

# Ted Aoki's Curriculum Perspectives and Their Implications for Indonesian EFL Teaching

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*Abstract: Curriculum as the standard guide that sets expectations for student learning achievement and teacher accountability has become central to the Indonesian education system. The instability of curriculum and the centralized approach of the educational system have become challenges for education in Indonesia. Often teachers are snared between ministry-planned curriculum and their own experiences and knowledge. Ted Aoki, a Canadian curriculum scholar, introduced the concept of curriculum as a lived experience to describe the circumstances that teachers experience worldwide. This article discusses the Indonesian national curriculum within the lens of Aoki's lived experience curriculum concept, specifically in English language teaching.*

*Keywords: Curriculum, Ted Aoki, lived experience, English language teaching*

## Introduction

Improving the quality of national education has become a foremost priority for the Indonesian government (Rosser, 2018). Although the Indonesian government has allocated 20% of the national budget to education (World Bank, 2013), the quality of Indonesian education has not yet improved. According to the OECD report in 2019, Indonesian students' achievements in international standardized assessments have been relatively poor compared to neighboring countries in Southeast Asia (OECD, 2019). Indonesian students performed lower than the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science. According to a 2016 study conducted by Central Connecticut State University in New Britain which measured literate behaviors and supporting resources, Indonesia is the second lowest of 61 countries in the World's Most Literate Nations (WMLN) (Miller & McKenna, 2016).

Looking at this data, educational reform is required to improve the country's national education quality. Reforms must focus on strengthening the national curriculum by considering teachers' and students' voices and experience in designing the national curriculum, improving the quality and welfare of teachers, and improving educational facilities and infrastructures. Since Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch and Japanese in 1945, the curriculum has already undergone several changes. Therefore, simply transforming and renewing the curriculum is not an adequate solution without simultaneously improving the curriculum's content and addressing disparities in teacher quality and infrastructure access. Curriculum reform is required to meet social, political, and technological developments and achieve educational quality. However, the change must be accompanied by teacher readiness in implementing the new curriculum and reinforced with sufficient resources.

According to Riadi (2019), the instability of the Indonesian national curriculum has impacted teachers and students. The constant changes in curriculum have not improved students' learning. While teachers are the spearhead of curriculum implements, they face great difficulty implementing the nationally mandated curriculum due to a lack of resources and information (Riadi, 2019). Teachers further from urban areas require more time and resources to adapt to changes, creating inequalities and disparities between rural and urban schools. Teachers are often trapped between the mandated national curriculum and the combination of their own teaching experience in addition to their students' unique cultural backgrounds and interests. Aoki, a prominent curriculum scholar, proposes the concept of curriculum as a *lived experience* (Aoki, 1993; 2004). Carson (2004) states that Aoki understood that being a teacher means living in an "uncomfortable space of tension between the curriculum-as-plan, and the curriculum-as-lived in actual schools and classrooms" (p. 2). Aoki's curriculum perspectives are related to Indonesian teachers' position. This article seeks to describe the Indonesian national curriculum within the lens of Aoki's lived experience concept, specifically within the field of English language teaching.

## Ted Aoki and Lived Experience Curriculum

Ted Tetsuo Aoki is a leading Japanese-Canadian curriculum scholar who was born and raised in Canada. Aoki began his teaching career in the Alberta public school system when he was nineteen years old. He later joined the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education where he was eventually appointed the Department Head of Secondary Education. Aoki worked with Max Van Manen, a graduate student writing his dissertation on a phenomenological study, and

William F. Pinar, who was writing *Currere*<sup>4</sup>. Aoki, Pinar, and Van Manen began the conceptualization movement in curriculum and pedagogy (Irwin, 2010). Pinar (2003) stated that Aoki was “the man who taught us to hear curriculum in a ‘new key’” (p. 2). Aoki has influenced the educational field with his phenomenological, post-structural, and multicultural ways of thinking (Irwin, 2010). He has broadened curriculum to encompass cultures, languages, and lived experiences. Aokian philosophy explores the concept of a lived curriculum alongside a planned curriculum and the role of culture in curriculum.

Aoki lays his curriculum theory on the tensions between two opposing concepts. The first concept, called the *curriculum as planned*, refers to the teaching units, lesson plans, learning objectives, and expectations designed by ministry officials or schools outside of the living classroom (Aoki, 2004). The second, which he labels the *curriculum as lived* (lived experience), refers to the reality of what actually happens in the classroom based on the dynamic relationship between students’ and teachers’ living experiences (Aoki, 2004). In other words, in lived experience curriculum, teachers educate students based on their own teaching experiences and students’ backgrounds and distinctiveness.

According to Aoki (2004), curriculum as planned often neglects teachers’ skills and students’ different learning styles and interests. In this type of curriculum, the planners’ vision of the world is infused in teachers, and this belief always includes their own interests and assumptions about how and what knowledge should be taught (Aoki, 2004). Teachers become merely doers because they are trained to effectively deliver the official plan. They then turn into a mechanical tool that has to supply the same form of knowledge fabrication. They can no longer adapt teaching strategies and learning materials to accommodate students’ different levels, backgrounds, and needs. Consequently, classroom activities are filled with rote learning, which places a boundary on students’ creativity, originality, and happiness.

In contrast, curriculum as a lived experience focuses on every individual student’s uniqueness and ties that distinctiveness with the teacher’s professional experience in the classroom. In this context, individual differences are acknowledged, accommodated, and appreciated. As a result, teachers have more freedom to create lessons tailored to their unique students.

The tensions exist within what Aoki calls the “zone of between” (Aoki, 2004, p. 161). According to Aoki (2004), “this is the dynamic, living space where pedagogic touch, tact, attunement that acknowledges in some deep sense the uniqueness of every teaching situation” (p. 165). This zone is the space in between planned and lived curriculum where educators are left to interpret and implement the curriculum. Aoki (1993) states that “the prosaic discourse of the external curriculum planners... and the poetic, phenomenological and hermeneutic discourse in which life is embodied” are both significant (p. 261). Educators may emerge from the space between planned and lived curriculum to discover effective strategies to incorporate both curricula.

In *Teaching as Indwelling between Two Worlds* (Aoki, 2004), Aoki describes the situation with which many teachers struggle. He describes it as “living in tensionality - a tensionality that emerges, in part, from indwelling in a zone between two curriculum worlds; curriculum as a plan and curriculum as lived experiences” (p. 159). Aoki’s concept reflects not only the reality of the planned curriculum in Canada where he has taught, but also the curriculum in Indonesia. Often, teachers are trapped between the nationally mandated curriculum and the reality they face in the classroom. As a result, they execute prescribed lessons to fulfill their obligations without considering the needs and characteristics of their learners. Yet, in each classroom, there are often learners who come from different learning backgrounds or cultures and thus require a different approach.

## Curriculum Development in Indonesia Over the Years

The Indonesian national curriculum has been a trial-and-error process for a long time. Since the country’s independence in 1945, there have been eleven national curriculum changes - in 1947, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, 2006, 2013, and several revisions of the 2013 curriculum (Alwasilah, 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> *Currere* is a term developed by Pinar in the early 1970s. The word comes from a Latin word (infinitive verb form) meaning “to run” and refers to curriculum as “the educational experience of a complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2015, p. 1).

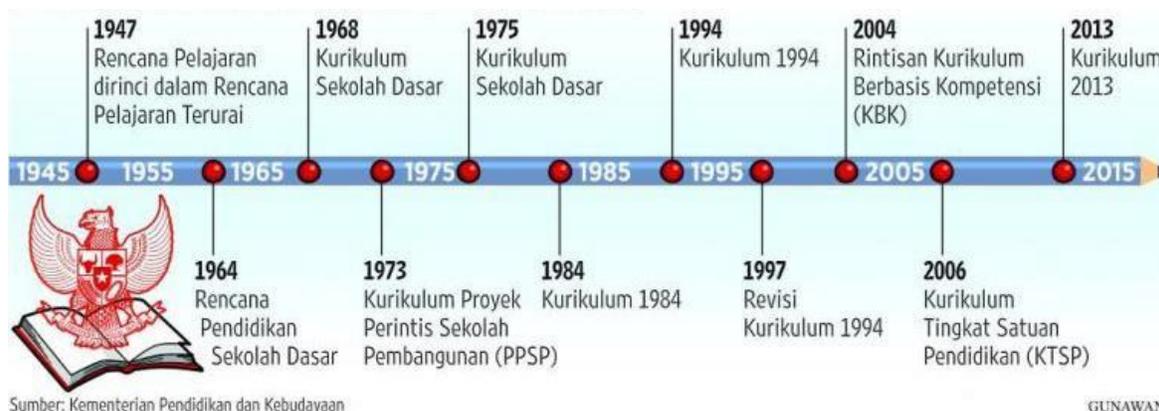


Figure 1. *Curriculum Development in Indonesia*  
(Source: Indonesian Ministry of Education)

As seen in the diagram above, the national curriculum has been changed almost every five years. Almost every newly appointed education minister has introduced a new curriculum that tends to last for a few years. Instead of focusing on improving and strengthening the national curriculum, according to Soekisno (2007), curriculum amendments in Indonesia are related to political issues, government systems, or social, cultural, economic, scientific, and technological revolutions in society.

These inconstant curriculum conditions have challenged both students and teachers. Lacking resources, infrastructure, and proper training in developing syllabi and teaching units, teachers are forced to design their lessons based on the national curriculum (Azhar, 2013). Due to the above-mentioned disparities between urban and rural areas, teachers in rural areas often fail to catch up with current reforms. Despite numerous changes to the national curriculum, neither the quality of education nor teachers' performance has improved (Riadi, 2019).

### Lived Experience in Curriculum 2013 for English Language Learning

Curriculum 2013 is the newest nation-wide curriculum to be implemented. According to Azhar (2017), Indonesia's 2013 curriculum is a competency-based learning system derived from the experiential learning paradigm. The experiential learning paradigm was first introduced by David Kolb in 1984. In his learning paradigm, learners construct their knowledge through the transformation of experience (McLeod, 2013). Effective learning can only happen when a person completes a cycle of the four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. First, a person has a concrete experience that serves as the basis for consideration. Then, in reflective observation, the individual reflects on their experience before making any judgments. They then develop ideas to explain their experience in the abstract conceptualization stage. Finally, the learner applies what they learned in their original experience to solve a problem in another situation (Kolb, 1984 as cited in McLeod, 2013). Dewey's (2011) and Aoki's (2004) ideas were based on Kolb's model of learning. However, both Aoki and Dewey look at both teachers as learners of experiences instead of learners alone. For Aoki (2004), teacher and student lived experiences are vital for learning to take place. In developing a curriculum, the curriculum maker of a mandated curriculum often disregards the expertise and knowledge that teachers have attained from reflections on their daily conversations and interactions with their students in the classroom (Aoki, 2005; Okyere, 2018). Aoki (2004) further claims that curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation are grounded exclusively in the 'technicist' orientation that gives minimal consideration to human beings and the world.

Since standardization and evaluation are still part of the Indonesian education system, experiential learning is only attached symbolically to the 2013 curriculum. Moreover, students' achievements are still measured by high stakes testing (Azhar, 2017). Research on the Indonesian Curriculum 2013's implementation in primary schools shows that textbooks are centralized, which clearly neglects local wisdom and learners' cultural backgrounds (Alwasilah, 2013; Azhar, 2019). Textbooks also tend to position learners as passive recipients of knowledge. What is worth learning is predetermined by the textbook, and an overwhelming academic dependency on the teacher's authority is encouraged.

Learning is limited to what the official textbook and the teachers accept as truth. The teaching and learning activities sourced from the teachers' books encourage learners to believe that what the teacher says is unquestionable. Moreover, the student's competency is assessed only through a standardized exam that determines only the student's level of knowledge in certain prescribed subjects.

In the field of EFL in Indonesia, the English Language curriculum has been transformed from a grammar-based approach to a communicative functional approach. However, in the national mandated Curriculum 2013, the content of lessons, teaching methods, and standardized exams are still centralized. This situation has left teachers with the dualism that Aoki (2004) describes, in which there is tension between the curriculum as planned and the curriculum as lived. Many teachers strictly follow the planned curriculum rather than accommodating students' particular learning interests. In their English Language classrooms, there is a strong focus on the grammatical aspects of learning and on topics that will appear on the standardized test. Consequently, EFL learners in Indonesia are passive receivers of what they are being taught instead of becoming the agents of their own learning. Freire (2005) referred to this model as "banking education," where teachers have domesticated their students by depositing knowledge into them. For such students, learning becomes monotonous and uninteresting. Students come to school to fulfill the attendance requirement for participation in the national standardized test, and they only retain what they have learned for long enough to pass the test.

English language learners are required to learn four communication skills in order to master the language. The four English skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, are structured by two modes of communication; productive and receptive skills. Productive skills consist of speaking and writing and receptive skills include listening and reading. In English class, it is widely known that the development of productive language skills is limited since the learning is emphasized mostly on listening and reading skills (Alwasilah, 2013) with a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

Although Curriculum 2013 for English language learning shows promise for improving learner language competence, very little space is given within lessons for teachers to accommodate students' needs. While some teachers are eager to develop holistic language learning grounded in each student's learning experiences and interests within the boundary of the planned ministry curriculum, they find themselves struggling due to a lack of support and resources. Despite these challenges, Cone (2007) suggests that such teachers may find themselves investing extra effort, work, and reflection to develop lessons that match their students' interests and are suitable within their unique classroom contexts. In this situation, the promotion of communicative language skills by integrating all different language skills through various activities should be observed. Aoki (2003) advises that living pedagogy is a site of uncertainty, hesitancy, and ambiguity. Yet it is also a site of possibilities and hope that provoke and motivate teachers to pursue their calling as teachers and to live peacefully between the planned and the lived curriculums. The curriculum "planners" must be open to and adjust to these possibilities developing along the ontological lines through existential modes of understanding, providing the space that Aoki called "situational interpretive" in the midst of the tension (Aoki, 2003).

Having a planned curriculum does not prohibit teachers from developing their own lesson plans. Planning, budgeting, and creativity are required to create and deliver instructional materials that are relevant to a particular set of learners. Teachers of English should be able to put themselves in the students' place and look at the lesson from their viewpoint so that they can see where students may be struggling. For example, if the students lack vocabulary, the lesson should integrate vocabulary instructions through continuously developing various language skills. It is also essential for a teacher to notice the different ways in which each student participates in a lesson. Plans frequently need adjustment based on students' responses. This situation is when teaching must become improvisational, allowing for and capitalizing on constantly changing settings (Aoki, 2003). Cone (2007) suggests that "lesson plans serve as a foundation, a roadmap of the intended direction, yet they need to allow for the exploration of the new paths that might emerge" (p. 37). More importantly, constant self-reflection on teaching and learning is beneficial for the teacher to observe which strategies need to be improved and which should be eliminated. While the national curriculum might change, teachers are the ones responsible for implementing it. In addition, they are responsible for ensuring that each learner reaches their potential. Van Manen (1991) states the following:

A teacher who is more than a mere instructor is constantly required to know instantly what is pedagogically the right thing to say or do. In other words, like a jazz-musician who knows how to improvise in playing a musical composition (and, thus, charm the audience), so the teacher knows how to improvise the curriculum pedagogically (for the good of the students). (p. 160)

## Where to Go From Here?

The teacher is the most fundamental aspect of any curriculum. Teachers have a unique ability and responsibility to reconcile curriculum practices in the classroom with the ministry planned curriculum. Indonesian EFL teachers might already have knowledge of general strategies to teach the components of language skills. If they are free to draw on this knowledge and their experiences, they can benefit from both without becoming trapped in the tension. In the article *A Living Intentionality* (Aoki, 2004), Miss O describes her experiences teaching in the zone between the two concepts of the curricula. As professionals, teachers are required to follow the national curriculum; as human beings, teachers care deeply about their students' education. They realize every student and teaching strategy has unique characteristics (Aoki, 2004). Teachers feel the same responsibility for their students as those students' parents – to always provide the best for every unique child, no matter the extra effort required.

As Van Manen (1991) explains, pedagogy is an intertwining of educating and parenting. A pedagogical moment thus becomes a moment when the teacher experiences a sense of softening, of opening up, and of embodying and acting on their inner senses of morality and care for the students they teach. In these moments, the teacher can dwell amidst the tensions of teaching (Aoki, 2004), step beyond the labels that often hide their students, and truly see and connect to the child that is in front of them (Van Manen, 1991).

Ted Aoki (1993) uses the lived experience curriculum to explain the substantial relationship between students and teachers, lessons, classroom activities, assessments, and school system culture. John Dewey (2011) earlier argued that learning is a social experience and that students will prosper in an environment where they are free to experience and interact with the curriculum. Both Aoki and Dewey advocate for a learning experience that focuses simultaneously on students' current and future developmental needs. These foundational understandings of curriculum are as accurate today as they were when they were first written. What has changed is how teachers fulfill these aspirations.

Teachers can no longer robotically follow and implement government plans, a curriculum maker's ideas, or a textbook author's strategies. They must ask themselves what will benefit their students most to learn, and how will they learn it best. Teachers must move away from a machine-like teaching style and become real, human teachers who consider each of their students' unique learning experiences and interests.

## Conclusion

Aoki's (1993) lived experience curriculum suggests that lived curriculums can and should vary in every classroom. It is difficult for a teacher to plan a course without knowing the dynamic situation of the classroom. Therefore, teachers must use their own experience in the classroom to bring the prescribed curriculum to life. Teachers are both constrained and supported by macrostructures such as schools and school districts, and more massive political and societal changes are needed. As Tilley and Taylor (2013) state, teachers and students shape, construct, and redefine their engagement with curricular knowledge and materials in response to the experiences they live out in classrooms. Students change each year. Their backgrounds and experiences are constantly shifting and morphing. Therefore, teachers must also change and adapt curriculum to each student using the experience and knowledge they possess.

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