

Current Issues in English Language Teacher Education: Challenges, Reforms, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of educational systems is closely tied to the competence and professionalism of teachers. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), these demands have become increasingly complex due to rapid technological change, evolving curriculum policies, and growing expectations for inclusive and responsive pedagogy. This article aims to examine key contemporary issues in English language teacher education and to explore how these challenges are reshaping teacher preparation and professional development. Adopting a qualitative narrative literature review by drawing on relevant scholarly works and policy reports to identify major themes influencing ELT teacher education, the findings reveal several persistent challenges, including the integration of digital pedagogy, the preparation of teachers for diverse classrooms, inconsistencies in educational policy, and the ongoing gap between theoretical preparation and classroom realities. They also highlight the need to reconceptualise teacher education as a process of professional formation and to strengthen systemic coherence across different stages of teacher development. The article concludes by suggesting strategic directions for improving ELT teacher education, emphasizing the importance of integrated training systems, sustained professional learning, and context-responsive policy frameworks.

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INTRODUCTION

Student learning outcomes are strongly influenced by the quality of instruction that takes place in classrooms. Within the teaching–learning process, teachers function as key agents who guide students in constructing knowledge, developing learning strategies, and cultivating motivation for independent inquiry. Through instructional design, classroom interaction, and academic guidance, teachers shape how learners engage with knowledge and how effectively they acquire competencies. Consequently, improving teacher quality remains one of the most critical priorities in efforts to strengthen educational systems.

In recent decades, education systems worldwide have experienced substantial transformation driven by technological innovation, economic change, and evolving social expectations. Teachers are no longer expected merely to deliver subject knowledge; instead, they are increasingly required to facilitate student-centred learning, integrate digital technologies into instruction, support students' social and emotional development, and respond to the needs of increasingly diverse classrooms. Because of these expanded responsibilities, the effectiveness of teacher education programs has become a major concern among policymakers, educational researchers, and practitioners (Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 3).

Similar challenges are visible within the Indonesian context. Teacher education institutions (*Lembaga Pendidikan Tenaga Kependidikan—LPTK*) play a central role in preparing prospective teachers through undergraduate programs that are followed by professional certification pathways. During the past decade, educational reforms have attempted to strengthen teacher quality by introducing competency standards, certification requirements, and performance-based evaluation systems. While these policies aim to increase professional accountability, they do not always guarantee coherence between teacher preparation, early career induction, and continuing professional development. Evidence from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) indicates that Indonesian teachers participate actively in professional development activities; however, questions remain regarding the relevance, sustainability, and classroom applicability of these initiatives (OECD, 2020, p. 108).

Within teacher education programs themselves, discussions of teacher quality often emphasize measurable competencies while paying comparatively less attention to broader aspects of professional identity, ethical responsibility, and reflective practice. When teacher preparation is framed primarily in terms of technical competence and compliance with standards, it risks overlooking the complex relational and moral dimensions that characterize effective teaching. The challenge therefore extends beyond identifying what teachers should know; it also involves designing systems that nurture their professional growth in increasingly complex educational environments.

Research consistently shows that many beginning teachers feel insufficiently prepared for the realities of classroom practice. Difficulties frequently arise in areas such as classroom management, teaching diverse learners, integrating technology effectively, and adapting curricula to local learning contexts (OECD, 2020, p. 89). These concerns highlight an enduring gap between the knowledge provided by teacher education institutions and the practical demands teachers encounter in schools. Studies also demonstrate that well-designed teacher education programs contribute significantly to the development of pedagogical knowledge, classroom management skills, and professional identity formation (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, p. 456). However, traditional models of teacher preparation—often characterized by fragmented coursework and limited clinical

experience—are increasingly criticized for failing to equip teachers with the competencies required in contemporary classrooms.

Additional concerns have been raised regarding teachers' preparation in areas such as educational policy literacy, learning theory, academic development, social-emotional learning, leadership, and social justice. It is widely acknowledged that limited exposure to these areas may weaken teachers' capacity to respond effectively to the broader social and institutional dimensions of education (Arafeh, 2015, p. 7; Richardson & McDaniels, 2015, p. 27; Haynes, 2015, p. 45; McDaniels & Magno, 2015, p. 61).

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has further transformed the landscape of teaching and learning. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the global shift toward online and blended learning environments, exposing significant disparities in teachers' digital competence and institutional readiness (Trust & Whalen, 2020, p. 191). These developments highlight the need for teacher education programs that prepare teachers to design flexible and responsive learning environments that can adapt to changing educational conditions.

In addition to technological demands, teachers are increasingly expected to support inclusive education, address students' social and emotional well-being, and adopt culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. Meeting these expectations requires preparation that extends beyond subject expertise to include reflective practice, ethical judgment, and ongoing professional learning (Schleicher, 2018, p. 27). For this reason, teacher education should no longer be viewed as a single phase that precedes employment, but rather as a continuous process of professional growth throughout teachers' careers.

This article advances two central arguments regarding the future of English language teacher education. First, teacher preparation should be understood as a process of professional formation that integrates theoretical knowledge, practical experience, and professional identity development. Second, meaningful reform in teacher education requires systemic coherence that connects pre-service preparation, induction into the profession, and continuous professional development. By synthesizing relevant research and policy perspectives, the article critically examines current approaches to English language teacher training and proposes strategic directions for strengthening teacher education systems in response to contemporary educational challenges.

To guide this review, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the major challenges currently affecting English language teacher education?
2. How do these challenges influence the effectiveness of teacher preparation and professional development?
3. What strategic directions can be proposed to improve the quality and sustainability of ELT teacher education systems?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative narrative literature review to examine current issues in English language teacher education. A narrative review approach was selected because it allows for the integration, synthesis, and critical interpretation of findings from diverse sources, making it suitable for exploring complex and multifaceted issues in ELT teacher education.

The data for this study were obtained from a range of scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and international policy reports related to teacher education and English Language Teaching (ELT). The literature was primarily

collected through academic databases such as Google Scholar and other accessible academic repositories.

The inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed articles and policy reports published between 2010 and 2023, with a focus on teacher education, professional development, and ELT-related issues. Seminal works published prior to this period were also included where relevant to provide theoretical grounding. Studies not directly related to teacher preparation or lacking scholarly rigor were excluded. The search process involved keyword combinations such as "*ELT teacher education*," "*teacher preparation*," "*professional development*," "*digital pedagogy*," and "*inclusive education*." A total of approximately 30 sources were selected for analysis based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the topic.

The selected literature was analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Each source was carefully reviewed, coded, and grouped into key thematic categories, including the theory–practice divide, competency-based approaches, digital transformation, inclusive education, and policy-related challenges. This process enabled the identification of recurring patterns, major issues, and emerging trends across the literature.

The findings are presented and discussed in relation to the broader educational context and the specific demands of ELT, with particular attention to how these issues influence teacher preparation and professional development. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a coherent and critical understanding of the current landscape of ELT teacher education and to propose strategic directions for its improvement

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the literature review on current issues in English language teacher education. The analysis reveals a number of critical challenges that influence the effectiveness of teacher preparation and professional development. These findings are organized into thematic areas that reflect both structural issues and emerging reform directions in ELT. Each theme addresses the identified challenges, examines their implications, and highlights potential directions for improvement consecutively.

Major challenges in ELT teacher education

The analysis reveals that the challenges in ELT teacher education are not isolated deficiencies, but systemic tensions rooted in the structure and assumptions of teacher education itself. These tensions shape not only what is taught, but how teaching is understood as a profession.

Theory–practice divide as a structural misalignment

The persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice (Korthagen, 2017, p. 392) reflects more than a simple issue of curriculum design. It reveals a deeper assumption within teacher education: that knowledge can be transferred from abstract theory into practice in a linear and predictable manner. However, classroom teaching—particularly in ELT—is inherently **contextual, interactive, and contingent**. Teachers must make immediate decisions based on learners' responses, linguistic abilities, and classroom dynamics. As such, knowledge is not merely applied but **reconstructed in practice**.

This suggests that the problem lies not in the *lack* of theory, but in how theory is positioned. When theoretical knowledge is detached from practice, it becomes difficult for

teachers to operationalize it in real contexts. Consequently, teachers may experience uncertainty, reduced confidence, and reliance on routine practices rather than informed decision-making. In an ELT perspective, this misalignment is even more critical because language learning depends on **interactional competence**, not just instructional planning. Therefore, bridging this divide requires not only more practicum experience, but a reconceptualization of how knowledge and practice are integrated.

Paradox of competency-based standardization

Competency-based approaches attempt to define effective teaching through measurable indicators (Mulder, 2014, p. 109). While this enhances accountability and comparability, it introduces a significant tension: the complexity of teaching is reduced to observable performance.

This reduction creates what can be described as a **measurement paradox**. On one hand, competencies provide clarity and structure; on the other hand, they risk excluding essential but less measurable aspects of teaching, such as ethical judgment, responsiveness, and relational engagement (Biesta, 2015, p. 76).

In ELT, this limitation is particularly pronounced. Effective language teaching requires sensitivity to learners' communicative needs, cultural nuances, and evolving interactional patterns. These dimensions cannot be fully captured through standardized indicators. As a result, competency-based models may produce teachers who meet formal standards but struggle to adapt to complex classroom realities. This suggests that competency frameworks should be viewed as **necessary but insufficient**, requiring supplementation through broader conceptions of professional development.

Digital transformation as a pedagogical reconfiguration challenge

The integration of technology into education is often framed as a matter of digital skills. However, the literature suggests that the core issue lies in the **pedagogical transformation required by digital environments** (Trust & Whalen, 2020, pp. 191–194). Teachers may be able to use digital tools, but struggle to design learning experiences that meaningfully engage students. This distinction highlights a gap between **functional competence** and **pedagogical integration**.

In ELT, this challenge is intensified because language learning depends on interaction, feedback, and communicative practice. Digital environments require teachers to rethink how these elements can be facilitated online. Without such rethinking, technology risks becoming a tool for content delivery rather than a medium for language use. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed this issue by forcing rapid transitions to online teaching (Trust & Whalen, 2020, p. 194). While many teachers adapted operationally, the experience revealed deeper limitations in pedagogical preparedness. Therefore, digital transformation should be understood not as an external addition to teaching, but as a **redefinition of teaching practice itself**.

Inclusion as a foundational yet under-integrated principle

Although inclusive education is widely emphasized in global policy (UNESCO, 2020), its integration into teacher education remains uneven. This suggests that inclusion is often treated as a **specialized area**, rather than a fundamental aspect of teaching.

This approach is problematic because contemporary classrooms are inherently diverse. In ELT, diversity is not an exception but a defining feature, encompassing variations in language proficiency, cultural background, and learning needs. When inclusion

is not embedded in the core design of teacher education, teachers may lack the conceptual and practical tools needed to address learner diversity effectively. As a result, inclusive policies may exist at the institutional level but remain under-realized in classroom practice. This indicates that inclusion requires not only methodological training but a shift in how teaching and learning are conceptualized—as processes that must accommodate variability rather than assume uniformity.

Policy reform and the persistence of implementation gaps

Educational reforms often introduce ambitious goals, such as improving critical thinking or integrating new pedagogies (Schleicher, 2018, p. 34). However, the literature shows that these reforms frequently encounter difficulties in implementation (Fullan, 2016, p. 45). This gap arises because policy design and classroom practice operate at different levels of the system. Policies tend to assume that change can be achieved through directives, while teaching practice is shaped by contextual constraints, professional beliefs, and institutional conditions.

In ELT, this gap can lead to superficial adoption of innovations without deep pedagogical change. Teachers may comply with policy requirements without fully internalizing their underlying principles. This suggests that effective reform requires not only policy alignment but also **teacher engagement and ownership**, positioning teachers as active participants rather than passive implementers.

Impact on teacher preparation and professional development

The structural challenges identified above manifest in concrete ways across both pre-service and in-service teacher education, influencing not only teacher competence but also professional identity and sustainability.

Pre-service education and the emergence of “decontextualized competence”

The theory–practice divide leads to a form of preparation in which knowledge is acquired without sufficient contextual grounding. This results in what may be termed **decontextualized competence**, where teachers understand pedagogical concepts but struggle to apply them effectively.

This condition explains why many beginning teachers experience uncertainty and difficulty when entering the profession. In ELT, this is particularly evident in managing classroom interaction, adapting instruction to learner needs, and maintaining communicative engagement. The issue is not simply inadequate preparation, but a mismatch between how competence is developed and how it is required in practice.

In-service development as fragmented and insufficiently transformative

Professional development is widely recognized as essential, yet many initiatives remain short-term and disconnected from teachers’ daily practice (Desimone, 2009, pp. 183–185). This reflects a broader systemic issue: professional learning is often conceptualized as **knowledge transmission**, rather than as a process of sustained professional inquiry.

In ELT, where teaching contexts vary widely and require continuous adaptation, such approaches are unlikely to produce meaningful change. More effective models emphasize collaboration, reflection, and long-term engagement (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018, pp. 23–28).

Teacher well-being as a systemic outcome

The increasing demands placed on teachers, combined with insufficient support, contribute to stress and attrition (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011, pp. 23–28). Importantly, this suggests that teacher well-being is shaped by systemic conditions rather than individual resilience alone. When teachers are expected to navigate complex challenges without coherent preparation and support, professional strain becomes inevitable.

Systemic incoherence as the underlying constraint

Across all stages of teacher development, the most significant issue is the lack of coherence. Disconnections between pre-service education, professional development, and policy frameworks create fragmented learning trajectories. This fragmentation limits the cumulative impact of teacher education and prevents the development of sustained professional expertise.

Strategic directions for strengthening ELT teacher education

The literature suggests that addressing the structural fragmentation identified in question 1 and its consequences in question 2 requires a shift from isolated improvements to systemic and conceptually integrated reform. Importantly, these directions should not be understood as independent solutions, but as interdependent strategies that collectively reconfigure teacher education.

Building systemic coherence across teacher education

Developing integrated systems that connect pre-service education, induction, and ongoing professional development is widely recognized as essential (Darling-Hammond, 2017, pp. 118–121). Such coherence ensures that teacher learning is not fragmented across stages, but instead develops progressively over time.

More importantly, systemic coherence is not merely structural alignment; it represents a redefinition of teacher education as a continuous developmental trajectory. As Darling-Hammond (2017, p. 120) argues, high-performing systems support teachers through sustained and connected learning opportunities rather than isolated training events.

This suggests that the fragmentation identified in challenges in ELT education is not accidental, but the result of systems designed as discrete components rather than integrated processes. In ELT, where teaching competence evolves through experience and reflection, lack of coherence prevents the accumulation of professional expertise. Nevertheless, building coherence is not simply an organizational reform—it is a conceptual shift toward continuity, alignment, and long-term professional growth.

Reframing teacher education as professional formation

A second key direction involves reconceptualizing teacher education as professional formation, rather than technical training. This perspective emphasizes identity, judgment, and adaptability as central components of teaching (Biesta, 2015, pp. 75–77).

This shift directly addresses the limitations of competency-based models discussed in the first review question. While competencies define *what teachers should be able to do*, professional formation focuses on *who teachers become*. This distinction is crucial. Teaching, particularly in ELT, involves navigating uncertainty, responding to diverse learners, and making context-sensitive decisions. These capacities cannot be fully developed through standardized training alone.

Based on this perspective, teacher education must engage teachers in reflective practice, ethical reasoning, and identity development. As Korthagen (2017, pp. 397–399) suggests, meaningful teacher learning occurs when personal beliefs, professional knowledge, and practical experience are integrated. Simply stated, reframing teacher education as professional formation represents a paradigmatic shift—from producing technically competent practitioners to developing adaptive and reflective professionals.

Integrating pedagogy, technology, and context

The effective integration of technology requires more than technical proficiency. It also demands alignment between pedagogical goals, technological tools, and contextual realities. This is conceptualized in the TPACK framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2009, pp. 62–66).

This integration directly responds to the challenges identified in Question 1 above, where digital transformation exposed gaps in pedagogical readiness. As Koehler and Mishra (2009, p. 63) argue, technology becomes meaningful only when it is embedded within pedagogical and content knowledge.

In ELT, this integration is particularly critical. Language learning depends on interaction, feedback, and communicative engagement—elements that must be carefully redesigned in digital environments. Without such integration, technology risks reinforcing passive learning rather than facilitating active language use.

Furthermore, this suggests that digital competence should not be treated as an additional skill, but as part of a broader pedagogical reconfiguration. Teachers must learn not only how to use tools, but how to redesign learning experiences in technologically mediated contexts.

Strengthening teacher agency and research engagement

Another critical direction is the enhancement of teacher agency, defined as teachers' capacity to make informed decisions, adapt practices, and contribute to educational improvement. Research indicates that when teachers engage with research and reflective inquiry, they become more effective and adaptive professionals (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, pp. 462–465). This directly addresses the implementation gap identified in Question 1. When teachers are positioned as passive recipients of policy, reforms are often superficial. In contrast, when teachers are engaged as active participants, they are more likely to internalize and meaningfully enact change.

In an ELT context, teacher agency is particularly important because language teaching is highly context-dependent. Teachers must continuously adapt to learners' needs, classroom dynamics, and evolving pedagogical approaches. To meet the objective, teacher agency must: 1) foster reflective practice; 2) encourage practitioner research; and 3) support collaborative inquiry. This implies a shift from top-down reform models to participatory and knowledge-building approaches, where teachers are recognized as contributors to professional knowledge rather than mere implementers.

Embedding inclusion as a core principle

Finally, the literature emphasizes that inclusion must be embedded as a foundational principle in teacher education (Gay, 2018, pp. 34–38; UNESCO, 2020, p. 7). This responds directly to the gap identified in the first question, where inclusion is often treated as an additional component rather than an integral aspect of teaching. As Gay (2018, p. 36)

argues, culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to integrate learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into instruction.

In ELT, this is especially significant because language learning is inherently tied to identity, culture, and communication. Treating inclusion as peripheral overlooks the reality that diversity is central to language classrooms. Embedding inclusion therefore requires more than methodological adjustments; it demands a reconceptualization of teaching as responsive, equitable, and context-sensitive practice. This also implies that teacher education programs must: 1) integrate inclusive principles across all courses; 2) provide practical experience with diverse learners; and 3) develop teachers' cultural and linguistic awareness. By so-doing, inclusion becomes not an additional responsibility, but a defining characteristic of effective teaching.

Taken together, the proposed strategies—systemic coherence, professional formation, pedagogical integration, teacher agency, and inclusion—should be understood not as separate solutions, but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a transformed teacher education system.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined key contemporary challenges in English Language Teaching (ELT) teacher education and their implications for teacher preparation and professional development. The analysis demonstrates that issues such as the theory–practice divide, competency-based standardization, digital transformation, inclusion, and policy implementation gaps are not isolated concerns. Rather, they reflect a deeper structural condition—namely, the fragmentation of teacher education systems across conceptual, pedagogical, and institutional dimensions.

This fragmentation has significant consequences. It contributes to the development of decontextualized competence among pre-service teachers, limits the transformative potential of in-service professional development, and places increasing pressure on teacher well-being. More broadly, it constrains the capacity of teacher education systems to respond effectively to the complex and evolving demands of ELT contexts, where teaching requires adaptability, interactional sensitivity, and contextual awareness.

The findings of this review point to the need for a fundamental shift in how teacher education is conceptualized and organized. In particular, the study argues that teacher education should be understood as a coherent process of professional formation, supported by systemic coherence across all stages of teacher development. This implies moving beyond fragmented and technical approaches toward integrated models that connect pre-service preparation, early career support, and continuous professional learning.

The Indonesian context illustrates both the opportunities and challenges associated with such reforms. While initiatives such as teacher certification and competency standards represent important steps toward improving teacher quality, their effectiveness greatly depends on the presence of integrated preparation systems, sustained mentoring, and context-responsive professional development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the perspective on the afore-described conclusion, several implications emerge. At the policy level, there is a need to design teacher education systems that prioritize coherence, continuity, and long-term development rather than short-term interventions. Policies should also recognize teachers as active agents of change, creating space for professional judgment and contextual adaptation in ELT settings.

At the level of practice, teacher education programs need to more effectively integrate theory and practice, ensuring that knowledge is developed in relation to real classroom contexts. This includes strengthening reflective practice, supporting collaborative and sustained professional learning, and enhancing teachers' capacity to integrate technology in pedagogically meaningful ways. Equally important is the need to embed inclusive and culturally responsive approaches as foundational elements of teacher education, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse ELT environments.

In addition, this review highlights several directions for future research. Further empirical studies are needed to explore how systemic coherence can be implemented across different educational contexts, how professional formation influences teacher identity and instructional practice over time, and how teachers develop integrated technological and pedagogical competencies. There is also a need for more research on the relationship between teacher education design and teacher well-being, as well as context-specific investigations into inclusive practices in ELT.

In conclusion, improving ELT teacher education requires more than incremental reform. It calls for a systemic and conceptual transformation that repositions teacher education as a continuous, integrated, and context-responsive process. Only through such an approach can teacher education systems effectively prepare and sustain teachers who are capable of meeting the demands of contemporary language education.

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