

A narrative inquiry into lecturers' experiences with standardized testing pressures in an Indonesian English Language Education Department

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Abstract

Indonesia's English Language Education Departments have two priorities: developing students' communicative competence and ensuring that students are able to graduate with a TOEFL test score. Such conditions create a form of 'washback' where testing priorities are at odds with the principles of communicative language teaching, shaping the approach to teaching. Negative washback has been documented; however, few qualitative studies examine the internal tensions, lived experiences, and emotional struggles of lecturers. This study examines how Indonesian ELED lecturers negotiate the conflict between their CLT philosophy and the demands of standardized testing. A narrative inquiry was conducted with seven lecturers from an Indonesian public university ELED. Data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a three-dimensional framework (temporality, sociality, place) to construct and interpret participants' experiential narratives. Lecturers face a conflict in which they differentiate themselves as either a Teacher or a Test Preparer. To protect their pedagogical values, they practice 'quiet resistance,' whereby test practice is incorporated into communicative tasks. While this is a form of active resistance, the emotional costs are significant, leading to feelings of guilt, fatigue, and cynicism. The conflict is pedagogical, personal, and continual, leading to the fragmentation of professional identity and the erosion of psychosocial well-being. Lecturers show resilient agency through covert negotiation; yet, the misalignment between assessment policies and the communicative goals of teaching remains unaddressed, with implications for the sustainability of educators. This study recommends a re-evaluation of assessment policies to align with pedagogical values and lecturer well-being support within institutional frameworks.

Keywords: *Communicative language teaching; narrative inquiry; professional identity; standardized testing; washback*

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INTRODUCTION

Language assessment is a force that influences teaching strategies and learning outcomes in the current global higher education environment. It is not just a tool for testing competency (Xiao & Yang, 2019; Prasad et al., 2023). Moving beyond discrete-point grammar and vocabulary tests, the paradigm shift towards communicative language teaching (CLT) in recent decades has highlighted the need for assessments that reflect authentic language use (Vattøy, 2020; Taghizadeh & Mazdayasna, 2023). Although the learning objectives of English Language Education Departments (ELEDs) may vary from one institution to another according to the institution's vision and mission and regional contexts, many ELEDs in Indonesia share a common dual mandate to prepare students for the academic demands commonly certified by standardized proficiency tests (the TOEFL) and to develop students' holistic communicative competence (Baghaei et al., 2020). This dual mandate places ELEDs at the center of national efforts to improve English proficiency in Indonesia as part of its larger engagement with international standards and the ASEAN Economic Community. The national curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) and ministerial regulations (those from the Directorate General of Higher Education / *Ditjen Dikti*), emphasize graduate outcomes measured through standardized international tests, frequently making a minimum TOEFL score a graduation requirement. This dual mandate creates a point of tension within the Indonesian higher education landscape (Arsyad et al., 2024; Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2022). The format and content of these tests have an impact on pedagogical decisions. As a result, Indonesian ELEDs operate within a washback environment (Huang, 2022; Boylu, 2021). This pressure is further exacerbated by the legacy of a national exam-oriented culture, institutional accreditation demands that prioritize measurable outcomes, and the societal perception that test scores are a definitive marker of English proficiency (Riswanto et al., 2022; Basori & Mubarak, 2020).

There is a challenge in this environment concerning the conflict between the ideal and the requirements of standardized testing. Known as the 'washback effect,' this phenomenon illustrates how high-stakes testing can narrow the curriculum and limit learning to mere test-taking strategies. This diminishes the broader goals of learning to communicate fluently and think critically (Kjell et al., 2024; Wicaksono et al., 2023; Clack & Dommett, 2021). This is evident in Indonesia. From the national university entrance examination to the English Proficiency Test score requirements for graduation, scholarship awards, and promotion of lecturers, the high-stakes testing culture has shaped the national education system for decades (Chen et al., 2023; Mikami, 2024). Even among the educators who advocate for CLT, Lin et al. (2024) have documented that the pressure to obtain high scores for the test most of the time results in a 'teaching to the test' phenomenon.

Little has been documented regarding these testing regimes, even though researchers have attempted to measure and document the micro-level effects to a certain degree. There is a knowledge gap when it comes to qualitative research focusing on the external struggles and lived experiences of university lecturers. This body of work discussing the identity of ELEDs and the interactions of their teaching practice while in the conflict mentioned above, in particular, Jon et al.

(2021) and Marcellino (2015), pertains to the other problems of English teaching in Indonesia, although it does not do them justice. Within the academic community, stories of their compromise, resistance, and frustration remain unspoken and unexamined. Socio-political configurations of the educational system in Indonesia, including the marginal position of lecturers and national policy (Rodhiya & Wijayati, 2020), and the entrenched 'culture of testing' (Jon et al., 2021) create a void in the study of this conflict. See, for example, Öncel et al. (2021) where policy in relation to lecturers tends to homogenize them. It ignores the 'emotion work' and 'self-governance' that characterize their work life. A case in point is where a lecturer holds a course for an entire semester on TOEFL preparation even while believing in CLT. Thus, while the material currently unpublished has been assessed with the 'negative washback' ailment, it has almost nothing to say regarding the lived 'symptoms' and coping mechanisms of the principals that it focuses on.

This study contributes to washback research by introducing a narrative perspective that conceptualizes lecturers' responses to standardized testing as a process of identity fragmentation, quiet resistance, and emotional endurance within Indonesian English Language Education Departments. This narrative inquiry aims to close this gap by examining the lived experiences of lecturers at an Indonesian ELED as they struggle with the conflicting demands of communicative teaching philosophies and standardized testing pressures. The research question of the study is: How do Indonesian ELED lecturers deal with the conflicts between communicative language teaching philosophies and the demands of standardized testing? This research extends beyond outcomes to foreground the human dimension of educational policy by utilizing a narrative inquiry methodology (Rice, 2024).

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses narrative inquiry. It is situated in the constructivist paradigm as well as the narrative conception of human existence. Constructivist theories suggest that human beings and collectives do not simply perceive reality. They construct it as they go along in their life journeys and as they attribute meaning to it (Rice, 2024). In this study, there is no unitary, objective reality of 'teaching under standardized testing pressures.' Rather, there is a pluralistic reality that is construed and constructed by each lecturer's individual narrative, context within the institution, and philosophies. The paradigm of narrative also emphasizes the fact that human beings are innate storytellers (*homo narrans*). They narrate and live the stories that help them make sense of the world, their identities, and their moral predicaments (Rice, 2024).

Narrative inquiry as the primary methodology captures a richness pertaining to the how and why questions related to each lecturer's experience in a manner that did not rely on simply documenting a range of perspectives and analytically gauging the degree of particular behaviors. This research design appreciates that 'data' are more than a collection of ontologically detached facts but are textured accounts related to the multi-dimensional story of professional

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lived experience, identity adaptation, and ethical tension (Clandinin & Caine 2013; Riessman, 2008).

Participant Selection

A purposive sampling technique was used to capture a range of experiences. The sample was composed of seven full-time lecturers from the ELED of a public university in Indonesia who had first-hand experience teaching courses that required students to pass a standardized English proficiency test, the TOEFL ITP, to graduate. The selection criteria were designed to foster variety along three main dimensions. First, in order to capture differing perspectives, teaching experience was weighted. The group comprised early-career lecturers with 1-5 years, mid-career lecturers with 6-15 years, and senior lecturers with 15+ years in the field. Second, to gain information about the various assessment-related challenges, the sample comprised those teaching 'skill-based' courses directly targeted by the test (Listening and Academic Writing), as well as those teaching 'content-based' courses (Curriculum Development) where the testing pressures were more peripheral. Lastly, to incorporate an administrative dimension to the stories, the sample captured a head of department, whose account involved some administrative policy dealing with the institutional policies and pressures from the university top management. For the purposes of this narrative inquiry, a sample of seven lecturers was deemed optimal (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest et al., 2006; Sandelowski, 1995). The participants comprised both male and female lecturers, holding educational qualifications ranging from Master's to Doctoral degrees, with academic ranks from Assistant to Associate Professor, and varying years of teaching TOEFL-related courses.

Data Collection Procedures

The instrument for this study was a set of semi-structured interviews, which was created after extensive literature analysis on narrative inquiry, washback, and lecturer identity (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Riessman, 2008; Barkhuizen et al., 2014). The procedure included two interview guides. Interview 1 (Unfolding the Narrative) was comprised of around 10-12 open-ended questions with follow-up prompts. Interview 2 (Probing Depth and Meaning) was comprised of approximately 6-8 questions aimed to explore emergent themes in greater depth. The interview was piloted with two lecturers not part of the sample prior to data collection for fine-tuning of question phrasing, detection of ambiguous prompts, and determination of suitable interview length (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In addition to the interviews, a brief demographic and contextual questionnaire was administered to participants prior to the first interview.

Data collection was conducted in three stages (Saleh et al., 2014), namely 'field texts,' 'interim texts,' and 'research texts' for constructing contextual narratives. Three semi-structured interviews conducted with each lecturer formed the basis of field texts. Interview 1 (around 60-75 minutes) addressed the building of a chronological narrative of the professional life history and early identification of the lecturers, including their initial experiences of the stresses of testing. Interview 2 (about 45-60 minutes) was about occurrences and what is referred to as 'stories of tension' in the clash between the teaching philosophy and the needs of testing, where there was the most strain. Interview 3 (about

30-45 minutes) involved descriptive member-checking and the resolution of preliminary narrative topics. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the data-collecting phase, the researcher maintained a reflexive notebook to record first impressions, thoughts, and reflections on the researcher's positionality and potential biases during the co-construction of the narratives.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this narrative inquiry, data analysis was a part of an inductive process that occurred simultaneously with data collection. This involved a process of 'narrative coding' and 'narrative restorying'. The analysis was performed following a methodical procedure: (1) Step 1. This started with numerous readings of the transcripts and listening to the audio interviews to get a general idea of each participant's story. (2) Step 2. The method began with the identification of 'narrative segments,' chunks of the transcripts that narratively summarized a whole process, including events, issues, and emotional responses (Riessman, 2008). (3) Step 3. The element of analysis was the re-storying. This involved constructing a narrative from the unprocessed, often chronologically unorganized narratives from the interviews that told the story of each participant's experience.

Each re-storied narrative was organized in terms of story grammar with particular attention to: (a) the plot, the sequence of events in the story; (b) the characters, including the lecturers and other actors; (c) the setting, the time and place of the story; (d) the tension, the problem/issue; and (e) the resolution, the way in which the tension was resolved or left unresolved (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). (4) Step 4. Confirming with participants. The re-storied narratives were returned to participants for verification and validation, allowing them to confirm, clarify, and correct their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). (5) Step 5. Narratives' thematic analysis. A narrative thematic analysis was then conducted following the individual narratives. This included an analysis of all re-storied narratives to discover higher-order narrative themes that revealed common and complicated patterns, actions, and contradictions across participants' experiences (Riessman, 2008).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The trustworthiness of this narrative inquiry was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Trust and understanding of participants' stories were enhanced through long-term engagement throughout three interview sessions. The members were thoroughly checked by sending transcripts and theme summaries back to participants for verification, clarification, and correction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Peer debriefing was used with a colleague experienced in qualitative research who reviewed emerging themes and challenged potential researcher biases. Confirmability was ensured through the use of the researcher's reflexive journaling, which captured personal assumptions, biases, and positional influences throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section covers the stories of seven lecturers as they share their experiences of negotiating the contradictions between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) ideologies and the institutional pressures of standardized testing. The analysis is structured into three narrative threads that emerged from the data: (1) the conflict of being a 'teacher' and a 'test preparer'; (2) the negotiations and 'quiet resistance' that lecturers employ to retain their pedagogical values; and (3) the emotional toll of this ongoing struggle.

The Teacher vs. the Test Preparer

Across all seven lecturers' narratives, an emotion and theme was a sense of a broken professional identity described as a divide between being a 'teacher' and being a 'test preparer'. This was more than a difference of teaching style. It was an internal conflict that happened throughout the three-dimensional narrative inquiry scaffolding of time, social relations and space. Employing a use of metaphor, the data captured a single story of each lecturer describing him and herself as housing two professional identities. One was a full identity grounded in the lecturer's teaching beliefs and values. The other was a shell of an identity, a role performed in the name of compliance with the institution's expectations. This split produced moral and emotional suffering, which in large part constituted their lived experience in the ELED. Interrogating the stories through the lens of the temporal dimension made it possible to show that the conflict was not in stasis, but rather involved movement through experiences of loss and change. Most lecturers' accounts started with a description of the 'past self', the ideal educator, novice educator, full of inspiration, and a zeal for communicative language teaching (CLT). 'A1' is a mid-career lecturer with a decade of service, reminisced: *'I was the lecturer who was philosophical, and as a facilitator of communication in the classroom, I aimed to assist the students in voicing their ideas in English. I wanted to instill confidence in them to express ideas, and that was who I was, 'the teacher' I was trained to be. But institutional pressure to ensure students were passing the TOEFL ITP exam was experienced as a force that destroyed this identity.'* B1, a 38-year-old senior lecturer, described his loss: *'I feel I have lost a part of myself. The young lecturer, who, in the past, was so enthusiastic about developing creative writing assignments, is now buried in a pile of practice tests and strategies for triumphing over the Structure section. I am not the same lecturer, and I have to admit that.'* Future projections, for most, were met with a weary sense of acceptance and calculated opposition, but with the expectation that both of these opposites could be fully integrated.

Although there was not a substantial time period between social events on an individual and social level, it was this sociality dimension that created and shaped this identity conflict. On a personal level, the lecturers went through various internal emotional struggles, namely, feelings of guilt and frustration, a lack of authenticity, and a sense of betrayal concerning their values as educators. With a level of discomfort, early-career lecturer, 'A2', states, *'There is a voice in my head when I am drilling them on TOEFL tricks. It whispers, 'This*

is not teaching. This is a fraud.' I feel like an impostor in my own classroom. The real 'me' believes in fostering critical thinking, but the 'me' that the system requires is a trainer for a specific game.' It is social interactions and engagements of such a nature that the internal conflict is compounded even more.

Within the department, lecturers perceived what they called the 'unspoken story' as one of compliant resignation, where the staffroom served as a 'frustration chamber' from which they vented, but felt there were no opportunities for social system challenges. If staffroom venting is essential in subsequent social system challenges, such an interaction was very compliant. This was also an area of conflict, particularly their relationships with students. 'B2', who teaches Academic Writing, narrates the following account which reflects this conflict: *'A student came to me, and although she presented a very good argumentative essay, she had a grammatical error. The thought that plagued my mind was, 'This student will fail a portion of the TOEFL.' I had to spend an entire class unpacking her thoughts into accurate sentences. I witnessed the motivation get sucked out of her. I could not help but feel I had let her down. My test prep role was thrust upon me.'* This was an institution-level policy, as a social force, devoid of any personal consideration of the policy, and to them, it represented a disregard of their professional discretion, where they had to prioritize a test score over the more integrative aspects of a student's language development.

There are numerous data that contain quotations that illustrate this psychological fracture. One of the lecturers recounts the phrase, 'teaching to the test,' as a form of psychological self-estrangement. 'B3,' the head of the department, describes a form of administrative inauthenticity. *'In my curriculum development class, I am the expert. I feel intelligent, I am pushing my students to think. But in the weeks before the TOEFL ITP, when I am forced to run intensive drills, I feel like a robot. The connection to my students, the joy, it just evaporates.'* Another lecturer, 'A3' illustrated this with a different figurative expression, *'I have a split personality. From Monday to Wednesday I am the 'Teacher,' we get to have debates, we analyze articles, we laugh. Then Thursday and Friday I wear my 'Drill Sergeant' hat. We all enter this grim, transactional space where the only thing that matters is the score.'*

There are four elements to the collective narrative of this story as a result of narrative restorying. Starting with the initial element as a collective professional identity, the conflicting element as the impact of high-stakes standardized testing, the climactic element as the continuous cyclic experience of having to choose in a manner between pedagogical values and socio-institutional demands, and, for the most, the resolving element as an unresolvable and dislocated equilibrium, a continuous shift between the two conflicting selves. This is shown collaboratively through interviews and member checking, which shows that for these lecturers, the ethical conundrum goes beyond the particulars of what is taught and instead focuses on what kind of professionals they are allowed to become. The story of the teacher and the test preparer, therefore, is a narrative of conflicting identities, where the essence of their teaching practice is held captive in the challenging context of the Indonesian ELED classroom. Table 1 gives a synthesis picture of these narrative

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elements, giving an overview of the statements, manifestations, and analytical interpretations that emerged across the experiences of all seven participants.

Table 1. Narrative Portrayals of Lecturer Identity Conflict

Narrative Dimension	Quotes	Manifestations & Analysis
Temporality (The evolution of identity over time)	'A1' (Mid-career): <i>'I was the lecturer who was philosophical, and as a facilitator for the communication... that was who I was 'the teacher' I was trained to be.'</i> 'B1' (Senior lecturer): <i>'I feel I have lost a part of myself... I am not the same lecturer... a hard thing to admit in moments of silence.'</i>	• Past Self, characterized by idealism, CLT philosophy, and an identity as a facilitator of communication. Described with words like 'creative,' 'fulfilled,' 'authentic.' • Present Self, described as a 'compromise.' A sense of loss and change, where the original lecturer identity is 'buried' under test preparation demands. • Future Self, characterized by 'weary acceptance' and 'strategic resistance,' with little hope for full integration of the two identities.
Sociality (The interplay between personal feelings and social/institutional relations)	'A2' (Early-career): <i>'There is a voice in my head... 'This is not teaching. This is a fraud.' I feel like an impostor in my own classroom.'</i> 'B2' (Academic Writing): <i>'I witnessed the motivation get sucked out of her. I could not help but feel I had let her down... My test prep role was thrust upon me.'</i> Contextual Note: <i>The 'unspoken story' in the department was one of 'compliant resignation.'</i>	• Personal Dimension (Internal), such as emotions of guilt, frustration, inauthenticity, and a sense of being a 'fraud' / 'impostor.' This is a moral and ethical conflict. • Social Dimension (Relational), with students, such as tension between the role of a 'mentor' and a 'test preparer,' it leads to feelings of failing students' development, with colleagues/institution, (a feeling of powerlessness). Institutional policy is experienced as an impersonal 'social force' that overrides discretion.
Place (The context where the conflict is lived)	'B3' (Department Head): <i>'In my curriculum development class, I am the expert... But in the weeks before the TOEFL ITP... I feel like a robot... a technician servicing a machine.'</i> 'A3' (Lecturer): <i>'We all enter this grim, transactional space where the only thing that matters is the score.'</i>	• The conflict is anchored in the Indonesian ELED classroom as the site. • The classroom itself transforms based on the activity: it is a place for intellectual exploration ('the Teacher') versus a 'transactional space' for test drilling ('the Test Preparer'). • The institutional context of the Indonesian public university shapes and constrains the stories that can be lived and told.
Narrative Restorying (The overarching plot of the identity conflict)	Metaphors from Data: 'Split personality,' 'Drill Sergeant vs. Teacher,' 'Technician servicing a machine,' 'Fraud,' 'Impostor.'	• Initial State is an idealistic professional identity ('The Teacher') • Tension is the imposition of high-stakes standardized testing (TOEFL ITP). • Climax is the recurring experience of having to decide between institutional demands and instructional values. • Resolution is an ongoing oscillation between two selves that is unsettled and 'dislocated equilibrium.' The moral

		conundrum concerns their professional identities.
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The Narrative of Strategic Negotiation and ‘Quiet Resistance’

In tandem with the analyzed identity struggle detailed within the first finding, the narrative inquiry analysis showed the counter-argument of agency and quiet defiance. Lecturers are by no means mere targets of institutional pressure, as their stories reflect a great deal of clever pedagogical defiance, where they participate in a struggle to gain and defend territory for real learning. These stories do not reflect open insubordination, but of defiance by means of compromise and reasoning so that they can retain their pedagogical ideals. These strategies, seen from the perspective of temporality, show evidence of learned mechanisms over time due to evolving institutional pressures. In the early stages of their career, the lecturers’ stories exhibited a more binary position of either teaching communicatively, or ‘teaching to the test’. However, with the consolidation of the testing regime, their accounts became more sophisticated to include strategic planning of the timelines within the semesters. Mid-career lecturer, with 12 years of experience, ‘B4’, narrated this progression of stories: *‘In the first few weeks, I establish what I call the ‘social contract.’ We do the communicative activities, the project-based learning. I build the rapport and the English-speaking environment. And then, as the test looms closer, we shift. I’ve learned to front-load the real teaching, so the test preparation feels like a final review.’* This was a common narrative in explaining the temporal sequencing, a way of holding on to the essence of their teaching philosophy by the distribution of time so that their teaching selves had a time of their own before the testing self was put on the front.

The relationships that were built during the negotiation were sophisticated and multi-layered. Practicing such techniques, ‘A2’, from Finding 1, saw the other facet of the experience in the second interview description that stated, *‘Whenever I prepare a lesson, there is this strange satisfaction that I feel. I tell my students, ‘We are going to do a drill in TOEFL Listening Part A,’ but I use audio from a podcast debate. They are practicing for the test, but there are real and authentic debates in the audio. It feels like I am sneaking genuine education into the classroom in a game of hide and seek.’* The ‘Smuggling’ metaphor in the statement and others was a reused description of the absence of these actions social value, but the presence of acts social value. The Staff Room, as a social space, was whispered to be a place of cohesion among lecturers. Discussing silent forms of collaboration, dissent, and tacit forms of resistance, ‘B1’, a lecturer says, *‘We don’t complain openly in meetings, but we share our ‘life hacks’ over coffee. ‘Oh, if you frame your debate as a practice for the Independent Writing task, the head of department won’t question it.’ We call it our silent forms of activism, a means of helping each other out while keeping it low-profile.’* This shows a certain unit cohesion, even if it happens in the background, and a common set of soft resistance strategies.’ There were very specific examples that involve strategic negotiations such as embedding and reframing. The embedding strategy utilized moving exercises focused on tests and exercises communicatively. One example was from ‘B2’ in her Academic Writing course: *‘I was teaching a unit on writing a thesis statement. Instead of just providing them*

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with a template for the TOEFL essay, I had them analyze op-eds in international newspapers. They were identifying arguments, evaluating evidence. I would say, 'See the structure of this argument that is quintessential in a TOEFL essay.' The practice of the test was hidden inside a richer task.'

'Reframing' involves strategic maneuvering, which the lecturers employed to justify their communicative activities by linking them to the requirements of the test. 'A3', a lecturer of a Curriculum Development content course, illustrates the need to rationalize his techniques: *'My course is not the one that is tested, however, the pressure is there. I inform the students, and write it in my lesson plan, that it is a practice for the TOEFL test and that it will help them develop fluency, organization, and confidence.'* While this is true to an extent, it is also a distraction. It protects the task from being viewed as unproductive in a test-centric culture. Institutional narrative restorying suggests that the accounts of these stories follow the same pathway. The pressure (institutional pressure) is not addressed head on, but rather addressed with clever and creative, though often counter-actions. The outcome is not an achievement, rather, it is a continuous practice of compromise that enables the instructors to rest easy because they know they have, albeit in the smallest of ways, fulfilled their responsibility toward their students' rightful access to quality language instruction. This narrative of 'quiet resistance' is in essence a tale of flourishing the profession. It shows how teaching professionals within constrained environments exercise their agency not by protesting loudly, but by the clever individual design of their teaching practice, continuously walking the tightrope of institutional pressure. Table 2 provides a synthesis of these narrative characteristics, with the statements, manifestations and analytical interpretations that emerged from all seven participants' descriptions of their strategic negotiations and quiet resistance.

Table 2. Narrative Portrayals of Strategic Negotiation and 'Quiet Resistance'

Narrative Dimension	Quotes	Manifestations & Analysis
Temporality (The evolution of strategies over time)	'B4' (Mid-career): <i>'In the first few weeks, I establish what I call the 'social contract.'... I've learned to front-load the real teaching, so the test preparation feels like a final review, not the entire course.'</i>	• Past Approach, a more binary choice between communicative teaching and 'teaching to the test.' • Present Approach, a strategic temporal planning of the semester. 'Front-loading' authentic teaching early on frames test preparation as a 'final review.' This preserves the core of their teaching philosophy.
Sociality (The personal and social dynamics of negotiation)	'A2' (Early-career): <i>'It feels like I am sneaking genuine education into the classroom in the game of hide and seek over the test.'</i> 'B1' (Senior lecturer): <i>'We share our 'life hacks' over coffee... It's our silent forms of activism, a means of helping each other out while keeping it low-profile.'</i>	• Personal Dimension (Internal), a 'secret satisfaction' and sense of professional pride in 'smuggling' real education past institutional constraints. This reclaims a sense of agency. • Social Dimension (Relational), with Colleagues, covert collegial solidarity through sharing 'life hacks' in the staffroom. This is a collective, though unspoken, 'quiet resistance'; with Institution, a choice to avoid open confrontation ('keeping it low-profile').

Place (The contexts where strategies are enacted)	'B2' (Academic Writing): <i>'The practice of the test was hidden inside a richer task.'</i> 'A3' (Curriculum Development): <i>'It protects the task from being viewed as an unproductive use of time in a test-centric culture.'</i>	• The site of resistance is the classroom, where pedagogical activities are designed. • The staffroom serves as a social space for the covert exchange of resistance strategies. • The strategy is shaped by the 'test-centric culture' of the institution. It requires activities to be defensible within its logic.
Forms of Negotiation (The strategies employed)	Embedding: 'B2': <i>'Instead of just providing them with a template... I had them analyze op-eds... The practice of the test was hidden inside a richer task.'</i> Reframing: 'A3': <i>'I inform the students... that it is a practice for the TOEFL test... It protects the task from being viewed as an unproductive use of time.'</i>	• Embedding, integrating test-focused exercises (TOEFL question) into communicative activities (analyzing authentic texts). • Reframing, using a discursive strategy to justify communicative activities by linking them to test benefits, thus creating a 'shield' against institutional criticism.
Narrative Restorying (The plot of strategic negotiation)	Metaphors from Data: 'Smuggling genuine education,' 'Silent forms of activism,' 'Life hacks,' 'Hide and seek.'	• Initial state is institutional pressure to 'teach to the test.' • Tension is the need to comply while preserving pedagogical values. • Climax is the development and deployment of covert strategies of negotiation (embedding and reframing). • Resolution is a daily practice of 'quiet resistance' that allows lecturers to maintain professional integrity. The story is one of resilience and agency.

The Narrative of Emotional Toll

When reconciling the emotional relationships of the lecturers' narratives, the stories show a voice that starts with guilt, continues with professional burnout, and closes with an institutional disconnection cynicism in regard to the educational priorities, which in most cases are the institutional educational priorities. The emotional narrative is not a standalone narrative. It is the human cost of the identity conflicts and the refined resistance, and the systemic issues at play, and it is the emotional narrative of the identity struggles and resistance. The story's timeframe depicts an unsettling unfolding narrative. A multitude of individuals described as 'early-career' ostensibly in singular events describing a feeling of guilt for having failed to provide an education to their students. An account of guilt was given by early-career educator 'A2,' saying, *'I spent a whole class on Listening strategies, and after that class, I went home and I could not sleep. I was thinking of one student who asked a really good question about the culture of the audio and I had to shut her down because I was supposed to 'keep moving.' I felt I shut down the reason I wanted to teach in the first place. That guilt sits in your stomach.'* For the more experienced lecturers, however, the intense guilt gave way to a quieter form of self-disappointment. 'B1' stated, *'The guilt does not keep me up at night anymore. It's more of a background noise in*

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my career. The worst part is knowing that I am giving subpar education to students compared to what I am fully capable of giving. I have learned to live with it, but it has dimmed the passion I once had.' After experiencing the situation multiple times, there is a shift in emotions from 'guilt' to a deeper-set form of 'fatigue'. This is more than regular 'tiredness'; it is a deep 'fatigue' of morale and psyche, caused by the constant mental strain and juggling of the situation. The lecturers reflected on this as being the sustained effort needed to uphold their 'silenced defiance' and the continual effort to relieve their sustained identity and integrity from teaching fort/bound.

The 'draining activity' tells of mental suffering and exhaustion to endure the activities of their double life, lie by omission. It is not merely teaching, it is a perpetual act of 'theatrical and performative' negotiation and by the week's end I am left with no emotional energy for my own family, my own research.' 'When you're deeply exhausted, it's like the well is just dry.' In particular, the social aspect of the setting was compounded by the perceived isolation of their experience. Although it was possible to share 'life hacks,' the informal context of these social hacks can have been perceived by members of the group as rendering the 'emotional labor' solo, as disclosing such feelings in a formal setting was viewed as unprofessional or a waste of time. Many lecturers, particularly in the mid-to-late career stage, accumulated guilt and exhaustion to the extent of developing a cynical attitude. This attitude served to protect them from psychological trauma and disappointment by decreasing the expectation of the institution.

Within the social dimension, this translated to a lack of trust in the system's will and ability to foster real education. The department head, then 'B3,' resigned to: *'My stance in meetings these days is just to recite the pass rates. I have learned to present the story the university prefers. It is not the story of confident individuals. The story is a collection of figures and bar charts. The story of my education is not valid, it does not have a KPI.'* The other senior lecturer 'A3' provides a negative illustration of the purpose of their work: *'We are not educating global citizens, I see us as a certification factory. My role is to ensure the student, the product, is stamped. I criticize the 'transformative power of education' sentiment the university advocates for, it's just a cynical myth.'* 'The outcome is simply the test result.' Considerations of the constraints of the Indonesian public university, with their resource limitations and top-down policy mandates, exacerbated these feelings. Lecturers perceived their agency as being bounded, not by individual unwillingness, but by an institutional location that emphasized metrics, not mentorship. The emotional toll, then, was seen as a byproduct of functioning within the parameters of a system.

As these testimonies were restoried, the plot arc was constructed in a way that depicted gradual erosion. Initial passion and idealism (the initial state) comes head-to-head with a conflict (the tension). Attempts to resolve the conflicts in the system were partial. To resolve an issue, in this case systemic conflict, at an emotional cost and result in the burnout and disillusionment of the individual is to reach a climax. However, many do not arrive at a satisfied state resulting from acceptance of the outcome but a cynical endurance that is wearisome, a narrative of competing values leading to emotional turmoil and the disintegration of the individual spirit that is the most wearisome of all the

underlying narratives. This testament of emotional toll is the most poignant finding. It reveals that the conflict over standardized testing is not simply a pedagogical debate, but a human, and often struggle that exacts a toll on the lecturers implementing it. Table 3 gives a summary of these narrative elements, with the statements, expressions, and analytical interpretations that arose in all seven participants' reflections of the emotional toll of this continuous conflict.

Table 3. Narrative Portrayals of Emotional Toll

Narrative Dimension	Quotes	Manifestations & Analysis
Temporality (The progression of emotional states over time)	'A2' (Early-career): <i>'I felt I shut down the reason I wanted to teach... that guilt sits in your stomach.'</i> 'B1' (Senior lecturer): <i>'The guilt does not keep me up at night anymore... It's more of a background noise... it has dimmed the passion I once had.'</i>	• Early-career (acute), intense, event-specific guilt over betraying student curiosity and teaching ideals. • Mid/late-career (chronic), guilt evolves into a constant 'background noise' of professional self-disappointment.
Sociality (The personal and institutional sources of emotion)	'A2' (Early-career): <i>'It's mentally exhausting... this double life... a perpetual act of theatrical negotiation... the well is just dry.'</i> 'B3' (Department Head): <i>'I have learned to present the story the university prefers... The story of my education is not valid, it does not have a KPI.'</i> 'A3' (Senior lecturer): <i>'We are not educating global citizens... we are a certification factory.'</i>	• Personal dimension (internal), profound psychological fatigue from maintaining a 'double life' and constant negotiation. It leads to emotional depletion ('the well is dry'). • Social dimension (relational), with the institution, a deep-seated cynicism and loss of faith. The institution is seen as prioritizing metrics (KPIs) over mentorship. This reduces education to a 'certification factory', isolation, emotional burden is borne alone, as expressing these feelings is seen as unprofessional.
Place (The contextual amplifier of emotional toll)	<i>'Considerations of the constraints of the Indonesian public university, with their resource limitations and top-down policy mandates, exacerbated these feelings.'</i>	• The context of the Indonesian public university, with its resource constraints and top-down mandates, is not a backdrop but an amplifier of the emotional toll. • Lecturers feel their agency is bounded by this institutional place that prioritizes metrics over mentorship.
Emotional Trajectory (The identified sequence of emotional states)	From Guilt: <i>'I felt I shut down the reason I wanted to teach.'</i> To Fatigue: <i>'The well is just dry.'</i> To Cynicism: <i>'We are a certification factory.'</i>	• Guilt is acute feeling of betraying students and pedagogical values. • Fatigue is a state of moral and psychological exhaustion from the constant 'juggling act.' • Cynicism is a protective shell of disillusionment. It lowers expectations of the institution to manage disappointment.
Narrative Restorying (The	Metaphors from Data: <i>'Guilt sits in your stomach,' 'The well is just dry,' 'Background</i>	• Initial state is passion and idealism. • Tension is recurring conflict between values and institutional demands.

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<i>overarching emotional plot)</i>	<i>noise,’ ‘Certification factory,’ ‘Double life.’</i>	• Climax is burnout and disillusionment from the emotional cost of partial resolutions and constant negotiation. • Resolution is not happy acceptance, but ‘weary, cynical endurance.’ The story is one of the erosion of the professional spirit.
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DISCUSSION

This study examines how lecturers in the English Language Education Department in Indonesia deal with the conflict of the philosophies of language pedagogy and theories of standardized testing. This study reveals that this ongoing tension and conflict is not only an educational problem. In fact it is a structural problem that is related to the professional’s identity and practice and to emotional and mental wellness. The lecturers’ narratives show the notion of ‘negative washback’ (Cheng et al., 2015; Alqahtani, 2021) by reliving its consequences, stressing the paradox of an identity crisis, determination with a price to pay, and unravelling it in the restricted time and socio-cultural setting. This identity conflict can be perceived as an outcome of the dissonance of two logics in the Indonesian higher education system, namely the logic of communicative competence promoted by CLT and the logic of accountability imposed by institutional accreditation requirements. The lecturers are located at the point of intersection of these opposed mandates, and the ‘fractured self’ they describe is a personal psychological reaction and a foreseeable product of this tension. The fractured self, the teacher vs the test preparer, is in relation to a more extensive examination of lecturer identity as a contested formation of teacher identity and social and institutional discourse (Zólyomi & Széll, 2025; Randez, 2023).

The conflict is felt because lecturers are asked to produce content and to embody pedagogical values, and when institutional demands conflict with these values, the resulting dissonance is experienced as a threat to their professional selves. The participants’ narratives of feeling like an ‘impostor’ and a ‘technician servicing a machine’ reflect the alienation that critical pedagogies articulate when educators are compelled to implement behaviors they detest (Pless & Katznelson, 2019). Such emotions of inauthenticity are rooted in a perceived disconnect between professional training and the work they are expected to execute. This disconnect is exacerbated with time as testing pressures increase. This contribution also builds on Irham (2023) in the context of Indonesia, as it presents an analysis of the way compulsory national and institutional testing is experienced. The lecturers’ moral distress is inflicted by an internal struggle between the ‘personal’ pedagogical care they espouse (which connects to the sociality dimension of the moral/ethical in Zabidi et al. (2020) and the ‘social’ demands of the system to show performance. This supports the assertion of Prasetya (2024) that the internal challenges faced by Indonesian educators are often neglected. It underscores the importance of qualitative narratives in this neglected aspect of teaching practice.

Lecturers have shown agency in response to the identity conflict. The case study ‘Strategic Negotiation and Quiet Resistance’ showed lecturers’

agency by embedding paradox. This agency was a matter of necessity; when it became clear that resistance within the institutional hierarchy was not possible, lecturers devised clandestine strategies to protect their educational principles, while remaining externally compliant. The temporal evolution of these techniques shows that they are learned responses to ongoing institutional pressure, rather than pre-existing tendencies. Lecturers are not viewed as implementers of policies. The ‘embedding’ and ‘reframing’ as strategies are examples of what (Zembylas, 2021) calls ‘resistance pedagogy,’ where educators in the periphery find ‘cracks’ in the system to enact their beliefs. The possibility of these strategies depends on the fact that the classroom is still a relatively autonomous environment, in which lecturers have substantial discretion. But this autonomy is constrained, and has to be negotiated constantly.

This correlates with the idea of ‘street-level bureaucrats,’ (Guimarães et al., 2022) whereby teachers limit policies through their daily discretionary practices. Lecturers resort to these covert techniques rather than open protest because the institutional power system provides few overt routes for questioning evaluation policies and hence dissent is driven underground. The ‘smuggling’ of communicative activities to prepare learners for tests illustrates their agency. The lecturers’ shared ‘life hacks’ in the staffroom reflect the creation of a ‘community of practice’ (Mychajluk, 2017) that supports this resistance and provides a hidden counter-narrative to the institution’s dominant story on compliance. Collegial solidarity plays a double role; it offers emotional and practical support, but it also fosters the idea that resistance must be suppressed and collective action for systemic change may be thwarted.

The finding complicates the narrative of the uniform ‘teaching to the test’ (Zakharov & Carnoy, 2021; Muth & Lüftenegger, 2025) as efforts to safeguard their pedagogical identity are not exposed. Clearly, there is a cost to this agency, as stated in the ‘Narrative of Emotional Toll.’ The sequence of impacts starting from guilt, progressing to exhaustion, and finally to cynicism outlines the self-reported psychological impacts of continuing stress. This tendency can be explained by the cumulative character of the dispute. Every semester, there is a fresh wave of testing pressure, and every compromise entails emotional labor that gradually drains lecturers’ psychological resources. The ‘chronic fatigue’ mentioned by the participants is similar to what (Hoben et al., 2020) refers to as the exhaustion of emotional inauthenticity and performative compliance.

Perhaps the move from shame to cynicism among senior lecturers is a defensive response. The lowering of institutional expectations may be a way of coping with continual failure, with successive compromises. The senior lecturers’ cynicism by describing the university as a ‘certification factory’ is a form of emotional disengagement, protective coping strategy, similar to what is reflected in (Trenkic & Hu, 2021) vulnerability of teachers and the protective strategies he outlines for the erosion of the core of their identity. While this cynicism is protective, it is also a loss of the professional idealism with which these lecturers first entered the profession, and should be noted as a considerable cost to their professional fulfillment. This emotional trajectory articulates that the ‘washback’ effect is not only a phenomenon of the curriculum, but a profoundly human one, with consequences on the burnout

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and sustenance of the ELED profession in Indonesia (Apoko & Cahyono, 2024) that go beyond the mentioned consequences.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to examine lecturers of the English Language Education Department and their attempts to manage the tension between their teaching philosophy and standardized tests. The lecturers displayed some form of agency, responding to the conflict termed as 'silent resistance.' This is not the tale of direct struggle, but rather delicate forms of rearranged maneuvering within the confines of the system. The lecturers subtly sidestepped the other forms of the examination by 'embedding' examination requirements within assignments that were richer, more communicative / detailed and by 'reframing' some activities that were pedagogy-focused as examination activities. They 'smuggled' real education into the classroom, which some underground support network of 'life tips' aided, and alongside this piracy, they sought to regain the professional respectability and pedagogical integrity they were trying to protect. However, this 'double life' came with a burden as they lived with an emotional turmoil stemming from their career-long perceptions of conflicting interests and systemic constraints of the examination regime. This emotional state is one of guilt from the students' underdevelopment that then shifts into an unending protective distancing from a system that relegates learning to a 'certification factory' where pedagogy becomes subordinate to a myriad of administrative dictates.

The study offers some contributions, yet it has a few limitations. Firstly, the findings come from one institution, which limits generalizability. Second, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which are prone to social desirability bias and retrospective recall. The findings have various policy and practice implications. Concerning ELED curriculum policy, the existing minimal TOEFL ITP score as a graduation prerequisite requires reconsideration. Instead, policymakers should consider ways to uncouple test scores from graduation requirements / to embed test prep into a larger communicative curriculum rather than an external obligation. Curriculum designers also need to embed explicit space for communicative language teaching activities inside the formal curriculum, removing the need for lecturers to 'smuggle' authentic learning into their courses through clandestine resistance. The evaluation procedures should be reformed to incorporate a variety of indicators of student competence, such as portfolio-based assessment and performance-based assignments, instead of relying exclusively on a single standardized test score. Institutions should establish official support mechanisms, such as counseling services and peer support groups, to promote lecturers' welfare, allowing them to freely share the emotional issues they face in reconciling contradictory institutional expectations. Professional development programs need to improve pedagogical skills and emotional resilience.

Further research could extend the present study by including multiple institutions from other regions in Indonesia to capture a broader range of experience. Further, comparative research comparing public and private universities or ELEDs with differing testing regimes will deepen the understanding of how institutional contexts impact instructor experiences.

Moreover, it can use longitudinal designs to examine the development of coping mechanisms and emotional trajectories of lecturers over time. Besides, quantitative / mixed-methods approaches could complement these story findings by quantifying the prevalence and correlates of identity conflict, emotional weariness, and quiet resistance among larger groups of ELED instructors.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

I Putu Andre Suhardiana was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, investigation, analysis, writing the original draft, writing review and editing, and project administration. **I Gusti Ayu Indah Triana Juliari** handled investigation, data curation, analysis, writing the original draft, and writing review and editing. **Made Wahyu Mahendra** performed methodology, validation, analysis, writing the original draft, writing review and editing, and visualization. **Astuti Wijayanti** provided resources, validation, writing review and editing, and supervision.

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