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The Role of English in Improving Students' Communication Skills: A Normative Analysis of Indonesia's Education Law and Communicative Competence Theory

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ABSTRACT

English holds an ambiguous position in Indonesian education. It is widely regarded as indispensable for global participation, yet the national legal framework speaks only of "foreign languages" and places them alongside the constitutional primacy of Bahasa Indonesia. This article uses normative juridical research to examine how the Indonesian legal order frames the role of English in developing students' communication skills, and whether that framing is compatible with contemporary theories of communicative competence. Applying statute, case, and conceptual approaches, it analyses the 1945 Constitution, Law No. 20 of 2003, Law No. 24 of 2009, Government Regulation No. 4 of 2022, and Constitutional Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012, and interprets them through scholarship on communicative competence, willingness to communicate, language anxiety, feedback, digital learning, and assessment. The analysis shows that these norms treat foreign-language learning as an additive capability serving the national aim of producing capable, independent citizens, and that this aim is best realised when English is taught as a means of communication rather than as a body of rules to be memorised. The article proposes a normative–pedagogical alignment framework that links statutory duties to classroom principles and assessable indicators, and offers recommendations for policymakers, school leaders, and teachers.

Keywords: *English language education; communicative competence; normative juridical research; Indonesian education law; willingness to communicate; language anxiety*

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INTRODUCTION

English is now used far beyond the communities in which it is a first language. Much of the interaction conducted in English around the world takes place among speakers for whom it is an additional language, which has led scholars to describe it as a lingua franca whose success is measured by mutual intelligibility rather than by conformity to native-speaker norms (Jenkins, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2005). For students in Indonesia, a country whose linguistic ecology includes more than 700 living languages (Zein et al., 2020), English therefore functions as a channel to scientific knowledge, professional mobility, and international networks, while Bahasa Indonesia remains the language of national unity and public life.

The central pedagogical question is what it means to "know" English in this context. Since the foundational work of Canale and Swain (1980), applied linguistics has treated language ability as communicative competence: the capacity to use grammatical knowledge accurately, to adapt language to social context, and to manage breakdowns in interaction through strategy. Yet classroom learners often struggle precisely where this capacity is tested. Anxiety about speaking a foreign language is well documented (Horwitz et al., 1986), and a learner's readiness to enter a conversation depends on a layered combination of enduring traits and situational conditions (MacIntyre et al., 1998). English education in Indonesia has attracted a large body of research (Zein et al., 2020), and communicative and task-based approaches have been promoted across Asia, albeit with well-documented difficulties of implementation (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2007).

The normative dimension of the problem has received comparatively little systematic attention. English teaching in Indonesian schools does not take place in a legal vacuum. The Constitution declares Bahasa Indonesia the state language (1945 Constitution, art. 36). The Language Law makes it the compulsory medium of national education while allowing a foreign language to be used for purposes that support learners' foreign-language ability (Law No. 24 of 2009, art. 29). The National Education System Law likewise permits foreign languages as a medium of instruction in certain education units for that purpose (Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 33(3)). The Constitutional Court, moreover, has annulled the legal basis of the "international standard" school programme, in part out of concern for the effect of foreign-language instruction on national language and culture (Constitutional Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012). Any claim about the "role of English" in improving students' communication skills should therefore be grounded in what these norms permit, require, and aim at.

Against this background, the article addresses three research questions: (1) How does the Indonesian legal order define the position and purpose of English, as a foreign language, in national education? (2) How can the notion of foreign-language "ability" in these norms be given operational meaning through theories of communicative competence? (3) What normative–pedagogical principles follow for classroom practice, affective support, digital integration, and assessment?

The article contributes in two ways. First, it reconstructs, through doctrinal methods, the legal framework within which English teaching is both justified and limited. Second, it translates that framework into a normative–pedagogical alignment framework (Table 1) that educators and policymakers can use to evaluate programmes without relying on unexamined assumptions. The article proceeds by describing the research method, presenting the analysis in six parts, and concluding with recommendations.

METHOD

This study is normative juridical (doctrinal) research. Rather than collecting data from participants,

it treats legal norms and scholarly doctrine as its objects of analysis, identifying the applicable rules, interpreting them, and examining how they relate to one another and to the problem under study (Hutchinson & Duncan, 2012; Marzuki, 2017). Because it does not collect empirical data on particular students or schools, its findings are analytical and prescriptive in character: they state what the legal framework and the best available scholarship imply, not how often or how well these implications are realised in practice.

Three approaches were combined (Marzuki, 2017). The statute approach examined the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia; Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System; Law No. 24 of 2009 on the Flag, Language, State Emblem, and National Anthem; and Government Regulation No. 4 of 2022, which amends Government Regulation No. 57 of 2021 on National Education Standards. The case approach examined Constitutional Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012, focusing on its treatment of foreign-language instruction. The conceptual approach drew on peer-reviewed scholarship in applied linguistics and educational assessment to clarify the concepts through which the legal notion of language ability can be operationalised: communicative competence, willingness to communicate, language anxiety, corrective and formative feedback, technology-mediated learning, and balanced language-learning programmes.

The legal materials were classified as primary (the Constitution, statutes, regulation, and court decision) and secondary (journal articles and scholarly books). Secondary sources were selected for conceptual authority and relevance, combining foundational works with more recent reviews and studies, and were limited to peer-reviewed or academically published material. Provisions are cited by instrument and article, and statutory wording is paraphrased closely rather than quoted.

The analysis proceeded through textual (grammatical) interpretation of individual provisions, systematic interpretation of how provisions relate across instruments, and teleological interpretation of the aims they serve. The resulting propositions were then examined against the scholarly literature using deductive reasoning and synthesised into a prescriptive framework. The principal limitation of this design is that the framework is not empirically tested; it is offered as a set of propositions for subsequent empirical research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yields seven findings, presented in six sections. Section A reconstructs the position of English in the legal order. Section B gives operational meaning to the notion of foreign-language ability. Sections C to E address affective support, digital integration, and assessment, respectively. Section F consolidates the findings into a framework and sets out recommendations.

A. The Position and Purpose of English in the Indonesian Legal Order

The legal hierarchy begins with the Constitution, which establishes Bahasa Indonesia as the state language (1945 Constitution, art. 36). Law No. 24 of 2009 carries this status into education by making Bahasa Indonesia the compulsory language of instruction in national education (art. 29(1)). The same article, however, provides that the language of instruction may include a foreign language for purposes that support learners' foreign-language ability (art. 29(2)), and it exempts foreign education units and special units that educate foreign nationals from the obligation (art. 29(3)). Law No. 20 of 2003 mirrors this structure: it allows a foreign language to serve as the medium of instruction in certain education units in

order to support learners' foreign-language skills (art. 33(3)).

Within the curriculum, Law No. 20 of 2003 requires basic and secondary curricula to include language as a compulsory component (art. 37(1)) and requires curriculum development to refer to national education standards (art. 36(1)). The Government sets the basic framework and structure of the basic and secondary curricula, while education units develop curricula according to their relevance (art. 38(1)–(2)). Government Regulation No. 4 of 2022, amending the regulation on national education standards, specifies that the language component of the curriculum comprises Indonesian, regional languages, and foreign languages. Two observations follow. First, in the provisions examined, the legal texts speak of foreign languages generically and do not single out English; the prominence of English reflects curricular policy and practice (Zein et al., 2020) rather than an explicit statutory designation. Second, the language component is plural by design, which places English in a multilingual configuration alongside the national and regional languages.

What purpose do these provisions assign to foreign-language learning? Both article 29(2) of Law No. 24 of 2009 and article 33(3) of Law No. 20 of 2003 justify the use of a foreign language by reference to learners' foreign-language ability, that is, by reference to what learners are able to do with the language rather than what they know about it. This purposive reading is consistent with the general aims of national education in article 3 of Law No. 20 of 2003, which directs education towards developing learners' potential so that they become, among other things, knowledgeable, capable, creative, and independent citizens. Systematically interpreted, the norms therefore position foreign-language learning as a means of building capabilities for action, a functional rather than a purely content-based conception.

The Constitutional Court's decision in Case No. 5/PUU-X/2012 adds a limiting principle. The Court annulled article 50(3) of Law No. 20 of 2003, the provision that had underpinned the pilot international-standard school (RSBI) and international-standard school (SBI) programmes. In its reasoning, the Court did not deny the importance of mastering foreign languages; its concern was that practices emphasising foreign-language instruction across school levels risk eroding pride in the national language and culture, and it observed that educating students who can compete globally and use foreign languages does not require an "international standard" label (Constitutional Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012). The decision can thus be read as affirming the value of foreign-language ability while cautioning against models in which foreign-language instruction displaces or overshadows the national language.

Taken together, the provisions support three propositions, which constitute the first three findings of this study. *Finding 1:* English has no autonomous legal status; its role derives from the general category of foreign languages. *Finding 2:* that role is additive and bounded, supplementing but not displacing Bahasa Indonesia as the national and instructional language. *Finding 3:* the role is purposive and functional, since the use of a foreign language is legitimate to the extent that it supports learners' ability. These propositions frame the remainder of the analysis.

B. Communicative Competence as the Operational Meaning of Foreign-Language Ability

If the legal norms are concerned with what learners are able to do, the next question is how that ability should be understood. Canale and Swain (1980) proposed that communicative competence comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence, and argued that approaches to teaching and testing should rest on this broader conception rather than on grammatical accuracy alone. Adopted as an interpretive lens, the framework gives content to the statutory notion of ability: a capable user of English can form accurate utterances, adapt them to social context and purpose,

and repair communication when it falters. A programme that assessed only grammatical rules would leave two of the three dimensions unexamined and would therefore fall short of the functional purpose identified in Section A.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) are the pedagogical families most closely associated with this conception. Richards and Rodgers (2014) present communicative approaches as a set of principles centred on meaningful interaction and the use of language for real purposes rather than as a single fixed method. Ellis (2009) clarifies that tasks in TBLT are primarily meaning-focused and that attention to form can be integrated rather than excluded, correcting a common misunderstanding that task-based teaching neglects grammar. The literature on implementation nevertheless cautions against importing such approaches uncritically. A review of the Asia-Pacific region identifies conceptual, classroom-level, and societal-institutional constraints, including examination systems and resource limits, and concludes that CLT and TBLT need to be adapted to local contexts (Butler, 2011). Littlewood (2007) similarly argues for a continuum of activities running from form-focused practice to authentic communication, adjusted to learners' context, and Kumaravadivelu (1994) maintains that teachers should develop context-sensitive strategies guided by particularity, practicality, and possibility rather than apply one prescribed method.

The legal framework is compatible with this methodological pluralism. Because education units may develop curricula according to their relevance (Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 38(2)), the legal order does not prescribe a particular teaching method. What it establishes, through the functional purpose identified above, is an outcome orientation: whatever method is chosen should be capable of developing learners' practical ability to use English. *Finding 4:* communicative competence is the most defensible operational meaning of foreign-language ability under the legal framework, and it serves as the criterion for evaluating methods, while the choice among methods remains a matter of professional judgement in context.

C. The Affective Dimension: Anxiety, Willingness to Communicate, and the Educator's Duty

Developing communicative competence depends on learners being willing, as well as able, to use the language, and a substantial literature shows that affective factors shape this willingness. Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualised foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) showed that anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing at the stages of input, processing, and output, and a meta-analysis reports a moderate negative association between second language anxiety and achievement (Teimouri et al., 2019). Willingness to communicate (WTC) is conceptualised by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as the product of enduring and situational influences, and later work in Japanese and Chinese English-as-a-foreign-language settings links WTC to motivation, confidence, and the classroom environment (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002).

Research has also moved beyond anxiety. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) show that foreign language enjoyment and anxiety are related but distinct emotional experiences, and a broader review traces the growing role of positive psychology in the field (Dewaele et al., 2019). Earlier work on classroom motivation emphasises that teachers can influence learners' motivation through the way they organise tasks and the climate they create (Dörnyei, 1994). The practical implication is that reducing anxiety is necessary but not sufficient; classrooms should also cultivate enjoyment and a sense of purpose in communicating.

This body of research converges with a statutory duty. Law No. 20 of 2003 requires educators and education personnel to create an educational atmosphere that is meaningful, enjoyable, creative, dynamic,

and dialogical (art. 40(2)(a)). Read teleologically alongside the functional purpose of foreign-language learning, this duty can be understood to extend to the affective conditions for communication: an English classroom that provokes fear of negative evaluation works against both the pedagogical goal and the atmosphere that educators are bound to create. Affective support therefore appears not as an optional refinement but as part of the professional obligation within which teaching takes place.

Feedback is the point at which affect and learning meet. Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that corrective feedback in communicative classrooms differs in how likely it is to prompt learners to repair their own utterances, with some types producing more learner uptake than others. Hattie and Timperley (2007) show that feedback can be among the most influential factors in learning, but that its effect depends on its focus: feedback directed at the task, at processes, and at self-regulation is more useful than feedback directed at the person. These findings suggest, as a normative inference rather than an empirical result of this study, that corrective practices which preserve the flow of communication, invite learner repair, and focus on the task are more likely to support both accuracy and willingness to speak than practices that interrupt and evaluate. *Finding 5:* the affective conditions for communication are both pedagogically necessary and legally relevant, being supported by robust research and by the educator's statutory duty to maintain a meaningful and enjoyable learning atmosphere.

D. Digital Media, Lingua Franca Communication, and the Equity Constraint

Because classroom time is limited, the role of English in developing communication skills depends in part on what happens beyond the classroom. Reinders and Benson (2017) set out a research agenda for language learning beyond the classroom, noting that learners increasingly engage with the target language through self-instruction, naturalistic encounters, and technology. Kern (2014) characterises the internet as both a remedy and a potential harm for language education, which calls for pedagogical mediation rather than uncritical adoption. Structured virtual exchange, defined by O'Dowd (2018) as the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interaction with partners from other cultural contexts as an integrated part of their programmes, offers a more controlled route to authentic interaction.

Interaction beyond the classroom is also likely to involve speakers from many first-language backgrounds. Research on English as a lingua franca suggests that successful communication in such settings rests on mutual intelligibility and accommodation rather than on native-speaker norms (Jenkins, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2005). For the learning goals of an Indonesian classroom, this supports defining success by communicative effectiveness, which is consistent with the strategic and sociolinguistic dimensions of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980).

A normative analysis must also ask who benefits. Law No. 20 of 2003 recognises the equal right of every citizen to a quality education (art. 5(1)). Digital and extracurricular provision is not evenly distributed, and a model that makes communicative opportunity depend on private resources would sit uneasily with this principle. The implication is that schools and governments, rather than families alone, should bear responsibility for the infrastructure, devices, and supervised activities on which digital communicative practice depends, and that tasks should be designed to function under limited connectivity where necessary. This conclusion is a normative inference from the equality principle; its feasibility in particular regions is an empirical question beyond the scope of this study. *Finding 6:* digital and out-of-class practice extends communicative opportunity, but under the equality principle it should be provided as a shared institutional responsibility and directed at intelligibility and effectiveness in lingua franca interaction.

E. Assessment, Programme Balance, and the Sustainability of Communicative Competence

If the purpose of foreign-language learning is communicative ability, evaluation should measure that ability. Law No. 20 of 2003 assigns educators the task of evaluating learning outcomes in order to monitor learners' processes, progress, and improvement on a continuing basis (art. 58(1)). The emphasis on process and continuity points towards formative assessment, which Black and Wiliam (1998) show can raise standards when information from assessment is used to adjust teaching. Assessment aligned with communicative competence would sample interaction, spoken and written production, and strategy use rather than rely only on tests of grammatical knowledge (Canale & Swain, 1980), and feedback within such assessment should follow the principles discussed in Section C (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Sustainability also depends on programme design. Nation (2007) proposes that a well-balanced course includes four strands, namely meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development, each receiving substantial attention. Applied to the Indonesian setting, the four strands offer a checklist for ensuring that grammar instruction, which belongs to language-focused learning, is complemented by listening and reading for meaning, speaking and writing for meaning, and repeated practice that builds fluency. Because education units may develop curricula according to local relevance (Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 38(2)), they have the legal room to implement such a balance. *Finding 7:* the statutory emphasis on continuing evaluation, together with research on formative assessment and balanced programmes, supports performance-based, formative assessment of communicative competence within a balanced curriculum.

F. A Normative–Pedagogical Alignment Framework and Recommendations

The seven findings can be consolidated into a framework that links each normative source to a pedagogical principle and to an indicator by which a programme can be evaluated (Table 1). The framework is a product of interpretation, not of empirical testing, and is intended as a basis for programme review and for further research.

Table 1. Normative–pedagogical alignment framework

Normative source	Normative content (as analysed)	Pedagogical principle	Indicator for evaluation
1945 Constitution, art. 36; Law No. 24 of 2009, art. 29	Bahasa Indonesia is the state language and compulsory medium of instruction; a foreign language may be used to support learners' foreign-language ability.	English is additive and bounded; its use in instruction is purposeful.	English use is tied to stated communicative objectives; Bahasa Indonesia is not displaced.
Law No. 20 of 2003, arts. 33(3), 36–38; Government Regulation No. 4 of 2022	Language is a compulsory curricular component, including foreign languages; education units develop curricula according to relevance.	Outcome-oriented curriculum with locally adapted methods.	Learning goals state what learners can do (interact, produce, negotiate meaning), not only what they know.
Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 3	Education aims at developing capable, creative, and independent citizens.	Communicative competence (grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic) is the criterion of ability.	Tasks and assessments sample all three components.
Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 40(2)(a)	Educators create a meaningful, enjoyable, creative, dynamic, and dialogical atmosphere.	Graduated, low-threat speaking tasks; supportive, task-focused feedback.	Learner participation and confidence are monitored over time; feedback invites learner repair.

Normative source	Normative content (as analysed)	Pedagogical principle	Indicator for evaluation
Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 5(1)	Every citizen has an equal right to a quality education.	Communicative opportunity and digital resources are an institutional responsibility.	All learners can access practice opportunities regardless of private resources.
Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 58(1)	Educators evaluate learning outcomes to monitor process, progress, and improvement continuously.	Formative, performance-based assessment within a balanced programme (four strands).	Regular feedback cycles; speaking and interaction are assessed; time is balanced across the four strands.
Constitutional Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012	The importance of foreign-language mastery is not denied; concern for national language and culture is affirmed.	Foreign-language competence is pursued without eroding the national language and culture.	Programme documents state how Bahasa Indonesia and local languages are maintained alongside English.

Note. The framework is an interpretive synthesis of the legal materials and literature analysed in this article and has not been empirically validated.

Several recommendations follow. For policymakers, curriculum documents that implement the language component should express foreign-language learning outcomes in communicative terms and make explicit that English is taught as an additive capability. Any move towards foreign-language-medium instruction should be justified by reference to learners' foreign-language ability, in line with article 29(2) of Law No. 24 of 2009 and article 33(3) of Law No. 20 of 2003, and should take account of the concerns identified by the Constitutional Court. For school leaders, the priorities are to protect time for communicative practice, to provide equitable access to digital and extracurricular opportunities, and to support professional development in communicative and formative practices. For teachers, the framework suggests graduated speaking tasks, task-focused and supportive feedback, and a programme balanced across the four strands. For researchers, the framework invites mixed-methods testing in different school contexts and comparison with other multilingual jurisdictions that regulate foreign-language instruction.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the role of English in improving students' communication skills through the lens of normative juridical research. In response to the first research question, the analysis found that the Indonesian legal order gives English no autonomous status but treats it as a foreign language within a plural language curriculum. Its role is additive and bounded by the primacy of Bahasa Indonesia, and it is purposive: the use of a foreign language is legitimate insofar as it supports learners' foreign-language ability (1945 Constitution, art. 36; Law No. 24 of 2009, art. 29; Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 33(3); Constitutional Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012).

In response to the second research question, communicative competence provides the most defensible operational meaning of that ability (Canale & Swain, 1980). Because the legal framework leaves teaching methods to professional judgement at the level of the education unit, communicative competence functions as a criterion for evaluating methods rather than as a mandated method, and the research on communicative and task-based teaching indicates that its application requires adaptation to context (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2007).

In response to the third research question, four principles follow: affective support is both pedagogically necessary and consistent with the educator's statutory duty (Law No. 20 of 2003, art. 40(2)(a)); digital and out-of-class practice should be provided equitably, consistent with the equal right to quality education (art. 5(1)); assessment should be continuous, formative, and performance-based (art.

58(1)); and programmes should be balanced across meaning-focused and language-focused learning (Nation, 2007). Because the study is normative and its framework has not been empirically tested, the principles should be treated as propositions for further investigation. Mixed-methods research that tests the framework in diverse Indonesian classrooms is the most important next step.

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