Formulating SMART Learning Objectives in EFL Curriculum: A Qualitative Literature Review

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Abstract. This literature review investigates the effectiveness of formulating SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) learning objectives within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum using a qualitative research method. A systematic literature review was employed to analyze empirical and theoretical studies published between 2015 and 2024. The findings reveal that SMART objectives contribute to increased instructional clarity, learner engagement, and alignment with curriculum goals. Thematic content analysis highlights key benefits, such as improved learner autonomy, language proficiency, and instructional planning. This study provides a structured synthesis for educators and policymakers in designing effective EFL curricula.

Keywords: Curriculum design, EFL curriculum, Instructional design, Learning outcomes, SMART learning objectives

1. BACKGROUND

Education is a fundamental process that involves planning, implementation, and evaluation. Within this framework, one of the essential aspects is the formulation of learning objectives that can guide both teachers and students in achieving intended outcomes. Learning objectives serve as the foundation for instructional design, assessment, and curriculum development. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), clearly defined objectives are particularly vital because they provide direction in the acquisition of complex language skills, which require gradual and measurable progress. According to Doran (1981), SMART learning objectives—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound—are designed to improve the clarity, structure, and efficiency of learning. These objectives help teachers communicate expectations, focus classroom activities, and assess student performance in a more targeted manner. When properly implemented, SMART objectives have the potential to increase student engagement, promote autonomy, and ensure alignment between instructional content and assessment (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Recent studies have emphasized the integration of SMART principles within Smart Learning Environments (SLEs), which are designed to personalize and enhance the learning experience through adaptive technology and data-driven instruction. Huh and Lee (2019) found that applying SMART-based approaches in EFL classrooms not only strengthened students' creativity and English skills but also fostered motivation and learner independence. This is

supported by García-Tudela et al. (2021), who proposed that SMART learning environments offer personalization, real-time feedback, and context-sensitive instruction that responds to the needs of each learner. In this regard, SMART objectives are not only a planning tool but also a catalyst for pedagogical innovation.

Despite the apparent advantages of SMART objectives, their application in EFL curriculum design remains underexplored. As highlighted by Vasbieva et al. (2018), many educators struggle with aligning learning objectives with curriculum standards, especially when dealing with abstract language skills or diverse learner profiles. Abdelhadi (2025) also notes that while teachers may be aware of the SMART concept, they often lack the training and resources necessary to formulate objectives that are genuinely effective and measurable.

However, the practice of implementing SMART learning objectives in EFL contexts, especially in Indonesia, is still unsystematic and poorly documented. This suggests a gap between theory and practice that needs to be explored further. From the theory and prior findings above, this study focuses on identifying how SMART learning objectives have been applied in EFL contexts and to what extent they contribute to instructional effectiveness. This research does not merely aim to reiterate the theoretical benefits of SMART design, but also to synthesize empirical evidence on its impact within EFL learning environments.

By conducting a comprehensive literature review, this study seeks to explore the pedagogical role of SMART objectives, uncover challenges in their application, and propose recommendations for their more effective integration in EFL curricula. This study aims to examine the implementation of SMART learning objectives in the EFL curriculum and evaluate their effectiveness based on current literature findings.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

The implementation of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) learning objectives in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum is based on several pedagogical theories that emphasize instructional alignment, learner autonomy, and measurable progress. One of the most relevant is the theory of Constructive Alignment, introduced by Biggs and Tang (2011), which states that effective learning occurs when learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments are coherently aligned. In this framework, SMART objectives serve as important reference points that guide educators in designing focused learning experiences and selecting appropriate assessment methods, thus ensuring that the learning process is goal- and outcome-oriented. The SMART concept, first introduced by Doran (1981) in a management context, has been widely adopted in education to improve

clarity and accuracy in instructional planning. In EFL teaching, formulating learning objectives using SMART criteria allows teachers to translate abstract language competencies into specific and observable learning targets. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) emphasize that clarity of objectives not only directs students' learning efforts, but also improves teachers' decision-making in instructional design and assessment development. From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky's theory underscores the importance of learning mediated through the use of tools and social interaction. In modern classrooms, technological aids-such as voice-based apps, video conferencing platforms and interactive learning environments-serve as mediating instruments that support learners in achieving their goals. Studies by Kozyreva et al. (2020) and Mukherjee et al. (2024) show that technology not only facilitates interaction with content and peers, but also promotes learner autonomy, especially when learning objectives are clearly defined and measurable.

The integration of SMART objectives is further supported by multimedia learning theory, which states that individuals learn more effectively when information is presented through both verbal and visual modes. In the EFL context, where learners have to develop multiple language skills simultaneously, digital aids that combine text, audio and video can improve comprehension and retention. Research by Sclater and Lally (2018) and Li and Walsh (2023) shows that technology-supported instruction can significantly improve learners' speaking and listening skills if guided by well-structured and time-bound objectives. In recent years, the emergence of Smart Learning Environments (SLEs) has further expanded the possibilities for implementing SMART goals. SLEs provide adaptive learning systems, real-time feedback, and data-driven personalization, all of which contribute to the achievement of specific learning objectives. According to García-Tudela et al. (2021) and Huh and Lee (2019), the integration of SMART principles in SLEs supports not only cognitive development, but also motivation and creative engagement, especially in the context of foreign language learning.

Despite these theoretical and empirical advantages, the application of SMART goals in foreign language learning - especially in the Indonesian context - is still limited. Dhari and Maisarah (2023) observed that many English teachers in Indonesia do not have adequate training in formulating objectives that fulfill all SMART components. As a result, instructional objectives are often vague and poorly linked to assessment strategies. This highlights the urgent need for professional development programs, standardized curriculum frameworks and institutional support to facilitate the systematic adoption of SMART learning objectives across different educational settings.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) approach to explore the role and effectiveness of SMART learning objectives in the English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum. This approach was chosen to enable the researcher to examine in depth various studies that address the formulation, interpretation and implementation of SMART objectives in English language learning. The data sources in this study are journal articles, conference proceedings, and academic book chapters published between 2015 and 2024. The articles used were obtained from four major databases, namely Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and JSTOR, using keywords such as "SMART learning objectives", "EFL curriculum", "learning outcomes", and "curriculum design in English language teaching".

The literature was purposively selected based on the inclusion criteria, i.e. articles written in English, published within the specified time frame, peer-reviewed, and explicitly discussing the application of SMART principles in EFL learning contexts. Meanwhile, literature that originated from non-EFL contexts, was non-peer-reviewed, or did not address SMART objectives directly, was excluded from the analysis. The data collection and selection process went through four stages: article identification, title and abstract screening, selection based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, and thematic analysis of the content.

Data were analyzed using a thematic content analysis approach, where each study was reviewed to identify key themes related to the formulation of learning objectives, their impact on student motivation, alignment with the curriculum, and effectiveness in lesson planning and evaluation. Data validity was maintained by using only reliable and methodologically sound sources, as well as through inter-author discussions to ensure consistency of themes found. The results of this process were compiled to provide a comprehensive picture of the contribution of SMART learning objectives in EFL curriculum development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the integration of SMART learning objectives in EFL instruction, particularly through the use of technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) tools such as Duolingo, Zoom, ELSA Speak, and YouTube. The findings are discussed across three major dimensions: (1) implementation of SMART-aligned tools, (2) their impact on learning outcomes, and (3) challenges in practical application.

Implementation of SMART Learning Objectives through TELL Tools

The implementation of SMART objectives in EFL classrooms has increasingly been supported by digital tools that allow for structured, measurable, and time-bound learning experiences. Applications such as Duolingo and ELSA Speak exemplify this alignment. Duolingo offers goal-setting features and daily streaks, allowing learners to track specific and measurable language targets (Nur Hanifah & Harsul Lisan, 2024; Rahmawati, 2024). Similarly, ELSA Speak provides targeted pronunciation exercises with immediate feedback, supporting the "achievable" and "relevant" aspects of SMART by addressing learners' individual needs (Anggraini, 2022). Zoom's breakout rooms encourage learners to participate in live speaking tasks, aligning with the "time-bound" and "relevant" components of SMART objectives, while YouTube's use in EFL learning supports autonomous learning with rich, real-world language content.

These practices demonstrate how technological tools can serve as mediators in achieving instructional goals, in line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Kozyreva et al., 2020). The structure and features embedded within these tools reflect a shift towards outcome-based learning, where learners are guided toward specific and observable speaking goals.

Effectiveness on Instructional Quality and Student Outcomes

The integration of SMART-based tools showed a positive impact on the quality of instruction and student learning outcomes. Studies revealed that Duolingo and ELSA Speak improved speaking performance through repeated, focused practice, thereby enhancing pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency (Rahmawati, 2024; Anggraini, 2022). Students using Zoom for real-time discussions exhibited greater engagement and confidence in speaking activities (Fitriani Guci & Siahaan, 2021), while YouTube enabled learners to internalize authentic pronunciation and intonation by modeling native speakers (Wahyuni & Utami, 2021).

These findings support the view of Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), who argue that clear learning objectives act as a bridge between curriculum expectations and classroom reality. Moreover, the increased motivation observed among learners—particularly due to gamified features in Duolingo and personalized feedback in ELSA Speak—demonstrates the relevance and attainability of SMART goals in digital contexts. The thematic analysis also shows alignment with Biggs and Tang's (2011) constructive alignment model, where learning activities and assessment tools are coherently linked to intended learning outcomes.

Challenges in the Application of SMART-Oriented Digital Tools

Despite the apparent benefits, several challenges were noted in the implementation of SMART-based TELL tools. Technical barriers such as limited internet access, lack of digital devices, and unsupportive learning environments were commonly reported, especially in under-resourced settings (Iberahim et al., 2023; Putri & Suryaman, 2022). Specific tools also had their limitations: for instance, ELSA Speak required quiet surroundings and high-quality audio input to function optimally, while Duolingo, although effective for beginners, was less suited for learners needing spontaneous, real-time interaction (Anggraini, 2022; Jiang et al., 2021).

Additionally, while some teachers showed interest in integrating these tools into lesson planning, many lacked the pedagogical training to formulate SMART-based learning objectives or to align digital tool usage with curriculum goals (Dhari & Maisarah, 2023). These findings reinforce the notion that effective implementation of SMART principles requires not only access to technology but also adequate institutional support, training programs, and adaptable curriculum policies.

Discussion

The analysis of this study confirms that SMART learning objectives, when supported by appropriate digital tools, can significantly enhance learners' speaking skills and overall instructional effectiveness in EFL contexts. Tools like Duolingo and ELSA Speak not only offer measurable and structured learning experiences but also promote learner autonomy and sustained engagement. However, successful integration of these tools depends on various contextual factors, such as teacher readiness, infrastructure availability, and alignment with pedagogical frameworks.

These findings also suggest that while technology can support the delivery of SMART objectives, its use must be complemented by traditional methods and robust instructional planning. There remains a need for targeted professional development and clearer national guidance on how to integrate SMART objectives effectively within EFL curricula, particularly in countries where such frameworks are still emerging. Thus, the study underscores the importance of a balanced, context-sensitive approach in implementing SMART-oriented, technology-supported language learning.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the analysis of existing literature, this study concludes that SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) learning objectives play a crucial role in improving the overall quality of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Their application contributes significantly to enhancing instructional clarity, boosting student motivation, and increasing the alignment between learning objectives, teaching activities, and assessment practices. Furthermore, the use of SMART objectives aligns closely with the principles of outcome-based education and reinforces the concept of *constructive alignment* as proposed by Biggs and Tang (2011), in which learning outcomes, instruction, and assessment are coherently integrated to support effective teaching and learning.

Despite their recognized advantages, the implementation of SMART learning objectives in many EFL contexts, particularly in Indonesia, remains inconsistent and fragmented. Several studies highlight that this inconsistency stems largely from the lack of structured teacher training, limited access to professional development, and the absence of standardized curriculum guidelines that promote the practical use of SMART principles. These obstacles hinder the optimal integration of SMART objectives into instructional planning and classroom practices, potentially weakening the overall impact on student learning outcomes.

To overcome these challenges, this study offers several recommendations. First, it is essential to implement intensive and continuous training programs for EFL teachers that focus specifically on the formulation and application of SMART learning objectives in language instruction. Such programs should include hands-on workshops, peer collaboration, and reflective teaching practices. Second, education policymakers are encouraged to develop and distribute standardized curriculum templates at the national or institutional level that explicitly integrate SMART principles. These templates would provide clear guidance for teachers and promote consistency across instructional settings. Third, further empirical research is needed to explore the practical implementation of SMART objectives in diverse classroom environments. Studies such as classroom observations, action research, and teacher training evaluations could offer valuable insights into how SMART objectives influence teaching strategies, learner engagement, and assessment accuracy in real-world educational settings.

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