

# Exploring Grade Two Teachers' Interpretation of New Curriculum Pedagogical Concepts in the Teaching of Writing

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discover teachers' interpretation of the pedagogical concepts informing the underlying philosophical framework of the curriculum implemented in Indonesia when the study on which this paper is based was conducted. The curriculum was Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan (KTSP), meaning school-based curriculum. The teachers' understandings of the pedagogical concepts were examined using the setting of writing lesson teaching in grade 2. The study used a qualitative method that involved 10 grade two teachers from 10 elementary schools in Makassar, Indonesia. Data collection techniques were classroom observations, informal discussion at the end of each observation, and interviews. Although the KTSP committed to distance from a traditional view of teaching and learning, the study found that the teachers' interpretations of the pedagogical concepts of the KTSP in the teaching of writing appeared to echo this view. The study also found that the teachers interpreted the pedagogical concepts through competencies of writing lesson that grade two students should achieve. Although other forms of curricula have replaced the KTSP, the findings from this study could inform the government and other relevant decision-makers about teachers' difficulties in understanding change that will have an implication on policy and practice regarding the support given to teachers in implementing existing and future curricula in Indonesia and different contexts.

**Keywords**—Curriculum change, writing in grade two, Indonesia

## INTRODUCTION

Several educational reforms happened during the last few decades globally. These reforms took various forms, such as educational system changes, curriculum content and organization, and classroom practices (Marsh, 2004). Cheng (2005) stated that the occurrence of these reforms was to encounter the challenges of globalization, technological advancements, economic change, and worldwide rivalry in the twenty-first century. Changes in education have manifested in a variety of ways. A paradigm shift in learning, teaching, and assessment is one of the reform movements that have frequently taken place (Cheng, 2005; Gopinathan & Deng, 2006; Park, 2008; De Segovia & Hardison, 2009; Park & Sung, 2013; Ulumudin et al., 2020; Pristiana et al., 2022). Of particular importance for this study, these reform movements have occurred in Indonesia (Sulfasyah, 2013; Sulfasyah et al., 2015).

A new curriculum was introduced in 2006 by the Ministry of National Education (MONE), Republic of Indonesia, to replace the Competency-Based Curriculum, also referred to as the KBK. The name of this new curriculum was Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan (KTSP), which roughly translates to "school-based curriculum" in English. The KTSP followed the KBK's competency-based model (Muhaimin et al., 2008). The KTSP was designed for development by individual schools through referral to the competencies and content standards outlined in the government's curriculum policies and guidelines (Muhaimin et al.,

2008). It was to ensure that all students in Indonesia achieved minimum standards regardless of their geographical area. Despite the minimum standards, schools had the autonomy to determine standards more complex than required if their local context supported that. In addition, schools needing help to develop their KTSP were permitted to adopt or adapt the model exemplified by the government in the Curriculum Guidelines (Muhaimin et al., 2008).

The Curriculum Policies and Guidelines governing the implementation of the KTSP underlined the need for significant changes in teaching and learning practices in all learning areas of the KTSP, in addition to transitioning to competency-based and school-based curriculum development. The use of student-centeredness, active learning, and the transformation of the teacher into a facilitator were just a few of the changes that were advocated. These modifications seemed to be influenced by the constructivist philosophy (BSNP, 2006; Muslich, 2007; Pusat Kurikulum, 2007).

Student-centered learning (SCL), encouraged in the KTSP, is considered fundamental to a constructivist approach to teaching and learning (Jones, 2007; Brown, 2008). It is a pedagogical approach that considers students' needs, abilities, learning styles, and interests in planning, teaching, and assessment (Jones, 2007; Brown, 2008). SCL embodies a paradigm shift from a focus on teaching to one on learning (Weimer, 2002). In this approach, students are believed to learn better when they can build their knowledge and understanding, suggesting that teachers cannot convey knowledge to students. Instead, the students should participate actively in the construction process of knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Weimer, 2002; Murdoch & Wilson, 2008; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010).

Hence, active learning, another pedagogical concept encouraged in the KTSP, is essential to knowledge building and is represented in SCL. Active learning is commonly defined as any teaching method that engages students in learning and encourages them to participate in meaningful learning activities (Prince, 2004). Active learning encourages students to work independently, in pairs, or groups and allows them to solve problems and take the initiative to build their understanding. In small-group discussions, role-playing, practical projects, and question-and-answer sessions, active learning can be presented. These activities can be accomplished through discovery, inquiry, and problem-solving learning strategies (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). Collaborative learning is one type of active learning that is significantly encouraged in the SCL classroom (Jensen, 1998). Collaboration can offer learners strong social scaffolding and support that promotes higher-order thinking, emphasizing the importance of interaction in SCL.

SCL necessitates the teacher's position as a learning facilitator since it entails students' active participation in learning through high levels of interaction (Weimer, 2002). The new curriculum in Indonesia encourages teachers to act as facilitators. It is expected that they would aid students in building knowledge and connecting previously learned material with new information to make sense of the new material (Good & Brophy, 2004; Soderman et al., 2005; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Tompkins et al., 2012). Teachers should foster a learning environment that empowers students to take ownership of their learning (Weimer, 2002). Teachers encourage students to actively participate in the process of knowledge construction by providing a variety of learning experiences. Various active learning methods cater to students' learning preferences (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

When this study (Sulfasyah, 2013), upon which this paper is based, was conducted, the KTSP had already been applied in all Indonesian schools for several years. However, little was known about how the teachers interpreted the pedagogical concepts of the KTSP. According to curriculum change theory, one of the elements influencing a change's successful implementation is how well teachers, who implement curriculum, comprehend the change (Fullan, 2007). Several studies in various contexts showed that teachers need more understanding of the curriculum to implement it as intended in the curriculum policy (Utomo, 2005; Blignaut, 2008; Park, 2008; DeSegovia & Hardison, 2009; Park & Sung, 2013).

In the context of this paper, teachers' comprehension of new concepts, specifically those pertaining to new pedagogy to them, was essential to the application of new teaching methods. Thus, this investigation fulfilled the research needs and focused on finding out how teachers interpreted some of the pedagogical concepts of the KTSP, which include:

1. student-centered learning;
2. active learning;
3. the role of the teacher as a facilitator.

The teachers' interpretations were assessed based on their understanding of the three key concepts of the KTSP about the teaching of writing in grade two elementary school. Before the KTSP was implemented, writing instruction was primarily based on a traditional teaching strategy focused on skill-based learning, teacher-directed input, and little student interaction. This has been the preeminent method of instruction in Indonesia for a long time (MBE Project, 2003; Sari, 2012). The KTSP's pedagogical concepts, such as the student-centered approach to writing instruction, necessitate a significant change in practice making them a convincing setting within which to study the teachers' interpretation of the KTSP's pedagogical concepts.

## METHOD

This paper reports on one aspect of an extensive study about the implementation of KTSP, which is how teachers interpreted key concepts of the KTSP concerning the teaching of writing in grade two elementary school. The study used a qualitative data collection method involving ten second-grade teachers from ten elementary schools in Makassar, Indonesia. All these teachers had been teaching for more than three years and reported to have participated in some degree of professional development regarding the KTSP organized by various organizations.

Qualitative data were gathered from these teachers through classroom observations, informal discussions at the end of each practical lesson, and interviews. The schools, which represented a range of contexts and socio-economic conditions, were selected using a convenience sampling method because they partnered with the university where the researcher worked as an education tutor responsible for the student's teaching practice program. Data triangulation was used to determine the nature of teachers' interpretation of the KTSP in their writing lessons. The data from classroom observations and interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2005). The themes in this study were recognized by identifying keywords, and the emerging patterns were coded and categorized. Before the data collection, the researcher obtained permission from all the parties involved.

## FINDINGS

This study found two crucial findings relating to the way teachers interpreted the KTSP concerning teaching writing to grade two students. Firstly, the teachers in this study seemed to interpret the KTSP using a traditional view of learning. Secondly, the teachers' interpretation was influenced by the writing lesson competencies that grade two students are expected to achieve, as stated in the KTSP Curriculum Policies.

Finding 1: Teachers interpreted the KTSP in writing through a traditional view of learning

The teachers in this study interpreted the key pedagogical concepts of the KTSP in writing through a traditional view of learning. This view has been broadly associated with a teacher-centered approach, where the teachers are concerned with transmitting information, and students receive it passively (Cox, 2005). In this approach, the students are typically involved in activities that demand low levels of thinking (Cox, 2005). The teachers' responses showed a traditional view of learning when asked to state their

interpretations of the KTSP pedagogical concepts in the interview. This view was also evident in the teaching observed in the classroom and their explanation during an informal discussion at the end of each observation. The influence of this view was evident in all the key concepts investigated in this study.

First, the influence of a traditional view of learning was identified in the teachers' understanding of student-centeredness. Teachers described student-centeredness as when students were actively involved in writing activities provided by their teachers.

One teacher, for example, stated in the interview:

Student-centered to me means students actively participate in classroom activities as requested by the curriculum. If the activities focus on writing, students should be active in doing their tasks regardless of the task type given.

This statement would appear to be in line with the concept of SCL. However, further analysis indicated that the teachers' view of active learning mirrored a traditional view. That is, the teachers defined being active as the students being seen practicing handwriting or copying texts provided by the teacher. These activities were the most frequently observed in the ten teachers' classrooms. Teachers also referred to low-level activities that were not cognitively demanding in the informal discussions after the classroom observations and during the semi-structured interviews. On two occasions during an observation, a teacher asked her students to write about their experiences during the holidays and a flood in their village. Although this type of activity would appear to involve higher-level thinking and composition, the emphasis of both occasions was on the neatness of the handwriting, correct spelling, and low-level punctuation skills, which echoed a traditional view of learning.

Second, the influence of a traditional view of learning was also evident in the teachers' interpretation of active learning, the second key pedagogical concept of the KTSP investigated in this study. During their interviews, teachers found defining what active learning meant to them difficult. When asked about this, they expressed their understanding by illustrating how they encouraged their students to be active in writing lessons. Their illustration appeared to be consistently influenced by a more traditional view where the teachers' role is dominant (Browne, 2009; Cox, 2005).

The teachers' examples of active learning indicated that they perceived the concept to involve students undertaking writing tasks or activities as instructed by their teacher. They noted that these included a range of activities, from copying texts to discussing writing. The observation results showed that there remained a focus on low-level writing skills. During the observation, the teachers sometimes modeled these tasks before the students were required to do them. Some teachers also saw students sharing their writing products with their peers in a group as part of active learning. Although working in groups is associated with student-centered pedagogy, this was not the case in this context. This type of sharing indicated during classroom observations referred to the activity where students exchanged their work with their friends to check each other's answers. One teacher, for example, expressed her understanding of this key concept as students doing what a teacher asks of them. This included students listening to texts read by the teacher, answering questions related to the text, and recounting the story in their own words. She stated:

Well, to make my students active, I will generally read a text or a story first from the textbook, ask them to listen, and later on, they will answer the questions related to the story. When they understand, I would ask them to rewrite the text or story using their own words and neat handwriting, and I would ask them to read their story. In this process, students should actively respond or do what the teacher asks them to.

Another teacher stated:

To make my students active, I need to show them first how to read a poem and explain the related materials.

Then I will point to several students to read the poem in front of the class. Next, they will write the poem in their books neatly using cursive writing. If time permits, they will compose their own poem based on the theme of the whole lesson. If not, it will be their homework.

Similarly, the teacher's interpretation of the role of a facilitator in writing, the third key concept of the KTSP investigated in this study, appeared to reflect a more traditional view of learning. When asked about their understanding of this new role, the teachers' responses of being a facilitator appear similar to a more traditional perspective where teachers dominate the lesson. Teachers described being a facilitator as explaining the lesson first, demonstrating it, and then asking the students to practice what had been modeled. This adds further evidence of teachers interpreting the role of a facilitator as a knowledge transmitter, which is highly influenced by the traditional view of teaching (Cox,2005). One teacher, for example, stated:

Being a facilitator does not mean that it is the students who have to be active all the time. Teachers must explain first, show examples using various media to ensure that students understand, and then have them practice it.

Finding 2: Teachers interpreted the KTSP in writing through the writing lesson competencies grade two students were expected to achieve

The second finding in this study revealed that the teachers appeared to interpret the key pedagogical concepts of the KTSP in writing through the competencies that grade two students were expected to achieve in this subject. When describing their interpretation of the pedagogical concept of the KTSP, most teachers consistently related it to writing skills as described in the competencies expected for grade two students. It was evident in their comments about all of the key concepts investigated. For example, some teachers stated that student-centeredness means students should write using neat handwriting. Others noted that students could copy poems and stories from the textbook in beautiful handwriting using correct punctuation.

One teacher, for example, stated:

I guess student-centeredness, particularly in writing lessons, should be related to children's handwriting, how to make them write correctly and beautifully because at grade two, the students' achievement focuses on this.

Likewise, when describing the role of a facilitator, some teachers reported that they should focus their teaching on handwriting, capital letters, and using full stops in a sentence. Further, students should write sentences that their teachers dictate correctly using neat handwriting. All these writing activities were part of the basic competencies in writing for grade two.

Teachers in this study interpreted the pedagogical concepts of the KTSP in writing through the grade two writing competencies because of their limited understanding of the concepts. When asked about their understanding of SCL, for example, seven out of ten teachers stated that they were unsure of the meaning of this concept, as they had yet to attend any professional development that comprehensively discussed it. Therefore, they tried to understand the concept by focusing on the competencies their students should achieve in a writing lesson. The competencies these teachers referred to focused on low-level writing skills such as handwriting and using capital letters and full stops. The following quote exemplifies what the teachers mean.

To be honest, I am not really sure about what this student-centeredness means. I have not attended any training or workshop that explicitly shows or guides what it is and how to implement this in the classroom. I



think if this is related to writing, then it focuses on the students' writing, such as on their handwriting, how to write neatly and correctly. This aligns with the standard competencies that students should achieve in early grades.

## DISCUSSIONS

The findings derived from the teachers' interpretations of the investigated key concepts suggest that although the KTSP committed to moving away from a traditional view of teaching and learning, the study found that the teachers' interpretations of the pedagogical concepts of the KTSP in the teaching of writing appeared to reflect this view. The teachers' interpretations of the KTSP in this study seemed to be influenced by practices they were familiar with, and those practices reflected a traditional approach to learning in which the role of the teacher was dominant. Such practices are common in classrooms across Indonesia (MBE-USAID 2003; Rahayu et al., 2011; Sari, 2012). The findings were consistent with other research findings examining how implementing agents understand and interpret the new curriculum (Spillane, 1999; Blignaut, 2008; Park, 2008; Park & Sung, 2013). Although the contexts differed from the current study, these studies also found that the teachers' existing knowledge appeared to influence their interpretation of the changes. In addition, the expected competencies for grade two writing lessons influenced their interpretation strongly. This finding supports the findings from previous research on curriculum change that teachers would concentrate on what students should achieve if they did not understand the curriculum change well (Utomo, 2005).

In the context of this study, the teachers interpreted the key pedagogical concepts of the KTSP as they were due to their limited understanding of the contexts. Consequently, they understood the concepts from their existing knowledge or familiar practices, reflecting the traditional learning view.

Related to the grade two writing lesson competencies, it is interesting to note how the teachers in this study narrowly interpreted the competencies. The teachers consistently related the writing competencies for grade two with low-level writing skills such as neat handwriting and copying, although some of the four competencies outlined in the KTSP curriculum guidelines were relatively broad. For example, Basic Competencies 1, completing a simple story using correct words, and Basic Competencies 3, concerned with students' ability to describe plants or animals in simple sentences using written language, were relatively broad. These two competencies allowed flexibility to teachers to provide learning activities that promote a higher order of thinking, thereby encouraging their students to learn higher-level skills such as composing their text. In contrast, Basic Competencies 2 and 4 are relatively narrow and skill-based, promoting the learning of low-level writing skills such as copying. However, regardless of the types and levels of writing activities suggested by these four competencies, the teachers in this study often associated these with activities focused on low-level writing skills. Thus, the teachers also seemed to have a limited understanding of the writing competencies grade two students should meet.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings revealed that the teachers' interpretations of the key pedagogical concepts of the KTSP in relation to teaching writing in grade two investigated in this study were inconsistent with the underlying theory that framed the development of the KTSP. While the KTSP stressed a more progressive approach to learning that fostered learner centered learning, the teachers' interpretations saw the requirements as narrow. It focused on knowledge transmission and skills practice based on a more traditional view of learning. These findings suggest that the teachers needed more understanding of the key concepts that framed the Curriculum Policies and Guidelines. Although the teachers in this study claimed to have received professional development regarding the KTSP, this training was seen as inadequate to support their understanding. This suggests that well-designed and ongoing professional development programs responsive

to teachers' learning needs are required if future curriculum change is to be effective because teachers' understanding of the curriculum will affect their implementation. This is particularly the case for teachers, such as those in this study, who were expected to understand and adopt learner center models representing a fundamental change in all planning, teaching, and learning aspects, including the expected competencies that students should achieve. The teachers should only be expected to understand and incorporate these significant changes with adequate preparation, including hands-on experience and modeling.

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