a reduction in *teacher agency*. When teachers are expected to "deliver" rather than "interpret and adapt" the curriculum meaningfully, they tend to prioritize compliance over creativity. Consequently, the process of setting learning objectives becomes a bureaucratic exercise rather than a reflective pedagogical act. This limits teachers' ability to integrate local cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic realities into their objectives a particularly crucial aspect in diverse educational settings like Indonesia. Addressing

this issue requires not only technical training in curriculum interpretation but also a paradigm shift that empowers teachers as curriculum designers who can localize competencies and articulate learning goals responsive to their students' contexts and identities.

Constraints from Student-Related Factors

The findings reveal that diverse student proficiency levels and affective barriers significantly constrain teachers in formulating realistic learning objectives for writing instruction. The presence of mixed-ability classrooms compels teachers to modify or simplify intended outcomes to accommodate varying levels of readiness, echoing Tomlinson, (2017)'s view that differentiated instruction is essential in heterogeneous EFL contexts. This adaptation, while necessary, often leads to compromises in achieving standardized curriculum goals. Furthermore, low student motivation, writing anxiety, and negative attitudes toward writing exacerbate these difficulties, limiting teachers' ability to pursue higher-order objectives. Consistent with Dörnyei, (2005)'s concept of language learning demotivation, such affective factors hinder meaningful engagement with writing tasks. Consequently, these findings suggest that addressing both cognitive diversity and emotional readiness is crucial for enabling teachers to design attainable yet challenging learning objectives that reflect students' actual capabilities.

Students' reluctance is often fueled by past failure, limited vocabulary, and lack of exposure to writing models. In Indonesian classrooms, writing is typically taught in a product-oriented manner, with minimal emphasis on prewriting or drafting stages (Cahyono & Widiati, 2011). Without scaffolding, struggling students become disengaged, making it nearly impossible for teachers to maintain high-level objectives. Moreover, in large classrooms, individualized feedback a crucial component of writing instruction is often unfeasible. Teachers must generalize instruction, which risks under-challenging more advanced learners and overwhelming weaker ones. This tension reinforces the necessity for differentiated instruction and tiered learning objectives, but many teachers lack the time, training, or resources to implement such strategies (Zacharias, 2013).

In response to these issues, some teachers opt to simplify objectives, focus on specific writing components (e.g., using connectors or writing topic sentences), or group students by level. While these strategies show flexibility, they also highlight the systemic gap between policy and practice curriculum planners expect uniform outputs, but teachers must make micro-level decisions daily to ensure equity and engagement. The findings underscore the importance of integrating student affect and readiness into lesson planning. As (Nation, 2009)notes, writing success in EFL is not only a matter of linguistic competence but also of motivation, confidence, and clear instructional support. Addressing student-related constraints requires holistic

planning that includes not just pedagogical technique but emotional intelligence and classroom management strategies.

Beyond these pedagogical and affective dimensions, the issue also reflects a systemic misalignment between curriculum expectations and classroom realities in Indonesian EFL education. National standards tend to assume a homogeneous level of student proficiency and access to learning resources, which rarely matches the conditions teachers encounter on the ground, particularly in public and rural schools. This structural gap places teachers in a constant state of negotiation balancing accountability to the curriculum with responsiveness to learners' diverse needs. As a result, teachers' professional agency is often exercised defensively, through adaptation and simplification, rather than proactively through innovation. This reinforces what (Richards & Farrell, 2020) describe as "pedagogical compromise," where the ideal of achieving complex writing outcomes is constrained by systemic inequities in learning conditions. To move beyond this, curriculum design and teacher training must recognize diversity not as an obstacle but as a foundational consideration, embedding flexibility and differentiation as standard components of instructional planning and assessment in EFL writing education.

Instructional Design Limitations

The findings indicate that many EFL teachers lack sufficient training in instructional design, particularly in formulating clear and pedagogically grounded learning objectives for writing lessons. Although teachers are generally aware of frameworks such as Bloom's Taxonomy and the *Kurikulum 2013* competence descriptors, they often struggle to translate these theoretical models into practical applications. Limited instructional design competence often leads teachers to reuse outdated objectives without evaluating their relevance or alignment with assessment standards. Such practices suggest a gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom implementation, resulting in objectives that may not effectively support skill progression in writing. Therefore, this finding highlights the need for continuous professional development programs focused on hands-on training in instructional design, enabling teachers to develop contextually appropriate, measurable, and outcome-oriented objectives that reflect students' real learning needs.

Several teachers attributed these shortcomings to limited exposure to instructional design in pre-service or in-service training. The curriculum courses they attended often focused on curriculum theory or generic lesson plan formats rather than practical workshops on developing SMART objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound). This lack of applied training is echoed in studies by Richards & Farrell, (2020), who argue that many teacher education programs especially in EFL contexts tend to emphasize subject knowledge at the expense of pedagogical design competence.

Additionally, teachers cited administrative overload as a major barrier. Many described spending excessive time on lesson documentation, attendance logs, media preparation, and bureaucratic reports. One participant stated, “Writing *lesson plans*, *inputting data*, *preparing learning media*... I don’t have enough time to reflect on the objectives I make.” This echoes the critique from Widodo, (2016) that objective-setting in Indonesian schools is often approached as a compliance task, reducing it to a routine formality rather than a space for pedagogical reflection and creativity. Moreover, the lack of peer collaboration and mentoring further isolates teachers in their instructional design efforts. While some respondents mentioned informal sharing of lesson plans, there was little evidence of structured collaboration or professional learning communities where teachers could co-construct, review, or refine learning objectives together. According to Lieberman and Miller, (2008), such collaborative environments are key for shifting from isolated teaching to inquiry-driven professional development.

Ultimately, the data suggest that teachers operate in a structurally unsupported instructional culture, where the design of learning objectives is under-prioritized in both policy and practice. To bridge this gap, there is a need not only for targeted training but also for systemic reform in how instructional design is positioned within teacher workloads and school accountability systems.

Furthermore, this limitation in instructional design reflects a broader disconnect between teacher professionalization and curriculum innovation within Indonesia’s EFL system. While educational reforms such as Kurikulum 2013 promote outcome-based and student-centered learning, many teachers lack the pedagogical literacy and institutional support to actualize these principles in daily practice. As Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) emphasize, curriculum reform without parallel investment in teacher capacity-building risks creating a gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. In the case of writing instruction, this manifests in objectives that are theoretically aligned with national standards but pedagogically shallow failing to scaffold students’ linguistic and cognitive development effectively. Strengthening instructional design, therefore, requires a dual focus: enhancing teachers’ conceptual understanding of curriculum frameworks and empowering them with practical tools such as exemplar objective banks, collaborative planning sessions, and reflective evaluation models to make informed pedagogical decisions. By embedding instructional design as a sustained professional practice rather than an administrative task, schools can foster a culture of continuous improvement that links curriculum intent with tangible learning outcomes in EFL writing classrooms.

Adaptive Strategies for Objective Setting

The findings suggest that, despite various pedagogical and contextual constraints, EFL teachers demonstrate a degree of pedagogical agency through the

use of adaptive strategies in setting learning objectives. Consistent with Priestley et al., (2015)'s notion of teacher agency, these strategies reflect teachers' professional capacity to make reflective and contextually responsive decisions. The use of backward design Wiggins and McTighe, (2005) enables teachers to ensure coherence between objectives, learning activities, and assessment, promoting greater goal clarity. Likewise, the application of pre-assessment allows teachers to gauge students' proficiency levels and design differentiated objectives suited to their needs, aligning with Tomlinson and Tomlinson, (2017) 's emphasis on assessment-for-learning. Overall, these adaptive practices illustrate that even within the limitations of institutional and curricular frameworks, teachers actively construct meaningful, realistic, and measurable objectives that enhance instructional effectiveness in EFL writing classrooms.

Several teachers also emphasized the value of real-life writing tasks as a way to make learning objectives more relevant and engaging. These included writing personal emails, job application letters, complaint letters, or birthday invitations texts students are more likely to encounter in their actual lives. As Hyland, (2019) notes, such authentic tasks help to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and communicative competence and increase student motivation.

In addition, a few teachers leveraged technology-based tools to reinforce objectives and provide real-time feedback. Applications such as Grammarly, Quill, and Google Docs were used to support error correction, vocabulary building, and paragraph organization. These tools were cited as helping teachers monitor progress and adapt objectives in response to student performance. Zou et al., (2021) found that digital writing tools can enhance both learner autonomy and instructional clarity when used to scaffold writing tasks aligned with explicit goals.

Another adaptive practice involved setting process-based objectives rather than outcome-based ones, especially for lower-proficiency learners. For instance, instead of requiring a complete narrative text, the objective might be: *"Students can draft a narrative paragraph using a sequencing outline."* This form of scaffolding reflects principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT), where instruction is structured around achieving stages of communicative competence (Willis & Willis, 2007).

Some teachers also reported collaborating with colleagues informally through WhatsApp groups or teacher forums to exchange samples of learning objectives and lesson ideas. Although these collaborations were not institutionally formalized, they served as peer-driven professional development. This supports the concept of teacher learning communities as proposed by Lieberman and Miller, (2008), where shared practice leads to collective growth and instructional improvement.

In sum, although many systemic barriers persist, these strategies illustrate that Indonesian EFL teachers are not passive recipients of curriculum policy. Instead, they exhibit adaptive professionalism Sachs, (2016), actively modifying instructional

design based on student data, assessment demands, and real-world relevance an approach critical for effective EFL writing instruction in dynamic classroom contexts. Moreover, these adaptive strategies reveal the emergence of teacher resilience and situated professionalism in the face of systemic constraints. Rather than merely complying with prescriptive curriculum mandates, teachers demonstrate a form of *contextual pragmatism* a dynamic negotiation between ideal pedagogical standards and the realities of their students' linguistic, emotional, and cultural needs. In the context of EFL writing, this adaptability becomes a critical skill, allowing teachers to sustain instructional quality despite limited institutional resources or training. However, while these practices exemplify teacher agency, they also underscore the need for systemic recognition and institutional support. Without formalized structures to share and sustain these adaptive innovations such as communities of practice, digital repositories, or mentoring programs teachers' creativity risks remaining isolated and unsystematic. Therefore, to harness and amplify such adaptive professionalism, educational policymakers must design professional development frameworks that acknowledge teachers not just as implementers but as active co-creators of pedagogical solutions in Indonesia's evolving EFL landscape.

Institutional and Professional Needs

The findings reveal a strong demand among teachers for sustained, practice-oriented professional development programs that specifically address the challenges of setting and aligning learning objectives for EFL writing instruction. This indicates that existing training opportunities, often limited to theoretical curriculum orientations, fail to meet teachers' practical needs in designing objectives that reflect students' diverse proficiency levels. Consistent with Widodo, (2016), the lack of continuous and context-sensitive professional support restricts teachers' capacity to implement curriculum principles effectively. Participants' emphasis on hands-on guidance highlights the need for institutional initiatives that integrate theory with classroom application through mentoring, collaborative lesson design, and reflective practice. Overall, this finding underscores the crucial role of school leadership and educational authorities in institutionalizing professional development structures that empower teachers to design pedagogically sound and contextually relevant learning objectives for writing.

The findings also highlight the persistent gap between experience and expertise, suggesting that years of service alone do not guarantee mastery of instructional design without targeted support. Among the most requested supports were: Workshops on writing pedagogy, particularly those that integrate curriculum unpacking, objective formulation, and classroom practice; Annotated model lesson plans, which explicitly map learning objectives to instructional strategies, student activities, and rubric-based assessment criteria; Collaborative teacher forums, both in-person and virtual, where teachers could share challenges, co-develop lesson

components, and engage in reflective inquiry (e.g., lesson study or peer coaching cycles).

Furthermore, this aligns with Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) , who argue that effective professional development is job-embedded, collaborative, ongoing, and centered around content-specific teaching challenges. In this case, the teaching of writing in EFL classrooms where outcomes are complex and highly dependent on instructional clarity requires a space for professional dialogue, co-construction of objectives, and evidence-informed experimentation. In addition, some participants noted that existing instructional guidance focuses too narrowly on standardized test preparation or curriculum interpretation but rarely addresses how to translate syllabus goals into student-centered, achievable, and cognitively appropriate writing tasks. This omission reflects what Borg, (2018) calls the “invisibility of teacher cognition” in education systems where teachers’ thought processes, knowledge construction, and local expertise are underutilized in policy and curriculum support structures.

To address these gaps, the development of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), online micro-credential programs, or school-based pedagogical mentoring is highly recommended. Such approaches would not only reduce teacher isolation but also foster a culture of reflective professionalism, where teachers can continually refine their instructional goals based on student data, curriculum shifts, and peer dialogue. Beyond the need for continuous training, these findings point to a structural and cultural shift required within educational institutions to sustain professional growth. Teachers emphasized that without supportive leadership and institutional policies, even well-designed training programs risk becoming temporary interventions rather than catalysts for long-term pedagogical change. In the Indonesian EFL context, fostering such a culture means moving away from hierarchical supervision models focused on compliance and documentation toward developmental supervision that encourages experimentation, reflection, and teacher-led inquiry. Additionally, providing teachers with time allocations for lesson study, peer observation, and collaborative planning would institutionalize reflective practice as part of everyday teaching routines. Ultimately, institutional reform that positions teachers as active knowledge producers rather than passive recipients of top-down directives is essential for ensuring that the formulation of learning objectives in EFL writing evolves into a sustainable, context-responsive professional practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the multifaceted challenges faced by Indonesian EFL teachers in setting learning objectives for writing instruction in senior high school contexts. The findings reveal that teachers struggle primarily with interpreting broad curriculum standards, accommodating diverse student abilities, and applying

instructional design principles. Despite these challenges, many educators exhibit adaptive professionalism by implementing strategies such as backward design, pre-assessment, real-life task integration, and the use of digital tools. The findings also highlight systemic constraints, including insufficient professional development, limited institutional support, and the lack of collaborative platforms. While the curriculum encourages competency-based instruction, the translation of these standards into practical, measurable, and context-sensitive learning objectives remains difficult without robust guidance and ongoing support.

This study affirms that EFL writing instruction requires more than content knowledge or procedural compliance. It necessitates pedagogical agility, contextual awareness, and sustained opportunities for professional growth. Teachers are willing to innovate and adapt, but they need systems that recognize and support their efforts in a practical, continuous, and collaborative manner. In conclusion, effective learning objective design is not an isolated act but a professional competency that thrives under the right policy, institutional culture, and pedagogical infrastructure. Supporting teachers in this area is vital for improving the quality of writing instruction and enhancing student learning outcomes in Indonesia's EFL classrooms.

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